

Papers from the
British Criminology Conference
An Online Journal by the British Society of Criminology

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Editor

Lizzie Seal

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Editorial

Lizzie Seal

The British Society of Criminology's 2018 Conference was held from 3-6 July at Birmingham City University. The theme was 'Transforming Criminology' and the keynote speakers featured prominent criminologists - Ben Crewe, Jeff Ferrell, Yvonne Jewkes, Michael Levi, Thomas Raymen and David Wilson - as well as Edmond Clark, artist-in-residence at Grendon Prison 2014-2018.

The papers submitted to this volume went through the journal's rigorous peer review process and three out of seven submissions were accepted. Many thanks to the peer reviewers for their essential work in enabling publication of the journal and for the helpful comments that they provided to help further strengthen the submissions. Thanks is also due to the authors for their prompt revisions and co-operation. The timeline for journal is short and its production is greatly aided by this willingness to meet deadlines.

The first article by Page and Temple-Malt explores using the World Café approach as a participatory method for conducting research on new psychoactive substances with students and homeless people. They outline how they undertook their research and explore the benefits of using this methodology as well as some of its disadvantages. In particular, they find potential in its ability to 'stimulate rich, animated and productive exchanges'. Kennedy et al present data from a pilot study conducted in Birmingham on public perceptions of the demographics of typical offenders across a range of crimes. They find that their sample tended to be correct in determining the characteristics of typical offenders for most crimes, although there was some divergence between public perceptions on this and findings from official statistics and criminological research. Finally, Parsons examines the importance of bearing witness to people's personal transformation away from offending and towards imagining positive future selves. She presents findings from a Photographic electronic Narrative (PeN) project hosted at a resettlement scheme for men. Through focusing on one man's journey in particular she explores both his photographs and blogs, and the public's interaction with them via social media, as a form of bearing witness.

In 2019, the British Society of Criminology Conference will take place at University of Lincoln from 2-5 July, with the title 'Public Criminologies: Communities, Conflict and Justice'. I wish you all a relaxing break and a fruitful 2019.

Lizzie Seal, University of Sussex, December 2018

World Café: a participatory research tool for the criminologist engaged in seeking world views for transformation

Sarah Page & Dr Em Temple-Malt

With recognition and thanks to Gallagher, S., Lawton, K., Holt, M. & Nash, K., Briggs, A. for their research assistance on this project.

Abstract

This paper introduces the creative participatory research methodology of 'World Café' in the context of our primary research on NPS (new psychoactive substances) usage within the youth and homeless population in Stoke-on-Trent in the UK. Our study involved conducting 6 World Cafes, with a total of 41 participants with homeless hostel service users (n=16), local college students (n=14) and professionals working with illegal drug users (n=11). We offer new pedagogical insight for a criminological research method that has the potential to be transformative. The 'World Café' is a conversational methodology that enables participants and researchers to get a 'world' view of issues and it lends itself for discussions pertaining to innovative solutions (Brown with Isaacs, 2005). A world view and innovative solutions can facilitate transformation at an individual level, as well as whole systems change in policy and practice. The role of the criminological researcher is to encourage participants to become active research assistants and our amended model combines this with undergraduate student researchers. Active engagement of research participants at a participatory level facilitates transformation of the research process in reducing power dynamics. We discuss the 'world café' approach and its transformative potential considering our first-hand experience of using the methodology to gather data on NPS drug usage.

Key Words

NPS, Drugs, World Café, Research Methods, Social Exclusion

Introduction

This paper aims to introduce a new approach to qualitative data collection for studying criminological topics that we suggest has transformative application. The approach, 'World Café', is hitherto not documented in criminology but is a conversational and

innovative methodological tactic to derive information from participants in a group setting (Brown with Issacs, 2005). We outline this method and consider its use to investigate NPS (New Psychoactive Substances) knowledge and user levels among homeless hostel service-users and colleges students from Stoke-on-Trent, in a study aimed at giving local policy makers insight into demand levels within the city, to inform service design that reduces drug related harm and associated crime. However, using innovative approaches to data collection is not without problems. This paper aims to reflect upon both the strengths and limitations of World Café in the context of our NPS research. We offer insights on how this method can be applied within the wider field of criminology.

Researching vulnerable groups in society on crime related topics has ethical sensitivities. Conversational approaches create a more informal atmosphere for generating data and potentially reduce power inequalities between academic researchers and participants. However, Bachman & Schutt (2017;p278) highlight that “the very act of research itself imposes something unnatural on the situation”. When barriers to inclusion are already an issue for a potential group of participants, criminological researchers need ethical, flexible and engaging methods to listen to people’s experiences and gain ideas for future improvement to individuals, services and society. Along with using World Café, we also invited student researchers to support us in generating data to further reduce power dynamics from influencing findings, and as a form of applied pedagogical practice that gave undergraduate students real world empirical experience.

The UK has opted for a blanket ban on all NPS through the British Psychoactive Substances Bill (2016) generating criminological critical analysis (Chatwin, 2017; Reuter & Pardo, 2017; Seddon, 2014; Stevens et al, 2015). Comparatively, the Netherlands and Portugal have embraced a harm reduction and normalisation policy approach (Chatwin, 2017;p112). Much criminological discussion of NPS has focused on how NPS challenges arise considering changing socio-economic, political, cultural and technological contexts. Less discussion has focused on the impact of NPS on local communities. Stoke-on-Trent, a former industrial city in the centre of England, has been highlighted in national press as the epicentre of a range of stories concerning NPS, particularly ‘monkey dust’ (Page, 2018). Yet there has been relatively little research on the impact of NPS use at a macro, community level to validate media reporting. Our research, conducted prior to media reporting, aimed to ascertain what was happening on the ground and what could be done to address any issues.

The World Café approach to data collection and our innovative research and pedagogy gives a unique localised but also pedagogically transformative approach of utilising undergraduate student researchers within the research process. We aim to describe our use of the World Café approach and its applicability to the wider field of criminology. We also share some of our findings on NPS and links to crime to show readers the quality of data that World Cafés can ascertain from participants and to provide our unique contribution to the NPS research field. This paper will not include an analysis of the

entirety of the data to enable us to focus on sharing methodological application and reflection.

Criminological Research Methods Explored

Existing examples of criminological qualitative research on NPS tends to be small scale and/or localised (see Blackburn & Bradley, 2017; Linnell et al, 2015; Ralphs et al, 2017; Addison et al, 2017). National data on NPS has only recently been obtained within the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW). However, young people under the age of 16 and those who are homeless are not recorded in the crime survey (Gore, 1999; Broadfield, 2017). These groups have been highlighted as being more likely to use NPS (Addison et al, 2017; Ministry of Justice, 2015; Johnson et al, 2013; O'Neil, 2014). Alternative data collection is required to consult with these potential user groups, if demand issues are to more successfully addressed. Gore (1999: 575) asserts when looking at drug trends 'alternative surveys may need to be designed which target higher-risk sentinel groups, such as young people living in deprived areas, or young offenders' to get more reliable trend data. However, surveys may not be the best data capture tool when literacy levels of socially excluded groups are considered.

At local levels, research with young drug users has tended to take the form of questionnaires, interviews and focus groups (Simpson, 2003; Addison et al, 2017; Blackman & Bradley, 2017). Net-research liaising with people online has also been used to identify NPS trends (Bruneel et al, 2014). Completion of questionnaires and online approaches require respondents to be literate which excludes certain populations (Bryman, 2012). Online access is also an issue, although, Urbanik & Haggerty (2018) argue the digital divide has reduced with online interactions concerning drugs being more prevalent today. Ralph et al's (2017) NPS research with male adult prisoners in England used mixed methods, including interviews, focus groups and observations of workshop group discussions. These studies are examples of some of the research that has given useful insights into drug trends.

However, data collection and analysis in the drugs field has tended to be expert led. This means there is an overt power difference between academic researcher and the socially excluded and/or young participant. Surveys reduce interviewer effects, but the data can lack rich contextual information from further probing (Bryman, 2012). One-to-one data capture does not allow for creative processes of group problem solving, which provides opportunity for testing out ideas. Interviews and focus groups enable richer data but have a formal feel to them. Interviewers tend to have more power than the participant (Mishler, 1986; Ellis & Berger, 2003; Dingwall, 1997; Kvale, 1996). If a participant has had a negative experience from being interviewed by police, probation and other professionals, this may impact upon how they experience being interviewed one-to-one or in a group with academic professionals. So, it is important to explore more informal options for generating data that reduce power imbalance and negative associations.

Focus groups are thought to be less directed by the researcher than interviews (Bryman, 2012). However, it is recommended not to exceed 12 participants in a focus group (Noaks & Wincup, 2004) and there are occasions when larger group gatherings are and cost-effective for capturing data.

Reflections on Co-produced Research and Using World Café

World Café offers an alternative data collection methodology using group discussion in a face-to-face environment (Brown with Issacs, 2005). In this section we attempt to reflect on applying World Café with vulnerable groups in society on their understanding and consumption levels of NPS and give some examples of the ethical and data issues experienced.

In the mid-1990s academics and business leaders developed the World Café dialogue approach, a type of participant-led group-discussion (Brown and Isaacs 2005; Aldred, 2009). People with collective interest on an issue engage in several rounds of dialogue with others in a café environment (Dawkins, 2017; Finch et al, 2014). It is helpful to visualise this as multiple focus groups, simultaneously occurring, in the same venue, where participants can rotate and join other groups' conversations with refreshments on offer. Engaging in these exchanges transforms individual knowledge and experiences into collective intelligence and decision making, and allows for innovative possibilities to emerge (Prewitt, 2011: 4; Khong et al, 2017: 181).

We have amended the World Café approach to facilitate co-produced research with undergraduate and alumni students, alongside partners on this project from Public Health, who hold an important role in addressing NPS usage in the UK according to Ayres & Bond (2012). The Stoke-on-Trent public health team lead for commissioning drugs and alcohol services highlighted the need for this research and worked with us to design and scope the project with the agreement that findings would inform feasible action and adjustments to service provision. Reinharz (1992) highlights the importance of research that leads to social change and ensuring policy-relevant organisations and policymakers are connected to research. This is a skill set that students get to learn by being involved in professional research with us. Our 'academic collaborative model' allows for collaborative practice with an academic staff research lead, guiding the process and role modelling partnership working. Boville et al (2016: 199) point out there is "personal and professional risk" involved with academics co-researching with students, which can be managed by research focusing on issues within HE (Maunder et al, 2013; Little, 2011; Dunne et al, 2011). We extend this further, by enabling students to work with organisations outside of the university on wider agendas.

Our research team decided to use World Café due to consideration to potential participants and how they might benefit from the informal data collection atmosphere. Furthermore, World Café offers a cost-effective mechanism to capture data from a wide

range of people, which accommodated our small research grant. We envisaged that we would host approximately 20 participants at each of the six World Café events that we had planned (2 for college students; 3 for homeless hostel-users; 1 for professionals from addictions and community safety field of work).

Our 'purposive sample' (Ritchie et al, 2014: 173) aimed to capture data from a portion of the groups of people that current NPS research indicates prevalence among (Ministry of Justice, 2015; Johnson et al, 2013; O'Neil, 2014; Addison et al, 2017; Blackburn & Bradley, 2017). We hoped our sample of college students and homeless hostel users would give us useful local insight into NPS user levels and knowledge. We would then be able to check findings with professionals in the field to gain further perspectives and a more holistic viewpoint. It was felt these specific populations would be able to generate innovative solutions to problems for future drug service delivery. Forty-one male and female participants aged 16 years and above took part: 14 college students, 16 homeless hostel-users and 11 professionals from various organisations (including health, police and drug services). Data collection took place between mid-April and September 2016 to coincide with the period shortly before and after the introduction of The Psychoactive Substance Act of 2016. While a respectable sample size for a qualitative study, the numbers fell short of what we aimed for (Finch et al, 2014: 236) and had repercussions for World Café delivery and data quality.

Each of the six World Café events lasted between 60-90 minutes (depending on numbers present). The venue was arranged like a café with chairs around tables covered with multiple paper tablecloths (one tablecloth per discussion theme), felt-tip pens, refreshments, and a menu highlighting the event order and research materials, such as information sheets and consent forms (MacFarlane et al, 2017; Ritch & Brennan, 2010; Burke & Sheldon 2010). Participants sat around tables and listened to a short presentation about NPS terms, effects and the law to stimulate thinking. This was followed by an outline of the World Café procedure and their rights as a participant. Informed consent was gained. The presenter, acting as café host, facilitated the whole café experience, supporting the research assistants, managing time and participant movement. The host was able to observe student research practice and give feedback for further improvement in debrief sessions.

After the initial presentation and gaining of informed consent, participants responded to a discussion theme, answering a small range of questions for 15 minutes. The nominated table 'scribe' created a written record of group members' contributions on the tablecloth (MacFarlane et al, 2017: 282). For this study, our student research assistants and ourselves (when appropriate) scribed to reduce barriers to participation based on literacy levels. However, the general approach is participatory, so participants are scribes and offered the opportunity to be 'table host'. Several participants from each table are then invited to move to another table (Aldred, 2009). The 'table host' remains and summarises previous group's discussion to incoming participants. Newcomers share highlights from discussions at their former table and any new data is captured on the

tablecloths (Ritch & Brennan 2010: 406). The second conversation lasts approximately 10-15 minutes, followed by a third rotation if the host thought it would produce further productive discussion (Chang & Chen, 2015). A spokesperson from each table presents an account of the collective group's responses to all other café participants in turn, highlighting similarities and unique contributions, which creates a 'world view'. This cycle is repeated for each new discussion theme.

At the close of each of our World Cafés, participants were invited to complete a short questionnaire allowing the option to privately disclose any personal usage of NPS and related experiences (Simmons, 2001: 86). Our student research assistants were available to support questionnaire completion. The questionnaire is not part of the World Café approach but helped manage ethical issues around disclosure and ensuring everyone was given the opportunity to contribute (MacFarlane et al, 2017). The aim was to reduce what Garner & Sercomb (2009: 81) refer to as issues that emerge through "social relations". The questionnaire also enabled us to get feedback on their experience of the World Café.

Careful consideration was given to ethical issues (e.g. vulnerability and participants' age). College lecturers secured parental consent for students to participate and hostel staff were perceived as 'guardians' for under-18s homeless participants (given reliance on temporary accommodation, rather than residence within the family home). Hostel management took responsibility for informing and recruiting suitable participants and providing us with a venue. All researchers secured DBS checks as a safeguarding measure. Informed consent was gained at the beginning of each event and participants were assured they could withdraw at any point. Details of drug services were shared with participants should they require a referral via leaflets and debrief sheet. Concerningly, few participants were aware of existing local drug support services which highlighted an area of service improvement.

Homeless hostel-users can be evicted for using drugs, including NPS. To reduce this impacting upon self-disclosure, pre-agreements were put in place with hostels that accommodation would not be affected by information shared. This was explained to participants at each event. However, all student participants and most homeless-hostel participants claimed they had not used NPS, despite research suggesting these groups are more likely NPS users (Ministry of Justice, 2015; Johnson et al, 2013; O'Neil, 2014; Addison et al, 2017; Blackburn & Bradley, 2017). Student participants reported either not knowing anyone using NPS, or that only "10-20%" of their peers used NPS, which is in line with USA findings from Stogner & Miller (2013), but challenges existing literature in the UK. CSEW data indicates young men aged 16-24 years are the most prevalent users (Broadfield, 2017). Our student sample was mostly female (F=11, M=3), meaning that gender bias could have influenced findings and this is an area for further investigation. Some homeless hostel participants mentioned experimenting with NPS; two reported using daily and all estimated up to "85%" of their peers using NPS, with comments like "people on the streets, a lot of them do it". Our findings corroborate with existing literature on NPS being prevalent among the homeless (Blackman & Bradley, 2017;

Addison et al, 2017). Homeless hostel-users were also largely unaware that NPS was illegal in the UK and knowledge about NPS effects were low. A need for more thorough NPS drugs education was apparent.

Based on contact with drug users, our professional participants claimed NPS users tended to be 'vulnerable' (including 'homeless', 'rough sleepers', people with 'mental health' issues, 'street drinkers' and '*C.S.E. victims'). Professionals also recorded that 'existing drug users', were using NPS with an estimation that '75-80% use NPS in combination with other drugs'. This links to the suggestion that NPS is part of a poly-drug scene in the UK (Blackman & Bradley, 2017: 70). Our professional participants also thought that NPS was being used recreationally, but that 'Weekend users [were] inadvertently using NPS thinking it's something else'. Our findings indicate that NPS has not necessarily overtly recruited new drug users, but that existing drug users within this participant cohort are more likely to be using NPS. Polydrug usage also leads us to question whether associated negative effects and behaviours are due to NPS, or from the combination of chemicals from polydrug usage.

We had worked on strategies to safeguard participants should they disclose NPS usage. Our World Café questions had been designed to be non-intrusive, so participants felt no obligation to self-disclose. However, we had not fully considered support for participants who may have been victims of serious crimes associated with NPS, as this was not the focus of our research. One of our participants disclosed how they had taken 'mamba' (a street name for one NPS product) and this had resulted in them not being able to 'move', before being 'gang raped'. This participant went on to talk about how this had impacted upon accommodation stability and the development of mental health problems. The researcher working with this participant indicated for support from the café host (presenter), who had extensive experience working therapeutically with drug users and was able to ensure emotional well-being of the participant, ascertaining that suitable support services and networks were being accessed. This practice is akin to recommendations by Bachmann & Schutt (2017: 279) for debriefing participants to ensure emotional well-being. The World Café where this disclosure occurred had low attendance and it is unlikely that the participant would have disclosed in a larger group context. This is something to be mindful of when using World Café; it has the potential to silence the telling of certain stories (Prewitt, 2011: 5).

Participants from homeless hostel accommodation reported that NPS users were engaged in crime and said that they were aware of 'loads of begging', 'shop lifting', 'dealing' and 'fighting'. These crimes link to associations between drugs and acquisitive crime (Seddon, 2006; Seddon et al, 2008). As also cited in Page (2018), one of our participants confessed being charged for 'breach of the peace' by the police after taking 'monkey dust' (another NPS product) and 'arguing with a garden gnome 9pm-3am'. It was also felt that there were connections between taking NPS and 'domestic violence, criminal damage, assault, murder, debt, theft and debt from buying the drugs' as well as 'knife and gun violence'. Here, associated crimes seem quite wide ranging and largely based on

observations of friends that were using NPS and assumptions about NPS users. Several hostel accommodation participants commented that 'they all know someone who has been attacked' and assaulted by 'mamba' users.

Since our data collection, we are aware of further research that connects NPS usage to aggression and violence (Addison et al, 2017). Appropriate referrals for victims of crime is important for ethical practice for future research in this field. Interactions with local NPS users led professional participants to express knowledge of a range of negative health effects associated with NPS, including: 'paralysis', 'seizures', 'skin problems from IV drug use e.g. from monkey dust', 'sores' and 'hallucinations' and users had displayed 'violent behaviour', 'unpredictable behaviour' and were 'unaware of surroundings'. The more tranquillizing effect of paralysis reported by professionals corresponds with what our homeless hostel participants reported. Whilst we had made provisions to support people based on their own drug usage and associated health concerns, as well as provision for those concerned over someone else's drug usage, we had not made explicit referral routes for participants who may have been victim to crimes associated with NPS.

Using World Café in Criminological Research: Methodological Reflections

Using innovative approaches such as World Café to generate data is not without problems. Sufficient numbers (approx. 15-20 people) per café are needed to successfully generate productive group discussions and allow for rotations that lead to 'cross-pollination' of ideas (Ritch & Brennan, 2010). Due to insufficient numbers at our events, we were unable to successfully deliver three of the six planned events and had to adapt our approach to collect participants' experiences. Poor attendance was attributed to various factors. One of our cafés, was scheduled during college students' revision leave and one student attended, instead of the anticipated large group. We improvised with an in-depth interview. Poor attendance at two events in hostels was a result of various factors. In one hostel, the manager had not informed participants about the research and went on to tell hostel staff, without consulting us, to round up hostel-users, waking them up and disrupting daily routines of showers and breakfast. Hostel-users were told participation was mandatory, so we spent time explaining to agitated and angry hostel-users that participation was voluntary. Several residents helped themselves to our refreshments while they deliberated over participating, then promptly left. Others remained but struggled with moving around to the different tables for the discussion. So, we reduced the rotations accordingly.

In another hostel, poor communication about the event from staff to hostel-users was again apparent. We suspected that a hostel-user was actively discouraging others from participating in our event. That session ended up running more like a research drop-in service, rather than a structured, yet informal World Café event. Our amended research drop-in service approach resulted in going through the presentation information on a one-to-one basis and then conducting interviews, but still using the tablecloth to record

findings. The issues we encountered enabled our student research assistants to gain first-hand knowledge of how researchers need to be flexible and spontaneous to respond to issues as and when they arise, and how to manage the complexity of real-world research.

When the World Cafés worked, we observed that they have the capacity to stimulate rich, animated and productive exchanges. Reviewing the tablecloth records after the event, depth of vibrant conversations can be less apparent, with mostly bullet-points, single words and sentences reflecting discussions, which leaves the researcher to interpret what was meant (MacFarlane et al, 2017). Where our research assistants acted as 'scribes', more detailed accounts of conversations could be captured with direct quotes and reconstructions. Research assistants were involved in typing up the table cloth notes. Our research budget had dissolved by the time we got to the professionals' World Café and we assumed that they were experienced at attending work-related meetings where they needed to take notes and contribute simultaneously, so we utilised the participatory approach of inviting them to scribe and table host. Some table hosts captured lots of data and others very little. When café events are used, consideration needs to be given to who the participants are, their skill-set and the amount of depth wanted from the tablecloth conversations. While World Café data appears less rich and detailed in comparison to in-depth interview or focus group data, it is generally more detailed than survey data. Bryman (2012) reports that even audio-recorded focus group data is a challenge to decipher and not everyone participates equally. So, however data is recorded there are strengths and limitations.

These practical issues aside, we endorse this novel method and encourage criminologists and sociologists to add it to their research toolkit. Used carefully, this technique has the potential to flexibly lend itself to the study of other criminological topics where focus groups are often preferred and the default option. As part of the questionnaire used at the end of the World Café, we asked participants for feedback on the event. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse this data, in summary, participants enjoyed taking part in the World Cafés and said they learnt new things about NPS. Our personal reflections are that it offers an energetic, dynamic and passionate form of inquiry. Since completing the NPS study, we have gone on to use World Café in a variety of other studies including; eliciting feedback from professionals on impact from research findings from a domestic violence and perpetrators of domestic abuse study; exploring people's views about the practicalities of delivering domestic abuse prevention education in schools; improving educational materials being used in a domestic abuse education prevention programme; and eliciting views and ideas about creating a breastfeeding culture change from young people and professionals within the sociology of health sphere. We are also presently working with external organisations in developing research projects using World Café to explore the attitudes towards race hate crime and extremism as well as to evaluate a community arts prison program. In our links with external partners over recent months we discovered that the Prison service is being encouraged to use World Café to consult with inmates and staff for improvement purposes (Revolving Doors Agency, 2016). As a follow up to this study, a staff and student academic partnership in

collaboration with public health is in the planning stages of using World Café to explore how NPS usage impacts upon local communities.

Conclusion

The 'Academic Collaborative Team Model' we developed offers students employer connections and professional skills, as well as opportunity to conduct meaningful research that in this project influenced positive service level changes. It takes students out of the university and gives them knowledge from the real world and connects the two in a research experience. Further research is required to demonstrate the transformative impact of utilising undergraduate student researchers in professional research with external agencies.

World Café, and utilising undergraduate student researchers within this approach, has a potentially wider benefit to the field of criminology. This innovative methodological approach to derive information from participants in a group setting and ascertain creative solutions provides an engaging and informal data collection method (Brown and Issacs, 2005). Our experience of using it in a range of criminological and sociological projects comes with reflections on limitations, particularly regarding data quality (if research assistants are not utilised as scribes) and the need to use a flexible approach if fewer participants turn up to a World Café event than scheduled. We also acknowledge that group discussion approaches to data collection are less desirable for gaining insight into sensitive topics where personal disclosure is a form of evidence. However, we believe that the strengths outweigh the problems that we have experienced when applying World Café methodology. In particular we suggest that a World Café approach has truly transformative potential through a) people gaining a more nuanced world view at data collection events on a given topic; b) transformation via a more democratic approach to data collection that informs policy and practice as findings create real time change and c) using undergraduate researchers in the research process can transform their confidence, employability and research skillset. When World Cafés work, we observe they have capacity to stimulate rich, animated and productive exchanges, which transforms individual knowledge and experiences into collective intelligence, decision making and allows for innovative possibilities to emerge (Prewitt, 2011: 4; Khong et al, 2017: 181).

In terms of research findings, we noted low levels of NPS usage and associated drug knowledge, inclusive of legislation, among college students. However, information shared by homeless hostel users about peers who were using NPS gave evidence for links between NPS with problematic behavior, acquisitive crime and violence. There needs to be more research into the links between crime and NPS usage and NPS users, along with the effects of different NPS substances inclusive of the interplay with mental health and poly-drug usage. Whilst this research aimed to add knowledge to the field, it does not systematically address all under-researched areas and it is beyond the scope of this paper

to report and offer analysis on all findings. We would advocate using World Cafés to address research gaps, where group discussion is appropriate to the topic.

The research methodology used in this study is novel to criminology and has significant contributions to make to advancing the researchers' toolkit into a more contemporary, informal participatory approach. This is particularly important for research participants who may have had negative experiences within the criminal justice system of interviewing and form-filling, which traditional criminological qualitative research methods unintentionally often reflect. We argue that the World Café approach has advantages over focus groups and interviews in terms of capacity to reduce power imbalances and manage possible former negative associations encountered with interactions with professionals. World Café also allows the researcher to undertake data collection with large sample sizes that can be cost-effective and can still lead to stimulating data. Data collection and analysis about NPS drugs has tended to be expert-led, so participatory approaches offer the opportunity to reduce power dynamics and this can be further achieved by utilising undergraduate students as active researchers in the data collection process.

Our participants identified practical solutions to better support NPS users and prevent NPS usage in the city, which could be applied elsewhere, with the main recommendations for better NPS drugs education and harm reduction information at a preventative level, and as cited in Page (2018), "on-site drop-in services" for drug support at homeless hostels. We also advocate for better communication and marketing of existing drug services in cities to vulnerable groups. Detailed recommendations have been presented to local policymakers and as such, our World Cafés offered both our participants and our undergraduates the opportunity to become catalysts for change in reducing crime and anti-social behavior through informing service design that reduces drug related harm and associated crime.

Sarah Page and Dr Em Temple-Malt are both senior lecturers at Staffordshire University in Sociology and Criminology. They are the co-directors of the Staffordshire University Crime and Society Group.

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Guess Who?: Exploring the public's perceptions of perpetrators of crime

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Abstract

This pilot study looked into who is perceived as the 'typical offender' by the public based on the characteristics of gender, race and age for murder, rape, child sexual offences, robbery, fraud and phishing. The field research was conducted in Birmingham and the questionnaire sample consisted of 156 participants (53.8% male and 46.2% female). The findings suggested that the perceived typical perpetrator for all crimes is male, white (except for robbery) and aged between 25 and 34 years old (except child sex offenders and fraudsters who would be older). While most of the public's perceptions of perpetrators were consistent with the existing literature and official statistics, indicating that the public have become more educated about crime, disparities also suggest media and other sources of information also play a role in creating their ideas.

Keywords

Stereotypes, offenders, age, gender, race/ethnicity

Introduction

This article presents findings from a pilot study that investigates public perception of the identity of offenders. It examines whether certain demographics (ages, sexes and ethnicities) are associated with specific offences. The way in which society forms collective opinions may become warped leading to stereotyping. This generalised belief about a particular group can create out-groups or an 'us' and 'them' mentality (Becker, 1963). Roberts and Stalans (1998) suggest the belief that crime is committed by a distinct, separate group can lead to a wish to distance oneself from former prisoners. Stereotyping

encompasses personal beliefs about individuals or groups who are deemed to have certain attributes and are judged accordingly (Macrae, et al., 1996). This can be in a positive or negative manner. One negative example is that black males are more likely than others to be associated with street crimes. This is visible through the stop and search policy where black males are disproportionately targeted (Waddington, et al., 2004). The media has been accused of perpetuating racism and Islamophobia by 'othering' those deemed as 'alien' and culturally separate to other British citizens (Saeed, 2007). The press may have a role in perpetuating racism by attributing specific forms of criminality to certain demographics (Van Dijk, 2012).

Bull and Green (1980) found no evidence that physical characteristics are related to a specific type of crime but concluded that the public and police often believe that they can tell if someone is a criminal by his/her appearance. They sought to explore whether people linked certain crimes with specific populations by showing photographs to members of the public and police who were asked to match them with a list of crimes (including rape, theft and robbery). The results showed no significant differences for age and sex across most types of crimes meaning that the identity of the participants did not appear to be a significant factor. While Bull and Green (1980) carried out their research almost 40 years ago, it is important to note that they found that police and public perceive that one can tell a criminal by appearance – despite results suggesting otherwise, given the disparate opinions of participants (Bull and Green, 1980). Time has passed, and the social context has changed, creating the need for new research on this topic.

MacLin and Herrera (2006:4) investigated the criminal stereotype by asking “what are the first 10 things you think of when you hear the word criminal?”. The findings showed participants believed the archetypal criminal to be black and male, Madriz (1997) yielded similar results. It must be noted that Bull and Green's (1980) methodological differences may have contributed to differing findings. Alternatively, these could also have been due to societal changes including a rapid evolution of technology and spread of information by the media. Furthermore, the ongoing contentious debate regarding increased immigration, the growth of fundamentalist Islamist terrorism, changing perception of female criminality and the increasing criminalisation of juveniles, may now play a role in the shifting perceptions of the identity and nefarious intent of the 'other' (D'Cruze and Jackson, 2009; Huysmans and Buonfino, 2008; Squires, 2008). The evolution of social norms and shifting media focus may impact upon the public's level of trust/distrust, e.g.,

if male offenders are receiving much news coverage, at a time of heightened racial tension, we may expect the stereotypical offender to be non-white and male. Perhaps, this concerns changes in perceptions of specific types of offence as opposed to crime in general, as studied by MacLin and Herrera (2006) and Madriz (1997). This link is complex – specific conclusions which appear to be drawn regarding criminal identity, for example that offenders are male, appear to have little to do with moral panics and may be linked to general perception and facts. It is important to note that racist sentiments do not necessarily stem entirely from media hostility and may be linked to other institutions, including the education system (Gillborn, 2008). Similarly, xenophobia can be linked to the positionality of the individual and perceptions of threat to social status (Harrison and Peacock, 2009). These complicating factors suggest that distrust of the ‘other’ cannot necessarily be linked to media bias, although the role of the press is essential to consider, it is significant not to over simplify the relationship between media and stereotyping. Furthermore, considerations must be made in terms of perceptions of desirability. Agnew (1984) found a link between unattractiveness (as perceived by interviewers) and self-reported delinquency. It is imperative to note that this discussion specifically centres around the United States but may have ramifications for the UK owing to similarities in environment, such as an alarmist media and the politicisation of the Criminal Justice System (CJS). Attractiveness is a subjective variable which seems to be associated with undesirable traits. Roberts and Stalans (1998) suggested that the public generally believe offenders to be unattractive, unemployed gang members. Cavior and Howard (1973) found that faces of ‘delinquents’ were deemed less attractive by participants asked to compare photographs and darker skin was associated with criminality across racial boundaries. Notably, this study was conducted over four decades ago and based in the United States, again highlighting the need for ongoing research in the UK. Goldstein, et al. (1984) suggested that there is a general perception of what an offender looks like and that individuals tend to assume specific occupations (particularly criminal ones) correlate with a certain physical appearance, to the extent that this biases juries. This contrasts with the findings of Valla, et al. (2011) who suggested that whilst their (student) participants could predict criminality with general reliability, they could not distinguish between offences. Research by Yarmey (1993) suggested that although there may be agreement between people on who is likely to be a criminal, this is not necessarily accurate despite the possibility that it may affect decision making. Yarmey (1993) found

that whilst participants were confident in their ability to recognise offenders, they were surer of their recognition of non-criminals. Research by Gross and O'Brien (2007) suggested that misidentification of black suspects is disproportionately high owing to white populations allegedly finding identification between different black strangers difficult. Given the racialised nature of this assertion it is important to examine society's current construction of attractiveness or desirability, its relation to race and ethnicity, and where these norms might be created.

Although studies around perceptions of offenders are important to consider, it is necessary to examine where people acquire their understanding of crime. Hough and Roberts (2005) suggest that while there is a strong appetite amongst the wider community for information regarding crime, public knowledge is limited. There is a plethora of information regarding crime available to the public through a variety of sources: government websites; newspapers; television. However, some sources are more accessible than others. This, and the way in which offences are reported, can influence the public's perceptions of crime (Jewkes, 2004).

It is worth noting that the 'dark figure' of crime means that many instances of criminality are not brought to the attention of the police and, therefore, are not officially recorded (Brookman, 2005). Additionally, changes in practice and operational priorities may influence police recording of certain types of crime. The combined result is that the picture of criminality offered by police statistics may not accurately reflect reality and should be treated with a degree of caution (Tilley and Tseloni, 2016; Van Dijk and Tseloni, 2012). Even if the public seek to examine official statistics, it does not mean they will learn the 'truth'. The CJS deals with an array of offences, some receive more academic and media attention than others. Both the media and many researchers focus upon serial homicide offenders (see Flowers, 2003; Hickey, 2015; Yardley and Wilson, 2015). This has arguably impacted public perception of what a murderer 'really' looks like. The same applies to other serious crimes, including sexual offences.

Following on from previous studies, this research focuses on six types of crime: homicide, rape, child sexual offences, robbery, fraud and phishing, examining the public's perceptions of the offenders' gender, age and ethnicity. This wider range of crimes include a mixture of high and low-profile offences, from homicide which receives a lot of attention, to the comparatively neglected offence of phishing. Table 1 presents a brief summary of the literature on public perceptions and official statistics, specific to these

types of crime, which will be used as a basis to compare the findings of this research. Owing to the lack of consistent academic focus on the subject in the UK, it is necessary to consider international literature that can be somewhat transferable due to similarities in how stereotypes may be created and how the public gains information, for instance via a ‘free press’ and state funded education system. For the sake of brevity only particularly relevant studies have been discussed in depth throughout this paper, these have been selected owing to their direct relevance to findings presented here and/or the methodology utilised. Overall, it is often not clear what age the typical offender is, as can be seen in Table 1. Previous research appears to concur that for most crimes the likely perpetrator would be male and white.

Table 1: Summary of the literature on public perceptions and official statistics.

Crime	Demographics	Literature on public perceptions	Official Statistics (convictions in the UK, unless otherwise stated)
Homicide	Gender	Male (Brookman, 2005)	Male (UNECE, 2015)
	Ethnicity	White, but BME overrepresented (Brookman, 2005)	White, but Black overrepresented (principle suspect) (MOJ, 2015)
	Age (yrs)	Not distinctive, but comparatively young (Brookman, 2005; Roberts et al, 2007)	16-24 (suspects) (ONS, 2018)
Rape	Gender	Male (Craissati, 2005; Polaschek, et al, 1997)	Male (Home Office, 2013; UNECE, 2015)
	Ethnicity	White, but black overrepresented (Craissati, 2005)	White (Home Office, 2013)

Child sex offences	Age (yrs)	18-35 (Scully, 1990)	Not found
	Gender	Male	Male (Home Office, 2013)
	Ethnicity	White (Milner and Webster, 2005)	White (Home Office, 2013)
	Age (yrs)	Over 30 when convicted even if behaviour begins earlier (Murray, 2000; Hanson, 2001)	Not found
Robbery	Gender	Male (Monk, et al., 2010; Smith, 2003)	Male (UNECE, 2015)
	Ethnicity	Black (Yapp, 2010)	White, but overrepresented (UNECE, 2015)
	Age (yrs)	Under 25-30 (Smith, 2003; Yapp, 2010)	Not found
Fraud	Gender	Professional – male; Opportunists or average fraudsters and partakers may be female too (Baldock, 1997; Hayes and Prenzler, 2003; Kapardis, Krambia-Kapardis, 2004; Smith, 2003)	Male (principle suspect) (Ministry of Justice, 2017)

		Not distinctive – dependent upon type (Baldock, 1997; White Hayes and Prenzler, 2003; Kapardis, (Ministry of Justice, 2017) Krambia-Kapardis, 2004; Smith, 2003)	
Ethnicity			
Age (yrs)		Potentially over 30 (Baldock, 1997; Hayes and Prenzler, 2003; Kapardis, Krambia-Kapardis, 2004; Smith, 2003)	Not found
Phishing	Gender	Not distinctive (Allison, Schuck and Lersch, 2005; APWG, 2015; Koops, 2011)	
	Ethnicity		Not found
	Age (yrs)		

Methodology

This pilot study aims to ascertain whether members of the public associate a particular gender, age and ethnicity with any of these six crimes: murder; rape; child sexual offences; robbery; fraud; and phishing. To generate this primary data, a closed-ended questionnaire was produced which aimed to identify and explore the public's understanding of a 'typical offender' based on demographics which in turn could then be compared with literature.

Data collection was conducted between April and June 2015 and involved five researchers approaching people, on four separate occasions. The researchers were two white British men (aged mid-twenties and late fifties), two white women (one British, early-thirties and one Portuguese, mid-twenties) and one British Asian man (mid-

twenties). It must be acknowledged that it is possible that a social desirability bias could cause participants to respond differently to researchers with different identities, for example if speaking to a person from a BAME demographic they may be reluctant to suggest that someone from that background is most likely to commit an offence, for fear of upsetting the researcher and appearing racist. However, it is unlikely that this had a strong impact as results did not vastly differ, depending upon the individual approaching participants. Locations consisted of a shopping centre in Perry Barr (Birmingham) and a park in Birmingham City Centre. These were chosen due to their heavy 'footfall'. Given its cultural diversity, Perry Barr was an appropriate location for a study of this nature. Perry Barr is one of four non-white majority districts in Birmingham where BAME groups make up over 50% of the overall population. This is over five times the national average (Brown, 2013). Nearly 50% of Birmingham residents are under the age of 30 years and 42% are described as non-white, making it a multi-cultural and ethnically-diverse city (Birmingham City Council, 2001). This can be seen by comparing these statistics to the UK as a whole where, as of 2011, 85% of the population consider themselves white. In some areas such as Cumbria this was much higher at 98.5%. On the other hand, in some areas the BAME population is significantly higher, for example, in Newham the white population is only 29% (Gov.uk, 2011). This differentiation could have ramifications for how representative citizens of Birmingham are in their attitudes. The differing social context in which they operate may alter perceptions regarding those who might otherwise be 'othered'. Frequent interaction with diverse populations can reduce distrust (Marschall and Stolle, 2004). Birmingham is also Britain's second city and is home to five universities, two of which rank among the top 400 in the Quacquarelli Symonds world university rankings (Quacquarelli Symonds Limited, 2018). With the number of foreign students doubling in the last decade, this may also impact the attitudes of those residing in Birmingham (Espinoza, 2015).

The participants constituted a convenience sample, limited to those individuals present at the time of data collection and willing to participate; this also may have ramifications for generalisability (Bryman, 2016). However, data collection was approached in this way to represent those members of the public who would be out in busy areas, interacting with others in a typical, every day, manner, such as shopping, in a multicultural area, meaning a certain profile of participant was included. Utilising the internet to collect data

may have reduced the social desirability bias but would have removed this aspect of the research process and skewed the sample towards those with an active interest in learning about and discussing crime. It would also have limited the amount of clarification researchers were able to offer participants. Another advantage of a face to face questionnaire is the likelihood of capturing the participants' immediate responses. The pressure of completing a brief structured questionnaire does not allow the time for the reflection that an online version may provide. There is more incentive to immediately answer and provide a 'gut' reaction as opposed to a considered response. This pilot study is identifiable as focused upon a multicultural, urban area, allowing future research to differ in scope and focus and build upon this. It was deemed too ambitious for this preliminary research to attempt generalisability across the UK, thus collecting data at specific points of human contact, in a diverse city, was appropriate. In terms of demographics it is important to acknowledge that participants come from a specific population, comparatively young and ethnically diverse. Therefore, this study has less relevance for groups which are older and ethnically more homogenous but is indicative for younger, more ethnically diverse populations.

Researchers approached members of the public with the intention of asking for their participation in the study. Participants were then briefed on the aims of the research, informed of their right to withdraw at any point and assured that the information they were to provide would be guaranteed anonymity. Prior to completing the questionnaire, participants were asked to disclose basic demographic information including their gender, ethnicity and age. They were then guided through the questionnaire by the researcher and encouraged to respond as openly and honestly as possible through statements such as "please provide the first answer that you think of." By way of example, the researcher drew the participant's attention to the crime of fraud and stated, "which ethnicity do you think would be most likely to commit fraud?". The researcher clarified that questions concerned the entire UK population (within a white majority society), and not simply which demographics are overrepresented. For example stating that most fraudsters were black would suggest a belief that a typical fraudster would be black, not that black people commit a disproportionate amount of fraud relative to the size of the black population. Once the participant had provided an answer, the researcher then repeated the question, but lent focus to the characteristics of gender and age, before

shifting the focus to other crimes and repeating the process (see the questionnaire sample in appendix 1 which was explained to participants). Researchers also ensured that participants understood all questions asked, for example, by defining terms such as 'phishing' and 'mixed ethnicity/multiple ethnic groups' (one individual with mixed or multiple ethnicities instead of no typical ethnic group for that crime). The time taken to complete the questionnaire did not exceed three minutes per participant.

Results

A total of 156 individuals (53.8% male and 46.2% female respectively) from a range of ethnic backgrounds (52.6% white and 47.4% non-white), aged between 16 and 70 years answered the questionnaire. These demographics are similar to the ones reported for the areas in which the data was collected suggesting the sample was fairly representative of Birmingham and the surrounding areas (Birmingham City Council, 2001).

Table 2 indicates that participants generally believed that typical perpetrators of all crimes are male. In relation to ethnicity, many believed white people tended to perpetrate most crimes with the only exception being robbery. The results for robbery suggested males of mixed ethnicities as most likely to perpetrate robbery. In terms of age, homicide, rape and phishing were deemed to be perpetrated by those aged between 25 - 34 years old whereas child sex offenders were considered older (45-54 years old) as were fraudsters (35-44 years old). Concerning robbery, participants' answers suggested the age range would be larger, 16-34 years old.

Table 2: Most common characteristics perceived for each type of offender

Crime Type	Gender	Ethnicity	Age (years)
Homicide	Male (96%)	White (50%)	25-34 (46%)
Rape	Male (99%)	White (40%)	25-43 (50%)
Child sex offences	Male (95%)	White (72%)	45-54 (37%)
Robbery	Male (96%)	Mixed (36%)	25-34 (42%)*
Fraud	Male (90%)	White (66%)	35-44 (40%)
Phishing	Male (90%)	White (47%)	25-34 (51%)

*also 16-24 (41%)

Discussion

Participants' answers, literature and official statistics present mostly similar or approximate results among these different crimes, except for phishing. This suggests that the public may be better informed regarding crime and likely perpetrators than previous academic findings suggest – although it is important to emphasise that this is a pilot study. The principal conclusion drawn by the researchers is that this is an area in need of greater research and exploration. Table 3 offers a summary of the comparison.

Table 3: Comparison between the literature on public perceptions, official statistics and this research results on who is more likely to commit certain offences

Crime	Demographics	Literature on public perceptions	Official Statistics	Findings	Notes
Homicide	Gender	Male	Male	Male	Similar
	Ethnicity	White (BME overrepresented)	White (Black overrepresented)	White	Similar
	Age (yrs)	Not distinctive, but fairly young	16-24	25-34	Approximate
Rape	Gender	Male	Male	Male	Similar
	Ethnicity	White	White	White	Similar
	Age (yrs)	18-35	Not found	25-34	Approximate
Child sex offences	Gender	Male	Male	Male	Similar
	Ethnicity	White	White	White	Similar
	Age (yrs)	Over 30	Not found	45-54	Approximate
Robbery	Gender	Male	Male	Male	Similar

	Ethnicity	Black	White (Black overrepresented)	Mixed	Different
	Age (yrs)	Under 25-30	Not found	16-24/25-34	Approximate
	Gender	Not distinctive, most types male	Male	Male	Approximate
Fraud	Ethnicity	Not distinctive	White	White	Similar
	Age (yrs)	Not distinctive, potentially over 30	Not found	35-44	Approximate
	Gender			Male	Different
Phishing	Ethnicity	Not distinctive	Not found	White	Different
	Age (yrs)			25-34	Different

The literature appears to present mixed demographics for fraud and phishing, with professional fraudsters being overwhelmingly male. This research yielded similar findings, developing a more holistic picture of fraudsters being mostly male, white and falling into an age range of 35-44 for fraud and 25-34 for phishing. Official statistics concur that those who commit fraud are likely to be white (MOJ, 2017). The choice of a younger age-bracket for phishing may be due to the cultural belief that ‘young’ people tend to be ‘better’ with technology, technology reliance is seen as disadvantaging older people (Kottorp, et al., 2016). Fraud may be associated with white-collar crime, informing the public’s belief that individuals who commit crimes are white males (Allison, et al., 2005). Despite some differences, findings for fraud show greater similarity to the literature and official statistics than those for phishing.

Concerning gender when related to other crimes (homicide, rape, child sex offences and robbery), participants perceived males as likely offenders which is similar to the literature and official statistics. Such findings are unlikely to be influenced by the respondents' gender as the percentage of male and female was roughly equal.

Regarding ethnicity for homicide, rape and child sex offences, participants perceived white as the most likely ethnicity which concurs with the literature and official statistics. However, for robbery, literature suggested that the typical offender would be black while participants believed 'he' would be mixed ethnicity and official statistics indicated white. The latter is unsurprising as the general population figures indicate the majority of inmates are white (86%), however, BAME individuals are overrepresented, as is often reported, which could potentially influence the public to believe that BAME individuals are more likely to commit this crime. Additionally, it is also a crime often associated with deprived socioeconomic status - BAME people are overrepresented in this economic bracket (Jefferies, 2005; Institute of Race Relations, 2017; ONS, 2011; Rees, et al., 2012). In terms of age, participants' perceptions seem to be equivalent to the literature and the official statistics (when available) for all crimes (apart from fraud and phishing). However, participants drew slight distinctions where the literature and official statistics did not, finding an age range where research suggests this is not a significant factor, or selecting a narrower age band than the literature would support. This represents a departure from the literature and official statistics but perceptions concerning age could be influenced by our methodology and how brackets were pre-defined. For homicide, respondents selected mainly the interval 25-34 years old and the literature offers a smaller range pointing to between 31 and 35 years old (Brookman, 2005; Roberts, et al., 2007). With rape, the literature suggested a wider range, 18 to 35 (Scully, 1990), whereas results were focused on a smaller range, 25-34 years. Typically, the literature found child sexual offences were carried out by those over 30 (Hanson, 2001). Respondents seem to agree to an extent as they concentrated on a range of 45-54 years old. In relation to robbery, two categories received focus: 16-24 and 25-34 years. However, the literature indicates those under 25 years (Monk, et al., 2010; Smith, 2003).

This research suggests that when asked to choose from a list of potential demographics, the public's views on who is likely to commit these six crimes aligns, which is similar to a

conclusion gathered by Bull and Green (1980). More recent research suggested that society's perception of perpetrators was narrow and the public believed criminals were mostly black males (MacLin and Herrera, 2006; Madriz, 1997). It appears that they have become more educated about crime and who seems likely to commit particular offences. It is important to acknowledge that these results could be in part due to the specific sample surveyed.

However, it seems that even now, certain preconceptions exist. Assumptions, if accepted (inter)nationally, may shape policy, action, media and politics which in turn influence people's perceptions. This cycle would need to be broken to challenge preconceptions and include an acknowledgement that the 'dark figure' of crime may complicate the picture. For example, a woman may find it easier to avoid conviction for child sexual abuse if investigators assume perpetrators are male and accept stereotypes of passive, nurturing women and threatening, predatory men, resulting in a lack of clarity concerning female perpetrators (Wakefield and Underwager, 1991). Although it must be acknowledged that (as seen in Table 3) statistics show that men commit a vastly disproportionate percentage of sexual crimes.

There are still some deviations from official statistics, suggesting an acceptance of some stereotypes. It is notable that there is a lower level of agreement between participants with regards to age and ethnicity and greater agreement concerning gender. Age is considered difficult to approximate and if participants recall the faces of offenders from the media, they may not feel confident in aging them (Voelkle, et al., 2012). Respondents appeared to agree that men are the 'criminal sex', reflecting older studies, as seen in Table 1. This may be related to growing public understanding of 'toxic masculinity' and the link between perceptions, and projection, of hypermasculinity and offending (Valenti, 2018). It could also be connected to society's attitude to femininity, that female criminals are 'doubly deviant', disobeying not only the law and social norms but their own feminine nature. This is illustrated by the comparative notoriety of women accused of notable crimes, some of which are considered worthy of celebrity status (Middleweek, 2017). The connotations for the consideration of men as more criminal are worthy of further research, as is the prevalence of this view. It is important to ascertain how accurate this perception is, Tables 1 and 3 illustrate that official statistics indicate men commit a

disproportionate amount of crime, but it is of academic interest how the public become aware of this.

Conclusion

The public's perception of homicide, rape and child sex offences was found to be generally consistent with the literature and official statistics. Most respondents believed perpetrators were white males. In comparison, participants' overall expectation was that those most likely to commit robbery were males of mixed ethnic heritage which demonstrates a distinction between the public's perceptions of crime and ethnicity and that of the literature. The consideration of age was more complicated as, in most categories, it differed but not significantly. It is important to note that while this research adds to the existing literature, it does not suggest demographics are permanently fixed for these crimes.

The comparative similarity between these findings and both the literature and official statistics is promising given concerns regarding misinformation by the media (Carter, 2016; Narayanan, et al., 2018). This may be due to the availability of information about crime over the last few decades coupled with how the media reports particular offences (Jewkes, 2004). People may have garnered information from a wider network via social media (Mahtani and Seetharaman, 2017). Stalans (1993) suggested that interpersonal experience can help to neutralise recall bias and contextualise media overreporting of particularly serious crime.

This research represents an important step in the academic analysis of public perceptions of who is likely to commit certain offences. The anonymous, informal nature of data collection reduced the social desirability bias. However, this could have still had an impact as it is natural that people wish to be liked by others. Therefore, when communicating face to face with a researcher, a participant may fear expressing views that they may perceive as bigoted, reducing honesty (Krumpal, 2013). The research is geographically limited but represents a significant development as it is fairly representative of Birmingham, a diverse city, considered the 'second city' of the UK, and taken as a key example of a 'large urban area' by previous research (Charlesworth, et al., 2003). This research is more relevant than ever owing to current political divides and a

rise in hate crimes, similarities between public perception and official and academic findings are encouraging and suggest a lack of stereotyping and suspicion concerning people with different identities. It is acknowledged that this pilot study was conducted in a multicultural area and this may have implications for generalisability.

Future studies may utilise different methods and seek to probe why respondents draw their conclusions, Hough and Roberts (2005) highlighted the importance of qualitative data in assessing public attitudes to crime. This pilot study may provide a basis from which to further explore them, including samples with demographics. Further research could use focus groups to explore why participants choose certain groups as likely offenders over others, and the influences that have shaped their understanding.

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Appendix 1 – Questionnaire sample

Gender	
Male	
Female	

Ethnic Group	
White	
Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups	
Asian	
Black	
Other ethnic group	

Age Range	
16-24	
25-34	

35-44	
45-54	
55-64	
65 and over	

Virtual social media spaces, a relational arena for 'bearing witness' to desistance.

Julie M Parsons

Abstract:

This paper considers the benefits of participating in a Photographic electronic Narrative (PeN) project funded through a mid-career fellowship scheme and hosted at an independent, part community funded resettlement scheme (RS), located outside of the prison estate in England, for men released on temporary licence (ROTL) and others on community sentences referred through probation (trainees). After two years, two interrelated and significant outcomes have emerged, firstly, that the PeN project through the co-creation of blog posts, has given trainees an opportunity to imagine future selves (Giordano et al 2002, Hunter and Farrall 2018), with the research encounter a means of bearing witness to this and the trauma of criminalisation (Anderson 2016). Secondly, creating and posting PeN project blogs has created a virtual space for these imagined future selves to be articulated and, crucially, it gives trainees' families, friends and the wider community a means of also bearing witness to trainees' desistance narratives (Anderson 2016).

Key words

Witnessing, desistance, narrative, social capital, social media

Introduction

There is a long-standing tension between risk assessment/managerial responses to problems of recidivism in the criminal justice system and relational interventions that value human relationships (McNeill 2006, McNeill and Weaver 2010, Farrall et al 2015). Current practices in 'offender' management, particularly in England and Wales, increasingly follow the former approach, with a focus on managing risk. Anderson (2016)

argues that this approach silences the lived experience of criminalised individuals, discrediting “offenders as human subjects and rendering them objects of policy” (Anderson 2016:409). Relational interventions on the other hand provide probation or criminal justice social work (Scotland) an opportunity to ‘bear witness’ to desistance, which Anderson (2016) contends is vital for ‘offenders’ in becoming active agents in their own desistance narratives. Moreover, as Anderson (2016) continues, it is important to attend to what ‘offenders’ value and the meanings they ascribe to criminal behaviour as this helps to establish relationships “that provide relational goods (such as trust or loyalty) (Weaver and McNeill 2015; Weaver 2016) or recognition (Barry 2015)” (Anderson, 2016:409). In addition, a critical role is played by the audience in co-creating desistance, as Anderson (2016) claims:

bearing witness is to see, attend to and testify to lived experience and is linked to ideas of narrative, voice and truth... [whereby] the co-creation, performance and acceptance of the desistance narrative can facilitate a shift from object to subject, increasing feelings of personal agency and enabling the transformation in narrative identity that takes place in desistance from offending (Anderson, 2016:409).

Anderson (2016) also suggests that bearing witness to desistance does not have to be face-to-face but can “happen through art and rituals that enable the act of bearing witness to be sustained through time and space” (Naef 2006)’ (Anderson, 2016:412). In this article, I therefore focus on the potential benefits for criminalised individuals in engaging in a mediated virtual dialogue through social media blogs and posts, in the context of becoming co-creators of meaningful desistance narratives. This sits within a wider field of desistance theory that stresses the role of the community and social relationships in ‘offender’ interventions (McNeill 2006, McNeill and Weaver 2010, Weaver 2016).

In the remainder of this article I explain what is understood by ‘bearing witness’ in the context of developing a relational approach to desistance. In the findings and discussion section, the evidence I provide comes from a Photographic electronic Narrative (PeN) project, which makes use of social media, blog posts and photographs taken by trainees at a resettlement scheme (RS) that works with prisoners released on temporary licence and other ‘offenders’ referred through probation, collectively called trainees. I therefore

provide details about the RS that hosts the PeN project, as well as the aims and objectives of the PeN project itself. I outline the PeN project's methodological approach, and discuss findings, with evidence provided from one person's desistance journey, using blog posts and corresponding feedback posted via the website and Facebook. I conclude by suggesting that the PeN project provides a useful virtual social space for 'bearing witness' to desistance. This includes a social space for audience responses that reflect and validate the participants' desistance narratives.

Background

Desistance is conceptualised as the study of change in criminality (defined as a propensity to offend) (Weaver 2016:9), rather than a complete cessation of criminal activity that can only be conferred upon an individual posthumously (Maruna 2001). Contemporary desistance theories emphasise both the social and relational (McNeill 2012, 2013, McNeill and Weaver 2010, Weaver 2016) as well as the individual and agentic (Hunter and Farrall 2018) when (re)building non-criminalised identities.

Moreover, the notion that desistance is both an individual *and* social process is significant; there are a number of key authors working in the field. For example, McNeill (2006) claims desistance is not just a private business but also a social process. Indeed, the stigmatising master status of the 'criminal' label, ensures that criminalised individuals remain one of the most "vilified, marginalised and excluded group[s]" (McNeil and Weaver 2010:28). Hence the context of 'bearing witness' to desistance as creating a social space for 'rebuilding social relationships' (McNeil 2012:13) that enables individuals to gain a 'stake in conformity' (McNeill and Weaver 2010:54) is important.

Furthermore, whilst it is acknowledged that desistance is faltering, uncertain and punctuated by relapse (McNeil and Weaver 2010), and not linear or predictable, it also incorporates relational, inclusive and interactional practices (Weaver 2016). Hence, relational interventions need to be dialogical and reinforce a sense of 'we-ness' (Weaver 2016). 'Problems' of desistance are social as well as individual; they are not just a private business (McNeil 2012). In this context, bearing witness to desistance narratives encourages a form of de-labelling, with positive behaviour recognised and reflected back

(Maruna and LeBel 2003). This is underpinned by the implicit belief that under the right circumstances people can change and grow (Anderson 2016). Indeed, when moving from 'offender' to 'non-offender' identities, social reaction is important, the change in behaviour needs to be recognised by others and reflected back (McNeil and Weaver 2010). In this context, Nugent and Schinkell (2016) discuss 'relational desistance', which is the need for change to be recognised by others. Moreover, Cody (2001:289)' although describing a personal presence in terms of bearing witness, outlines three necessary elements: firstly 'being there, seeing or hearing' or actually 'witnessing' the narrative. Secondly that this is a temporal process and thirdly that there is some means of expressing understanding or empathy for the person's narrative journey.

Indeed, Anderson (2016) argues that bearing witness to desistance and the trauma of criminalisation and penalisation is significant in the co-creation of desistance narratives. For potential desisters to be understood, not condoned, she argues that: "desistance occupies a moral space that includes what the community owes to the offender as well as what the offender owes to the community" (Anderson 2016:420). In Anderson's work she highlights the significance of probation/criminal justice social work in bearing witness to desistance and highlights the critical role played by the audience, whether this is face to face, through art or ritual. Hence, the audience has "a critical role testifying to experience and as co-creator of the narrative" (Anderson 2016:412). Moreover, citing Butler (2004:44), Hunter and Farrall (2018: 292) argue that "individuals embarking on change request recognition of their ability to change – it is recognition which they seek" and this is important when bearing witness to desistance.

The PeN project and the Resettlement Scheme (RS)

The Photographic electronic Narrative (PeN) project was initially part of a 12-month Independent Social Research Foundation (ISRF) mid-career fellowship that started in September 2016 ([link 1](#)), but is now an on-going, integral part of the evaluation of an independently funded resettlement scheme (RS). The RS offers through the gate support to men released on temporary licence (ROTL) from the local prison on work placements and others (men and women) on community sentences, who are referred through probation, collectively known as trainees. The PeN project was developed with two

interrelated aims, to enable trainees at the RS to create visual, self-reflective narratives about their time at the scheme, and to engage the wider community through online blog posts that included both photographs and autobiographical reflections ([link 2](#)). These posts are uploaded onto a bespoke website, which is promoted through social media platforms, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

The RS hosting the PeN project, is a unique, fully independent, part community funded, charitable incorporated organisation (CIO), which has worked with over 80 trainees in a rural location *outside* of the prison estate in England, since July 2013. It is unusual in that it is an enhanced work placement operating outside of the prison estate in England, offering individualised, bespoke support and training in a range of skills. The RS works closely with the prison and probation. Trainees on ROTL are usually recruited to the scheme for 6-9 months prior to release for through the gate support. Those on community sentences have variable commitments to the RS and may attend from one to five days per week. The RS has 1250+ registered supporters who receive regular newsletters, and includes a smaller number of volunteers, visitors and stakeholders who engage with the RS on a regular basis. Gaining a ROTL to attend the RS is optional and a privilege only open to prisoners on the resettlement wing of the local prison, who are not on life sentences or have Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA). All trainees are screened for suitability and willingness to change before being accepted. This means that around half of the trainees occupy an unusual position as they are serving prisoners working outside of the prison estate and subject to non-prison social norms and values.

The RS offers an enhanced work experience for trainees and develops bespoke action plans loosely based on a strengths-based approach to resettlement (Hucklesby and Wincup 2007). For example, the RS works with trainees to overcome social problems, notably those around accommodation, finance, employment and relationships, as whilst these might be insufficient as motivators for desistance, they are important to progress change (Burnett and Maruna 2004). Further, the RS is in a unique position as it can choose to work with those who are ready to change, whilst understanding the zigzag nature of the process of desistance (Maruna and Farrall 2004). To generate and motivate people in the processes of change the RS:

provides training and work experience in practical skills - such as landscaping, vegetable growing, carpentry and construction – as well as developing life and employability skills, building responsibility, team work and confidence. (RS handbook v9 January 2017)

Moreover, the RS is interested in community support for its trainees “in order to build and create a master status that breaks free from the offender/ ex-offender dyad, it considers repair, reconciliation and community partnership important” (Halsey and Deegan 2015:21). Moreover, the RS provides an important non-prison space for its trainees to imagine a (non-offending) future self (Giodarno et al 2002, Hunter and Farrall 2016), as well as opportunities for the development of real and imagined social capital.

Methods

There are two inter-related aims of the PeN project, firstly to enable trainees to tell their stories in their own words, illustrated through the photographs they take to record their time at the RS and secondly to enable the community to engage with the trainees through a bespoke website/blog posts and associated social media. The PeN project draws on photovoice and visual autobiography, alongside an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to research, which attempts to understand social phenomena from the perspective of the participant (Smith *et al* 2009). It primarily makes use of a ‘participatory style’, which is ‘an emerging qualitative research approach [that] refers to the use of any art form (or combinations thereof) at any point in the research process (Cole and Knowles 2001; Knowles and Cole 2008) in generating, interpreting, and/or communicating knowledge’ (cited in Boydell et al 2012: unpaginated). It is argued that incorporating creative/art-based resources within the research process promotes dialogue and storytelling (Jones 2006). This was considered important in this context, as Bergold and Thomas (2012:20) identify, there is a basic dilemma in participatory approaches, notably that marginalised communities are usually not in a good position to initiate or control research nor other aspects of their lives, which can lead to feelings of disempowerment, low motivation, reduced opportunity, and lack of personal support strategies and networks (Pettinger *et al*, 2017). Yet, the disclosure of personal views,

opinions and experiences of these groups is essential not least when trying to initiate change, develop policy initiatives and/or challenge social exclusion.

The reference to a participatory style is deliberate and distinguishes it from Participatory Action Research (PAR), which involves cooperation from research respondents, as they work alongside researchers in the co-production of knowledge, at *all* stages of the research process from research planning, data collection, analysis and interpretation to the publication of findings (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005). Here, a participatory style incorporates visual methods, or a modified photovoice technique, which has been used to give vulnerable groups access to artistic and creative methods of expression to build skills in disadvantaged communities (Wang et al 2000). A participatory style and photovoice share attributes in common, notably to give respondents a voice to address, challenge and rebalance power relationships (Clarke et al., 2005; Coad et al., 2009; Parsons and Pettinger 2017, Poudrier and MacLean, 2009).

Moreover, when making use of a participatory style, one of the main issues of concern is the creation of a 'safe space' for communication and the development of trusting relationships, that requires 'closeness, empathy and emotional involvement' (Bergold and Thomas 2012:47). Here the emphasis is on research 'with' rather than doing research 'on' people (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). In this case the PeN project also makes use of the autobiographical narratives trainees developed around their photographs. Further the dialogue this encourages with the wider community is considered significant. The PeN project therefore serves to highlight the co-constructed nature of narratives and how these can contribute to the development of 'non-offender' identities.

The PeN project was introduced to trainees, staff, volunteers and supporters of the RS towards the end of October 2016. I am a regular visitor at the RS. Once a week I work one-to-one with a trainee, when we cook lunch for everyone (see Parsons 2017, Parsons 2018). Trainees are also at the RS for a number of weeks before they are approached to participate in the PeN project. Full ethical approval for the project was granted by the University ethics committee and all participants give written consent. All trainees choose a pseudonym and no identifying photographs are used. To date 23 trainees have engaged with the PeN project, taking photographs of their achievements and activities at the RS

on a regular basis. These photographs are uploaded and discussed during informal interviews with me. These discussions are led by trainees who chat about what they have been doing at the RS in the weeks preceding, as well as anything of concern/interest to them. They last from 40-120 minutes, with some trainees engaging in interviews up to seven times over the course of their time at the RS (12 months).

The interviews are transcribed *verbatim* and I put together around 600-800 words from these when creating a blog post for discussion with the trainee the following week. The blog posts follow the flow of the interview transcripts, excluding personal information and general chat. In keeping with a participatory style, I endeavour to create a 'safe space' for all discussions with trainees. Moreover, the blog posts are considered to belong to them, they are their words as spoken verbatim during the interviews. In the follow up meetings, trainees are encouraged to amend, change and/or delete any information from their blog posts, which are then usually posted the following week. Again this gives trainees time to reflect on the content before they are released into the public domain.

All posts are further checked and approved prior to publication by the director of the RS, to ensure there is no identifying information on trainees or defamatory remarks that might put the RS at risk. Since the PeN project began, I have conducted 72 in depth interviews with 23 trainees (11 prisoners and 12 people on community sentences). To date the PeN project has published 71 blogs and the website has had 11,192 views from over 60 countries, with comments, likes and shares from across the various social media platforms. There was an exhibition of photographs at the RS's annual supporters' event in August 2017 and a PeN album produced for some of the trainees on graduation from the RS.

Trainee biographies, like the blog posts are co-created, in that trainees are asked for a biography to be used on the website, during their initial interview. These are then approved by trainees prior to publication ([link 3](#)). Feedback comments made directly on the PeN project blog, or on Facebook or Twitter are also fed back to the trainees, either in follow on interviews for their next blog, or informally once the blogs have been published. Indeed, discussion of reactions from the wider community to trainee's posts is

a feature of follow-on interviews and trainees often work with the lead researcher who posts their replies to the comments.

In the context of identifying how the PeN project works in terms of bearing witness to desistance, one case study from Brett will be used for analysis ([link 4](#)) (all blog posts from trainees are in the public domain on the website ([link 5](#))). Brett was referred to the RS via the local Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC), with a 12-month suspended sentence for misuse of drugs. In the past he worked as a self-employed landscape gardener and had his own gardening business for about four years. He always worked until he was forced to stop due to health issues which arose as a result of long-term drug abuse. He is enrolled on a rehabilitation course, which he attends on a regular basis. He is the father of twin two-year-old boys, for whom he has joint custody with his ex-partner, four days per week. However, not long after he started at the RS social services intervened, preventing him from being the main carer and only allowing him supervised sessions with the boys at weekends, pending an investigation. He started at the RS in December 2016 and started working with me on the PeN project in January 2017. Seven blog posts were published from six interviews during his time at the RS.

Findings and discussion: Bearing Witness to Desistance

In this section I use excerpts from Brett's blogs, feedback and Facebook comments to demonstrate how the PeN project can be a useful vehicle for bearing witness to desistance (Anderson 2016). Moreover, these posts show how the creation of imagined future selves (Giodarno et al, Hunter and Farrall 2018) can be used to alleviate some of the stigma associated with a 'spoiled' or criminalised identity, whilst simultaneously demonstrating a shift from past to future selves. It is notable that all of Brett's posts had from 78-82 views, that is around 80 people have opened each of his blog posts. This is outside of comments and likes across other social media platforms. The first blog from Brett was published on January 26th, 2017 entitled "It's hit rock bottom, so I can only go up can't I..." ([link 6](#)).

I took the wrong path, and then that has obviously led me here, and then being here is amazing like... there's not a lot of, as far as I'm aware, of places like this for people to come and get their head's straight, and get a starting point back in place

in their minds, to start their life again, a lot of people would just drift off into a deeper and deeper hole, especially if they haven't got someone there to stand up and say, hey you know, come here for a bit of support...

The post was accompanied by some of the photographs Brett had taken of work he had been doing in the art room, including a tile he was making with a Batman logo, a superhero Brett identifies as having meaning for him from his childhood.

Image 1: Superhero tile



His post received three comments, notably this one:

This is great to read Brett. You are so right about how amazing and special the place and people that make the resettlement scheme are. You are also right about needing to feel 'ready' to do the rehabilitation and have success with it. Keep positive and I wish you good luck for your future.

Brett replied to Jane a week later:

Thank you very much for your kind words, Brett

What is notable about this post is that Brett admits that he "took the wrong path" and is looking for support to help him change. He also engages in a virtual dialogue with those posting on the website. He continues this theme in his next post on the 10th of February, entitled "This is the first time I've needed a bit of back up here", ([link 7](#)), accompanied by

photographs of a sculptural art piece he is working on, that he has called 'Transformation man'. As he explains:

I was like we should do a superhero for this place and try and represent what this place does for you and what you want to do in your life, you want to change for the better, you wanna walk away from this place one day and be like yeah I've conquered my faults and I am walking away a stronger person, so yeah, so that was like yeah and that was a transformation and so transformation man...

Image 2: Transformation man in progress



Here Brett is imagining a future self, transformed and able 'to walk away a stronger person'. Comments in response to this post, include the following:

- Fantastic blog from Brett: creating a sculpture which both represents and encourages a transformation in his life. Brett has brilliantly developed the concept for Transformation Man, deciding which materials to use and considering how others will interpret its meaning. A powerful piece of work!

- Just loving the whole idea of Transformation man – good one Brett... And we all need back up in our lives, so onwards and upwards now you have found it
-

Brett replies, “thank you very much for the comment – it’s nice to know you understand the concept and idea of transformation man, Brett”. Again, this shows Brett engaging in a virtual dialogue with people posting comments on the website. These posts are therefore a means of enabling others to bear witness to Brett’s desistance journey, expressed through his creation of ‘transformation man’, which is simultaneously a representation of his own metamorphosis and imagined future self (Hunter and Farrall 2018).

In Brett’s post on April 6th he highlights the importance of the feedback he has been getting in person and via social media, his post is entitled; “It’s just nice to get feedback off people” ([link 8](#)). This post is accompanied by photographs of ‘Transformation man’ on his plinth, which includes the words ‘out of the darkness and into the light’, as Brett notes in his blog:

to portray something that literally represents from stepping out from the darkness and into the light you know? It’s really done that and now it’s sort of finished in stages and I feel the way I do, compared to what I was like when I first came here... [when] I wasn’t, I didn’t have the, what’s the word? I didn’t have the outlook that I have now, I was still a mess and I was still dibbling and dabbling yeah, I wasn’t ready for the change, but then it was a combination of being here and the situation with my boys, I had to make that change and it’s all worked out... I’ll forever be grateful to this place, it’s definitely saved my life I think really, because when I lost the boys like, I just thought life cannot get any worse and it just seemed like a road that was just so long, unachievable really to get them back, but now I can see the light...

Image 3: Transformation man (to overcome darkness and step into the sun)



This post received comments on both the website and Facebook page as follows:

- He's great Brett – saw him yesterday when I popped in for my Dorito bowl. Great job, great symbolism. The photo I saw before, with him and Sarah holding the life-buoy, held an even greater message. Like throwing a lifeline to someone going under.... Hooray for Transformation Man and his many messages!
- Inspiring and brilliant! Has he(?) got a name yet? May be Mr Awesome and some!!

Brett says: thank you for understanding and appreciating the concept. He's called 'Transformation Man' because he represents the change, I want to make in my life.

In response to this blog, there was also a post from the Poet Laureate for City (2017) who had heard about Brett's 'Transformation man' at a conference, and writes on the website:

Hi Brett. I learnt about your creation from a recent presentation and was inspired by it! I wrote a poem whilst looking at a picture of your sculpture and listening to your incredible story. Here is the poem, I hope you like it!

Brett replies: Thank you for your kind words, I am massively grateful, and it means a lot that you were inspired to write a poem about Transformation Man, Brett

Comments on the PeN project Facebook page include these:

- Go Transformation Man! Loved your blog today Brett and coming to see your handiwork soon :)
- This really moved me. That Brett can see the light now is beyond wonderful!

Brett comments: Thank you so much for your kind words, they mean a lot. Brett

Hence, Brett is continuing to engage in a virtual dialogue with those posting responses to his blog posts on the website and Facebook pages. At the end of April social services concluded their investigations and agreed to reinstate Brett's custody of his boys. In his blog post in May ([link 9](#)) Brett says:

I'm really, really confident that I'm not going to use again, but you know equally it's important to me that I can get drug tested, because you know, it just shows to everyone around you that you're still motivated to stay clean, I know you can say it, but it's rewarding almost, because it's like from week to week to week, it's a constant reward, a constant buzz that I'm staying clean, and you know I just feel better that I've found my life, and everything's coming together with my boys... so yeah, it's brilliant, I feel proud of myself actually, it's like I've really turned myself around for my boys...

In this post Brett is clearly identifying the importance of having his drug free status witnessed, not only by those doing the drug testing, but also virtually through social media he is making a permanent declaration of intent and imagining a drug free future self. In Brett's June blog post ([link 10](#)), he explains how he copied the poem written by the Poet Laureate, which he then burnt into wood to be displayed alongside the sculpture:

So the poet laureate did a poem about transformation man, which was really, really flattering yeah, it means a lot that anyone is inspired by my story and you know for him to do that was really, really cool, really epic so I thought it was only fitting really that we write the poem down and put it up next to transformation man really, as a tribute to that really, I think it was really cool that he was moved enough to do something about it

Image 4: Transformation Man poem burnt into wood



In the same post Brett again underlines the importance of imagining a future ‘non-criminalised’ self, as he says:

I’m really proud of myself and what I’ve achieved, I never thought I’d be able to beat the addiction really, it’s a long time 12 years, I don’t like to dwell on the amount of time too much, because it’s just wasted years, I don’t even remember much, it’s funny like when I talk... about my earlier days here, I don’t really remember, I was wasted, sad, it’s bad, but I was just a mess, and I just have so many not memories, memories are not there, things that have happened, and I’m like really? So now I’m really excited to create memories and have memories long lasting, especially obviously now with the boys, because you have such amazing times with them whatever you do, I want to remember them and cherish them...

Here Brett is generating an imagined future self, as a dad to his boys, he is looking to create good memories for them all, which is something he has not necessarily experienced before. Moreover, the fact that this is being shared in a public space (albeit virtual) ensures that readers of his blog post ‘bear witness’ to this transformation and his desire to change. There is a joint blog post in July for Brett and Simon ([link 11](#)) who have been working with the person who leads on the market garden at the RS. In this post Brett re-establishes himself as a gardener. Similarly, in his previous post in May, he describes the landscaping he is going to do around ‘Transformation man’, again re-establishing a future self, based on his previous expertise.

Brett continues his transformation in his September blog post ([link 12](#)), where he also reflects on the talk that he gave at the RS annual supporters' day in August. This again, demonstrates how Brett's transformation is witnessed, this time by supporters (of around a hundred and fifty people), as well as his mum and twin boys. He says:

I came in in December. I'm different in every way now. I can vaguely remember the headspace I was in back then and it was that of a completely different person, in all shapes and ways, the way I looked, the way I interacted with people. Compared to now, it's a complete transformation.

Comments on this blog post come from people who attended the Supporters day, such as a previous trainee from the RS who says:

I heard you speak at the Supporters Day and I think that "Transformation Man" is brilliant. I'm glad that your own transformation means that your boys have a father they can be really proud of – they were proper little characters in the audience when you were speaking Good Luck with whatever comes next for you.

Alongside a comment from the Poet Laureate, who says: "Good luck Brett. I wish you all the best with everything ahead."

Overall, Brett's series of blog posts for the PeN project, demonstrate the potential benefits of engaging in a virtual dialogue, that enables a 'criminalised' individual to create an imagined future self and to have others bear witness to this transformation. In Brett's last post, he further identifies an imagined future self:

I've been doing my peer-mentoring course and I'm hoping to do some volunteering work with them. I think it'll be great to be able to help people that have been there. They're in the same situation that I've been in. I think with drug addiction, it's one of them where it's really hard, no matter how qualified you are, to be able to get what it's all about from a textbook. I think it's a really challenging thing for anyone to get their head around unless they've been there, and because I have been there and have managed to get through to the other side, I'm really keen to try and help anyone in the same situation...

This is part of what Maruna (2001) refers to as generativity and demonstrates a shift towards wanting to help others. Moreover, these social connections are considered key

to unlocking “the power of the self to change behaviour. Generativity or the desire to do something for others, to repay debts as it were, is a final aspect of ‘making good’” (Rocque, 2017:142). However, not only does the PeN project offer trainees the opportunity of (re)making social connections with family, friends, and the wider community, but it enables a narrative re-scripting of the past, what Maruna (2001:87) refers to as “redemption scripts,” as he claims:

The way each of us views our own history is interesting not only because of what it reveals about our personality and our background; *this subjective autobiography actually shapes our future choices and behaviour*” (Maruna 1999:05, emphasis in the original)

Hence, it is through the public sharing of past, present and future selves that trainees engage in a mediated social dialogue and a (re)imagining of a future self (Hunter and Farrall 2018). The engagement of an audience, albeit a virtual one, through comments, likes, shares and even numbers of views, is also critical in the co-construction of desistance narratives. It creates a moral space and a means of “bearing witness, to see, attend to and testify to lived experience, linked to ideas of narrative, voice and truth” (Anderson, 2016:408).

Concluding Comments

The PeN project creates a virtual space for the articulation of an imagined future self, with an audience ready to bear witness to their desistance journeys. The PeN project therefore works as a tool for personal development as it enables trainees to focus on photographing their work and achievements as they work to turn their lives around at the RS. The strapline for the PeN project website is “A window into the RS”, and clearly trainees’ blog posts provide this. They simultaneously offer a unique glimpse into the everyday lives, hopes and aspirations of a group of people that supporters and the wider community may not have seen before. Moreover, the use of social media platforms enables the creation of a dialogue between groups of people in the community that might not ordinarily meet, nor engage in conversation. This is identified in desistance literature as important for successful social integration. The PeN project is significant on a personal level for trainees as well, as they see how their efforts at rebuilding their lives are recognised by others, this is reflected back and enhances self-esteem.

The PeN project crosses interdisciplinary boundaries within and beyond the social sciences, as a creative endeavour that reaches out to a social inclusion agenda for the Arts and builds human, social and cultural capital. The PeN project empowers trainees and challenges the notion that prisoners and/or offenders are an homogenous group. Most significantly PeN enables trainees to take ownership of their desistance journey and this has the potential to continue after graduation from the RS. It underlines the importance of relational interventions, which can also be virtual if they follow Cody's (2001) three criteria and the value of 'bearing witness' to desistance (Anderson 2016).

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