

Study on motivational narratives of meth users in Alabama is first photo-ethnography in criminology

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A new study examining the narratives and motivations of men and women in rural Alabama who used methamphetamine (meth) is forthcoming in *Criminology*, a publication of the American Society of Criminology. It is the first photo-ethnography to be published in the journal. The study was led by researchers Heith Copes (University of Alabama at Birmingham [UAB]), Fiona Brookman (University of South Wales), Jared Ragland (Utah State University), and Blake Beaton (Sam Houston State University).

The aim of this 18-month project was to understand how people who used [meth](#) made sense of their lives and navigated their drug use within the context of economic marginalization and rural life. Photo-ethnography—the use of photography to encourage responses and insights from participants—was critical in "unravelling the motives people expressed for [questionable behavior](#), such as drug use, and gives us insights into cultural expectations and personal identities," explains Copes, professor of criminal justice at UAB, who led the study.

In addition to these unique insights, using photographs helped the researchers connect and build rapport with participants; it also allowed participants to introduce ideas they found important and to visually represent themselves, evoking more emotional, multilayered responses than traditional interviews.

"We believe the use of photographs in published research can help remove some of the stigma surrounding marginalized groups," says Ragland, the project photographer and professor of photography. "Photographs not only provide context to participants' stories, but they can also draw readers into their lives, elicit empathy, and shrink the social distance among participants, researchers, and their audience."

The ethnography consisted of formal and photo-elicitation interviews (with 28 women and 24 men, most of whom were White), field observations, and photography. Since the study was limited to a small group from a single county in rural Alabama, the authors caution against generalizing their findings to other groups.

Participants' narratives about why they used meth differed considerably by gender, but these narratives shaped how they interacted with others, the study found. "The way participants talked about their motives for drug use became a way for them to create desired identities based on broader cultural beliefs, but motive talk can be more than a way to explain behavior; it can also be important for guiding future behavior," Copes says.

Men spoke of meth as a "sex drug" that enhanced sexual performance and pleasure. Men's stories shaped how they interacted with women, often leading them to use violence and coercion to control when, where, and with whom their sexual partners used meth and often explaining their patriarchal behavior through narratives of protectiveness.

Women were less likely to say that enhanced sexual feelings were their primary motive for using meth, but like the men, they said that how they sought to control their relationships and interactions and found ways to resist coercive control were intertwined with their gendered narratives of drug use. Women drew on traditional gendered themes of femininity when explaining their [drug](#) use. By emphasizing their role as caretakers,

women said they often needed the energy from meth to carry out their household duties.

"Our findings provide important insights into understanding how narratives guide behavior and shape harm, especially among already-vulnerable groups," concludes Brookman, professor of criminology and coauthor of the study. "Accessing and unpacking narratives from those who engage in crime or [drug use](#), as well as from victims of crime, affords a deeper understanding of how sociodemographic and cultural norms are reproduced and resisted within particular communities."

Provided by American Society of Criminology

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