

“Counter-images” and counter-narratives: Exploring the use of auto-photography and photo-elicitation with women offenders

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Feminist Research Methodologies Conference:
Challenges and Negotiations

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Overview

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- Research aim and questions
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Introduction to my PhD

- Community sentences are increasingly used for female offenders in the UK, yet research into their experiences of these kinds of disposals is limited (Malloch and McIvor, 2011; Gelsthorpe, 2011).
- Women, particularly those in receipt of social assistance, find themselves subject to high levels of surveillance, moral scrutiny and punishment, often along classed and raced lines (Bumiller, 2013).

Research aim and questions

Aim

To explore the everyday lived experiences and sense-making narratives of women who have offended or who are considered to be 'at risk' of (re)offending at the penal-welfare nexus.

Research questions:

- How do women subject to community-based criminal justice interventions experience surveillance, social control and punishment in the community?
- How do they make sense of their status as 'offender' or 'at risk of offending'?

Research questions (continued)

- What helps / hinders their desistance from crime?
- What strategies do they develop to deal with being simultaneously inside and outside of the criminal justice system?
- How do their lived experiences contrast with prevailing ideas on female offending in public opinion, policy and practice?
- How does their relationship with key workers shape their experience?
- To what extent do key workers resist or reinforce dominant narratives on female deviance and offending?

Research context

- Women constitute: 18% of those arrested; 23% of those receiving out of court disposals; 25% of those convicted; 15% of those under supervision in the community (Ministry of Justice, 2014).
- Overall, most common sentence outcome for men and women is the fine. “Monetary sanctions or fines ...are a neo-liberal punishment par excellence” (Vaughan, forthcoming).
- Welfare conditionality and sanctions regime has been likened to the mainstream judicial system, a “secret penal system” (Webster, 2014).

Theoretical inspiration

- ‘Grand theories’ of social control and punishment have neglected women
- Wacquant: ‘carceral-assistential net’
 - ignores women’s imprisonment and engagement with CJS in community
 - US-centred perspective
- Garland: penal-welfarism, control, the victim
 - gender specific policy is not problematised
 - complexities of victimhood under explored
- Foucault: disciplinary society thesis
 - the prison continues, bodily forms of punishment remain
 - useful in understanding the role of women’s centres in instilling normatively acceptable behaviour

The visual in criminology

- Contemporary society saturated with images of crime and the criminal
- Images are inherently political
- Absence of "counter-images" that could challenge 'carceral culture' (Brown, 2014)
- A "just image" - one that does justice to what it represents (Carrabine, 2012)

The visual in criminology



Source: Wade (2014)

Methodology

- Feminist ontology and epistemology
- “Women’s own perspectives and experiences” is integral to feminist research (Presser, 2005)
- “Sustained empathetic inquiry” (Yanow, 2003)
- “Looking, seeing and knowing have become perilously intertwined...rendering our world as primarily a ‘seen’ phenomenon” (Jenks, 1995)
- ‘Reality’ is something socially experienced and interpreted rather than 'discovered'
- Knowledge production should be “studied, critiqued...made explicit” (Ackerly and True, 2010)

Research methods

- Auto-photography: 15-20 participants will be asked to take photographs ('counter-images') of their lived experiences
- Walking methods (O'Neill and Hubbard, 2010)
- Photo-elicitation: the photographs will be inserted into research interviews, this "audiencing" of the photographs supports the development of rich data for interpretation and analysis (Rose, 2012)
- Auto-cartography and timelines as mnemonic devices
- In-depth interviews: key worker participants

Ethical considerations

- Feminist research ethic:
 - power of knowledge and epistemology
 - boundaries, margins, silences, intersections
 - relationships and power differentials
 - sociopolitical position of the researcher (Ackerly and True, 2010)
- Participants may be experiencing serious social and/or economic exclusion factors
- What right have I to represent *you*? (Levi-Strauss, 2003)

Ethical considerations

- “Attempting to create a more equal relationship can paradoxically become exploitation and use” (Acker et al., 1996)
- "The potential for relationships to end abruptly and for participants to feel that they have been misunderstood or betrayed, especially...when...priorities diverge" (Kirsch, 2005)
- "Epistemological authority" (Skeggs, 2004)
- "Just an image" or a "just image"? (Carrabine, 2012)

Challenges

- Making the case for studying women
- NOMS National Research Committee
- Recruiting gatekeeper - balance of research aims/org aims; feeling of being an inconvenience
- Changes in my personal life

Thank you for listening

Any questions?

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