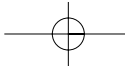
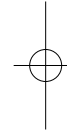
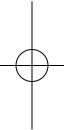


Part 4

Fieldwork as a Reflexive Enterprise



7

Self-Narratives and Ethnographic Fieldwork

BEN CREWE AND SHADD MARUNA

Identity psychologists like Dan McAdams (1985, 1993) argue that if you want to know the answer to the question 'who am I?' (in other words, if you want to know my identity), you first have to know my story. The construction and reconstruction of one's life story narrative (or 'personal myth'), integrating one's perceived past, present, and anticipated future, is the process through which modern adults imbue their lives with unity, purpose, and meaning. Overwhelmed with the choices and possibilities of modern society (Fromm, 1941), modern individuals internalize this autobiographical narrative in order to provide a sense of coherence and predictability to the chaos of their lives.

Over the last two decades, this idea that identity is an internal narrative has achieved a privileged place in the social sciences and humanities, with adherents like Norman Denzin, Paul Ricœur, Roger Schank, and Charles Taylor. The distinguished psychologist Jerome Bruner (1987: 15) argues:

Eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives

achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very 'events' of a life. In the end, we become the autobiographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives.

The equally distinguished UK sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991: 54) agrees, arguing that in modernity, '(a) person's identity is not to be found in behavior, nor – important though this is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going'.

Theodore Sarbin (1986: vii) has argued that the narrative should be seen as the 'root metaphor' for the entire field of psychology and that 'narrative psychology' represents 'a viable alternative to the positivist paradigm'. The idea, building on traditions such as symbolic interactionism, hermeneutics and phenomenology, is that human life is essentially and fundamentally narrated and that understanding human interaction, therefore, requires some understanding of these stories. Indeed, Bruner (1987: 21) largely accepts Jean-Paul Sartre's famous claim that the human being 'is always a teller of stories, (s)he lives surrounded by his (or her) own

stories and those of other people, (s)he sees everything that happens to him(her) terms of stories and (s)he tries to live his(her) life as if (s)he were recounting it'.

As a result of this widespread, intellectual consensus, 'life history methodology' has flourished in fields as diverse as anthropology, cognitive science, criminology, education, history, literary criticism, moral philosophy, and theology. An endless list of research articles have analyzed the life stories of teachers, French bakers, deer poachers, trial lawyers, tribal elders, prostitutes, and individuals from every conceivable walk of life (see especially, Bertaux, 1981). There is nothing new to oral history methods, of course. In fact, approaching research 'subjects' and asking them to 'tell me the story of your life' might be among the oldest tools in the short history of social science (see, for example, White, 1943/1989: 289). However, this old practice has been given a new life by the theoretical insights of the narrative identity school.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that traditional life history methodology – usually involving the tape recording, transcribing and analysis of life story interviews conducted one-on-one in a private, non-clinical setting – is the only appropriate strategy for exploring and understanding life narratives. In this chapter, we will argue that life history research can both enhance and be enhanced by ethnographic fieldwork methods. First, we will outline our understanding of narrative psychology, and demonstrate how such self-narratives might be as easily accessed in field interactions as they are in a more formal interview situation. Next, drawing on our own fieldwork experiences, we will demonstrate the value of fieldwork for analyzing and interpreting life history data. Just as importantly, we will demonstrate the value of life history

interviewing for the interpretation of field observations and interactions. Our conclusion is that life history research and fieldwork are highly complementary approaches to social research and that either method used in isolation from the other may miss important insights available with methodological triangulation.

For the sake of clarity, all of the examples throughout this chapter will be drawn from a field-based study of prison social life (see Crewe, forthcoming), conducted over a ten-month period between October 2002 and August 2003. Based in (Her Majesty's Prison) Wellingborough, the project has used the method of sustained immersion in a single establishment that was the standard approach of much early prison sociology (most obviously, Clemmer, 1940; Sykes, 1958; Mathiesen, 1965; Carroll, 1974). The main aim of the study has been to revisit the classic themes of such work within the contemporary context. The prison, a 'Category C' training establishment (medium security) with an operational capacity of 526 prisoners at the time of the research, lies in the East Midlands of England. Most prisoners are serving sentences of between two and six years, for offences such as burglary, robbery and possession (of drugs) with intent to supply. One wing, in the prison's main buildings, holds around 60 life-sentence and long-term prisoners who have been deemed suitable for medium-security conditions.

The first author was provided with keys to enable access throughout the establishment, and was allowed to move freely and without accompaniment. Visits were made around four times per week, including weekends and evenings. The first three months of fieldwork were spent observing everyday practices and interactions, and talking informally with staff and prisoners about daily life in the prison. In the months that followed, and informed by the initial phase,

a large number of long, semi-structured interviews were conducted, generating around 300 hours of recorded material. Life history interviews were carried out with around half of the overall sample of 70 prisoners. Most were individuals with whom some kind of relationship had already been established through informal engagement in the early phases of the research.

THE NEED FOR SELF-NARRATIVES

Arguably, self-narratives hold a special place in the type of prison-based research the authors typically conduct. Goffman (1961: 66) notes that the 'milieu of personal failure' in total institutions is such that inmates display a 'peculiar kind and level of self-concern' and tend to develop 'sad tales' or storylines about themselves that explain their current status. Certainly, a great deal of this kind of storytelling occurs in prisons. Many prisoners assert narratives that account for their predicament, differentiate them from other inmates, or provide a plot for a happier future. As Goffman suggests, these tales may have functional purpose, in protecting those who tell them from anxieties about their moral status, their prospects and their ability to control their environment. Indeed, where they are most forcefully declared, they can help prisoners to negotiate and navigate their way through the prison social world. A prisoner whose plan to pursue a business idea or whose identity as a recovering alcoholic or 'changed person' is most fully formed, exudes a single-mindedness that detaches them somewhat from the bustle of the prisoner community (see Maruna, 2001).

At the same time, it should be noted that the role of self-narratives in the prison environment is little different from their place

outside such institutions. All of us tell stories about who we are and what makes us unique, and these stories influence the way we interact in our own environments. The biographical content of prisoner self-stories (most obviously including an explanation of how they came to be there) simply accentuates the role of narratives, and the prison setting has a tendency of exposing and laying bare the human need for sense-making and meaning in life.

Psychologists argue that the self-narrative is what keeps the very human experience of meaninglessness and existential void at bay (McAdams, 1985). Personal myths may also be the primary mechanism through which individuals are able to maintain a sense of self-worth in the face of moral, social and personal failings. We use stories to make sense of, rationalize and account for our experiences, be they successes or tragedies. Not every aspect of a person's life requires such internal explanation. Brushing one's teeth at night or saving part of one's salary in a bank are rarely central features in an identity story, because these behaviours are so common that they require little justification. Generally, narratives focus on deviations from normative behaviours or the experiences in a person's life that, when taken in totality, make them unique as an individual: achievements, predicaments, failings and aberrations. Most critically, narrative reconstruction becomes necessary when a person experiences some threat to his or her identity (see Maruna and Ramsden, 2004). As such, research on narratives has a natural and essential place in the study of deviant or criminal behaviour. For instance, Scott and Lyman (1968: 62), argue: 'Since it is with respect to deviant behavior that we call for accounts, the study of deviance and the study of accounts are intrinsically related, and a clarification of accounts will constitute a clarification of deviant phenomena.'

These stories represent personal outlooks and *theories* of reality, not reality itself. While based on historical fact, the self-narrative is thought to be an imaginative rendering, a sort of myth-making through which the past is reconstructed, edited and embellished in order to create a coherent plot and themes. Like the symbolic interactionist mantra 'if (persons) define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas and Thomas, 1928: 572), narrative psychology is premised on the idea that 'stories hold psychological truth' (McAdams, 1999: 496).

The storied identity can be seen as an active 'information-processing structure', a 'cognitive schema' or a 'construct system' that is both shaped by and later mediates social interaction. Giddens (1991: 14) writes: 'Each of us not only "has," but lives a biography'. People tell stories about what they do and why they did it. These narratives explain their actions in a sequence of events that connect up to explanatory goals, motivations, and feelings. Moreover, these self-narratives then act to shape and guide future behaviour, as persons act in ways that accord to the stories we have created about ourselves (McAdams, 1985). Gergen (1971: 2) theorized that the 'way in which a man conceives of himself will influence both what he chooses to do and what he expects from life'.

While our life goals and strategies give us a direction in which to act and our traits give us our behavioural styles, our individual *identities* provide the shape and coherence of our lives. Epstein and Erskine (1983: 135) use this 'need to maintain a coherent, integrated conceptual system' or 'theory of reality' to explain 'behavior that either is manifestly self-destructive or is maintained in the absence of reinforcement'. Caspi and Moffitt (1995) argue that a person's self-narrative may act as a filter for the encoding and processing of social information as different

people exposed to the same situation will react differently as they interpret events in a manner consistent with their understanding of self (self-narrative), their understanding of others, and their previous experience. Self-narratives may also act as a filter in the clarification of goals by filtering out goals that are inconsistent with an individual's self-narrative.

Unlike personality traits, which tend to be largely stable over time, the narrative identity can and does change throughout life. In fact, our stories have to be 'routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual' (Giddens, 1991: 52). As such, numerous therapeutic efforts have been directed to the possibility of re-creating one's self-narrative in more socially adaptive directions (e.g., White and Epston, 1990). Moreover, these dynamic narratives are not created in a vacuum. Identity theorists argue that identity is very much shaped within the constraints and opportunity structure of the social world in which people live. Rather than stripping individuals of community and macro-historical context, therefore, narrative analysis can inform our understandings by illustrating how the person sees and experiences the world around her. Self-narratives are therefore also excellent data for the analysis of the underlying socio-structural relations of a population (Bertaux, 1981).

HOW ETHNOGRAPHY ENHANCES LIFE HISTORY RESEARCH

The study of self-narratives is, for obvious reasons, linked closely to life history methodology. Research in narrative psychology sometimes draws on existing, written narratives, such as published autobiographies (e.g., Maruna, 1997), or on diaries and other forms of confessional writing (e.g., Stewart et al., 1988). Other researchers have asked research

participants (often undergraduate students) to write autobiographical essays specifically for research purposes (Schütz and Baumeister, 1999). Most commonly, however, those interested in self-narratives tend to conduct one-on-one, tape-recorded, biographical interviews with research participants (see Josselson and Lieblich, 1993). These narratives can be analyzed to discern the 'themes' and roles that guide an individual's behaviour. Sometimes this content analysis involves the development or utilization of elaborate coding schemes for systematically recording patterns in the structure and thematic content of narratives (see especially, Smith, 1992). The narratologist's interest in these narratives is not so much the facts they contain (what happened in their lives), but rather in the meanings the person attaches to such facts – how they choose to frame the events of their lives.

This methodological privileging of life history interviewing, however, does not necessarily flow from the theory behind narrative psychology. That is, there is a substantial difference between the internal, personal myths that an individual 'lives by' and the verbal or written accounts they might give about their life in a research situation. The transcribed life histories collected in social scientific research are thought to 'hold the outlines' of these internal narratives (McAdams, 1985), but they are not the identity narratives themselves.

Presumably, then, there are other strategies that are useful for tapping into these internalized narratives. One obvious approach would be the deep immersion into a field setting associated with ethnographic research. The fieldworker who becomes closely involved with individuals in real-world settings potentially has the same access to the 'outlines' of these identity narratives as the researcher who conducts a two-hour interview and then never sees the person

again. Fieldwork allows opportunities for deeper, longer-lasting relationships to emerge, as well as allowing for interactions and observations in a greater variety of situations.

The role of self-narratives in the analysis of field data might be made more clear by looking at concrete examples from the first author's prison ethnography. In prison research, identity issues are often manifest. Prisoners often identify themselves as a 'former drug addict' or as 'different from the other scum in here' almost immediately upon being introduced to a fieldworker, and although time and privacy in interactions might be required in order to work out precisely what such descriptions 'mean', formal interviews may be unnecessary for understanding the self-perspectives of prisoners.

Consider the following two interactions, both occurring on a single night of fieldwork on a prison wing at Wellingborough. The first involves a prisoner whom the first author had met once before in the prison's philosophy class. He politely invites the first author for a cup of coffee in his clean, undecorated cell. The man is older than most inmates, and says that he socializes mainly with a set of 'more mature' prisoners on his wing (the Voluntary Testing Unit), where there is, he says, a 'better quality person' than elsewhere in the establishment. Despite this, he explains, he avoids getting close to anyone, lying about his offence so that no one knows that he is relatively affluent. He does not trust other prisoners, and makes sure that he neither gives anything to nor borrows anything from others. Although he plays cards and snooker with a small number of associates, he would not consider giving his address to anyone. The first author is, he says, the only person with whom he has been honest about his crime. He describes in detail his personal wealth, the houses and

businesses that he owns, and the unfairness of his conviction. He is charming and flattering, asking about personal and professional issues, and he expresses regret when the researcher leaves to visit elsewhere on the wing. His self-identity is evident from this brief, but intimate interaction: he is a businessman and a family man, not a 'criminal', and he has more in common with the researcher than with other prisoners.

The second interaction reveals similar themes during an informal conversation on the ground floor of the wing. A prisoner explains that this is his first sentence, related to a pub fight in which someone was seriously hurt: 'It could have been anyone ... it happens all the time.' But, unlike most other prisoners, he accepts responsibility for what happened and deeply regrets it. He has a 'different mindset' from most others on his wing, and 'nothing in common with a twenty-one year old car thief'. He is 'a bit of a snob, really', and doesn't think of himself as a criminal. He has always worked and paid taxes, whereas most prisoners have never done so and don't want to. He has only a couple of friends on the wing, 'hardworking lads – not addicts – who have got into trouble through no fault of their own'. Although he has not found prison difficult, it was a shock to get used to: he finds it difficult 'being treated like a second-class citizen', and finds it odd that staff were suspicious of how polite he was. They were used to people being rude, and told him that it would help him move through the system if he started off misbehaving and then changed, because they could then say that he was improving: 'I won't do that – become part of the system.'

Such discourses of distinction from 'this lot' were common. Prisoners who were 'working people' or 'family men', who had found religion or education, or who were recovering drug addicts often recounted

their stories publicly, or in private conversations in public spaces, such as the workshops, the segregation unit, or the wings. In doing so in these locations, they could specifically identify those prisoners from whom they wanted to differentiate themselves: 'junkies', 'proper criminals', 'idiots', 'nonces', or 'kids'. Since identity is always relational, that is defined in everyday context and interaction, the opportunity that ethnography gives for these relational distinctions to be observed and understood is highly valuable.

Likewise, identity may be mutually confirmed and reinforced through the support of narrative partners. In one work unit, two prisoners recount a shared story of recovery from drug addiction. Placed together in a double cell in their local prison, they had bonded over the discovery of common life circumstances, opening up to each other as they began to get clean and think about their lives. Both had children, and say they had always made sure, even when addicts outside prison, that their families came first: 'A lot (of prisoners) don't give a shit. They'd rather get a bag (of heroin) than a phonecard to call their kids.' They describe how being away from their children is the hardest thing about prison. One has not seen his kids since starting his sentence over a year ago, and is now being divorced by his wife, who is 'fed up with it'. He goes on: 'I'm fed up too. I'm 30, and if I don't stop now, I never will.' Both men are keen to change themselves, working with dedication and supporting each other's proclamations of personal transformation. Here, then, experiences of drug abuse and its impact on family life provide the dominant nodes in life stories that are jointly mobilized to shape institutional behaviour and ambitions about release.

Family narratives were not always used in such ways. In another workshop, a prisoner

complains about how little money he will be given when he's released back into society: 'I'm a man with three kids and lots of women. By the time you see your kids, you've got no money left.' He goes on to describe that his daughter now demands designer clothing, and that it is hard to ensure that her demands are met. 'Whatever my kids want, they'll get', he insists. 'It might take a week, but they'll get it. There's people in prison earning more money in here than they ever will outside.' He identifies himself explicitly as 'a provider', and describes how belittling it feels not to be able to support your family as you would like to: 'You can't be there – and every child needs a father.' I ask how he manages: 'I used to sell drugs', he whispers. 'You need at least ten phonecards a week to speak to your children. I won't go without' (fieldwork notes, December 2002).

In interview, two months later, he repeatedly revisits the themes of protecting and providing for his family, using them to justify his involvement in the prison's illicit economy. In highlighting how drug dealing had enabled him to be a 'head' (i.e., a powerful prisoner) inside as well as outside prison, and in boasting of his ability to make money under the noses of his captors, when they 'wouldn't survive two seconds in my world', he also reveals the significance of discourses of status and masculinity to his activities. In such respects, the ethnographic fieldwork and life history interview are complementary in a number of practical and intellectual ways.

Fieldwork is valuable partly because, in generating trust, credibility and familiarity, it makes interviewees more likely to disclose themselves in interviews. Researchers who engage in life history interviewing are consistently surprised and honoured that research participants are so willing to talk about their lives to a complete stranger (and indeed seem

to immensely enjoy the experience). Yet, research participants are presumably even more open when they believe their interviewer has some appreciation of their world and their needs. The researcher is evaluated in action, and potential participants make decisions about them accordingly.

This lesson was made manifest in the first author's prison ethnography. One of the first prisoners to take place in the life history interviewing explained his willingness to participate as follows:

You know, it just happens that we've spoke a few times on the wing and I find you a pretty sensible fella. You know, so I don't really mind – we've spoke on the landing, I see how you've spoke with other people, I've seen how you've dealt with them: you've heard them, you've listened to them, you've got your own points of view.

Knowing before an interview begins where a prisoner is from, the work that they have chosen within the prison, or their attitude towards prison staff, provides a practical 'hook' – a way of naturally starting conversation, rather than clearly following an interview protocol. Likewise, recalling a past conversation with an interviewee or referring to an interaction that has involved them helps to confirm the sincerity of one's interest.

HOW LIFE HISTORY RESEARCH ENHANCES ETHNOGRAPHY

The benefits of linking life history interviewing to ethnographic research go both ways, however. That is, collecting and analyzing life history narratives from individuals in a research setting can greatly enhance one's understanding of field interactions.

Most obviously, life history interviews can clarify the deeper meanings of incidents that have been witnessed during the fieldwork process (see also Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). This may be especially useful when

someone's behaviour appears to deviate from dominant cultural norms. For instance, in the first author's prison study, he observed a striking and unusual episode in which a prisoner named 'Andrew'¹ confronted a large and aggressive fellow prisoner who had been abusing an older inmate for his lack of hygiene. This risky intervention, in support of a distinctly low-status and socially isolated prisoner, against a dominant wing resident, was both brave and uncharacteristically public. The incident only made sense when situated in the context of Andrew's life story and analyzed alongside his biographical interview transcript:

Was there a stage in your life when you felt like you were a man, rather than a boy?

The only thing close to that I can think is, I got put into care when I was fifteen, still at school. [...] It was then that I met people that hadn't got parents, which were already totally, totally out of control. [...] I got bullied in that kid's home [...] and I did start to hate it for a while, y'know, 'James', he's a big skinhead and he made my life a misery. [...] But then I got locked up and I got four months Detention Centre, and when I was there, you get made to do gym, [and] when you come out, you are fit; and when I finished that I went back to the kid's home, and I remember James, on the stairs with a girl, trying to show off, and he smacked me in the mouth, [and I thought:] 'I ain't takin' this anymore,' and I knocked him clean up with two bangers, [...] and within the space of comin' out of that [Detention Centre], within six weeks they were all terrified of me. I realized I could fight. [...] That's when I grew up, when I went first into Detention Centre, because I was forced, I had no option.

Indeed, Andrew was able to draw the connection between his past experiences and his current attitudes himself during the interview (conducted several weeks after the initial incident):

Even to this day now I can't abide a bully, I won't see it, y'know, because I know from my own personal experience what it's like. And even if I didn't know you and even in 'ere, even though I'm goin' home in five weeks, if I see somebody bullyin' someone, I'd do something about it, I would. [...] Bad as I am, I've got a heart, and when I see that, I feel so sorry for that geezer [and] there's a big rising anger in me for the bully.

Once the first author raised the issue of the above incident during the interview, Andrew reflected further on its meaning:

I've nearly been in a few fights over that guy. [...] I understand that he smells and all the rest of it, but you don't have to start shoutin' your mouth off and makin' him feel bad, y'know, makin' yourself try to look big, havin' a go at him in front of everybody else. 'Cos it gets to me that much, y'know. I just, I can't understand how people can be so insensitive, y'know. I'm the same outside, I'm exactly the same outside. If one of my mates has a go at somebody, and [if the] guy's scared, [...] I'll stop my friend. [...] I dunno whether that's because of what happened when I was at the kid's home, but I've always been the same. If I can see somebody's scared, I won't let it happen, I'll do whatever I can, not to let it happen.

An interview with another prisoner, 'Jeff', likewise clarified a conversation that had taken place some weeks earlier. Standing on the prison landings one evening, Jeff had explained the frustration of going to bed at night worrying about his children. He was particularly agitated about a motorbike that he had bought for his son before starting this sentence, whose brakes were not working. His wife had sent it to someone to be fixed, but 'nothing's happened for weeks. The guy's missus keeps saying he's not in', and Jeff expressed considerable annoyance that he could not intervene to sort things out.

The researcher noted the conversation but interpreted it only as an unusual manifestation of free-floating anxiety regarding what is going on 'on the outside' that is typical of prisoners (although somewhat out of character for this particular individual). However, when the individual was formally interviewed, without reference to this prior exchange, a series of autobiographical comments revealed the symbolic significance of motorbikes in Jeff's life story:

What did you end up in jail for then?

What, for me first offences? Me very first offences was just pinchin' motorbikes. [...] I've started hanging around with lads on my estate, and I started nickin' motorbikes – 12, 13 year old – as a kid, I started nickin'

motorbikes. And me dad started beating me up and things, because of that. [...] With me dad, the way he was brought up was, his dad used to beat him up. And he was the same as me when I was little, pinchin' motorbikes and things like that. If he'd a bought me a motorbike, I wouldn't a pinched one. My lad won't pinch one, I've bought him one, you know what I mean, he doesn't 'ave to pinch one, he's been *bought* one.

Here, then, the nature of Jeff's frustration became apparent only through the elucidation of his life story.

Interviews can be deliberately used to address apparent inconsistencies from the fieldwork phase and to probe beneath public identities. It may be tempting to regard ethnographic encounters as more 'real' than the representations offered within the more organized environment of the interview. However, interviews provide an opportunity for participants to offer alternative versions of the self. In prison, where putting on a 'front' or 'mask' can be important, it is unsurprising that many interviewees distance themselves from their public personae. 'Dan' had a reputation for aggression and instability, and described a number of incidents from his prison career in which he had acted with 'no inner feelings'. Such acts cannot be discounted from assessments of his character, but Dan explained that there was a difference between his public portrayal and his sense of self:

Once I walk out this door I'll be a totally different person, because I don't want people to think I'm a muppet, they can take the piss. So, I look out for myself, it's how you've got to be when you're in this environment.

So you're different in this environment to the way you think of yourself?

I'm totally different. When I'm banged up behind my door I'm totally different, I'm laid back, chilled out, like a normal person. I'm on my own, I've got no one to argue with, no one can wind me up, I'm happy. That's my time to sit and think about other things instead of your daily routine in here.

What's the identity that you have on the wing that you show to other people?

Everyone just leaves me alone. On that wing there is no one on there that can really cause me any trouble or grief. [...] If you put on a front as though you don't care and no one bothers you, then you're going to sail through your sentence, no one will give you any grief. [...] If I've got a problem I'm not going to walk around looking mopey, sad, because someone is going to look at it as a weakness and try and exploit it.

Dan appeared to be hyper-sensitive to minor slights, such as being talked about behind his back. He railed against another prisoner who, by standing on his foot and not apologizing, he felt had 'taken the piss'. Such sensitivities to weakness and disrespect were striking partly because Dan was largely seen as dangerous rather than vulnerable. As he went on to explain, however, one reason why Dan was so keen not to be disrespected was that he was aware of the extreme nature of his reactions. He admitted to harbouring homicidal fantasies when slighted. Elsewhere in the interview, Dan reported having been subjected to serious physical abuse by his father, for which he claimed to be 'really, really grateful': 'it made me into a person that can take a real good kicking [...] I've not got no pain barrier. There's nothing there now to cause me pain.' Dan's lack of compassion for others, his intense response to minor, personal affronts and his attempt to avoid trouble through inhabiting a psychotic persona would appear to be connected to such life experiences.

Other interviews shed light on apparent discrepancies between self-identities and actions, and between seemingly incompatible public roles, in ways that also illuminated the character of prison life. Thus, when prisoners publicly censured heroin users ('smackheads'), but then admitted in interview to themselves being users, it became apparent that the addict identity was stigmatized: 'Even though I know you've seen me smoking gear (heroin) I ain't a smackhead', claimed one

interviewee, in what was a common refrain. As interviews subsequently revealed, for those prisoners with reputations as serious or 'professional' criminals, it was especially important to avoid the 'smackhead' label.

In another interview, with a gregarious and dominant prisoner named 'Paul', probing the values and self-image of his autobiographical interview made it possible to reconcile what had appeared to be his somewhat incongruous public identities. Fieldwork observations and conversations suggested that, on the one hand, having been socialized into prison culture from an early age, Paul held rigid anti-establishment views, and identified himself with traditional inmate values. At the same time, however, he was somewhat detached from mainstream inmate culture, and appeared to have little involvement in the internal economy or in the everyday wing politics between prisoners. Moreover, he was deeply involved in prison education: an activity that could potentially be regarded as 'institutional'.

In interview, Paul recounted coming from a close-knit family, run by 'a group of sort of matriarchs [...] proper old battleaxes', who had taught him to treat women with respect. He was among a minority of prisoners who reported having female friends outside prison. Expanding on how this affected him within prison, Paul noted that '95% of the attitudes towards women you meet in prison are not good', and that a 'prevailing attitude' in prison was to 'class the whole of womanhood as bitches and evil scum'. He had himself been 'betrayed' by a woman during his sentence, but was proud not to have submitted to what was a dominant and 'worrying' misogyny: 'I suppose it's my arrogance speaking but I think that my values, my attitudes and my morals that I hold are far superior to most peoples.' Overall, then, Paul was left feeling somewhat different from other

prisoners: 'sort of removed. [...] It puts me in a position where I don't quite understand where a lot of them come from. [...] I have to bite my tongue a lot.'

That Paul managed to maintain a credible prison identity was also interesting given his commitment to prison education. He had discovered education early in his sentence, devouring books and their bibliographies until he satisfied his intellectual curiosity. Asked whether this had influenced his self-image, Paul responded that it had done so 'hugely, in quite a few ways', diverting his attention from other things within the system, in both positive and negative ways: it had 'broaden[ed] the horizons' and prevented him from succumbing to the 'destructive forces' of boredom. At the same time, he believed it had stopped him participating in some of the activities that the prison explicitly recognized as positive contributions, such as work with children and the Listeners scheme. However, Paul expressed considerable ambivalence about such schemes, suggesting that he would not want to 'get involved in something just to get out, just to get tick marks on "he's a good boy" sheet', and distinguishing education from other prison activities: 'education is like a separate entity within the prison because they're not part of the establishment, if you know what I mean.' Through such logic, then, Paul had forged a prison role that allowed him to escape anti-institutional temptations and maintain his self-image as different from the inmate mass, without forcing him to engage directly with the establishment's aims or making him appear 'pro-staff'.

Incidents observed *after* an interview has been conducted may make more sense in the context of powerful life events. Early on in his interview, 'Shaun' recalls his step-father waiting for him to come home from school, 'watching what I was doing [...] and the way I saw it he was trying to catch me out doing

things wrong so he had an excuse then to [...] ground me, slap me, whatever.' He goes on to describe being beaten not only for very minor incidents, but also for things which continued to influence his thinking in relation to 'trouble':

It wasn't that he'd beat the truth out of me, which he did a couple of times; he beat me to tell him I'd done something when I hadn't. [...] Even if it wasn't me, he was going to make me say it was me anyway. And I'd have to go through all that pain, for no reason. Even to this day – it's something I say to a few people on the wings – [...] I'm a person where if I'm going to lose out and something's going to happen to me for no apparent reason whatsoever then I get the infamous 'fuck it' attitude. If something's going to happen to me for *no* reason, then I'll be damn sure to make something happen for *some* reason. I'd rather you smack me in the mouth for something I'd done than for something I hadn't done. [...] I may as well create something or do something wrong, you know, than get the amount of trouble I'm going to get for no reason. At least at the back of me mind then I know I've done something wrong. At least compensate for the beating I'm going to get for something that I never did wrong in the first place. [...] Why get your head kicked in for fuck all, when you can get your head kicked in for something? Why get four years for one burglary, when you can go out and get four years for 15 or 20 odd, you know. So I suppose that's, it's that kind of attitude that's stuck with me for a while you know.²

In the eyes of the establishment, Shaun was a 'difficult prisoner,' whose behavior was volatile and unpredictable. Yet, for him, when confronted with the possibility of being disciplined, it was rational to respond belligerently, as he did, twice, in subsequent weeks, in ways that would have been opaque without an understanding of his life story.

NARRATIVE IDENTITY AND SUBCULTURAL RESEARCH

Most of the examples above demonstrate how biographical interviewing can help researchers interpret the actions of individual actors in a research setting. However, a principal goal of much ethnographic research, of course, is to

better understand the ways and norms of groups or subcultures of individuals. Indeed, one risk in utilizing a narrative psychology framework in field settings is the potential for making overly reductionist interpretations of such social milieus. In other words, repeatedly ascribing the origins of various interactions to the autobiographical understandings of individual participants may ignore the ways in which subcultural involvement itself shapes individual identities and self-understandings.

Nonetheless, the value of narratives for making sense of sociological patterns in institutions or subcultures should not be underestimated. Again, prison research illustrates this point well. The classic literature on prison subculture has been almost entirely sociological in focus, demonstrating how institutional constraints lead to various social behaviours and norms. However, many of these characteristics of prison life may also be enlightened by an appreciation for the autobiographical self-understandings of prisoners.

One recurrent discourse, expressed frequently and vehemently (as in Andrew's case, above), is a hostility to bullying and the exploitation of the vulnerable. Prisoners insist that bullying is not tolerated, and that those who attempt it are quickly and forcefully 'dealt with.' As the following interview quotes suggest, this norm may have roots in prisoners' personal experiences:

I don't like bullying. I really don't like bullies at all. [...] Because I have been bullied before, and I don't like people violently hurting me. [...] If you've got a big fellow bullying a little kid, then it is something to do with me, because it's wrong. It's wrong in outside society and it's wrong in here.

'Steve' was being bullied [...]. Now, if anyone goes near him to give him any grief whatsoever the person that gives him grief will be like out of the jail in hospital, because he's been bullied the whole of his life. I was bullied by my dad up to the age of 18 so I know what

being bullied is like. [...] I walked into the pad of the [bully], the geezer is there with his mates laughing so I grabbed him by the throat up against the window. I said 'why don't you try slapping me?' – he said 'I've got no problem with you' – I said 'but you've got a problem with him because he can't defend himself.' [...] I hate people that pick on the weak in jail, I really do detest bullies in jail.

I couldn't stand fucking bullying. I was bullied in school. And from as early an age as I can remember, even in pubs, if I saw somebody take the piss out of somebody [...] I'd stand by him, and embarrass him. 'How would you feel?' [...] That was one of my morals. That was one of my codes. Always look out for the vulnerable guys. And I still stick to that rule today. [...] Once upon a time I was little, and I was vulnerable, and I was picked on. And the day I snapped is the day I swore that I won't tolerate it. I will not let that happen in front of me. And I've stuck by my guns ever since. [...] I've been bullied, and being picked on – people don't understand the effect it can have on someone.

This is not to suggest that codes relating to bullying are reducible to the biographical experiences of prisoners. Ideals of mutual aid between prisoners can also be seen as a functional response to the pains of imprisonment (Sykes, 1958). However, for some prisoners in particular, this is an issue which has normative as well as practical significance, rooted in personal histories. For researchers interested in the origins and functions of the 'inmate code', this is an important observation.

Another striking aspect of inmate subculture is a somewhat contradictory attitude towards women, including female officers. As discussed above, women were commonly denigrated as manipulative, unfaithful and malevolent, and were highly objectified as sex objects. Yet they were also held up as beacons of virtue and salvation, particularly mothers and grandmothers, and were treated and talked about in ways that displayed courtesy, chivalry and sentimentalism.³ Interviews suggested that these patterns were embedded in life experiences and values, as well as being responses to the sexual and emotional frustrations of prison life.

For instance, Owen's life story included multiple, contemptuous references to women. Girlfriends, who were often prostitutes, were referred to as 'whores', including Owen's own sister, about whom he expressed passionate, at times confusing, views, that signalled feelings of betrayal as well as disgust:

She started to smoke crack and that and she's a whore now and I hate her guts. [...] Because when I used to go to prison and secure units all over the country, she would come and visit me. [...] She used to be wicked [i.e., great]. Wicked. She was so lovely. [...] Now, it's totally, totally changed. Everything about her. She's just a bitch. She's horrible. She's got three kids. She don't even see them. She don't give a shit about herself. She's just fucked. She's a lost cause, she really is. I mean I love her to bits, it's my sister, I always will, we shared the same bathwater as kids. But I hate her as well. I fucking hate – I hate her. I hate what she's become anyway. I truly hate what she's become. I've been here for three years, she's come to see me once.

His antipathy towards other women, often expressed through violence, also related to notions of being 'disrespected' and anxieties about control:

And a lot of women will suck crack dealer's dicks, basically, for crack. And that's why she'd get a beating, basically. [...] I'm not forcing her to go out there and sell her body. But if she whores about with crack dealers and people I know, then to me, she's disrespecting me. If she wants to go and do a punter, I don't mind that. But if it's people I know, then I'm not having that. I've done some bad things. [...] Saying that, if I didn't do that, they'd run fucking rings round me.

In contrast, Owen described his mother in highly idealized terms: 'the most beautifullest woman I know. The most loving, caring woman I know [...]. Just a beautiful woman. Lovely, in every sense. Just my best mate.' Although she had beaten him as a child, she had also provided unconditional love:

I can always remember my mum saying to me 'Look, you are what you are. You are my first born and I love you to bits. The only thing I ask of you is tell me the truth. Never lie to me. Just tell me the truth and I'll be there for you.' And I respect her for that. And all the shit I've put her through as well. [...] And she's always there for me. Always sends my money. I love her to bits.

Given her unqualified support for him, it was significant that Owen's mother was 'the only person I've got 100 per cent faith in'. Likewise, both of the other people who Owen adulated offered the same unreserved love: a substitute father figure, and – somewhat ironically – a prostitute whom he saw as a 'big sister' rather than a 'whore', and who 'even though she was a crack addict [...] She'd always come and make sure I was alright. [...] She'd just look after me'.

Owen's attitude towards female officers seemed to echo his negative life experiences with women and his anxieties about respect. He described having had confrontations with his female personal officer, reflecting that 'maybe they think I'm a pushover and they can take the piss, and when I snap, they think "well, maybe not"'. One incident involved a female officer having taken down from his window a curtain that, against the rules, he had placed there. Incensed, Owen challenged the officer, and recalled responding to her explanation as follows: 'I says "look, let me break something down for you. Have a bit of fucking respect." [...] And I said "Look, you're a bitch. Do that again and I'll knock you out. I don't care if you're a woman. I'll punch you in your face."'

Asked if he had a different relationship with female officers than with male officers, he answered: 'I hate them, female officers. I fucking hate them. I hate them. Not because they're women. [...] – I suppose it's got something to do with them being women.' Providing an explanation, he recounted an incident in which a female officer had told him and a friend 'loads of things real personal', but subsequently disciplined the friend without discussing it with them first. Owen clearly resented that, having established some level of intimacy with them, she had then exerted power over them, regarding this as a typically female betrayal: 'How can

you sit there and tell people [things], laugh and joke with him, then when you leave, go up to security and get him [done] for something he said? Fucking bitch. All women screws are like that. [...] They'll go on safe at you, laugh and joke. Then they'll just switch on you.'

Though not typical, such views were not unusual. Prisoners described female officers in terms that were considerably more emotionally charged than those used for male officers. The recurrent labelling of female (but much less often male) officers as 'two-faced' was symptomatic of the way in which many prisoners encouraged them into nurturing or sexual roles, and resented them when they acted in accordance with their official responsibilities. Often, then, prisoners projected on to female officers the terms of actual or desired relationships with women who were not present in the prison, especially mothers and girlfriends. This could entail positive as well as negative sentiments: 'The older female staff, I talk to them like me nan', reported one prisoner; another said:

You do treat women different. People might find this a bit sexist and that but I treat most women I come across like I'd treat me own mum. [...] It's very rare that I'll swear in front of a woman officer, I wouldn't. I daren't swear in front of me mum, [...] that's how I was brought up [...]. If you sit down and talk to a woman officer, it's like you are talking to them as, you know, as a woman.

At the same time, most prisoners claimed that they would intervene without hesitation in a situation where a female officer was in danger of being attacked, whereas a male officer might not elicit the same response. Prisoners outlined their logic not just in terms of their values ('it's just the way I was brought up ...'), but also life events. Thus, one prisoner explained that he would step in to protect a female officer because his home life meant that he had seen 'enough women

getting hit' in his life. Again, then, attitudes towards women was an aspect of prison culture that was inflected by personal experiences as well as general cultural mores outside prison and the inherent characteristics of prison life.

IN SUMMARY

The idea that identity takes the form of a self-narrative has become nearly paradigmatic in the humanities and social science. What this typically means for researchers is that in order to understand why people behave the way they do, it is important to understand the personal myths by which they live. This does not necessarily mean that the best form of research involves the collection of oral history data, however. Indeed, there are numerous reasons to think that ethnographic interactions with individuals in their 'natural environment' provides an equally good, if rather more time-intensive, method for accessing self-narratives. At the very least, fieldwork can greatly enhance a researcher's access to life history information and can be of considerable value in interpreting life stories.

While benefiting from ethnographic work, life interviews also enhance the ethnographic process. Most obviously, they aid further interaction with interviewees and provide interpretative guidance on potentially salient issues. In addition, however, the systematic collection of autobiographical data can even help shed light on unusual aspects of subcultural and institutional behaviour. Although researchers need to avoid the hazards of reductionism in their interpretation of field interactions, the combination of life history methodology with ethnographic observations appears to be a highly complementary form of research triangulation and worthy of greater utilization.

NOTES

1 All names used here are pseudonyms.

2 Another prisoner told a similar story of abuse and its effects on his mentality:

I was beaten by my dad from a very early age. I think that made me want to rebel even more. I'd sit there and think, at least I'm getting a kicking for something I had done, even if they didn't know I'd done it. [...] I was being beaten by my dad every day, so if I was doing something, even if they didn't know about it, then in my head it would just be that I'd been found out by dad and he was giving me a beating for it, even though he knew nothing, they didn't know for quite a while when I was doing things.

3 Female researchers are almost always referred to as 'miss'; prisoners often apologise for swearing in front of women; and there is little embarrassment about romantic gestures directed towards women, whereas most other forms of emotion are proscribed.

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