Co-authoring a book with a former Learning Criminology Inside student

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We met Billy when we were in our first cohort of our Learning Criminology Inside (LCI) programme at HMP Risley in 2017. The LCI programme provides the opportunity for third year BA Criminology students and Master’s students at the University of Manchester and prison-based students to learn together. The workshops take place in prisons (HMP Risley and HMP Wymott along with some one-off workshops in HMP Styal) and allow students to discuss topics such as desistance and drug regulation. Initially sceptical of the programme, Billy increasingly engaged with the material, recognising many of his own experiences in the literature and submitted an interesting and thoughtful end of programme essay. On submission of the essay, he said:

“sorry it’s late, I just wanted to do yourself, Shadd and everyone else justice for the course”

Following Billy’s release towards the end of 2018, he contacted us to explore options of being involved with the University. Working in a pub kitchen and being presented with the opportunity to run the Manchester marathon with one day’s notice (which he completed!), Billy was determined to create a different path, away from drug use and drug dealing. Having met some of our BA Criminology students through LCI and understanding their aspirations to learn, Billy was interested in sharing his experiences of offending, prison and desistance and later asked us if we would help him to tell his story in a book.

Since then, Billy has delivered seven inputs for students across two course units. His family, work and sport have supported his desistance. He is honest and open with the struggles that have emerged and has been an inspiration to students and to us. He has completed several triathlons and swam the channel raising thousands of pounds for charity. He actively supports men with mental health and drug problems in his community and received an award for his voluntary work during the pandemic. Billy attended the Learning Together event at Fishmongers Hall in 2019 with us and was a great source of support during and after the tragedy.

Between us all, we developed the idea for the book and we have secured a contract with Emerald publishers. The book will be entitled ‘Bringing Criminological Development Theory to Life: A Critical Exploration of Lived Experience Through and Beyond the Criminal Justice System’ with a publication date of 2024. This book will cover core aspects of developmental criminology, the journeys into and out of offending, in a completely unique way. Each chapter will be framed around a single individual’s life story: Billy. Yet, this is not an autobiography. Rather, Billy’s rich and fascinating life will provide the scaffolding for six rigorous, evidence-
based and scholarly chapters on key issues in criminology. Along the path of his life, Billy has moved from being a soldier, to a prisoner, to a university student involved in the Learning Together curriculum, to a father and an acclaimed athlete. This journey will provide the inspiration for six commissioned essays from leading figures in criminology on each of these controversial issues from the intersection of military veterans and criminal justice, to the values of the Learning Together course made famous through the tragedy of Fishmongers Hall, to the role of sport in desistance from crime.

Billy’s life-history will be told chronologically and thematically by chapter. Each chapter will be told half in Billy’s words, following a narrative interviewing methodology, which will then be critically analysed and linked to theory by an academic specialising in that area. Billy’s inspiring story of desistance will be pulled together in the introduction and conclusion by the editors of the book. The concept of identity, mental health and drug use and the way in which these intersect with Billy’s roles, circumstances, criminality and desistance throughout his life are key to the story.

While there is a large body of literature on both theories explaining crime and journeys out of crime (desistance), and the growing discipline of life-course criminology combining these, these tend to be written about in an abstract way. While this literature often uses empirical research and examples from participants, a single case study approach is rarely taken. This book will apply theory to one person to show the interconnectedness of theories and the complexities of people’s lives. The book’s unique approach is the use of a number of different authors writing about one person.

We are fortunate to be collaborating with some fantastic academics who will use their expertise to contextualise Billy’s story. Drs Lisa Williams, Laura Bui and Will Floodgate will lead on a chapter about childhood experiences of drug related exploitation and trauma. Dr Emma Murray will reflect on Billy’s experiences as a soldier and how this impacted on his mental health and drug use – sharing commonalities with other research she has conducted with veterans. Drawing on her experiences of working in prison education and Learning Together, Dr Helen Nicholls will lead on a chapter on Billy’s experiences in these areas. As sport has featured heavily in Billy’s desistance, Prof Rosie Meek will focus on this in her chapter. We, along with Prof Shadd Maruna will write the introduction and the conclusion and a chapter discussing Billy’s experiences of prison and community supervision and Dr Emily Turner will author a chapter on the positive social bonds that have helped Billy to desist from crime. But most importantly, Billy will co-author the introduction, bringing his words and reflections on the chapters as a whole to introduce readers to his story.

Emily and Rose have conducted five interviews with Billy, each focusing on a different aspect of his life and organised in that way in collaboration with Billy. We have used a narrative interview approach to allow Billy to tell his story in his own words. The interviews have been illuminating and given us a privileged insight into Billy journey into and out of crime and drug use. The interview transcripts will be shared with the co-authors and, following their comments, we will conduct a final interview with Billy to explore any aspects of the first interviews further. Billy will review all the chapters before submission to make sure that the interpretation of his story reflects his meaning and experience.
The book will allow readers to understand pathways into crime and desistance in the context of in-depth complexities and reality of these stories. Working with Billy on the book and on his inputs at University has been an honour and we are all excited to share his stories and their interpretation. It would not have been possible without the development of the prison-University partnership, the support of the Learning Together network and, most of all, without Billy’s wish to share his story.

*For more information about this work, please contact Rose Broad: rosemary.broad@manchester.ac.uk*