

AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY ON DESISTANCE FROM CRIME

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In 1999, as a 24 year old assembly line welder in eastern Nebraska and a new father, I found myself in the perfect situation for unrealized trouble. For a bored energetic young man, Nebraska, a sparsely populated state of flat cattle pastures and few buildings over two stories high, offered few outlets for entertainment or expenditure of excess energy. As a child and teen I was quite precocious, constantly reading books, getting high grades in honors courses in secondary school, and participating in gifted student programs. Still, by the time I was 24, I had failed out of college three times, and had a difficult time attaining good grades, while yet still managing to get A's in the sociology courses I liked.

I had, by then, developed a large substance abuse problem along the way. Also, by this point, I had attended several drug and alcohol rehabilitation treatments, although the treatments were not successful. Thus, I was working at two low paying jobs, while at the same time paying child support to my estranged son's mother, and found it quite hard to make financial ends meet.

While working at one of the jobs, some co-workers approached me about earning some extra money by "moving" some drugs for them. At the time, this seemed like a good opportunity for me to create some sorely needed additional income. Soon I was moving ever-increasing quantities of drugs. In 2001 at the age of 26, I caught the attention of the Federal government. Even though I was never caught with any drugs, several individuals whom I associated with in the drug trade were caught with large amounts of drugs. Under threat of long prison sentences, they soon became "federal witnesses" essentially giving the federal government information about me in exchange for substantial reductions of their own legal penalties. This information was used to generate a "conspiracy to distribute cocaine and methamphetamines" federal indictment against me.

In the United States, there are 50 state criminal justice systems and courts, and one federal criminal justice system with its own respective courts, each with its own set of legal statutes

and prisons. Federal statutes are generally harsher than state laws, and the courts hand out longer sentences with less time off for good behavior. Federal courts generally focus on drug crimes that involve transportation across state and/or international borders, and all of the drug crimes I was indicted for and qualified for this category.

Off I Go to Prison

After sitting in federal holding cellblocks for ten months while going to court, I finally received a sentence of two years in prison, three months in a federal halfway house, four years of supervised release, and 300 hundred hours of community service for a first time non-violent offense. During the ten month court process, I was transferred to 13 different federal holding facilities, moving from facility to facility for reasons unknown. Some of these lockups were county jails, and smaller state facilities that the federal government contracted out to in order to hold the massive over-flow of federal inmates, and others were private “for profit” prisons. The massive over-flow is due to the war on drugs (Austin et al., 2001) within the United States, which has played an integral role in generating the largest prison population in the world (Rose et al., 2010).

Once the courts handed me my sentence, I was transferred by the Federal Bureau of Prison’s [FBOP] own airline (jumbo jets) to the federal diagnostics and evaluation center in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. This facility holds several thousand inmates, and is unique in that the inmates walk directly off the jet, and into the prison via a skywalk. I was housed in what is called ‘administrative population’ which means that inmates from all security classifications, from minimum to maximum, are housed together, yet at no time did I ever feel I was in danger or threatened. From this facility, my case was evaluated, and because I was a first time non-violent offender, I was assigned a minimum-security status. Thus, I was sent to a minimum-security prison in Yankton, South Dakota. Yankton Federal Prison Camp (FPC) Yankton is an all male facility designed to hold around 400 prisoners. Yet, at the time I arrived at FPC Yankton, the prison was holding over 600 inmates due to prison overcrowding issues generated from the war on drugs. Rooms designed for 4 men were often crammed with six to eight men.

From Prison to University

Fourteen months later, in November of 2003, I was released from FPC Yankton and returned to Nebraska. While in prison, I had a lot of time to reflect on the direction my life was going and decided that my best option for success and desistance from crime upon release was to attend to my education. Consequently, I had taken college correspondence courses via mail while in prison, and had sent my application to the University of Nebraska, hoping to attend classes and finish my Bachelor's degree when I was released. My application was accepted, and in January of 2004, I returned to college, with the goal of completing my initial degree in sociology.

By December of 2005, I had navigated through two years of coursework, finishing my Bachelor's degree, and performed quite well academically. I caught the attention of some of the professors in the Sociology Department who strongly recommended that I apply for graduate school in sociology. I took their advice, and was accepted into the University of Nebraska's sociology graduate program a year later. Also, towards the end of my Bachelor's degree studies I had begun to develop a strong interest in crime and deviance research, and in early 2005, I presented at a large regional sociology conference in Minneapolis, and made contact with the Convict Criminology [CC] Group (Richards and Ross 2001; Ross and Richards, 2003).

To explain further, Convict Criminology is group of criminologists who share the common bond of past incarceration, and/or a strong interest in critical, progressive, reform based criminological research and criminal justice policy. The CC Group strongly believes in the power of mentorship, and provided me with guidance and advice throughout the course of my graduate career. The CC Group also places a heavy emphasis on research collaboration amongst members. The focus being the production of viable, relevant scholarship and publications, which is a vital to the furthering of CC's mission of creating an academic space for formerly incarcerated academics' voices to be heard, critically examining the massive social inequalities present in the current American criminal justice system, and formulating progressive/rehabilitative correctional policy (see Jones et al., 2009; Richards and Lenza, 2012).

My coursework for my Masters degree began in the Fall semester of 2007. When I had been in graduate school for a couple of years, and more fully understood how the academic world operated, I myself began to mentor the newer members of the CC Group, providing advice and encouragement in regards to navigating graduate school applications, how to properly approach the academy in regards to securing future employment, and how increase our marketability as formerly incarcerated academics.

I am currently a PhD candidate and am writing my dissertation. I expect to finish my PhD in May of 2013. During the course of my graduate career I have had the opportunity to travel extensively to conferences, complete study abroad courses, and to conduct research. In June of 2010, The Convict Criminology Group, in collaboration with KRIS of Finland, and Tampere University, organized the International Scientific Conference on Global Perspectives on Re-entry, at Tampere, Finland (see Ekunwe and Jones, 2010). In the summers of 2009 and 2011 I traveled to Scandinavia, spending time in Sweden and Denmark, and was allowed to visit a Swedish halfway house, and make contact with KRIS, a Swedish advocacy group for formerly incarcerated people that now has many international locations. Through these travels, I was able to make contacts with formerly incarcerated people who would lend their expertise to my dissertation research, and gain a valuable cross-national perspective on more progressive forms of criminal justice policy.

Desistance from Crime

After over eleven years of desistance from criminally deviant behavior, I can place emphasis on several factors that helped to refocus my priorities on pro-social activities. The first factor being the educational process, which functioned to channel my creative abilities and enthusiasm towards learning (abilities that I had always possessed, yet had been unused for many years) into a tangible goal. A college campus is one of the safest places for a person recently released from prison to be, as they are removed from their pre-incarceration environment, which generally lowers their risk for recidivism (Kubrin and Stewart 2006).

The second factor was the active support and mentorship the CC Group provided. Being a part of this group that is striving to overcome discrimination and the prevalent societal prejudice against formerly incarcerated people, a bias that is often encouraged in status-quo

American society, has had a powerful and motivating effect on my academic journey. To have the opportunity to see other CC members attain prestigious university posts, produce quality research, and present it at academic conferences provides a sense of hope to a struggling future academic. This hope is especially necessary to new members of the CC group when they have recently experienced the degradation of the American correctional system, and who often feel that they have few if any options available to them when immediately released from prison. A final factor that I will mention will rely on the life course theoretical model of crime proposed by Sampson and Laub (2005) which proposes that as individuals age, they are generally less likely to commit crime, thus a process of aging out of criminal behavior with the likelihood of recidivism eventually decreasing to levels of individuals without a criminal conviction.

In the case of my auto-ethnographic discussion, I would like to place the majority of emphasis on the former two desistance factors and the least emphasis on the latter. Education's ability to channel an individual's focus and energy towards positive life-goals, along with the mentorship, guidance, and academic foundation provided by the CC Group have expedited the process of desistance from criminal behavior by granting me access to a positive opportunity structure, and the motivation to utilize the positive opportunities.

Conclusion

My life experiences within academia and as a formerly incarcerated individual have created an opportunity for me to create pro-social change within the criminal justice system, and to add a new perspective to criminological scholarship. As a PhD within the sociological discipline with an emphasis on criminology, I possess the classical training and knowledge of my academic field yet I have also acquired the unique perspective of a former insider within the criminal justice system. I have experienced firsthand, the arrest process, court procedures, jails, holding facilities, and the daily life and ordeals of a prisoner within an American federal prison, and this experience provides me with insight into the actual routine of prison life, how prisoners construct reality behind the walls, how the pathway from prison to society operates, and a wealth of resources which I can apply to dynamic academic research. Such 'insider' experiences allow me to shed light on perspectives and issues that many relatively sheltered criminologists may not otherwise recognize.

Ex-convict academics who possess insider perspectives into the criminal justice system are able to, 'merge their past with their present and provide a provocative approach to the academic study of criminology, criminal justice, and corrections' (Richards and Ross, 2001: 181). Academia has provided me with the opportunity to mature and grow as both a productive individual and as a scholar, yet I still recall the lessons of the prison. I use such insight and experiences to further intelligent discussion and inform progressive criminal justice policy and creative criminological research within my profession. Through the journey from corrections to academia, I have experienced a process of maturation into a scholar and an informed citizen who is able to serve society in a positive fashion. Furthering my education has provided my life with the intellectual discipline to better understand how individual problems are often reflective of larger social structures (Mills, 1959). Once this is understood, it is difficult, if not impossible to return to an individualistic perspective of life. As such, through education, knowledge, and maturation, I have become a very different person.

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