

# **CULTURES OF DESISTANCE: REHABILITATION, REINTEGRATION AND ETHNIC MINORITIES (2013)**

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Studies are available that focus on the engagement of minority populations in crime and in the criminal justice system, for example the overrepresentation of certain groups at different stages of the criminal justice process. In criminal justice more generally the attention to risk factors and the routes into offending for all offenders has been widened in more recent years by the literature on desistance; paying attention to the ways in which individuals move away from offending. So far however, there has been a lack of substantive thought about the potential influence of ethnicity in successfully moving away from crime. This book very helpfully begins to redress the balance.

The author opens with case studies of two particularly successful individuals of different ethnicities, who have desisted from crime and prospered. There is a danger that using well-known names might be seen as an irrelevance and the author acknowledges that they are in some ways atypical, however it is an engaging start to the book. It also acts as a reminder that an understanding of, not just, the shared influences and pathways between individuals, but an understanding of each individual's particular lived experience is important. In the first chapter the author succinctly reviews the existing literature on desistance. This is a clear account which makes plain, as it progresses, the need to know more about how ethnicity and culture may interact with other variables, to influence both processes and outcomes.

The next chapter is a detailed methodology setting out the basis of the findings; a study of 33 individuals of Indian, Bangladeshi, Black African, Black Caribbean and Dual heritages. It largely draws on in-depth qualitative interviews, of what is acknowledged to be small sample and the chapter explores in some detail the choices that were made in selection. Those choices in themselves explore challenging issues. For example the choice was made not to include recent migrants and also not to conduct a comparison study with specific matched white offenders. This latter decision allowed a clear focus on the experiences of individuals from different backgrounds in their own right and in contrast to each other, although as always with small scale qualitative research also raised interesting areas for further work. The author makes it clear that when looking at the process of desistance, core influences and processes are shared between the groups in the study and between them and the mainly white individuals featuring in other research. The bulk of the book is then able to look in detail at particular aspects of the experience of individuals from the subgroups represented. The depth of those accounts is interesting in its own right and a welcome reminder of the importance of understanding subtle factors that can be operating in any individual's journey to desistance.

In chapter seven the author looks comparatively at the findings from the interviewees from different groups and argues that the processes associated with desistance are both

universalistic and particular. This study explores the particular but in the context of an understanding of shared aspects of desistance. Differences between groups are produced by variations at a wider societal level, at the level of community and in the family and in the individuals themselves. When looking at the level of the community and neighbourhood the ways in which those wider influences play out is explored, for example the very different social context of the Indian offenders whose family tend to be less likely to be involved in crime and who often have higher levels of social capital. This raises questions about the impact of this, not just on processes like access to employment, but also on social processes like family shame and family competition that can make a real difference to individuals. In the Bangladeshi sample the greater importance of religion and the opportunity it provides for relationships with pro-social others was clear. Those contacts were less important economically, but recognised and validated the efforts of individuals to desist. Black and dual heritage groups were found to have weaker access to social capital and were more likely to experience unhelpful influences from their family and community. In contrast with Bangladeshis whilst more than half of the Black and Dual heritage group had a religious upbringing and believed in God, this was of much less significance to desistance, being individualised and less likely to involve them in positive social contacts. The more individualised path to desistance was more likely with a 'knifing off' from old contacts and associates and a finding of motivation and strengths within themselves. Summaries like this however don't do justice to the complexity of the findings and should simply encourage reading of the book and full engagement with the detailed findings and arguments within it.

The book concludes by thinking about the implications of the study and acknowledges that ethnicity is not found to be an independent causal variable, however the author argues that it is a significant dependant variable, affecting the resources and pathways out of crime available to individuals. The evidence of the study is persuasive but only one small step towards a greater understanding. The author suggests further studies using quantitative and qualitative methods, but also using alternatives and specifically ethnographic studies, in order to capture more immediately the processes of desistance themselves. There is also an ongoing need to study other groups and contexts. This study was London based and also did not include women, or more recent migrants. It would be fascinating to see how the findings compare in different parts of the UK and across Europe where social and cultural contexts will vary and where the pattern of ethnic diversity is rapidly changing.

From the point of view of the practitioner the place for ethnographic studies providing that nuanced understanding of the process of desistance is clear. This book and the detailed accounts of individuals of different ethnicities in their structural and community contexts it contains should be widely read by practitioners in criminal justice. While of particular interest to practitioners in a UK context the findings will resonate in areas across Europe. The book provides practitioners with topics to think about when working with an individual or community and provides a reminder of the importance of interpersonal skills in engaging with individuals and learning from them. Every practitioner can play a part in learning about the lives of those seeking to end an involvement in crime in order to understand how their journey to desistance is experienced and how best it can be supported.