What can "Lies" Tell Us about Life?
Notes towards a Framework of
Narrative Criminology

Sveinung Sandberg

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In criminology even studies that involve extensive fieldworks rely a great deal on research participants own accounts. The main question raised in the paper is: how do we know if research participants are telling the truth, and does it matter? It argues that criminological ethnographers have been too preoccupied with a positivist notion of truth, and the related question of whether research participants are telling the truth. For narrative analyses, this is not really important. The paper will present interview data from offenders to illustrate the fruitfulness of a narrative approach in criminology. Whether true or false, the multitude of stories people tell reflect, and help us understand, the complex nature of values, identities, cultures, and communities. The emphasis will be on offenders' shifts between subcultural and more conventional narratives. The argument expands upon Presser's notion of narrative criminology. The result is a framework that further challenges positivism and individualism in contemporary criminology.

It was a bitterly cold winter's night at the street drug market. Not many people where around and I was tired and looking forward to a dry room and something hot to drink. I was together with a social worker and we had been walking around for hours. She was used to it, I was not. Suddenly we spotted the light of a fire under a bridge. The street drug dealers often sought sanctuary there in bad weather. They were burning planks found in the vicinity. Three young men stood around the fire, talking and keeping the fire going. I knew one of them— the others were new to me. I tried to convince them to do an interview with me, now or later. Ali, whom I was on speaking terms with, told me "I don't sell drugs anymore." I doubted it, but said nothing. They soon lost interest. Their attention was caught by a quarrel about how the fire should be tended. (From the author's fieldwork in Oslo; Sandberg and Pedersen 2009)

Doing research on offenders is not essentially different from doing any other kind of ethnographic research. The researcher has to address the same issues of getting access to the field, establishing rapport with research participants, learning and understanding hidden codes, and balancing the roles of insider and

outsider to get interesting, theoretically relevant data. That being said, these issues are more difficult to reconcile when the subjects of study are engaged in illegal activity. The social distance between the researcher and the participants is often greater than in other kinds of social research, which has the potential to cause participants to be especially skeptical of the researcher's intentions and motivations. Thus, establishing a bond with participants becomes even harder and the codes of conduct even more hidden when studying deviant groups. This distance also fortifies the question all qualitative researchers at some point ask themselves: how do we know if research participants are telling the truth? For many researchers, eliciting the truth from participants is the hallmark of sound research. But not all share this stance on validating the accuracy of participants' claims. In this paper I argue that discerning the "truth" is not always important. Whether true or false, the multitude of stories people tell reflect, and help us understand, the complex nature of values, identities, cultures, and communities. Thus, "truth" may not be the best measure of interesting and theoretically relevant data.

As early as in the 1950s, John P. Dean and William Foote Whyte argued that statements represent only the *perception* of research participants. We must recognize that such statements are "filtered and modified" by their "cognitive and emotional reactions" and reported through their "personal verbal usages" (Dean and Whyte 1958, p. 34). The implication is that researchers should not be as concerned with determining whether or not research participants are lying. Rather, they should seek to answer the question, "What does the informant's statements reveal about his feelings and perceptions and what inferences can be made from them about the actual environment or events he has experienced?" (Dean and Whyte 1958, p. 38). This is still an insight of which criminologists need to be reminded.

In this paper I also challenge the ethnographic rationale that "having been there" is always better than "having heard someone talk about it," and discuss the widespread opposition between data quality and efficiency. I then present a discussion of narrative criminology (Presser 2008, 2009), discuss the concept of validity, and present insights from ethnomethodology and discourse analysis to illustrate the point. Interview data from my own research will be presented to show the fruitfulness of a narrative approach for studies of offenders. The examples include data from an ethnographic fieldwork with street drug dealers and in-depth interviews with drug smugglers in prison.[1] The emphasis will be on offenders' constant shifts between subcultural and more conventional narratives (see also Sandberg 2009a, 2009b). It is my hope that the issues raised here will be of interest to qualitative researchers in general, and, more importantly, to criminologists, regardless of their methodological orientation.

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1. Because they all involve leaving the office, interacting with people, and seeing them in their social surroundings, they will be considered ethnographic.
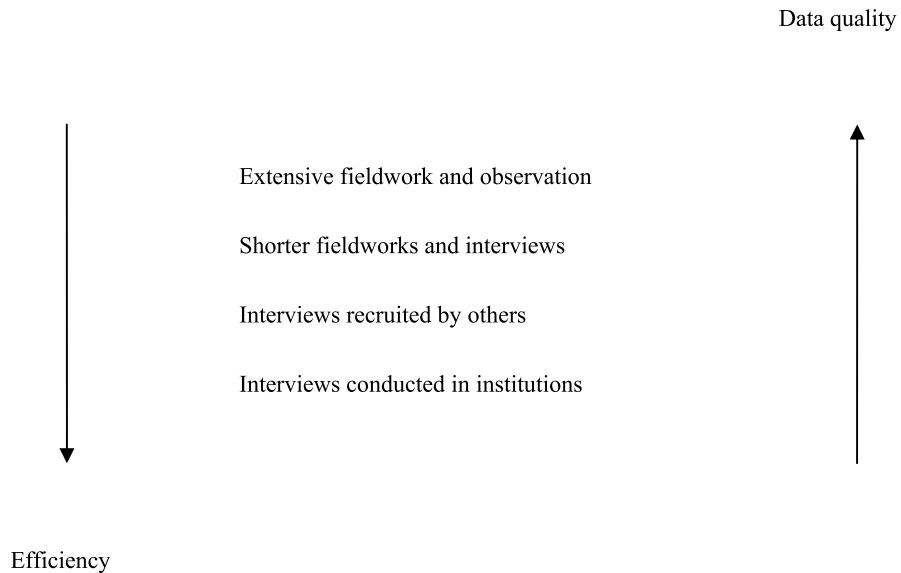
Challenging the Ethnographic Rationale

There are many methodological challenges in ethnographic research, but knowing if research participants can be trusted is often described as one of the most important. The concern is particularly often raised in criminology since offenders apparently have many reasons to lie about their activity—the most obvious is that the truth may put their status as free citizens in jeopardy. Ethnographers usually recommend interacting with offenders in their "natural" social context and "getting to know them" as the best way to get valid data. Extensive ethnographic fieldworks and observation is thus often portrayed as the ideal methodological design.

According to the ethnographic rationale, the further away the researcher is from the actual places, settings and networks of people, the greater the reason to be skeptical about the information received. That is, when evaluating ethnographic research, "having been there" is thought better than "having heard someone talk about it."[2] The ethnographic rationale emphasizes that observations provide better quality data than interviews, and that interviews in a "natural" setting give better data than interviews in institutions. Many are also skeptical about the involvement of outsiders when recruiting participants, because these may influence participants. For example, they question the validity of data that come from participants recruited by correctional officers because they assume that inmates will disguise the truth to frame their actions in the best possible light. They argue that ethnographers who engage in extensive fieldwork and observation are better able to see through these deceptions and to provide the most trustworthy data and analysis. This is because doing so provides a stronger bond between the researcher and the participants due to more direct contact between the parties. For efficiency reasons, interviewing, getting help in recruiting, and doing interviews in institutions can be an option, but the ethnographic rationale considers this to be data of poorer quality.

The ethnographic rationale is the driving force behind most fieldwork studies in criminology—including my own (e.g., Sandberg and Pedersen 2008, 2009). However, while the opposition between data quality and efficiency is intuitive, it is also too simple. The differences between the varying approaches may not be as great as they seem. The underlying assumption about offenders can, for example, be questioned. For example, Jacobs (2000) argues convincingly that there is no reason to believe that offenders lie more than non-criminal participants (see also Wright and Decker 1994). Rather, the secrecy of the business turns the research interview into one of the few safe contexts where, for example, dealers can demonstrate their extensive and complex knowledge

2. Ethnographic research can be categorized in different ways. Categorizations often include the questions: (1) were extensive fieldwork or interviews the primary source of data; (2) has fieldwork been conducted, but secondary to interviews; (3) have research participants been recruited by the researcher or by others; and (4) have institutionalized populations been interviewed. Following the ethnographic rationale, methodological approaches can best be seen on a continuum from extensive fieldworks to interviews in institutions.

Data quality

Extensive fieldwork and observation

Shorter fieldworks and interviews

Interviews recruited by others

Interviews conducted in institutions

Efficiency

Figure 1   The ethnographic rationale.

to outsiders. Moreover, the risk of getting caught by police or accused of snitching is probably perceived as small, especially when talking about the past.

There are also those who argue against the assumption that fieldwork or interviews with active offenders inherently produce better data. Pearson and Hobbs (2004) argue that ethnographic fieldwork may not be particularly helpful for studying illegal drug markets. The rule of the drug game for most participants is that they do not ask too many questions. They often think that the less they know about the dealing of others, the safer all parties will be. Thus, ethnographic field observation might do little more than reproduce fragmented perceptions. In a similar way, Copes and Hochstetler (2010) argue that it is easier to meet motivated and interested participants in prison; here they are less likely to be under the influence of drugs, have more time to think about their past, and present more cohesive and meaningful interpretations of their lives. The prison context also makes it easier to recruit a more representative group of participants because researchers do not have to recruit through social networks.

In studies of crime, the ironic ethnographic contrast between "what people do" and "what people say they do" (Atkinson and Coffey 2003), and between quality and efficiency of data, is particularly problematic. Most ethnographic analyses of offenders are based on self-reported data. Observing criminal activity is difficult because it is infrequent, hidden, and people will be uncomfortable with doing it in front of researchers.[3] Illustratively, even in studies that

3. As Ward (2008) points out, "standardized codes of ethical conduct cannot easily be translated to ethnographic research on criminal activity." Observing crime in progress can be ethically problematic. While observing petty crime may be acceptable, observing large-scale drug dealing, violence, or sexual offences should probably not be the goal of any researcher.

involve extensive fieldworks, analysis of criminal activity is usually (if not always) based upon the offenders' own accords. Venkatesh (2006, 2008) spent many years with a Chicago gang, but observed violence just a few times and was privy to no large-scale drug dealing. Bourgois (1996) also relied mainly on self-reported stories when it came to violence, rape, large-scale drug dealing, and other more sensitive issues. Thus, even the best ethnographers must rely on the retrospective descriptions of crime. This rather obvious detail is often downplayed in ethnographic debates in criminology.

When studying the use of language we also experience another paradox; one that is completely opposite to the ethnographic rationale. The more data you have, either from year-long ethnographic fieldworks or from large samples of qualitative interviews, the harder it will be to discover the nuances of narratives. If analyses are detailed, and emphasize semiotics or sociolinguistics, one interview, conversation, or fragment of text can be enough to make an interesting observation.

Narrative Criminology

Ethnography is absolutely crucial to understand both mainstream society and subcultures. The ethnographic rationale is also important, but it is often embedded in a problematic positivist notion of truth. Firstly, while self-reported data from extensive fieldwork may be taken from a more "natural" setting than formal interviews, and the extensive fieldwork provides important background information, they are still narrative data shaped by the research participants—and must be analyzed accordingly. Secondly, which the paper returns to later, even *events* are narrative in structure and the observer's capacities to recognize them are also narrative in form (Atkinson and Coffey 2003).

Presser's (2008, 2009) methodological and theoretical framework of *narrative criminology* is of great help when analyzing the self-reported data of offenders. Presser defines narrative as a "temporally ordered statement concerning events experienced by and/or actions of one or more protagonists" that "draws selectively on lived experience" (Presser 2009, pp. 178–179). She describes three ways in which "narrative" has been conceptualized in criminology: narrative as record, narrative as interpretation, and a constitutive view of narrative. The first treats narratives as indicators of criminal behavior, and Presser argues that this perspective still dominates criminology. Most criminologists utilize narratives as stores of data on criminal behavior and its causes. Methodologically, this has meant an emphasis on whether or not research participants are telling the truth and skepticism towards, or exaggerated belief in, offenders' narratives. Narrative as interpretation means studying how people see their world, but the social world still exists as an objectively given entity. The emphasis shifts from narrative as representing what really happens to narrative being socially constructed versions of what happened. This is the

perspective of Dean and Whyte (1958), and numerous other ethnographic researchers.

Presser's own position is the constitutive view of narrative. This is a more radical constructivist approach on a social level that privileges language and stresses that narratives are made available by social order and culture (Presser 2009, p. 185). Her most important argument, however, is that studying narratives are still useful for realist criminology, because stories are *antecedents* to crime. In this way, the concept narrative "circumvents the realism to which other theories of criminal behavior are bound" (Presser 2009, p. 177). Narratives are important not because they are true records of what happened, but because they influence behavior in the future.

Presser's (2009) theoretical work marks a watershed for narrative analysis in studies of offenders. She introduces insights from other social sciences and humanities to criminology, where simple descriptions of neutralization techniques (Sykes and Matza 1957) and excuses and justifications (Scott and Lyman 1968) have dominated (Maruna and Copes 2005). Her empirical work (Presser 2008) includes a study of the oral self-narratives of violent men in prison. She finds reform narratives, stability narratives, and elastic narratives. The latter are the most widespread. One issue still needs to be raised. Presser analyzes self-narratives as unified, and sometimes they are. However, I think that narrative criminology also needs to include a less "rational" and individualistic understanding of the way language works.

Can Observations Validate Interviews?

The question about whether or not research participants are telling the truth is closely linked to concerns about the *validity* of data. When narratives are conceptualized as record, an account has been understood as valid "if it represents accurately those features of the phenomena, that it is intended to describe, explain or theorise" (Hammersley 1987, p. 69). This is also consistent with a positivist notion of truth, which narrative criminology challenges.

Validity is for example at the core when Jacobs states that he "attempted to minimize lying and distortion in every way possible" and monitored the truthfulness of responses by checking for and questioning inconsistent answers (Jacobs 2000, p. 18). In the same way as Wright and Decker (1994, 1997), he also recommends interviewing active criminals rather than incarcerated ones, because in prison criminals are claimed to rationalize their behavior. Other related validity concern about prison interviews are offenders' ulterior motives, impression management, and difficulties in establishing rapport (Copes and Hochstetler 2010). However, as Copes and Hochstetler point out, most of these concerns also apply for interviews outside the prison context. They argue that based on available data, we simply do not know whether interviews with active offenders produce more valid data than interviews with the incarcerated ones.

A similar idea about validity is expressed when Jacques and Wright (2008, p. 35) state that the "criminals who are closest in relational distance to the researcher, especially those who have done previous interviews, are the ones most likely to produce the greatest amount of valid data." Hoffer (2006) interpreted the rejection of money as a sign of emerging friendship and proposed that the increased trust gave him more valid information. Brannen (1988) however suggests that interviewees who know they will not meet the researcher again will be more sincere. The idea is that the information participants give is protected better when the researcher is an outsider, which would apply wherever they are interviewed. It may be that the positive effect of fieldwork and repeated interviews is as much about the quantity of information about a person and community, as it is about the quality. Again, it is difficult to generalize, and attempts at constructing "laws" for the interaction between researchers and research participants (see Jacques and Wright 2008) will probably fail.

A more fundamental concern about the validity of narrative as record is raised by the discussion of observation versus self-reported data. Many "hardcore" ethnographers argue that there is a large gap between behavior and attitude, or between what people say they do and what they actually do (Gobo 2008, p. 6). Some even define ethnography as "a methodology which privileges (the cognitive mode of) observation as its primary source of information" (Gobo 2008, p. 12). Interviews are thus considered to be secondary to observation, and less valid as data. While researchers doing extensive fieldwork use observation, interaction, and experience to validate narrative data, interview-studies often validate data from one interview by checking them with information from another. If responses in a sample start to get repeated, for example concerning prices of drugs or how transactions are organized, and there is no reason to suspect that the research participants have collaborated in order to respond in a certain way, they are regarded as valid.

Validity is a contested term, primarily because it represents a positivist notion of truth. Constructivists often challenge this positivist notion. They prefer the term *accountability* over validity because it demands only that the researcher publish the "empirical documentation on which his or her analysis has been based" (Gobo 2008, p. 264). In this way other researchers are able to make their own interpretations.

The intuitive difference between observation and interview is also questioned by many. Dean and Whyte (1958) emphasize that behavior cannot be used to validate attitudes, because behaviors are in flux as well. Presser (2009) argues that we need not know if a story is true in order to recognize its role in promoting criminal behavior. In Järvinen's (2000, p. 385) words, narratives act as boomerangs "thrown from the present into the past and returns with a force bearing it into the future." Narratives emerge from earlier experiences and social interaction and influences actions to come. It is therefore difficult to separate them from action or behavior.

Atkinson and Coffey (2003) more radically challenge the division between observation and interviews. Their argument is twofold. First, an event does not

just happen, it is made to happen. It has a beginning, middle, and an end. Its structure and the observer's capacity to recognize it are essentially narrative in form. Moreover, in participant observation, events are narrated by observers, and hence rely on the same culturally shared categories of memory, account, narratives, and experience (Atkinson and Coffey 2003, p. 119–121). As everybody else, researchers do not see phenomena objectively during observation, but structure them according to the interpretative schemes and discursive repertoires they already possess.

The fieldwork-note at the beginning of this paper can serve as an example. The choice to categorize the young men as "drug dealers," instead of "poor" or "marginalized," is decisive. Both categories are true, but which one is used influences the way we understand the phenomenon. Moreover, a student once commented that the whole extract sounded more like a detective story than a scientific text. Ethnographic work particularly, and scientific articles and books more generally, borrow narratives and language from other literary genres, also when it is not a conscious choice by the author. Bakhtin (1981) famously called this *intertextuality*. Observations are thus embedded in narratives in the same way as interview-research, also when it is less obvious than in the fieldwork-note above.[4] Events have to be narrated and they are therefore embedded in our common pool of interpretative resources, described by Foucault as the "archive" (Foucault 1972) or "the order of discourse" (Foucault 1978).

A Framework between Ethnomethodology and Discourse Analysis

When developing a framework of narrative criminology, insights from ethnomethodology (see Garfinkel 1967), conversation analysis (see Silverman 1998), and narrative psychology (see Crossley 2000) must play an essential part. However, such a framework should also include insights from more post-structural discourse analysis (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985) and the postmodern trend in qualitative research. Themes in the latter literature include uncontroversial concerns about the blurring of the boundary between interviewers and interviewees, the introduction of new forms of communication and new topics of inquiry, more concern about whose stories are told, and an increasing concern with interviewees' own understanding (Fontana 2003). More radical themes from the postmodern trend include experimenting with forms used to report findings (Fontana 2003), radically changing the center of attention from the research participant to the researcher (Gubrium and Holstein 2003b), and an increasing politicization of research (Denzin and Lincoln 2005).[5]

4. The scientific article is also a genre that limits what can be said.
5. There are great differences within postmodern approaches to qualitative method, as illustrated between the different "brick" handbooks. Gubrium and Holstein's anthology (2001, see also 2003a) is, for example, less radical and political than Denzin and Lincoln's (2005).

Borrowing from this vast, and at times quite technical and complicated literature, has its disadvantages. To make it straightforward, and avoid narrative criminology turning into some kind of theory exercise, it really comes down to two points. First, narrative criminologists must *analyze talk as action*. Ethnomethodology emphasizes that speech acts must be analyzed as symbolic resources "used to perform specific tasks" (Potter and Wetherell 1987, p. 73). In his study of the use of inmate codes, Wieder's (1974) concern, for example, is not whether or not a statement is "true," but rather what is achieved by using it and what function it has in concrete interactions. This idea can be illustrated with the data from my own research. Ali, who was introduced in the fieldwork-note at the beginning of this paper, knew I was only interviewing drug dealers. When he said he did not "sell drugs anymore" it can be understood as a way to get rid of me. More than being true or false, his speech act performed a specific task: dismissing me. Moreover, like everybody else, research participants construct themselves as particular kinds of moral agents when they speak (Atkinson and Coffey 2003, p. 116). Ali's comment may also be interpreted as a form of self-presentation. Framing his earlier drug dealing as "out of character" (Presser 2008, p. 78) functions to present a morally decent self.

Second, and at the same time, as pointed out by discourse analytical studies inspired by Foucault (1972, 1978), narrative criminologists should recognize that *narratives are enacted and identities constructed through "shared narrative formats"* (Atkinson and Coffey 2003). Ali's "out of character" narrative was told by him and effective because it is a widespread cultural narrative. Meaning is constructed locally, from minute to minute, but always in a way that reflects "discursive environments" and "families of language games" (Gubrium and Holstein 2003c). It can thus be argued that narratives used in an interview, or elsewhere, are taken from, and illustrative of, the social context. Research participants cannot choose from an infinite pool of language and meaning. Instead they rely on ways of self-presenting and thinking that they have learned and used elsewhere. In this way, no matter what kind of stories are told, or whether they are true or false, they tell us something important about values, identities, cultures, and communities.

Doing Narrative Criminology

Narrative criminology is situated in the classical opposition between agency (what is the teller trying to accomplish?) and structure (which narratives are available?). The different ways of doing narrative criminology can be illustrated with extracts from interviews with offenders. Let us take a closer look at three examples: Thomas, Moa, and Daniel.[6]

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6. The interviews with Thomas, Moa, and Daniel were done in Norwegian and tape-recorded. They were translated by the author.

Thomas: Three Conflicting Stories

I met Thomas while I was engaged in an on-going project interviewing drug smugglers and large-scale drug dealers in prison. Throughout the interview, he kept returning to an episode where he had retaliated violently against a friend who had stolen from him. He had reflected a lot around this event, and it was an important part of his self-narrative. Towards the end of the interview, Thomas presented three conflicting stories about the incident within three minutes. The following was the first of the three:

> Thomas: It went too far. I should've stopped beating him earlier. But I ended up … [describes the grave violence in detail]. That's just completely unnecessary. He's down, so that's just completely unnecessary.

Thomas' self-criticism demonstrates that he is aware of a "code of honor" which says that fighting can be acceptable, but it ends when one of the fighters is down. In this way he justifies the fight itself, but not the severe violence he administered. The quote could have been used to argue that there is an "honor culture" among violent offenders, but that practice does not always follow ideology. We could also emphasize how Thomas takes responsibility for his actions by self-criticism, and yet how he still manages to argue that there was some fairness and integrity involved. In this way he presents a "morally decent self" (Presser 2004); an important part of this presentation of self is taking responsibility for one's own actions (Sandberg 2009b).

Only a minute later however, literally speaking, he presented a different version of the event. In his words, "If I hadn't been wasted on GHB that night, I would never have gone to his place. So that wasn't a very rational moment. From there on it all went wrong." Now Thomas claims that the main problem with his actions began the moment he decided to approach his friend. He also rejects responsibility for everything that happened that night by blaming it on the use of drugs. This version is the one that is closest to views about violence portrayed by conventional others (i.e., fights are wrong and drugs are destructive). The naïve methodological criticism of such statements is that they are merely attempts to justify or excuse behavior when talking to representatives of the prison or mainstream society. Such accounts should, therefore, be regarded as untrue. A more sophisticated interpretation would see it as a neutralizing technique (i.e., denial of responsibility) (Sykes and Matza 1957) or form aligning action (Stokes and Hewitt 1976) where Thomas frames his actions in a way to make it easier for him to commit the violence, or at least justify it later. It is a "not my fault" narrative (Green, South, and Smith, 2006), where the drugs and not him are framed as responsible for the incident. Interpreted in this manner, the truth of whether drugs led to his decision or not is irrelevant. What matters is that Thomas frames his story in this manner.

The emphasis upon agency, or what the teller is trying to accomplish, is common in narrative analysis inspired by symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and

narrative psychology. Such a "rational" approach to the interview with Thomas, however, is not only challenged by the fact that he already has presented two different accounts, but further challenged when he less than a minute later presents yet another version of the episode.

> Thomas: Well, that's the way it goes right. I didn't say this in court, but I would have done the same thing again. Only this time, instead of treating him like a friend, and try to talk to him first, I would have beaten him so bad that he wouldn't be able to go to the police, right. It would have been worth it. (…) [getting increasingly aggressive, both in body language and verbally, listing reasons to kill this person]
> Sveinung: To make a point?
> Thomas: Yes, yes
>   [Ca. four seconds break]
> Sveinung: Well, the smartest thing would probably have been just to leave it?
> Thomas: Of course [both laugh]. Of course! Hell. That's what I had planned to do as well.

The obvious methodological observation in the quote above is that interview data are co-created and that the interviewer influences which stories are told.[7] The less obvious is that Thomas is presenting a repertoire of narratives, which all says a great deal about him and his social context. During a short period, Thomas changes between three rather contrary understandings of the same episode. In the first one he thinks he was right to give his friend a beating, but that it became too severe. In the next he blames the drugs and describes the whole incident as irrational and not what he intended. In the third he states that he would do it again, but this time even more brutally. The final version is the one most dedicated to what has previously been conceptualized as "street masculinity" (Mullins 2006), "the code of the street" (Anderson 1999), or "street capital" (Sandberg and Pedersen 2009). Here, Thomas even takes it further and explicitly "neutralizes being good" (Topalli 2005).

We can understand each of these narratives by emphasizing what is achieved by using it, and what function it has in concrete interactions (Wieder 1974). The first one presents a morally decent self, the second denies responsibility, and the third boosts an image as "bad." To understand the sum of them however, we need to add a less "rational" and voluntaristic understanding of the way language works. If Thomas was any kind of rational actor he would choose one narrative and stick to it.

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7. From years of interviewing violent offenders I am used to this kind of talk, but this time I became uncomfortable. Was I encouraging a story about the rationale in killing a guy? And more importantly, was he talking about the past or the future? As a result, after long a period of silence, I confronted him with a different interpretation of what would be the "smart thing" to do. This was a very tense moment, and I was not sure what to expect. He could have seen this as an attempt by me to correct him and gotten angry. He was already quite aggressive. Fortunately, he only laughed and returned to the first narrative.

When Foucault (1970) announced the often misunderstood "death of man," he was trying to capture the way narratives are not only *spoken by* individuals but also *spoken through* them. This is the more radical stand of seeing narratives as the unit of analysis, and not individuals. Thomas' talk, for example, is not so much rational stories with an attempt to accomplish something (conscious or not), as it is a display of the set of narratives his social context offers him to understand his present situation. Even though Thomas' narratives differ, none of them are necessarily "lies" or deception.

Some ethnographers may argue that behavior more accurately measures commitment to subculture. Thomas retaliated violently, which means that he must have been committed to "the code of the street" (Anderson 1999), and afraid of losing face. What he has to say about it afterwards does not matter. But Thomas' behavior supports both claims. First he waited for months before retaliating, which supports the second narrative, but in the end he finally ended up doing it, which indicates a strong commitment to subcultural values. Dean and Whyte (1958) argue that behavior, opinions, and values are in flux and that the conflict among them may be the most important information obtained. Thomas' devotion to a criminal subculture is obviously in fluctuation. The next two examples further elaborate on the importance of such an observation for narrative criminology.

Moa: Between Conventional Culture and Subculture

Moa was one of the drug dealers I met during fieldwork at a street drug market. We were in a pub, when I asked him:

> Sveinung: You said before, you got away with it [crime] most of the time. What exactly did you get away with?
>
> Moa: Back then, it was fruit machines [slot machines]. We're talking millions. There could be as much as 20-30,000 kroner in a machine. We did a couple of machines every day. While the shops were open. We broke in from behind. Cleaned them out for every penny. And fed in banknotes, took them out again. Then we raised our credit limit to 10,000 and sat and played till we dropped. It was petty crime alright. And so easy! The penalties were pitiful. Still are. Theft, you don't get punished for it. It's like rape, grown-up men raping young girls, no punishment at all. That's really bad. It's sick! They get off so fucking lightly. That's the system of justice in Norway for you, plain as day. If you want to be a criminal, and you know the rules and what to expect, you can earn a million before you're caught. They'll lock you up for a year or two, and you're sitting there with a million stashed away some place. All my older friends have done it.

Without recording the interview, I would probably have written down the kinds of crime Moa had committed, and how he committed them. The parts on punishment and rape could easily have been considered as chaotic nonsense

that was difficult to understand and thus left out. After all, in real-time, it is all over in 15 seconds. In retrospect, however, what is most interesting about this interview is not the details of the crimes Moa committed, but the way he talks about them.

When Moa states that he has made millions of kroner, it is likely an exaggeration. We do not know and maybe we do not need to know. What is interesting is that by telling the story in this way, Moa manages to link his petty theft with the activity of some of the big guys in Oslo's criminal underworld. The emphasis on knowing people with millions "stashed away" surely has this effect. With this narrative Moa becomes an important, experienced, smart, and fascinating person, and emphasizing his friendship with some of the people higher up in the hierarchies makes the story convincing. His "older friends" are well-known Oslo gang leaders, which he in other parts of the interview mentions by name. These kinds of stories are typical for offenders involved in a violent street culture. They are typically embedded in the *gangster discourse* of a violent street culture (Sandberg 2009a, 2009b). Gangster discourse includes a series of personal narratives emphasizing how hard, smart, and sexually alluring the speakers are. Exaggerations are common, and criminal activity is bragged about.

Street culture is not the young men's only cultural influence however, and in the middle of the flow of gangster discourse Moa merges a highly conventional story about how the penalties for crime are too low, especially for sexual offences. This sudden change can be interpreted as an attempt to justify criminal activity towards mainstream society. Moa justifies it both by stating that he *knows* that penalties should be higher and by comparison: at least robbing a fruit machine is not as bad as grown men raping young girls. This is what Cromwell and Thurman (2003) describe as "justification by comparison" (see also Presser 2008, p. 93). Moa is acknowledging some criminal participation, but distances himself from "real" criminals and sick people like rapists. This distancing himself from others is similar to the way, for example, hustlers try to distance themselves from crackheads, who are considered weak, dirty, and unworthy of respect (Copes, Hochstetler, and Williams 2008).

Many of the drug dealers we interviewed tended to brag about their criminal activity. At the same time however, literally speaking, they felt obliged to justify or excuse these same crimes. Moa manages to merge these different narratives more elegantly than Thomas, but even in his story the narratives represent quite different rationales. Both Hochstetler, Copes, and Williams (2010) and Presser (2008) describe complex identity constructions among violent men similar to the one Moa is presenting. Presser described it as "elastic" narratives. Many did, for example, resist being labeled as authentically violent and told narratives that made them both potentially violent and morally decent. This should not come as a surprise. According to Goffman (1963), stigmatized people will more than others participate in such "two-headed role-playing." They feel excluded from mainstream society, but still seek recognition from it.

Daniel: Two-Headed Role-Playing

An interview with Daniel, another drug dealer, illustrates similar "artful" (Garfinkel 1967) combinations of conventional and subcultural narratives. We were discussing drug use when I mentioned chasing the optimal high:

> Sveinung: To chase the optimal high, is that common?
> Daniel: […] Time just floats. That's the same about everything, everything you see and do, you come to a certain "supreme" [in English] superiority, see? If you manage to keep it there. You don't manage to keep it there. I understand your concept, I know what you are trying to get at. It's like a spiritual experience. Like the Indians, they used hashish to come to, to get to ….
> Sveinung: Another place?
> Daniel: Another place. Yes, generally. When you do amphetamines for many days, so many weeks, then it's not the same anymore. Cause amphetamines is chemical, so it's not the same. […]
> Interviewer: How are the highs different?
> Daniel: It depends on the person. Depends upon how your body can handle it. A guy can smoke hashish for 10 years and never experience shit. He can take amphetamines once and become so high that he flies. It's tricky to answer that. Everybody experience it differently. Except for ecstasy [MDMA], then you fly. You can be so happy that you say "I love you" to anyone. Everything is good, see. You live in a world of dreams. As long as it lasts. The high usually doesn't last more than 12 hours. Those that didn't land ended up at Gaustad [a well-known mental hospital]. Maybe they only tried it once.

Notice how Daniel emphasizes the difference between cannabis and "chemical" drugs, a widespread way to justify cannabis. The paradox is that he himself uses more cocaine than cannabis, but this is probably harder to justify, so he does not try. He also introduces a more implicit narrative about "Indians" and their use of drugs. Evoking Native Americans brings up associations to a celebrated indigenous group and similarly fortifies the "natural" status of cannabis without even completing the story.

Another interesting aspect about the quote is to see the way the frame story is a rather conventional one, where it only takes one use of drugs for some to end up in mental hospital. Later, he even speculates about the percentage of people getting into trouble due to the use of drugs. Such a statement can be interpreted in two ways. It can be seen as a way of pointing out that these types of consequences of drugs are random and not necessarily signs of weakness on the part of users.[8] Daniel thus protects his identity from any negative consequences from the use of drugs. This understanding emphasizes his agency (what is he trying to accomplish?). At the same time we could also present a more structural understanding (which narratives are at his disposal?). The frame story is the main narrative about drug use both in drug rehabilitation centers, in

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8. Thanks to Heith Copes for pointing this out.

media, and in society as a whole. His use of it could indicate the power of mainstream society and dominant discourses. Even though Daniel uses a lot of drugs, he cannot avoid framing it in an overall negative narrative.

The interview extract demonstrates that Daniel has two narratives at his disposal, one subcultural (illegal drugs gives great experiences, makes you stand out from conventional society, and can be managed by some) and another more conventional (it is dangerous and will go wrong in the end). He is not sure which story to stick to. The latter may be the frame story because he is speaking to a person he sees to be a representative of the welfare state apparatus, because he tries to communicate something about his identity, or because the "order of discourse" (Foucault 1978) does not allow him to say anything else. All of these interpretations make sense, and the one should not exclude the other. It illustrates how narrative criminology is situated in an on-going tension between the active use of language (agency) and the language available (structure).

Concluding Remarks

Flexibility and being able to change research strategy is one of the main advantages of qualitative research. In narrative criminology, it is therefore more difficult than in other types of research to suggest "best practices." Based on the discussion above, some advice can still be offered. The choice of methodological approach should depend upon practical concerns and interests of the researchers: if the primary interest is facts (e.g., of certain types of crimes, prices of drugs, etc.), a positivist notion of truth and a traditional understanding of validity may not be problematic. One still has to remember that events and facts have to be narrated, and that narratives are constitutive of social life. If the researcher's primary interest is in cultures and value-systems, however, questioning the truthfulness of research participants may be unnecessary.

Like social science more generally, criminology often uses self-reported data. This has often come with a concern about whether or not research participants are lying, and been followed by speculative and common-sense questioning of the accuracy of statements. This is often described as "methodological criticism." For example, "you met him in a prison, that means he must be lying in order to get his sentence reduced" or "you met her in rehab, that means she must have taken you for one of the staff there" or "you talked to him on the street, he must have been showing off in front of his friends." But who tells stories independent of whom they are talking to and environmental context? The narratives we tell differ, but this does not make them less interesting or valuable as sources of data. At the same time the stories people tell will always reflect a rather limited repertoire of narratives.

Interviews are an effective way to reveal offenders' repertoire of narratives because they, as illustrated above, often trigger a set of otherwise context-specific stories. Some positivist researchers promote the use of standardized

interview guides (e.g., life history calendars) even when conducting ethno-graphic interviews (Freedman, Thornton, Camburh, Alwin, and Young-DeMarco 1988). The objective is to minimize variation. This may be a fundamental mistake when studying cultures and value-systems. Instead of standardizing, we should do our best to get the multitude of stories present in a social and cultural context. Instead of always searching for consistency and rationality in the stories people tell, we should, sometimes, explore fragmentation and flux in language use. Thus, the interviewer should try to record the interviews (to reduce loss of data), probe from different angles, follow what seems interest-ing, and most importantly, let the research participant speak as freely as possi-ble. The best way to capture research participants' repertoires of narratives is to let them be carried away by their own stories.

Moreover, why must we necessarily know whether or not a story is true for it to be worth studying? Even obvious lies can be interesting, and the natural inclination to minimize lying may not always be the best approach. Research participants do not even always know the truth themselves, which makes a positivist notion of truth, and the traditional idea of validity and of narrative as record suspect. In the interviews with Thomas, Moa, and Daniel, it would have added little to the analysis presented above. However, one could still ask how important these changes between narratives are. What can criminological theory learn from them?

The complex discursive work where Thomas, Moa, and Daniel balance differ-ent interpretative frameworks reveals some of the complexity of social life, and challenges the homogeneity of culture and the consistency of identity assumed by much social scientific theory. More specifically, it challenges the ideas of isolated deviant subcultures described by both the Chicago- and the Birming-ham-school (for an overview, see Plummer 1997; Turner 1990) and common-sense categorizations of people into, for example, "street" or "decent" (Anderson 1999). It also challenges Presser's emphasis on the *one* "unified life story" (Presser 2008). Many of Presser's narratives and the interview extracts presented above indicate a set of fundamentally different narratives. In order to *substantially* challenge the inherent individualism and rational actor model in criminology, it is probably better to describe such changes as interdiscursivity or as indicative of a repertoire of narratives (Sandberg 2009a). These narratives are sometimes in conflict, other times creatively combined, but always taken from the social context.

Instead of always searching for "the truth" one should appreciate the multitude of stories present in a social context, whether these are the product of years of fieldwork, a few meetings on the street, or interviews arranged by others or in prisons. Not only offenders, but everybody tells a multitude of stories. Instead of damning our data, these complex narratives teach us a great deal about people, culture, and society. By seeking answers to what narrative repertoire is available, why particular people emphasize particular stories, and how they go about doing this, we shed light on both them and their social context. The most common question in ethnographic research (do research

participants lie?) can thus be turned on its head with a more important one: what can "lies" tell us about life?

Acknowledgments

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