An Exploration Of Young Offenders’ Life Trajectories Through Narrative

Holly Ackland
An exploration of young offenders’ life trajectories through narrative

Dr Holly Ackland
University of Birmingham, Warwickshire EPS
Overview

• Rationale
• Literature review
• Narrative approach
• Research questions
• Participants
• Methodology
• Findings
• Implications for practice
• Role of EPs
• Evaluation
• Reflections and future recommendations
Rationale

- Fewer Young People within the Youth Secure Estate (YJB, 2018)
- Number of First Time Entrants Declining (YJB, 2018)
- More entrenched patterns of offending (Taylor, 2016)
- 68% of YOS reoffend within a year upon release from custody (YJB, 2018)
- Average number of reoffences has increased to 3.8 (YJB, 2018)
- Emerging role of EPS within the YJS (Parnes, 2017, Ryrie, 2006)
Literature review findings within developmental psychopathology framework

Facilitating factors:
- Social relationships
- Coping strategies
- Prosocial identity development
- Education, training, and employment
- Mindset: Higher order thinking skills, visualisation
- High motivation to desist

Barriers:
- Social relationships
- Community/culture – stigma
- Continued association with offender identity
- Lack of education, training, and employment
- Mindset: Impulsive, short-term thinking
- Low motivation to desist

Life experiences
- Developmental stages
- Historical factors
- Social cultural environment

DESISTANCE

LIFE COURSE

Biological process of ageing
Social bonds
Subjective interpretations of the world
Identity development and self-narrative
Cognitive transformations
Narrative approach

Individuals make sense of lives in a **storied format** (Spence, 1986), creating **meaning from matter and circumstances** (Murray, 2015)

Considers how an individual’s **identity and personality** have been shaped over time (Atkinson, 2007)

Deep insight into the connections, relationships and **interdependence** between individual, social circles and their environment (Kerby, 1991)
Primary research question:

a) How do YOs account for their life trajectories through narrative?
b) What protective and risk factors are perceived by YOs in relation to their criminal and desistance pathways?

Secondary research question:

a) What do professionals perceive as protective and risk factors to desistance?
b) How do these align with and differ from YP’s perceptions?
# Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus groups</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1st group: 4 Ps, including, an EP, case manager practitioner, probation officer and mental health practitioner. | **3 males**  
**White British heritage**  
**Aged 17**  
**First convicted of crimes aged 13**  
**Range of desistance periods**  
**Range of crimes committed**  
**2 Ps in employment, 1 awaiting college placement**  
**Recruitment – through 3rd party** |
| 2nd group: 4 Ps, including, two case manager practitioners, a social worker and an operations manager. | **3 males**  
**White British heritage**  
**Aged 17**  
**First convicted of crimes aged 13**  
**Range of desistance periods**  
**Range of crimes committed**  
**2 Ps in employment, 1 awaiting college placement**  
**Recruitment – through 3rd party** |
Methodology

Focus groups
- Lasted approx. 1 hour each
- Conducted in YJ buildings
- Professionals included from 2 different teams
- Card sort
- Thematic analysis
- Narrative re-storying

Interviews
- Lasted between 60-120 mins
- Conducted in YJ building, community centre and young persons home
- Card sort
- Visual aid / timeline
- Thematic analysis
RQ1
a) How do YOs account for their life trajectories through narratives?
b) What protective and risk factors are perceived by YOs in relation to their criminal and desistance pathways?

YP’s interviews
Card sort activity, visual timeline, and interview schedule

Verbatim transcription followed by further listening, reading, and re-reading

Short summary created of each Ps narrative

Narrative re-storying: Analysis of events and experiences

Thematic analysis: Identification of common themes

My own interpretations, comments, and reflections as the researcher

RQ2
a) What do professionals perceive as protective and risk factors to desistance?
b) How do these align with and differ from YPs perceptions?

Focus groups with YJ workers
Card sort activity, discussion questions and visual prompt

Verbatim transcription followed by further listening, reading, and re-reading

Thematic analysis: Identification of common themes

Results used to inform interview schedule for YP

Analysis, sense making, interpretation, and reflection

Analysis, sense making, interpretation, and reflection
‘they aren’t on my side, they’re against me’

‘I thought I was the man’
Luke

'wouldn’t let me give up on myself'
'don’t really want to be leaving'
Mason

‘kept kicking me out… made me… more angry’

‘I don’t care about my life no more’
RQ1

a) How do YOs account for their life trajectories through narratives?

b) What protective and risk factors are perceived by YOs in relation to their criminal and desistance pathways?

YP's Interviews
Card sort activity, visual timeline, and interview schedule,

Verbatim transcription followed by further listening, reading, and re-reading,

Short summary created of each P's narrative

Narrative re-storying: Analysis of events and experiences

Thematic analysis: Identification of common themes

My own interpretations, comments, and reflections as the researcher

RQ2

ea) What do professionals perceive as protective and risk factors to desistance?

b) How do these align with and differ from YP's perceptions?

Focus groups with YJ workers
Card sort activity, discussion questions and visual prompt,

Verbatim transcription followed by further listening, reading, and re-reading,

Thematic analysis: Identification of common themes

Results used to inform interview schedule for YP

My own interpretations, comments, and reflections as the researcher
Focus Group 1

'easier to go back to what you know'
'returning to an environment that hasn’t changed'
Focus Group 2

They’ve got so much rejection
We need a whole change in our approach

Individual factors
- Substances
- Challenging backgrounds
- False perception of custody

Systemic factors
- Professional frustrations
- Need for systemic changes
- Area/location
- Accommodation
Key findings

• **Professionals**: frustrations, systemic constraints, environmental challenges, practical support (e.g. accommodation, education, training, employment)

• **Young people**: individual factors (e.g. mind-set, proactive strategies), relational support

• **Transition**: period of disorientation and reorientation

• **Turning points**: childhood events, custodial experience

• **Desistance/persistance**: binary distinctions vs continuum
Adaptive functioning: non-offender identity
Non-criminal pathway

Adaptive functioning: offender identity
Criminal pathway

Custody

Childhood adversity
Unstable primary relationships
Poor attachments
Unmet needs
Parental/supportive role of shame in family/society/religion
Poor access to timely, meaningful supports
Reflexion from presocial organizations
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-custody</th>
<th>Custodial support</th>
<th>Post-custody</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Societal shifts – perception of offenders</td>
<td>• Desistance focused approach</td>
<td>• Realistic expectations – zig-zagging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Early identification and prevention</td>
<td>• Bespoke interventions across systemic layers</td>
<td>• Emotional support for transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Usefulness of ‘desistance’ terminology?</td>
<td>• Support to navigate challenges successfully</td>
<td>• Increased availability of ‘hooks for change’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Support for professionals e.g. supervision</td>
<td>• Consistent relational support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Greater focus on transitional supports</td>
<td>• Length of YOT involvement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengths</td>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Small sample size – rich, in-depth data</td>
<td>• Small sample size - lack of generalisability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Personal sense making</td>
<td>• Difficulties obtaining desired sample</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Greater insight into desistance</td>
<td>• Practical difficulties - interviews</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Findings enhanced theoretical generalisations / informed professional practice</td>
<td>• Retrospective accounts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ps governed direction of interviews</td>
<td>• No way of falsifying accounts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Often unheard population - platform</td>
<td>• Influence of interviewer / context of interviews</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Causal links / cumulative nature of events and experiences highlighted</td>
<td>• Participant feedback on analysis was not obtained</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reflections

- Ethical/practical constraints – flexibility
- Systemic, organisational and community work
- Role of schools in social inclusion
- Relational approaches
- Use of labels
- Reflective practice

Future recommendations:

- Voices of those in wider systems e.g. parents/guardians
- Application of psychological theory and frameworks within YJ practice
- Role and contribution of EPs within YJSs
References


Please tweet about the Conference using #DECP19