



Ethnographic research on crime and control: Editors' introduction

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Abstract

Jennifer Fleetwood and Gary R. Potter introduce a Special Section on ethnographic research on crime and control.

Keywords

Ethnography, criminology, criminal justice, reflexivity

Ethnography has a special place in the history of criminology and the sociology of deviance. While other methodological approaches may be more widely employed, commitment to prolonged presence, and sometimes participation, undoubtedly generates rich data and theoretical insight. Many of the most successful theories and perspectives within criminology (strain, sub-cultural theories, differential association, labeling, etc.) have emerged unashamedly from ethnographic research, and many of the biggest names in criminology have been ethnographers for at least part of their research careers.

Ethnographic research is particularly suited to studying crime, control and victimisation. Given that crime has no ontological reality (Hillyard and Tombs, 2004), positivist approaches – in isolation – seem doomed to fail. Quantitative research, including criminal justice statistics, is a mainstay of criminological research, but ethnography is uniquely able to get under the skin of the phenomenological draws of crime and control and the corporeal realities of victimisation. Ethnographic methods – that is, prolonged presence, observation and perhaps participation and interviews – allow us to explore the relationships between crime and control, to see the world from the perspective of those we seek to study and to understand the broader social and cultural milieu in which such behaviours – and state responses to them – manifest. To borrow from Oscar Wilde, overreliance on uncritical positivist approaches that seek only to *measure* behaviours may allow us to count everything but risk revealing the value of nothing. Qualitative methods help reverse this bias, prioritising understanding over measurement.

But beyond this, ethnographies can inspire. They are the books we proudly display in our offices (having actually read them) – the ones we pack for long journeys, read in hospital

waiting rooms or take on holiday (when we're supposed to be having a break from work, etc.). By weaving together history, biography and culture and shedding light on the everyday good, ethnography enthuses researchers and their audiences – students, fellow academics, practitioners and the general public – with its ability to contribute both depth and breadth to our knowledge of groups who are often marginalised and poorly understood. Making the alien, strange or threatening comprehensible has long been a strength of ethnographic research – a task that remains vital in the contemporary context of global, social and cultural division.

Ethnographic research on crime and control is arguably undergoing a period of unprecedented creativity and vitality, influenced in part by the emergence of cultural criminology in the late 20th century (Ferrell et al., 2015) and ultra-realism in the early 21st century (Hall and Winlow, 2015). Ethnography has once again been centrally situated within critical and radical criminological traditions pitched now, as previously, as an essential counter-point to the quantitative methods of the positivist approaches that have come to dominate a 'mainstream' criminology seeking to position itself as 'scientific' in its approach (see, for example, Hall and Winlow, 2016; Young, 2011). Although cultural criminology never advocated exclusively for ethnography, as a holistic method it is nonetheless well placed to appreciate the

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subjective, sensual aspects of crime (Ferrell, 1997). And although Wacquant (2002) claimed that prison ethnography was in ‘eclipse’, the preponderance of PhD students researching ‘under the radar’ in prisons – and other criminal justice institutions – says otherwise (Jewkes, 2016).

Yet, it has long been stated that ethnography is under threat as a major research approach in contemporary criminology, caught between the dual pressures of demands for output (increasingly measured – that positivist word again – by number of publications, citations and impact) and research governance (including ethics procedures and risk assessments) (Adler and Adler, 1998; Hall and Winlow, 2012). Ethnography does not always fit with the former demand, dependent on extensive periods of fieldwork, lending itself to publication in book form rather than as multiple journal articles and often (but by no means always) producing findings that may appear to be limited in their generalisability (when set against the yardsticks of positive methods – which of course entirely misses the point of ethnography) due to engaging with small and unrepresentative samples. And criminological ethnography can be controversial – researchers’ engagement with criminals and knowledge of (and, at times, participation in) illegal behaviour throw up ethical questions, and examples exist of ethnographers who have maybe gone too far. Academic institutions, like so many other bodies, are increasingly risk-averse and may wish to avoid the publicity and scrutiny that goes with examples like Alice Goffman (accused first of participating in serious crime and then of making up data), Bradley Garrett (arrested and prosecuted for committing crimes with his research subjects), Laud Humphreys (1975) (whose work on the ‘Tearoom Trade’ features as a core text on so many ethics courses) or Rik Scarce (who served prison time for refusing to share the contact details of his respondents with law enforcement). Although our counterparts in the United States predicted that the institutional ethical governance of research was a death knell for ethnography or ‘risky’ research (Haggerty, 2004), PhD students, supervisors and researchers have nonetheless managed to defend their research and soldier on.

Against the background of increased teaching and administration-related workloads, finding the time, freedom and institutional support to engage with ethnographic research is undoubtedly difficult for most academic criminologists. Yet in the challenging times of late (high, post-, reflexive, liquid) modernity, where the nature of both deviance itself and responses thereto seem to be constantly – and rapidly – changing alongside broader changes in society, culture and communication, the insights gained from the immersive nature of ethnography are perhaps more important than ever. Fortunately, ethnographic research in British criminology is alive and well – and while PhD researchers (who have the time and freedom to engage in sustained, in-depth fieldwork) may dominate this area, ethnography is also employed by many research-active criminologists both within and beyond

academia. We present this Special Section to celebrate and support criminological ethnographers out there – and to encourage other, would-be ethnographers to follow suit. But we also hope to demonstrate the importance and utility of ethnography within the criminological endeavour – and to encourage fellow academics, managers and departmental heads, and funders and policy-makers to actively support ethnography despite the current academic climate.

The Special Section

The Special Section we present here emerged from a Symposium on ‘Doing ethnographic research on crime and control’, held at the University of Leicester in May 2015 (more below). It brings together articles by emergent UK ethnographers undertaking ethnographic research on crime, control and victimisation.

The continuing success of ethnography owes much to a long-standing tradition of reflective practice: offering detailed confessionals and personal accounts on the myriad issues encountered in the field and beyond. Researching crime and control is at times particularly tricky: ethical and legal issues abound. Although good accounts in print do exist (e.g. Hobbs and May, 1993), researchers have reputations to build, or protect, and so narrative accounts of fieldwork demand a productive resolution. That is to say, published accounts almost always have a happy – or, at least, a definite – ending, whereas in reality fieldwork tends to leave loose ends all over the place. These realities of ethnographic field research are often discussed in the corridors of universities or in the pub at conferences. These informal discussions have different rules: there is less need to present the job as finished or even as well done. Mistakes can be discussed and solutions mulled over together. These kinds of discussions can also subvert hierarchies: after all, with some exceptions, PhD students tend to be closer to the field, lending them a vivid connection to fieldwork that office-bound academics lack. The main problem with such discussions is that there is never enough time.

The Symposium, snappily titled ‘Doing ethnographic research on crime and control’ was dreamt up to give space to these important discussions. It gathered momentum, especially when Professors Peter and Patricia Adler agreed to come to the United Kingdom and join in (not just as keynote speakers, but as active participants throughout) and when Professor Yvonne Jewkes and Dr James Treadwell agreed to give plenary papers – together representing the dual themes of research on crime (James) and control (Yvonne). Word of the symposium spread, and a team of fantastic ethnographers committed to attending and participating, including enthusiastically agreeing to some unorthodox requests (more below). Of course, none of the above could have happened without the financial backing of the University of Leicester, and in particular the support of Professors John Goodwin and Adrian Beck who committed last minute funding that meant that the symposium could be free.

In order to reflect the free-wheeling nature of pub-based conversations, strict rules were needed. Aside from plenaries, most of the symposium was composed of parallel sessions foregrounding discussion rather than quiet listening. Speakers had just 10 minutes to reflect on the topic at hand; literature reviews and PowerPoint/Prezi were banned. Speakers were given licence to pose questions (rather than answers) and to speak to the personal as well as professional aspects of fieldwork. The Chatham House rule was adopted to encourage open and honest debate. Sessions included reflections on the role of the researcher's body and emotions in research, lively discussions about ethics and legal issues, and negotiating access to criminal justice institutions, drawing on a diverse array of research topics from computer hacking to parkour, policing and probation culture, festivals and protests. Chairs were under strict instruction to encourage everyone to participate regardless of formal academic status. The success of the event owes much to presenters who dared to leave the safety of rehearsed scripts, chairs who set the tone for discussion and participants for their thoughtful, honest and enthusiastic participation in discussion. In particular, Patti and Pete were fantastic contributors who shared their extensive knowledge without making the rest of us feel naïve: their plenary 'The FAQs of ethnography on crime and deviance: What everyone wants to know but is afraid to ask' offered a rare peek behind the scenes at the craft, as honed over decades of experience.

Translating the spirit of the symposium into print has not been easy. Bluntly put, the kinds of things that could be said in the safe confines of the symposium pose problems for journal editors and authors alike – and the majority of contributors and contributions to the symposium did not translate into articles. As a result, some submissions are missing. Of course, we are duty bound not to discuss the whys and wherefores, but some of the issues extend beyond single submissions, so perhaps we can say something in more general terms. The legal (and indeed public) risks run by ethnographers were an important theme of discussion at the conference – most well known being Alice Goffman and Bradley Garrett. These cases (and others similarly) say much about the contemporary nature of ethnography and also stimulate important debates about our professional practice. Nonetheless, translating them onto the page, and out of the context of our professional 'huddle', proves complex work indeed. Frank discussion between ethnographers about our craft is vital but becomes hugely more complex when the 'audience' includes any number of unknown 'others'. A second theme that turned up as we reviewed papers was how much of the researcher's 'self' to reveal. This is not a new debate (Jewkes, 2012), but it was especially salient since many contributors – both to this Special Section and the parent symposium – are emerging scholars for whom the costs of identifying oneself as deviant, or even as deviant-sympathetic, may come at a high cost. While criminologists might

value insider status and even deviant experiences, to the lay audience, these same experiences likely undermine our objectivity and credibility. While these hurdles have been difficult to manage, arguably they confirm the importance of the symposium itself – there is no substitute for being together to spark discussion. Nonetheless, the following contributions offer fascinating insights into the challenges that dedicated, in-depth fieldwork generates. The papers we present here illustrate methodological innovations while reflecting on practical, ethical and personal challenges inherent in many ethnographies, but not always so openly or reflexively discussed in print.

In our opening paper, Hannah Thurston discusses her ethnography of punishment museums in Texas, advocating strongly not only for the museum as an ethnographic site but also for the importance of reflecting on personal emotions as museum visitor/researcher and as observer of other visitors and staff as she and they interact with the artefacts and architecture of what is both an educational and a tourist institution. In a similar vein, but dramatically different context, Deidre Ruane reports on conducting research into drug use at music festivals and combining the roles of support worker, researcher and festival participant – reflecting on how these sometimes competing, sometimes complementary identities both demand innovative methods and generate novel empirical and theoretical insights. Irene Zempi also focuses on the relationship between researcher identity and emotion, and participatory methods as she discusses her decision to adopt a (partial) insider status by donning the veil in her research into Islamophobic victimisation. She explores the ethical dilemma of such an approach (which flirts with problems of deceit and of cultural appropriation) and the emotional challenges relating to her own experiences of victimisation while adopting the identity of her research subjects – and reflects on both the personal and academic aspects of this experience.

Gary Potter's contribution moves away from the personal reflexivity of the first three papers, but continues the theme of methodological innovation in ethnography. Drawing on over 15 years of experience researching cannabis cultivation, his discussion of the role of – and interplay between – online and offline ethnographic approaches provides an important lesson for the contemporary era: as aspects of criminality (like all other forms of social interaction) increasingly straddle both the 'real' and 'virtual' worlds (and as the distinction between the two becomes increasingly artificial), so ethnographic research much integrate online and offline approaches rather than prioritising either over the other.

Changing focus again, Tracey Elliott and Jennifer Fleetwood conclude the collection with a discussion on the legal risks related to criminological ethnography. Combining Elliott's legal with Fleetwood's ethnographic expertise, they tackle the problem of 'guilty knowledge' – of receiving information about, or even directly witnessing, criminal activity during fieldwork. It is likely some relief to many of

us working in this tradition to know the limits of the law here (there is no default duty to report crimes we find out about during research, at least under UK law), which may help us (in part, if not entirely) to deal with some of the ethical dilemmas inherent in criminological ethnography.

Postscript: future of the symposium

In 2016, we met at the University of Birmingham for a second Symposium on Ethnographic Research for Crime and Control. Newcomers Professor Dick Hobbs and Dr Ben Crewe, as well as a returning Yvonne Jewkes, gave inspiring plenaries. As previously, we were struck by the vibrancy of ethnographic research in the United Kingdom. Panel discussions were wide ranging: as before, ethical dilemmas abounded and questions of how much of the researcher to reveal and conceal in writing up were writ large. Again, we were enthralled by the very wide range of research topics from wildlife crimes to ‘violent’ sports and ethnographic research in institutions as diverse as prisons and children’s homes. In 2017, we are taking a break, but plan to return in 2018. It is hoped that the symposium continues to cultivate expertise on ethnographic research, as well as offers support for participants in their endeavours in the field and in print. In this same spirit, we are proud to be bringing these papers to a wider audience via *Methodological Innovations*.

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