

Article

The soundtrack of criminal careers: On music, life courses and life stories

Theoretical Criminology

1–19

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DOI: 10.1177/13624806231173665

journals.sagepub.com/home/tcr



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Abstract

Music is ubiquitous in contemporary societies, and criminologists are paying increasing attention to it, asserting that it takes antisocial, prosocial and anti-establishment forms regarding criminality. Established approaches provide vital ways to understand the relationship of music and crime, but criminologists have yet to theorise the fluidity of music's roles for those who have committed criminalised acts. The life-story interviews we conducted with prisoners in Latin America reveal that music's role in people's lives changes over the course of their lives in complex ways. It also frames and influences the way they talk about their own histories. Informed by repeat interviews with four prisoners, we suggest including the concepts of life courses and life stories to facilitate understanding the complexity and multi-dimensionality of the relationship between crime and music. We also demonstrate and discuss how life courses and life stories are intertwined.

Keywords

Latin America, life course, life story, music, narrative criminology

Introduction

When you enter a prison yard in Latin America, the music is striking – surprising and unavoidable. Reggaetón, salsa, cumbia, hip-hop, rock and the latest global pop hits blast out of loudspeakers for hours upon hours, providing a soundtrack to the social

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interactions in the prison yard and adding to the vibrant and animated atmosphere of prison life. The tunes intermingle with conversations and shouts, and the sounds of people playing sports, washing clothes and selling goods. If you close your eyes, you can imagine dancing in a club or hanging out on a bustling street far removed from the walls of incarceration. But if you open them, you are assaulted by the harsh reality of overcrowding and underfunding even as quieter sounds come from other parts of the prison where religious groups worship, bands rehearse and TV sets entertain. Inside prisons, as outside, music accompanies life.

Criminologists have paid significant attention to the relationship between music and crime (in the multiple and complex meanings of the latter), providing valuable analytical perspectives and underscoring music's constitutive power (Ferrell, 1999; Lee, 2022; Siegel and Bovenkerk, 2021). Criminologists have also made significant advances in the past few years in the study of the importance of sonic prison environments (Herrity et al., 2021; McKay, 2018; Russell and Carlton, 2020). They have shown that carceral sonic environments are highly diverse across the globe and impact individual inmates differently. Criminology, however, still has to incorporate tools to account for the multiple – and often contradictory – roles music plays throughout the lives of those who have committed criminalised acts. In particular, the role that music plays in their life storytelling is by and large unexplored.

In this article we attempt to augment the theorisation of the relationship between music and crime – or the criminology of music. Our starting point are interviews conducted as part of CRIMLA, a research project conducted in prisons in Latin America. In interviews, prisoners talked about the importance of music in their lives inside and outside prison – some even organised their life stories around lyrics. We take up ideas from decades of criminological studies of music and combine them with life-course (Carlsson and Sarnecki, 2016) and narrative (Fleetwood et al., 2019) criminology. The aim is to theorise the fluidity and variability of the roles music plays in people's lives, also in relation to criminality. Our purpose is to better understand the complex changes in incarcerated individuals' musical taste and the repercussions of this for their identities and self-narratives. To substantiate our approach, we detail the role music has played in the life of four prisoners.

Music in criminology

There is a wealth of studies about music in the history of criminology (Siegel and Bovenkerk, 2021), and the perspectives used to analyse its role in relation to criminality are ever evolving. The discipline has moved beyond initial naïve readings of music as the direct cause of crime that saw humans as black boxes filled with the media's detrimental content (Reiner, 2002). Although the idea that music directly encourages criminal behaviour lives on in political circles, scholars have been swift to demonstrate that this cultural expression is about much more: subcultures (Bennett, 1999), social meanings (Green, 2019) and the texture of cultural life (Bennett, 2001). Scholars have also forefronted the experimental, material, affective and emotional aspects of music. For instance, confronting the demonisation and policing of certain genres, usually those embraced by non-white, impoverished and disenfranchised groups, criminologists have pointed out that such denunciations are shaped by colonial and discriminatory echoes (Fatsis, 2019).

Criminology is now populated by myriad approaches that highlight the complexity of the relationship between crime and music.

The criminological study of music has also critically engaged with the debate about the meaning and processes of crime and criminality. In line with Marxist readings of the discipline that indicate that the criminal system is an instrument to achieve 'subordination through discipline' (Melossi and Pavarini, 2018/1981: 226), commentators have warned that musical genres are racially criminalised to sustain the hegemonic aesthetic order desired by powerful groups (Brisman et al., 2021), following 'racist assumptions within processes of state regulation and social control that betray their origins in the history of slavery and European colonial control' (Fatsis, 2021: 30). Peters (2021: 1) has highlighted the importance of a 'critical criminology of music' that embraces a harm perspective and studies the harms perpetrated by the powerful against the disenfranchised that are, nonetheless, not criminalised. Aware of the cultural and political dimensions traversing the social experience of music, Lee (2022: 447) tasks 'musicriminology' with delving into an intricate analysis of 'music, musicians, and audiences, and the cultures, spaces, and contexts through which they interact with the law, institutions, power, and social control'.

Despite the myriad elements and perspectives that criminologists of music consider in their studies, there are some identifiable tendencies in their approaches. Some of the most conservative studies explore how music indirectly affects antisocial behaviour. This antisocial perspective focuses on the negative impact of music (and the practices around it) and condemns, for instance, its glorification of violence. Based on a study of self-reported identity formation, Dalzell and Cavanagh (2021) argue that young people use music to measure themselves vis-à-vis their peers and mark belonging. The authors suggest that in the fragility of group belonging and peer pressure, music can glue people together around violent practices. Wellinga (2021) explores how narcocorridos, a popular Mexican genre that glamorises drug traffickers and their activity, has become a weapon in the indirect warfare of drug cartels and has resulted in the murder of artists when rival gangs take revenge over unflattering lyrics. Wadds et al. (2021: 14), using data from Australia, argue that carnivals can end up being 'premised on the pleasure and entitlement of (heterosexual) men' rather than being the promised transgressive spaces to satisfy the need for release for all people. The antisocial perspective, then, explores how music in conjunction with complex social forces, like exclusion or detrimental imaginaries, can have harmful consequences.

At the other end of the spectrum are studies of how music is prosocial by helping people learn social norms and binding individuals in solidarity and resilience in difficult times. A study by Anderson et al. (2016: 66), for example, highlights that 'spending more time in productive activities in the presence of capable guardians, such as sports, music, or study groups, is associated with increases in prosocial outcomes'. Regarding solidarity and resilience, de Haan (2021: 174) documents how prisoners in Nazi camps used music to lift their spirits by singing whenever they had the opportunity – a practice that helped them 'reconnect with their pre-war lives' and offered them 'opportunities for imaginative escape into a world outside the camp'. A prosocial criminological approach to music is, thus, any perspective that highlights the social and emotional benefits of music for people at risk of criminalisation.

Significant attention has also been paid to music's anti-establishment potential; this artistic expression as an outlet for the dissatisfaction of groups as a result of oppressive

social systems. This approach follows the sociologist Charles Brown (1995: 440) who interpreted blues as a 'collective response to oppression' in which Black Americans addressed 'their cry for freedom'. More recent studies have analysed mumble, a hip-hop subgenre, as 'a cultural zeitgeist for resistance' (Omrow, 2018: 44), invited readers to 'perceive hip hop as a looking glass into road life' (Lynes et al., 2020: 1214), and interpreted violence in drill lyrics as 'establishing an artist as an authentic voice of the ghetto, with all the acumen and "cool" that attaches to this' (Ilan, 2020: 1003). A further example is the work of Kauzlarich and Awsumb (2018), who document the political work of punk rockers in opposing state violence and oppression. The anti-establishment approach suggests that music is used by marginalised communities to claim the social capital and means of expression that society has denied them. In this scholarship, music signals revolt, transgression and rebellion against unjust social systems.

Criminological approaches have thus moved from an initial belief that musical contents directly dictate a person's behaviour – i.e. violent lyrics lead a person to be violent – to understanding that tunes and lyrics are rather a way to construct and dispute the reality with which individuals engage and interpret in complex and ambiguous ways. Willis (2014/1978), already in the 1960s, developed a social-constructivist perspective of the issue by highlighting how two distinct cultural groups (motorbike boys and hippies) used music to challenge cultural meanings dominated by capitalism and produce new understandings to replace them. Two decades later, with the arrival of cultural criminology, the view of music as constitutive of society's cultural fabric was reinvigorated. Ferrell (1999: 395), in his programmatic proposal for an exploration of 'the convergence of cultural and criminal processes in contemporary social life', was interested in the role of music as part of the 'culture wars' and the disputation of image, meaning, and representation in the social arena. He highlighted the importance of deep cultural immersion and a 'detailed analysis of popular music's historical and thematic structures' (Ferrell, 1999: 401) to understand the profound and broad symbolic underpinnings of this form of cultural expression. Years later, Ferrell, this time with Hayward and Young (2012: 137), rejected music as a static influence and invited readers to visualise its fluidity: 'an "interpretative resource", a way of "organising" or perhaps more accurately reconstituting reality'.

More recently, Urbanik and Haggerty (2018: 1346) have underscored music's ambivalence. For them, rap functions both as 'a form of resistance to structural barriers' and as a means for rappers to increase their street capital (Sandberg, 2008) and their profits from dealing drugs. In other words, these authors invite readers see to this cultural output as discursive and narrative forces that are part of the continuous negotiation and construction of reality. Along the same lines, Crockett Thomas and colleagues (2021: 8) document how song writing allows offenders to challenge 'the relationships between their selves and their punishment'. Song writing gives inmates about to re/integrate into society the opportunity to compose new identities, reinforce resolutions and reinterpret their experiences of punishment. Hjørnevik et al. (2022: 1) argue that musical therapy in prison affords 'congruence between the past, the present and the projected future for participants by way of their unfolding musical life stories'. Moreover, in his programme for musicriminology, Lee (2022) argues that the best way to understand music in social life is by studying holistically the three components of sonic spaces: an atmosphere that

produces a corporeal impression, a soundscape that ‘refers to the cultural meanings ... that constitute the listening experience’ (p. 450), and an acoustic environment (the location) where we produce, listen, or perform.

We build on these studies that highlight two aspects: 1) the ambiguity, complexity, and fluidity in music and soundscapes, and 2) the connection between music and self-stories. Our main contribution, however, is taking a longitudinal view of music in people’s lives and exploring the variety of roles it plays in people’s life trajectories and life stories. We draw inspiration from life-course criminology and the nascent analytical field of a life-course trajectory of musical taste and, furthermore, emphasise the role that lyrics and tunes play in life storytelling.

Life-course analysis, musical taste and narratives

Life-course analysis is employed widely in the social sciences (Elder, 1998), including criminology (Blokland and Geest, 2017; Laub and Sampson, 1993). A life course is a linked sequence of phases in life ranging from infancy, to childhood, to adolescence, to adulthood and to the senior years. Significant changes – including physiological ones – happen in a person’s trajectory during those years, and society constructs expectations for people as they move through the life phases. The individual often interiorises and strives to comply with those expectations. Acknowledging a life course as a sequence of phases is important in sociological analyses because first, ‘the same event may give rise to very different results depending on how old the individual is when it occurs’ (Carlsson and Samecki, 2016: 7) and, second, because causes of social phenomena do not operate simultaneously but sequentially, creating the need to ‘deal with a sequence of steps’ (Becker, 1963: 23). Notably, however, life-course literature ‘has largely ignored the influence of life-course stage and age on cultural taste’ (Harrison and Ryan, 2010: 650).

There is evidence of ‘a life-course trajectory of musical taste, which begins with fairly narrow tastes in young adulthood, expands into middle age, and then narrows later in life’ (Harrison and Ryan, 2010: 664). Some scholars have identified the significance of life trajectories and life phases for the role that musical taste plays in the formation of identities (Bennett and Hodkinson, 2020; Hodkinson, 2011) and the accumulation of cultural capital (Rahadiano Sutopo et al., 2017). Taste, including musical, is a form of cultural capital: the ‘long-lasting dispositions of the mind and the body, cultural goods, and educational qualifications’ that people have accumulated through labour and can exchange for social energy (Bourdieu, 1986: 17). Because musical taste is part of people’s cultural capital, it plays an important social function like indicating to others who we are (Bourdieu, 1984), marking moral boundaries by stating who we are not (Lamont and Molnár, 2002) and creating social networks by enabling or disabling people to transcend the symbolic boundaries of ‘otherness’ (Harrison and Ryan, 2010: 653). Although criminologists have explored the significance of life phases in ‘the onset, persistence, and desistance of offending behaviour’ (McGee and Farrington, 2019), we argue that engaging a life-course trajectory of musical engagement, taste and narration in association with ‘criminal careers’ (Matza, 1964) accounts for some of the multifaceted, dynamic and seemingly contradictory roles that music plays throughout a life also in regard to criminality. Music, for instance, ‘invokes memories and emotions’ (Harrison

and Ryan, 2010: 665) and builds an identity by partially relying on the narratives present in lyrics to construct a sense of who we are and where we are headed.

Musical lyrics are often narratives, defined in criminology as 'a type of discourse that follows events or experiences over time and makes a point' (Presser and Sandberg, 2015: 2). Understanding the 'capacity of stories to explain, guide, and arouse' (Fleetwood et al., 2019: 1), highlights the significance of music's narrative elements for individuals, social groups and cultures. Lyrics, for instance, help construct life stories through which people 'provide their lives with unity and purpose by constructing internalised and evolving narratives of the self' (McAdams, 2001: 100). The life stories people construct are 'conditioned by culture and context' and draw on 'a wide variety of cultural narratives and discourses' (Sandberg, 2013: 80–81) – including music.

Concepts from life-course and narrative criminology invite us to study how music plays out in the trajectories and stories of individuals who have engaged with criminality. Although emerging from very different epistemological and ontological traditions, both perspectives follow long-term sequences as an uneven continuum. The two are closely intertwined considering how 'the life course itself', at least in part, can be analysed as a social construction (Holstein and Gubrium, 2007: 337) often created within and formed through life stories. Combined life courses and life stories may thus add a longitudinal and narrative component to criminological studies of music. These perspectives may furthermore assist in understanding the complex and varied roles that lyrics and tunes plays throughout individual life courses, the stories people tell about themselves, and the relationship between the two.

The sound of crime

Beginning in December 2021, a research team including the two authors of this article conducted life-course interviews with 350 people imprisoned in seven Latin American countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Honduras and Mexico (Bolivia was added later). Half of the interviewees were women and the other half men. The team, which also included both women and men, selected participants sentenced for a range of offences: drug trafficking, kidnapping, murder, sexual offences and violent theft. Most often the participants had committed several of these offences and many others for which they had not been sentenced. Each inmate was interviewed several times with some days between sessions. Each session lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours. Interviews were based on an extensive interview guide emphasising family context, childhood, youth, adulthood, crime, drug use, violence, detention, legal process, life in prison and perceptions of victims. We made a point of letting participants tell their own stories, and interviewers were free to probe topics of special interest not covered by the interview guide. Music turned out to be prominent among such topics.

The research project was hosted by the University of Oslo, Norway. Therefore, we sought and obtained authorisation from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) to collect and store life stories. We also received authorisation from local ethics committees in the seven Latin American countries where we conducted fieldwork. All participants received an oral and written explanation of their rights in Spanish and Portuguese and agreed to participate. Names and important details from their stories have been anonymised. Considering that most participants had experienced significant

psychological trauma, we implemented a trauma-informed approach (Todd-Kvam and Goyes, 2023) that assumed, among other things, that obtaining informed consent from participants was a continuous process across and within the sessions rather than a one-time formality. This approach to consent was of particular importance for Camila who we present below and who has memory loss and learning disabilities as a product of her prolonged use of cocaine derivatives. Although her condition did not compromise her ability to consent to her participation, we made sure not to transgress any of her rights or cause harm.

In what follows, we take a closer look at the life stories of four participants: Luis, Daniel, Alejandro and Camila. The first three were interviewed by the second author and the fourth by a female research assistant. We sketch their lives and paths into crime and prison, paying attention to the role of music. The methodological rationale for this selective approach relies on the oral history tradition, which uses interviews to ‘gain insight into great events’ and significant social dynamics (Ritchie, 2010: 4). Simultaneously, we used narrative portraiture for the presentation of our findings, a process that Rodríguez-Dorans and Jacobs (2020: 613) define as ‘selecting and rearranging extracts from interviews, observations, field notes, or documents [to] offer a glimpse into the subjects’ lives’. Narrative portraiture ‘depicts social phenomena through people’s stories of everyday life experience [and is] ... thus able to bridge the gap between individual and society’. In other words, although we chose to present the profiles of those participants for whom music was particularly important, they represent tendencies evident among the other participants we interviewed. Our cases can thus work as ideal types for more widespread propensities. We focus on life stories to delve into detail and capture the complex and often ambiguous relationship between music and crime. We furthermore hope that what may be lost in terms of a systematic and ‘representative’ analysis is gained in the detailed exploration of nuances and ambiguity of the role that music plays for people who have committed criminalised acts.

Luis: Music as presenting a gangsta persona during his street years and an outlet for emotions during fatherhood

Maleante, le viven tirando a mi pana pero coroné [They go at my bro’ but I crowned]
 Tengo lo mío, trafico los kilos, me dejan billetes de a cien [I got mine, I traffic kilos, I get
 hundred bills]
 Aunque me quieran matar ellos no van a poder [Even if they want to kill me they will not
 manage]
 [Rapping in English] We made it
 Money and we are flipping and this bitch’s talking winning
 I am about to get it going nigga, all these bitches talking about we winning
 Fuck what you think these motherfuckers don’t winning
 Man I am gone
 I am smoking on the strong, everywhere I go I got these bitches
 Man I am going crazy, got my man, I am amazing

Luis was serving time in Mexico. He was talkative and self-confident but at the same time vulnerable and marginalised. He had recently been violently attacked and almost

killed in prison, and on the way to one of the interviews his cigarettes and lighter were stolen by prison guards. Luis was excited about being interviewed and five minutes into the first interview, he revealed why: 'I'm a trap artist, I like trap. Maybe someone will listen to these tapes (from the interview) and discover me'.

Luis has a long history of violence: being a gang member, working for a drug-trafficking organisation and operating his own drug-dealing businesses. In the years during which his main identity was connected to street life and drug trafficking, his music skills provided him with a certain position among his few friends. Singing was a crucial source of pride for him: 'It's freestyle, I never write anything down.... Put on a beat and let's go ... I don't have to write a song, put me a fucking beat and I'm gonna make you a song'. He has videos on YouTube and 54 songs on a memory card. He had constructed, over many years, a clear identity as a trap rapper. He explained:

A trapper is a guy who raps, but who really lives out of selling dope. He's a dope dealer. I'm not gonna lie to you, that's what I am, that's what I really am. I really was in here. You know I was here. So when I get out and I say I've been in prison, folks are gonna be 'wow that dude was really there though'. So what happens is that people believe everything you say.

His musical expression and style were based on keeping it real, an important value in much of hip-hop worldwide, especially in what is often described as reality rap and its subgenre gangsta rap (Keyes, 2002; Krims, 2003). It reveals an aspiration through which artistic expression can have very real effects as they 'play on the authenticity of these representations' (Lee, 2022: 460) and 'rivals, and sometimes even strangers, start pressing [the artist] to prove his authenticity' (Stuart, 2020: 11). For Luis, the aspiration for authenticity meant believing that trappers must do what they rap about:

A lot of rappers out in the street say they are killers, and been to jail, but they have never been down.... We eat all these motherfuckers alive because they're all just T-bone steak to us. How you're gonna come and tell me you're bad if you never killed no one.

Lyrics provided the script for the role that Luis interpreted and enacted as a gangsta persona, musical and criminal careers overlapping for a big portion of his life course. However, as he entered into a new life phase when he became an incarcerated parent, song writing gave Luis an outlet for his softer emotions. He left his daughter when she was three, a contingency that led him to sing about 'the pain I felt when I left her'. He rapped to confirm his street persona but increasingly to mend wounds and make his family proud. Being able to express emotions through lyrics – a familiar pattern for him – helped him heal. New songs in his musical repertoire were an ode to relationships and emotions, as opposed to most of his lyrics that boasted of violence.

Music is the only legal activity Luis had mastered, received mainstream confirmation from and taken pride in. Most other aspects in his life revolved around crime. Music partly ensnared him in a gangsta persona, but it was also something licit he was good at and a crucial way for him to express and process emotions. As Luis transitioned from young adulthood to adulthood through his parenthood, so did his engagement in and relationship to music, but it remained indefinite. It is thus not surprising that the self-

narratives Luis conveyed both in his songs and in the interview were highly ambiguous, multifaceted and sometimes contradictory – not unlike narratives more generally (Sandberg et al., 2015). Life trajectories and life stories are intrinsically intertwined.

Daniel: Music as a socialising tool when in isolation and as therapy when wanting peace and quiet

[Singing a corrido]

Máxima seguridad, se llama esta porquería,
que construyeron los gringos, porque encerrarnos querían,
se nos trata con rigor, más que en la penitenciaría.
El gobierno americano, también centroamericano,
o sea el gobierno hondureño y de los estados Unidos
se pusieron bien de acuerdo
para ponerlos bien cautivos.

Maximum security, is the name of this crap
built by the gringos because lock us in they will
They treat us severely, more than in the penitentiary
The American government and the Central American too,
Meaning the Honduran and the North American,
Pretty much agreed
To make them good captives

When we met Daniel, he had been incarcerated more than 20 years. Scars from fights and burns from the time he set light to his cell in a suicide attempt cover his body. During the interviews, he expressed his desire to live in peace and quiet. He had recently left a prison gang, which caused him trouble, and had also intensified his long-time engagement with music: ‘I smoke weed, I relax and get control of my life – and I write songs’. Describing his activity as a lyricist he said, ‘I’ve got some music, I don’t know if you know it, it’s called corrido. I got three of those, and three rap songs, and romantic ones. The romantic one is for my girl’. Song writing and drugs help Daniel deal with his depression and the threat of prison violence. Yet, when we asked him about his relationship with music, he held back, as one holds closely something secretive and precious.

Daniel has spent most of his adult life in prison in Honduras. He first went to prison as a juvenile, and one month after his release, he killed several people to avenge a loved one. He was locked up again – for a long time – this time in adult prison. As self-protection, Daniel joined a gang and engaged in violent fights, adding years to his sentence. He was then moved to maximum security. There, as an adult, Daniel found again his love for music when his life circumstances changed dramatically reducing his social network. Like many others, inside and outside prison, Daniel used singing as cultural capital to connect with others (Harrison and Ryan, 2010).

When I was there [maximum security], no news, nobody going out, nobody coming in. Only the 21 people there, for nine months. Without TV, without music, without visit, without stuff,

without many things. I was thinking, you know, to write a song to explain people. To let people know how it is there. To let the voice come out of there. So, I wrote a song.

Here he composed his favourite song, one that meant a lot to him, *A Nasty Garbage Maximum*. Daniel sang mostly in the isolation of his cell, and other inmates heard it. At one point he was singing on demand: 'they were so excited man, screaming and all that. They were feeling happy because music gives you another energy, you know.'

After a while, Daniel decided that he would 'mainly sing for himself'. He had no ambitions of becoming famous and no need to perform for anyone:

Some guys that were there with me are here now. They ask, 'hey Daniel, what's up, why don't you sing up here'. I say, 'I'm trying to cool down man'. 'You gotta sing though. Because up here you got a speaker, you got microphone, you didn't have nothing down there and you sounded so good. I can only imagine how you would sing here with all that stuff'. Thanks to them for trying to get my spirits up, but no way I'm gonna sing. I ain't got no buzz, I ain't got no manager, I ain't got nothing. I do it when I feel I want to do it.

As illustrated by Daniel's story and emphasised by DeNora (2016: 56) music can 'afford asylum' by offering 'removal—from the painful role, the illness producing environment, or simply the daily routines'.

Daniel's turning points in life implied significant changes in his relationship to music. When he was sent to maximum security, after the hectic life of being part of social groups, he sang to connect with other inmates. Once he decided he wanted to distance himself from violence and criminal activity (get 'peace and quiet'), music became a private affair. Singing comforted him; it was therapeutic and self-expressive, as art can be. Through his lyrics, Daniel meditated and dealt with his separation from his mother and the trauma of being isolated in maximum security. Daniel lyricised his life story (McAdams, 2013) by singing, for himself, his inner story ('I make my own songs; I don't do nothing for nobody man'). Again, life story and life course are continuously co-constructed and closely intertwined with music.

Alejandro: Music from youthful night scenes to life story

Alejandro: Na na na na [singing a Christian song]. And then I'm singing in my mind and then I'm happy.

Interviewer: And with the Christian group they sing too, you sing together? You like that too, right?

Alejandro: Yes, I like it because they don't sing bad songs. They are singing alabanzas [praise].

Interviewer: What's your favourite religious songs?

Alejandro: Mmm. Oh oh oh oh [singing] en la casa hay un fuego, fuego en mi interior, fuego [In the house there is a fire, a fire inside of me, fire].... Like bon bon [makes the sound of the instruments].

Alejandro smiled and joked during the interview despite struggling with depression. He sang fragments of songs, drummed with his hands and hummed rhythmically throughout the interview. He occasionally sang to illustrate his point, for example, regarding football games, religious emotions or phases of his life. The interview sessions with him resembled a musical in which talk became song at pivotal points in the plot. Music structured Alejandro's life storytelling.

A judge sentenced Alejandro to several years of imprisonment for extensive drug trafficking. Yet, he identified as a worker rather than a criminal. He worked for many years for several legal organisations before he was arrested. Alejandro is not a performer but a devoted fan for whom a variety of genres have been important at different stages in his life. He evidenced a rich and complex musical career. Growing up, Alejandro was deep into rock: he name-dropped a multitude of bands including Linkin Park, van Halen, Limp Bizkit and Evangelion. These bands evoked a lifestyle of dancing, drinking, smoking marijuana and seducing women. As he aged, and as predicted by studies in life-course analysis of taste (Harrison and Ryan, 2010), Alejandro developed a more varied musical taste: during the interview he sang Jimmy Hendrix's *Hey Joe*, Joe Cocker's *It's a Sin When You Love Somebody* and Santana's *Magic Woman*. But he condemned reggaetón despite his broad musical taste: 'They are talking about bad things, about women, and talking about other guys, bad things. Talking about doing bad things. You have to do what is right'. Through reggaetón he engaged with symbolic boundary work, strengthening his identity as an honest, working man, and marked what he *was not* (Copes et al., 2008; Lamont and Molnár, 2002).

In prison, Alejandro joined an evangelical group mainly to avoid trouble, and he greatly enjoyed the gospel in the meetings. As has been documented in other Latin American prisons where 'the sensory experience—the music, movement, shouting—of the religious events ... is what draws people in' (Pierce, 2021: 136), Alejandro felt uplifted by choir singing, especially up-beat songs. Evangelical meetings filled with energy and social communion made life in prison more bearable for him.

The changes in Alejandro's taste and the role of music along his life course are clear. Earlier in his life, participating in raves and parties energised and helped him socialise but also exacerbated his alcoholism. Later in life, when he had a more 'mature' taste, he listened to rock to raise his spirits while trafficking drugs. In prison, music again played a prosocial function by giving him hope. Alejandro first sang, together with the interviewer, and then talked fondly of Judy Garland's *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*:

Alejandro: You can sing, and the rainbows, the colours are so beautiful, beautiful life, and at the end you can find...

Interviewer: Mmm. There is opportunity on the other side. Somewhere.

Alejandro: On the rainbow, you have the chance, you have the opportunity [silence as he struggled to explain the meaning of the song].

Alejandro also treasured anti-establishment music. He sang Gondwana's *Guerra* (war), Morla's *Corazón de lava* (Lava heart), and Lennon's *Give Peace a Chance* – all songs calling out violence – to bolster his social critique.

In his youth, music was part of Alejandro's social activities and way of life, sometimes accompanying crime, at other times fuelling radical political opposition. However, as he matured and his circumstances changed (in large part due to his incarceration), music also became a source of comfort and a way to stay out of trouble. Along the way, lyrics were an important means by which he structured his life storytelling. Music added flavour and sometimes replaced words in his life story. When struggling to explain his life and feelings, he sang a song he felt was self-explanatory, replacing deep elucidations in his narration. Music accompanied his life course and aided his storytelling in a rich, multifaceted and interconnected way. Alejandro used it to construct meanings 'in relation to the notion of a life course' (Holstein and Gubrium, 2007: 335) separating different life phases, and made his life story memorable for him – and tellable to others.

Camila: Music's transition from hobby to a way to keep track of a vanishing life

No debí poner mis ojos en alguien como tú.
 Ya sabía que tus anhelos van buscando otros sueños,
 Que te llevan de mi vida cada vez más lejos,
 Y siento morir lentamente en mi alma una ilusión...
 Tú seguirás tu camino ya escrito,
 Donde alguien te esperará,
 Y a mí este amor me atormenta,
 Me envuelve en su tempestad,
 Y a mi amor me atormenta ayayai,
 Me envuelve en su tempestad.
 I should not have turned my gaze on someone like you.
 I knew that in your hopes you sought other dreams,
 Which take you all the time farther from me.
 I feel, in my soul, a dream slowly dying...
 You will follow your path written beforehand,
 Where someone waits for you,
 While this love torments me,
 It wraps me up in its storm,
 It torments me ayayai,
 It wraps me up in its storm.

Camila is a 35-year-old woman sentenced to 20 years in prison for kidnapping – she had 12 years left to serve. Camila used drugs intensively for almost three decades. She first consumed bazuco (a cut of cocaine with brick dust) at age eight upon the invitation a friend. At the age of 14, she started sniffing shoe glue (made of toluene hexane). The chronic inhalation of toluene hexane led to memory loss and a learning disability, a common consequence of such consumption (Woodward and Beckley, 2014). She was, at times, incoherent and contradicted herself in the interviews.

Interviewer: I am confused, how many children do you have?

Camila: Four.

Interviewer: How old are they?

Camila: My daughter is nine, the other one 10, the twins are six, the oldest 21, the other one 14 and the other one 16.

Interviewer: I thought they were only four?

Camila: Look, the tween girls are 19 and the other one 15.

Camila struggled to keep track of time, making it difficult for her to sustain a life story in the strict sense (McAdams, 2013), but she remembered significant episodes in her life. When asked about her hobbies she replied, 'I have always been mesmerised by music'. During childhood and adolescence, she enjoyed dancing and singing both alone and in social contexts. During the first nine years of her life, Camila witnessed many episodes of violence between her father and mother. When her mother left, Camila's home continued to be violent, now with her father and stepmother. At age 14, tired of the ever-present threat of physical abuse, she left her hometown and took a bus to Bogotá, the capital city of Colombia, where she ended up in the Bronx, a neighbourhood that hosted thousands of homeless and impoverished people, most of whom struggled with drug addiction, and where several organised crime groups operated (Redacción, 2021). During her first year in the Bronx and as a skilled dancer, Camila socialised at nightclubs. She entered an abusive and controlling relationship with one of the persons she met at a nightclub. Her husband demanded Camila remain at home, but she burgled to buy drugs.

As she reached the age of majority and still in an abusive relationship, Camila used music as an escape from domestic violence. As she recollected the domestic violence she experienced at the hands of her husband, she mentioned a day of drinking to cope with her sorrows and listening to *Distintos destinos* (Different destinies) by Binomio de Oro de América. This song, the epigraph for Camila's profile, tells the story of a man who regrets falling in love with a woman he knew would not be good for him.

However, once in prison, music become more than a hobby and provided Camila with a storyline. Having no coherent life story because of drug-related memory impairment, Camila used lyrical tropes (Sandberg, 2016) to give her a sense of identity – particularly for keeping track of violent episodes. As the interview sessions continued, we confirmed that Camila based important portions of her life narrative on lyrics. During the first interview, she mentioned an episode of violence between Abel (her husband) and a friend of hers. She did not provide details but sang *Aunque te fuiste* (Even though you left) by Don Omar. The reggaetón song deals with the pain of losing a dear person: 'It was not easy, having you and losing you, to accept forgetting you, and today that you left, I feel I will go crazy'. During the second interview, Camila recalled more details of the episode:

Camila: We [Camila and her friend] sat at the table to drink and I suggested we play cards, and he said 'ok'. We started playing when my husband arrived with other sayayines [slang for vigilantes in drug markets]. I started drinking, I opened the first beer. He [her friend] put the beer on the table and then they took him [she simulates shooting a gun].

Interviewer: Did your husband kill your friend?

Camila: Yes, my husband.

Interviewer: In front of you?

Camila: Yes, in front of me.

Music was unrelated to the criminalised acts Camila committed. Our decision to include her, however, corresponds with our desire to highlight that music, more often than not, is dissociated from criminality, but is still significant for the majority of incarcerated people. Camila's portraiture reveals that in her youth and early adulthood dancing and singing was a hobby, a tool for socialising, and an escape from abuse. As she got older and circumstances changed – including a dissolving identity due to substance use – music provided her with a way to understand traumatic episodes in her life, locate them in time, and express her feelings associated with the trauma. Lyrics helped her keep track of a vanishing life, and stories of music (that do not vanish; Short and Dingle, 2016) took precedence over her actual life and erased the subjective differences between life course and life story.

Concluding remarks

The relationship between crime and music is fundamentally ambiguous and complex. In Luis's youth when lived on the streets, singing helped build his gangsta persona, but when he transitioned into adulthood and parenthood – much of it spent in prison – music provided him with an outlet for his 'softer' emotions. When Daniel was removed from the intense social activity to which he was accustomed, he found a love for music and used it to connect with others, but when he transitioned into wishing for 'peace and quiet', writing songs was a form of therapy for him. In his youth, partaking in concerts, parties and raves was a central part of Alejandro's life, which also included illegal work, but as years passed and he suffered the pains of incarceration, including prison-induced depression, music became a therapeutic tool. Most importantly, in his adulthood Alejandro organised his life around lyrics and made his life tellable. Similarly, with a faulty memory, Camila attached events, meanings and feelings to songs. Music allowed her to keep track of an otherwise vanishing life story. Those examples, although admittedly limited and selective, show the variety of roles music played in the lives of those who at some point in their lives committed criminalised acts. They demonstrate that the role of music changes throughout people's lives as they transition into new phases and as circumstances change. This artistic expression can fulfil, in a single life course, all the social roles criminologists have identified through decades of research.

In life-course analyses, some have suggested structuring the phases of life based on an individual's biological development (Wright et al., 2015), others on the traits and changes of relationships along the life course (Waldinger and Schulz, 2023), and still others on the socially constructed expectations for the phase of each individual (Holstein and Gubrium, 2007). Constructivist perspectives reveal how individuals use constructed life courses as a narrative device to understand their lives in a form of biographical work 'looking back on events and linking them in a pattern leading up to the endpoint that they currently exist [in]' (Holstein and Gubrium, 2007: 346).

We have shown how music is an important tool with which people keep track of their life story and continuously construct their life course; that is, people use music to recount their past and create and give meaning to their current and future life trajectories. Lyrics provided narratives and tropes that participants used to tell and organise their lives and in this way also shaped them. Illustratively, although life-course criminology has been criticised for its insistence on the study of ‘objective factors’, some have also called for narrative studies of offenders’ careers (Piquero et al., 2007). This call builds on the insight that individuals make ‘decisions not merely based on certain events and circumstances but rather based on their interpretation of these events and circumstances’ (Blokland and Geest, 2017: 2).

As opposed to ‘life as a book’ (McAdams, 2013) or ‘life as a film’ (Canter and Youngs, 2015), music arose naturally in our interviews, solely on the initiative of the participants, as part of a framework to narrative their lives. Signalling the narrative value inmates found in music implies, among other things, that it has the potential to give them a voice through which they can express their views and experiences – often silenced by broad social and institutional dynamics and by the psychological traumas they have experienced. This role of music for life storytelling requires further analysis in criminology and other disciplines studying life stories.

Combining the analytical power of a life-course perspective (Carlsson and Sarnecki, 2016) with narrative criminology (Fleetwood et al., 2019), we showed the advantage of combining temporality and life story in the criminological study of music. While imbuing studies of music in criminology with the deep criminological understandings of music as a constitutive force and the tendencies identified in previous studies regarding the role of this artistic expression in antisocial, prosocial and anti-establishment phenomena, we suggest that exploring musical commitment and taste along a life course allows for a better understanding of the multiple roles it can play, including storytelling. A life-course and narrative approach not only underscores that music in itself is not directly conducive to criminality (because its significance always comes from its interplay with broader structural arrangements), but also highlights that music is performative in complex ways throughout the life-long construction of the identities of those who have committed criminalised acts.

Music is ‘a fellow traveler, a confidant, and an interlocutor’¹ in the lives of humans who have committed criminalised acts. In the words of Lee (2022: 449), it is ‘a cultural force and cultural product, an artifact, a sonic “background” that sometimes animates situations, a soundscape for everyday troubles, an acoustic accompaniment to deviance’. Music has a complex link with criminality in our data and only in portions of the lives of the participants, if at all. Music, however, was the soundtrack that gave them an outlet for emotions, opinions, and experiences – often through life storytelling that simultaneously shaped their life course.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Nigel South, Alistair Fraser and the three anonymous reviewers that gave us feedback on earlier versions of this article. We also thank Leslie Paik and Mary Bosworth for their editorial feedback.



Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This paper is a product of the broader CRIMLA project, funded by the Research Council of Norway 324299.

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Note

1. This phrasing was suggested by an anonymous reviewer. We thank them for the authorisation to borrow their words.

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