Community Studies Using Ethnographic Techniques: Still Relevant to Criminology?

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Abstract

During the 1960s and 1970s there was a robust and vibrant research tradition in the social sciences that involved documenting small communities and subcultural groups within societies. Since then, this tradition has sporadically resurfaced within Australian criminology, primarily through anthropologically oriented research that focuses on Indigenous people and their communities, and through 'street' participant-observation with young people and/or drug users. The impetus to undertake research of this kind has faltered in the past two decades for a range of reasons, loosely summarised under the headings of political, ethical, practical and empirical concerns. This article briefly describes the history of this research tradition within criminology and the factors that led to its decline, and concludes by arguing for its renaissance.

Introduction

A recent review of current meanings associated with 'community' underlines the evolving impact of globalisation, although it remains a powerful concept that continues to refer in cross-disciplinary social research and policy-related discourse to communities of place, interest and identity (Crow and Mah 2012). In this article the focus is on community-centred research and its use in and impact on Australian criminology. It is argued that, drawing on a number of sociological and anthropological traditions, 'community' studies that have had a bearing and influence on criminology have fallen into three main categories: those that centre on crime in a geographical area (typically a rural area), those that examine the social identities and networks of those involved in a marginalised lifestyle and/or illicit activity, and those that focus on cultural meanings and practice that shape interpersonal violence. A further significant and more recent strand of 'community' study has been the community of practice, such as courts, which is examined within the context of a particular site or place. In all four types of community study, there are spatial boundaries (such as town, neighbourhood, court location) and, despite differing research questions and theoretical frameworks, all share the common characteristic of participant-observation as a cornerstone of their methodology.

It can be claimed that ethnography in its many guises has undergone a resurgence internationally, and it appears to be resurfacing in Australia as a powerful methodological

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approach (Madden 2010). However, within criminology, although community studies using ethnographic techniques have had a considerable influence over the years, they are not often undertaken today. It is not the purpose of this article to examine the specific purposes of, or the theoretical-political debates that have surrounded and flowed from, the studies themselves. Nor is this a comprehensive survey of what has been done. Instead, a range of examples illustrates the kinds of studies that have been undertaken in Australia. Most of the examples are not recent. This is not to say that such research does not happen nowadays, but rather underlines the point that most of the influential or 'exemplar' studies were undertaken in the preceding two decades.

Drawing on the written accounts of these studies and commentaries by their authors, the article outlines current challenges and resistance to this research tradition. Based primarily on the reflections of those who have actually undertaken community studies (including the author), it concludes by outlining the positive attributes of such studies and the contribution they can make to answering fundamental criminological questions — How is crime defined? What influences crime? How is justice (re)generated? — as well as their relevance to insightful, informed policy and practice debate.

Community studies — Significance of place and location

A textbook from the 1970s on community studies (Bell and Newby 1971) traces the origins and development of community studies in the US and the UK from the 1920s onwards. The authors distinguish between what they see as studies where the community is an object of study, and where the community study is a method of empirical investigation. They are primarily studies of rural communities, with the exception of the Chicago school studies of urban neighbourhoods, with a focus on stratification, local politics, family, and the impact of socio-economic change. These were not necessarily individual enterprises; often teams of researchers were involved and, even when they were writing, they referred to debates about what 'community' means, the blurring of distinctions along the rural-urban continuum, the need to capture local and national dimensions to the local social system and to social networks that for some people are locality bound, but for many are not.

A key concern for some studies, most notably those generated by the Chicago school in the 1930s and 1940s, was the impact of ecological factors on social relationships. However, the theoretical underpinnings of a social ecological approach diminished in influence with a widespread view that it was pointless to tie patterns of social relationships to a specific geographical milieu. However, Dempsey (1990) argues that his study of 'Smalltown', an Australian rural town, found two key ecological factors — the small and stable population and its geographical isolation — played crucial roles in its social life. An analysis of crime data for rural New South Wales found that a key factor that correlated with higher crime rates was the size of the town (Jobes et al 2004), and Dempsey (1990) claims that gender, class, age and, to a lesser extent, length of time of residence were the principal factors shaping Smalltown social life.

'Street' ethnographies — The significance of the group

In the US post-World War II and up to the 1970s, there was a proliferation of studies broadly defined as 'street' ethnography. Drawing on the ethnographic tradition of anthropology, researchers would spend time immersed in what were called 'deviant' subcultures, which primarily centred on drug-taking and offending adults in inner-city areas (Weppner 1977). In essence, these types of studies involved investigating drug use and/or crime, from an insider's perspective and at 'street-level' or in 'domestic' spaces, with members of the 'group' having culturally or subculturally specific perspectives on crime or

drug use (Spradley 1974). Not all the research was ethnographic in the traditional sense. Inciardi met and 'hung out' with pickpockets in a range of locations and at different times, as the pickpockets did not congregate as a group in a publicly visible way (Inciardi 1977). In his study of 'rootless, alienated and unhealthy people' who lived in slum tenements, Siegal (1977:81) notes that the 'community' was not defined by 'place', but by the lifestyle of its members and how they were perceived and treated by more prosperous coterminous residents of the neighbourhood.

Anthropological fieldwork — The significance of cultural traditions and practices

Both community studies and 'street' ethnographies were influenced by the anthropological tradition in which ethnography emerged as the key method of studying typically small-scale Indigenous or 'exotic' societies (for example, Warner in the 1930s, who did fieldwork on Indigenous people in Australia before undertaking or being involved in community studies in the US and Ireland) incorporating the fieldwork method and a commitment to see another world view, the idea of a distinct or separate cultural domains. Still, during the 1970s, anthropologists were undertaking what might be termed 'classical' fieldwork in small, remote communities in Australia, and their subject of study was Indigenous traditions.

So, for example, Bell lived in central Australia in the mid-1970s in a house with her two children, and her book focuses on women's ritual life (Bell 1983). Similarly, Cowlishaw (1999) undertook fieldwork for her PhD in the 1970s in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, with the intention of understanding Aboriginal women's lives. Both books document their author's arrival 'in the field'— very much a literary tradition of ethnographies — in order to describe initial impressions and to locate the author and the reader in 'another world'. As Cowlishaw (1999:18) describes it, fieldwork is the 'major methodology of anthropology, a way of intensively participating in an unfamiliar cultural domain in order to understand, as it were, from the inside'.[1] Post-fieldwork, both have written about interpersonal violence based on their ethnography-informed experience (Bell and Nelson 1989; Cowlishaw 1999). As is argued later in this paper, contemporary understandings of violence in Indigenous communities continue to draw on earlier ethnographic work by anthropologists in a range of settings.

The Australian experience — Place, group and culture

In Australia, since the 1970s and the end of 'classical' fieldwork in remote Indigenous communities, there have continued to be some ethnographies in such places, but they are few and much influenced by disciplinary upheavals of the past few decades (see, for example, Austin-Broos 2009; Musharbash 2008; and Marcus and Fischer 1986 for

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[1]   Cowlishaw, however, is writing many years after she undertook her fieldwork and in the interim she wrote a book on race relations in a country town she calls Brindleton. Her account is laced with an ironic tone and she refers to the seismic shift within the anthropological tradition since her time in Arnhem Land. Fieldwork became problematic for a host of reasons: it was no longer appropriate, it was a legacy of the colonial past, and it was a flawed and misconceived discipline that objectified the 'other' and could no longer focus on the culturally different, 'exotic', small-scale communities because of globalisation and rapid change that had occurred everywhere. At the time of her fieldwork, Cowlishaw drily notes that she did not see herself as 'engaged in producing a disempowering Orientalist form of knowledge ... much less complicit in the repressive state apparatus, or part of a Foucaultian panopticon' (1999:26). She observes that during her fieldwork she realised she needed to tell a story not of cultural traditions, but of the 'painful drama of race relations' in which anthropologists are actors, rather than observers (1999:27).

an elegant exposition of the anthropological angst). Other studies that employ ethnographic techniques have had different foci: place, collective cultural meanings, individual life stories and subjective experiences. In the tradition of community studies, the book *Crime in a Rural Community* is based on a study of a particular small rural town named 'Walcha' in northern New South Wales. O'Connor and Gray (1989) were interested in the significance of locality on crime, as they argue that local knowledge, conditions and opportunities have direct effects on the nature and extent of crime in the local social environment and, it might be added, the responses to that crime. Their research involved examining census and police data, and a survey of a random sample of adult residents. The primary location of seven weeks of 'participant-observation' was the police station, along with attendance at one court session (as the magistrate only visited occasionally). With a focus on violence and masculinity, recent research on mining communities in regional Australia involved fieldwork and semi-structured interviews with more than 140 individuals, but participant-observation is not included in the account of its method (Carrington et al 2012).

In 'street' ethnography, only some groups are suited to the classic fieldwork study, and participant-observation enables the researcher see how people interact in their everyday lives with peers and others. Where place-based observation and interaction are not so feasible, there is a greater reliance on in-depth interviews. To take a few examples, Maher's ethnographic study involved fieldwork for two years in Cabramatta in outer Sydney (Maher et al 1998); Dwyer's (2008) study of the street-based drug marketplace in Footscray, Melbourne, involved two years of fieldwork with Vietnamese-Australian heroin users/sellers; and research on recreational poly-drug use involved in-depth interviews (Duff 2008), as it is not a geographically defined drug marketplace.

Any attempt to capture the reality of life in a subculture or marginalised cultural traditions entails spending time in a particular locale to see how cultural meanings influence everyday life and how 'representatives' interact and are treated by other members of society, including statutory representatives, such as police. This includes research with marginalised youth, ethnic groups, and Indigenous communities. Three recent examples of research conducted in urban locales are Cowlishaw's (2009) urban ethnography with Aboriginal people in Mt Druitt, the research by Maher et al (1998) in Cabramatta, and a study in south-western Sydney, which informs Collins et al's (2000) book *Kebabs, Kids, Cops and Crime*.

Inner-city, ethnic young people

Maher's study was in Cabramatta, with user-sellers of heroin who were participants but not necessarily residents in a drug market in a location that was known as Australia's 'heroin capital' and Sydney's 'Asian city'. The site of fieldwork was analysed as a drug market, with systematic recording of transactions and policing. But geographical boundaries and a sense of place were also significant because the research team concluded that, for Indo-Chinese youth, 'territoriality' was an integral part of oppositional street culture (Maher et al 1998:8–9).

Calling it 'ethnographic-type' research, the study by Collins, Noble, Poynting and Taber (2000) was less geographically defined, but their book draws on fieldwork conducted in 1996 by three of the authors in south-western Sydney among male and female Lebanese youth, as well as additional in-depth interviews with young people, parents, community leaders and workers, and police. Having referred to the literature on subcultures, whereby groups/gangs are given functional explanations, they stress how gang and friendship groups are strategies for creating order and, although neighbourhoods are the places where the

young men reside and grow up, they suggest there is fluidity of groupings across ethnic/race and territory boundaries.

Sites but not places

Another way 'place' can be central to a study is where there is a 'hot spot' of criminal or antisocial activity. Similar to drug markets, there have been observational studies of areas with a high density of alcohol outlets and/or nightclubs (see, for example, Tomsen 2004; Hauritz et al 1998). However, the principal difference that there is no self-identifying 'community' of regular patrons, and it is not usually the subjective experiences of drinkers that are of interest as they do not have a clearly articulated 'differentiated' or 'discreet' world view.

Although there are examples of overseas research where the researcher has immersed himself or herself in 'closed institutions', such as mental hospitals and prisons (for example, Drake and Earle 2013), this doesn't seem to have happened in Australia. Instead, there are studies that involved in-depth interviews with prisoners or young male offenders, such as Halsey (2007), who over a five-year period recorded the accounts of 47 young men, and Goulding's research in a Western Australian prison, where her method is described as 'in-depth conversations with prisoners serving long-term sentences' and her analysis is of 'prisoners' narratives' (Goulding 2007:399).

Often it seems in-depth interviews are conducted with groups because of their experience of crime and/or of the criminal justice system. As victims of crime are usually of interest because they have been victims of a certain *type* of crime, such as sexual violence or domestic violence, they are not linked by social or cultural ties; nor do they identify with a physically defined community, which means in-depth interviews and focus groups are the usual method used.

Nevertheless, there have been place-based studies of criminal justice practice that involved observing how victims are treated in specified court settings for specified cases (for example, Bonney 1987) and the processing of juveniles through the courts (for example, Travers 2007). Observing but not necessarily participating in criminal justice agencies (most notably, police) has occurred in specified locations or regions (for example, Chan et al 2003; Dixon 2011), but none have quite the 'immersion' of a classical participant-observer found in Lea's account of the health bureaucracy in the Northern Territory (Lea 2008).

A common theme running through these studies is the aim of eliciting an insider's perspective, with considerable variation in how much emphasis is given to individual and collective beliefs and behaviour as a result of place-based 'community'. Although not typically articulated, it seems for many the 'site' of research is representative or illustrative of many similar entities or processes (such as court-based observations). For other studies, the place or community has a more specific and uncommon character that frames the approach and analysis (such as street-based ethnography and community studies). Table 1 presents a summary of Australian examples of studies that are referred to in this paper.

Table 1: Australian studies that examine place-based communities or practices

Type	Focus	Examples referred to in the paper
Community studies	Social stratification, local politics, social cohesion Race relations in country towns	Dempsey 1990 Wild 1974 O'Connor and Gray 1999 Cowlishaw 1999
'Street' ethnographies	Inner-city drug users Young people in 'ethnic gangs' in urban locations	Maher et al 1998 Dwyer 2008 Collins et al 2000
Cultural ethnographies	Social life, conflict and violence, substance misuse in remote communities Urban ethnography	Brady 1992 Sackett 1988 Martin 2009 Cowlishaw 2009
Sites of 'justice in action'	Observation of police and courts Prison life	Chan et al 2003 Dixon 2011 Travers 2007 Bonney 1987 Halsey 2007 Goulding 2007

Critiques

The question arises why there have been so few criminological studies that employ fieldwork or participant-observation since the 1970s. Some reasons given relate to critiques of the method, others to the subject matter (crime and criminals), and others to institutional and structural factors that shape the conduct and focus of social science. There is not the space here to explore or do justice to wide and often interrelated critiques from a range of standpoints, but Table 2 presents a short overview of some of the more persistent strands of resistance, loosely grouped under the headings of political and ideological, ethical, practical, and empirical critiques. Some of these critiques are canvassed in more depth in other contributions to this Special Issue.

Table 2: Critiques of ethnographic fieldwork and participant-observation

Political and ideological	The impact of post-modernism and post-structuralism on the theoretical foundations: • According to Cowlishaw (1999) anthropologists have been their own most effective critics, with a sustained attack on past work that involved deconstructing representations and texts as colonial or neo-colonial projects. • In criminology, the focus on crime has been viewed as contributing to stereotypes of problematic 'other' people/groups and as presenting working-class lives in a way that perpetuates their oppression and/or marginalised status or, on the other hand, as valorising bad behaviour and reifying certain groups as 'outlaws'.
Ethical	Contributing to the challenges of contemporary ethical review processes, there is a whole host of ethical issues attached to participant-observation including: • Whether there can there be 'informed' consent', with some glossing their research as 'writing a book' (for example, Whyte 1955; Cowlishaw 1999). Very intrusive. • Whether the 'subjects' can be involved as equals in active engagement in the research process and end products. • Whether the 'subjects' get 'something' from the research. • Whether there are risks to researchers and to those they 'participate with' and observe, and what protection there is, given it can be a process of familiarisation and result in unexpected and intrusive narratives (see, for example, Menih 2013 in this Special Issue).
Practical	There is a problem of defining boundaries, in a spatial sense, as well as the 'social unit' of analysis (James 1977). At a more applied level, it may not be feasible due to: • the absence of institutional support and funding; • the absence of a rich and varied tradition of such research being undertaken in criminology, which creates an absence of precedents and expertise; • a lack of clarity at the outset of the project, and the length of time it takes; • the requirement for a special sort of person to do it; • the need for formal and informal support from key 'gatekeepers', and the risk of being 'conned' or 'co-opted'.
Empirical	Probably the most trenchant and influential criticisms are in the empirical tradition, and they depict such research as unique, discrete and non-cumulative. Questions are raised about: • How can the research be generalised sufficiently to inform policy and practice?

	- As it is one person's or several people's narrative or account, with inherent subjective biases, how representative or valid are the results? Within the 'field' there may be conflicting and different viewpoints, and how are these dealt with? - Can the results be replicated, as the analysis and interpretation rely heavily on the researcher's understanding of the site and group (Maher et al 1998)?

What ethnographic research offers

Such critiques need to be balanced by a consideration of what ethnographic research can achieve, and of its advantages. Arguably, as a *form of communication*, a good ethnography is hard to beat, and can sit easily between popular fictional and 'factual' media representations of crime and justice and academic tracts. There has been an era of 'dissolution' during which much has been said about the blurring of boundaries, fluidity and hybridity. Although it is indisputable that the notions of community and identity are much harder to pin down, so much energy seems to have been redirected into debates on political standpoints and displays of theoretical knowledge.

An in-depth description focused on a 'community', defined by place or practice, based on lived experience of 'habitus' and practice, can be a very powerful account of social life that will stand the test of time. So, for example, *Street Corner Society* gives a vivid picture of aspects of life for inner-city young men in America in the 1930s (Whyte 1955). There are a number of examples where ethnographic research and experience have enabled authors to write in a very direct way about phenomena widely viewed as 'negative' or 'unreasonable' or 'unfair' by 'outsiders'. Below I briefly refer to three examples: understanding violence, risk-taking, and the practice of justice.

Understanding violence

In her introductory chapter, Cowlishaw (1999) touches on practices and beliefs which caused frustration among 'whites': not amassing or caring for goods, fluidity of movement, and sense of personal autonomy. She states that much of the Rembarrnga social life was invisible from outside, except in a 'distorted and impoverished form', and much of everyday life is not perceived as cultural. To provide insights into the specific forms of violence found in some Indigenous communities there continues to be recourse to earlier anthropological work that involved being 'embedded' in everyday life for at least a number of years.

In their report *Violence in Indigenous Communities*, Memmott et al (2001) cite anthropologists and other social scientists, such as Reser, Hunter, Martin, Brady and Langton, who have worked in or undertaken fieldwork in Indigenous communities or neighbourhoods. Their analyses of situational factors that contribute to violence include 'expressions of anger' and precipitating causes, which include 'jealousy', 'payments of debts' and 'payback'. They cite Martin (1988), who lived for many years at Aurukun, when he argues that the nature and role of contemporary fighting and violence at Aurukun can be attributed in part to intervention by wider society and in part to deeply rooted cultural values effecting expressions of emotions such as anger.

Even today, and even with more Indigenous people directly involved in and leading research, there is ongoing reference to and co-option of key concepts and understandings that emerged and developed over time from fieldwork that was undertaken in remote

Indigenous communities from the 1960s to the early 1980s. For example, the term 'demand sharing' was first coined by Peterson (1993). The significance of and tension between autonomy and relatedness explored so lucidly by Myers in his 1986 book *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self*, continues to percolate and inform more recent writings on violence and social disorder (see, for example, Martin 2009; Blagg 2011) and also contemporary commentaries by anthropologists on violence in Indigenous communities (see the three chapters on violence in Altman and Hinkson 2010). The situated nature of interpersonal violence and 'resistance' to intervention is often presented through community-based ethnographic work in remote places (see, for example, Sackett 1988; Martin 2009), with social and geographic boundaries captured through the concept of 'domains' (for example, Trigger 1986).

Understanding risk-taking

Australian researchers on drug and substance abuse have argued the importance of the appeal and subjective experience of drug taking, and not just from a physiological perspective. It includes the pleasures of use and group bonding and excitement often experienced with 'scoring' (MacLean 2008; Dwyer 2008). Duff (2008) argues that 'rationalist' accounts of young people's drug-use behaviours, with their emphasis on 'cost-benefit' decision making, do not sufficiently explain and capture what he describes as conscious and unconscious choices and decisions, physical and psychical sensations and structural and contextual forces. Public health messages about the risk of drug taking are contrasted with what he describes as users' private codes about the illicit pleasures only they experience.

Although Duff (2008) argues that considering the significance of drug-related risks and pleasures as experienced by users will lead to new and more effective interventions, he does not spell out in any concrete way what this might entail. Nevertheless, the involvement of former users in counselling and mentoring roles in treatment or rehabilitation regimes would suggest there is potential value in reviewing intervention approaches and practice based on such experiential accounts, and has been argued over the years as assisting and informing those engaged in treatment or rehabilitation (see, for example, Spradley 1977).

Understanding the practice of justice

From a personal perspective, observation of and interaction with police over five years in the Western Desert helped ensure that a research project that I was involved in on the policing implications of illicit drug use in rural and remote Indigenous communities was framed in a way, both in terms of method and the writing up of the findings, that was relevant to everyday policing (Delahunty and Putt 2006). As a result, we considered at the outset the different ways illegal drugs are relevant to policing; for example, being responsible for or having contact with drug-affected people in everyday practice at the time of apprehension, in custody, through reports of crime or child protection, through the detection and prosecution of illegal drug offences, and in their community and crime-prevention work. We developed a good-practice framework and held workshops that used scenarios that tried to capture the kind of routine experiences police have and the decisions they have to make.

Another example is found in the reflections of Dixon (2011), who fondly remembers his fieldwork with police, although he does at the outset emphasise that the research was not ethnography, but observation of police practice over a six-month period. The experience, he writes, fundamentally changed what he knew and gave him an understanding of the mundane nature of policing work and of the cynicism common among police. Having underlined the importance of doing/seeing, rather than reading about, he discovered through

his earlier fieldwork in England that commonly accepted views of policing practice were 'empirically wrong' and not just a political difference in perspective (Dixon 2011). His enthusiasm for the learning he acquired about the practice of policing through his observations is echoed by other authors who have undertaken fieldwork. The next section refers to some of these.

Attributes of situated participant-observation

In accounts of ethnographic research various attributes of the methodological approach have been highlighted. These include:

- *Accessing marginalised/submerged/subversive/hidden 'groups'*: According to Maher et al:

  > ethnographic research methods have demonstrated utility in situations where little is known about the phenomena under investigation, where populations are 'hidden' or hard to access, where contexts and phenomena are not durably constituted, trends and processes are emergent, and where populations display wide variations in roles and performances (1998:9).

- *Better 'representation', and more representative*: For example, the initial stages of two years of fieldwork in Cabramatta in Sydney involved mapping 'social locations' where drug use and street-level distribution occurred. It was part of a 'time-location method' of targeted sampling, which it is argued produces a more robust sample than surveys that rely on self-selected or opportunity samples (Maher et al 1998:10).

- *Better interpretation of statistics from survey and administrative data*: As administrative data is a cumulative product and representation of the process of meting out justice, such research can enhance and inform the interpretation of statistical data from criminal justice agencies, as well as survey responses (James 1977; Roy et al 2012). Seeking to test theoretical models used to explain Indigenous violence, a recent analysis of survey results in Australia shows, however, the limitations of equating questionnaire items and a binary distinction between remote and non-remote residence with the complex picture that emerges from ethnographic fieldwork in particular places (Weatherburn and Snowball 2012).

- *Enhancing researcher-awareness*: Without a doubt, personal factors affect research (Dixon 2011), but the process of interpretation and analysis challenges assumptions and unconscious values and judgments, so that we are more aware of our limitations and our partial knowledge and understanding of the 'other', and different ways of seeing and being. The process also illuminates the taken-for-granted everyday (Cowlishaw 1999). The personal experience of a small social world and of participant-observation can often be discomforting and unsettling — to be an 'outsider', and to have liminal 'status' — especially when decisions and actions are part of being a participant.

- *More accountability*: Direct engagement with research participants and 'subjects' during a prolonged period of fieldwork and post-fieldwork can ensure the process and the researcher are more accountable to local people, who will ask why and 'what for' about the study (see, for example, Dixon 2011). Various strategies to address the insider/outsider divide and to forge a more collaborative approach to 'community' and 'group' ethnographic-oriented research have involved 'joint projects' (for example, Wood and Bradley 2009), 'joint authorship' and

complementary commentaries (for example, Bell and Nelson 1989; Barclay et al 2007), and the emergence of individual scholars who are practitioner-academics (for example, Young 1993). Nevertheless, it remains questionable whether such strategies sufficiently address underlying tensions related to accountability, representation and ownership.

Policy and practice implications — Place, group, and culture

We acknowledge diversity in the Indigenous population and the importance of context to understand why certain measures cannot be transplanted from one place to another. Within the social policy domain, the delivery of social services and targeting of initiatives is structured by the significance of macro-indicators of economic-social disadvantage to specific vulnerable and marginalised populations. Through 'thick' descriptions, the 'mapping' of needs and gaps becomes a more sophisticated and nuanced accounting of individual and collective risk and protective factors that influence criminal and harmful behaviour. Such accounts can also challenge the fundamental assumptions that underpin normative concepts within social policy and criminal law.

However, we need to be judicious in our decisions about where and with whom place-based participant-observation might be fruitful. Below are some examples of what researchers have argued are the practice and policy implications of their in-depth research. Such claims may help guide these decisions, because of clear connections between the context (knowing place and localised cultural practices and beliefs) and policy or practice.

Community crime prevention

O'Connor and Gray (1989) describe a renewed focus in criminology on the role of the local environment, primarily because of the emphasis on local community and environment within crime control and prevention initiatives. They argue their research supports the importance of locality in understanding the public's perception of crime and reactions to it (O'Connor and Gray 1989). Attachment to community, social capital and cohesion affect fear and perceptions of crime, and the willingness and capacity to address social problems, including crime. It is assumed that characteristics of the community influence crime-related attitudes and behaviour, and impact on attitudes and behaviours within the criminal justice system. This is also a major theme in the *Violence in Indigenous Communities* report, in that effective violence prevention is viewed as needing to be understood and then developed within local contexts because of specific socio-cultural factors and localised histories and traditions (Memmott et al 2001).

Criminal justice reforms and drug harm reduction

It is probably in the realm of drug policy, and the intersection between the three strands of harm, demand and supply reduction, that the usefulness of ethnographic research is most apparent, in its ability to present a grounded view of the ramifications of policy on a community or group. Maher et al (1998) highlight the consequences of certain forms of law enforcement practice on intravenous drug use and the contribution of ethnographic research to understanding the transmission of blood-borne viruses between intravenous users. They assert that such research has informed the development and implementation of culturally relevant street-based interventions and aggressive outreach programs in the US and the UK.

Another illustration relates to demand and supply reduction efforts aimed at alcohol abuse and petrol inhalation. As a health researcher and criminologist, Brady first undertook

fieldwork in Yalata in the 1980s and over the years has produced papers and resources that seek to inform both Indigenous people and policymakers about alcohol use (Brady 1998) and petrol sniffing (Brady 1992). It is doubtful that her work would have been so insightful and influential without that initial and subsequent exposure to everyday community life and the criminal justice system's 'ways of doing business'.

Conclusion

This article has drawn on Australian examples of research in the crime and justice field that have been influenced by the ethnographic tradition of prolonged participant-observation within a 'community', in order to convey its intermittent and selective deployment and evolution over the years. Despite the differing research questions and theoretical and disciplinary lenses that framed their research, these studies share a common thread: a commitment to understand the detail of the everyday through participant-observation or 'immersed' observation. Some are enduring legacies and, certainly, all of those involved have seen the study of community as a personal journey of considerable reward and insight that ultimately can and should contribute to reform and critical debates. So often the multiple viewpoints and practices of the 'community' are marginalised or muted.

It seems there are endless opportunities to look more closely at the significance of place, group and culture. It may be argued that it is no longer relevant: we are too mobile, too often participating in the virtual world, and too fragmented in our socio-cultural identities. It could be argued it is too difficult, especially given the time and commitment that may be involved and the challenges of obtaining funding, gatekeeper support, and ethics committee clearance. Certainly, unless there is a more conscious and proactive movement to support such research, the tradition is likely to continue to wither and survive only in shallow and truncated forms of ethnography.

'Communities' and their cultural mores and practices have always been maddeningly difficult to define, and very contested, but a recent survey in the UK of 100 community studies concludes that such studies remain a powerful and relevant framework for research and policy development (Crow and Mah 2012). Reflecting on 45 years' experience with community studies, Pahl (2005:637) is heartened by recent research on personal communities that moves beyond the dichotomy of the observed, outsider-imposed and subjective community because 'where people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences'. It has never been nor ever will be a perfect process, and the picture will continue to be partial and infused with theoretical and political standpoints, but the end result can be very illuminating.

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