

Move over and make space for lived experience criminology: Why we do “lived experience”

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Abstract

This paper points out the disparity in the recognition of lived experiences between the United States – where convict criminology is more established, and Australia. The authors call for a shift from convict to lived experience criminology in Australia, emphasising the need for diverse methodologies beyond autoethnography. It is pertinent to note here that the authors of this paper, Antojado and McPhee, are formerly incarcerated scholars, serving time in various prisons in Australia. We use our expertise by experience to inform our work. This paper discusses the challenges individuals with lived prison and/or criminal legal sanction experience (LPCLSE) face in gaining academic recognition and critiques the academic community’s hesitance to accept us as equals. It stresses the significance of lived experiences in deepening the understanding of the social and emotional aspects of crime and justice. Integrating these narratives into criminology is argued to challenge and enrich present epistemological frameworks, leading to more holistic and empathetic research and policy-making in the criminal legal sector. The authors advocate for redefining criminological expertise to value experience equally with academic qualifications and call for academic support for the development of lived experience criminology. This is seen as crucial for a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of crime and justice discourses, urging criminologists to embrace and develop this subfield. Using the work of bell hooks and Dean Spade, we also turn our attention to the reasons for why people with lived experience expertise might engage in this type of work, arguing that it is a way for us to make/unmake meaning, to live with purpose, to live with guilt, and to love.

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Introduction

The incorporation of lived experience is progressively being acknowledged within the discipline of criminology. This approach has experienced a more rapid and comprehensive integration in fields such as mental health (Gilbert & Stickley, 2012; Roennfeldt & Byrne, 2020) and social work (Baidawi et al., 2023), in contrast to criminology, which has demonstrated a more gradual, hesitant (and slow) adoption. A significant milestone in this context was achieved during the 2023 Australia New Zealand Society of Criminology (ANZSOC) Conference in Melbourne, Australia, where a keynote panel focusing on lived experiences was introduced for the first time, featuring speakers Dwayne Antojado and Koryom Gatulak – individuals with lived experience of the criminal legal system (CLS) in Australia. In a parallel development, the 2023 American Society of Criminology conference, held in Philadelphia, United States, underscored the importance of engaging individuals with first-hand experience in criminological discussions. In the United States, the subfield of convict criminology actively engages the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals in research, pedagogy, and the generation of knowledge pertaining to prisons and the broader CLS (Richards & Ross, 2001; Ross et al., 2014; Tietjen, 2019). This subfield notably emphasises the contributions of scholars who possess direct experience within the CLS. However, such a degree of integration and recognition of lived experience has not yet been equivalently reflected in the Australian criminological terrain (Carey et al., 2022). This indicates a noticeable disparity in the evolution and acceptance of the lived experience paradigm within criminology between these geographical and political regions.

While there have been efforts by some Australian and Aoteroa New Zealand scholars (e.g., Antojado et al., 2023; Johns, 2023; Johns et al., 2022; Thom & Burnside, 2018) to prioritise and amplify the narratives of individuals with lived experience, these efforts remain limited and have largely been overlooked within the broader criminological discourse. Carey et al. (2022) have elucidated the challenges and obstacles in integrating convict criminology into the Australian criminological terrain. Among these challenges is the difficulty faced by Australian academics with criminal records in attending the annual American Society of Criminology conference – which is considered the central hub of this subfield (Newbold, 2017). The restrictive visa and entry policies that discriminate against individuals with criminal histories in the United States pose a significant barrier (Blista et al., 2015). Additionally, Carey et al. (2022) discuss the problematic nature of the term *convict* in the Australian context, given the country's colonial history. They articulate that the mere presence of the word in an Australian setting can evoke strong negative emotions and even anger due to the historical context where the arrival of ships from the *old country* led to the forceful displacement, abuse, and murder of Indigenous people (Carey et al., 2022). Addressing the intricate challenges identified, Antojado (2023a) advocates for a transition from the term *convict criminology* to *lived experience criminology* within the Australian scholarly terrain. This terminological evolution also seeks to extend the scope of the discipline to include a diverse

array of CLS experiences. It emphasises engaging with a broader spectrum of academic methodologies, moving beyond the predominant reliance on autoethnography that characterises convict criminology. This strategic reorientation aims to anchor the discipline in a framework that is not only more inclusive but also more attuned to the specific contextual realities of Australian criminological scholarship. Such that the violent histories of Australia's colonial context is not mirrored in the name of the subfield which seeks to platform marginalised voices, including those of First Nations people.

However, the implications of lived experience criminology extend well beyond the Australian context. Although still in its nascent stages, with its formal naming in Antojado's (2023a) paper published in the *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, the subdiscipline holds significant potential for international application. This framework may prove particularly relevant in other countries where colonisation and migration of *convicts* induce painful memories for Indigenous and First Nation populations (e.g., Aotearoa New Zealand, Canada, etc.). At its core, lived experience criminology is about democratising knowledge production by involving those who have been subjects of the CLS in the creation of criminological epistemologies, whilst remaining attuned and abreast with decolonising perspectives within the discipline (see Blagg & Anthony, 2019). It challenges the traditional paradigms of convict criminology, which have largely relied on autoethnography, by advocating for a more expansive conceptualisation of the lived realities of those within the system. This approach seeks to transcend the limitations of self-narrative and engage with a wider range of academic methodologies, thereby offering a transformative lens through which criminological scholarship can evolve. Latour's (2004) epistemology of the body, where he argues that the body is an "interface that becomes more and more describable as it learns to be affected by more and more elements" (p. 206), describing our knowledge about the body as a culmination of outputs derived from the various instruments of science – a stethoscope, a scanning tool, blood chemistry, and so on. Each of these renders a *way of knowing* about the material body, though alone cannot paint a holistic picture. We argue that lived experience criminology brings forth one way of knowing that contributes and forms part of criminological epistemologies, akin to the various instruments of science used to describe the body. Similarly, Santos (2007, as cited in Johns, 2023) proposed an ecology of knowledge premised on the "recognition of the existence of a plurality of knowledge beyond scientific knowledge" (p. 59). In our view, this includes knowledge derived from lived experience of being part of the system and its institutions (e.g., prison).

Nevertheless, both Carey et al. (2022) and Antojado (2023a) emphasise the imperative to facilitate the inclusion and empowerment of individuals with lived prison and/or criminal legal sanction experience (LPCLSE) within the academic realm. They advocate for the utilisation of these individuals' personal experiential narratives and wisdom, which embody "the emergent, frequent, and salient themes" (Antojado, 2023a, p. 6) derived from their experiences, as foundational elements in their academic contributions. This approach is posited to foster the development of new perspectives and methodologies, thereby propelling the field of criminology in innovative and hopefully nuanced directions. However, a significant challenge arises from the academy's apparent reluctance to accept individuals with LPCLSE as equal members of the criminological community. This hesitation is evidenced by the experiences of both authors of this paper. There exists a perceptible attitude of superiority within the academic community, which often relegates individuals with LPCLSE to the role of mere research subjects, undervaluing their potential to contribute substantively to the discipline. This issue was raised by Dwayne

Antojado in the most recent 2023 ANZSOC Conference in Melbourne, where the current president, Angela Higginson, apologised for the subjugate treatment of those with lived experience seeking to obtain recognition from the local criminological community.

It is essential to note that while there may be a growing recognition of the value of lived experience perspectives within the scholarly community, this recognition has not necessarily been translated into tangible and meaningful outcomes for lived experience scholars, particularly in Australia. To the authors' knowledge, no scholar who openly incorporates their lived experience into their academic work is employed on an ongoing and continuing basis in any criminology department within higher education institutions in Australia. While this might partly reflect the relatively nascent development of the lived experience community in the country, it also underscores a concerning lack of focus on ensuring meaningful representation of lived experience within academic spaces (Antojado et al., 2024). This apparent oversight by the academic community can be compared to the critique offered by Phillips et al. (2020), who challenge British criminology's neglect of race and racism, and the marginalisation of Black scholars and Black scholarship. They argue that mapping the contours of this neglect is a difficult task but nevertheless an important one. In this spirit, we recognise that, using their terms, the *neglect* of Australian criminology's blinkeredness, may not indeed be intentional, but we hope this paper serves as a reminder for those that have may have forgotten, or as an informative piece for those who may never have thought to see the people they research as equal contributors to the field of criminology. Borrowing from Paula Harriot's (2024) keynote address at the 2024 British Society of Criminology conference in Glasgow, "there's no criminology without criminals", and Rod Earle's (2018) "criminology's debt to criminals" (p. 1499), the neglect to elevate the voices and expertise of those who buttressed the careers of many in the field is ethically problematic, but that is a paper for a different occasion. However, more needs to be done to ensure that people with LPCLSE are represented at universities, on the same terms as everyone else.

Additionally, there are also notable absences of structured pathways for individuals with lived experience to meaningfully engage in criminological discourse, with their involvement frequently reduced to tokenistic consultations. The literature also reveals the academy's potential unsuitability for welcoming individuals with LPCLSE, citing issues such as allegations of bullying, negative workplace cultures, and territorial dynamics regarding research areas (Giorgi, 2012; Wieland & Beitz, 2015). This raises a critical question: if not within the academic environment, which traditionally serves as the breeding ground for new and emancipatory knowledge, where should individuals with LPCLSE be positioned? The position taken by the authors of this paper suggests that individuals with LPCLSE should not be confined solely to academic roles but should also be integrated into various sectors of the CLS. We argue that the academy should provide the educational foundation necessary for these individuals to contribute effectively to diverse areas. Given that scholarship is often the incubator for groundbreaking ideas, pushing the boundaries of criminology into critical domains, the inclusion of LPCLSE is deemed essential to this progressive endeavour.

This paper, while not featuring a conventional results section, is grounded in our collective journey, from incarcerated people to lived experience scholars. The opinions, perspectives, and arguments presented herein are deeply anchored in our experiences as individuals with LPCLSE. It is crucial to acknowledge that lived experience work and research may not always conform to traditional academic structures for presenting novel and/or nuanced knowledge. The distinctiveness of lived experience scholarship lies in its ability to transcend the usual

boundaries of academia. It adds rich, often inaccessible textures to knowledge and research, especially pertinent in the field of criminology where criminalised people are often ostracised, forced into underground subcultures and thus deemed hard to reach. Lived experience research allows us to tell and share our stories and expertise on our terms, interpreted through our worldview, minimising the risk of misinterpretation and othering. This departure from conventional academic formats is not a limitation but rather a strength. It enables a more comprehensive and authentic representation of the complexities inherent in the lived experiences of those who have navigated the CLS. By embracing these diverse methodologies and insights, criminology as a discipline can evolve to include a broader, more nuanced understanding of criminal justice issues.

What do we mean by lived experience and why is important?

Lived experience, particularly within the context of criminology, encompasses the personal encounters, perceptions, and insights of individuals who have directly engaged with the CLS, whether as professionals within the system, or those subject to the system as part of a criminal legal sanction imposed upon by law, abbreviated in this body of work as LPCLSE. While adoption has been slow, the criminological interest in lived experience is extensive, encompassing the experiences of those harmed, criminal legal workers, and incarcerated people (McGregor, 2021). This interest extends to the exploration of incarcerated people's lived experiences behind prison walls, shedding light on the phenomenological corporeity in prison settings (Philippe-Beauchamp, 2021). Moreover, cultural criminology emphasises the importance of understanding the lived experience of crime, transgression, and social control, recognising the significance of personal narratives in comprehending the complexities of criminality and victimisation (Merrill & Frigon, 2015). Additionally, lived experience is crucial in informing public criminology, as it strengthens the relationship between academics, policymakers, advocates, practitioners, and individuals with LPCLSE, victimisation, and punishment, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the CLS (McAleese, 2019). The exploration of lived experience within criminology is not only essential for understanding the personal and emotional dimensions of crime and justice but also for informing transformative learning and professional practice, particularly in working cross-culturally and addressing the needs of diverse populations (Blalock & Akehi, 2018). Therefore, lived experience plays a pivotal role in enriching criminological scholarship and practice by providing a platform for marginalised voices, fostering reflexivity, and offering a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of crime, victimisation, and social control, for example.

Lived experience is increasingly recognised as a valuable perspective in criminology, offering unique insights into complex social phenomena. McIntosh and Wright (2019) argue that lived experience can inform sharp critique and offer an innovative window on aspects of the *shared typical* or what Antojado (2023a) coins as the *common experiential narrative*. It is important to value these stories and ensure that lived experience researchers are not re-traumatised through their involvement in research (Visser et al., 2021). Additionally, understanding experience in the context of social, cultural, and institutional narratives is crucial (Puplampu et al., 2020). Lived experience reports emphasise the importance of context on various phenomena, such as health behaviours, and decision making—highlighting the significance of understanding experiences in the context of social, cultural, and institutional narratives

(Antojado, 2023a; Bervoets et al., 2023). Lived experience approaches provide insights into the shared typical experience, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the CLS (Doyle et al., 2021). Furthermore, they are crucial for understanding the role of the criminal legal voluntary sector in supporting individuals with criminal records in the community, strengthening the relationship between academics, policymakers, advocates, practitioners, and people with lived experience of criminalisation, victimisation, and punishment (McAleese, 2019). Therefore, the incorporation of lived experience perspectives in criminology is essential for enriching scholarship, policy, and practice, as it offers a deeper understanding of the complexities within the CLS and informs transformative learning and professional practice.

Lived experience criminology advancing the discipline's epistemology

In criminology, the traditional ways of knowing or epistemologies have predominantly relied on empirical research methods such as statistics, surveys, and observational studies (Kleck et al., 2006). However, the incorporation of lived experiences offers a novel approach to understanding crime and the CLS. This perspective emphasises the value of personal narratives and subjective experiences, which can reveal insights not captured by conventional methods (Gray & Benning, 2019). Lived experiences, particularly from people with LPCLSE (including the authors of this paper), provide a rich, contextual understanding of the social and psychological dimensions of crime (Loader & Sparks, 2010). They highlight the complexities of human behaviour and the multifaceted nature of criminal legal involvement, allowing for more holistic and empathetic approaches in criminological research and policymaking (Dearey et al., 2011). The incorporation of diverse voices through lived experiences can challenge and expand traditional criminological theories. By incorporating these narratives, criminology can move beyond the limitations of traditional empirical research methods and develop more nuanced theories that reflect the complex realities of crime and justice (Sweeney, 2022). This expansion of perspectives can lead to more effective and human-centred justice solutions, addressing the needs of those impacted by the CLS (Lynch et al., 2017). For example, Antojado and Ryan (2024) describe the prison visitation experience through the experiential insights of Antojado, a formerly incarcerated scholar. Antojado recounts the emotional and existential toll and logistical challenges faced by incarcerated people and their families during prison visitations. He highlights the anxiety caused by stringent security protocols and the often-dehumanising treatment of incarcerated people by correctional staff. These insights lead Antojado and Ryan (2024) to propose reforms aimed at humanising the visitation experience and responsive to the needs of those incarcerated and their families. They suggest implementing procedures and policies based on Antojado's autoethnographic insights, acknowledging the dignity of those incarcerated.

It is within this juncture that Antojado's (2023b) lived experience criminology emerged, rooted in relational sociology, with particular influence from Latour's (2005) Actor-Network-Theory (ANT). This theoretical framework posits that relationships and networks are central to understanding social phenomena, and it provides a foundational basis for lived experience criminology (Antojado, 2023a). By applying Latour's (2005) perspective, this new criminological approach seeks to explore and elucidate the complex interplay of

relationships and networks that individuals with lived experiences of the CLS encounter and navigate. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the conceptualisation of lived experience criminology should not be confined solely to the framework of relational sociology, such as Latour's (2005) ANT, but a discussion on this is outside the remit of this paper; we are merely acknowledging the work of Antojado (2023b) in attempting to extend the theoretical terrain of lived experience scholarship beyond autoethnographic methods. We hold the view that this is highly relevant to the discussion, particularly because lived experience criminology is arguably the most prominent discourse (relating to lived experience) within the Australian context. Given that this paper is situated in Australia, its relevance is unsurprisingly significant. Antojado (2023b), however, does not contend that ANT is the sole framework through which lived experience can be conceptualised. Aside from the autoethnographic approach predominantly employed in convict criminology, he also encourages scholars to propose additional theories and frameworks that complement or even refute his proposition of Latour's (2005) work. Lived experience criminology is not necessarily oppositional to the convict criminology project but rather complementary, in such a way that gives lived experience scholars a wider ambit of choice of identification, and thus broadens lived experience research, activism and advocacy.

Why do we/they do lived experience work?

The discourse surrounding criminality and the CLS is a complex and ever-evolving landscape, particularly when viewed through the lens of lived experience. We aim to delve into the intricacies of meaning-making within the context of criminalisation and punishment, exploring the dynamic interplay between individuals' personal narratives and the overarching narratives imposed by the CLS. As we dissect the multifaceted processes of understanding, re-evaluating, and sometimes unmaking these meanings, the focus is not only on the cognitive aspects but also on the emotional and existential dimensions of these experiences. At the heart of this discussion is the recognition that interactions with the CLS often lead to a profound reconfiguration of personal identity (see Crewe & Ievins, 2020) and understanding of societal norms, such as the experiences of Antojado (2023b) and McPhee (2021), both with LPCLSE, who have now become lived experience scholars in criminology. This reconfiguration is influenced by a range of factors, from the dehumanising language of the system to the contradictions and abuses inherent within it. We examine how individuals navigate this complex terrain, often finding solace and a sense of purpose in articulating their experiences through writing and other forms of expression. This creative outlet not only aids in coping with the oppressive realities of incarceration but also serves as a foundation for post-incarceration endeavours, where the unmaking of previously imposed meanings becomes a pathway to personal and communal empowerment.

A way to make/un-make meaning

The process of meaning-making encompasses two primary dimensions: firstly, the significance attributed to acts of lawbreaking and the resultant harm, and secondly, the interpretations formed around criminalisation and punishment. Maruna (2011) has noted that amidst the re-entry literature, there is very little attention paid to the emotional labour people leaving prison must undertake in order to move from a "degraded status [to one of] 'citizen' (p. 13). This cognitive endeavour, akin to other forms of mental processing, is intricate and subject to variation across temporal and spatial contexts. Reflecting upon one's trajectory towards incarceration

and interactions within the CLS, individuals often re-evaluate the meanings ascribed to these experiences, evolving in tandem with their growing understanding of both the system and their personal development. However, for those who have been criminalised, the CLS often presents as a paradigm of incomprehensibility. From encounters with law enforcement and judicial proceedings to the mechanics of incarceration, house arrest programs, and parole, the system is riddled with contradictions, deceptive tactics, coercive controls, psychological manipulations, abuses of authority, and outright maltreatment, bordering on torture. For those ensnared within this web, the experience can be overwhelmingly oppressive and even terrifying. A prevalent coping mechanism among people with LPCLSE is writing. Engagement in activities such as journaling and composing letters to loved ones occupies a significant portion of those with LPCLSE, serving as a tool for crafting meaningful, reflective prose. Consequently, upon release from prison/sanction, many possess a nuanced understanding of the meanings they ascribe to their personal narratives.

In discussing the unmaking of meaning, we refer to the dynamic nature of how interpretations of harm and punishment evolve over time and in different contexts. The CLS, with its dehumanising terminology and labyrinth of both explicit and implicit regulations, perpetuates a state of constant self-doubt. It endeavours to impose a narrative that conforms to its own paradigms of guilt and individual culpability, often at odds with an authentic representation of the self and personal experiences within the social fabric. Therefore, a significant aspect of post-criminal legal interaction meaning unmaking involves disentangling oneself from these pervasive narratives, a process frequently undertaken within the supportive milieu of a community with shared lived experiences. Whilst the lived experience community can provide a safe and understanding space to formulate a more positive sense of self, there remains a significant resistance from the wider academic community. Maruna (2011) highlights the dichotomy in public attitudes to reintegration, in that the incarceration “of human beings is taken for granted as normal or even natural ... and the return of the same human beings to communities is the cause of often inordinate concern” (p. 4). However, while Maruna (2011) sees the value in moralistic rituals of “atonement, forgiveness, redemption, and reconciliation” (pp. 4–5), the lived experience community welcomes people without the need for any symbolic displays of *goodness*.

Engagement in lived experience scholarship within criminological research transcends traditional academic endeavours, representing a profound exploration into the dynamics of meaning-making and its deconstruction. Individuals who have traversed the intricate pathways of the CLS – encompassing encounters with law enforcement, judicial processes, correctional institutions, and rehabilitation initiatives – can emerge with profoundly altered perceptions of justice, societal norms, and personal identity (Crewe & Ievins, 2020). Moreover, the intricate and sometimes isolating journey of contributing to a field that has historically played a role in establishing and fortifying these very systems presents a unique set of challenges. This scholarly pursuit necessitates a rigorous examination of personal experiences, motivations, actions, and their consequent ramifications. It involves a comprehensive understanding of the various dimensions of criminal acts and the resultant harm inflicted not only upon those harmed but also upon the societal structure and the people who have harmed themselves. For scholars with direct experience of criminalisation, integration into the academic sphere of criminology serves to disrupt entrenched criminological narratives, simultaneously bringing to the forefront the human impact of carceral policies on individuals and criminalised communities. Within the academic context, scholars with LPCLSE

occupy a dual position: as subjects under the criminological lens, and as colleagues contributing to discourses and epistemologies.

In contrast, the process of unmaking meaning entails the critical dismantling of narratives perpetuated by the CLS, which often categorises individuals merely as offenders, thereby diminishing their identities to their criminal actions. This facet of lived experience criminology challenges the stigma and stereotypes linked to criminalisation, promoting a more empathetic and humanised perception of those with LPCLSE. It rigorously questions prevailing concepts of punishment and rehabilitation, scrutinising the effectiveness and ethical dimensions of current practices. Through this iterative process of constructing and deconstructing meaning, lived experience criminology endeavours to shed light on the often overlooked or misunderstood elements of the criminal legal experience, aiming to cultivate a more intricate and comprehensive understanding of the intricacies of crime and punishment.

A way to live with purpose

For many individuals with LPCLSE, finding a renewed sense of purpose post-sanction can be a profound challenge. This struggle is well documented in criminological literature, highlighting the difficulties faced by those with LPCLSE in reintegrating into society (e.g., Peternoster & Bushway, 2009; Reich, 2023; Stone, 2015). Lived experience work offers a transformative pathway for these individuals, enabling them to channel their experiences into constructive and meaningful avenues. Engaging in lived experience work allows individuals with LPCLSE to redefine their identities beyond their past actions. This redefinition is not merely about personal rehabilitation but extends to becoming advocates, educators, practitioners, abolitionists, and reformers. Maruna's (2001) seminal work, *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*, underscores this potential for transformation. He highlights how people with LPCLSE often engage in *making good* by constructing redemption scripts and redefining their identities in positive terms. This process not only aids in their personal redemption but also contributes significantly to societal betterment. Moreover, these individuals' unique insights and experiences are invaluable in the discourse on criminal legal reform and rehabilitation. Richie's (2012) *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation* exemplifies this, as she explores the intersections of race, gender, and the CLS, drawing on the experiences of Black women. These narratives are crucial in understanding the systemic issues within the CLS and in formulating effective reform strategies. This pursuit of purpose through lived experience work transcends individual redemption; it embodies communal upliftment. As noted in Braithwaite's (1989) *Crime, Shame and Reintegration*, the involvement of individuals with LPCLSE in community efforts facilitates societal healing and reintegration, fostering more inclusive and restorative approaches to the CLS. By participating in lived experience work, these individuals join a broader community of reformers, abolitionists and activists dedicated to addressing systemic issues within the CLS. Their collective efforts are instrumental in shaping more equitable and humane policies and practices, thus playing a pivotal role in societal transformation.

Lived experience work, and therefore the establishment of lived experience criminology, enables individuals with LPCLSE to transform their personal adversity into societal advocacy. Drawing on the insights of criminology scholars like Braithwaite (1989), Richie

(2012), and Maruna (2001), it is evident that these efforts contribute significantly to both personal redemption and the broader social good. Through their engagement in reform and advocacy, individuals with LPCLSE become key agents in driving change within the CLS, ultimately contributing to the creation of a more just and empathetic society. Engaging the establishment of lived experience criminology allows individuals with LPCLSE to redefine their identities beyond their past actions. This redefinition is not merely about personal rehabilitation but extends to becoming advocates, educators, practitioners, abolitionists, and reformers. This redefinition can also be seen in the community-based and prison-based think tanks, led by Martinovic et al. (2022), where Antojado et al. (2023) argue that engaging in the think tanks promotes secondary and tertiary desistance, where people with LPCLSE start to view themselves beyond their experience with the CLS. They utilise their lived experience as “invaluable insights into the problems present in the criminal justice system” (Antojado et al., 2023, p. 80), thereby dispelling the stigma and shame that may be inherent with incarceration.

A way to live with guilt

Guilt, an intricate and often burdensome emotion, is frequently experienced by individuals who have engaged in criminal activities or have been entangled in the CLS. Engaging in lived experience work offers these individuals a vital platform to confront and process their feelings of guilt. It enables them to contribute positively to society, engaging in restorative practices that are beneficial not only to the community but also instrumental in their own path to healing. This facet of lived experience work transcends mere atonement; it embodies a journey of transformation. It requires individuals to recognise and accept their past actions, comprehend their impacts, and actively engage in reparative measures. Through advocacy, educational initiatives, and participation in policy reform, they can play a crucial role in deterring others from following a similar trajectory (Antojado et al., 2023). Such proactive engagement in fostering positive change serves as a potent mechanism for reconciling with one’s past and charting a course towards a future marked by purpose and positivity.

Another manifestation of guilt, often emerging post-incarceration/sanction, resembles a form of *survivor guilt*. This emotion becomes a significant driving force for many in using their lived experiences to challenge detrimental narratives and practices within the system. The poignant experience of leaving prison, possessions in hand, while bidding farewell to fellow incarcerated people – many of whom may be enduring, suffering or facing significant injustices with extensive sentences ahead – can evoke profound feelings of guilt. This emotional response galvanizes some individuals to dedicate themselves to causes aimed at ameliorating conditions within prisons and other aspects of the CLS’ punitive complexes, both for those left behind and for those at risk of returning. Others become fervent advocates for improved treatment of individuals experiencing incarceration and other forms of CLS sanctions, motivated by their direct experiences of the harsh realities of criminal legal sanctions. Additionally, there are those who leverage their experiences and expertise to advocate for the abolition of prisons and the broader prison industrial complex, including in-community-based sanctions, envisioning a future where carceral responses are supplanted by transformative justice approaches and systems of mutual aid.

The essence of cultivating a community centred around care and praxis is deeply rooted in the collective effort to uplift each other, fostering an environment where mutual support and

collaborative growth are paramount. This approach is particularly vital in contexts involving individuals with LPCLSE, where the journey towards societal reintegration and personal transformation can be fraught with challenges. In such communities, the focus is on harnessing the strengths and experiences of each member to facilitate collective healing and empowerment. This concept aligns with the principles of restorative justice, as articulated by Zehr (2014) where the emphasis is on repairing the harm caused by criminality through inclusive and reparative practices. In a community centred around care and praxis, members actively engage in creating a safe space for open dialogue, sharing experiences, and providing emotional and practical support to one another. The notion of care in this context extends beyond mere empathy; it involves an active commitment to understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by individuals with LPCLSE. As Braithwaite (1989) discusses, this approach fosters a sense of belonging and acceptance, crucial for individuals who have often faced marginalisation and stigmatisation. By promoting an ethos of care, these communities help mitigate the feelings of shame and isolation that can accompany criminalisation, thereby facilitating a more positive self-concept and a stronger sense of community belonging. Moreover, the praxis element of these communities involves putting theoretical understanding of criminal legal issues into action. This is not just about discussing problems but actively working towards solutions. Members engage in various activities, from advocacy and policy development to educational initiatives and community outreach programs. This approach resonates with Freire's (2000) concept of praxis, emphasising the importance of reflective action in creating transformative change.

A way to love

hooks' (1994a, 1994b, 2003) scholarship has profoundly influenced global academic discourse through her resolute integration of love in her work and her steadfast dedication to an anti-racist, anti-oppressive, feminist ethos. In the context of criminology, particularly for scholars and educators drawing from lived experiences, the incorporation of love into academic writing and teaching can present as a challenging concept. Nonetheless, hooks (2003) advocates for embracing love in scholarly endeavours, considering it the cornerstone for building vibrant learning communities. Engaging in lived experience criminology harbours the potential for transformative impacts on practitioners, students, and the discipline itself. hooks (2003) recalls her experiences in learning environments that emphasised respect and responsibility, particularly in regard to perspectives that could harm others' self-esteem or well-being. She underscores the significance of discerning between destructive criticism and constructive critique, attributing such learning to the cultivation of a community grounded in love. While not every student or colleague may experience a radical shift in perspective, hooks (2003) found that the mere expansion of thought beyond prevailing narratives embodies the potential for change.

Similarly, trans-activist and law professor Dean Spade disrupts dominant ideologies through his career-long dedication to social justice, specifically in challenging the structures of prisons, borders, poverty, and war (Spade, 2020). Like other communities engaged in social struggle and mutual aid, those with LPCLSE advocating for systemic change and solidarity work may encounter either a supportive, inclusive community or a fragmented one. Spade (2020) identifies dangerous tendencies within solidarity communities, such as creating dichotomies of "deserving and undeserving" (p. 45) individuals and succumbing to co-optation. He critiques the prevalent *deservingness hierarchies* in criminal legal discourse and warns against

replicating moralising eligibility frameworks, even within communities that are formed in response to systemic exclusion. In much the same way as other communities of struggle, people with LPCLSE who are using their experience to advocate, disrupt, participate, and change systems can face a loving and inclusive community of practice or a community divided. For instance, individuals with offence categories that we do not understand, can find it extremely difficult to exist in a lived experience community. Moreover, people with LPCLSE may be using their lived experience in a variety of ways, some of which may involve working alongside or within oppressive systems in order to affect change, and for others it will be working staunchly outside of that dynamic. These different approaches to systems change and advocacy can divide communities of struggle rather than welcoming and supporting individuals regardless of their level of political understanding of injustice (Spade, 2020).

Spade (2020) highlights the challenges faced by individuals with less understood offence categories within lived experience communities. Additionally, he notes the variance in approaches to systemic change, ranging from working within oppressive systems to staunch opposition to them, which can lead to divisions in these communities (Spade, 2020). Echoing hooks' (2003) focus on love and well-being protection, Spade (2020) advocates for mutuality and collaboration in collective efforts. A significant aspect of lived experience work involves safeguarding community well-being, mutual support in criminal legal sanction life, and collaborative efforts to alleviate communal struggles. This approach resonates with hooks' (1994a, 1994b, 2003) conceptualisation of a love ethic encompassing care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust (Tworkov, 1992). Recognising that those with lived experience are often the most attuned and committed to the intricacies of this work, Spade (2020) emphasises the fundamental role of collective action, asserting that people power is humanity's most substantial resource.

At its core, lived experience work in criminology has the possibility to be an act of love – love for oneself, love for others who have been marginalised, and love for a society that often fails to understand the complexities of crime and punishment. Influenced by the work of critical feminist autoethnographers like hooks (1994a, 1994b, 2003), this approach to criminology is deeply rooted in principles of anti-racism, anti-oppression, and feminism and provides an opportunity to shape a lived experience criminology that is not framed in gender-, class- or race-neutral terms. It seeks to dismantle the structures of power and inequality that perpetuate cycles of criminalisation and injustice, and is dedicated to understanding the devastating impact of the CLS when it intersects with multiple roots of oppression. Lived experience criminology seeks to infuse empathy, understanding, and compassion into the dialogue surrounding the CLS. This approach is predicated on acknowledging the inherent humanity in all individuals, including those whose actions might challenge our comprehension. The core objective of this work is to cultivate a nurturing community, one that prioritises care and support. Such an environment aims to facilitate healing, amplify previously marginalised voices, and lay the groundwork for substantive, transformative change. The integration of perspectives from Black anti-carceral feminists and queer activists, exemplified by figures such as bell hooks and Dean Spade, significantly enhances this discourse. Their contributions underscore the critical need to address systemic inequalities and injustices that frequently serve as the backdrop for criminalised behaviours. Their advocacy propels a shift in the paradigm of justice – away from punitive measures and towards a framework that is restorative and transformative, fostering inclusivity rather than perpetuating exclusion. This enriched discourse thus

advocates for a re-envisioned concept of justice, one that is more equitable and empathetic, aligning with the broader goals of social justice and human dignity.

This exploration of meaning-making within the criminal legal context naturally leads into a broader conversation about the role of lived experience in academia. Embedding lived experience criminology is not merely a methodological consideration but a transformative approach that challenges and expands the boundaries of traditional scholarship. Making space for lived experience in the academy involves recognising and valuing the unique insights and perspectives of those who have first-hand experience with criminalisation and the CLS. It necessitates a shift in academic culture and norms, creating an environment where these voices are not only heard but are instrumental in shaping research agendas, pedagogical approaches, and policy discussions.

In this context, lived experience criminology becomes a conduit for redefining narratives around crime, punishment, and justice. It allows for a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of these concepts, breaking away from the monolithic and often de-contextualised views perpetuated by conventional criminological discourse. By integrating the rich, diverse, and sometimes painful stories of individuals who have navigated the CLS, criminology can move towards a more inclusive, comprehensive, and ultimately more human understanding of criminality and its societal implications. This integration of lived experience into the academic realm not only enriches the field of criminology but also serves as a powerful reminder of the transformative potential of scholarship that is deeply rooted in real-world experiences and grounded in a commitment to social justice and human dignity.

Embedding lived experience and making space for lived experience in the academy

The central thesis of this paper is a compelling call to action directed at members of the academic community. It urges them to facilitate the integration of scholars with lived experience into the realm of criminology and to support the establishment of a distinct subfield: lived experience criminology. This call encompasses an invitation for open dialogue and collaboration, treating these scholars as equals within the academic sphere. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve deeply into the theoretical underpinnings of lived experience criminology (see Antojado, 2023a), we have provided a succinct overview of its theoretical framework above. We intend to advance this theoretical exploration in future works. The paper outlines the foundational aspects of how lived experience contributes to epistemology within criminology, detailing the motivations, rationale, and valuable insights these scholars offer to enrich the field.

The authors acknowledge that the emergence and recognition of lived experience work within criminology will not occur spontaneously. It requires the creation of opportunities by established academics, particularly those who have built careers partially based on the adversities faced by individuals with LPCLSE. There is a moral imperative for these academics to actively engage in creating space for the inclusion of these scholars at the discussion table. Furthermore, the paper suggests practical steps that can be taken to significantly impact this integration process. One such recommendation is the establishment of accessible educational pathways for individuals with LPCLSE. These initiatives would not only facilitate their entry into academia but also ensure their meaningful participation and contribution to the field of criminology. Through such measures, the academic community can demonstrate a tangible commitment to diversifying and enriching the discipline with unique perspectives and

experiences (see Antojado et al., 2024). Another vital step is the cultivation of a willingness among established academics to attentively listen to and genuinely consider the voices and perspectives of those with lived experience. It is imperative to acknowledge the substantial value that these unique insights bring to the discourse. This paper also advocates moving beyond the traditional emphasis on credentialism. It posits that expertise derived from lived experience does not emanate from academic qualifications or titles conferred by universities. Instead, it is rooted in the very act of experiencing the realities of the CLS (Antojado, 2023a). The authors recognise that while there are varying levels of expertise and a need for individuals to engage in reflexivity and reflective practices (among other things) to attain a level of expertise, this does not necessarily require adherence to conventional academic credentialing. This perspective challenges the notion that formal education is the sole pathway to expertise, highlighting that lived experiences provide a profound and invaluable form of knowledge (Sandhu, 2017). By embracing this broader understanding of expertise, the academic community can foster a more inclusive and diverse criminological discourse that encompasses a wider range of experiences and insights, thus enriching the field.

Conclusion

The authors of this paper have embarked on a crucial journey to transform and enrich the discipline of criminology. This transformation is rooted in the recognition and integration of lived experiences, particularly those of individuals who have directly interacted with the CLS, making room for lived experience criminology. The paper underscores the pivotal role of these personal narratives in advancing our understanding of crime, punishment, and rehabilitation, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive and empathetic criminological discourse. Through this exploration, we advocate for a more inclusive and dynamic academic environment in criminology, one that not only values but actively seeks the perspectives and contributions of individuals with LPCLSE. The journey involves confronting and dismantling existing barriers within academia, including the reluctance to accept individuals with LPCLSE as equal contributors and the lack of structured pathways for their meaningful engagement. It calls for a shift away from viewing these individuals merely as research subjects to recognising them as valuable collaborators with unique insights. This paper posits the necessity of redefining the concept of expertise in criminology. It challenges the traditional emphasis on credentialism, advocating for the recognition of expertise derived from lived experiences. Such an approach enriches the discipline with diverse perspectives and deepens our understanding of the multifaceted nature of crime and justice. This serves as a clarion call to the academic community. It invites criminologists to not only make room for but also to actively engage with and support the development of lived experience criminology. This subfield, rooted in the realities of those who have navigated the intricacies of the CLS, offers invaluable insights that are essential for the growth and evolution of criminology. It is through this integration and collaboration that we can hope to foster a more just, empathetic, and effective CLS, one that is informed by the rich tapestry of human experiences and guided by the principles of social justice and human dignity.

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