Criminologist or criminal? Liminal spaces as the site for auto/biography

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Abstract
Feminist epistemologies place value on disrupting dominant ways of knowing. Personal experience and struggle can serve as transformative sites of meaning-making. I have lived experience of sex work and of organised crime. In 2018, I endured two crown court trials, both as the wife of the defendant, and as a victim. This article will interrogate the complexities of occupying such liminal spaces and the role of emotion as a way of knowing.

Keywords
Organised crime, stigma, victim, feminist, trauma, lived experience, auto-biography

Introduction
Much has been written about the advantages and challenges of ‘insider’ qualitative research; that is, contexts in which the researcher identifies as a member of the social group or community that is being studied (Dragomir, 2020). Participatory paradigms build on this to prioritise lived experience or ‘practical knowing’ over other forms of knowing, placing explicit value on this insider position as integral to conducting effective research that interrogates ethical issues and negates problematic power dynamics (Heron and Reason, 1997). However, there is a little writing that has adequately discussed how researchers may personally benefit from their participation in qualitative and/or insider research, or indeed how the research itself benefits from this dual-relationship (Ross, 2017). Through navigating personal challenges in both the primary experiences themselves, and in the barriers of telling the story through a criminological lens, I have appreciated that accounts do not have to be finished or perfectly theorised to be important and necessary. Starting places are important.

I have been involved with the sex industry for almost 20 years, having worked as a lap dancer for 5 years and being involved in research, teaching and activism. This has provided me with extensive experience of occupying a stigmatised and liminal space. I am well versed in impression management and how one’s identity is spoiled through conflation with the sex industry (Ahearne, 2015; Goffman, 1963). Working in the night time economy from the age of 17 years also gave me my initial experiences of serious organised crime. I was employed as a club promoter for night clubs before I turned 18 years and entered the world of strip clubs. I have also experienced secondary stigma for being married to a man who was given a custodial sentence in a highly publicised firearms case. This stigma sticks to my body and has rendered my body as a site of spatial exclusion and disgust (Grosz, 1994). In 2017, I was the co-victim of an organised crime gang (OCG) and, in 2018, I attended crown court as a victim, and later in the same year, with my husband as defendant. As such, I belonged nowhere and instead occupied a haunting liminal space. My experiences were too messy, chaotic, risky and real to be neatly packaged for criminology and academia.

Reflective practice has risen up research agendas (Dragomir, 2020; Harding, 2020; Pearce, 2020) and feminist epistemologies have argued that knowledge is contextually specific and the researcher’s biography affects what they find out and what we know. Research is not undertaken in a vacuum and researchers cannot claim to be occupying a neutral default position (Hammond and Kingston, 2014). Central to much feminist research methodology is acknowledging and stating the position of the researcher as part of and...
influencing the research process. O’Neill (2001) argues that feminist research works with the complexity of women’s lives and helps to create the academic and practical spaces for women’s voices to be heard, and in turn, for them to feel validated and involved. O’Neill (2001) asserts that we need to engage with the depth and complexity of women’s lives to understand women’s lived experiences and their forms of resistance, so that we might better address policy change. For O’Neill (2001), a ‘politics of feeling’ privileges emotions, feelings and meanings in accessing ‘lived experiences’ and ‘lived cultures’.

Criminology has historically been androcentric and many of the claims to positivist objectivity have been at the expense of women’s voices and ways of knowing. The narratives of OCGs and drug reform are male-centred. My experiences as a woman victim of male violence or members of an OCG urge me to remind people that women and children are often the collateral damage in organised crime. Women are the silent victims; our bodies are sites of violence in order to coerce and control male partners. As a feminist criminologist, I experienced criminology as a form of secondary victimisation during this time. The linear narratives presented to me by academics, underpinned by various theoretical frameworks, reflected nothing of my own experiences. As a woman who has had threats of being raped, being shot, being stabbed, having acid thrown over me, I realised how sterile and disjointed that criminology can be from the realities of organised crime.

I have always found writing to be a cathartic process, and it was through exploring my experiences with words that I have started to utilise my experience to conceptualise more broadly. Processing trauma is a time-consuming project and writing about trauma is even more so.

**Risks of the auto/biographical**

Deciding to utilise the auto/biographical in research can be (mis)understood as the researcher having a lack of professionalism and being able to successfully ‘manage’ emotions (Copp, 1998). Monitoring the intensity of one’s emotional responses is seen as the golden standard in academia; of having something to say, but not sharing too much. However, it would be churlish for me to fail to recognise the potential risks to self that an auto/biographical researcher faces. There are many writings on the ‘risk’ of emotional research. One ‘risk’ is that many do not consider such accounts to be sufficiently rigorous (Pearce, 2020). Some scholars argue that auto/biography and/or autoethnography have been associated with narcissism, personal anguish and a lack of academic credibility (Griffin and Griffin, 2019). Brennan and Letherby (2017) rightly state that the auto/biographical has clear epistemological implications where it has featured in critical feminist research that challenges malestream assumptions about ‘objectivity’ in scholarship. Not least that auto/biography recognises the dynamic and in-flux relationship between the self and other. As such, the subjectivity of the author is always present when writing about others; and when writing about the self, there is always the trace of others there (Carr, 2018). The risks that one takes when writing through, and of, the self, is that such explorations will be dismissed and discredited. However, I would argue that the risks of not writing in a way that is raw and uncomfortable is to legitimate the institutional betrayal and secondary trauma that many of us feel (Smith and Freyd, 2014).

This can be understood using the work of as a form of ‘representational dilemma’. By being transparent about my story and using auto/biography as a method, I find myself the victim of an impossible dichotomy. If I choose to disclose my lived experience and how my trauma impacts the way in which I experience criminology, I might be accused of being ‘too involved’ or lacking the illusive ‘objectivity’ that androcentric criminology demands (Pearce, 2020). However, if I do not reveal my personal involvement with the conceptualisation of trauma, then I fail to be transparent and could be labelled as disingenuous. I am not claiming that by experiencing trauma I am an expert on trauma more broadly, but rather that by addressing the uncomfortable reality of victimhood I can speak to an under-theorised liminal space. Wrestling with issues of disclosure represents a grave emotional burden on the researcher (Hubbard et al., 2001).

Auto/biography can thus be critically understood as an apparatus of feminist epistemologies of examining that institutional betrayal and the secondary trauma that results from it (Smith and Freyd, 2013). Discrediting the academic legitimacy and robustness of a personal account can be felt as a form of gaslighting. Pearce (2020) outlines some principles of a methodology for the marginalised and in doing so, turns her attention to the discipline of sociology itself. Stating that the discipline has long ago rejected positivism she asks why we so often employ detached, individualistic approaches to our research (Pearce, 2020). Bochner and Ellis (2016) encourage researchers to ‘write vulnerably about crucial turning points that they’ve lived through [. . .] stories with raw and naked emotion that investigate life’s messiness’. Pearce (2020) refers to this as ‘evocative autoethnography’ that the approach does not necessarily guide the reader through an argument, but rather leaves space open for different kinds of reader engagement with the author’s interior life. Emotion in research is important; it is how we explore distressing and complicated concepts (Javaid, 2019). However, I suggest that far from having the answers through auto/biography, we merely need to provide a ‘way in’ to the messy grittiness of criminological concerns (Darra, 2008).

**Stigma**

It is important for me to explicitly address how I am using stigma here. As a sex work researcher, I routinely use stigma
as a theoretical framework (Ahearne, 2015, 2016, 2019; Ahearne et al., 2020). Broadly speaking, I use ‘stigma’ to refer to the processes of exclusion and judgement that occur when an individual or group is constructed as being deviant, dirty, and of having a spoiled identity (Goffman, 1963). I also understand stigma as an internalised embodiment by the individual who is ‘cast out’ in this way. As such, those who experience stigma are likely to develop strategies of stigma management (Hammond and Kingston, 2014). I have employed strategies to avoid stigma by deciding when it is safe or not to disclose details surrounding my personal life and proximity to criminality and the sex industry. Morris (2018) cites Goffman to explain how ‘discreditable’ people can pass as ‘normal’ provided they can successfully manage information about the source of the shame. It would be disingenuous if I failed to acknowledge that having the social capital to produce an academic article is a strong tool for impression management, and that being employed by a university affords me a status that does dilute some of the stigma I experience. Nonetheless, stigma is a persistent barrier and can be experienced as an additional form of trauma.

Victim or villain

In 2017, I endured 5 months as the co-victim in a blackmail plot. I was working as a lecturer in Sociology and living a dual identity as somebody whose life was at risk. My husband was imprisoned in the 1990s for his role in a high profile case, and so going to the police was not an option. Partly, this was due to the ‘no grasping’ culture that seeks to silence victims, and in part, because my husband would probably not be seen as a worthy victim, or a reliable witness. I suffered in silence and could not reveal to anybody including close family and friends what was happening.

I was under acute stress from five members of an OCG, and I made the decision to try and take my own life. My husband reported me as a missing person, and the call handler could tell that this was an unusual case. When I was located by the police, they insisted that I spoke to the police psychiatric nurse. Shortly after this, Crime Investigation Department (CID) were involved. I felt cut off from the world, there is a stigma attached to being a victim, engaging with the police and of the dangers involved. There is also a strong stigma attached to mental health. We refused to give statements for days, despite CID having daily visits to us. Criminology tends to not show OCGs for what there are: dangerous predatory men who exploit the vulnerable. Much like the grooming of children, these men rely on silence and compliance to achieve their aims. Extorting money makes better business sense than selling drugs because they do not need a product; their threats are their labour.

The police were varied in their approach to us. Although polite and professional, some were clearly wary of our credibility. My husband’s criminal record hung in the air and he worried that he was not being seen as a worthy victim. We were presented with Threat to Life warnings (often referred to as Osman warnings), these are issued where police have intelligence that there is serious threat to life, and in August 2017, we were taken into police protection (Protected Persons’ Status) for a period of 3.5 weeks in Scotland, until I decided to come home. I could not go through with it. I am aware that as I write this, it is like I am talking about someone else. Four of the men had been arrested, charged and remanded in this time, and I felt nothing but terror. There is no literature in criminology which adequately expresses the terror that I felt every second of the day. My house was arson-assessed by the fire brigade, we had a panic alarm that went straight to the police; I saw shadows everywhere I looked. My husband wore a stab-proof vest and each time that my husband left the house, I was sure he would be shot. This is the reality of organised crime and one that is not often presented in academic literature.

It is no surprise that I was diagnosed with Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD). The layers of trauma that I have experienced due to male violence, sexual and physical, throughout my life, accumulated during this time. My hair was falling out, I lost an extreme amount of weight and developed gastro problems. I grappled with suicidal ideations everyday that I was alone. A month after returning home from protected persons’ status, I received a lectureship to teach sociology and, therefore, had to perform the role of the academic, while being terrorised by members of the OCGs’ family and friends. My house was broken into by a member of the OCG who threatened us to ‘drop the charges’ and the wait for the crown court trial was an unbearable period. Many friends and acquaintances dropped us because we were ‘grasses’, we had broken the cardinal rule to never speak to the police. However, as a feminist, I was determined I would not be silenced by men. As a working class woman who has struggled to get to university, receive my PhD and get a lectureship, I was as angry as I was scared. I did not come this far to be crushed by a group of men.

The trial was scheduled for a duration of 5 days at crown court. However, on the day of the trial, our prosecutor accepted a plea for a much lesser offence. While disappointed that they were not facing the blackmail charge, we were not in the right physical or mental shape to be cross-examined by five different defence barristers. My husband would have been presented as being of ‘bad character’ and, therefore, an unreliable witness. Therefore, we were spared the torture of a 5-day trial and we were awarded with restraining orders and guilty pleas. However, as with all stories, there are twists and complexities in mine.

Playing with fire

Unfortunately, my husband was arrested before this crown court trial and charged with the possession of pepper sprays which are a prohibited weapon under Section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968. He was also charged with other offences which were dropped 2 years later.
My house was raided for 3.5 hours, while my husband was in the police cells. I felt like my heart was being ripped from my body. I have never felt so violated in my entire life as the time where 13 police officers including armed police and the dog squad degraded my house. I was a prisoner in my home and it seemed to last for days. The police used torches to search in my garden, and the aftermath of having the belongings of my house upside down. The melted ice in puddles all over the kitchen floor, where the police had been looking for drugs in my freezer. In the aftermath, I sat cross legged in the middle of my kitchen, a stranger in my own home.

This meant attending crown court with my husband as defendant in November 2018. Placed behind the perspex screen with close family and friends, I felt like I was drowning in full sight of everyone. My body and mind could not take any more pressure. I had stopped eating, was unable to sleep without tablets, and my hair had turned grey. Grasping my friends’ hands, I almost collapsed when the judge sentenced my spouse to a suspended sentence. Here I was, victim and villain in the same year, in the same crown court building. A victim of feeling unsafe and abandoned by a system that is meant to protect us. It was 11 months after this that the other charges were dropped. For 3 years, my life was in limbo due to the criminal justice system. This is a burden not easily discussed in the academic literature, and not easily described to outsiders. It is easy to explain why your career has not advanced due to a maternity break, or health-related reasons. It is something else entirely to explain how you have gone through several serious legal issues in the space of a few years. Criminology must offer space for these narratives.

Vulnerability

A number of studies have reported the dangers both physical and emotional that researchers can encounter in the field (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Sikic Micanovic et al., 2020). Lee-Treeweek and Linkogle (2000) warn that a researcher can face serious threats to their emotional stability and sense of self when researching participants who are undergoing stressful life events. These scholars write about the external risks presented from coming into contact with the distress of participants, and how they might be felt by the researcher (Nilan, 2002). I argue that sharing the insider or outsider status and interrogating these boundaries constitutes a particular danger for the researcher. It is easy to ‘screen ourselves out’ of research areas that provoke feelings of vulnerability and danger (Hubbard et al., 2001). However, these are the research areas that we might have the most to contribute to. Far from dealing with ‘emotional threats’ from literature or data (Hubbard et al., 2001) for those with insider status, we might also be facing very real tangible threats alongside our research.

This vulnerability is not a weakness to the research or a failure of maintaining an objective stance (Fontana and Frey, 1994). Perhaps, the greatest challenge facing researchers is not about successfully managing emotions, but rather is about recognising that emotions have epistemological significance (Hubbard et al., 2001). Talking openly about my experiences and recognising my vulnerabilities helps other scholars to understand the realm of organised crime. As with any piece of research, the researcher’s positionality should be explicitly expressed.

It has been acknowledged that there is privilege in the academic voice. Fields such as ‘convict criminology’ aim to disrupt the insider or outsider binary by centres perspectives and analyses around the lived experience of incarceration. This work is critical of research that ‘analyzes crime from the sterile viewpoint of the middle class academic’ (Newbold et al., 2014: 440). This is not, however, a process without tension, with scholars problematising the idea that those with lived experience have epistemic privilege over the discipline. It must be acknowledged that even those of us who are working class with lived experience within our research fields, we raise epistemological debates from a place of academic privilege. Writing a journal article for an academic public is by itself an exclusive act that most people cannot access. Nor can it be claimed that my lived experience is broadly felt, or that women victims of OCGs are a homogeneous group.

Victimology

Judgements are made surrounding whether a victim is ‘worthy’ or not, was I the right kind of victim? I am someone with a spoiled identity (Goffman, 1963) from both my former occupation, my proximity to the ‘dangerous’ body of my husband, and therefore, I am seen as having fault or blame. The language of risk and vulnerability are a key part of criminological debates (Sibley, 2018) and those seen as negating their own risk by actively engaging in ‘risky’ behaviours are held accountable. By refusing the extreme protection that the state offered me in the form of protected persons’ status, I was considered to be the narrator of my own risk. I refused to embody passive victimhood and comply with the risk-management of the state. It is dangerous for a woman to reject the protections that are awarded to her, but as Brown (2012) rightly asserts, vulnerability is used as a mechanism of social control.

The ideal victim (Maglione, 2017) might be a much contested fixture in writings of criminology, but the idea of ‘victim’ and ‘offender’ is false dichotomies (Cuneen, 2010). Writings on victimology have tended to construct people as either ‘offender’ or ‘victim’, with little attention to the profound difficulties that underpin these classifications. My husband resides in both of these categories, and the complicated nature of this liminal identity posed multiple problems when engaging with the criminal justice system. The police are not a homogeneous group, and some officers appeared to be sceptical about my husband’s victimhood. This leaked
down to me and led to stigma by association and secondary victimisation. As a feminist academic, it was a grave source of frustration that I was constantly being judged by the actions of men.

Living through the terror of being targeted by an OCG had a deep impact on me. Yet, when I returned to literature in order to make sense of my experiences, I was met with scholarly struggles that I could not relate to. Whether I am called a victim or survivor is not an issue (Van Dijk, 2009), what is an issue, is that there are few spaces where I can speak openly within academic circles. Voices that reject or question the academic legitimacy of semantic fields are not welcome. Victim-labelling is a non-issue for me; I would rather the academy focuses on why so few people with experiences of organised crime are recognised in the writings. I am a human being with complex and seeping identities and values, like anybody else. Whether I feel forgiveness or the need for punitive measures depends on the day. This does not mean that I am less of a criminologist; on the contrary, this valuable personal knowledge means I am constantly interrogating the nuances and hidden areas of debate. I have spoken openly about my experiences to other academics, and the tension that I navigate between being a victim–survivor and being a criminologist are not unusual.

Emotion work in lived experience

During my pilot research into the processes of exploitation within OCGs, I strongly felt the pull between being a researcher and being someone with lived experience. I was being presented with linear data that could not fully represent the trauma. You cannot adequately describe the terror of being threatened with acid in your face in academic writing; it is a weakness of the cold formal writing that we are prescribed. Yet, there are few spaces for the messy impassioned musings of the survivor. There have been multiple times where I have wanted to scream in academic spaces, to take up space in stating my truth. Wilkins (1993) argues that there is an important place for ‘taking it personally in research’. Our biographies are a valued source for weaving together the stories of the researcher and the theories and concepts that surround them (Cotterill and Letherby, 1993; Dragomir, 2020; Harding, 2020) and providing a tool for transforming dominant positions of knowledge. Indeed, observe that ‘feelings of personal conflict, anxiety, surprise, shock, or revulsion are of analytical significance’.

I am not separate from the field of criminology. I am a part of the topics that I teach and my emotions are a valuable asset in the teaching of criminology and the (re)conceptualising of women’s voices in the field. This positionality can be hard to wrestle with and I have often felt like an outsider. I experience dissociation as part of having Complex PTSD, but I also experience dissociation from being my private self and my formal role of academic. My narrative is embodied and it weighs heavy. I feel it in my chest, the tight spasms in my stomach. I could find a very little academic literature on the intensive emotional work that is required to exist in academia as someone who has personal experience of organised crime and other traumas. The management of my emotions has been a tiring form of emotional labour; I have had to perform the role of the professional academic when facing threats to my life (Hochschild, 1975). It is impossible to express the difficulty involved in this process, of interrogating the self and imagining the criminological from this messy place. Sharing my own emotions during this process has been a struggle. To show visible signs of distress inside a work setting brings discomfort to others and a questioning of your professionalism (Ahrens, 2006).

Feminist scholars position self-disclosure as ethical and necessary (O’Neill, 1991; Reinharz, 1992) and I assert that women speaking truth to power are embroiled in an integral act of resistance. Women’s experiences are continually diluted, devalued and de-centred (Ahearne, 2019). Far from my experiences being a barrier to acquiring knowledge, my biography is the site in which knowledge is produced. The perspective of women offers a radical critique of criminology (Smith, 1974). I have been alienated from my own experience by a discipline that does not value women speaking back. But speaking back and speaking out of a neat linear format, is necessary and is the only thing for radical transgression to take place. I am not reduced to my victimhood or survivor status, nor am I the sum of my trauma. Rather, we inform one another, my own expertise has been a guiding force for me to cast a critical lens at trauma in the academy. I am rejecting my subservience to the structural inequalities of the institution.

The main purpose in this article is to say that I am here, and that there are many other women like me. Our voices and experiences matter and feminist epistemology argues for the need for a reconceptualisation of auto/biography and the discipline. The article is auto/biographical in that it draws upon my life. I have found academia an incredibly difficult place to be because it does not value firsthand experience and people who demand to tell their own story, particularly certain kinds of stories that it finds threatening. I do not want to be spoken for, or over, I am qualified to write my own story. Attention to these issues clearly demonstrates that auto/biography is relevant and should be central to criminological and sociological approaches.

Conclusion

The academy must place more value on lived experience and on narratives that disrupt the status quo and challenge the discipline. Ahmed (2017) refers to being a ‘feminist killjoy’ and it appears that the same exists within criminology. Those who reject dominant ways of thinking and knowing are maligned and rejected. I do not claim to speak for all
victim-survivors of male violence, or all wives of former prisoners, or all former strippers, but I do strongly assert that such accounts are strong ones with value for the discipline. I recommend that criminology allows more people to speak for themselves, and to be able to do so in noisy, fractured, provocative ways. By placing value on new ways of storytelling, we place value on women’s writing and those who come from non-traditional academic backgrounds.

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