Editorial: entering the field of criminological research

WATERS, Jaime <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0261-7349>

EDITORIAL: ENTERING THE FIELD OF CRIMINOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Dr Jaime Waters, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, Sheffield Hallam University

"We are - before we are academics, scholars or researchers - diverse human beings with a vast array of life experiences and complex histories. The emotive processes that stem from these and the theoretical insights they can provide should not be underestimated. My point here is that the 'self' is not just who we are, but a living embodiment of how we research, how we theorize and how we come [to] know and tell about our subjects. In this respect, no longer should it be relegated to footnotes or methodological appendices." (Wakeman 2014: 719).

This special issue of the *British Journal of Community Justice* will focus upon the experiences of researchers making their entry into the field of criminological research. Its genesis can be traced to the annual meetings of the European Society of Criminology Postgraduate and Early Stage Researcher Working Group. During these meetings the group's conversations repeatedly turned to the nagging feeling that the lived reality of criminological investigation did not always match up with what we had been taught in classes or read in textbooks prior to beginning our nascent research careers.

Professor Yvonne Jewkes' keynote speech at the 2013 British Society of Criminology conference at the University of Wolverhampton, which highlighted some of the difficulties of engaging in criminological research, inspired us to bring together a special panel at the 2014 European Society of Criminology Conference in Prague on 'entering the field of criminological research'. At this panel a group of emerging scholars picked up on the themes Professor Jewkes had discussed in Wolverhampton and sought to show the special difficulties faced by those more inexperienced researchers starting out on their journey into the discipline. At this panel Dr Jaime Waters discussed how personal biography had influenced her research, Dr Sabine Carl talked of the difficulties involved in interviewing professionals and experts, Bethany Schmidt spoke of values, allegiances, and politics in prisons research, and Filip Vojta presented on issues in qualitative research on international criminal justice, all from the perspective of those undergoing their initiation into the world of scholarly inquiry. The panel was very well received, and two of the papers presented on that day (Waters and Carl) have been developed for inclusion in this issue.

This special issue, building on the success of the Prague panel, seeks to document the experiences of early career researchers and to provide an account of the 'messiness' of the research process that, all too often, inexperienced researchers are ill prepared for. Across the four original contributions, a foreword by Yvonne Jewkes and an afterword by Stephen Wakeman, a number of key themes have emerged. For example, the papers raise the question of the place of emotion in research and the way in which emotions can potentially be useful in scholarly investigation. In her keynote speech in Wolverhampton, Jewkes' specific focus was on the emotional investment often required in qualitative inquiry. She suggested that criminology as a discipline has remained largely silent on this matter. Indeed, with a few recent and commendable exceptions (for example, Wakeman, 2014; Lumsden & Winter, 2014), the discipline has tended to encourage the repression of the messy emotional reality of qualitative inquiry. Yet, particularly in the case of inexperienced researchers engaging in fieldwork for the first time, powerful emotions can often forcefully intrude on the research process. How they are accommodated thus becomes of real importance, and it is an issue not dealt with in conventional accounts of the research process. Here, Fleetwood takes a 'confessional' approach in her piece which allows for an exploration of her life experiences, how they informed her entry into the field and how they affected the actual process of data collection itself. Carl discusses the emotional aspect of her research, and considers how this shaped her analysis, while Waters' piece features reflections on the emotional hardship of persisting with a 'failing' sampling strategy in the absence of better alternatives.

In a similar vein, the papers in the special issue interrogate the notion of reflexivity; what is its role and how can it be a worthwhile tool? There is a reflexive bent to all of the papers in the special issue as the relatively young authors found themselves constantly questioning their practice and technique as they attempted to collect data or bring their studies to fruition. Reflexivity is inherent in Fleetwood's 'confessional' approach, for instance, whilst for Carl it emerges in the re-evaluation of her research and its findings. It is also clear in Preiser's discussion of what gets included in one's field notes and one's findings, and, just as importantly, what does not. Meanwhile, the process of self-reflection engaged in by Waters as she struggled to bring her research to a satisfactory conclusion ultimately resulted in valuable insights into the nature of her participants.

Wakeman (2014: 708) has argued forcefully for the importance of autoethnography and the role it can play in the creation of meaningful criminological knowledge, and this is a repeated motif in our collection of papers. That our authors were not well known, experienced operators, yet to be fully assimilated into their role as researchers or academics, shaped their studies in profound ways. Both Carl and Waters use an autoethnographic lens to scrutinise their findings on politicians and prison ombudsmen and older illegal drug users respectively, while Fleetwood acknowledges the impact of her own biography on actually gaining access to her research subjects in the first place. Preiser's understanding of how her personal biography impacted upon her ethnographic work clearly demonstrates the importance of situating oneself critically within the research endeavour.

Finally, the papers provide a sense of how the institutional and political environment that research takes place in can often serve to obscure the difficulties that budding researchers

face. As Lumsden and Winter (2014) have argued, and as any student of Foucault would concur, the creation of knowledge itself is bound up with issues of funding, politics, and governance. The current criminological milieu can often seem to consist of "a renewed and growing dominance of and push for positivist and normative criminology and crime science and the push for applied evidence based research, which further includes increased professionalisation, use of metrics and the impact agenda in the United Kingdom, the pursuit of knowledge transfer opportunities, enterprise activities and funding" (Lumsden & Winter, 2014: 2). For the more inexperienced investigator setting out on their journey into the field, this environment can be especially harsh as it can render trivial difficulties such as the ones detailed in the contributions here. Furthermore, external constraints can be particularly ominous to junior researchers as the risk to one's nascent career should a study not deliver on its objectives can be significant.

In sum, the contributions presented here offer reflections on a very particular time in their authors' research careers. It is clear that there are some specific challenges that inexperienced researchers face on their entry into the research field. It is also clear that those who are new to the praxis of research must come to terms with the messy and often emotional reality of the environment they find themselves in very quickly if they are to be successful. Perhaps inadvertently, in making these accommodations, our contributors managed to uncover certain truths about the research process that are of universal importance to the discipline. The issues they raise here, though they might well resonate especially keenly for newcomers to the research process, are surely applicable to all researchers, whatever their level of experience or esteem. Acknowledgement and understanding of such issues can only lead to better research practice. As Wakeman puts it, "an increased focus upon the self in criminological research can produce significant advantages in three interlinked fields: the ways in which research is done, the theory that stems from it and then the ways in which it is presented" (2014: 706). Thus this is not an exercise in "navel gazing, merely placing the researcher at the centre of the work" (Lumsden & Winter, 2014: 10), but a staging post towards better research across the board.

Contributions to the Special Issue
Professor Yvonne Jewkes, whose keynote speech at the 2013 British Society of Criminology conference inspired this special issue, provides the foreword which sets the stage for the contributors and offers a number of insights that are taken up in the papers that follow. For instance, Jewkes highlights how much research, inadvertently or otherwise, conceals the messiness involved in 'getting in, getting on and getting out' and as a result does a disservice to more junior researchers. She also discusses the lack of emotional recognition and discussion in research publications, the 'bureaucratization' and 'commodification' of research and results, the difficulties involved in 'reconciling the personal contradictions inherent' in the research process, and, more broadly, the notion of reflexivity. Jewkes reminds us that, in the end, research is *always* an 'inherently personal, political and partial endeavour' and that 'objectivity and balance may not only be impossible and impractical goals, but may also be undesirable if these qualities neutralise important issues'.

Fleetwood focuses on her experiences of undertaking ethnographic fieldwork with imprisoned drug traffickers in Ecuador. She takes a 'confessional' approach, examining globalised hierarchies alongside her own biography ('middle-class, white British' and 'western, Anglophone foreigner'). The role that storytelling played in her fieldwork is also discussed. Fleetwood explores, among other things, how the interplay between her biography and her adoption of narrative practice served to facilitate both physical access to the prison as well as the developing relationships with her subjects. Indeed the data collected in the field and the analysis that followed was decisively shaped by the narrative storytelling that all the participants (including Fleetwood herself) engaged in.

Carl explores some of the difficulties involved in interviewing professionals and experts, reflecting on her emotions in conducting two qualitative interviews for her PhD. The differing relationships that developed between the researcher and the researched led to interviews that varied greatly in tone and tenor. Carl reflects on how the interaction between herself and her interviewees and the emotions that bubbled up on the days in question affected the subsequent analysis and presentation of the findings. She argues for the value of a second or even third analysis of the data, which allows for the passage of time and the subsiding of emotions and can assist the researcher in gaining new insights. She ends with a 'helpful guideline for (self-) reflection' and invites future researchers to learn from her experiences.

Waters, using the lens of autoethnography, examines how her own personal biography affected the research process in a study of 'hidden' older illegal drug users. The lengthy and difficult gestation of her research was caused in part by her age, nationality, professional standing and differing cultural outlook to her participants. Yet, on reflection, these difficulties helped to reveal something of the nature of the participants themselves. In the end it was possible to 'know' the participants a little better precisely because of the problems involved in bringing the project to a successful conclusion and the sometimes strained relationship that developed between researcher and researched.

Preiser writes on the tensions and the risks involved in an overt participation observation of nightclub bouncers in Germany. Her wide ranging discussion focuses on three main aspects of this type of ethnographic work: Firstly, the risks involved for the participants and the researcher; Secondly, how openness, discretion and active but restrained participation can contribute to the success of the endeavour; and finally, how intentional blanks in fieldnotes - partly inadvertent, partly intentional - can help to protect the participants. In sum, Preiser argues that this type of work involves a constant balancing act between competing logics. On the one hand is the logic of ethnography to reveal that which is ordinarily hidden, and on the other is the logic of research ethics to prevent harm to participants as far as possible. She suggests that ethnographic data needs to remain incomplete, because it is through silences and absences that we can guarantee the privacy and anonymity of our participants and thus encourage them to allow us into their worlds.

Stephen Wakeman, whose article in the *British Journal of Criminology* on autoethnography (2014) resonated with us as we worked on the special issue, looks forward to the future of the burgeoning field of autoethnography in his afterword. For Wakeman, autoethnography provides a means through which both theory and practice

can be critiqued and created anew. His piece serves as something of a call to arms against an unreflexive and often leaden criminology and is a fitting way to end the issue. As he puts it, "the real beauty of the autoethnographic approach then is that it can provide a means by which both our discipline's dominant theories - *as well as the dominant, privileged voices that propagate and protect them* - can be challenged and transcended."

References

Lumsden, K. and Winter, A. (2014) 'Reflexivity in Criminological Research' in Reflexivity in K. Lumsden and A. Winter (eds). *Criminological Research: Experiences with the powerful and the powerless*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wakeman, S. (2014) Fieldwork, Biography and Emotion: Doing Criminological Autoethnography. *British Journal of Criminology* 54: 705-721.