

Book Review – Experiencing Imprisonment. Research on the experience of living and working in carceral institutions. Edited by Carla Reeves

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Experiencing Imprisonment is a thought provoking book which showcases a wide range of insightful qualitative research, particularly that within the ethnographic tradition, from experts around the world. The editor's commitment to lay bare a range of subjective experiences of imprisonment, from mapping prison foodways to dilemmas faced by families affected by parental imprisonment, illuminates the fundamental ambition of the text. To ensure that the lived experiences of those working and residing in penal institutions are gathered and learnt from. The energy and determination felt throughout this book to have the 'voice from below' heard (Brown, 2008:228) makes this an essential read for academics, students and practitioners interested in critical penology.

The book consists of eighteen chapters which are all based upon empirical research that has been conducted in one or more countries, within one or more institution. Each of which are loosely structured around three broad themes which are discussed in detail throughout three distinct, yet interconnected parts. Within each, there is a short introduction that summarises the key theoretical and practical issues which thread together the research that is presented in each of the sections.

The first part of the book (*cultures of imprisonment: stigma, identity and interaction*) provides a comprehensive overview of the seminal work of Goffman on stigma; Clemmer on the prison community and Irwin and Cressey's ideas on the formation of prison culture, which are skillfully put into a contemporary context as findings from empirical research, within and around the aforementioned areas, are reflected upon. I found this a particularly stimulating section, occupied by innovative discussions on a number of topics such as staff and prisoner's experiences of a sexual offender treatment prison (Blagden and Perrin, pp. 27-45), masculinity, imprisonment and working identities (Sloan, pp. 81-95) and mapping prison foodways (Smoyer, pp. 96-112) to name just a few. For me, the underlying message that is present throughout each of the chapters in the book is made explicitly clear early on in part one. 'Prisons remain largely punitive and prisoners bear one of the most stigmatizing statuses in society' (pp. 11) despite honorable attempts to make an individual's experience of imprisonment somehow less painful.

The second part (*coping with the pains of imprisonment*) showcases research from across Western Europe, Serbia and Israel which illustrates some of the particularly difficult challenges faced by prisoners, from personal vulnerability to victimization and violence. Differences in the experiences of various prisoner groups such as first time prisoners in Portugal (Goncalves *et al.*, pp. 119-136), ageing prisoners (Mann, pp. 176-189), female prisoners (Copic *et al.*, 190-207) and those and those diagnosed with physical and mental health issues (Einat and Chen, pp. 208-224) are considered as are the adaptations and adjustments prisoners make in response to the deprivations that they face

(Drenkhan and Morgenstern, pp. 137-155 and Wolter and Boxberg, pp. 156-175). The adept use of quotations from prisoners within and between accounts provide a compelling yet raw insight into how prisoners attempt to endure the 'pains of imprisonment' (Sykes, 1958).

The third and final part (*the boundaries between the inside and outside worlds*) introduces research from across Europe and Canada which explores some of the challenges prisoners face upon release into the community, as well as some of the obstacles encountered by those who have either a personal or professional relationship with (ex)offenders. In chapter 13, Lockwood and Raikes illustrate some of the difficult decisions faced by parents in prison through an exploration of some of the narratives that they tell their children about their absence (pp. 230-247). Fitzgerald and Cherney go on to consider the role and value of 'work' in prison beyond the prison gate (pp. 248-263), followed by an informative insight into the unique trials and tribulations faced by innocent individuals who have been wrongly convicted (Clow and Ricciardelli, pp. 264-279). The last three chapters pay particular attention to the environment and social interactions between staff and ex-prisoners who are required to live in semi-secure accommodation as part of their license conditions.

Reeves goes on to provide a particularly emotive finale which consists of a number of poignant yet powerful points about one of the cornerstone institutions of the criminal justice system around the world. 'Imprisonment is pain' (pp. 325) for prisoners and staff alike, and the struggles faced by all of those involved in carceral institutions are 'lessons we must learn from' (pp. 329) as we embark upon the 'pursuit of socially just but socially protective' (pp. 328) responses to lawbreaking and those who break the law.

Bibliography

- Brown, D. (2008) 'Giving Voice: The Prisoner and Discursive Citizenship' in Anthony, T. and Cunneen, C. (Eds) *The Critical Criminology Companion*. Australia, Hawkins Press (pp. 228-239).
- Sykes, G. (1958) *The Society of Captives*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.