

# Brexit: the consequences for innovative criminological research

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A choice to exit the EU on June 23rd will not be without consequences for criminology. Obviously student and staff mobility will face new obstacles, as will collaborative and innovative research. Furthermore, at a time when public criminology should challenge and lead changes in criminal justice policy, isolation from our European colleagues who can aid and inform policy debates could be debilitating.

Many of us have benefitted from European collaboration and shared research initiatives. An example has been the hugely successful Offender Supervision in Europe research network developed by Fergus McNeill (University of Glasgow) and Kristel Beyens (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) over the last four years involving 23 EU countries and 63 active participants who have been working together to collate research on offender supervision across Europe. The research network is funded by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) awarded under Action IS1106. The Memorandum of Understanding, which sets out the aims of the project stated:

The main objective of the Action is to exchange, increase and deepen knowledge about offender supervision in Europe, in order to understand its development in social context, how it is constructed and experienced by those involved and its impacts and consequences (McNeill and Beyens, 2016)

Criminology is a multi-disciplinary area which benefits immensely from the wide variety of researchers from different backgrounds. The research network was able to draw on expertise from law, criminal justice, psychology, social work and sociology. Another strength of the network was that policymakers, practitioners and academics from a number of EU countries were all involved in the planning, research and dissemination of findings of the projects undertaken by the research network.

During the first year (2012) the network group explored what was already known about offender supervision research in Europe and looked at the various methodological issues involved. There followed an intensive period focussing on the development of new research methods to expand the knowledge base of experiences and best practice in community supervision. This led to a number of initiatives including a pilot research project – the Supervisable project. The final year of this project (2015/16) was taken up with the dissemination of findings to specialists and the general public - including offenders on supervision - through exhibitions, song writing workshops, conferences in addition to journal articles and edited books.

The importance of the programme lies in the fact that criminology tends to focus on mass incarceration rather than community sanctions with the latter being regarded simply as a less intrusive alternative to imprisonment. But in most European countries the number of people under supervision is around three times the number incarcerated (McNeill, 2013). While sanctions and supervision are supposed to change offender behaviour, there has been a paucity of research on how offenders themselves perceived and responded to the process of supervision. Offenders' perceptions of criminal justice professionals tend to be taken for granted rather than problematized (see Durnescu et al., 2013; Graebisch et al., 2014<sup>1</sup>). The methodology of the Supervisible project started from the understanding that gaining meaningful responses from individuals who have been under the control of the criminal justice system for an extended period required an approach which did not simply replicate their experiences of the continuous and 'ever present' process of being interviewed by officials: during police investigation, by prosecutors, court trials and probation supervision meetings. Standard interviews are also extremely text-orientated for people who have limited reading abilities and who often have a history of unsatisfactory experiences in communicating in educational as well as criminal justice institutions, both of which rely strongly on textual messages.

The support provided under the umbrella of the COST-Action 'Offender Supervision in Europe' (McNeill and Beyens, 2014) programme was crucial for the Supervisible project. This was developed initially in the jurisdictions of England, Scotland and Germany using Photovoice While Photovoice is an established tool in disciplines such as health research (Wang and Burris, 1997; Becker, 2002; Grady, 2004; Rose, 2011) and has been utilised to give a voice to marginalised individuals targeted by community programmes, it had never hitherto been a technique to investigate experiences of those subject to offender supervision<sup>2</sup>. A more traditional approach is Photo-elicitation (Pauwels, 2015), which has rather less ambitious aspirations than Photovoice and uses photos not necessarily taken or chosen by the participants as stimuli for qualitative interviews or – in our case – focus groups. This latter approach positively supported those taking part in the Photovoice project who gained strength from using the photographs (they had taken) to share experiences with a variety of people within the focus groups.

One of the innovative aspects of the research was the location of the Photovoice sessions in organisations and locations not closely connected to the supervising institutions, namely non-governmental organisations supporting women's centres, half-way houses, legal aid centres, etc. This is important, because research on the client's experience of probation, as far as it has occurred at all, has always been undertaken in an environment directly connected to the supervisory service in one way or the other. For example, clients

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<sup>1</sup> Research that has been done on this subject in Europe: I. Durnescu/C. Enengl/C. Grafl (2013): Experiencing Supervision, in: Offender Supervision in Europe, Hrsg: McNeill/Beyens, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 19-50; bezogen auf Deutschland: C. Graebisch/M. von Borstel/S.-U. Burkhardt (2014): Experiencing Supervision – Country Report Germany, Annex II in Graebisch/Burkhardt (Fn. 1), pp. 95-120.

<sup>2</sup> A parallel study also conducted under the auspices of COST dealing with perceptions of supervision by professionals involved Carr et al: Carr, N, Healy, D, Kennefick, L and Maguire, N (2013) 'A Review of the Research on Offender Supervision in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland', Irish Probation Journal, 10, 50-74.

have been asked (and selected) by probation officers to take part in a study, interviews have taken place in the probation office and/or a questionnaire has been given back to the research institute by the probation officer. Thus, the rather positive results of our Photovoice pilot studies of probation experience have methodological implications for further research in this area.

So instead of interviews the offenders were given disposable or digital cameras and asked to spend around an hour taking photographs of their life under probation supervision. The researchers gave a brief introduction to the task and project engaged an artist who demonstrated the possibilities of creatively using the camera as an instrument for self-expression and also how to take images which might lead to retrospective identification of the location and participants. The participants were later asked to discuss their photos collectively in focus groups. The images and the group discussions turned out to be a highly effective method of enabling participants to share their experiences, their difficulties and their aspirations. The artist and researchers quickly built an intimate and trustful atmosphere where participants could honestly reveal their journey through the criminal justice system and their feelings about their supervision. Important themes that emerged were shared by all of the groups involved in each country were constraint, waste and judgement, also growth or aspirations and hope for something that was not easily attainable like a job, accommodation or even acceptance (Fitzgibbon et al., 2016).

Output has taken the form of a combination of, on the one hand, traditional conference papers, articles and book chapters and on the other hand some innovative dissemination methods such as podcasts, and a public exhibition of the images taken by the participants in the Supervisable project. Our final conference in Brussels held in March 2016 included a 'Seen and Heard' event including an exhibition of about 60 of the images from these projects (curated by the artist Carolyne Kardia) and a performance (by the musician Louis Abbott) of songs inspired by the images.

The images and the narratives that arose from the Supervisable focus groups powerfully conveyed the pervasive and overpowering nature of offender supervision as well as some of its helpful aspects. The following image demonstrates the ambivalence and complexity of the photographs. Superficially it can be seen as benign. However, this meaning completely changes when one hears the words of the participant who actually took the photograph:



The participant 'Vivaldi' (from Germany) who took the photo said:

I have taken this photo just because... When you are out of prison... You are still controlled... and, ah, you are not allowed to decide for yourself and things like that. [...] I would describe this lady as, let's say, lady justice. [...] She is a decider. She is determinant. You also can't state your opinion freely or, ah, simply move freely, or leave, or whatever else. [...] With the justice system for me it is simply like this, that you are forced into a corner or into a dead-end road. And you are no more allowed to leave from there."

Such intense and revealing methods require skilled interventions and time to build and interpret the experience in a meaningful way.

Our Supervisable pilot study was so successful that members of the Offender Supervision in Europe network are extending the project to Ireland, Malta and Denmark. But what is important to understand is that all these opportunities and the shared sense of identity and commitment among both participants and researchers were made possible by the European COST initiative. Co-ordination across several European countries with different languages, legal systems, practitioner training and sentencing practices is an outstanding achievement made possible by EU funding mechanisms and social policy initiatives. EU funding through the COST initiative covers the costs of facilitating, organising and hosting

twice yearly meetings across Europe for Offender Supervision in Europe research network. The EU as umbrella structure means that all network participants can apply for travel and accommodation costs regardless of the wealth of their own institutions or governments. This in particular has enabled participants from many of the poorer Eastern Europe EU states to attend and contribute. This ability to participate then enabled the research network to gain status and publicity and so strengthened the position of participants in their home states.

Obviously, defenders of Brexit could argue that such collaborative research networks as the one described here do not stand or fall on UK membership of the EU and could be achieved by various mechanisms of bilateral agreements between institutions. Many of us have experience of such bilateral collaborations between individual universities. However, it is arguably much more difficult to see purely bilateral informal structures as effectively substituting for the economies of scale in the areas of administration and funding – particularly for the poorer states – in institutions such as criminal justice systems. While police and security surveillance services across Europe are driven to collaborate for obvious reasons, criminal justice agencies such as probation and offender supervision are far less likely to collaborate naturally – due to different legal and punishment administration systems – without some facilitating umbrella funding and administrative mechanisms. These, our case study has hopefully shown, are already up and running. It might seem perverse to go back to the drawing board.

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For more details, see the report of the programme here:

<http://www.offendersupervision.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Final-Report.pdf>

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