

TO WHAT EXTENT DO CRIMINAL BIOGRAPHIES ADD TO OUR UNDERSTANDING OF CRIMINALITY?

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Abstract

What is the academic value of criminal “insider” accounts? How might the personal accounts of convicted criminals add to our understanding of criminal action? Might these accounts contribute to the study of criminology as a vibrant subject? Do such texts illuminate the subject in a way that makes the social reality of criminals easier to comprehend, or are they of no more value than works of fiction? These telling questions focus our attention upon an area of research which has currently received little attention, meaning that there is a gap in the existing literature on the use and usefulness of written criminal accounts. This makes this investigation particularly worthwhile, interesting and justified. This dissertating examines the differences, strengths and weaknesses between a number of criminal biographies and autobiographies and the usefulness of such criminal life stories in criminology.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

For those who have recently subscribed to criminology as an academic subject, it may come as a surprise to unveil what the course actually entails. To many students interested in crime and criminality, general interests are often acquired through observing crime and criminals as part of a popular culture. Films, television, books and indeed autobiographies all capitalise on real-life criminal pursuits, portraying criminology as an exciting and exhilarating topic. However, while criminology may appear exciting on the surface, it often loses its gloss after realising that much of its work is usually bound by evaluations and statistics. In fact, these intriguing stories told by infamous crooks and villains, which have inspired many to explore criminology further, are rarely used within academic criteria. As Goodey (2000:473) claims, 'criminology, as a social science discipline, has never embraced the idea of research that is based on the study of the individual.'

This paper is interested in looking at why this is so, by critically examining the value of criminal "insider" accounts for academic criminology. By this, it is meant how the personal accounts of convicted criminals may add to our understanding of criminal action but also how these accounts contribute to the study of criminology as a vibrant subject. It is beneficial to explore whether such texts can illuminate the subject in a way that makes the social reality of criminals easier to comprehend or whether such works should be seen as works of fiction. In other words, should students be encouraged to read more of these texts to expand their knowledge of criminality or should they simply be viewed as an unreliable source. This is an area of research which has currently received little attention meaning that there is a gap in the existing literature on the use of written criminal accounts. This makes this investigation particularly worthwhile, interesting and justified.

In order to carry out this investigation, the first part of this dissertation will assess the methodological issues arising from qualitative research. The methods which shall be discussed are ethnography/participant observation, interviewing, discourse and conversation analysis and textual analysis. It is evident that whilst trying to capture social reality through the use of qualitative research methods, researchers are often presented with a number of problems. Taking these into consideration, it is possible to assess whether personal accounts of crime can overcome such problems, and provide the researcher with something that is increasingly denied to social scientists; an authentic voice.

After exploring the problems within the accepted forms of qualitative methods the paper is able to compare the evidence gained from those sources with the weaknesses and advantages likely to be found in criminal biographies. Once this paper has underlined the disadvantages of using other methodological approaches, it shall then identify the advantages of using criminal biographies. This chapter shall assess how influential these accounts have been in shaping our knowledge of criminality. To support this, extracts from selected criminal biographies will be analysed and used to illustrate the discussion. Finally, this paper goes on to highlight the ways in which criminal biographies have contributed towards criminological texts.

Essentially, this paper aims to assess what "lessons" can be learnt from 'criminology's attention to biography' (Goodey, 2000:474).

Chapter 2: Methodology

This research was conducted using secondary research as this method was more appropriate for exploring the research question. The unusual research topic meant that rather than building from a textbook outline the study began by following diverse strands, from issues around qualitative research to use of biographies in criminology texts to the autobiographical accounts. Following the citation trails to build up the outline then body of the dissertation was a demanding part of the process. The main sources of information were the library and the internet.

This research is ultimately concerned with assessing different forms of secondary data, as criminal biographies are texts which have already been written.

According to Bryman (2004) there are a variety of advantages available to those who adopt the use of secondary research. These are as follows; firstly it is cost efficient as the library and internet provide a service allowing you to obtain information quickly and cheaply. It can also be less time consuming not having to plan and conduct your own primary research. The fact that it is less time consuming means that the researcher has more time to analyse their data. Also secondary data allows you to examine not only high quality data but also cross-sectional and cross-cultural research which may be impossible to obtain through primary research due to lack of time, access and funding. Studying secondary data can also be more useful than primary research as it can be viewed and analysed from different angles, creating the possibility of discovering new information.

However, there are also a number of disadvantages when using secondary research. As secondary research is research that has been carried out by others it is difficult to control the quality of data. This is important to remember as some secondary research is simply not worth the paper it's written on. Errors and inconsistencies may arise therefore making the research unreliable. Other factors to consider are that the research may not be up to date therefore may not address current issues or suit the needs of the researcher. However, the disadvantages of using secondary data actually form a large part of this dissertation. It is imperfections such as this which this paper considers in order to draw together the importance of criminal accounts.

Chapter 3: Methodological weakness in qualitative research

One way to assess how useful biographical accounts of criminals are is to identify the areas of methodological weakness. By highlighting the difficulties in different methodological approaches, it is possible to assess whether criminal biographies can be used as a credible alternative. According to Ramos (2007) there are ‘a number of research methods available to social scientists and Bryman and Teevan offer insight into the issues behind many of them.’ These issues can severely disrupt the validity of the research; therefore it is important for researchers to be aware of them. Below are some examples;

3.1 Ethnography / Participant Observation

The first qualitative research method which this paper shall address is ethnography. Similar to participant observation, Bryman (2008:693) defines ethnography as

‘a research method in which the researcher immerses him – or herself in a social setting for an extended period of time, observing behaviour, listening to what is said in conversations both between others and with the field-worker, and asking questions. However, the term has a more inclusive sense than participant observation, which seems to emphasize the observational component. Also, the term ‘an ethnography’ is frequently used to refer to the written output of ethnographic research.’

One of the key problems found whilst trying to conduct ethnographic research is how the researcher “immerses” him or herself into the social setting (Bryman, 2008). Researchers often use different approaches to gain access, depending on whether the setting is a relatively open one or a relatively closed one. Open settings/public settings are usually informal in nature and include ‘research involving communities, gangs and drug users for example (Bryman, 2008). Whereas closed, non-public settings are likely to include research based on ‘organizations of various kinds, such as firms, schools, cults, social movement, and so on’ (Bryman, 2008). In order to gain access to such places, the researcher must have permission; however this proves to be quite difficult particularly if the group does not wish to be studied.

When these practical obstacles are considered it starts to become clearer why criminal biographies may be used in research as a credible alternative. Many researchers, particularly students who have little time and funding may find it difficult to carry out an ethnographic study. This is even more so, considering the fact that an ethnographic study into crime and deviance would most likely involve working with criminals. Therefore not only is it hard to gain access to such social groups, but a number of other ethical issues also arise, including the researcher’s safety and well-being. In Ditton’s (1977) research on “fiddling” in a bakery, his status shifted from a covert role to an overt role after his participants discovered him making field notes in the lavatory. While this did not put Ditton in any direct danger, the consequences could have been quite the opposite if the social setting was of a different orientation. A crack house for example could have lead to some very unpleasant business, which is something Venkatesh (2008) is quite familiar with. During his research into gang-culture he was held hostage by a gang, therefore is one of the very few who can relate to such dangers. This is seen in his book *Gang Leader for a Day* (2008). While Venkatesh’s research provides a useful insight into the criminal underworld, there is a general lack in the use of participant observation on accounts of criminal action. This could be because most researchers are reluctant to enter such a dangerous world. Berg (2007:138) states that many ‘field investigators have encountered

illness, personal injury, and even death during the course of ethnographic research.’ Whyte’s (1955) study of *Street Corner Society* is but another example highlighting the dangers of ethnographic research. Whyte (1955, cited in Seale, 2004:218) states that after asking to join a particular social group:

‘There was a moment of silence while the main stared at me. He then offered to throw me downstairs. I assured him that this would not be necessary and demonstrated as much by walking right out of there without any assistance’.

Unlike ethnography, personal accounts of criminals are readily available for researchers to use and can colourfully illustrate first hand criminal action without endangering the researcher. They describe what it was like to live in certain socially deprived areas along with the social context of the time. Therefore, not only are these texts easy to access, but they can also be used as important social documents to describe the environment of different areas during different time periods.

While gaining entry into a research locale ‘can be fraught with difficulties’ (Berg, 2007:184), it is not impossible, and when done successfully can produce high quality and representative research. Researchers often overcome the problem of access by adopting a covert role or using gatekeepers. By adopting a covert role, the researcher is in fact undercover and attempts to merge into the study group as an absolute insider. Merton (1972, cited in Hodkinson, 2005:132) believes that the idea of researchers acting as absolute insiders or outsiders is ‘based upon “deceptively simple” notions of identity and status’. However, gaining insider status into certain social groups is extremely problematic, particularly when studying certain criminal subcultures. These groups are ‘united by strongly held attachments towards relatively distinct sets of tastes, values or activities. Furthermore, it would seem that the participants of such groups continue actively to differentiate themselves from those deemed not to share the characteristics or perspectives so important to them’ (Hodkinson, 2005). Therefore, the researcher must be able to identify his or herself with the group, for example joining in fully with group activities, wearing the same clothes, speaking the same language, carrying knowledge on similar music and so on. A researcher wishing to study a group that he or she has no relevant social ties to may find this extremely difficult.

Upon studying football hooliganism in Sheffield, Armstrong (1993, cited in Hodkinson, 2005:137) revealed that ‘his local working-class background, his long-term status as a committed Sheffield United fan and previous interactions with hooligans were of crucial importance to socialising effectively in the field’. Hodkinson (2002, cited in Hodkinson, 2005:135) in his study of the Goth scene revealed that ‘there were few social rewards for those who displayed partial or temporary involvement and significant encouragement for the display of commitment to a relatively consistent and distinctive range of norms and values.’ However, ethnographers who are viewed to be “trying too hard” equally face problems. It is argued that ‘those who merely “adopt” an unconventional appearance without possessing the necessary “inner” qualities are regarded... as “plastic”, “not real”... a subcultural “Other” against which the interviewees authenticate themselves’ (Muggleton, 2000:90). By drawing on the above information it would appear that Becker (1963:168) was correct in stating that:

‘It is not easy to study deviants. Because they are regarded as outsiders by the rest of society, and because they themselves tend to regard the rest of society as outsiders, the student who would discover the facts about deviance has a substantial barrier before he will be allowed to

see the things he needs to see.’

However, gaining access is not the only problem with this research method. In the early developments of field research Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939, cited in Berg, 2007:186) identified form of reactivity known as the *Hawthorne effect*. Briefly, the *Hawthorne effect* suggests that ‘when subjects know they are in a research study, they will alter their usual (routine) behaviour.’ (Berg, 2007:186) Unless the researcher adopts a covert role, ethnographic research can be particularly prone to reactivity. This causes the researcher to misinterpret events and affects the validity of the study, as ‘reactivity is deemed to result in untypical behaviour’ (Bryman & Bell, 2007:731). Hodkinson (2005:141) continues by stating that when a researcher adopts an overt status, he or she may find it difficult to fully ‘access and understand the values, meanings and worldviews of those they study. No amount of qualitative interviews or temporary involvement’ it is argued, ‘can compete with the privileged view possessed by genuine insiders’.

It interesting to question whether criminal biographies can avoid problems such as reactivity and present researchers with something that is increasingly denied to social scientists, an authentic voice. This area shall be further examined in the following chapters.

Additionally, ethnographic researchers must protect the identity of their participants; ‘care should be taken to ensure that none of the information collected would embarrass or harm them. If confidentiality cannot be maintained, participants must be so informed and given the opportunity to withdraw from the study’ (Wallen et al, 2001:478). This can cause major disruption in the research, affecting its credibility and usually bringing the study to a halt. This wastes not only the researcher’s time but also their resources.

Further difficulties found with ethnographic research are the fears of researchers “going native”. This term is used to describe the situation whereby researchers lose their sense of being a researcher and ‘become wrapped up in the world view of the people they are studying’ (Bryman, 2004:302). This can easily happen in ethnographic research, as over time researchers can often form close relationships with their participants. This blurs the focus of the study making it extremely difficult to gather accurate, unbiased information.

Moreover, Allport (1947:144) concludes that ethnography and participant observation are

‘inferior to the personal document when it comes to the important region of subjective meaning: experience of love, beauty, religious faith; of pain, ambition, fear, jealousy, frustration; plans, remembrances, fantasies, and friendships.’

3.2 Interviews

Other qualitative research methods include interviewing which Denzin (1998:353) describes as ‘the favourite methodological tool of the qualitative researcher.’ Interviews can be sorted into three differentiating styles, these are; structured interviews, semi-structured interviews and unstructured interviews. The first of these refers to ‘a research interview in which all respondents are asked exactly the same questions in the same order with the aid of a formal interview schedule’ (Bryman, 2008). Alternatively researchers may carry out a semi-structured interview which ‘typically refers to a context in which the interviewer has a series of questions

that are in the general form of an interview guide but is able to vary the sequence of questions' (Bryman, 2008). Lastly researchers may adopt the use of an unstructured interview which is generally the most favoured 'approach in exploratory and qualitative research' (Konicki Di Iorio, 2005:19). The interviewer usually 'has only a list of topics or issues' that they wish to cover, which they do so using a very informal approach. (Bryman, 2008) This style of interviewing 'permits the person being interviewed to tell their stories at their own pace, in their own ways, and within their own time frames' (Gubrium et al, 2001: 324). This is interesting to note, as biographical writings are quite similar in nature whereby the subject is able to share with the reader their experiences at their own pace and unravel their stories how and which they choose.

However, despite which interviewing style the researcher adopts, each method may encounter the problem of researcher bias. Bias affects a number of research methods and techniques and 'presents a real threat to the validity of interviews' (Powell, 1997:112). Researcher bias in particular makes it difficult for the researcher to 'see the truth in the data, owing to preconceived notions.' (Roberts & Greene, 2002). This is worrying as it 'limits data analysis and interpretation' (Belk, 2006:322). Researcher bias is also present among participant observation and ethnographic research studies. As both methods are 'highly dependent on the researcher's observations' and usually have no numerical data to support this, therefore there is often no way to check the validity of the researcher's conclusions. As a result 'observer bias is almost impossible to eliminate' (Wallen et al, 2001:476). While criminal accounts of crime also present information given by a single perspective, many are supported by other criminal accounts whose writings are based around similar time periods. It is evident in the following chapters that criminals, who were active at the same time or perhaps in prison together, compliment and support each other in their biographies. This further increases the credibility of such texts.

Similar to ethnographic research, interviewing may also be subjected to reactivity. Bryman (2008) defines reactivity as 'a term used to describe the response of research participants to the fact that they know they are being studied.' An example of reactivity within interviews can be seen when the person being studied wishes to conform to the norm. During interviews 'people quite often want to convince the researcher they do what would be normally expected of people "like them". They either conform to a social norm, or sometimes, just the opposite, they want to appear deviant' (Williams, 2003:117). This again damages the validity of the research, as the researcher's findings do not reflect a true representation.

While asking questions is an important part of the interview process, the way a question is asked is a key concern. Evidence suggests that it is actually a harder task than many appreciate since 'the spoken or written word has always a residue of ambiguity, no matter how carefully we word the questions and report or code the answers' (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998:47). Williams (2003:117) claims that good researchers 'try to avoid leading questions, but it is possible to create opinions where none previously existed by asking questions. This can have important ethical implications, for example, to ask people about their fear of crime in a relatively crime free area can instil a fear of crime.' Therefore it is important for the interviewer to be selective in the way the interview is conducted. Bryman (2008) claims that it is 'easy to make some fundamental mistakes' whilst interviewing. Roulston et al (2003:659) contribute by revealing:

'An American study of postgraduates' experiences of a lengthy interview training course

showed that novice interviewers were easily thrown out by a number of events or experiences in the course of the interview’.

These problems included dealing with sensitive issues, handling unexpected behaviour and reactions by interviewees, managing personal bias and expectations and maintaining focus and concentration while asking questions. Therefore whilst trying to capture social reality through the use of interviews, it must be remembered that things may not always go according to plan. Foster (1990:2) adds that structured interviewing, questionnaires and survey research are not designed to ‘establish links between attitudes and behaviour or the cultural context in which these are expressed.’

While qualitative research methods aim to understand the meaning that unpins complex behaviours, in order to do this there must be a certain level of trust between the researcher and his or her participants. Trustworthiness is ‘made up of four criteria’ which are ‘credibility’, ‘transferability’ ‘dependability’ and ‘confirmability’ (Bryman & Bell, 2007:411). Without this trust, participants may feel dubious about revealing personal details.

Although interviews face a number of issues which can affect the validity of the research, it can be argued that most of these issues can be overcome if the participant’s identity is kept anonymous. Many people feel uncomfortable about sharing personal details with the world, which is exactly what a published biography does. Seale (1999:11) claims that ‘people may find it easier to reveal secrets to strangers’, particularly secrets which they may not be particularly proud of. However, the very fact that most people are reluctant to reveal their personal details should encourage researchers to make use of those who are willing. For example, those who come forward and share their experiences through published biographies.

3.3 Criminal biographies

Notwithstanding the difficulties apparent in the above qualitative research methods, overall, biographical accounts of criminals continue to be less relied upon than other research sources. This is despite the fact that many of these texts offer a significant and valued contribution to the study of social research. Highlighted in this chapter are a number of disadvantages researchers have identified in using personal documents for research. These disadvantages may explain why most social researchers remain ambivalent towards biography (Smith, 1994, cited in Goodey, 2000: 476).

While biographies can provide a useful insight into social reality, it must be remembered that all must be approached with caution. One of the main criticisms of autobiographical accounts is that they are a product of memory. Harre (1993, cited in McNeil & Chapman, 2005:152) notes that memory is ‘constructed from the past which must be revived before it can be described’. Furthermore, the fact that most criminal biographies rely solely on the individual’s ability to recollect past events leads many to question how reliable these accounts are. For example, Boyle (1977) writes about memories of his father reaching up ‘to a shelf in the small lobby to get a parcel’. He continues to inform the reader that ‘somehow a vague recollection connects this parcel to a gun’, highlighting a level of uncertainty in his tale. Therefore when using biography, it is important to recognize ‘the impact and constraints of temporality and memory on people’s accounts of their lives, alongside the realization that representations of reality and reality itself cannot always be prised apart’ (Goodey, 2000:482).

Allport (1942:79) continues that ‘the problem of early life is always a stumbling block in autobiographical writing. Reminiscence does not extend back to infancy, while according to prevailing theories, this formative period is of vital significance in slanting the personality.’ However, to contend these criticisms, it need not matter if personality is slanted one way or another or if it is genetically pre-programmed, as most criminologists recognise that determining criminality cannot be reduced to any one factor. Given the same slanting in different social contexts, context generally adds a vital ingredient. Therefore, it is irrelevant that ‘reminiscence does not extend back to infancy’, as the age at which one first recalls is of little importance. It is what is remembered that is most interesting, and the most significant moments in our lives are usually highlighted in our memory. These are turning point moments that induce change upon our lives and are often remembered as being ‘creative, transformative, rebellious, momentous and so on’ (Jarvis, 2006: 120). Denzin (1989, cited in Erben, 1998:151) refers to these moments as “epiphanies” which ‘leave marks on people’s lives’. He believes that recognizing these epiphanies is essential in understanding “criminal” lives. Ultimately, it is argued that life stories offer the most thorough approach to identifying epiphanies as they enable one to understand ‘the direction individual lives take with respect to crime and victimisation’ (Goodey, 2000:474).

Schwartz (1999, cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2003:80) looks at how we remember these “epiphanies” and concludes that ‘biographical memory... is better understood as a social process and that as we look back, we find ourselves remembering our lives in terms of our experience with others.’

Another major criticism of criminal autobiographies, as noted by Shipman (1997:49) is that autobiographical writing tends to be “self-justifying” and is therefore unreliable. It is evident that among the array of criminal autobiographies which stack society’s true crime shelves, a number of criminals tend to glamorise and garnish their stories in order to enhance their appeal to the public audience. This is not to suggest that their accounts are false, however, that they are possibly exaggerated versions of the truth in order to secure the sales of their book. Gomm (2004, cited in McNeil & Chapman, 2005:153) notes that biographies are “‘simply ‘stories’” that people tell about their experience aimed at convincing their audience that they are ‘likeable’ and ‘trustworthy’. However, in order to identify these texts it is important to identify what the author’s purpose was for writing his or her biography.

Boyle (1977:2) describes his book *A Sense of Freedom*, as ‘a genuine attempt to warn young people that there is nothing glamorous about getting involved in crime and violence’ (Boyle, 1977). Boyle also pledged to donate the proceeds of the book to a Trust Fund to help ‘kids in the socially deprived areas in the West of Scotland’ (Boyle, 1977:2). To add to this, Boyle (1977) does not glamorize his story, he “tells it how it is”, meaning that his account is a highly educational piece of text. It can be argued that texts such as these are most useful, whereby the author gives back more than he receives.

An example of the self-indulgency Shipman (1977) sees as a flaw in autobiographies is the type of glorification of self found in Dave Courtney’s accounts. Courtney has produced a number of books about his life such as *Raving Lunacy* (2000) and *Stop the Ride I want to get off* (2001). However, while these books provide some insight into the criminal underworld, both seem to overemphasize and exaggerate certain events. Unlike Boyle’s, Courtney’s books are written in a completely different style. It would appear that Courtney’s books aim to entertain rather than

educate the reader, as they are concerned with portraying Courtney as a fun-loving “diamond geezer” who is both loved and feared. This is emphasized by the fact that Courtney discloses his criminal career in a particularly humorous way, presenting him as a somewhat “icon” or “hero”. It can be argued that Courtney has used his autobiographies as a publicity stunt, to boost his profile and increase his reputation, not to mention making a considerable profit. However, it is unfair to tarnish all autobiographies with the same brush, as Boyle (1977) suggests rightly it is nothing to do with a ‘popularity contest’.

While many ex-prisoners may be tempted to sugar-coat their accounts, it can be argued that the temptation for criminals to over claim or exaggerate their accounts is minimised at the thought of being ridiculed by fellow companions or convicts. It is important to note that being imprisoned for a lengthy period of time results in criminals making friends or acquaintances with other criminals. These associates will often bear witness to certain events and can therefore support each other’s stories and vouch that each other are telling the truth. In a number of texts, it is not uncommon for criminals to refer to other well-known criminals who they encountered in their time. For an ex-prisoner to produce a dishonest autobiography, it would likely award him a bad reputation and lose him a lot of respect. With respect and reputation, arguably being two of the most valuable necessities a prisoner aims to achieve whilst inside, it is questionable if one would forfeit such attainments. Delvin et al (1999: vii) support this view in their book *Going Straight*, stating that ‘the respect which they have earned from others are among the things which the ex- offenders have come to value.’

Foster (1990:1) is both for and against the use of criminal accounts. She argues that while there have been several accounts written by professional criminals which ‘offer insights into the more serious end of the offending spectrum’, there are few personal accounts of the common petty offender. Despite the fact that ‘most crime is petty in nature’ (Clarke et al, 1994:118). This suggests that biographies only deal with the most serious and violent offenders and fail to address minor day to day criminals. This can clearly affect ones knowledge and understanding of criminality, as it must be remembered that criminals vary in the frequency and severity of their crimes. Not all criminals commit murders, use violence or try to escape from prison, despite however many biographies wish to capture these compelling tales.

Additionally, there are fewer autobiographies published by women. This therefore extends the readers knowledge as far as male criminality, yet fails to include a great detail on criminal women. While this limits to use of criminal autobiographies, this is perhaps only a minor downfall considering the fact that ‘crime does seem to be a male preserve’ (Macionis et al, 2008:571).

Further criticisms of autobiographical writing claim that these texts only concentrate on “conflict”, with what Krueger (1925, cited in Allport, 1942:78) has called the ‘personality-making’ situations in life. It is argued that periods of happiness or peace are often overlooked as ‘writers seem driven to elaborate on the conditions that have wrecked their hopes and deprived them of satisfactions. Of lasting happiness, conditions of good health, high morale, and pleasant routine, they have little to say’ (Allport, 1942:78). However, many criminals may actually view their lives as a chain of missed opportunities; therefore if a researcher wishes to understand criminal life through a criminal perspective, this is exactly what they receive.

On the other hand, although many criminal accounts primarily focus on “conflict”, it is

important to consider how their outlook on life changes from beginning to end. For example, Boyle (1977) explains that his book is written ‘in a manner that expresses all the hatred and rage that’ he felt at the time and describes writing his book as ‘a difficult and very painful experience.’ However, the book is ultimately a story of survival and rehabilitation, whereby Boyle does not give up hope and allows his experience to help others in similar situations. Perhaps when one looks at the bigger picture they will recognise that it is not all about “conflict”.

To contend Shipman’s (1997) criticisms, that autobiographies are simply ‘self-indulgent’, Allport (1942:131) states even those accounts which present themselves as egotistical “heroes” can be of use. He states that:

‘A person is a self-regarding focus of value. What we want to know is what life does look like from this focus of value. Every self regards itself as sacred, and a document produced from precisely this point of view is exactly what we desire.’

Further criticisms have been noted by Gruhle (1928, cited in Allport, 1942:126) who has argued that first-person documents only reveal information on those who are talented in writing. Allport (1942:126) continues and states that delinquents can only offer personal accounts ‘if they are literate and inclined to express themselves in the written word.’ This highlights the fact that criminal “insider” accounts are not representative of the entire criminal nation.

An interesting thought is how metaphors are used within research in order to increase ones understanding of events. Berg (2007:213) discusses how ethnographic researchers may use metaphors to effectively analyse the social world. He states that:

‘Metaphors provide an avenue to see important elements of social support, interaction, networking, relationships, and a variety of other socially significant factors, and allow the researcher to represent action when theorizing about various explanations or relationships.’

This is interesting to note as autobiographies commonly favour the use of metaphors whilst describing their experiences. McVicar (1974) describes an incident of behaviour where he and his fellow prisoners ‘were all scampering around like mischievous chimps on the forest’s canopy. Destroying prison property.’

Chapter 4: The place of biography in academic criminology

The use of biography, life stories and the case study have long been associated with the ‘Chicago School Sociologists of the 1920’s/1930s who designed their studies within the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism and focused on a specific set of social processes; namely, those implicating deviancy’ (Goodey, 2000:494). In fact, it was Blumer (1939) who coined the term “symbolic interactionism” as he believed human behaviour is both unpredictable and indeterminate. Therefore, he argued, in order to study “the individual”, one must adopt a humanistic approach and view the world ‘through the eyes of the actor’ (Blumer, 1939). This is significant to note as the Chicago School has had a major influence on academic criminology. This, accompanied by ‘the growing importance of qualitative and feminist work stressing the need for detailed and reflexive research in the discipline’ suggests that both biography and interactionism ‘enjoy a healthy place in contemporary criminology’ (Goodey: 2000:476).

Despite this, the government have been increasingly less supportive towards criminal biographies. Understandably, from a victim’s perspective, it seems unjust to allow criminals to profit from publishing biographies of crime. Therefore, the government has attempted to discourage this through a number of actions. In 2006, the ‘Scottish Executive published a consultation paper on proposals for a new measure to prevent convicted criminals profiting from published accounts of their crimes’ (The Scottish Government, 2009). Both the Home Office and Northern Ireland Office contributed towards this proposal, however this has yet to be accepted. It is revealed that:

‘There is currently no effective mechanism where profits that convicted criminals receive through publications about their crimes can be seized. This is because the current law does not consider writing about a crime to be unlawful conduct and so any profit resulting from a publication about a crime is not unlawfully obtained’ (The Scottish Government, 2009).

Whilst this may seem unfair to victims, the following chapters highlight how useful these accounts can be in terms of learning and developing an understanding towards crime. As this paper continues, it can be argued that criminals should in fact be encouraged to produce personal accounts as these texts can be extremely enlightening and helpful in addressing the causes of crime.

Chapter 5: The advantages of using criminal biographies to capture social reality

5.1 Variety

The personal accounts of criminals not only feature a variety of different topics such as prison life, family relationships, education, childhood upbringings and social environments but they have also been written by a number of different criminals who have committed a cocktail of crimes. In order to select which accounts would be of most use to criminologists, it is important to remember that 'such documents vary greatly in candor, scope, authenticity, and psychological value. Sometimes they are deceptive and trivial; but sometimes they represent distillations of the most profound and significant experiences of human life' (Allport, 1942, xiii). Berg (2007:289) is a key writer in qualitative research methods for social scientists and reminds us that:

'Autobiographical documents include a considerable variety of written material. They may be published or unpublished documents, cover an entire life span, or focus on only a specific period in a subject's life or even a single event. Even a written confession to a crime may be seen by some researchers as a type of autobiographical document.'

Ultimately there are three different types of autobiographies known as; the comprehensive autobiography, the topical autobiography and the edited autobiography (Berg, 2007:252). The first of these covers the life of an individual from what they first remember up until the time of writing. During this period the author usually discusses their life experiences, personal insights, feelings, opinions and memories. It is this form of autobiography, which 'inexperienced researchers are usually most familiar with' (Berg, 2007:252). One of the first significant social research studies to use life histories and other personal documents is Thomas and Znaniecki's (1919:7) *The Polish Peasant*. In their research into cultural identity and social change in the Polish Immigrant Community, the Chicago School sociologists paid a Polish immigrant to write his autobiography. They express that social institutions can only be understood 'if we do not limit ourselves to the abstract study of its formal organization, but analyze the way in which it appears in the personal experience of various members of the group and follow the influence which it has upon their lives.'

The topical autobiography has a much tighter focus and offers only 'an excision from the life of the subject. As such it invites comparison with other kinds of lives' (Denzin, 1978, cited in Berg: 253). This can be useful if a researcher wishes to examine a certain aspect of one's life, for example the relationship between the subject and his/her parents.

Lastly, the edited autobiography is when researchers attempt to increase clarity of 'lengthy discourses' by shortening and editing them. They do this by 'highlighting and amplifying selected segments of the material while deleting other segments' (Berg, 2007:253). Edited biographies can be highly useful to researchers as they can make areas of interest quicker and easier to obtain. Rather than reading the entire life story, researchers can locate certain topics from the account which are relevant to their study.

5.2 Personal

The fact that these texts are based on personal experiences should give them a major advantage. However, 'there remains an unhealthy intellectual suspicion of what "the individual" or, more damning, "the personal" has to offer criminology (Goodey, 2000:141). This chapter seeks to remove these suspicions by highlighting the importance of personal experience in order to understand attitudes and behaviour.

Many research studies into crime and criminality are carried out in controlled, artificial settings, meaning that the findings do not reflect an entirely accurate representation. This is particularly relevant to research on prison life, which can be seen in Zimbardo's (1971) study on the psychological effects of imprisonment. Unlike Zimbardo's study, criminal biographies explain crime and criminality using a naturalistic approach.

For an ordinary law abiding citizen, it may be impossible to truly appreciate what life is like on the "inside", just as it may be difficult to imagine being part of a criminal subculture. It can also be difficult to understand a criminal outlook upon family life and morals or what motivates one to repeatedly offend. This is because most people do not commit crime and therefore they are unfamiliar with the criminal underworld (Marx, 2004: xi). Criminals on the other hand are quite the opposite and can use their knowledge to educate others. It is thought that 'knowledge is only acquired by experience of some kind' (Ward, 1883:488), and with hardened criminals often carrying a life-time of experience, who better to explain criminality than criminals themselves.

Chapter 6: Prisoner biographies and the issues which they address

6.1 Life Inside

It is interesting to question whether one can really write about prisons academically without ever actually experiencing life as a prisoner. Morgan (1999:337) argues that prisoner biographies are most useful at explaining ‘the meaning of prison and its practices’ as they ‘represent some of the most extended narratives and analysis of a particular social experience.’

Foucault is one of many who have attempted to research prison life. In his study, Foucault (1977) and his colleagues devised questionnaires which were given to prisoners at a number of different prisons by family members. These questionnaires focussed on a variety of different aspects relating to prison life such as ‘visits, letters, cells, food, leisure, work, medical care and discipline in prisons’ (Smart, 1994:275). The prisoners responses were published and revealed inside information on prison riots and the constant humiliations of the prison, along with ‘hunger strikes, the training of guards [and] the use of drugs to quiet unruly prisoners’ (Smart, 1994:275).

Additionally, Foucault (1977) suggests that prisons do little to reform offenders. In fact, they ‘encourage recidivism, as inmates form a subculture with loyalties to each other and further alienation from authority’ (Maguire et al, 2002: 239). Clemmer’s (1940) study of inmate subcultures in a state penitentiary in America supports this view. This research found that the prisoners studied followed an “inmate code” whereby prisoners must; remain loyal to each other, avoid helping prison or government officials and never give out any information which may cause harm to a fellow prisoner. This is greatly supported by a number of “insider” accounts which highlight how the relationship between prisoners and “screws” is very much bound by an “us” and “them” attitude.

Goffman (1968) is a key writer in the impact of “institutional experience”. His descriptions of institutional life in a mental hospital, with its similarities to prison life, reveal an emotionally brutalising experience where an individual’s self-conception can be dramatically changed by this socially enclosed context. It is clear that Boyle’s (1977) account brings the reality of these experiences to life, expressing emotional and physical abuses he suffered and his own “animalised” response to the brutalisation.

A key issue highlighted in Boyle’s (1977:157) account is the brutality Boyle experienced in the prisons of that era, he writes:

‘I was told that there would be no brutality, all they wanted was my clothes for the cops. I thought this over and accepted that they were telling the truth as there was enough of them to beat me up with my clothes on. No sooner had I stripped off than some of them moved in punching and kicking me. I tried to hit back, calling them cowardly lumps of shit. These were shouts of anger, but they beat me to the floor, leaving me in a pool of blood.’

Perhaps one of the most infamous prison protests was when Boyle (1977) covered himself in his own excrement just so the prison guards would not go near him and give him another beating.

Although brutality in prisons may have decreased over the years, it is evident that attacks such as this still take place from time to time. In 2003, The Prison Service admitted that officers in Wormwood Scrubs prison in West London ‘subjected inmates to sustained beatings, mock

executions, death threats, choking and torrents of racist abuse' (The Guardian, 2003). It was revealed that fourteen prisoners were brutally attacked, in 'what amounts to the biggest abuse scandal in a British jail in modern times' (The Guardian, 2003). This is important to note as brutality and corruption are serious issues within the penal system, however they are rarely a part of government debates or Home Office reports.

There is much to learn from Boyle's (1977) *A Sense of Freedom*, whether it is to warn of the danger of being lulled into the easy belief that being 'tough' on prisoners can make them change for the better or whether to appreciate why treating people with dignity and respect was such an important principle for prison reform. Although his writings can only be applied to that time of society, 1960's – 1980's, Wright (2008:178) believes that '*A Sense of Freedom* should be required reading for anyone concerned about penal policy.' Sentenced to life in prison at the age of 23 for a murder he claims he did not commit, Boyle's account highlights the strains and hardship of prison life in an especially captivating manner.

Cook & Wilkinson (1998) have also highlighted prison life in their book *Hard Cell*. This text forms the personal account of Frank Cook who spent sixteen years of his life in some form of institution. Ultimately, the account highlights the routine violence, rapes and murders which circulate our prison system, along with the unstoppable drug culture forever present on the inside. It is a book which focuses on 'the ultimate failure of a prison system which spends 25,000 a year keeping a prisoner in custody in an environment which reinforces criminality and removes self-esteem and hope.' (The Bluecoat Press, 1998). Like a number of other criminal "insider" accounts, Cook & Wilkinson (1998) portray the life of inmates in exceptionally vivid detail. While some may argue that criminal accounts of crime are created by biased individuals, Becker opposes this view. He argues that:

'more studies are biased in the interest of responsible officials than the other way round. Yet accusations of bias are disproportionately directed at those who study or privilege offenders. This is unjustified, he argues, because officials lie. They do this because they are responsible and things are seldom as they ought to be. Institutions are flawed, and therefore officials develop ways of denying and explaining away failure. Accounts by offenders may expose these lies and are therefore discredited' (Liebling, 2001; 473).

This highlights the fact that criminal biographies may unveil areas of institutional failure which may otherwise be overlooked or disguised. This is important as they can reveal pathways to improve both the penal and criminal justice system. It is unlikely for the Home Office to discuss these problem areas or even be aware of them without listening to prisoner responses; therefore these texts can be a real eye-opener.

Some will argue that prisons are nothing but "colleges of crime" whereby first time offenders are housed with hardened criminals. This seems hardly an appropriate environment to steer people away from crime. Boyle (1977:107) supports this view as he describes how it 'felt really good to be in beside lots of hard men as I was on my way to being one myself.' This again highlights the disadvantages of the prison environment.

6.2 The Effects of Imprisonment.

A major topic covered within prisoner accounts are the psychological effects of imprisonment. By this it is meant, how the prison environment can affect, change and even damage ones mental state.

Many who believe that “prison isn’t working” have argued that prison can be ‘an expensive way of making bad people worse’ (Home Office, 1990). This opinion is supported by a number of biographical texts, as many criminals sentenced to “life” claim that they have nothing to lose once inside and therefore act accordingly. This can be seen in Boyle’s (1977) account where he reminds prison officers that he is in there for life. He states ‘being a life prisoner meant looking at prison in a totally different perspective’ as he warns the guards that if he can attack the Governor, he can certainly kill a “screw”. This is supported by Cohen and Taylor’s (1971) study on the maximum security unit at Durham prison which found that prisoners who received lengthy sentences had minimal incentives to co-operate with the prison staff. Whether prison is or isn’t an adequate form of punishment, it is important to understand how prisons function from a prisoners perspective, in terms of improving rehabilitation and lowering re-offending rates.

Moreover, Ramsbotham (2003:72) claims that prisons have always dealt with the ‘Bad’, ‘Mad’ and ‘Sad’. This is alarming news considering the fact that many have agreed the prison environment is likely to worsen ones state of mind (Soering, 2004). Sykes (1958) presents five main deprivations which amount to the pains of imprisonment. These are deprivations of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy and personal security. Johnson (1996) believes that when these psychological deprivations are combined, the human personality begins to self destruct which leads to the deterioration of behaviour.

The Stanford prison experiment supports this. In this two week study, Zimbardo et al (1971) set up a mock prison environment whereby twenty-one male undergraduates were employed to take part as either prisoners or prison guards. He was interested in observing what made good people turn bad. The position of 11 guards and 10 prisoners were randomly allocated, however none of the participants were told how they should act. During the experiment, five prisoners were prematurely released due to ‘extreme emotional depression, crying, rage and acute anxiety’ (Haney et al, 1973, cited in Doris, 2002:51). The guards, on the other hand, seemed to enjoy their roles. Although they were prohibited from using physical punishment on prisoners, they found ways to compensate this by making prisoners clean out toilets with their bare hands (Haney & Zimbardo, 1977). The results of the study found that the power structure of the prison itself was thought to bring out the worst in people. To add to this, it was also evident that different individuals had different psychological reactions towards confinement. While some of the participants experienced mental breakdowns, others found ways to survive the environment. However, it can be argued that whilst studying the psychological effects of imprisonment, there is more to be gained from reading personal accounts of prisoners than there is from artificial studies such as these. Zimbardo’s study does not represent people in their natural state, therefore it can be argued the that the participants simply conformed to a role which they thought was expected of them.

Frankie Fraser (1995) for example, was certified as insane on three occasions during his time inside. This tagged him with the nickname of “Mad” Frankie Fraser, however it is revealed in his biography that he simply pretended to be “mad” in order to have things a bit easier on him.

This highlights a major problem the criminal justice system face whilst sentencing offenders, as if offenders believe they can escape prison they may simply plead insanity, as Fraser (1995) said, 'to have things a bit easier'. While one may feel confident in assessing an individual's state of mind, Rosenhan's (1973) study *On being sane in insane places* highlights the difficulties in defining normal from abnormal behaviour.

6.3 Education

By observing an individual's life history, it is possible to understand the route individual lives take which may have lead to their criminality. In Cook's (1998) account, he highlights his failings in school and education and the impact that it had upon him. This is important to observe as it determines a part of his identity and behaviour. He writes:

'Because I lived on gypsy camps until the age of eight, I had missed the majority of my primary schooling and so I was put in the bottom set. The set, known as the 'dunces class', comprised of maladjusted children, immigrant Asian kids who couldn't speak English and the usual odds and sods who couldn't be fitted into the normal framework of the education system. I was more intelligent than the other members of the set and willing to learn but, as I couldn't read or write, the lessons were of no benefit to me. School offered me little stimulation and I turned to mischief, both in and out of school, to amuse myself and the other members of the class. Incidents, including lobbing paving slabs over motorway bridges, setting farm animals loose and, on one occasion, herding sheep into the local hospital, secured my popularity with the pupils but amongst the teachers I built a reputation as a bit of a trouble-maker' (Cook & Wilkinson, 1998:11).

The fact that Cook discusses his educational years is highly important as 'crime and deviancy are often attributed to poor education' (Sutherland et al, 1992:232). This text captures Cook's experience of school years in a nutshell, and, whilst it is possible for this information to be gathered through interviews, this method is more time consuming and involves the researcher organising access and planning. It is clear that Cook's social behaviour in school supports Blumer's (1969) theory of interactionism, as he conforms to the role of the "naughty" pupil because, in doing so, it secured his popularity and built reputation. In many ways this reflects certain attitudes of prisoners, as many prisoners act out against officials. Boyle (1977) is one of many who are guilty of this, once known as Scotland's most dangerous and violent criminal, Boyle began to 'enjoy the respect of his peers and so tried to live up to his new reputation. As a result he became the leader of the criminal community' both inside prison and out (Jackson, 2004:257).

6.4 Rehabilitation

Another area which criminal biographies tend focus on is the personal process of rehabilitation. In other words, many published accounts illustrate the journey a number of criminals have taken in order transform their lives. As briefly mentioned in the above chapter, Delvin et al (1999) compiled a number of criminal accounts in their book *Going Straight*, highlighting that rehabilitation is possible. In short, they are tales of hope and regeneration. Delvin et al (1999:10) reveal that 'the individual accounts allow the reader to search for clues about life experiences and events which can trigger change.' A question commonly asked is why some people are able to leave crime behind and 'how they constitute to remain "crime free" despite a range of pressures and temptations.' The accounts in this book 'are not presented as if they

provide some scientific or finite answer (and we doubt whether any amount of analysis can do that), but it is possible to identify certain recurring features which seem to point the way' (Delvin et al, 1999:10.) From reading these accounts it is evident that family, friends, relationships, personal achievements and earned respect are but a few of the most important ingredients which aid the "going straight" process. They also demonstrate how it is possible to overcome many of the common problems offenders face when they are released from prison, institutionalisation being one of these. Collins (1998, cited in Delvin et al, 1999:98) writes that on the first day he was released from prison he was 'full of heroin before nightfall, desperately trying to figure out a way' to get himself back into prison. He discusses how he was so used to following prison rules and regimes that he felt unable to function without them. This highlights a major issue surrounding re-offending. However, Collins (1998) owes his survival to the support of his wife. This highlights the importance of keeping in contact with friends and family whilst in prison in order to increase the chances of a successful rehabilitation. This is something which is increasingly affected by the continual rise in prison populations. With most prisons experiencing severe levels of overcrowding, prisoners are often sent lengthy distances from their home towns in a search to find a prison to accommodate them. This is worrying as it can potentially jeopardise the offender's relationship with the outside world, making visiting journeys longer and more expensive.

Chapter 7: Evaluating theories of crime against biographical texts.

Upon reading any criminal "insider" account, it is interesting to observe whether the information given sits well within criminological theory. It can be argued that criminal biographies are usually only relevant if they are supported by criminological theory because this increases their value and credibility. It can be more useful to obtain some kind of criminological knowledge before reading such texts in order to understand the extent of the complex issues presented in them. Therefore, whilst criminal biographies are useful, they become more useful when supported by additional research sources and theory.

After studying 411 London boys aged 8 to 32 using a set of structured social interviews, The Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development revealed that impulsivity and daring, along with poor concentration, 'were among the best independent predictors of chronic offenders' (Farrington & Coid, 2003). While longitudinal studies can reveal a great deal about criminality, their findings are presented in a very systematic way. This is known as the risk factor approach which is a type of approach that 'produces a flat-pack criminal. We have the components, we know what it looks like when assembled, but we don't know how they fit together. The process of construction is important and open to random distortion through accidents of history, rejection, and other unforeseen events' (Wilson 2007: 133) Personal accounts of crime, on the other hand, capture the process leading to criminal action and the action itself in a way that is "more absorbing, more enlightening and fundamentally more real" (Allport, 1942). While, 'many researchers believe that impulsiveness plays a role in the genesis of crime' (Dahlbäck,

2003:142), very few look at why impulsiveness occurs. Although criminal autobiographies do not explain to the reader the exact causes of impulsivity, events are explained in such a way that it becomes clear that the social environment to which many criminals are brought up in actually results in impulsive behaviour. In many situations criminals had to be impulsive, it was often a case of thinking fast or having your head kicked in; it was 'part of the environment, a natural thing. There was nothing unusual in it' (Frankie Fraser, 1994). For Boyle (1977) who grew up in Glasgow's Gorbals, all around him the world was drinking, fighting and thieving. It appears from his account that to survive, he had to fight. Collins (1998, cited in Delvin et al, 1999:92) supports this opinion as he grew up in the same area of Scotland and claims that 'violence was acceptable and respected.' It was used as a major method of survival within this particular culture and with it came a position of power and social status.

Chapter 8: Supporters of biography in understanding social reality.

Hobbs (2000, cited in McNeil & Chapman, 2005:153) is one of many who value the use of biographical texts in both criminological and sociological research. He argues that:

‘autobiography and biography have contributed positively to our understanding of crime and deviance today. He notes that sociological studies of British professionals and organised crime are rare, as so, to some extent, we are dependent upon biographies, autobiographies and true crime books for an insight into the motives of professional criminals.’

Additionally, Bertaux’s (1981, cited in Goodey, 2000:476) believes in the importance of biographical accounts and suggested that his book *Biography and Society* ‘presented the first sample of a growing new wave of sociological research (and hopefully criminological research) employing the life story’.

Personal accounts of crime from the likes of John Mcvicar, Jimmy Boyle, Mad Frankie Fraser and Freddie Foreman are very much appreciated as they highlight ‘the attractions of a life of crime, the dynamics of masculinity at its heart, the role of violence and the importance of reputation, even within instrumental networks of criminal entrepreneurs’ (McNeil & Chapman, 2005:153). The reason this paper draws more attention towards Boyle and Mcvicar’s autobiographies is because these criminals have in fact written their accounts themselves. Most accounts of criminals are in fact biographies, whereby a writer writes the account for them. Advantages of this are that the account is written more skilfully and easier to understand, however one cannot help wonder to what extent the writer has influenced the overall text.

The rawness and honesty in the accounts written by Boyle (1977) and Mcvicar (1974) are particularly rare, however, many researchers have recognised that in order for any personal document to be useful, it need not be taken at face value. Allport (1942:3) explains that even those accounts which exaggerate, bend the truth or misconstrue events can reveal a lot about the criminal’s state of mind. He states:

‘Even the production of a paranoiac, not one word of which may be believed, can reveal much concerning the writer. Prejudices, self-deceptions, wholesome and unwholesome outlooks, ego-ideals, mannerisms, complexes, aspirations, errors of insight, and the reasons for persistent failure – all these and many other characteristics can glimmer or glare through a document whose accuracy in reporting and self- appraisal is not to be trusted.’

Perhaps what is most appealing about criminal biographies is their ability to bring a subject to life. A key example of how biographies can recreate past events is seen in Harding & Samuel’s (1981) *East end Underworld*. This research focuses on the life of ‘a slippery and dangerous criminal’ known as Arthur Harding and was created using ‘tape-recorded reminiscences taken over a six year period’ (Harding & Samuel, 1981: viii). These recordings revisit a wide range of topics covered throughout Harding’s life, including criminal apprenticeship, prison years, domestic life and social change, dealing with the police, relationships and marriage. Samuel combines these reminiscences with other sources in order to corroborate Harding’s accounts, descriptions and events. The text itself provides detailed descriptions of several prison inmates, highlighting an array of different criminal “types”. Whilst doing it disputes Lombroso’s (1836 – 1909) theory of the ‘born criminal’ and explains that none of the prisoners Harding encountered ‘could be classed as embryo habitual criminals’ (Harding & Samuel, 1981:161). It

aids the reader in understanding a diversity of different criminals and in doing so, addresses a major current issue present in criminological debates today. That is, the level of mentally disordered offenders behind bars.

As Carlen (2006) once claimed, prisons still fulfil their 'age-old function of catering for the homeless, the mentally ill, the stranger, the non-compliant poor, the abused and the excluded' and this text illustrates this well. Harding encountered a life-sentence prisoner who he claims was 'harmless' and who 'should have been in mental hospital.' He writes:

'Number Three, a child killer, had done some ten years, spoke like an educated man, could have been about forty years of age, same type as homosexuals. He was very far gone along the road to mental deterioration. Would ask me every morning if I had heard the crowds around the prison demanding his release. Always believed that MPs were demanding his release' (Harding & Samuel, 1981:162).

This draws attention to the complex debate on whether such offenders should be treated through the criminal justice system or dealt with by high-security hospitals. This is an area which causes increasing concern for the criminal justice system.

When it comes to researching the effects of imprisonment, researchers have found the use of criminal accounts particularly helpful and enlightening. For example, Christian Parenti (1999) draws on a number of prisoner's personal accounts to illustrate the brutality of the US penal system - and its negative impact on people. In his book *Lockdown America*, the combination of actual facts supported by criminal narratives gives the text that cutting edge which leaves a lasting impression on the reader. Not only do the criminal accounts make the issues in the text more realistic but they add to the overall impact of the book by extending the reader's imagination and understanding.

Similarly, Carlen (1985) produced a book called *Criminal Women* which Goodey (2000:476) regards as being 'a rare example of a criminological text embracing the biographical method.' Carlen (1985) argues for validity in autobiographical accounts of prison by ex inmates and highlights the complexity and diversity of female offenders lives. It suggest that 'there can be no one theory of women's crime because there can be no such thing as the typical criminal woman - either in theory or in practice' (Carlen, 1985: 10). She goes onto claim that there are two dominant myths about women offenders. Firstly, that they are essentially masculine, mal adjusted or mentally ill. Secondly, that woman prisons are more caring institutions than men's prisons. However, the accounts by ex-prisoners in *Criminal Women* suggest that women experience similar hardships as men in terms of imprisonment. They reveal that women prison regimes, like men's, are structured and organised in brutal, degrading and damaging ways. The Corston Report (2007) suggests that some of this may still be the case today.

Peckham's (1985) account provides a fascinating insight into the function of female prison systems. Peckham (1985) suggests that the conditions in Holloway prison are similar to those in any other female prison. She supports Carlen in her argument and describes Holloway as having particularly punitive regimes. This is again extremely educational for students as most students will have never been inside a prison due to a number of ethical issues.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

This paper calls for the ‘resurrection’ of biography to be used ‘as a tool for research development’ (Goodey, 2000:493). It can be argued that biographical texts written by criminals make a valuable, yet somewhat unappreciated, contribution to criminological research as ‘biography remains, largely a theoretical or methodological “idea” rather than an empirical practice in criminology’ (Goodey, 2000:476). This is despite the fact that these texts offer a detailed insight into the criminal mind, in a fashion which is usually ‘more absorbing, more enlightening, and fundamentally more real’ compared to other research methods (Allport, 1947: xii).

These texts capture the imagination of the reader and invite one to observe criminal life, while avoiding fears of becoming attached to the subject or befriending them, as is the case in some ethnographic work. Reading these accounts allows researchers to understand criminal experiences whilst remaining entirely detached from the subject meaning that one can obtain an objective and unbiased understanding.

Additionally, biographies are able to contextualise an individual’s life in ‘regard to the historical changes taking place around them throughout the life course’ (Goodey, 2000:485). This makes it easier to understand an individual’s relationship to crime within the broader context, proving that these texts can be highly educational and useful to students.

Taking this into consideration, it can be argued that the government should welcome criminal biographies instead of trying to discourage them. Not only do these texts bring criminal life into reality, but they explain criminology in a way that is sometimes more capturing and more exciting than reading just textbooks. If these texts can help one to develop an interest in criminology then that in itself highlights a part of their importance. Without a general interest in the subject there would be less students assigning to the course, which in turn could lead to fewer people wishing to apply for work in departments such as the police service or prison service. This is importance as these jobs must be successfully filled in order to maintain a safer society.

Berg (2007:254) concludes that:

‘all in all, autobiography, whether offered as a full and lengthy unfolding of one’s life or as snippets of discourse in prefaces and appendices, can be extremely useful. This information offers more than simply a single individual’s subjective view on matters. An autobiography can reflect the social contours of a given time, the prevailing or competing ideological orientations of a group, or the self-reflections about one’s activities in various roles. In short, autobiographies offer a solid measure of data for the research process.’

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