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# Part 4

## Qualitative Methods

# Biography in Criminology; Source and Product

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Biography is commonly understood as the work of historians writing about the lives of deceased men and women who once were famous. In recent years, the number of biographies has increased and the choice for protagonists seems to shift to more popular personalities, most of whom are still alive. While in the past respected statesmen or artists of great accomplishments were written about, currently the main character can have a career in sport, in entertainment, or even in crime. Biographies were written on Mick Jagger and David Beckham, but they are trumped by the British Kray twins, infamous criminals with an impressive bibliography of their own.

Crime sells, and publishers are well aware of that. Over the years this has resulted in a large and diverse collection of publications on the lives of criminals. The literary and scientific quality varies enormously. So, it is necessary to categorize. Life histories make up the larger collection that includes narratives on complete lives or just episodes. They may vary in form, be verbal, written, or even filmed. A biography is generally written and it provides a description of the protagonist's life, put in context of time and place. Within biography three types can be distinguished.

## Three Biography Types

The first type is the autobiography written by the protagonist themselves. It is a text written in the first person and it represents the perspective of the protagonist. Sometimes a ghost writer is involved, but this is not always clear and it can be vague to what extent he has influenced the final text. Prison biographies that attest to a humiliating and unjust prison system fit this category (Abbott 1981; Boyle 1977).

The unauthorized biography, the second type, is written by an outsider who has not collaborated with the main character. This is the case because the latter has died, but there can be other reasons too. Working together may be impossible, for example because the protagonist is incarcerated and is not allowed to be interviewed. Especially when criminals have cases pending, they can have a strong preference to tell the story in a specific way or to leave things out. This makes the writer choose to work alone and be the only one to decide on the content of the book.

In the third type of the authorized biography, writer and protagonist work together. This has the important advantage of having direct access to the main source. The biographer

will interview the protagonist a number of times and it is likely that parts of the book will consist of first-person quotes coming straight from the protagonist.

## Biography as Ethnographic Data

The number of biographies on criminals has increased, but criminologists are seldom the ones to write them. Journalists usually are quick to deliver their story, focusing on what is “hot,” but this does not leave scientists empty-handed. In early 20th century, Chicago School sociologists produced biographies. They chose to write about “the Hobo” (Anderson 1923), “the Jack-Roller” (Shaw 1930), and “the Professional Thief” (Sutherland 1937), while reports on infamous gangsters such as Al Capone or John Dillinger, who lived in the same era, were written by journalists.

Whodunit? A fair question for detection and policing, and in the news it is repeated over and again, but in order to find out what goes on in the criminal mind one needs to go beyond obvious issues. This is where the work of criminologists has added value. In criminological research, biographies can be a source and a product, input as well as outcome.

Most biographies, if not all, carry information on family ties, (criminal) friends, school, and work, and on the circumstances of the offenses committed. But not always do they hold the protagonist’s motives and dilemmas, or present their thoughts when looking back on what happened during their life. Biography can be a source for criminology research, using this kind of content as ethnographic data (Shover 2010). This information must come straight from the protagonist themselves, which means direct contact with the author is presupposed. As a consequence, suitable data should be looked for in texts written in the first person. This would mean leaving out unauthorized biographies as a

data source. These can describe what the protagonist has done, but their thoughts and feelings cannot be properly registered from the position this author is in.

## Biography as a Product

In what follows we turn to biography as a product, and focus on authorized biographies. The fact that not many biographies on criminals are written by criminologists may be related to the current emphasis on quantitative methods in the discipline. The case study of one individual,  $N = 1$ , is easily dismissed, as the findings cannot be generalized. Still, biography is an excellent tool to study what goes on in the criminal mind, and career or life course models are easily linked to it.

## Perspectives: Structure, Interaction, Narrative

Then, how must the criminologist go about writing an authorized biography? Structure, interaction and narrative are three perspectives to be distinguished, but biographies may contain a mix of these. It is not so much the research design that varies, as in all three perspectives working with the protagonist is essential.

Following the structure perspective, a chronological timeline can visualize events on a micro level and show how they coincide with what happens on meso or macro levels. A historical-sociological frame reveals coherence between parts of the protagonist’s life and context (van Gemert 2011). The key person can represent a group or movement that is being criminalized. Like urban youth choosing their styles and targets while fighting the powers that be, the process typically fits the time frame.

The interaction perspective builds on concepts such as “presentation of self” (Goffman

1959) or “pose” (van Gemert 2015). The biography focuses on how the protagonist sees himself, how wants to be seen and how others see him. To what extent do these poses fit the specific context(s) in which the protagonist must act? The gang member makes sure his violent reputation is known to his fellow members as well as to his opponents, but next he presents himself as a caring father or a devoted religious man.

Central to the narrative perspective is the story the protagonist uses to express the meaning of a situation they are or were in (Maruna 2001; Presser 2008). Instead of working chronologically as in the structure perspective, the attention goes straight to what is most relevant for the protagonist, as he is asked for moments of revelation in his life (Denzin 1989). The biography then becomes a rhizome without a clear beginning or end. To build their story and express himself, a protagonist sometimes uses existing images – for example, Robin Hood, who stole from the rich to give to the poor, or mythical Zulu gangster Nongoloza (Steinberg 2004).

## Working with the Protagonist

The data required for writing an authorized biography come from interviews and to a lesser extent from observations and various documents. To gather this information, a good relationship with the protagonist must be established. The choice to do so derives from the preference to use an emic perspective and produce a story that is *from* them instead of *about* them.

Working with a (former) criminal obviously can involve risk. They may still be active and the researcher can hear about or even witness illegal actions. Ethical guidelines for researchers vary per country, but as a rule the criminologist should not break the law. Before starting the project both the researcher and the protagonist must be explicit on what they expect from collaborat-

ing. Signing a contract is not crucial, because trust cannot be agreed upon beforehand, it must evolve and come from both sides.

The life of one person is a huge subject to talk about. Research for a biography should not be limited to just one interview; rather, a number of interviews need to be scheduled. Normally, in an interview, “rapport” needs to be established during one encounter, but here a series of interviews provides much more time. During these interviews, the biographer and the protagonist may become a team. One can say that the researcher thus loses their distance as a scientist, but as communication increases, it entails more variation, becomes more intense, and there is more to learn.

Writing a biography can be done while the protagonist is incarcerated, but preferably they are at large. The prison setting not only offers practical obstacles, it also reduces the opportunity to get to know the protagonist in normal life. How he interacts with others, where he lives, what television shows he likes to watch, these things may seem trivial but they can be very informative as they are the components of everyday life. The biographer not only uses interview data, also draws upon observations to describe the protagonist as the result of his own life. As biography becomes ethnography, the protagonist and the biographer learn to understand each other, and thus validity of the research increases (van Gemert 2012).

## Complex Content

Depending on the perspective, the interviewer may ask the protagonist to go through his life step by step, to elaborate on his poses, or to focus on moments of revelation. Various techniques can be used. Because of the wide time span of a person’s life, we want to mention one technique especially. The protagonist is interviewed “here and now” and will normally answer by verbalizing

their thoughts and feelings at this time. This means they are implicitly looking back. Since we may want to know what feelings and thoughts they had while committing a crime or being involved in a personal matter, the researcher must point to the difference in time. "This is what you say now, as you look back. Let's go back to when it happened, what comes to mind?"

From a distance, research for biography may seem simple. It is a case study on a single individual, and given this protagonist cooperates, most of the data are within reach. In social science, researchers normally work with much bigger populations and look for correlations on higher levels of abstraction. Yet when zooming in on an individual, it is inevitable we find out we are not dealing with machines but that human beings are inconsistent, have doubts, and may act on testosterone or adrenaline (Maruna and Matravers 2007). As the number goes down, the complexity goes up, and we are left with many loose ends that the other researchers got rid of. The paradox of  $N = 1$  (van Gemert 2011).

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