Chapter 1

Learning about crime from criminals: editor's introduction

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There are many ways to learn about crime and about criminals. We can analyse criminal justice records, we can analyse data from surveys, and we can analyse the accounts of the offenders in their own words. The latter approach is referred to as 'offender-based research'. It usually involves talking to offenders and observing them in their own environment. Although offenders are potentially the richest source of information on their crimes and on their lives, offender-based research is difficult. Many offenders are hard to find, and many are unable or unwilling to tell us what we would like to know. Nevertheless, the offenders' perspective is vital to knowing and understanding crime.

Offender-based research evolved during the founding era of modern criminology, where it was at the heart of the Chicago School studies of crime. Already in the first decades of the past century, offender-based research included observational studies and case studies based on interviewing. For example, *The Gang* (Thrasher 1927) and *Street Corner Society* (Whyte 1937) are excellent examples of early ethnographic fieldwork. In *The Jack-Roller* (1930), *The Natural History of a Delinquent Career* (1931) and *Brothers in Crime* (1938), Shaw and his colleagues give book-length accounts of the lives of young offenders in the form of autobiographies – thus written in the first person – that were based on interviews with the boys and others acquainted with them, but also on official police records and newspaper stories.

The autobiographical style did not mean that Shaw and others took the boys' words for granted. There were clear concerns about the veracity and truthfulness of the accounts of these offenders. After stressing the importance of including other verifiable supplementary materials to evaluate and interpret more accurately the personal document, Shaw nevertheless underlines the value of subjectivity.

> It should be pointed out, also, that the validity and value of the personal documents are not dependent on its objectivity or veracity. It is not expected that the delinquent will necessarily describe his life-experiences objectively. On the contrary, it is desired that his story will reflect his own personal attitudes and interpretations, for it is just these personal factors which are so important in the study and treatment of the case. Thus, rationalizations, fabrications, prejudices, exaggerations are quite as valuable as objective descriptions, provided, of course, that these reactions be properly identified and classified. (Shaw 1930: 2–3)

Note that in the last sentence of the quotation, Shaw makes the subtle point that rationalisations and other distortions are important to record provided *they are recognised as such*. Obviously, this implies that it is possible to separate the objective event from the presentation of that event by the individuals involved. To claim that a person exaggerates a situation requires that we know what the situation actually was like.

In his Editor's Preface to 'The Natural History of a Delinquent Career', Ernest W. Burgess (1931) articulates a somewhat more critical attitude regarding the validity of the offenders' accounts, as he notes:

> Granted that the life-history possesses this unique human value, what if any is its function as an instrument of scientific inquiry? Is the writer of the document telling the truth? Is he not influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by his conception of his audience? Does any person know sufficiently well the causes of his own behavior for his statement, sincere though it may be, to be given full credence? These and other questions must be squarely faced before any final decision may be made upon the merits of the life-history as an instrument of scientific research.' (Burgess 1931: xi)

Burgess went on to prescribe that the offenders' accounts were to be checked by 'interviews with parents, brothers and sisters, friends, gang associates, school teachers and principals, probation officers and social workers' (p. xii) and against official records of their crimes. In other words, he was emphasising the need for cross-validation of the data.

These quotations from early offender-based studies demonstrate that from the very beginnings, the veracity and validity of offender accounts has been an issue concerning researchers working in the offender-based tradition.

Although offender-based research has always been an important branch of criminology, the last three decades have witnessed increasing streams of data originating from the criminal justice system and from victimisation surveys. In many parts of the world, criminal justice systems produce increasing streams of data on crime that are often accessible to researchers, including forensic evidence, CCTV footage and geocoded police reported

crime incidents. The discovery of the victimisation survey has greatly impacted our knowledge of crime. The National Crime Victimisation Survey(NCVS) and the British Crime Survey (BCS) are large-scale surveys that have been around for decades, and the latest wave of the International Crime Victimisation Survey (ICVS) includes data from residents of 30 nations and 33 main cities all over the world.

Although it has never been absent from criminology, offender-based research has not gained a comparable increase in interest or dissemination. This is unfortunate, because if anyone can provide first-hand information on offending, offenders can. How did a person learn to commit an offence? How precisely was a specific crime enacted? What made the person commit the offence? What made the offender decide in favour of a particular target? What were his or her emotions like when committing the offence? Because the offenders' perspective is vital to knowing and understanding crime, to answer these questions researchers need to leave their desks and offices and go out onto the streets and into the bars, shops, schools, boardrooms and prisons, to talk to offenders and see them in their own environment.

Outside of their offices, the researchers that conduct offender-based research have to struggle with many issues and concerns. Offenders are difficult to reach, and many are unable or unwilling to provide the answers we need. A special concern of the researchers is the veracity of what they are being told by the people they are interviewing or hanging out with. Are they speaking 'the' truth or 'their' truth? While this holds true for any person that we involve as subjects in research, it may be of particular relevance for offenders, as we ask them detailed questions on their stigmatised and sanctioned behaviours. There are myriads of reasons to lie or misrepresent information, if only for the purpose of creating an impression of respectability. There are just as many ways in which the findings are biased because of miscommunications and misunderstandings between the researcher and the offenders, who often come from different social worlds. How can we prevent this from happening, and how can we detect it and correct it when it happens?

This book is about what we can do to maximise the validity of what offenders tell us about their offending. Offending is broadly defined to include not only criminal and deviant acts, but also the emotions and cognitions that play a role before, during or after the act. We will take stock of various methods to elicit information on offending from offenders, addressing the strengths and weaknesses of each of these methods, and discussing strategies to obtain the collaboration of offenders and to maximise the validity and reliability of the data. The emphasis will be on methods that aim to collect tangible information on the behaviour of offenders in general and on their criminal behaviour in particular.

In the following 15 contributions, researchers from around the world share their experiences and insights, all with a clear focus

on methodological issues of fieldwork among various types of offender populations. Each contribution deals with a few central issues:

- Where, when and how can we obtain information from offenders on offending?
- What can we learn from offenders that cannot be accessed from other sources?
- How can offenders be motivated to participate in research?
- How can offenders be motivated and helped to provide valid accounts of their offending?
- How can the information that offenders provide be checked and validated?

The remainder of this chapter is a concise overview that serves to introduce the other chapters by sketching their subject matter and role in the context of this book. The chapters are ordered in five parts that roughly correspond to the settings of offender-based research (Part 2, 'Prison settings' and Part 3, 'Field settings'), the people involved in offender-based research (Part 4, 'Social categories of offenders and researchers') and what many see as the subject matter of offender-based research (Part 5, 'Learning about the act'). This editor's introduction and the next two chapters together form Part 1 ('Setting the stage') and serve as a broad introduction to the theme of this volume.

In the second chapter, *Henk Elffers* develops a simple but very useful taxonomy of the mechanisms that can threaten the validity of the offender interview. He discusses misinformation, misunderstanding and misleading, and makes recommendations on how to minimise the bias and distortions that may result from these mechanisms. One of the recommendations is to have a strict interview protocol with detailed interviewer instructions regarding appropriate and inappropriate questions and responses, a recommendation that follows from the observation that interviewers may easily spoil the validity of the data by posing suggestive questions or by failing to ask questions because they draw premature conclusions. Remarkably, this recommendation seems to contrast with the tendency in offender-based research to have the interview proceed informally – in the style of a normal conversation – in order to make the interviewed person feel at ease and 'open up'.

In the third chapter, *Scott Jacques* and *Richard Wright* extend the theory of offender-based method that they started to develop in earlier work. In that work, they discussed the hypothesised effects of relational distance between researcher and research subject on the amount of participation, the required remuneration and the quantity and quality of information provided (Jacques and Wright 2008). In their contribution to this volume,

Jacques and Wright use Donald Black's pure sociology approach to argue that offenders to whom more law has been applied (in particular institutionalised offenders) participate more in research, require less remuneration and provide lower quantity and quality of information than offenders to whom less law has been applied (in this case non-institutionalised offenders).

The core issue in the three chapters in Part 2, 'Prison settings', is how the prison setting influences various aspects of offender-based research. Of particular concern is the validity of findings that are obtained by interviewing offenders about their offending behaviour outside prison.

In strong defence of the prison interviews, *Heith Copes* and *Andy Hochstetler* offer counterarguments to Jacques and Wright's hypothesis that institutionalised offenders provide lower quantity and quality of information than those who are non-institutionalised. Acknowledging the possible selectivity of the population of detained offenders, their plea in favour of prison interviews is not just an opinion but is based on a comprehensive argument backed up by a considerable body of literature that seems to underline the advantages of conducting offender-based research in prisons or other closed institutions.

Implicitly supporting this point of view, *Carlo Morselli* and *Pierre Tremblay* report on their research on criminal achievement among offenders incarcerated in Canadian penitentiaries. They provide a detailed account of how they and their interview team managed to set up the research in the penitentiaries and learned practical methods of obtaining cooperation and trust from the respondents. The study's main dependent variable was a highly quantifiable variable: self-reported criminal earnings before incarceration. Arguably, criminal earnings is a challenging variable to measure, one that is potentially fraught with the risks that Elffers describes as misinformation, misunderstanding and misleading. Morselli and Tremblay demonstrate how the consistency of such a complex measure can be successfully assessed in various ways. They conclude that the measurement of criminal achievement among prisoners is a tractable and promising approach. It even yielded positive reactions from the respondents, in part because the form and content of the questionnaires (crime inventory, calendar, accounting of legitimate and criminal earnings) surprised and intrigued many of them.

In the concluding chapter of Part 2, *Fiona Brookman* provides an exceptionally complete overview, not only of the challenges associated with offender-based research in prison and how they may be handled, but also of how interview data obtained in this way might be enhanced with other forms of information or insight. She addresses the ways in which written documents (police files, newspaper reports), accounts of other people (victims, witnesses, co-offenders, family), group interviews, follow-up interviews and visual data (photographs and CCTV footage) can be used to assess the validity and enhance the insights gained from a

'standard' interview. In doing so, she not only provides many examples of how these enhancements have been utilised in offender-based research and in other contexts, she also warns of relying too heavily on each of these triangulation methods.

Learning about crime from criminals does not only take place in the setting of an interview. The three chapters in Part 3, 'Field settings', are written by researchers, all three anthropologists, who have conducted offender-based research by going out into the streets to talk to offenders and observe them in their own environment. Field settings provide many opportunities for learning about crime in more diverse ways and more directly than through the verbal accounts of the offenders themselves.

The possibility of triangulation – the validation of findings by using multiple sources of information or multiple methods to obtain or analyse them – is considered one of the main advantages of ethnographic fieldwork. In the opening chapter of this part, *Marie Rosenkrantz Lindegaard* makes an argument in favour not only of multiple methods but in favour of multiple triangulations. She distinguishes between triangulation of methods (whereby the same phenomenon is studied by multiple methods), actor triangulation (multiple persons give an account of the same events) and triangulation of context (the same person is observed in various geographical places and social contexts). Her chapter is a comprehensive account of how she used these three triangulations in her ethnographic research among young men in South Africa, in which she explored how they, as a perpetrator or as a victim, got involved in violence or managed to evade involvement.

In the second chapter, *Frank van Gemert* makes a plea for ethnography. One of his observations is that in ethnography researchers are sometimes initially fooled and told lies, but that such lies seldom survive repeated observation. As a consequence, repeated measurement of the same phenomena is one of the pillars of ethnographic validity claims, besides triangulation to multiple sources and continuous reflections of the researcher. In line with this argument, van Gemert argues that the single-shot interview is not always the most effective way to obtain reliable and truthful information from offenders.

In the third chapter of this part, *Ric Curtis* explores how existing methods can help to ascertain validity in ethnographic fieldwork among hard-to-reach and hidden populations. This includes locating eligible respondents, recruiting them into research, eliciting accurate and credible information from them, and assessing the veracity of their accounts. Where Van Gemert's emphasis on repeated measurement and triangulation of sources presupposes a researcher who is sufficiently embedded in the community and has gone through a lengthy period of gaining acceptance, Curtis discusses methods of verification that are useful when triangulation is not feasible. Many of these methods reconstruct part of the social networks among the population studied, sometimes using informa-

tion gained through the recruitment process, whereby respondents recruit other eligible research participants for their network. Although Curtis provides more examples of clear-cut lying and deceit than most other contributors do, his conclusion is remarkably optimistic: there are various ways to overcome problems of validity, and it is often our own preconceived ideas about what is possible that is the biggest impediment to what we want.

Offender-based research does not take place in a social vacuum. It involves researchers and respondents (and often also other persons such as prison warders or field recruiters) who often have very different social and cultural backgrounds. As a consequence, the issues of gender, social class and ethnicity that shape our interactions in daily life also play a role in the interactions between the participants in offender-based research. In passing, Morselli and Tremblay noted the reactions of respondents to their mixed-gender student interviewer team.

Offender-based researchers have to deal practically with issues of gender, social class and ethnicity. Not only must they take into account that their own gender, class and ethnicity (and those of their co-workers) may work in favour or against their recruitment attempts, they must also be aware of how the validity of their findings may be endangered by the biases caused by gender, class and ethnic differences or preoccupations. The three chapters in Part 4, 'Social categories of offenders and researchers', address the roles of gender, class and ethnicity in offender-based research.

Jody Miller reflects on the various ways in which the gender of the interviewer and the person interviewed may influence the style, length and content of interviews with offenders, very often in combination with other aspects of both persons' social positions, such as class, age and ethnicity. Although she remains profoundly skeptical about the extent to which interviews provide access to unmediated 'truth' about experiences, actions and motives, her analysis clearly shows that paying attention to the role of gender in interviews can reveal a great deal about how individuals construct accounts of their offending and about the contexts and meanings of offending. Drawing from three of her major studies, including both male and female offenders and male and female interviewers, she argues that interview-based research on offending is enhanced when research teams are diverse and when this diversity is taken into account when the data is analysed.

While the social positions of interviewer and interviewee without doubt affect the content of interviews, they can also strongly influence the recruitment process. This is clearly demonstrated in the contribution by *Sheldon X. Zhang*. It shows how he, as a researcher of Chinese descent, successfully gained and maintained access to Chinese human smuggling groups by making use of the large-role that social networks play in the Chinese community, both in the United States and in China. Ethnic and

cultural proximity can help to gain trust. The networks not only facilitated recruitment, they also helped to validate data from different sources.

Of the various sources of information on crime that we have access to, the autobiography, is probably the most curious and maybe also the most suspect. Against all odds, *Neal Shover* and *Ben W. Hunter* build their arguments on autobiographies of criminals or former criminals, and with remarkable results. Is there any reason to rely on the trustworthiness of the autobiography? If only because the writer has an obvious interest in presenting himself or herself positively, and enough time and opportunity to create a plausible story, autobiographies are usually taken with a grain of salt. But Shover and Hunter do not analyse the autobiography as a factual account of criminal behaviour. They read it as an apology, and an apology provides an interesting view on the thinking of the white-collar criminal. The authors' words echo Shaw's words that 'rationalizations, fabrications, prejudices, exaggerations are quite as valuable as objective descriptions, provided, of course, that these reactions be properly identified and classified'. An interesting observation is that white-collar criminals actually are good sources of information on white-collar crimes, precisely because they often lack a sense of guilt. They are not at all reluctant to talk about what they did and how they did it, because they do not see it as wrong. Consequently, those who interview white-collar criminals should be prepared to conform their vocabulary to the frames of their respondents, and avoid using words like 'offending', 'crime' and 'criminal'.

The chapters in Part 5, 'Learning about the act', have in common their strong focus on the act of offending itself. This interest includes observable behaviour, but certainly does not imply a narrow focus on it. Indeed, observable behaviour is something that can be registered and is often witnessed by victims or bystanders, or which can be derived from evidence on the scene. On the other hand, what goes on in the minds of offenders when they plan their act, when they choose their targets and when they make numerous other choices before, during and after the event is much more relevant to understanding the act of offending than the simple description of acts. Many offender-based researchers are essentially interested in offenders as experts in offending, and their task is to learn from the experts. Because many experts rely on automated routines and judgments, the art of learning from offenders is the art of learning from experts.

In the opening chapter of this part, *Claire Nee* reviews the offender-based literature on burglary, showing that a considerable amount of triangulated evidence has emerged over past decades on how the act of burglary is committed, and arguing that together these studies exemplify Glaser and Strauss's grounded theory, albeit realised not within a single study but within a series of subsequent studies, each one building on the results of prior studies. Nee describes a new method in which committing

a burglary can be simulated with a computer program. The program is used to track the movements and choices of respondents inside burgled houses. This method, more than did prior methods, comes close to watching a real burglary in progress.

In an attempt to reveal information about offenders' spatial cognition and decision-making that would be difficult to elicit otherwise, *Lucía Summers*, *Shane D. Johnson* and *George F. Rengert* used two types of mapping tasks in offender interview. For various reasons, sketch mapping tasks, in which subjects are asked to draw maps that represent their knowledge of their physical environment, proved to be less useful than cartographic maps, which are actual topographical maps of a specific geographical area. Besides providing information on offenders' spatial cognitions, the mapping tasks also enhanced the subjects' ability to articulate their spatial decision-making. In line with Nee's description of current developments in the use of computer technology, the authors suggest that mapping tasks in offender interviews be extended to include Google Earth and other spatially informed technologies.

Sketch mapping tasks (or mental maps) were also used by *Veronika A. Polišenská* in her research among burglars. She provides a comprehensive discussion of the possibilities and limitations of mental maps in general and in offender-based research in particular. One of the interesting aspects of her research among Czech burglars is the distinction between detailed local sketch maps and schematic travel maps. The first depict the burglar's knowledge of a specific local situation and are used by burglars who target properties in a limited area (possibly near their own residence); the latter resemble travel plans that link origins, destinations and major transit stops, and are typically drawn by burglars whose journey-to-crime is associated with extended travel beyond the boundaries of their city or town of residence. In addition to providing insights in how we can learn about concrete offending behaviour in offender-based research, Polišenská's chapter is also very useful in broadening our understanding of the conditions of offender-based research in prison in the Czech Republic.

In the last contribution to this part 'Learning about the act', *Birgit Zetinigg* and *Matthias Gaderer* describe their research among incarcerated bank robbers. They validated the robbers' accounts of their robberies not only with official files, but also with newspaper clippings describing these robberies, and with the results of site visits, where they talked to bank managers and clerks who witnessed the robbery, and where they took photos inside and outside the bank branch to record the physical characteristics of the site.

These five parts of the book, taken together, give a comprehensive overview of the challenges and possible solutions to issues of validity in offender-based research. As new issues are raised and new challenges are identified, the contributions will stimulate discussion about future directions in offender-based research. Most importantly, the accounts of the

authors who have written this book show that offender-based research is a thriving field where exciting developments are taking place.

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