

REVIEW

OFFENDERS ON OFFENDING: LEARNING ABOUT CRIME FROM CRIMINALS. Edited by WIM BERNASCO
(Cullompton: Willan, 2010, 322pp. £25.00)

Criminal activities are some of the most difficult areas to collect data about due to their covert nature and relative high risk. There are no obvious benefits for those concerned in advancing academia by 'exposing their practices to the pauperised milksop gaze of an academic' (Hobbs 1995: 2). Consequently, it becomes tempting for the researcher to limit themselves to data from official and media sources, thereby providing a skewed approach to the topic and often being trapped in 'the blindness of those in authority and their perspective' (Manning 2006: 374). In this context, qualitative criminological research with offenders has been situated *comparatively* less and less at the core of criminological research. As such, the book under review entitled *Offender on Offending: Learning about Crime from Criminals* is a valuable addition to the literature.

The book is the product of a three-day workshop held in October 2008 at the Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement (NSCR). By reading the title of the book, one assumes that the book is about offenders talking about crime. However, the title is slightly misleading, since it is criminologists who talk about research with criminals rather than offenders talking about offending. The aim is then explicitly mentioned in the preface, where the editor, Wim Bernasco, suggests that '[t]his book is about the methodology of offender-based research' (p. xxi).

Apart from the Foreword written by Michael Tonry and the preface, the collection is structured around five main parts. Part One (Chapters One, Two and Three) is entitled 'Setting the Stage'. In Chapter One, Wim Bernasco introduces the volume to the reader and offers a brief account of the 15 chapters that follow. Although to a varying extent and level of ambition, all chapters deal with a number of central issues, such as how researchers can obtain information about criminal activities from offenders, how offenders can be motivated to take part in a research study and offer valid accounts as well as what the researchers can do to validate accounts. In Chapter Two, Henk Elffers reviews three sets of issues that heavily affect the validity of offender accounts: misinformation-related problems (the offender being uninformed, or simply not remembering); misunderstanding between offender and researcher; and the offender intentionally misleading the researcher. At the end of the chapter, the author briefly identifies ways of dealing with these validity threats. In Chapter Three, Scott Jacques and Richard Wright attempt at extending the theory of offender-based research based on the perspective of pure sociology. Here, the authors suggest that, as more law is applied to offenders, the possibility of those offenders being recruited to a study increases; however, this comes with a decrease in the quality of data obtained from them.

Part Two (Chapters Four, Five and Six) is entitled 'Prison Settings'. Chapter Four, by Heith Copes and Andy Hochstetler, focuses on the strengths and limitations of interviews with imprisoned offenders and (contrary to Jacques and Wright) offer a very favourable account of this type of interviews. In Chapter Five, Carlo Morselli and Pierre

Tremblay offer an account of their study on the criminal earnings of incarcerated offenders in Canada (prior to their imprisonment) and describe how they managed to secure the cooperation and trust of their participants, and, importantly, the strategies they adopted towards validating their estimations. In Chapter Six, Fiona Brookman considers the challenges associated with offender interviews in prisons and offers a strategy of methodological triangulation materializing through the use of other sources such as official documents, other ‘key’ individuals, relatives and friends, and visual data, amongst others.

Part Three (Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine) is entitled ‘Field Settings’. In Chapter Seven, Marie Rosenkrantz Lindegaard offers an account of her use of triangulation of methods, actor triangulation, and context triangulation in her ethnographic study of South African youngsters in and out of a juvenile correctional facility. By using the case of a youngster who committed a murder, the author argues that multiple triangulations are highly effective in enhancing the validity of findings. In a similar vein, in Chapter Eight, Frank van Gemert uses examples from his ethnographic research with Moroccan youth in the city of Rotterdam and suggests that repeated measurement of and continuous reflection upon phenomena are integral to the process of validating data. Finally, in this section, Ric Curtis (Chapter Nine), through the provision of examples from his own research, looks into how existing methods can facilitate a piece of research and enhance validity of findings deriving from ethnographic research with ‘hidden’ populations.

Part Four (Chapters Ten, Eleven and Twelve) is entitled ‘Social Categories of Offenders and Researchers’. Chapter Ten, by Jody Miller, focuses on the impact of gender when conducting offender-based interviewing on the basis of three studies that the author conducted/participated in—studies that involved male and female offenders as well as male and female interviewers. In Chapter Eleven, Sheldon Zhang provides an account of the process involved in his field research with Chinese human smugglers, highlights the role of informal social networks and deals with the methodological limitations of his research as well as participant protection issues. In Chapter Twelve, Neal Shover and Ben Hunter focus on white-collar criminals. On the basis of autobiographical accounts by 40 white-collar criminals, they argue that this hard-to-reach group of offenders are a good source of information exactly because they do not view their offending as ‘crime’ or ‘wrong’.

Part Five (Chapters Thirteen, Fourteen, Fifteen and Sixteen) is entitled ‘Learning about the Act’. Chapter Thirteen, by Claire Nee, reviews the grounded approach in offender-based research, which has been used in research on residential burglary, and looks at triangulating methods as a way of increasing validity of accounts. The chapter also describes—amongst others—an innovative method that involves the commission of burglary being simulated with a computer program. In Chapter Fourteen, Lucía Summers, Shane Johnson and George Rengert offer a discussion of the use of cartographic and sketch maps as data-gathering instruments in offender interviews concerned with the offenders’ spatial decision making. Although there are methodological problems linked to the use of maps, the authors contend that the use of maps have facilitated their understanding of issues pertaining their research. In Chapter Fifteen, Veronika Polišenká, based on her research with burglars in the Czech Republic, focuses on the dynamics of interviewing offenders in a penitentiary environment. She also focuses on the use of mental maps as a method of acquiring accounts and information from offenders, as well as their strengths and limitations. Finally, Birgitt Zetinigg and Matthias

Gaderer, in Chapter Sixteen, look into and reflect upon issues associated with validating offender accounts in the context of a study with imprisoned bank robbers in Austria.

This rudimentary presentation of the chapters in this review does not, of course, do justice to their richness. In my opinion, this is an extremely interesting and teeming book, with absorbing methodological details, which, at points, transmits the excitement that offender-based research generates. It is a very much alive text in which the authors, coming from or researching a variety of contexts (including Austria, the Czech Republic and the criminologically ‘exotic’ Sri Lanka), share their extensive knowledge on the topic as well as their own experiences and stories—stories about tax fraudsters, incarcerated violent offenders, urban minority youth, Chinese human smugglers, white-collar criminals, etc. Some chapters are characterized by a distinctive and artful mix of formality and informality, and one can also observe that a few chapters complement (rather than ‘undermine’) one another, even when they provide mildly or strongly opposing accounts.

The book re-emphasizes aspects of the criminologists’ work: new forms of communication, new definitions of acceptable behaviour and social roles. In addition, it highlights the role personal and social variables, and cultural capitals play in the construction of social relations between the researcher and the researched, and consequently affect the research process as a whole. Parts of the book also highlight the fact that, despite criminals being apparently a ‘hard-to-reach’ segment of the population, they may be much more approachable (often depending on ‘accident’, ‘luck’ or ‘chance’) and much less ‘dangerous’ than people may think. The book, contrary to much misunderstanding, can also act as a proof that qualitative researchers working with offenders are indeed concerned with validity-related issues just like colleagues working from a quantitative perspective.

For reasons of balance, primarily, it would have been beneficial if the collection involved more chapters on researching active (or retired) offenders outside institutions and in their ‘natural habitat’ (Polsky 1967: 123). Although the third part of the collection is entitled ‘Field Settings’, much of it is set in prison. In addition, many of the accounts in other parts are based on research with incarcerated offenders.

Offender on Offending: Learning about Crime from Criminals offers a very comprehensive account of the possibilities, problems and solutions that exist in the context of conducting qualitative research with offenders. It is an important collection full of learning and latent common sense—a work that blows open debates on philosophical and practical aspects of research, and is a must-have to every fervent researcher conducting this kind of research, postgraduate students, as well as social research methods teachers. Readers who are not acquainted with relevant research-related literature will find the references section of every chapter a little treasure. All these groups will find it a compulsively readable work, which constantly pushes for re-assessment of ideas, and which highlights why the bulk of criminological research needs to return ‘back to basics’ and re-embrace the offender as the protagonist in the theatre of ‘crime’ and deviance. Qualitative offender-based research is certainly neither ‘better’ nor ‘worse’ than quantitative research. However, and as this volume exhumes, a sense of enthusiasm appears to be an integral part of qualitative offender-based research.

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REFERENCES

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