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# **Fieldwork, Biography and Emotion: Doing Criminological Autoethnography**

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## **Abstract**

This article presents an introductory yet critical overview of autoethnographic research in criminological contexts. Drawing on experiences of participant observation with heroin and crack cocaine users and dealers, as a former user and dealer of these drugs myself, the article demonstrates how the domains of fieldwork, biography and the emotions intersect to render clear a progressive account of heroin addiction. However, this is offset against some negative occurrences directly reducible to doing ethnography where biographical congruence exists between the researcher and the researched. Ultimately it is argued here that an increased consideration of the self – biographically and emotionally – both permits and facilitates the presentation of analytic yet stylised data in the form of what is termed below, ‘lyrical criminology’.

## **Key Words**

Research Methods, Heroin, Addiction, Ethnography, Lyrical Sociology

## Introduction

For some time now criminologists have been calling for a ‘reversal of the ethnographic gaze’ (e.g. Ferrell and Hamm, 1998; Kane, 1998) and recent years have seen many compelling accounts of ‘the self’ in criminological research (e.g. Liebling, 1999; Ferrell, 2006; Phillips and Earle, 2010). Despite this however, it would still be fair to say that most criminologists do not like to talk about themselves and their feelings very much. This has often been attributed to the ways in which the discipline is structured as a social science – criminology’s fixation with ‘methodology’, ‘objectivity’ and ‘restrained language’ effectively ‘discourage any form of biographical or emotional intrusion by the researcher’ (Jewkes, 2011: 65). The present article seeks to problematise and challenge this state of affairs by demonstrating how a greater consideration of the emotive self, both past and present, has much to offer the criminological researcher.

In essence, this article contends that autoethnography – understood as a form of ethnographic enquiry that maintains a strong focus upon the researcher’s biographic and emotive self – has the potential to significantly enhance criminology’s methodological repertoire. To exemplify this I draw upon my experience of conducting ethnographic fieldwork with a group of heroin and crack cocaine users and dealers, as a former user and dealer of these drugs myself.<sup>1</sup> Below I investigate the many ways in which the biographical congruence between my research participants and myself impacted upon the practice of ethnography in the field, the data it engendered, and then how in turn it was presented. These remain under-theorised fields in criminology, yet I am by no means the first to traverse them (see Hobbs, 1988, 1995; Ross and Richards, 2003; Williams and Treadwell, 2008). Broadly, the core claim of such works is that prior involvement with criminality, criminal/deviant cultures, and/or the various processes of criminal justice can provide an enhanced heuristic perspective on such phenomena that criminologists should take heed of.

Here I critically evaluate and extend such arguments. Whilst it may appear that this focus will restrict the applicability of this essay to a small section of the criminological community, this is certainly not the case. For reasons mapped out below the claims and contentions that follow should be of methodological significance to all criminological researchers, regardless of their biography. Drawing inspiration from standpoint feminism (see Smith, 1974; Haraway, 1991; Harding, 2004), the goal of the present article is to foster an intellectual environment that

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<sup>1</sup> Early findings from this research are available in Wakeman and Seddon (2013), more substantive accounts are currently in preparation.

welcomes – indeed, demands – further problematising of the self as a means of progressing towards more comprehensive accounts of research subjects. The greatest achievement of standpoint epistemologies is not, paradoxically, rendering clear the increased heuristic potential to be found in analysis of situated identities, but rather in challenging the normative structure of systems of knowledge. That is, the ways of doing and telling about research that characterise academic fields like criminology.

The article is organised thematically into three sections. The first provides a brief introductory overview of the relationship between criminology and ‘the self’. Here, as a precursor to what follows, an important distinction is made between emotive and analytic autoethnography in that whilst the former is primarily concerned with a researcher’s subjective life experiences, the latter directs its attention more towards the wider social context in which they are set (Anderson, 2006). Secondly I refer to my fieldwork and the ways in which it was both helped and hindered by my biography. Whilst ‘prior cultural knowledge’ (Winlow et al., 2001) of heroin-using cultures and practices was highly advantageous in this research, both in terms of conducting it and developing theory through it, it is also shown to have pressing negative consequences too. Importantly here, claims that specific biographies afford a certain amount of privilege in criminological research too frequently fail to recognise the emotional price one pays for it. Again this remains a severely under-theorised field. Finally, following the work of the sociologist Andrew Abbott (2007), autoethnographic data presentation is argued to constitute a form of ‘lyrical criminology’ in that it can go some way towards enhancing the dominant, narrative-based, accounts that currently characterise criminological scholarship. In summary, it is argued here that 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.

### **Criminology and the Self: The Case for Autoethnography**

There have always been trace elements of the self in criminological texts. A review of either William Foote Whyte’s (1943) *Street Corner Society*, or Clifford Shaw’s (1930) *The Jack-Roller* reveals almost as many references to the authors of these classic works as it does their respective participants, although some of these may not be immediately obvious (see

Gelsthorpe, 2007). However they are to physical rather than emotional selves; to instrumental researchers seeing and recording things rather than emotive beings feeling things. There is a fitting parallel to be drawn here between the self in criminology and the body in social theory. As Shilling (1993) observed, this relationship is characteristic of an ‘absent-presence’. That is, like the body in modern social thought, the self is and always has been present in criminological research, but it is infrequently acknowledged and rarely if ever prioritised to the extent that it can be considered virtually absent too. In relation to this Aldridge (1993: 53) details what she terms the ‘textual disembodiment of knowledge’ across the social sciences, inferring that the ‘self’ is all too frequently written out of texts within these field. Nowhere is this truer than contemporary criminology.

Significantly it is not just the emotive researcher who is often lacking in criminological texts; this is frequently the case regarding participants too. Their transcribed words are privileged over and above any descriptive data of their character, setting or emotive processes, and it is not uncommon to see them assigned numbers rather than names in article write-ups. Indeed, some have even gone so far as to claim that most contemporary criminologists present their data in an ‘inhuman’ form (Bosworth et al., 2005: 259). These two points are related, and arguably the absence of the emotive self – both in terms of the researcher and to a lesser degree the researched – stems from either criminology’s well-documented reticence around ‘the individual’ (Maruna and Matravers, 2007), its ‘physics envy’ (Young, 2011), or it is prerequisite of the administrative functioning (and funding!) of large sections of the discipline. The crux of the matter is this: for various reasons, and despite significant advances in recent years, many criminologists remain hesitant to include much detail of themselves, their life histories, and their emotive processes in the presentation of their research findings.

It is held here that biographically-attuned autoethnography is the ideal means by which this situation can be overcome. Autoethnography is:

a research approach that privileges the individual. It is an artistically constructed piece of prose, poetry, music or piece of artwork that attempts to portray an individual experience in a way that evokes the imagination of the reader, viewer or listener.

(Muncey, 2010: 2)

Or, put another way, it is ‘the ethnographic exploration of the self’ (Ferrell, 2012: 218). Importantly, it is fundamentally concerned with the emotive self; with the individual, their subjective experiences, and the actions and reactions they undergo throughout their situated lives (see Reed-Danahay, 1997; Chang, 2008; Muncey, 2010 for useful overviews). Beyond

this however the prospect of an authoritative definition is somewhat slim due to the breadth of works that can be considered ‘autoethnographic’ – there is even some debate as to whether or not the depth of this field precludes it being recognisable as a research methodology (Muncey, 2010). To illustrate this point, Denzin’s (2014: vii-viii) introductory overview of autoethnography recounts fifteen distinguishable variants of it in the preface alone. Of crucial importance in the present context however is the distinction between evocative and analytic autoethnography.

Anderson (2006) draws attention to this defining evocative (or emotive) autoethnography as being primarily – but certainly not exclusively – concerned with ‘topics related to emotionally wrenching experiences, such as illness, death, victimization, and divorce’ (Anderson, 2006: 377). By way of an example, Catherine Ellis’ work is cited (1995, 2004): here emotive autoethnography is argued to be more than a just research methodology, in fact its integrity is said to be compromised by framing it as simple ‘sociological analyses’. Rather, autoethnography is a space within which the demarcations between the novel and the academic journal can be broken down; its goal is emotional resonance over and above any sort of analytic utility. There is a complete rejection of any pretence towards objectivity and the intention is to create a shared emotional space through autoethnographic stories, poetry, images or prose.

In analytic autoethnography however, the above rejection of objectivity is retained alongside the prioritising of emotional resonance, but there is a greater commitment to the critical and analytical spirit of realist ethnography. That is, there is an imperative placed upon conducting autoethnography as an analytical strategy. The goal is not just to capture emotional and evocative content, but rather to develop a broad critical analysis of any given social phenomenon through it. In this respect analytic autoethnography – or what I term here ‘biographically-attuned autoethnography’ – is not so much a method of self-investigation, but a technique of social investigation conducted through the self.

Analytic autoethnography avoids overly self-absorbed accounts and instead seeks to establish connections between the researcher, the researched, and the wider structural settings both are situated within. Anderson (2006) details five key principles of analytic autoethnography: (1) ‘complete member researcher’ – the researcher is a complete participatory member of the group studied, now or in the past; (2) ‘analytic reflexivity’ – the researcher must engage in ‘self-conscious introspection guided by a desire to better understand both self and others’ (2006: 382); (3) ‘visibility of researcher in the text’ – simply put, the autoethnographer must be a visible presence in their textual output; (4) ‘dialogue beyond the self’ – autoethnography should involve participants alongside the researcher; and (5), ‘a

commitment to an analytical agenda' – here Anderson is most explicit, the above combine to provide 'a broad set of data-transcending practices that are directed toward theoretical development, refinement, and extension' (2006: 387). Analytic autoethnography is not just about biography as a site of analysis, but rather its place and impact in the process of doing fieldwork. Analytical autoethnography is just as much concerned with the ways in which it can aid in the further development of critical social theory as it is with a researcher's past experiences. Situating biography and emotion in the context of research is crucial; as Ferrell (2012: 219) astutely notes, 'first an ethnographer, and only then an autoethnographer'.

However at this point some of the complexities and conceptual traps of biographically-attuned autoethnography become visible. For example it is hardly controversial to reject notions of objectivity in qualitative research, and this is especially true in contemporary ethnography whether a biographic link exists or not. Yet, in examples such as this where a biographic link does exist, it is imperative that the limits to its heuristic utility are recognised. There is a real danger that, in subjectively focusing in too much upon one's self – in terms of history and/or emotive processes – one disconnects themselves from their wider social setting. That is, a rejection of any pretence towards objectivity and a move towards the subjective must not render the researcher blind to the often very objective and real social suffering that criminological research is frequently concerned with.

In this respect, it must also be noted that despite the advances made in this field in recent years, autoethnography is not straightforward and has attracted stern critical attention from criminologists. Both Sparks (2002) and Jewkes (2011) recount the multiple years that passed between the events their autoethnographies depict and their putting them to paper as indicative of their trepidation to engage in such 'self-absorption' (a practice Sparks (2002: 558) insinuates as potentially being 'ethically dubious and of peripheral relevance'). Moreover, Crewe (2009: 488) details his reluctance to foreground himself in his ethnography, 'not because my identity was irrelevant to the study, but because my identity was not what the study was about'. Both of these points are resonant for sure, but both can be negated too. Analytic autoethnography is not an exercise in narcissistic self-absorbed reflection. As demonstrated below it is a method by which the further consideration of emotions, biography and their intersections through research can enhance understandings of any given subject. And secondly, Crewe's (2009) logic certainly holds in his particular case. But not necessarily in others. What if, for example, the researcher is an ex drug user researching drug users? Or a former prisoner doing prison research? Or perhaps a victim of domestic violence doing research with others who have experienced such victimisation, or the perpetrators of this type of violence even? In these

examples – and there are countless others too – distinctions between ‘researcher’ and ‘researched’ identities start to seem a little less secure.

Before moving on it is crucial to note one last factor that impedes the further use of autoethnography in criminology – fear. Fear on the part of its actual and/or potential practitioners. The intolerance of intrusions of the self in criminology is not just bound up with its methodological/scientific aspirations, it can be understood critically as indicative of the discipline’s privileging of certain voices. In one of the most exemplary (auto)ethnographies to date, Randol Contreras recalls the reasons why he was initially disinclined to reveal his criminal past to his readers: ‘[m]ost of all, I was afraid of taking on the dominant White-male, scientific voice, which, for me, is neither neutral nor authentic’ (Contreras, 2013: 18). What he terms ‘standpoint crisis’ is the conflict between a desire to present a solid and rigorous academic contribution, and the need he felt to be honest about the ways in which his biography had influenced both his research and theory, even though his particular biography cast him as something of an ‘outsider’ within his academic discipline. In this sense then, an increased focus upon the self is not just useful in respect of advancing research practices, but also in terms of challenging criminology’s long-established (and potentially counter-productive) hierarchies of knowledge. It is here that the interface with standpoint feminist epistemologies becomes visible – this is not just about rendering clear progressive accounts of criminological subjects, but challenging orthodox criminological research practices too.

In summary, the discipline of criminology is yet to engage properly with the implications of researcher-researched relationships and biographical congruence within them, despite the fact that related issues have surely existed for as long as the discipline itself. However an analytic, biographically-attuned, autoethnography has the capacity to rectify this situation. The autoethnography practiced here is about moments of emotionality and the ways in which they intersect with biography during field research. In terms of how it is actually done, the process involves considering the emotional impacts of fieldwork and biography concomitantly; it requires asking where they intersect and what can be learnt from their matrix? That is, what can the intersections of field experience, biography and emotions reveal about the subject under investigation?

## **Autoethnography with Heroin Users**



The autoethnography underpinning the arguments made here was undertaken across 2012/13 as the basis of an investigation into heroin and crack cocaine use in ‘austerity Britain’. It was conducted on a housing estate in North-West England that I call ‘the Range’. A total of seventeen participants came to be named in this project, six of which were female, the rest male. The youngest was twenty-three, the eldest in her early seventies (and not a heroin user I should add!). The main method of data collection used was participant observation and during my time on the Range I visited the participant’s homes and accompanied them on trips around the town, ‘grafting’ (shoplifting) or ‘scoring’ (buying drugs) typically. I also joined them on some of their more formal engagements too (appointments at ‘the social’, drugs agencies, the doctors etc.). Whilst in the field I was always open about my reasons for being present, but only when asked. I carried a pen and notebook and used them as and when it was appropriate to do so. At the end of each day in the field a detailed set of notes was compiled and shorthand quotations typed up. This was an ethnographic approach that prioritised ‘being with’, and ‘being present’ in moments of meaning-making as they occurred, over and above one that relies on their later recollection in an interview setting. Whilst this was originally mandated by the participants’ wishes not to be recorded, it soon came to be regarded as a key strength of this research (as demonstrated below).<sup>2</sup> The project was granted ethical approval by my university’s research ethics committee in 2012.

The research was originally motivated by one main area of concern; the need to update and revitalise the classic accounts of heroin use conducted in the UK during the 1980s (e.g. Auld et al., 1986; Pearson, 1987; Parker et al., 1988). The rationale behind this was bound up with the current socio-economic context of ‘austerity Britain’ problematising the strong heroin-social exclusion links rendered clear in these early studies. More precisely, the current decline in recorded levels of heroin use can be understood as calling into question the exact nature of this until now reasonably well-established link. In an era of austerity and triple-dip recessions, we should expect to see heroin use – if it is strongly linked to social exclusion and marginalisation – increase dramatically. However, if the numbers are credible (and this is perhaps a big ‘if’), we have seen the exact opposite occur (see Hay et al., 2014) for current prevalence data, and Wakeman and Seddon (2013) for a pertinent critique). This in of itself

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<sup>2</sup> This, I remain convinced, was due to an association between being recorded and being interviewed by the police. Hostility is an entirely appropriate term too – one participant told me early on in the process that if I insisted on carrying a recording device with me I might as well forget about meeting dealers right away. Furthermore, he went on to inform me that should some of the other people on the estate find out I had it, his guarantees of my safety might have to be reconsidered. From here on in I left my voice recorder at home.

was considered motivation enough to think more critically about heroin's socio-economic role(s) in the rapidly evolving context of 'austerity Britain'.

However as is common in ethnographic research such as this, the project's theoretical concerns soon diversified upon entering the field. The very nature of addiction to heroin quickly became a central feature of this research, more specifically the nature of the participants' capacities to enact control over their use of this drug. Whilst heroin's irregular and controlled use has been recorded (see Warburton et al., 2005) there remain those users who, for reasons that are still very much in contention, seem to lose control over their use of this substance. The nature of this 'loss of control' is at the heart of addiction theory, yet remains significantly unaccounted for across the social and natural sciences (Weinberg, 2013). Thus control over heroin use soon became a key analytical interest of this project, with related findings emerging that began to pose questions around whether or not heroin users have been too quickly cast as rational actors with an established ability to enact both choice and control over their consumption of this drug (e.g. Becker & Murphy, 1988). As further demonstrated below, it was in this very domain – the nature of control over heroin use – that the intersections of fieldwork and biography combined to greatest effect in terms of rendering clear a progressive account of this particular phenomenon.

Finally, it is crucial to stress once more before moving on that analytic autoethnography is not just self-absorbed confession. Yet it is crucially important to what follows here that the reader is aware of my biography, specifically the fact that I have a history of heroin and crack cocaine addiction. Further details of my past are not important, what is important is the fact that this biography impacted upon the processes of conducting ethnographic fieldwork with a group of very similar drug users. This was the case in both an instrumental and intellectual sense: that is, how I conducted my research and the intellectual directions in which it unfolded were both impacted upon by the intersections of biography and emotions. Furthermore, these impacts were both positive and negative and as such, are addressed separately here now.

### Biographical Congruence: The Positive

It is certainly true that the biographical congruence between my participants and myself afforded me something of a privileged position in the field. The participants were unaware of my past and as such, I had 'insider' knowledge yet 'outsider' status. Admittedly, this is perhaps ethically dubious due to there being some levels of deception involved. However, withholding my past in this manner was mandated by my earlier experiences of trying to secure access to a

study sample. Some of the first impacts of biography arose when my status as an ‘ex’ drug user actually thwarted early attempts towards institutional access; a local drug service I was in contact with stopped taking my calls after discovering my past yet finding me unwilling to act as a sort of ‘recovery champion’ for them. It was this experience that affirmed my decision to keep my past to myself whilst in the field, initially at least. This was not an easy decision to make though. To avoid any accusations of being disingenuous I decided never to hide my past if asked about it, but not to mention it unless I was. 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; they were of the erroneous belief that working at a university would preclude one from engaging in drug use. While there certainly are important ethical questions here, with some feminist scholars positioning self-disclosure as sound and necessary research practice (Oakley, 1981; Reinhartz, 1992), the fact remains that in this instance, withholding the extent of my past in this manner was entirely ethically defensible.

Crucially in this respect however, this status was privileged; my cultural knowledge of this field meant that I already understood something of the ways in which it operated, but my ‘outsider naivety’ could at the same time justify continued questions. This ‘dual status’ proved to be most useful on the occasions where I found myself in close proximity to what could have become quite serious violence. This biographically-enhanced field position is similar to that described by Dick Hobbs in his pioneering research of London’s East end (Hobbs, 1988, 1995), as well as later work on nightclub security staff (Hobbs et al., 2003). Here a prior understanding of the conventions, norms and traditions of such populations was beneficial in enabling a progressive understanding of them to be developed, but also because awareness of the circumstances that can lead to their infringement helped manage exposure to the results of said infractions. The fact that I did not witness any serious violence (or fall victim to it!) in the field is only creditable to my ability to foresee and avoid it through being aware of my past experiences and the emotions they generated – that is, through what could be termed biographic-emotive awareness.

By way of an example, early in the fieldwork I headed out with ‘Ryan’ (a long-term heroin and crack user in his early forties) to pick up some syringes from a needle exchange located behind a high-street chemist. Only one person is allowed in at a time therefore I waited patiently out back in the dark and isolated ‘goods in’ area, neatly away from the paying

consumers round the front.<sup>3</sup> At this point I spotted a man approaching me from the side with a swift purpose to his step; it quickly dawned on me that I was standing in what was very probably the spot most conducive to being mugged in the whole of the North-West. He asked if I was next in the queue, to which I responded I was not, but was waiting for someone inside. When I mentioned Ryan's name he appeared to know who I was, 'you're the one writing the book then yeah?' he asked. Upon hearing that I was his whole demeanour changed; he told me of his long-term involvement with the drug scene, the recent 'in his arms' death of his friend through overdose, and he stressed his criminal prowess. He also told me that he had kept a diary for many years and I would be welcome to read it anytime. He gave me his phone number and told me to visit him soon. As he lived at the roughest end of the estate he said he would happily meet me in town to ensure my safety as I walked across. He appeared to be a young ethnographer's dream – he was exactly the type of participant I was looking for and could not be more willing to help.

However I never called this man; his enthusiasm simply did not feel right. At no point either did he enquire as to what participation might grant him (as every other participant did – in my experience dependent heroin users do very little for free). This proved to be the first example of many instances where my emotive processes resonated with my biography to guide me. I found myself in a situation I had been in before, but as heroin user. This was in the same emotional apprehension and anxiety I had experienced many years ago as a young heroin user promised the 'best gear in town' could be purchased on the other side of the estate through 'this alley' – upon entering said alleyway I was physically assaulted and relieved of my cash. In subsequent weeks I was warned by another participant to look out for the man I met that day, he was planning to lure me on to the estate rob me. Had I not been reminded so starkly of my past, had I not felt those feelings of fear before, things might have been different that day. Whilst it is almost certainly true that a 'seasoned' ethnographer would have reached this same conclusion, it is equally true that trusting the feelings of a biographic-emotive self – rather than relying on the neutral, objective self that the current intellectual structuring of criminology seems to foster – can be more than useful in situations such as this. Importantly here, this is not to say that ethnography where a biographic link between the researcher and the researched exists is in any way superior to ethnography where no such link can be found, but rather to highlight the fact that in the case of the former said link can be beneficial.

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<sup>3</sup> I am still undecided as to whether this is best representative of an effort to afford service users a degree of privacy, or another example of the ways in which these drug users are physically as well as ideologically excluded from the social mainstream?

This biography-emotion intersection impacted upon the ways in which fieldwork was conducted then; it structured my research in the physical sense of what I did and did not do. However as noted above, analytic autoethnography is primarily about the ways in which consideration of the self can transcend data – the rationale behind this method is the provision of alternative and progressive accounts of the phenomena studied. In this respect emotional-biographic intersections significantly shaped the development of my theoretical understandings as well as the ways in which the research was conducted. This is best exemplified with recourse to some data. The following is an excerpt from my field notes and details a short conversation I had with ‘Tony’, a 31-year-old man who had recently retired from drug dealing and ceased his heroin use a week prior to this meeting.

As I enter the flat I am keen to know if he’s stayed clean, I’m still a bit cautious of him, but confident enough to ask him indirectly:

SW: So how’s it going T, you all right? Better now than the other week yeah?

Tony: I’m good, it’s good man, been off it for ages now [pauses]. Well, I did have some the other day though, and yesterday, but it’s all good like, I’m not rattling [withdrawing] now you know Ste?

He’s talking just like Ryan was the other day, he considers himself ‘off’ heroin but he’s still taking it. Regularly too it sounds.

SW: How long can you go for like that then, like before your habit’s back?

Tony: Not long, couple of days at best really then you’re right back where you started y’ know? I’m sound just now though me. Had to be done Ste, waking up rattling and that, fuck that, that’s not for me no more. I’m glad I’m off it now. I’m not having any today y’ know, I’m keeping a lid on it, I can do that y’ know?

Field notes

The core of this brief extract is Tony’s earnest expression of his desire and ability to remain free from heroin dependency, despite the fact he had taken it yesterday and ‘the other day’ (meaning the day before yesterday I was later assured).

Crucially here this extract can be read and interpreted in two very different ways, and the pivotal factor between them is the inclusion of the emotion-biography intersection. For example, from a position of traditional reflexive research practice I know I have a past and I recognise it has the potential to impact upon my reading of situations such as this. Thus I note it, but through the teachings of my discipline I still privilege the data ‘as is’, or as it initially

appears. As such, the above excerpt shows Tony making positive life changes, taking steps towards desistance even, and exercising control over heroin use. Thus my research and theory develops along these lines. However from the alternative position of biographically-attuned autoethnography, I embrace my past. I embrace what I feel about this moment based on my prior experience of it, and from this position I understand it quite differently. Tony is not demonstrating control here at all – he is demonstrating a need to convey control that, paradoxically, actually demonstrates its absence. I have strong feelings of scepticism here; I suspect he will use again, and that he will do so very soon. I feel this because I recognise the emotional space he is in right now having experienced it myself many times. It is a strange emotional dissonance that stems from projecting one thing externally, yet feeling another internally. Thus, my theory surrounding this subject develops along these very different lines.

For the record, Tony did use again – about three hours after the above conversation took place. After leaving the flat that day to visit a newly established dealer on the estate, Ryan and I went to get chips for lunch. On the way back we bumped into Tony picking up some heroin from said dealer. When we had spoke that morning there had been a moment of emotional recognition and identification; a painful moment of confusion the likes of which are difficult to explain. Through his voice and my past intersecting I felt the desperate confusion of someone who is genuinely unsure as to whether or not they have the capacity to stop themselves doing something they know is harming them. This moment cannot be quantified, nor can it be recreated. It cannot be objectively observed, measured or even precisely defined. Yet this does not mean it is not real. It is moments of empathic emotionality such as this that are key to a progressive understanding of habitual heroin use through autoethnography. Here the limitations of the over-rationalised theories of addiction alluded to above become plain to see, but importantly so too do the ways in which the methodological positions advocated here can begin challenge them.

### Biographical Congruence: The Negative

The above considered however, it is also the case that biographical congruence can hinder research, potentially even rendering it harmful to both the researcher and their participants. For example, in the case of the researcher it was not long after I started the fieldwork that I found myself desiring drugs again. For the first time in many years I started dreaming about the use of heroin and crack. Moreover, a meeting with an individual in particularly poor health caused an outpouring of emotional difficulties due to the death of a friend of mine through very similar

circumstances some time ago. Each visit to the Range reignited painful memories and feelings from my past. Problematically, nowhere in the research methods literature does it detail the true extent to which an ethnographer takes their work home with them. Whilst I was able to physically leave the Range, in an emotive sense it would not leave me. In this respect, deliberately setting out to research fields where biographical congruence exists may not always be an entirely wise choice.

There was a period about halfway through the fieldwork where such difficulties became most pronounced. I became isolated and withdrawn yet still felt a strong need to portray myself as 'ok' to colleagues and all others around me. It was powerful and eventually started to damage my emotional stability. Again however I came to recognise this emotive space – to understand it as one I had inhabited before. Towards the end of my heroin use I reached the same point; no longer able to face the constant effort required to maintain an outward appearance of control, of being 'ok', no longer able to face the fear that my present circumstances were harming me to the extent they were, I came to accept that there was problem – one that was in and of my being – and thus my journey of change began from this point. There is a fitting parallel to be drawn here with my research process. From the time I sat in a colleague's office and confessed that I did not know how much longer I could go on like this, that I did not think I could face another day on the Range or one more night being awoken from violent dreams with the taste of crack cocaine in my mouth, things started to change. Here I found accepting who I once was as an integral part of who I now am to be the very means by which I could overcome the difficulties presented by this research. But, paradoxically, this was only possible through dialogue with others. There is the very real potential in projects such as this for an increased focus upon the self to result in an increasingly isolated self. In this respect, the criminological autoethnography I advocate here should never be undertaken alone.

But there is one other significant problem inherent in autoethnography such as this, one that has the potential to harm research participants. There is a risk that this method produces theory that feeds into harmful and misleading discourses surrounding heroin addiction. That is, there is a risk that my personal experience colours my interpretation to the degree that I lose my analytical edge and present a damaging account of my participants. My experiences of heroin, as both a user and researcher, have lead me to be somewhat sceptical of accounts of 'controlled' heroin use, as they have of the works of those who deny the existence of 'addiction' as anything other than a discursive construct (e.g. Peele et al., 1992; Davies, 1997). However my concerns around challenging such accounts through the above methods surround the ways in which my

developing theory has the potential to overly individualise the problems of heroin addiction. To imply that the problem ‘resided in and of my being’ is categorically not to imply that it is an entirely pathological state, even if this is not too far from the ‘truth’ emerging from my autoethnographic process. Herein lies a problem of representation stemming from autoethnography.

This can be understood, following Contreras (2013), as a representational dilemma. That is, biographic inclusion presents a risk of finding one’s self stuck between two poles: in the present context if I discuss to a large extent the ways in which my biography has steered my understandings of dependent heroin use I perhaps risk portraying my sample in an overly-pathological manner, and/or implying that my case is the case through which the correct understanding is to be reached. However if I do not reveal the extent to which the biography-fieldwork intersection challenges established understandings of this topic I run the risk of failing in my intellectual responsibilities to honestly divulge what I found with integrity and conviction. The solution to this can only be the careful consideration of both biography and fieldwork. Again this is why, as noted above, Ferrell (2012: 219) insisted ‘first and ethnographer, and only then an autoethnographer’. Experience does not directly equal expertise; suffering a heart attack does not make one a cardiologist. Of course either alone can be considered perfectly valid sources of knowledge, but my core claim here is this: autoethnography, when understood as the intersections of research and experience, of fieldwork and biography, can provide a sound epistemic platform upon which meaningful challenges to prevailing theories of criminological subjects can be presented. Thus, it is to such autoethnographic presentation that this essay finally turns.

### **Presenting Autoethnography: Towards a Lyrical Criminology**

Further consideration of the emotive self in criminological research both permits and facilitates the presentation of data in more emotive and stylised ways. As previously mentioned, the participants in this study were initially hostile towards my recording device. This prompted an early revision of my methodological approach in that it called for a switch from interviews to participant observation as the primary technique of data collection. As such, whilst the research presented a space through which the role of the emotive self could be problematised, it also did the same for the ways in which data were presented. A comparative lack of recorded conversations necessitated an increased focus upon descriptive accounts of fieldwork, its



settings and the emotive processes they engendered within me. This in itself can be considered something of a challenge to the dominant ways of presenting qualitative data in criminology, where the participants' transcribed words are currently almost always privileged over and above any other form of observatory and/or descriptive data.

It is arguably the case that the existence of the recording device has dissuaded researchers from engaging in the level of descriptive presentation to be found in seminal ethnographic accounts such as Geertz's (1973) *Notes on a Balinese Cockfight*, or Nancy Scheper-Hughes' (1993) *Death Without Weeping*. Of course, there are practical issues to consider here too. It is certainly true the space confines of many journals preclude much in the way of word-heavy descriptive context (as they also do much in the way of biographical intrusion from the author). However it is not the case that the above should be confined to the monograph only; even with a limited word count available there is still ample room to reconsider the ways in which research data is presented. A final core claim here is that descriptive detail, when hinged upon emotive reactions, can be understood as constituting an alternative, lyrical, method of 'telling about' criminological research.

Such a contention rests on the work of the noted sociologist Andrew Abbott (2007) who coined the term 'lyrical sociology'. Essentially, lyrical sociology is an alternative to narrative presentation of data; it is a method of telling about research with the goal of enabling readers to feel their way to understandings through emotional engagement, rather than being guided to it through linguistic narrative. Whilst it is something of a developing perspective at present, it has been fruitfully employed in an array of different contexts of late – from Penfold-Mounce et al.'s (2011) analysis of the HBO drama series *The Wire*, to Nettleton's (2013) field analysis of outdoor running.

Abbott's (2007) subtitle – *A Preface to Lyrical Sociology* – pays homage to the former poet laureate William Wordsworth and gives some indication of his task. The following extract (recounted here verbatim except for Abbott's exchange of the word 'poems' for 'studies') is from Wordsworth's *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*. It neatly demonstrates the potential of Abbott's epistemic reliance:

The principal object, then, proposed in these [studies] was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain coloring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature...

(Wordsworth, 1801 cited in Abbott, 2007: 71)

The poet and sociologist share a common motivation; an opposition to narrative when it comes to telling about their subjects. Their goal is to make readers feel their understandings through ‘lyric’, rather than be guided to it through ‘narrative’.

To this end, Abbott (2007) sets out his vision for a lyrical sociology under two headings – ‘stance’ and ‘mechanics’ (Abbott, 2007: 73-76). The former has three key components: these are engagement, location and time. A lyrical sociology is engaged rather than distant, and importantly here, engaged at an emotional rather than analytic level; the goal is to recreate a subject’s emotional impact for the reader. In terms of location, Abbott implies that a lyrical sociology needs to be situated both subjectively in its authors’ point of reference, yet objectively in their respective location in space and time. That is, lyrical sociology should convey its authors’ subjective feelings of their objective social situations. And finally, Abbott stresses that a lyric is momentary; lyrical sociology is focused upon subjects in various states of becoming. This is perhaps what most firmly distinguishes it from narrative – lyrical sociology does not tell stories that progress neatly through beginning-, middle- and end-stages: instead it offers snapshots of meaning captured through momentary glimpses of its author’s emotive responses, processes, reactions and conflicts.

The distinction between lyrical and narrative ‘telling’ is further apparent in the divergent mechanics of doing lyrical sociology; authorial intent is different in a mechanical sense. While the narrative writer seeks to document ‘happenings’ and in so doing, explain them, the lyrical writer seeks to convey their emotional reaction(s) to such happenings with a view to allowing their readers to experience them too. Essentially, narrative accounts provide sequences of events while lyrical accounts provide ‘congeries of images’ (Abbott, 2007: 76). In summary, Abbott’s is a sociology concerned with emotions and their reactions, a sociology that attempts to engender feelings about the events it depicts to reveal new ways of thinking about them to their viewer/reader/listener. In essence, lyrical sociology – and as such the lyrical criminology proposed here – is about conveying to an audience emotional processes that tell about subjects. Importantly, this is not simply a matter of decrying narrative as a technique of presenting arguments, but rather it is an attempt to highlight the potential to be found in alternative methods that are yet to be fully explored in a specifically criminological context. Ultimately, it is held here that a biographically-attuned autoethnography constitutes a form of lyrical criminology that can extend the capacity of the discipline to convey its knowledge and understandings of its subjects.

Again, this can be exemplified with recourse to some data:

A dank little kitchen holds the shadow of a man crouched down on its bare black floor. Rays of light pass through holes in a dirty old towel strung up over the window, they ripple over him as his eyes scan his folded forearm with precision, purpose and poise. A syringe nestled behind his ear is plucked from its resting place and as it punctures his skin the noir serenity of the scene ends. Repeatedly the plunger is pulled back and forth; the needle goes in and out many times but all seemingly to no avail. I know what he wants; I know what he needs – yet that tiny inverted mushroom cloud is just not forthcoming. The blood trickling down his arm is sucked off with loud kissing sounds that echo round the whole flat, but he can't stem its flow for long. It drips from his elbow pooling on the floor. A thick black tar has now replaced the translucent promise the needle held just minutes previously. Everything is silent and everything is still, yet tension fills the air. He has a tough choice now and he knows it – this hit is close to congealing. This could ruin it, and going back out there to earn more money rattling like this, well, that's just unthinkable right now. How many more attempts does he make at hitting a vein and getting that rush? He could just pop it in a muscle or under his skin, that'd do the job. But it wouldn't give him what he wants; it won't give him what he needs. Each insertion and each pull on the plunger now risks the loss of this gear, but they still increase in both frequency and vigour. The needle is now jerked about under his skin with reckless abandon. His face contorts with pain and desperation in equal measure, sweat is dripping from his nose and landing near the blood beneath him. Fear exudes from every fibre of his being as two fluids start to infuse. Hope is fading into anger. He stabs harder, he bleeds some more. I feel sick, but I still don't avert my eyes.

Amended from field notes

This is not a story, it is an image. Its purpose is not to explain the disturbing consequences of failing to 'hit' a vein (a harmful feature of heroin use rarely discussed), but rather to convey the feelings of discomfort I felt whilst watching this scene unfold. The rationale behind this is quite simple – it is these feelings that prompt questions around the strength of prevalent criminological explanations of this occurrence. Every drop of blood that fell from this man's arm that day carried with it a proportion of my faith in criminology's ability to account for what I was witnessing. The contention that this ordeal was just some sort of symbolically mediated consumption practice is less than convincing. The emotional response this scene prompted, which I hope to have conveyed here, renders clear a core question: why is it that this individual was willing to subject himself to such harm to get what he wants? That is, this moment of emotionality conveyed through lyrical telling forces the consideration of this individual on a deeper level; it requires that his motivations, beliefs and proclivities – in short, his subjectivity – be problematised further, rather than the whole scenario being understood merely as a discursive construct or his actions written off as a series of rational choices towards desired ends. Heroin addiction is just not that simple. The raw feelings of angst in my stomach that day, the discomfort the above engendered, prompt a question that is somewhat neglected in contemporary criminology: what really motivates this person to do that?

Through the above combined, an autoethnographic ‘lyrical criminology’, it is not only possible to ask whether or not heroin users have been too quickly cast as ‘rational choosers’ (cf. Becker and Murphy, 1988), but also to problematise further the nature and limits of the choices they make and as such, the control they may or may not have over their addictions. As noted above, the controlled use of this drug has been observed (Warburton et al., 2005) and it is certainly not my intention to deny outright that it is possible to use heroin recreationally without developing dependence. However, the above can bring this into some degree of contention in the case of some users. The individual in the above image demonstrated little if any visible capacity to make the seemingly ‘rational’ choice; he was never going to convert to an intramuscular injection method – I knew this as I watched, he knew it even as the blood ran thick down his arm. The question has to be then, why not exactly? What is it about this particular individual that compels him to continue on with this course of action despite its obvious harm and quickly diminishing potential reward? Thus, in this particular instance, the above can be seen to precipitate new thinking in criminology – it prompts a return to questions of subjectivity and motivation to do harm, to one’s self or others, in undertakings to get what one wants. The above renders clear a need for a more progressive criminology of drug addiction, one that is centred on the absence of control, on the irrationality of choice. This is where this model’s true strength lies: autoethnographic lyrical criminology is not just an emotive-descriptive technique, but a means by which we can start to rethink some of the discipline’s most pressing concerns.

## **Conclusions**

Before drawing any firm conclusions from the above I must stress again that I do not see autoethnography as any sort of magic formula whereby the criminological truth can be revealed. The potentials highlighted here remain just that, potentials. There is no claim that the above is necessarily superior to any other methods of doing or telling about research – rather, it has been presented here simply as a promising alternative. Importantly, it must also be noted in closing that the words I have devoted in my work towards reflecting upon my past would have been used by another researcher to talk about something else related to their

research, and in most instances this ‘something else’ would be very interesting. Crucially I am not implying here that the lack of a biographical link devalues any ethnographic research, merely that in instances where one does exist its analysis can be most fruitful and should not be ignored or downplayed. For too long now the relationship between the researcher and the researched has been of only marginal interest to criminologists, despite the fact that it has been shown here to be of significant potential regarding the ways in which we come to know our subjects. It is a frequently observed truism that research does not happen in a vacuum. Yet the same is true of criminologists: 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 theorise, and how we come know and tell about our subjects. In this respect, no longer should it be relegated to footnotes or methodological appendices.

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