



Student motivations for studying criminology: A narrative inquiry

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journals.sagepub.com/home/crj**Julie Trebilcock** 

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Abstract

The number of students studying criminology at university has significantly increased. Yet, criminology students have been all but ignored in research, despite being key stakeholders and ambassadors in the criminological enterprise. Drawing on the analysis of 12 in-depth interviews, we explore why students are motivated to study criminology and how these motivations are linked to their past experiences and future aspirations. Using a narrative inquiry, three types of stories emerged through our analysis: stories about (1) building on existing interests, (2) understanding the ‘self’, and (3) securing ‘justice’ and ‘helping’ others. The stories students tell about their exposure to ‘crime’ help motivate their decision to study criminology, while their engagement with the discipline, enables them to make sense of these previous experiences and of themselves.

Keywords

Biography, identities, narrative criminology, public criminology, study, university

Introduction

Around the world, the number of students studying criminology at university has significantly increased. In the United Kingdom alone, more than 100 universities now offer over 800 undergraduate programmes involving criminology (Levi, 2017). While

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criminologists have long reflected on the history of the discipline (e.g. Triplett, 2018), considered the work and identities of criminal justice practitioners (e.g. Mawby and Worrall, 2013), and deliberated about what criminology *is*, and *is for* (e.g. Bosworth and Hoyle, 2011), it is curious that almost no attention has been paid to our students. In *Public Criminology?* Loader and Sparks (2011: 4) advocate we ‘pay close attention to the diverse publics who are the users or would-be users of criminological “products” – as well as to the role criminology may have in constituting these publics’. Given students are our ‘first public’ (Burawoy, 2004: 1608) and can be viewed as both criminological ‘products’ and the ‘future’ of criminology, it is important we explore ‘criminology’s role in education and the ways student attitudes, experiences and careers become part of publicness’ (Walters, 2011: 733).

Drawing on the analysis of 12 in-depth interviews with UK students, this paper gives greater voice to our ‘first public’ by exploring why they may be motivated to study criminology. Criminologists have a responsibility to promote social justice (Richie, 2011) and in the context of significant growth in criminology degree programmes, populated by students who may aspire to work as practitioners, policy makers or academics, we need to consider what attracts people to our field. Criminal justice work can be difficult, ‘life changing, and psychologically challenging’ (Bailey and Ballard, 2015: 203) and our students may go on to be employed in positions of authority with vulnerable people (Bjerregaard and Lord, 2004). While not all students will work in related careers, criminology is still responsible for ‘producing a better informed and educated citizenry’ (Finckenaue, 2005: 419). Moreover, when students speak with those around them, they can serve as criminological ‘ambassadors’ by using their knowledge to dispel public myths about crime (Uggen and Inderbitzin, 2010).

A common reason given by students for studying criminology is because it is thought to be an ‘interesting’ subject (Walters and Kremser, 2016). While some speculate that students may be influenced by the ‘CSI effect’, ‘just as many are propelled into the field as a result of more altruistic and personal motivations’ (Belknap and Potter, 2007: 16) and because they want to ‘help people’ (Eren et al., 2019). Career-related motivations, increased media consumption, being good at similar subjects at school/college and deterred by more ‘scientific’ subjects, have also been identified as motivating factors (Barthe et al., 2013; Collica-Cox and Furst, 2019; Krimmel and Tartaro, 1999).

Most of the research undertaken in this area has been completed in the US and is quantitative in design. Given the focus and content of criminology degrees varies in different jurisdictions, with those in the United States often having evolved from academic based training for police officers (Sloan and Buchwalter, 2017), the applicability of these findings to UK students is unclear. Current research only provides a cursory understanding, and we know very little about what personal motivations students may have, or what they mean when they say criminology is ‘interesting’ or that they want to ‘help people’. Students are ‘carriers of a rich lived experience’ and we should develop a clearer understanding of ‘the historical and social contexts that have made them who they are’ (Burawoy, 2005: 9). Recognising this, we undertook a narrative inquiry and encouraged our students to tell the stories of their lives and how they came to study criminology.

Narratives, identities and actions

While criminologists have long been interested in stories, a narrative turn in criminology has recently been observed. Narrative criminologists began by trying to make sense of how narratives can inspire, motivate, sustain or prevent harmful actions (Presser and Sandberg, 2015a) which commonly involved looking at ‘offender’ stories (see Sandberg and Ugelvik (2016) for a review). As narrative criminology has developed, increasing engagement with other narrators can be observed, including criminal justice practitioners (Baker, 2019; Kurtz and Colburn, 2019; Offit, 2019; Ugelvik, 2016) and victims (Pemberton et al., 2018; Walklate et al., 2018). Narrative criminology is now a well-established theoretical and methodological approach that is interested with the constitutive effects of storytelling (Presser, 2009).

Narrative criminology ‘conceives of a world where experience is always storied and where action advances or realizes the story’ (Presser and Sandberg, 2015c: 287). Through narratives we interpret our lives, and these interpretations then help guide our response and the ‘morally significant things that we do’ (Presser, 2016: 140). Stories are an essential part of identity formation (Presser, 2016) and help reveal how people make connections between their past, present and future selves (Sandberg and Fleetwood, 2017). People commonly tell stories to ‘explore existential issues, construct identities and understand themselves and others’ (Sandberg, 2016: 155). Stories are therefore important resources for their ability to make acts available and attractive to the narrator (Sandberg, 2016). An important component of narratives is their ability, through a ‘selective reconstruction’ of the past, to help interpret previous experiences and shape future actions and responses (McAdams, 2011). Stories therefore do more than explain; they also serve to motivate action.

Study design and sample

In order to hear their stories, we conducted in-depth interviews with 12 undergraduate criminology students from one UK university. All participants were studying criminology as part of their degree, either through a single honours, dual honours, or major/minor route.¹ The sample consisted of eight female and four male students. Eight were final year students, while four were in their first year of study. Two participants were mature students (aged 26 and 30 years) and the remainder were aged between 18 and 21. Eleven participants identified as white British; one identified as Malaysian.

Participants were recruited via an email sent to all registered undergraduate criminology students (approximately 300) at the institution. Full information about the study was provided and those who were happy to give their informed consent were asked to email the research team to arrange an interview. While this presents limitations to the study design, we strived for rich, in-depth accounts from a small number of participants, rather than data from a representative sample.

All interviews were conducted on the university campus in a small private library by one of the authors (who for ethical reasons, was not involved with their current teaching). Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. Interviewees were asked five very general questions, beginning with: ‘Can you tell me how you came to study criminology?’

This was followed by broad questions about their life histories, their experiences of studying criminology, and their anticipated futures following graduation. Throughout the interview, participants were encouraged to talk at length about what they felt was important. Where possible this was done with minimal interruption from the interviewer using non-verbal cues (such as nodding) and encouraging phrases (such as: 'Can you tell me more about that?'). Where follow-up questions were used, themes were followed up in the narrated order in which they were given and using the same words and phrases as used by the respondent. This aimed to 'respect and retain the interviewee's meaning-frames', as recommended by Hollway and Jefferson (2013: 33). Our approach facilitated the collection of interviewee narratives with as minimal involvement from the researcher as possible.

Thematic narrative analysis

Narrative research can mean many different things to different researchers (Barkhuizen, 2011) and there is a multitude of analytical approaches (Fleetwood et al., 2019). While narrative criminology is primarily interested in what narratives *do* rather than what they *reveal* (Presser, 2016), narrative criminology is not wedded to any particular type of analysis. As a result of the limited understanding in this field of study (and our inexperience in narrative methods when we first began),² our initial aim was to consider the *content* of student narratives. Our analysis therefore started its life as thematic, based on the work of leading narrative scholar, Catherine Riessman (2008).

Thematic analysis can be useful for 'finding common elements across research participants and the events they report' (Riessman, 2008: 3). It is interested in the analysis of categories of events or experiences across the data, paying close attention to what is said, rather than with the form or structure of a narrative (Lieblich et al., 1998). Initially, each transcript was read several times by both researchers to gain familiarity. We then used NVivo, a qualitative software package, to group similar narratives together (i.e. student experiences of education, employment, families, local communities, crime and victimisation, and the consumption of crime media). Our analysis then sought to identify common themes across these different narrative categories. Several analysis meetings were held to ensure both researchers were identifying similar themes and to help achieve saturation.

While the thematic analysis of narratives has a 'minimal focus on *how* a narrative is spoken' (Riessman, 2008: 54, emphasis in original), as our analysis developed, it became clear that we also needed to attend to *how* participants explained their decision to study criminology (i.e. the form as well as the content of their stories). Our analysis therefore considers the purpose of the narratives, and what work they may 'do' for the participant. This reflects a concern for the ways in which students 'participate in the construction of their lives and social worlds' (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997: 14) and recognition that narratives 'cannot be constructed apart from cultural influence' (Dickinson and Wright, 2017: 693). Through our analysis we explore the significant spaces, people (or key characters), plotlines and other cultural elements that may have impacted on the stories that students told. Our analysis therefore attends to both the content and the production of meaning, to both *what* and *how* questions of telling (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997).

Findings

In line with previous research, almost every student told us they were motivated to study criminology because they thought it would be 'interesting'. However, many students appeared to have difficulty articulating where their interests in criminology may have come from, instead claiming things like criminology just 'fit' (Emily),³ 'linked' (Georgia) 'clicked' (Sophie) or 'appeals to me' (Hannah). Nevertheless, as the interviews continued, this 'fit' between individual students and criminology (and the importance of articulating it in this way) became more apparent. Once they began to tell some of the stories of their lives, students commonly made natural connections between key events in their lives and the subsequent action of studying criminology. Three types of stories emerged through our analysis: stories about (1) building on existing interests, (2) understanding the 'self', and (3) securing 'justice' and 'helping' others. Importantly, their exposure to 'crime' – whether this was to actual experiences of crime as offenders, victims or witnesses; to reported crime through the media; or through the consumption of fictional crime – all formed crucial parts of the narratives students told.

Stories about building on existing interests

Many students explained they had enjoyed (and/or received good marks in) similar subjects at A Level,⁴ with a few indicating they were deterred by the idea of studying more 'scientific' or 'statistical' subjects. A small number reported their interest in criminology stemmed from being 'academically curious' and wanting to achieve a greater mastery of the subject. Central to these narrative accounts were claims of accomplishment and descriptions of things the students felt they *had done* or *could do* well.

While many students drew on their previous academic achievements, many also told stories about their interest in, and consumption of, various forms of crime media, to explain why criminology had become a 'natural' choice. Students described consuming many different types of crime media including printed and digital news, TV dramas, documentaries, films and crime fiction. Emily, a student who was studying for a combined degree in English Literature and Criminology spoke at length about a range of crime novels and the impact they had had in her childhood. Although she had not originally intended to study for a degree in criminology, once she became aware of it as a discipline, her long-standing enjoyment of such literature, led her to articulate that criminology would be a good 'fit':

Crime detecting and crime fiction has been a big part of my childhood and I was going through [university prospectus] and criminology came up . . . it wasn't something that I'd ever really come across the possibility of actually studying myself. It was one of these things where I saw that it was available and then it kind of seemed to fit . . . it didn't take much kind of research in the prospectus and the website and stuff to make it seem like it was definitely something I want to do. (Emily)

Emily's account demonstrates how narratives involve 'emplotment', whereby disparate life events are plotted and interpreted in light of earlier ones and 'the subject of the story appears to *become* who they *always were*' (Lawler, 2014: 32, emphasis in original).

Emily's narrative reflects how students often told stories about building on existing strengths and interests and ones that drew on familiar frames of reference. Students with a love of crime media sometimes appeared to view criminology as a vehicle by which to turn a hobby into a legitimate academic pursuit. For example, Tommy spoke with considerable passion about the crime books he had read, and how this had led him to pursuing a degree in criminology:

I spoke to someone who had been at uni and he said to me, study something that you really, really enjoy. So, I looked back on my bookshelf and I saw it was full of crime books . . . and from then on, I really started thinking about studying criminology as a sort of academic discipline, whereas before it was always a hobby and something to read about. (Tommy)

Emily and Tommy's account reveal how personal narratives interact with broader social and cultural narratives (such as those about crime fiction) and may motivate some students to study criminology. One particularly interesting aspect of some student narratives regarding their consumption and enjoyment of crime media, was the nostalgia with which they retold how they and their families had watched crime news or dramas together. For these students, the home, particularly for those who presented otherwise quite sheltered lives, may represent a safe space where they first develop an interest and fascination with crime. Reflecting this, Chloe and Sophie spoke fondly of their childhoods and the role that crime media had had within the home:

Everyone is going to say this about criminology, but I like watching crime shows . . . I think all my family like watching them so they're always on the TV since I was young, so I've kind of been brought up with it . . . I used to watch Murder She Wrote with my Nan, obviously that's an awful programme, but I remember watching that from like the age of 10. (Chloe)

I've always watched the news and I've always been asking my parents questions about what's going on and why things might be happening. I mean not in a creepy way, but I've always enjoyed watching the news about murders and figuring things out. (Sophie)

Sophie's recollection of 'figuring things out' also reveals how many students told stories about their interests in, and desires to understand, the 'other'. Participants made frequent references to a range of high-profile offenders and cases across their interviews which they were aware of through media accounts of crime, often characterising offenders in stereotypical ways; as 'other' and 'completely different to them':

The serial killer is someone totally different to you, a bit crazy, a bit looney and obviously now I know that's not true, but when I was coming into it [criminology], I was that generic person who looked at them as an alien person, who fits a certain type of description and because it's different and it's nothing like you, or anyone you know, it is interesting. (Carly)

Carly's narrative highlights how storytelling is often used to draw symbolic boundaries (Copes et al., 2008) and 'transmit values and norms by drawing boundaries between a moral *us* and a deviant *them*' (Sandberg, 2016: 154, emphasis in original). However, it is of note that she is already acknowledging – perhaps in light of her engagement with a criminology degree and/or as a consequence of her interaction with a (criminological)

researcher – that her views (and therefore motivations) may have started to change. While those in the later stages of their degree tended to offer more complex and critical explanations behind their reasons to study criminology, stereotypical views of ‘offenders’ along with seemingly voyeuristic interests, were expressed by participants at all stages of their degree. For example, Emily, a third-year student, told us:

In terms of finding out why people are interested in doing criminology . . . [and] . . . why people decide to do it, at the end of the day we all just love a good murder and the idea of studying what drives people. (Emily)

Interestingly, these types of explanation appeared to be more common among those with a limited exposure to actual crime. Chloe, who characterised her life as very sheltered and as having minimal experiences of crime and victimisation, made multiple references to her high consumption of crime media and the pleasure that it brought to her. She acknowledged (albeit with some shame) that she preferred watching US prison documentaries because:

The ones here [UK] aren't as good, which is really bad for me to say. But they're not as kind of serious crimes or they're not allowed to interview people on death row. (Chloe)

In a similar manner, Carly revealed:

I've always been interested in, when the stories come out in the newspapers about crimes, I'm that typical consumer that likes to hear all the gory details. (Carly)

One problem perhaps with developing these interests in the safe space of the home, is that the ‘offenders’ visualised by most of the students were commonly the ‘usual suspects’, representing conventional ideas about ‘who’ criminals are and what ‘crime’ is. While the consumption of crime media may help encourage feelings of belonging, social connection and shared identity; ‘transportation’ into this ‘narrative world’ of crime can also serve to ‘reduce critical scrutiny’ (Costabile et al., 2018: 422). Some students did not exhibit a critical stance on the more systematic types of ‘harm’ committed by the ‘respectable, well-educated, wealthy and socially privileged’ (Box, 1983: 4) that we know as criminologists to be important.

Stories about understanding the ‘self’

Student stories about understanding the ‘self’ were often related to the student’s previous (and varying) exposure to crime or negative experiences growing up,⁵ their feelings of anxiety and powerlessness in response, and their subsequent attempts to develop agency. The motivation to study criminology because of its perceived relevance to the ‘real world’ (Collica-Cox and Furst, 2019) was evident in many of the stories students told. Indeed, Tommy told us:

I really believe crime is a really important factor in the world. It's everywhere, I mean from the city that I'm from . . . it's rife in crime every day. I've been brought up around it and then I just

wanted to think more into it and study something that I enjoyed . . . I know it sounds so simple, but that's how I become to study. (Tommy)

Here, Tommy's narrative not only reveals how he hopes to build on his existing strengths and interests in understanding why other people behave in the way that they do (as we saw in the previous section), but also how he wants to use his exposure to crime for good, and to generate further understanding of himself, of his life, and of his own behaviour. Similarly, Steven told us about his experiences of being victimised on the way home from school by a group of peers who were involved in a range of criminal activities:

It did influence wanting to go out and study crime and see why they would go out and you know just go and steal things just for the sake of it, or just go and break these windows, go and sneak into this factory, go down to the lake and smoke this weed and go drinking and stuff like that . . . it made me just wonder why they'd want to do it and I didn't. (Steven)

Importantly therefore, students are compelled to study criminology because of a desire to understand others and because they want to make sense of their own lives and identities. Students are thus reaffirming their own values and principles (Presser and Sandberg, 2015b) through their storied lives about criminology. Amy, a student who had been serving a community sentence⁶ and trapped in an abusive relationship prior to university, described how she saw criminology as a means to help her understand her life and the lives of other vulnerable women she had worked with as a volunteer:

I could start to identify how I had got into the situation that I had, and I started looking at how the people that I worked with in my voluntary environment got into the situation that they had. And the kind of inequalities that were set against them and things like that and it just helped me understand more and it sparked my interest. (Amy)

In a similar manner, Sophie told us how her experiences of crime had led to a desire to understand such behaviour:

Crime has become quite a, more a part of my life. I think it's definitely changed the way I look on things and I think learning about criminology, I think if those things hadn't happened to me, maybe I wouldn't find it quite as interesting . . . because things have happened to me, I'm more eager to find out why they might of, or the background to it, or similar cases and stuff like that. So, I think because I've sort of been a victim of it . . . it's more interesting and . . . a bit more personal. (Sophie)

Sophie's story here reflects how being 'the subject of pain' is 'a means of claiming authority' (Berlant, 2000 cited in Lawler, 2014: 36) and that for many students, their previous experiences of victimisation provide them with some authority (and a narrative) to study criminology. Storytelling can afford 'victims a space to reassert control and agency over experiences which have previously been disempowering and isolating' (Cook and Walklate, 2019: 241). A desire to combat feelings of powerlessness led some students to view studying criminology as a natural step. In this way, criminology (and the

stories students tell about it) can be viewed as a form of sensemaking and a way in which students seek to understand the 'self' and their life experiences.

To provide an example of these points, we return to the story of Amy, a mature female student who had been convicted of fraud prior to studying criminology. Through her account it was evident that a combination of being caught and punished for her offending, growing realisation that the domestic situation which she and her children were in was problematic, along with the sense of personal achievement that she gleaned from her voluntary work with other vulnerable women, were all tied up in her decision to try and make changes in her life. Together, these 'boundary experiences' – characterised by 'conflict, shortcoming or inability' (Geijssel and Meijers, 2005: 424) – appear to represent an important 'turning-point' (McAdams and Bowman, 2001) in her life. Indeed, Amy told us:

I came to study criminology off the back of going through the criminal justice system. I had no idea of studying anything at all and I was just a stay at home mum and what not, going through a bit of a bad time and I ran into some trouble, went through court, got put on probation and while I was on probation, it kind of hit home the enormity of the situation and that I needed to do something. (Amy)

Amy's story about how she came to study criminology followed a 'redemptive sequence' as she described how several bad events in her life and her feelings of powerlessness had eventually led to a positive outcome (McAdams and Bowman, 2001; see also Maruna, 2001). Similar experiences and responses were found within the other stories we heard, and there were multiple and diverse examples of how students felt powerless as a result of crime (or other negative experiences) in their lives. Steven, for example, told us about his experience of being victimised by a group of boys who were also involved with a range of offending:

They would always like try to make me go in [the off licence] and when I didn't, they didn't really like that. They used to like you know push me around a bit and beat me up a little bit for not like participating with whatever it is they were doing. So that helped actually, rather than actually making me go in and steal stuff actually it pushed me further in the opposite direction of wanting them to stop it, although I never could stop it because these people were twice my size. (Steven)

A similar account was given by Emily, a final year student, who told us about an incident whereby her friend (for whom English was a second language) was a victim of sexual assault. Soon after the offence had occurred, her friend made a phone call to her in a 'state of hysteria' and it was clear the event had had a lasting impact. Emily spoke about the secondary trauma she had experienced, which largely followed from her inability to get to her friend on the evening (she was 14 and could not drive) or go to the police (because her friend did not wish to report). The sense of powerlessness was evident in Emily's account, who told us:

I felt very responsible having had her ring [over the telephone] and her language difficulties and having a very kind of low support network from her family around her. Yeah and just feeling

like who does the responsibility go to from here, like I have no power, so who does? And that was quite, I think that was quite an eye opening position to be in. I think that was definitely something that struck me at that point in life about the world. (Emily)

Emily's narrative, like Steven's and Amy's before, is significant for its ability to demonstrate how 'boundary experiences' can be both cognitive and emotional experiences. In response to a negative situation, people may try 'to recover a sense of well-being, either by trying to avoid the situation that causes insecurity, or by finding other ways to cope with it' (Geijsel and Meijers, 2005: 424). What is significant about these personal narratives of varying exposures to 'crime' is how they were constructed by the narrator as forming a core part of the decision to pursue a degree in criminology and were linked with attempts to move away from feelings of powerlessness to secure greater agency and control.

Stories about securing 'justice' and 'helping' others

While a full examination of the 'anticipated futures' of the students is beyond the scope of this paper, one of the common reasons given by students for wanting to study criminology was due to a desire to work in a range of possible 'criminal justice' careers. The stories students told about their future career ambitions were commonly structured by desires to secure 'justice' and 'help' other people.

Students with family members who worked in the criminal justice system often spoke about their careers with considerable pride. Hearing about the work of their parents as they grew up was often reported to have influenced students' interest and commitment to pursuing a similar career path. Steven, for example, spoke passionately about the important work that his father did, and how this had inspired him to follow the same career:

My dad working in the police has been a major, major influence in how that's affected my life. I mean I always looked up to my dad, I always respected him so much for going out and, you know going out and solving all these murders and stuff that he would always come and tell me about. It always made me feel really, really, proud of him and I thought that's something that I want to go out and do. (Steven)

Here, Steven's action of studying criminology demonstrates the performative nature of narratives and their links to action, for his narrative permits him to 'perform a preferred self-story and thereby to construct a sought-after identity – a desired character' (Presser, 2018: 13). Steven's narrative of being proud of his dad 'solving all these murders' allows him to reaffirm what his own values are, and this also helps him plot his future. Stories therefore can be used as resources for identity construction *and* guides to action (Presser, 2018). A similar narrative was observed by a different student who, notably, also wished to pursue a career in the police. Indeed, Rayyan told us,

When I was a lot younger, I was interested in being a police officer. Seeing sort of injustice happen, a lot of it, well for me maybe that made me want to do something about it because you know you can't just sit round hoping someone else will fix it and you can just continue complaining about it. So maybe I wanted to find a solution to it. (Rayyan)

Rayyan's narrative highlights how some students use their previous experiences of 'powerlessness' to secure greater agency and control, and as motivators to try and 'fix' things. This not only enables students to make sense of their own values and principles, but also provides 'a plot that makes some particular future not only plausible but also compelling' (Frank, 2010: 10). Returning to Steven, he emphasises how rewarding his future ambitions to secure 'justice' may be, when he explained,

I want to go out and just stop criminals. To be able to be the one that actually says to a jury you should put this person away for life, here's all the evidence why . . . that sounds like an amazing career to be honest. To be able to make such a difference, to have such an influence on people's lives, families of victims etc., it would be really worthwhile. (Steven)

These narratives from Steven and Rayyan demonstrate the interaction between personal and other institutional, organisational and cultural narratives (Loseke, 2007). They draw upon broader narratives within popular culture about what 'crime' and 'justice' look like and use familiar plotlines, involving heroes and villains whereby here, the 'offender' is presented as the 'villain'. However, other students had different conceptions of what securing 'justice' and 'helping' others might involve. These alternative narratives, which commonly highlighted the victimisation and disadvantage experienced by many 'offenders', may perhaps reflect students' engagement with a criminology degree (and the context of an interview with a criminologist). While several stereotypes still littered their accounts, many students spoke with compassion, and often referred to the limited opportunities they felt 'offenders' to have had:

Everyone is telling them [offenders] they're going to be nothing for their whole life and then their parents are abusive and there's violence all the time and, it's just like how do they have a chance? . . . It kind of frustrates me that it's happening and that is something that I would like to give more like help to people in that situation to try and find a different way out. (Hannah)

Here, Hannah articulates her desire to work in an environment where she can 'help' people 'find a different way out' because of her (reported) frustration about the poor life chances and victimisation of those involved with the criminal justice system. Similar frustration was evident in other student narratives, including Dave, who, despite the death of his mother during his teenage years, appeared to have a long-standing sense of guilt about how comparatively easy his life may have been compared to those involved with the criminal justice system:

Something that's been in the back of my mind for a while . . . I really haven't earned shit you know. It's all been handed to me on a plate and people can say 'yeah you've made the best of it', but I've only been able to because I've had my dad, my sisters, I've had the support of people, but you know really if I'd been brought up by a single mother on a council estate, you know there's no way I would have, I would be a completely different person . . . crime is, in my view, very, very dependent on environment. I guess that's why I want to . . . help with rehabilitation programmes. (Dave)

These presentations of the lives of offenders, contrasted in this case with Dave's own life, which he characterises as having been 'handed to me on a plate', reflects the

distinction Hankiss (1981 cited in Sandberg, 2016) makes between dynastic life-stories (where a good past leads to a good present) and self-absolatory ones (where a bad past leads to a bad present). They also reveal how identifying with the suffering of others is culturally significant and that a 'sense of self, of place in the world and identity, has frequently been articulated using *someone else's* story of suffering' (Steedman, 1996: 107, emphasis in original).

Thus, far we have presented two contrasting narratives about desires to secure 'justice': stories about wanting to 'catch criminals' and put offenders in prison to secure 'justice' for victims, and stories about wanting to 'help' offenders and help correct the 'injustices' they may have experienced in their lives. Interestingly, our analysis also reveals how narratives about the desire to secure justice can be contradictory. While storytellers strive for coherence, in practice people commonly tell multiple and contradictory stories (Sandberg, 2016), as illustrated by Tara:

I would feel no emotion towards a criminal, especially if I knew what they'd done, so . . . I just feel like I could cope with working in a prison and I find it interesting to know why people do things. I mean I couldn't be a psychologist or anything because I don't know, I'm not interested in psychology, but I'd like to try and help them. (Tara)

Here, Tara claims to have a desire to 'help' people in prison but also exhibits little empathy towards people who offend. Her narrative reveals the different understandings of what constitutes 'justice' and what altruism in this area should look like. Moreover, her narrative about feeling she could 'cope' with working in a prison, reveals the important narrative identity work she is engaging in, as she works through her ambitions and skill set, and creates a narrative that will help support her future action of working in a prison. Our students' anticipated careers and motivations to secure 'justice' therefore reveal how storytelling is a form of social action (Fleetwood et al., 2019).

One interesting feature of the stories we heard about securing 'justice' was the ways in which heroes and villains were characterised in different ways. In some stories, especially among those with ambitions to work in the police, the hero is characterised as the official agent, the police officer or the prosecutor, who must catch, investigate and then prosecute the villain, the 'offender'. In other stories, the 'offender' is instead positioned as a victim, as someone who must be 'saved', by other official agents of the system (like a psychologist or prison officer). In either scenario, and despite very contrasting views about what 'justice' is and how it should be accomplished, the participant places themselves in the role of hero. Narratives about being driven to study criminology are therefore structured by the 'requirement of adapting to cultural templates and demands [and] a desire to make ourselves (story protagonists) look good' (Presser, 2018: 17). Students use criminology to help re-story parts of their lives in order to put across their 'good selves' and to help support their future ambitions to secure 'justice' and 'help' people.

Discussion

Using a narrative inquiry, this paper provides an unusual glance into the lives, identities and motivations of our 'first public' (Burawoy, 2004: 1608). Our analysis reveals how students make connections between their past experiences and future aspirations in their

storied understanding of how and why they came to study criminology. While students tell many stories, three types were particularly prominent: stories about: (1) building on existing interests, (2) understanding the 'self', and (3) securing 'justice' and 'helping' others. In this discussion, we try to make further sense of the narratives we heard, give thought to the implications of our findings, suggest directions for future research, and reiterate the need for criminology to give our students a voice.

Our analysis reveals how students draw on their personal experiences of victimisation to help explain their motivations to study criminology. For many of our students, one of the ways they sought to recover from their experiences of victimisation, was through greater understanding and exploration of a subject relevant to them. Studying criminology has been constructed as a way of turning negative life experiences around, by giving meaning to these events, and allowing them to be reframed into ones that provide an opportunity for 'transformative growth' (Costabile et al., 2018: 423). This reminds us of the power of stories, and how they can 'motivate and shape practices' (Sandberg, 2016: 158). Moreover, it supports calls for the academy to develop greater awareness and understanding of the potential victimisation experiences of our students (Eren et al., 2019).

Students also told many stories about the role of crime media in their decisions to study criminology. Importantly, these stories were not 'just' about entertainment. The consumption of crime media forms part of a culturally available story for students, reflecting broader, more common experiences in their lives, that they can draw on to help make sense of their decision to study criminology. Here, Jennifer Fleetwood's notion of 'narrative habitus' offers a helpful lens. Many student narratives (i.e. about being good at similar subjects, anticipating that criminology would be 'interesting', those that draw on the consumption of crime media, and those about the careers of their parents) are 'common sense', and naturalise 'the way things are' (Fleetwood, 2016: 184). According to Fleetwood (2016: 174), narrative habitus captures the ways in which narratives are conveyed as 'natural and logical', as if the 'story could never have been otherwise'.

The 'uncritical' nature of some narratives regarding the 'other' or simplified stories about securing 'justice', along with the way the home features so prominently in many students' stories, may be explained by the durable and engrained nature of students' past lives and habitus. Fleetwood (2016: 182) reminds us of the durability of the habitus, whereby 'narratives inculcated through decades of life experience cannot be replaced by those learnt in a few months'. Student narratives about crime media consumption, stereotypical ideas of who 'offenders' are, and what 'justice' looks like, are 'hegemonic stories' (Presser and Sandberg, 2015a: 14) about crime, morality, and law and order. The caution, and on occasions, embarrassment, some students exhibited when telling their stories, especially those about crime media, is therefore significant. Some of the conflict and contradiction across our student narratives, illustrate the inevitable tension between different 'fields' and the challenges students face as they work out new 'credible' discourses in their new field at university.

This reminds us of the co-production of stories between interviewer and interviewee. We construct ourselves through the 'complex product of biography and the selective patching together of events, attuned to the particular moment of telling' (Fleetwood, 2016: 175). 'Narrative environments' (such as the home, school and earlier lives of our

students) and the ‘narrative occasion’ (namely the recollection of stories in the context of an interview) serve to ‘mediate the shape of the story being told’ (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008: 247–248). A key challenge is that narratives are ‘moving targets’; they evolve and change as the self is constantly re-written and responds to key events (Maruna and Liem, 2020: 8.11). The stories people tell post hoc for the reasons a change occurred, may be different to the stories and reasons people put forward before those changes were made (Presser and Sandberg, 2015b). However, the co-production of stories does not make the data any less valuable or interesting since ‘narratives affect us whether or not they are ‘true’ (Presser, 2018: 14).

Narrative criminologists should attend to issues of power and study narratives that challenge harms (Fleetwood et al., 2019). Given our students have the capacity to influence wider understandings about crime and social harms, and may go on to work as future practitioners and academics in the field; failure to properly understand the lives, stories and motivations of those we teach, has the potential to perpetuate harm. In the context of an increasingly competitive higher education market, understanding what motivates students to study criminology is also important for a variety of financial, pedagogical, theoretical and welfare-orientated reasons. Moreover, we should explore how our own criminological research and teaching, has the potential to exacerbate, overlook and counter harms. It is important that we examine the ‘types’ of criminology programmes we deliver in order to encourage students to reflect on wider institutionalised harms and move away from ‘common sense’ understandings of ‘crime’ and ‘offenders’. We have a responsibility to attend to our own narratives as criminologists and consider ‘if or when it is our duty not just to analyse narratives, but to try and change them’ (Fleetwood et al., 2019: 16). Yet, the ‘proper goals and content of an undergraduate criminological training remain uncertain’ (Garland, 2011: 301) and we have limited understanding of what people think criminology is, and how criminology (and what criminologists do) are represented in popular culture (Rock, 2014).

In the context of work to decolonise criminology, it is important that we do more to examine the stories of other students. Narrative criminology ‘is well placed to explore how stories of ‘crime’ travel across time and space, nationally and internationally’ (Fleetwood et al., 2019: 14) and in our future research we intend to explore a range of diverse student characteristics, including age, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity and race. If we are to meaningfully decolonise our curriculums, we must listen to, and learn from, the diverse (and often marginalised), people we seek to educate. In our ‘very white criminological world’ whereby race continues to exist on the margins of the discipline, criminologists need to do more to challenge our own ‘habits of thought’ (Phillips et al., 2020: 429–430). Our students’ stories are not only about their emerging (and changing) selves; they are also stories about criminology and the broader cultural stories criminology seeks to (re)tell. Just as ‘crime’ is constituted in and through stories’ (Fleetwood et al., 2019: 17) so too is ‘criminology’ and our students’ reported ‘motivations’ to study it. By understanding more about our students, we can help them to develop clearer understandings of themselves and others, support them to promote and contribute to ‘better’ crime politics and regulation, and in doing so, help to promote social justice and counter harm. Furthermore, by learning about our students we can learn more about ourselves and our discipline, which may in turn help facilitate a more meaningful dialogue with our wider publics (Burawoy, 2005).

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Notes

1. A single honours degree is one where the student studies one principle subject (e.g. criminology). In a dual honours degree, students study two subjects concurrently and usually on a 50/50 basis. Both subjects are then listed in their degree title (i.e. BA (Hons) Criminology and Psychology). Students undertaking a major or minor route will typically split their degree on a 75/25 basis between two subjects.
2. It is here that we would like to gratefully acknowledge the detailed feedback and advice from two anonymous reviewers who pushed us to a new level of understanding.
3. Pseudonyms are used to protect anonymity.
4. A Levels are qualifications studied in England, Wales and Northern Ireland by pre-university students usually aged 16 and above.
5. While only one participant disclosed that they had been charged with a specific crime (Amy who had been convicted of benefit fraud) several students spoke about their exposure to, or minor involvement with, crime and antisocial behaviour.
6. For more information about community sentences in England and Wales, see the Sentencing Council guidance, available here: <https://www.sentencingcouncil.org.uk/sentencing-and-the-council/types-of-sentence/community-sentences/>

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