

Fifth CRIMVOL virtual working paper session: 14th January 2021

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About CRIMVOL: The International Criminal Justice Voluntary Sector Research Network

CRIMVOL is an international, multidisciplinary criminal justice voluntary sector research network for academics, practitioners, and policymakers. The network fills an important gap in scholarship and infrastructure: the criminal justice voluntary sector is more topical than ever before, but has not received academic attention commensurate with its importance anywhere in the world. The network is chaired by Dr Philippa Tomczak (Senior Research Fellow, University of Nottingham, Author of *The Penal Voluntary Sector*). CRIMVOL was established with the generous support of the British Academy (Rising Star Engagement Award) and the Socio-Legal Studies Association (Seminar Competition). A core focus is the development of specialist early career researchers and scholar-activist work.

Fifth 'virtual' working paper session

CRIMVOL hosted their fifth virtual event on Thursday 14th January 2021 with a presentation from [Ella Simpson](#), University of Bath Spa, England, followed by discussion. After the paper, [Samantha McAleese](#), PhD candidate, Carleton University, Canada led a career development session on coalition building and activism.



PART ONE: “Outsiders on the Inside: What can the stories of creative writing practitioners working in prisons tell us about the less explored dimensions of the penal voluntary sector?”

Ella presented a fascinating summary of her research: what drives creative writer practitioners in a criminal justice setting, and how they perceive themselves as outsiders. Her emphasis on methodology using deliberately crafted written stories to avoid distorting research participants' voices resonated with all the members of CRIMVOL present. The discussion afterwards involved three thought provoking questions about i) the value of narratives in evaluation ii) other renegades in the criminal justice voluntary sector and iii) the danger of producing more 'outsiderness' through research. In a convivial atmosphere, courtesy of Microsoft Teams, we discussed amongst other things the parallels between Ella's presentation and Samantha's career development session: mutual support. In the middle of it all, UK members empathised with those in Ontario, as they were alerted to another “stay at home order”.

Background

Ella explained that when she started her PhD, she was intent on proving the value of imparting the skills of creative writing in a prison setting. However, as soon as she embarked on her research journey, she discovered that it was the storytelling and relationships between the practitioners and prisoners that was key. But to whom? To the Prisoner? To the Practitioner? Or Both? She was also acutely aware that the radicalism and anarchism that had characterised research on the values of creative writing in the late 1980s, had been tamed by a focus evaluation and its jargon. She wanted to stir things up....

Research Questions

- *How do creative writing practitioners construct their intentions, motivations and journeys into prison through the stories they craft?*
- *What can these narratives tell us about the work that practitioners do with prisoners?*

Methodology and Analysis

Ella went on to describe her methodology and its benefits. She was influenced by Presser's (2009) “constitutive view of the narrative” which offered more proximity to an authentic and complete story, than the hermeneutics involved in the process of oral interviewing and extracting snippets from transcripts. Ella then demonstrated how she avoided her own impact on the data through the use of an eightframe storyboard. Her only instruction to her research participants was that the last frame had to contain ‘the first day in prison’. Ella went on to discuss the value of narratology to help her excavate “the bare bones of the plot” and the analytical tools of Greimas (1966), to pull out motivations, emotions and intentions. Ella then showed us how she used “fabula content analysis” to identify types of alterity, and ‘actantial analysis’ to explore why people practice creative writing in prison e.g. ambitions and perceptions on who benefits.

Results

Through these methods and analysis, Ella identified practitioners and their ambitions/motivations, three types of alterity and three types of narrative. This led to the idea that prisoners and practitioners

- ... share a sense of alterity (e.g. Becker, 1963, Maruna, 2001)
- ...don't want to be in prison (escape and transgression)
- ...resist authority.

Expanding on these themes, Ella explained how prisoners and practitioners share mutual understanding on issues pertaining to "outsider status", for example, employment practices. Practitioners and prisoners do not want to be in prison. They desire to "escape from personal circumstances" which raises the question why practitioners choose to "work in the antithesis of escape?" Practitioners also resisted authority overtly or through personal defiance. Ella explained this in terms of how some participants with previous experience of employment in the CJS had returned to challenge the system as creative practitioners.

Discussion

Ella wanted us to ponder three final questions during the discussion session and beyond.

- 1) Can narrative research add value to evaluation?
- 2) Are creative practitioners the only outsiders on the inside – or are there more renegades working in the PVS?
- 3) Did I shoot myself in the foot – will my research findings serve to place more creative practitioners as outsiders on the outside?

The feedback mainly focused on the first question, where the answer was a resounding YES. Many particularly appreciated the emphasis on "letting people craft" to reduce the interpreting role of the researcher, and the richness of data elicited through a "storyline". One shared their experience as a court supporter and the contradiction between their presence in court in the first place (symbolising resistance to a punitive system for victims and witnesses), and the fact that the role is funded primarily by the state. Finally, it was suggested that motivation might be a key avenue to explore, especially in relation to studies on the history of philanthropy, discursive links with benevolence, and this new emphasis on mutual aid.

We thank Ella so much especially for making us think more about the core role of creative writing in research, voluntary work and politics. We wish her all the success she deserves in her up and coming viva, and look forward to reading her future publications.

PART TWO: Career development session on coalition building and activism.

In our career development session, Samantha led a fascinating discussion based on her experience with CAMS, Ottawa “The Coalition against Active Surveillance” <https://cams-ottawa.ca>, which “hopes to draw attention to our concerns about increasing surveillance in Ottawa, specifically in neighbourhoods that are already overpoliced. These policing and surveillance efforts typically target areas that are occupied by a majority of people of colour, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, and/or other marginalized groups.” Sam shared her experience about how public events attracting politicians, business owners and academics had “nailed the coffin” for plans to increase CCTV surveillance.

However, the key theme of her talk was the success achieved by activists attending and representing their views at board meetings to oppose police budgets, especially given the context of police violence against black, indigenous and unhoused members of the community. *Sam discussed her role in demystifying the process of speaking at these events, particularly through supporting people develop skills in presentation writing, using evidence and public speaking.* This was particularly important where participants only had five minutes in board meetings to express themselves.

Samantha partially attributed the success of coalition groups to their ability to mobilise resources at a moment’s notice. She also remarked how coalitions supported voluntary practitioners as anonymity meant “no-one had to be the face of the movement.” Successful mutual aid groups and collective work involves members “leaving their ego at the door” and recognising that organising takes commitment with little credit. But Samantha focused on the positive gains: how her experience informed her analysis, writing and teaching.

The discussion centred around the importance of supporting others to support themselves, through their own voice, e.g. through prisoner “User Councils”. We also explored the importance of helping people “enter spaces where they were previously excluded”. Many of us could identify with this, and how power relations are constructed through material and embodied, unfamiliarity and restrictions (e.g. doors and buzzers). Samantha remarked how some speakers benefited from participating in meetings online, where they felt more comfortable calling officials out, when they weren’t getting enough attention.

We are really grateful to Samantha for leading the discussion. Our career development sessions rely on individuals sharing very personal views and identities, and this is so key to the success of our group.