Places on Probation:An auto-ethnographic account of co-produced research with women with criminal biographies.

Abstract

This chapter offers an auto-ethnographic account that charts the complexity or ‘messiness’ of conducting research that seeks to capture the lived experiences of women who are currently or have recently been subject to punishment within the community, whilst also drawing upon my own experiences of criminalisation and community punishment. The research is co-produced with criminalised women using a methodological framework that utilises various ‘messy’ ethnographic methods, as a means by which to prioritise these marginalised women as experts in their own lives. Focusing upon intersections of offender supervision, community, and female desistance, this chapter reveals a frequently untold account of researcher emotions and biography to create ‘emotional moments’; revealing the co-operation, conflict, and fears produced by researching female ex-offender’s experiences as a female ex-offender myself. Revealing my biography and the additional costs, benefit, and tensions that this brought to the research will go some way to reinstating an emotive researcher that prioritises the emotional experience of women subject to punishment.

Key Words

Emotion, punishment, female offender, auto-ethnography, Participatory Action Research.

Introduction

In contemporary criminology, there have been repeated calls for greater researcher reflexivity, or the ‘reversal of the ethnographic gaze’ (Ferrell & Hamm, 1998; Kane, 1998; Wakeman, 2014). However, accounts of the emotion involved in doing criminological research are still scarce. Hubbard, Backett-Millburn and Kemmer (2001) suggest that this is due to researchers intuitively ‘screening ourselves out’ of the types of research that may provoke emotional distress due to our own personal biographies. For criminologists with criminal biographies, particularly researching with individuals with convictions, ‘screening ourselves out’ of research that arouses emotional memory becomes more difficult. In fact, the researcher may have been drawn to criminology precisely because of their own biography as part of their ongoing desistance.

Maruna (2001) suggests that over their life-course, ex-offenders make sense of their transition from offending to desisting from crime through narrative scripts; the condemnation script and the redemption script. The redemption script describes how an offender attributes their desistance from crime to outside forces. In turn, as part of their continued desistance, they seek to payback as a form of gratitude, or to help others like their past selves (Maruna, 2001). With education frequently lauded as the key to a “better”, crime-free, life by criminal justice practitioners, it is clear to see how some narratives of desistance become entwined with researcher identities.

By crafting an auto-ethnographic account of a participatory action research project with women who have been or currently are subject to community punishment and surveillance, this chapter will contribute to Wakeman’s (2014) attempt to ‘foster an intellectual environment that welcomes – indeed, *demands* – further problematizing of the self as a means of progressing towards a more comprehensive account of research subjects’ (p. 706). This will be achieved by following Andersons (2006) five key principles of analytic auto-ethnography. I am ‘complete member researcher’, for I and the women in this study do not only share the label of offender/ex-offender, but we have also experienced the same category of punishment and types of interventions. This paper will contribute to my continued ‘analytical reflexivity’, as I draw upon my own experiences to better understand the experience of the women in this study, and am able to reflect upon my own desistance. There will be a visibility of myself, as a researcher and co-producer of research, within the text. However, this will be alongside the women who were also co-producers of research. Above all, this paper will contribute to an ‘analytical agenda’, where my emotions and biography are considered together, alongside those of the women in this study, in order to contribute to understandings of female desistance (Anderson, 2006).

Structured in three parts, this chapter will firstly summarise auto-ethnography in criminology, making the case that auto-ethnography extends beyond ethnographers and can apply to all types of research that call for participation by both the researcher and participant; in this case Participatory Action Research (PAR). This research offers an example of how ethnographic practices, such as thick description, can partner with research methodologies that seek to centre the experience of the researched to produce unique understandings of lived experiences of punishment. Secondly, this paper will examine how my biography influenced the practicalities of this PAR cycle, examining my intentions, the reality of the situation and the response that this received from the women who took part in this study. The final section will address my biography and emotion, during which we will look specifically at the intersections of my own experiences and the experiences of criminalised women demonstrated within this research. Here I consider the impact of emotion and biography in producing ‘emotional moments’ within this research, and the value that considering an analytical auto-ethnography can bring to criminological research in general.

Auto-ethnography in criminology

In recent years there has been an increased interest in the value of auto-ethnography in criminological research, spearheaded by scholars such as Stephen Wakeman (2014) and Yvonne Jewkes (2012) Whilst increasing in popularity, there has often been more of a focus upon biographical methods of understanding from those criminologists that have had deviant biographies, rather than the critical reflection upon the research process, and therefore the products of the process, that analytical auto-ethnography can bring. Convict criminologists have bridged this gap to an extent, however, the pre-requisite of convict criminology is having spent time ‘on the inside' in prison (Earle, 2014). With the expansion of the carceral net, and the ever-growing use of non-custodial sentences (McNeill & Beyens, 2013), convict criminology fails to capture the experiences of punishment ‘on the outside’ for both researcher and research participant.

In giving an account of his research with drug users, Wakeman (2014) considers the advantages and pitfalls of shared researcher/participant identities. He argues for an increased consideration of the self within criminology research; demonstrating how it is possible to include the emotive self, both past and present, to enhance ‘criminology’s methodological repertoire’ (Wakeman, 2014, p. 5). This is in stark contrast to the promotion of ‘scientific’ procedures and categorizations researchers are encouraged to apply to their research (Wakeman, 2014).

The inclusion of such expression of feeling, acknowledging researcher emotion and biography within research, is viewed as ‘intrusion by the researcher’ (Jewkes, 2011, p. 65). It is also feared that becoming emotionally connected, let alone highlighting researcher emotion and biography, can lead the researcher to ‘forgo the academic role’, losing objectivity and rendering the study less than scientific (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 376; Hubbard et al., 2001). However, Hubbard, Backett-Millburn and Kemmer (2001) agree that the ‘researcher is not merely an instrument to facilitate data collection’ (p120). This sentiment is particularly relevant within methodologies that encourage and even demand participation by both participant and researcher; such as ethnography and participatory action research.

Participatory action research with criminalised women.

The tension between researching women with criminal biographies as a female ex-offender myself was acknowledged from the outset of this research. The initial research proposal did not focus on women at all, due to my own anxieties of discrediting the knowledge produced from the research with my own biography. It was with these reservations in mind that I looked for developing methodologies that would help me situate the women as the expert, and myself a facilitator of research – prioritising their voices and experiences above my own. It is within this context that this project was designed, implemented and disseminated as a piece of Participatory Action Research (PAR).

Wakeman (2014) points to standpoint feminist epistemologies to challenge orthodox criminological research practices as well as ‘rendering clear progressive accounts of criminological subjects' (p. 709). PAR is a similarly feminist research methodology that seeks to challenge dominant hierarchies of knowledge (Lykes & Crosby, 2014). As such, an enhanced level of reflexivity was required during the research process that included reflective notes in my research diary that linked this research, my biography and the emotion produced when combining the two. It was in these notes that thick description combined my own immersive lived experience of punishment with what was said by the women in this study to describe what was felt in these ‘emotional moments’. Ryle (1971) described how ‘thick’ description involves ‘understanding and absorbing the context of the situation or behaviour. It also involves ascribing present and future intentionality to the behaviour’ (Ponterotto, 2006, p. 539). It was through the use of thick description in auto-ethnography within this PAR that biography and emotion became a distinct analytical tool.

The research in question centres on women who currently are, or have recently been, subject to probation supervision in the community within the North-West of England. Women were recruited through two projects, one a peer mentoring service assisting women with convictions to find employment, training and educational opportunities, and one a women’s centre. This was to capture the experiences of women currently subject to punishment and those who were no longer subject to punishment but had experienced this within the past 5 years. As PAR dictates, women were involved at each stage of the research process, inviting them to be ‘collaborators in defining questions, selecting methods, analysing data and disseminating findings, with the goal of pursuing social justice and change directly’ (Pain, 2009: p512).

My biography informed and sculpted my research practise and interaction with participants. However, the intention from the outset was to restrain my biography, only disclosing relevant facts when absolutely necessary. Yet in the transition from proposal to practise, the intentions, realities, and participant responses were shaped by my biography in ways that, in turn, significantly shaped the research. These specific moments, where research and biography met created emotional moments.

Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, and Kemmer (2001) discuss emotion within research as sensuous, cognitive and social/cultural experiences that remain simultaneously and inseparably linked.

‘Emotions, in other words, are *emergent* properties, located at the intersection of physiological *dispositions*, material *circumstances* and socio-cultural *elaboration*’ (emphasis in original Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, & Kemmer, 2001: p.121; Williams, 1998: p.750).

Hubbard et al. (2001) argue that within research, emotion consists of three parts; the ‘emotional labour’ of the researcher (Hochschild, 1983), ‘emotionally-sensed knowledge’, and sociology of emotion (Bendelow & Williams, 1998). Within this paper, I am addressing the emotionally-sensed knowledge produced through the process of PAR with women with offending biographies.

Biography and emotion in practice

I conducted this research on two different sites during 2016. The first site was within a peer-mentoring program for women with convictions. I gained access to this site partly due to having previously been a peer mentor when the programme was in its infancy, over seven years earlier. The second site was a women’s centre, to which access was obtained through my association with the first site; although in this case, I had never been in contact with the centre in any capacity other than as a researcher.

I approached the peer-mentoring programme director with my research ideas and asked to pitch my research plans at a team meeting, with a view to involving the current peer mentors at the centre; initially including them to help shape the research focus beginning the co-produced PAR process. My intention here was to approach the women as ‘researcher’ and not ‘ex-peer mentor/ ex-offender’, believing that, by holding back my biography, I would highlight their biographies unimpeded by my own experiences and ways of understanding. The reality of the encounter was, due to my entwined history with the project, I was introduced as an ex-peer mentor before it was explained that I intended to conduct research. This introduction signalled to the women I approached that I did indeed have a shared criminal biography, for a criminal biography was a requirement of the role.

In Wakeman’s (2014) auto-ethnographic account of research with drug users, he states that it is crucially important that the reader is aware of his history of heroin and crack cocaine addiction, yet further details of his biography are unimportant. I agree that within the context of applying an auto-ethnographic account to our research only minimal disclosure is required by the researcher, knowing I am a female ex-offender is sufficient information. However, unlike Wakeman (2014) who states ‘only once was I asked if I had ever taken drugs, to which I responded truthfully that I had when I was younger. Other than this, the participants did not quiz me about my biography’ (p. 711), my experience was considerably different. Upon receiving an introduction that alluded to my biography, the women then asked me many questions; in the beginning, they appeared more interested in my biography than the research project. To gain insights, not just access, I needed to answer their qualifying questions.

Taking lead from feminist scholars (Oakley, 1981; Reinharz, 1992), and considering participatory nature of the methodological framework within which my research is set, I decided that full self-disclosure was necessary at this point. Sidestepping the question would, at best, signal reluctance to share (contrary to the methodological context of co-production) and suggest to them they should also be guarded. At worst, the women may think me to be deceitful and could refuse to engage with me altogether. Therefore, I answered the women’s questions candidly, observing that although I felt particularly self-conscious due to the inevitable disclosure of details about my biography, this was a ritual applied to all ‘outsiders’.

By possessing similar biographies to the women, I was granted detailed insights into their everyday lives, experiences and emotions with little resistance. However, due to my biography, they applied a further series of qualifying questions in order to understand exactly how ‘like them’ I was. These began with details about my offence, becoming broader; including questions such as how many children I have, and where geographically I grew up. Once I had answered enough questions that they were able to find the part of my biography that made me different from them, the questions ceased. Not because of my current socio-economic status, but because of the difference in our historic identities.

In my case, the key difference was the socio-economic contexts of the areas in which we grew up. I was accepted by the women at this point, but only as ‘the posh one’, as the area within which I grew up had become gentrified in recent years. It felt significant that the women looked to the past to search for differences and commonalities rather than the contextual realities of our current situations.

Reflection upon past events rather than looking to the present or future became a significant and reoccurring theme within the research. Many of the women found it easier to speak about their lives before criminalisation, too traumatised by the present, and unable to look into the future. This interaction became more than simply gaining access, it became a useful exemplar for analysis. I remember experiencing the inability to look beyond sentencing and punishment, the jumbled fog that the process of thought became at this time. Later conversations would end abruptly when the future was interrogated, and the pain of thinking forward was evident. Future thinking became emotional moments, that reignited buried pains from both the participants and my past.

Emotional moments were scattered throughout the research relationship. Upon seeking participation from the women and their consent to the research, I had one refusal, who subsequently left the room but re-joined at a later session. After the later sessions, she confided that she had thought there was nothing I could possibly offer her that could help her current situation. Asking why she decided to return, she explained that the other women had reassured her that I was ‘sound’, and that she would benefit from the sessions as I ‘was like a shrink that had a past’. The emotional moments and links between our biographies allowed me to occupy space that lay between practitioner and criminalised woman, a position that produced trust, respect and a unique research partnership.

During research sessions, the women broadly fell into one of two groups depending upon how closely our biographies were entwined. Those who biographies were too dislocated from mine to be relatable, with different life experiences, convictions, or family relationships, tended to disengage or resist the process. The women whose biographies were most relatable to mine shared enthusiastically even when emotional or distressed. One incidence of enthusiastic sharing was a slightly older female. When it was her turn to discuss the map she had created, she stood up in the room, pinned her map to the wall and presented it to the group. In many ways, she mirrored the way in which I presented the research in the very first meeting. By recognising her own experiences in mine, she then used our similarities to inform her own behaviour and increase her power within this situation. Michael Taussig (1993) describes how “the wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and the power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power” (1993: xiii). In this situation, her mimicry of my behaviour extends the similarity of our experiences from the past and into the future, as she enacts my ‘reformed’ behaviour.

Conclusion

Biography and emotion affected this research in two distinct ways. Firstly, the disclosure of my past criminal conviction had practical implications within the research process. In gaining access the women opened up to me more freely than I believe they would have had I not disclosed. A non-disclosure here would have ruled out disclosing all of my biography (criminal or not), which would have made me less able to participate in this co-produced PAR and would have hindered my ability to meaningfully engage. Secondly, the way in which my emotions and biography added to the theoretical analysis and understanding of the important themes the women identified within the research. The emotional moments identified aided the critical analysis of the data produced. The analysis focused upon not only what was said, but what was felt. The unsaid became moments where my biography, experience, and the emotions felt in the room, were required to fill in the gaps through a thick description of my own immersive lived experience.

Sharing my biography in a frank and open way, which the PAR relationship demands, meant that my biography was no longer my own, but knowledge for the women to reflect upon and use as evidence, with their own experiences, to form action. When reflecting on her own past in a group discussion, a participant kept looking at me and saying, ‘*well you know what it’s like don’t you?’* She felt no need to elaborate, as a tear rolled down her face. I did know, for out of all the participants our biographies are the most alike. It is now my responsibility to translate that in ways that people unlike us can understand. It was in these moments that the pain of punishment, shared experience, and responsibility that emotional anxieties were produced. I began to critically interrogate my own experiences. The responsibility involved in saying ‘I was there and now I'm here' weighs heavy, as, through my studies and experiences of peers, I know my present is not a typical outcome for criminalised women.

The importance of acknowledging the influence of emotions and biography upon this research is not simply a methodological issue, to position myself within my research, or to be reflexive to justify my findings. It is to fully understand the importance of the emotionally-sensed knowledge produced through this piece of participatory research. The ‘messiness’ of sharing personal biography and emotional moments are captured within autoethnography in a way that cannot be understood in alternative methods. Despite this research consisting of a participatory action research framework, it is only in the use of ethnographic methods that a deeper understanding of ‘insider research’ can be found.

Bibliography

Anderson, L. (2006). Analytical Autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *35*, 373–95.

Bendelow, G., & Williams, S. (1998). *Emotions in social life*. London: Routledge.

Earle, R. (2014). Insider and Out. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *20*(4), 429–438. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800413515832

Ferrell, J., & Hamm, M. (1998). *Ethnography at the edge: Crime, deviance, and field research*. Northeastern University Press.

Fontana, A., & Frey, J. H. (1994). Interviewing: The Arts of Science. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, *i*, 361–376. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jconhyd.2010.08.009

Hochschild, A. (1983). *The Managed Heart: Commercialisation of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hubbard, G., Backett-Milburn, K., & Kemmer, D. (2001). Working with emotion: Issues for the researcher in fieldwork and teamwork. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *4*(2), 119–137. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570116992

Jewkes, Y. (2012). Autoethnography and Emotion as Intellectual Resources. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *18*(1), 63–75. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800411428942

Kane, S. (1998). Reversing the ethnographic gaze: experiments in cultural criminology. In *Ethnography at the edge: crime, deviance, and field research* (pp. 132–145). Northeastern University Press.

Lykes, B. M., & Crosby, A. (2014). Feminist Practise of Action and Community Research. In Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *Feminist Research Practise: A Primer (2nd eds.)* (pp. 145–181). Boston: Boston College.

Maruna, S. (2001). *Making Good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives*. London: American Psychological Association.

McNeill, F., & Beyens, K. (2013). *Offender Supervision In Europe*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Oakley, A. (1981). Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms. In *Doing Feminist Research* (pp. 36–61). Routledge.

Pain, R. (2009). Introduction: doing social geographies. In S. Smith, R. Pain, & S. A. Marston (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Social Geographies* (pp. 507–515).

Ponterotto, J. G. (2006). Brief Note on the Origins, Evolution, and Meaning of the Qualitative Research Concept Thick Description. *The Qualitative Report*, *11*(3), 538–549. Retrieved from http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr

Reinharz, S. (1992). *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ryle, G. (1971). *Collected papers. Volume II collected essays, 1929-1968*. London:

Hutchinson.

Taussig, M. T. (1993). *Mimesis and alterity: A particular history of the senses*. Psychology Press.

Wakeman, S. (2014). Fieldwork, biography and emotion: Doing criminological autoethnography. *British Journal of Criminology*. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azu039

Williams, S. (1998). Modernity and the emotions: corporeal reflections on the (ir)rational. *Sociology*, *32*, 747–769.