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## **Prepping and *verstehen* – A narrative criminological perspective**

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### **Abstract**

Talk, chat, and stories are ubiquitous in ethnographic research. Engaging with the recently burgeoning literature around narrative criminology, this article argues that considerations of stories and storytelling can add much to cultural criminologists' pursuit of 'criminological *verstehen*' (Ferrell, 1997). In doing so, we focus on one case study: ethnographic research grounded within the USA's contemporary 'doomsday' prepping subculture. The article considers the value of attending to narrative during the pursuit of *verstehen* at two levels. First, we address the importance of storytelling upon entry to the ethnographic field – drawing attention to how the narratives researchers share, and their respect for certain stories, can facilitate deep and experiential access to stigmatised fields of activity (such as prepping). Second, we explore how narrative remains in play *during* immediate experiences. In particular, we argue that fleeting excitements featured in prepping lifestyles are often shaped by the significance of the 'moments' in which they occur to numerous personal narratives. We therefore contend that, for ethnographers interested in *verstehen*, a consideration of narrative offers a means to expand and deepen empathetic appreciation of participants' worldviews and activities.

### **Keywords**

*Verstehen*, narrative, prepping, experience, stories, ethnography

## Introduction: No pain, no flame

*Zack is a 'prepper': an individual preparing to ensure his family's survival in a future scenario of major social collapse. Living in rural Washington State (USA), he has done this for almost ten years by storing food, water, weapons, and medicine in and around the home he shares with his wife (Chloe).*

*As part of his preparations, Zack and I are trying to start a fire. Being able to do so may offer vital access to light, warmth, and a means to cook food in the aftermath of a disaster. Specifically, we are testing a method of fire-starting that involves a powdery chemical compound Zack purchased a few days ago: potassium permanganate. Before we begin, Zack explains to me: 'What a lot of peppers do is buy things and stack them on their shelves **without using them.**' Prepping, for him, is about preparing for collapse, but **also** escaping this mindless consumerist habit. 'It's a challenge', he summarises, and 'an opportunity to learn and grow.' Zack also adds: 'In a stressful, dangerous, scary situation, to fool yourself that you're going to think clearly, and you're suddenly going to be able to put things together and use them... I believe that's naïve.' What he and I are about to do, then, by road-testing the potassium compound, is reflective of how he thinks a 'good' prepper goes about readying themselves for a crisis.*

*Zack and I start by watching an instructional YouTube video in his home office. It demonstrates that we simply need to grind the potassium under a flat-ended stick, as the friction from doing this should ignite the reaction we are looking for. We then head outside into the summer sun. We sand-down a branch taken from a nearby tree, and set up our experiment on a picnic bench. Zack piles some of the powder on a flat wooden board atop the bench, and crunches it underneath the stick. Unlike in the video, though, nothing happens. So, Zack tries once more. Again, he does so without success.*

*Taken aback by this failure, we assess the situation. We re-watch the video and note that the successful demonstration we see takes place on a stone slab. Thinking that the wooden board is our problem, we shift to grinding the powder on the concrete **below** Zack's bench. Yet, this does not produce flame either. We then try a bigger stick that could generate more friction. Again, no fire.*

*As Zack and I grow increasingly hot and frustrated in the late-morning heat, he improvises, suspecting that **brake fluid** could help ignite something. He retrieves a bottle of fluid, and pours a small amount on to some more potassium. This time, the powder blackens, and a faint plume of smoke rises. It immediately fills the warm air around us with a bitter smell. But, still, there is no flame.*

*We are both becoming dispirited. Yet, wiping sweat from his brow, Zack calmly reminds us both that 'this is **why** we test material **before** disaster strikes'. Delving further into his bag of tricks, he fetches a small wad of cotton wool and piles some powder on top it. Upon Zack's instruction, I then pour on some brake fluid. As before, smoke rises for a few seconds, but the reaction appears to subside.*

*Zack walks away from the table to ponder our next move. Just as he turns his back, though, a bright, hot fire **does** erupt from the cotton! I immediately call to Zack. He turns, and we observe a flickering orange flame in shared awe. We then smile, high five, and excitedly discuss a triumph snatched from the jaws of defeat – laughing and congratulating each other on a hard-won victory. (Field note, see Figure 1).*

In *Cultural Criminology: An Invitation*, Ferrell, Hayward and Young argue that ‘the negotiation of cultural meaning intertwines with the immediacy of experiences’ (2015: 3). In short, they invite criminologists to engage with an array of subjective sensations as a way to gain deep, empathetic understandings of deviant behaviours. Emphasising the value of ‘being there’, they label this appreciation ‘criminological *verstehen*’ (Ferrell, 1997). In the vignette above, we can glimpse how the deviant lifestyle of prepping is infused with immediate sensory pleasures and emotional satisfactions. In this case, we see an explosion of excitement and relief around the sudden brilliance of Zack’s fire. Being co-present to empathetically experience how the drudgery of ‘being prepared’ can be peppered with moments of exhilaration like this allows us to comprehend prepping’s appeals: to understand both the rationales underpinning planning for an uncertain future, and to share the *excitement* of prepping in the here-and-now.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

**Figure 1** Zack oversees various stages of failed fire starting – featuring brake fluid, sticks, and cotton wool – before flame eventually rises as he leaves the table (Michael F. Mills).

Drawing on Michael’s ongoing ethnographic study of America’s prepping subculture, we argue that researchers pursuing criminological *verstehen* can fruitfully engage with narratives that surround social action to develop deep, heartfelt understandings of experiences and their cultural meanings. Particularly, we contend that experiences take place against a backdrop of shared meanings that are often communicated narratively. For example, as we will return to later, the excitement surrounding Zack’s fire was not merely produced by surprise upon the sight of the flame. It was also notably shaped, in the moment, by a range of *stories* Zack tells about himself, prepping, and the USA. There are many ways in which narrative and ethnography may be combined, and we direct the interested reader to burgeoning work on ethnographic research on narratives (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008) and the performance of stories (Cashman, 2012). Narrative criminologists have also employed ethnography in the study of offenders’ narratives (Fleetwood & Sandberg, forthcoming; Tutenges & Sandberg 2013; Tutenges, 2019), and those of criminal justice professionals (Offit, 2017, 2019; Ugelvik, 2016). Our concern here is to consider what

attentiveness to narrative might add to ethnographic research whilst maintaining a commitment to criminological *verstehen* (Ferrell, 1997).

We begin by outlining the notion of criminological *verstehen*, and discussing narrative criminology, in more detail. Whilst both approaches attend to subjectivity, meaning, and criminal etiology, each adopts a different starting point in their enquiry. Indeed, some cultural criminologists have claimed that an interest in narrative is even *at odds* with their focus on immediacies (see Aspden & Hayward, 2015). Rejecting dualistic representations of speaking/doing, we argue that narrative analysis can enhance the pursuit of *verstehen* through ethnography.

To illustrate, we draw on Michael's fieldwork on prepper culture: an avowedly cultural criminological study examining how the fears that prepping confronts, the politics that underpin it, and the pleasures of *doing* prepping, each thrive in the context of late modern American capitalist society (see Mills, 2018, 2019). The study has thus far involved spending time in and around the homes of over fifty preppers living across eighteen American states. As well as 'hanging out', data has emerged through: detailed tours of respondents' homes; long informal conversations about prepping and various other subjects; recorded interviews lasting several hours; meetings of respondents' survival groups; and hands-on participation in various aspects of prepping (as illustrated above). Reflecting on this ethnography, we outline how tools within narrative criminology have been utilised to enhance Michael's pursuit of *verstehen* with American preppers. Specifically, we consider how engaging with stigmatising representations of prepping, and the significance of storytelling in prepping culture, were key to establishing ethnographic entrée. Beyond this, we also note how the emotional satisfaction prepping provides is often energised by narratives its practitioners weave around their actions. Recognising this dynamic, we explain how narrative criminology may enhance (cultural) criminologists' attempts to foster deep, empathetic understandings with their respondents. As we will show, a rounded appreciation of prepping's various gratifying 'moments' often requires an understanding of their importance to numerous processes of narrative construction.

### **Criminological *verstehen***

The pursuit of criminological *verstehen* is a well-established facet of cultural criminological research (Ferrell, 1997; Ferrell et al., 2015: 211-225). Cultural criminology explicitly privileges subjective experiences and meanings, premised on a particular criminological etiology: 'An understanding of crime and criminality as constructed from the immediate interactions of crimes, control agents and others and therefore as emerging from a tangled experiential web of situated dangers and situated pleasures' (Ferrell, 1997: 10). *Verstehen* is intended as a 'corrective of sorts to conventional criminology, [and a] counter-discourse on crime and control' dominated by supposedly objective modes of measurement and

calculation (ibid., see also Young, 2011). By centring embodiment and emotion (after Katz, 1988), cultural criminology directly challenges 'objective' methodologies, and rational choice theories.

Whilst cultural criminology espouses a variety of methods for engaging with culture (Ferrell, Hayward & Young, 2015), ethnography is uniquely suited to getting inside the immediacy of experience. Drawing on Weber, Ferrell explains:

[V]erstehen denotes a process of subjective interpretation on the part of the social researcher, a degree of sympathetic understanding between researcher and subjects of study, whereby the researcher comes in part to share in the situated meanings and experiences of those under scrutiny. (1997: 10)

Thus, sustained presence, immersion and participation enable the ethnographer to get inside the cultural logics of crime and deviance; to go beyond cognitive comprehension and *feel* its 'situational meanings and emotions – its moments of pleasure and pain, its emergent logic and excitement – within the larger process of research' (Ferrell, 1997: 10). Ferrell, Hayward and Young further clarify: 'in attempting to achieve empathetic understanding with those under study, the ethnographer engages in a form of emotional participation that, when successful, melds subjects' emotions and perceptions with those of the ethnographer' (2015: 222).<sup>1</sup>

The pursuit of *criminological verstehen* does not preclude also attending to what is *said* in addition to what is *done*. Whilst 'edgework and adrenaline' are significant, so are the 'linguistic' constructions and 'vocabularies of motive' (Ferrell, 1997: 14) that surround, and make sense of, deviant or criminal actions. Indeed, ethnographic scholarship frequently draws upon respondents' descriptions and explanations, using them as guides to their symbolic and sensory universes (Fleetwood & Sandberg, forthcoming). Arguably, sensory experiences have little meaning otherwise. Famously, Becker showed that the effects of marijuana are not inherently pleasurable; indeed 'the novice does not ordinarily get high the first time' (1953: 236). Getting high depends on learning how to smoke, recognising marijuana's effects, *and* learning to appreciate them as pleasurable (ibid). For cultural criminologists, such webs of meanings are best read from inside.

The distinction between doing things and talking about them might make a neat analytical divide, but cultural criminologists have long questioned easy separations between form and content, substance and style. Ferrell states: 'form and content exist not as a duality but as an interwoven whole – and surfaces stand not as impediment to deeper analysis but as *deeply meaningful texts themselves* worthy of critical

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst we acknowledge critiques regarding the practical and legal limitations on the kinds of topics researchers might garner experiential knowledge from (i.e. O'Brien, 2005; Feenan, 2002), the case of deviant prepping culture explored here lends itself to participatory forms of fieldwork by virtue of being almost entirely separated from law breaking.

interrogation' (2006: 258, emphasis added). However, whilst cultural criminology has developed sophisticated theoretical and methodological approaches to studying images of crime and control (i.e. Hayward & Presdee, 2010), less attention has been paid to stories. Indeed, at times, attention to narrative has been downplayed as a focus on 'retrospection' and 'discourse' that sits in tension with an analysis of deviance's immediate experience (Aspden & Hayward, 2015: 239). We argue that – even whilst upholding a commitment to criminological *verstehen* – researchers would do well to think about narrative and storytelling as part of the rich web of interactions that shape experiences and make crime and deviance meaningful.

## **Narrative criminology**

Long before criminologists 'turned' to narrative (Presser, 2016), the social sciences and humanities were tuned into the importance of stories in social life. Stories are seemingly everywhere. As Plummer puts it: 'we live in a storytelling society' (1995). For narrative theorists, narratives serve an existential purpose: they are a fundamental way of making ourselves and worlds meaningful (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008). As Bruner explains: 'we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative – stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on.' (1991: 4) This is not to say that *all* aspects of human experience are narratively comprehended, but as Joan Scott states so elegantly: 'Experience is at once already an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted' (1991: 979). Consistent with this view, narrative criminology 'blurs the distinction between narrative and experience by suggesting that experience is always known and acted upon as it has been interpreted symbolically' (Presser, 2009: 184). Narrative is not merely a post-hoc interpretation, but always in play, and therefore imbricated in social action (Presser, 2009; Presser & Sandberg, 2015a).

Narrative criminology theorises 'the role the telling and sharing of stories play in committing, upholding and effecting desistance from crime and other harmful acts' (Sandberg & Ugelvik, 2016: 129; Presser & Sandberg, 2015a). Research examines the narrative motivations of 'deviant' and harmful behaviour including binge drinking (Tutenges & Sandberg, 2013), drug taking (Dahl & Sandberg, 2015), drug dealing and trafficking (Sandberg & Fleetwood, 2017) and cannabis cultivation (Hammersvik, 2018). Contemporary research explores the importance of stories for victims (Pemberton et al., 2018; Walklate et al., 2018), in police cultures (Kurtz and Upton, 2017), and in youth justice settings (Petintseva, 2018; Saarikkomäki, 2015). Current approaches also consider non-textual narratives in self-presentations and photographs (Copes et al., 2019), artworks (Carrabine, 2019), and objects (Ugelvik, 2019).

If cultural criminology takes 'doing' as its main focus, the story and its telling are most important for narrative criminologists. Presser summarises: 'Cultural criminologists emphasize the body, emotions, and the "perceptual context" (Ferrell, 1999: 405) surrounding crime, whereas narrative criminology

emphasizes the discursive context surrounding both crime and the way crime is perceived and felt by its perpetrators.' (2012: 7). Two broad lines of enquiry have developed within narrative criminology. The first draws on interviews and texts, and focuses on narrative *constructions* of reality and how they motivate action, contextualising literary analysis within storytelling situations and their wider socio-political contexts (Presser & Sandberg, 2015b: 295). Presser's (2012) exemplary analysis of the narrative draws of the mass murder committed by David Adkisson does just this. Presser pays close attention to Adkisson's literary constructions of meaning in interviews and letters explaining his motives – which revolve around a story of his *and America's* hardships being caused by liberal and Marxist 'traitors' – before examining their connections to wider social circumstances. This brings into view *both* the cultural logics that make Adkisson's violence meaningful, and his personal investment in acting out such a story. As Presser illustrates, narratives can be profoundly seductive and emotionally moving; they can make abhorrent violence meaningful, righteous, and deeply compelling.

In the second approach, influenced by symbolic interactionism, researchers examine storytelling as a social activity. Doing so understands talk not just as a form of interpretation, but as social action that draws on, and contributes to, culture (Sandberg & Fleetwood, 2017). Researchers draw on Gubrium and Holstein's (2008) notion of 'narrative ethnography', which involves 'observing the performance and effect of narratives and their intertwinements with story content and construction' (Fleetwood & Sandberg, forthcoming). For example, using observations and interviews with Danish teenagers, Tutenges and Sandberg (2013) find that drinking stories are not just told after alcohol consumption. They are also told *before*, and are a part of the shared experiences (good and bad) of 'going out'. These stories are therefore not decorative or descriptive, but are an integral part of the experiential web of binge drinking. For researchers interested in experience and culture, analysis of narratives may thus help us identify the role of storytelling in shaping immediacies and perpetuating culture.

There is clearly a great deal of common ground between narrative and cultural criminology. Both are attentive to culture, subjective experiences, and collectively shared meanings. They also regularly draw on ethnographic research. Both reject dualistic representations of speaking/doing; form/content and representation/reality, highlighting the complex intertwinements involved. However, they do differ fundamentally in their ordering of what matters. Cultural criminology privileges the phenomenological and visceral immediacies of crime, set against the backdrop of shared meanings that may be communicated in language, signs, or style; narrative criminology forefronts the narrative constructions which make sense of these immediacies. Of course, all research approaches involve a critical ordering of what matters, prioritising some aspects of social life over others (Katz, 2002; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009: 28-29).

Yet, while all research involves prioritising some interests, and cultural criminology places its greatest emphasis on experiential participation, we want to argue that the pursuit of criminological *verstehen* can benefit from noticing and working closely with narratives. Thus, we aim to demonstrate



how insights within narrative criminology may enhance attempts to empathetically comprehend deviance through ethnographic research. We start by highlighting how narrative criminology can help researchers establish entrée to secretive and stigmatised subcultures. As a deviant subculture in which narratives play a fundamental role, but which is often ‘mis-storied’, prepping offers an excellent example of the importance of attention to narrative during fieldwork.

## **Researching prepping culture**

America’s prepping subculture has – from its post-2008 emergence onwards – been populated by mostly right-wing individuals, each preparing to independently survive major disasters (Mills, 2019). The events these preppers anticipate are generally medium-to-long-term scenarios of serious social collapse, in which food is not available to buy, basic utilities are interrupted, and many people may be dead or dying (Mills, 2018). Today’s prepping scene largely supersedes the USA’s extreme right-wing ‘survivalist’ movement, which spanned the mid-1970s, 1980s, and 1990s and was similarly focussed on medium-and-long-term disaster survival (see Mitchell, 2002).

Prepping, like survivalism before it, is a narratively-laden enterprise, and can be understood as a field of storied-action (see Mitchell, 2002). While some cultural criminologists may dismiss narrative as ‘retrospection’ (Aspden & Hayward, 2015: 239), the stories that guide prepping are pure *prospection*. Fundamentally, prepping begins with stories about what disasters could, or will, happen in the future (see Mills, 2018). At the same time, while it may appear individualistic and solitary, becoming a ‘prepper’ is also a social process in which the sharing of stories is of considerable significance. As illustrated above, preppers’ survival plans are not merely practical measures and roadmaps; they also reflect identity, morality, and values. Prepping, and specific ways of doing it, is therefore a way to tell a story about the self to others (including one’s family, and other preppers). In Zack’s case, preparations tell a layered story about being one type of American over another: a self-reliant man distinguished from others who passively succumb to consumer culture (more on this later). Much of prepping is thus driven by, and communicated through, storytelling – and can therefore be understood as narratively motivated social action.

Telling and sharing stories also *perpetuates* prepper culture. Richard Mitchell’s (2002: 155) ethnography of 20<sup>th</sup> century survivalists found that weekend training camps were not principally valued by their participants for the advancement of practical skill, but as forums for exchanging stories about plans, tools, and future collapse. Mitchell found that they frequently brought participants together with a shared desire to ‘dabble and fantasize, network and debate, telling stories to zest the late night coffee, or to justify hobbies and pastimes’ (2002: 48). This remains the case today, where stories in these settings continue to communicate the ‘narrative *doxa*’ of prepper culture (Sandberg & Fleetwood, 2017: 71). These stories not only communicate substantive knowledge about prepping, while featuring rich

subtexts; they also convey *how to tell a prepping story*. This does not solely happen where preppers meet face-to-face, but also – reflecting the contemporary nature of the phenomenon – through online media, and even bespoke post-apocalyptic novels telling stories of prepper families enduring serious social collapse. In typically self-reliant style, and reflecting prepping’s overlaps with narrative, two of Michael’s respondents have even self-published their own such novels.

Yet, despite the enthusiasm for storytelling evident in prepping culture, preppers’ stories are generally hard to access by researchers. As the first detailed analysis of American survivalism declared, the ‘survival movement is a sociologist’s dream *and nightmare*. (Dream because the movement is fascinating; nightmare because formal research by an outsider would be almost impossible.)’ (Myers, 1982: 15, emphasis added; see also Mitchell, 2002: 15). Others have found likewise. Imel-Hartford’s (2012) attempts to research 21<sup>st</sup> century preppers resulted in just nine telephone interviews, while most other researchers have opted to avoid the ethnographic field altogether – instead relying on content analysis of online text (see Kabel & Chmidling, 2013), or prepping’s representation in ‘reality’ TV documentaries (see Foster, 2014).

Prepping is primarily a ‘nightmare’ to access because many of its practitioners believe it is best kept hidden from those who do not practice it (Myers, 1982; Mitchell, 2002). Thus, while this subculture is replete with storytelling, conventions govern with whom such stories can be shared. Secrecy is underpinned by two main concerns. First, a belief that being ‘outed’ as a prepper raises the risk of others trying to steal one’s supplies in a desperate post-disaster context. Second, there is lingering apprehension around stigmatisation (Mills, 2018), in no small part due to National Geographic’s documentary series, *Doomsday Preppers*, showing a narrow stereotype of ‘real-life’ preppers readying for apocalyptic scenarios in underground bunkers with epic stashes of food and weapons. In reality, though, most prepare more modestly in the setting of their own homes, *and* in anticipation of a wide range of disasters they believe will be *less severe than any ‘apocalypse’* (ibid.). The problem for researchers is that preppers are well aware of their popular reputation, and seek to avoid mockery by keeping their prepping private.

As acknowledged earlier, Michael’s cultural criminological study involved successfully navigating prepping culture’s guarded boundaries. Part of this relied upon a perception of him as an unthreatening outsider: living in the UK, it was unlikely that any preppers’ decision to expose their activities to him would result in an unwelcome doorstep visit in the aftermath of disaster. More significantly, gaining access to the field also relied on insights drawn from narrative criminology’s focus on stories. Engaging with stories told *about* preppers, *by* preppers, and *by the researcher* was central to achieving entrée and experiencing prepping first-hand.

## **From narrative to participation: Accessing prepping culture through stories**

Narratives, especially about research subjects and the researcher, are an important resource for entrée into secretive, stigmatised, and suspicious subcultures. Gaining access can involve paying attention to stories already in play, being reflexive about the kinds of stories that we reproduce or explicitly seek to counter, and careful reflection on the stories we tell about ourselves. As discussed above, access to prepping culture may depend on whether one is suspected to be perpetuating ridicule. In Michael's attempt to enter the ethnographic field, deliberate effort thus went into cultivating a *narrative explicitly acknowledging and challenging stereotypes that could effectively help him navigate this tricky dynamic*.

This effort began with an online questionnaire. Whilst seeming antithetical to a cultural criminological approach, this survey was primarily used as a means to *communicate a story* to prospective participants that could facilitate face-to-face ethnographic access. The call for participants (circulated on various popular prepping websites) acknowledged stories frequently told *about* prepping. It addressed shows like *Doomsday Preppers* head-on, referring to them as the primary representation 'through which the preparedness community has come to be seen'. It also told a story about the researcher's intentions, explaining that Michael wished to move beyond 'media-generated narratives' by 'hearing preppers' own stories' in pursuit of an 'accurate' understanding. To reinforce this narrative, the survey itself eschewed terms featured in popular representations of prepping culture. For instance, 'social collapse/crisis' was chosen above sensational alternatives that pervade media discourse ('apocalypse', 'disaster', 'doomsday scenario'). Ultimately, this was intended to communicate and reaffirm the narrative about Michael's receptiveness to hearing and prioritising *unheard stories* that preppers may be eager to express. This appeared to have some purchase, as over sixty (of the first two hundred) survey respondents volunteered to take part in ethnographic research when invited to do so at the end of the survey.

Attention to storytelling has also underpinned Michael's efforts to deepen access and understanding in the ethnographic field. Drawing on narrative criminology's recognition of storytelling as an enjoyably expressive activity, and Mitchell's (2002) work on survivalism, direct requests for *stories* were identified as powerful ways to elicit in-depth accounts from suspicious preppers. These included initially asking respondents to 'Tell the story of how [they] became a prepper'. Michael also drew on narrative criminological work concerning objects. As Ugelvik (2019) notes, objects of various kinds offer prompts for rich narratives communicating multiple layers of memory and introspection. Taking a cue from this insight, participants were questioned on their particular prepping accoutrements – being asked, for example: 'What's the story behind you choosing *that* knife for your survival kit?' Altogether, these varied requests for narratives served to immediately indulge preppers' desire to tell numerous stories, reaffirm trust based on Michael's self-declared interest in respondents' narratives, *and* establish a basis for ongoing conversation. Stories about why certain knives were selected over other alternatives, for instance, became bridges to interesting reflections on how 'good' preppers make better choices than their contemporaries, and the scenarios in which respondents thought such weapons might be needed.

Whilst respondents' stories did not *always* neatly align with Michael's research interests, being seen to be open to them always aided the pursuit of *verstehen*. Ferrell, Hayward and Young (2015: 209-239) valuably advocate for criminologists' openness to empathising with those they study. Yet, the matter of whether a respondent *perceives* that they are being understood also clearly makes a difference to what they reveal about themselves – and thus significantly affects any researchers' ability to fulfil *verstehen*. When researching prepping culture, direct requests for (and attentive listening to) stories, in particular, represent an effective way to cultivate this perception, develop rapport, and subsequently elicit candid, in-depth accounts of preppers' fears, political perspectives, and self-impressions.

Crucially, concerning *verstehen*, the rapport generated through requests for stories *also* offered a route into *experiences* of prepping. Stories around prepping objects and skills, and the goodwill that they inspired, ultimately led to varied invitations to apply and develop them with respondents. This is how Michael ended up starting fires with Zack. Indeed, stories often prompted offers to take part in *numerous* prepping activities. This elsewhere included butchering young rabbits, fire-arms training, bee-keeping, chopping wood, and preserving food with various respondents (see Figure 2). In extending invitations to take part, it seems participants intuitively knew something that cultural criminologists also profess: that only so much can be understood through talking. That speaking alone could not convey the sensual, tactile, emotional, and *enjoyable* aspects of prepping that respondents were eager to convey: the delicious tastes of home-made honey; the spikes in heart rate that come with killing a young animal or using fire-arms; or the warm glow of achievement that comes with the successful development of a newly-mastered prepping skill. Thus, when Zack and others would explain in detail the myriad ways they enjoyed prepping, the *experience* of doing it with them allowed Michael to go beyond hearing their accounts, and to draw on first-hand feelings of these pleasures.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

**Figure 2** Experiences enabled by storytelling (clockwise from top left): Pressure-canning pickles; fresh honey reaped from bee-keeping; chopping wood; fire-arms training; and butchering rabbits. (Photo credit: Michael F. Mills)

Whilst Michael's research largely focusses on immediacy, we emphasise here that paying attention to *stories* and *storytelling* have done much to make these insightful experiences of prepping possible. Particularly, attentiveness to narrative initially guided him through prepping culture's boundaries, and helped establish productive rapport in the field. By telling a narrative challenging the stigmatisation of prepping, and recognising preppers' as enthusiastic tellers of stories, Michael sought to use storytelling to encourage openness from his participants. Here, we see evidence of how insights

developed within narrative criminology can benefit the pursuit of criminological *verstehen* – principally, by enabling access to the in-depth conversations, experiences, and feelings that make an empathetic appreciation of prepping possible.

### **Prepping for a ‘reason’: Narrative and immediacy**

If considerations of narrative can help take us to the point of ‘doing’, could they *also* help us understand how ‘doing’ is *experienced* by our participants? In this section, we examine how insights from narrative criminology can enhance empathetic understandings of prepping’s immediacies, showing that the experiential fabric of prepping is itself often riven with (and shaped by) various stories its practitioners express and consume.

Returning to narrative criminology’s focus on how stories motivate action, and our earlier summary of prepper culture, it is worth re-stating that narratives inspire, guide, and sustain much prepping activity. Through various novels, forums, and survival manuals, prepping culture provides individual preppers with storied descriptions of social collapse and ways to prepare for it. The plots of these texts regularly outline rationales for prepping that subsequently shape its practitioner’s disaster-based concerns. For example, Zack’s attempts to convert his wife, Chloe, to prepping enjoyed a breakthrough when he convinced her to read *One Second After* – a prepping novel by William R. Forchstein that describes the aftermath of a collapse in America’s electrical infrastructure. As she put it, reading the novel ‘really made me think... what *would* I do if the power grid didn’t work? I may not be as much of a prepper as Zack, but it definitely gave momentum to me thinking about the things we could do to be prepared for a situation like that’. Similarly, novels and survival guides – each of which contain considerable information about *how* to prep – outline levels of preparedness and how they can be achieved. In these texts, and real life, prepping typically begins with basic attempts to store food and water, followed by the development of prepping-related knowledge and numerous survival skills. The characters and chapters in these texts provide benchmarks against which readers’ progress in this endeavour can be measured.

As can be detected in Zack’s comments in our opening vignette, narratives animating prepping are also nested within wider American culture. Among them is a story linking prepping practices to (masculine) cultural traditions of self-reliant, individual independence. This facet of prepping is nested within ‘deep stories’ expressed in many preppers’ right-wing politics, in which America is described as losing its way from various values and virtues supposedly found in its past (see Hochschild, 2016; Mills, 2019). Being prepared, against the backdrop of this nostalgic story, means living up to an admirable heritage rooted in frontier lifestyles – and distinguishing oneself from other present-day Americans deemed dependent on government support and modern consumer convenience. As two respondents put it:

Prepping goes back to the old times, almost a century or more ago when people looked after themselves more. Government was there as an assist, not as a hand-out that it's become to some people. (Darren, Ohio)

Being self-sufficient is really important to me... to not rely on anyone, to rely on myself. It's that mentality from people born in the thirties: you're always self-sufficient... you take care of yourself. There were no social programmes, so you had to save up money to buy a house; you had to save up money to buy a television, you couldn't just put it on a credit card. (Monica, New Mexico)

Constructions of preppers as 'authentic' Americans were thus regularly expressed by participants, while they are also evident where prepping is discussed in various on-and-offline subcultural spaces (see Crockford, 2018).

Merely recognising that narrative constructions motivate action (see Presser, 2012) does little to reach *verstehen*: that point of empathetically *feeling* the experiences, subjective outlooks, and cultural logics of those we study. Nevertheless, in a narratively laden subfield like prepping, it is hard to conceive how *verstehen* can be reached *without* paying attention to stories. As narrative criminology reminds us, stories are in play *during* experience (Presser, 2009; Presser & Sandberg, 2015a). Here, narrative is not merely post-hoc retrospection, nor merely present in the build up to much prepping – it is part of *experiences* of prepping, too. In order to empathetically understand many of prepping's immediacies and gratifications, we therefore need to appreciate that they are energised by their place in wider narratives, and processes of narrative construction.

Returning to the fire-starting scenario introduced at the beginning, recall that the thrill around the moment the flame burst into life was not merely driven by excitement and surprise – or even immediate glee at a victory following several defeats. According to Zack, his excitement, *in this moment*, was also shaped by various narratives defining what was at stake in this situation. Among them, is the story that, unlike some of his counterparts, Zack is a capable prepper who tests his gear and has the knowledge and guile to overcome various challenges. Successfully demonstrating his trial and error method enacts Zack's self-story of being a competent prepper – demonstrating his ability to embody this story; to walk the talk, as opposed to *just* being a storyteller (in a pejorative sense). Excitement arises, then, partly because the story has been validated. Zack confessed: 'That was embarrassing for a while. I could feel the pressure. After I've spent days telling you how much we've learned about prepping... not being able to start a fire in front of a guest would have been... [sighs]. It was relieving to see the potperm [potassium permanganate] light up. I'm just thankful that we managed that.'

Zack's experience is also contingent upon an array of other narratives. When asked about ways in which he has enjoyed prepping over a ten-year period, he emphasised: 'I enjoy the mental challenge of

learning new things *for a reason.*' For Zack, the 'reason' to prepare is important, and is interpreted through aforementioned narratives that stay with him throughout his activities. The moments at which a new skill is mastered for the first time fizz with energy and meaning, at least in part, because they enact and validate the wider stories of becoming an advanced prepper, *and an idealised self-reliant American.* Without these driving stories, the 'challenge' of prepping would be rather more functional, far less meaningful, and less pleasurable. On this, Zack explains:

It's satisfying to know that you're covered. That if Plan A and Plan B don't go as you expected... you've invested this time in skills and knowledge and you can pull something out at any moment. And, when it does work, you get a thrill from that... a glow. It's like: "Ok, we're doing ok. We're prepared. I'm at that level now."

For Zack's wife, Chloe, a narrative around self-reliance likewise did much to bestow otherwise mundane prepping activities with energy:

Being able to create a meal that wasn't bought from a store, where I went out and picked this, this, and this... and it came from a seed that I planted six months ago... is rather absurd and amazing. I'm not the best knitter, I don't do that... it's not that exciting, but I *created* a scarf, and I *wear* the scarf that I knitted. It's exciting because *I made it*, and it's very cool that *I made it*. Same thing with the garden and the chickens – that's *my* chicken, those are *my* eggs. It's very cool. There's a certain pride in saying "I didn't depend on anyone else for that. I did that all by myself." [...] I think, in some senses, especially as a little girl, there's a certain amount of playing Laura Ingalls Wilder [author of *Little House on the Prairie*] and, you know, playing pioneer. We all grow up with those stories of the American pioneers, you know, on the plains, running through fields, or whatever. I'm doing that as an adult... I think there's an element of playing the fantasy of a pioneer.

As these accounts reveal, the positive sensations gained through mastering skills and various little victories – successfully starting fires, knitting scarves, improving fire-arm skills, butchering rabbits, and producing honey from one's own bees – are rendered gratifying *because of what they signify in personal stories that encompass them.* They are, at least in part, exciting because wider narratives shape what is at stake in such breakthroughs, and the excitement that emerges in moments that they occur.

As we have noted, cultural criminologists do not accept a duality between speaking and doing in their pursuit of *verstehen*. Moreover, cultural criminology's open interdisciplinary approach to doing research does not preclude the possibility of engaging with narrative to understand deviance. Yet, at times, narrative is marginalised as 'retrospection' and 'discourse' sitting in tension with a focus on immediacies (Aspden & Hayward, 2015: 239). In this discussion, though, we may glimpse how narrative

is not just background that directs action, or makes sense of its aftermath; rather, it remains in play to shape (and bestow meaning on to) immediate experiences 'in the moment'. As we stated earlier: narrative criminology 'blurs the distinction between narrative and experience by suggesting that experience is always known and acted upon as it has been interpreted symbolically' (Presser, 2009: 184). Consistent with this, we contend that, without attending to narrative, we may miss the underlying stories that *give prepping and many other experiences meaning (and render them exciting)*.

## Conclusion

Whilst criminological *verstehen* – attentiveness to that which is immediate, visceral and emotional – may seem at odds with a focus on narrative (Apsden & Hayward, 2015; Presser & Sandberg, 2015a), we argue for the importance of taking notice of, and working with, stories in pursuit of criminological *verstehen*. Drawing on Michael's fieldwork on the narratively laden subculture of prepping, we illustrate how attention to narrative supports, and may even be key to reaching, this appreciation of deviance. We suggest several 'moves' for working with narrative in ethnographic fieldwork with deviant subcultures.

Firstly, being cognisant of the narratives told *about* our research subjects is important for ethnographic entrée. Whilst stigma is often a barrier, researchers can productively position themselves as being open to listening to, and valuing, respondents' counter narratives. Secondly, appreciation of respondents' desire to tell stories may be vital for establishing ethnographic rapport. In the case of preppers, survival plans and objects prompted an array of narratives about values and identity. Stories convey a great deal about what matters, as well as what counts as a good story in that setting. As such, we contend that it is important to think about how our recognition and use of narratives can open up possibilities for the kinds of stories *and experiences* that can be cultivated in the field. Thirdly, stories also shape the significance and meaning of immediacies. If *verstehen* directs us to empathise with those we study, and to access the cultural logics underlying their actions, we do well to pay attention to how stories structure shared, ethnographic experiences. This is because, here, narrative is more than retrospection; it is present in 'the moment', and needs to be considered in a rounded appreciation of deviance's immediate reality.

Attention to narrative can be immensely valuable for researchers. As cultural criminologists argue, attention to representation and meaning enriches scholarship (Ferrell, Hayward & Young 2015). In a 'storytelling society' (Plummer 1995), narratives are likely to be important. Nonetheless, 'not all of social reality is encompassed in narrative' (Fleetwood 2016: 186). As we have shown, like many practices, prepping reflects and *contains visceral feelings and embodied satisfactions*, while also being motivated and made meaningful by stories over sustained periods of time. But, as cultural criminologists emphasise, some criminal or deviant acts explode rapidly and sometimes chaotically. We do not advocate attention to narrative *over* experience (see Apsden & Hayward 2015). However, there is much to be gained by



thinking about the stories that come before, and after, such explosive, or dynamic events. Thus, in order to empathetically appreciate the situated meanings of subcultural practices, such as prepping, we need to attend to 'doing' as well as 'speaking', and the intertwinements between the two.

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