

## EPILOGUE

### Beth Weaver

I am extremely appreciative to all the contributors to this special issue of *EuroVista* for their candour; for sharing with us their personal experiences and for casting a light on the public or collective concerns they have encountered including, for example, issues of rights, citizenship and discrimination. As I said in the preface to this tremendous collection of narratives, in what follows I do not presume to offer any form of interpretive analysis but to draw together some of the recurrent elements across the narratives – and within that, to highlight some of the divergences and commonalties of experiences – and, in so doing, to contribute a commentary on the meanings they hold for me as a reader - which may coincide or depart with the understandings that other readers reach. As readers, we will all be differently affected by what these 38 authors have shared, and the meaning we make out of what their words bring to us will necessarily be influenced by what we as differently positioned people bring to them. It is from my position as a criminologist and former criminal justice social worker that I have read and re-read these narratives and the meaning they hold for me is undoubtedly shaped and influenced by the existing insights I have gleaned into the issues they variously raise. I do not have personal knowledge of the experiences elaborated here. The words of others have been the window through which my understanding has been informed. Similarly, this collection of narratives can only provide a window into the various worlds that our authors have and do inhabit. Nonetheless, looking through windows can teach us much about what it means to be human.

As indicated in the preface, our contributors make no claims other than to speak for themselves and it was our desire to create a space in which speaking and being heard were made available to those whose voices continue to occupy a marginal place in academic and professional spaces. Indeed, as Duncan (England) rightly suggests, and as this collection of narratives testifies, ‘we don’t need academics to tell *our* story’ [emphasis added]. Yet, perhaps what this special issue also illustrates is that while there are commonalties of experience, each story is distinct and even similar experiences are differently encountered which perhaps then illuminates not only ‘the problem of speaking for others’ (Alcoff 1991)

but also the complexity of what it means to speak as an 'us' – from within a group. Nevertheless, that these stories and the experiences elaborated therein are indeed unique to the storyteller underscores the importance of taking individuals' perspectives seriously, of recognising and respecting the person who lives the life and speaks the words.

While there is some overlap between the areas that I have chosen to focus on in this epilogue, the remainder of this epilogue will collate some thoughts on offending, on the realities of desistance, on experiences and effects of imprisonment and re-entry and on social attitudes and societal practices.

### **On Offending**

Some contributors, including, for example Anon (Ireland), Dara (Ireland) and Horowitz (U.S) suggest that their childhoods or youths did not 'predispose' them, as some might term it, to engage in offending behaviour in so far as their backgrounds held no obvious clue or explanation as to why they became involved in offending. However, what these narratives have brought to my attention is that the meanings of and motivations for offending are as diverse as the type and nature of offending behaviours that people can and do engage in and the relational, cultural, geographical and structural contexts within which they occur. While, for example, Angelo (Italy) felt that his participation in acquisitive crime was an outcome of the exercise of rational choice, he similarly recognised that the peer or relational context within which much of his offending took place served to encourage if not amplify his offending. On the other hand, John (Norway) speaks of the 'seductions of crime' (Katz 1989) such that, as a precursor to desistance, he had to find a reason to stop, which seems to imply that he had to find a rationale for desisting. For him, then, the question was less about 'how do I give up crime?' but 'why should I?' Yet, Olga (Russia) seemed to pose the question 'what choice have you left me?' Crime for her was, incrementally, in many respects a means of surviving in a system weighted heavily against her. Indeed, as Olga makes clear, people's rationales for offending are not constant over time, yet neither are the means through which the desired outcomes of offending might be realised. Nagy, (Hungary), for example, discusses his susceptibility in youth to peer influence which was related to his (and others) desire for belonging and recognition (eg for being tough); yet, in early adulthood he appreciated that social recognition might be more widely realised through fraudulent

activities that could provide the kinds of financial benefits that are easily socially recognisable.

I was struck by the frequency with which themes of belonging, recognition and escape occurred across some people's narratives of their offending. Olga, for example, felt that as a displaced person in search of a sense of connection she found, at least at one time, a sense of belonging and solidarity within her criminal fraternity or network (see also Atsushi's (Japan); Weaver (Scotland)). Gerritsen (the Netherlands) identifies that his offending was a manifestation of the lack of meaning or investment he had in a life that had been scarred by loss and trauma; Dixon's (Canada) drug related offending behaviour was underpinned by a sense of disaffection, confusion and anger at the world from which he found some respite in drug use. Nabill (England) recalls a sense of emptiness as a young child, a sense of being ill at ease. His enduring desire for escape from reality and for recognition is one he remembers from his youth; his early offending provided excitement, meaning and purpose and for a while, or to an extent, occupied this void. Like Dixon, his later participation in substance use was an extension of this desire to escape but which served only to compound his feelings of despair. Trauma and loss characterised Williams' (Wales) early childhood and, in this context, his involvement with gangs and drug use was as much about finding a means of escape as it was a quest for belonging. Years of longing and searching characterise his narrative of his offending days (see also for example Gerritsen (the Netherlands), Spekkers (the Netherlands) and Thomas (Canada) and Weaver (Scotland)) and his, and others' narratives instil in me a sense of what it might mean to feel lost in your own life, to desire connection and yet to be consumed by the need to escape. I am, then, reminded of Mike Nellis' words in the preface to Allan Weaver's (2008) autobiography; not everyone who lived similar lives 'went to the bad themselves ... [but] it is these exceptions who need special explanations, not the many who become hard and cruel because this is what survival and status-seeking amidst poverty and disadvantage demanded of them' (Nellis 2008: viii) and to which we might add, what trauma and loss engendered.

### **On the realities of desistance**

In the preface to this issue, I outlined some of the recurrent themes emerging from theoretical and empirical explanations of the desistance process. In what follows, I outline

some of the recurrent themes emerging from our contributors' accounts of their change process, although I cannot hope to do justice in this epilogue to the nuances of individual accounts which, I would venture, speak for themselves. Readers will nevertheless have observed the affinities between contributors accounts and the desistance literature more broadly, but just to summarise briefly, desistance is typically associated with the acquisition or discovery of agency (the exercise of choice and control over one's life) and resilience, investment in significant social relations and associated social roles, access to opportunities for change (such as participation education or employment), the discovery of faith, generative engagement and concomitant shifts in people's personal and social identity.

However, Gerritsen (the Netherlands) raises a point that made me stop and think: the idea of civil disobedience versus uncivil obedience. If we conceptualise civil disobedience as a refusal to obey civil laws in an effort to induce policy and/or legislative change, then uncivil obedience might be understood as an uncritical acceptance or conformity with laws that violate rights that lack both morality and humanity. Gerritsen reasons that 'if desistance is taken to mean 'being well-adapted to the legal constraints that society imposes on its citizens, then what does desistance boil down to in a society that has gone astray? It would turn desistance into a matter of mere convention'. I think there is more to it than that; notions of adaptation and convention relate to the outcome which is easily reduced to notions of conformity to social and legal norms. When I read the accounts collated in this special issue and draw on the conversations I have had with other people who have given up crime, I am persuaded that desistance is rarely in itself pursued as an *end* but is embarked on as a *means* to actualizing their personal or relational concerns, with which continued offending is more or less incompatible. As Nabill (England) suggested, it is not about conforming to or pleasing others, you have to want it for yourself, but this needs to be contextualised through the lens of the realities of re-entry that our contributors have brought into view (see below). While wanting to give up crime is an important component of desistance, it is rarely sufficient in and of itself. Indeed, as some of contributors in this issue elaborate, the desire to give up crime long precedes its realisation and the process of desistance is, for some, punctuated by periods of reengagement in offending (see for example Atsushi (Japan); Anon (Ireland); John (Norway); Honeywell, Lunn, Nabill and Wackett (England); Ivo (Belgium); Trombley (US); Weaver (Scotland); Williams (Wales)).

The idea that people have to want to give up crime speaks to the role of motivation and agency in desistance, of self-determination and, for some, self-discipline. Indeed, many of our contributors observe that change is the outcome of considerable effort and commitment on their part, but more often than not they also recognise the crucial role that other people (be it professional or personal relationships) play in motivating or supporting them through this (see for example Cathy, England) or in reflecting a different view of themselves or the world to the one they have become accustomed to, and the part that certain social roles, responsibilities and opportunities play in enabling them to realise this (be it in the context of families, education, employment, activism or faith). Indeed, finding a meaning and purpose to life, whether this is about supporting other people or self-realisation or spirituality, can often be what gets people through the hard and lonely periods that so often accompany processes of change. In this sense, then, individual, relational and structural factors interact with each other to create conditions through which change is enabled or constrained. However, none of this can be achieved in a vacuum and, more often than not, the realities of re-entry can undermine motivation, suffocate hope and make it difficult for people to realise their aspirations.

### **On experiences and effects of imprisonment and re-entry**

As the narratives in this collection illustrate, and as Adam (England) observes, the effects of prison vary as widely as experiences of prison, and do so in accordance with individuals' characteristics, age at imprisonment, length of imprisonment and the cumulative or progressive effects of repeat imprisonment and the different penal cultures and institutions that people encounter in distinct penal jurisdictions. Moreover, as Olson Jessie (US) suggests, how people perceive and interpret their experience of prison and its effects can change over time. Nonetheless, prison is rarely experienced as a rehabilitative space; indeed as our Italian male contributor suggested, his time in prison did nothing to create the conditions within which desistance might be enabled and Adam (England) similarly reflects that his experience of imprisonment exerted neither a constructive nor contrary influence on his propensity to offend. Conversely, the distress Colby (England) experienced during his initial experience of prison was progressively eclipsed by his appreciation of the familiar

routine and the respite prison offered from the uncertainty and unpredictability of his life on the outside while expanding his repertoire of criminal skills.

For some, prison triggered a process of self-examination as to how they arrived there, what had gone wrong and which directions their lives were taking (see for example Anton (Czech Republic); Burnett (US); Lunn (England); Smrek (Slovakia); Olga (Russia) and Tietjen (US)). For Nagy, (Hungary), his desire for a different future on release influenced how he managed his time in prison which included disassociating from his extant social network, many of whom were imprisoned with him, while encouraging and supporting similarly motivated others. However, while prison may engender in some people the existential angst that can encourage an alternative way of being in the world, that this might translate into its realisation for only a few, and even then for some after one or two sentences while for others only after many, makes clear that prison is, at best, an unpredictable technique for triggering reflection and change. Unpredictable perhaps because as Olga (Russia) observes, this process of reflexivity requires a sense of self and identity, the very aspects of personhood that the prison system can overwhelm. That the pains of imprisonment create the conditions for self-reflexive examination is, however, hardly surprising, nor is the idea that few people leave prison unchanged (see below). Among the pains that imprisonment gives rise to, Nagy (Hungary) writes about both the effects of his imprisonment on his mother and girlfriend and the insularity that prison engenders. In prison, life is something that is happening to other people elsewhere over which the prisoner is able to exert little, if any, influence and, as Mobley (US) also suggests, from which he/she is forced to withdraw.

Olson Jessie (US) paints a vivid, if rarely appreciated, portrait of the women she came across in prison and the realities of their lives and describes the intense connections she formed with some of them. Mobley's (US) narrative of prison and experiences of the prisoner community captures the individualism or individuation, social withdrawal and dispossession required to survive penal institutions which does little to inspire the altruism, reciprocity or empathy that permeates some people's narratives of desistance but which he considers parallels our increasingly atomised social and professional worlds on the outside. Beyond the prisoner community, Horowitz (US) illuminates that the nature of interactions between prison officers and prisoners can have a significant influence on people's experience of

imprisonment; being treated fairly and humanely was important although as she identifies, the likelihood of experiencing this depends on who you are. Horowitz illuminates the challenges of compliance with a system that creates impossible constraints for people coming out of prison (see also Frana, US) but which is intensified for certain groups because of the widespread discrimination directed towards people by virtue of race, class, sexual orientation or by virtue of mental ill health.

Release from prison presented profound challenges for a number of our contributors. Spekkers (the Netherlands) describes making the hard transition from a place where everyone knows each other, where everything was certain, to seas of unfamiliar faces and knowing no one. Gerritsen (the Netherlands) similarly elucidates the confusion and bewilderment he experienced on release; the process of adjusting to a different world, to a different pace and to different norms of interaction. For some, the world one returns to is a very different one to the one that they left – not least because they themselves are or feel different or are seen differently (see for example Klara (the Netherlands). Gerritsen (the Netherlands) observes that prison can create enduring discontinuities for people between who they were, who they now are and who they can or might be and on how they apprehend the world. Although discussing her sense of personal and social displacement during her school years, Olga's question seems apt here - 'You know the feeling when you are kind of at home but feel homeless?' In similar vein, Dobrota (Slovakia) refers to returning to a different moral status or social position - as someone living 'outside the normal circle'. Prison toughened and hardened Spekkers (the Netherlands); your moral framework, he says, is rearranged. While he now feels more accepting of or tolerant towards people, he will not back from conflict and it has made intimacy and interpersonal relations difficult. Indeed, Curry (US) writes that prison breaks you and that you mend differently to how you were before; the reformed self this implies is necessarily different for different people. For Smrek (Slovakia) the self that emerged from prison was less ambitious, humbler and more mature which he attributes to the insights he gained from reflecting on his past in prison. Nagy (Hungary) similarly feels that he emerged a wiser, more reflective and determined man than the man who entered prison.

And yet the challenges of release are not just subjectively or psychologically experienced; there are significant economic, social and structural challenges to overcome (see below), which many people feel they were ill-prepared and under-supported to face. The arrangements and conditions for people coming out of prison vary across the world; Urdiales (Spain) elaborates that not only does the system do little, if anything, to help people but it is substantially weighted against them. In this context, Thomas (Canada), and others, advocate for increased support for people getting out of prison – economically and socially. For Dobrota (Slovakia), despite 15 years of custodial sentences, in which time he had only spent a year outside, he was released with a mere 70 Euros which, he observed, would not even enable him to acquire a night's accommodation. Dobrota advocates for the establishment of a support network for people released from prison where they might access advice and information, or, as Smrek suggests, assistance to meet their basic needs for housing and work. Thomas (Canada) suggests forming 'gangs anonymous' (GA) to provide similarly situated people with the opportunity to provide and receive mutual support to extricate themselves from gangs, to develop exit strategies, to support natural processes of reflexivity as to whether this is 'right' for them while representing both a site of and resources for recognition and trust. With all of this in mind, Mobley's (US) observation that more than 25% of formerly incarcerated people in the US end up on 'skid row', which he attributes to the inequalities and discrimination they encounter at both a societal and systemic level, begs the question – what is it that we are asking people to desist to? Indeed while these narratives illuminate quite different experiences and effects of imprisonment and re-entry, a sense of injustice and discrimination at a systemic and societal level permeate many of these stories. What, then, is civil or even just about what we are doing to whole populations of people, to children, women and men both during and following periods of punishment?

### **On social attitudes and societal practices: on being 'a prisoner to [the] past' (Duncan)**

The theme of being 'a prisoner to [the] past' (Duncan, England), referring both to social attitudes and societal practices, occurred frequently across our contributors accounts and in particular in reference to inequalities of or discrimination in the labour market by virtue of the possession of a criminal record (see for example Duncan, Adam and Lunn (England), Weaver (Scotland), Urdiales (Spain), Gerritsen (Netherlands) Dobrota and Mudra (Slovakia) Anon (Ireland) and Angelo (Italy)). Moreover, as Olga (Russia) and our US contributors

elaborate, the reduced citizenship status and denial of civic rights can extend far beyond discrimination in the labour market. Curry, Mobley and Richards (US), for example, discuss the discredited identities and social status afforded to formerly incarcerated persons in the US and the civil death by degrees that follow imprisonment including, but not limited to, exclusion from housing, jury service, voting rights, volunteer positions, employment, whole career paths, access to graduate school and consumer credit. As Dobrota (Slovakia) reasons 'your punishment lasts until the end of your life'. In this context, Olson Jessie (US) astutely observes that people with convictions are one of few groups of people against whom it is still acceptable to legally discriminate. While it is beyond the scope of this epilogue to review the various arguments surrounding, for example, *rehabilitation judiciaire* or judicial rehabilitation (on which readers may wish to consult the *European Journal of Probation* 3 (1) 2011), given the ubiquity of these experiences across penal jurisdictions, I am left with a sense that some form of social movement might be timely, if not overdue.

Social movements (such as feminist, disability, social justice and labour movements) exist, to simplify a complex phenomenon, to challenge and change the economic, social and political issues or status quo that affect the quality and course of people's lives and in so doing, to transform social, political and economic realities. I can find little justice in the idea that long beyond the time at which punishment ends, people remain excluded from the common rules or benefits of citizenship, in the idea that their past actions have resulted in the, often permanent, forfeiture of civic rights. While human rights are accorded on the basis of being human, it seems that the exclusion of former or currently incarcerated people, or indeed people with convictions more broadly, from certain civil rights implies that one is less than a full citizen. To me this is equivalent to social degradation, symbolic of a passage from one moral and/or civic status to another. Informed by Donati's (2009, 2011) relational sociology, I have argued elsewhere (Weaver 2013) that reciprocity is both the defining feature of social life and underpins the common good in society, the first of which is human dignity. The human dignity of any person cannot be violated without the community or, more broadly, civil society suffering because to do so is to fracture the possibility of doing common good from the start. When we consider the centrality of themes of belonging, recognition, personal and social redemption, citizenship, and participation in employment and education to narratives of personal progression and change, the need to challenge this status quo

becomes something of an imperative. Indeed, at the very least returning citizens<sup>1</sup> should be so recognised through means and processes, and in that policies and laws, that enable the (re)connection of the individual to ‘circuits of social reciprocity’ (Donati 2009:227), that are restorative and allow people to fulfil their reciprocal civic obligations.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this special issue, I set out to create a context or space in which speaking and being heard are made available to those whose voices continue to occupy a marginal place in academic and professional spaces and, in so doing, to create the kinds of conditions that make listening possible (Alcoff 1991). The experiences of offending, desistance, imprisonment and re-entry that our contributors have shared are in no way idiosyncratic or exceptional; they resonate, even accord with, research-based understandings of the processes to which they speak. However, for me, what these first hand perspectives have achieved is to texture these understandings with the realities of lived experience at the level of the individual while simultaneously illuminating their shared experience, not least in terms of the effects of exclusionary and prejudicial social attitudes and societal practices. While much of the focus of desistance research and the concomitant implications for policy and practice have to date focused primarily on supporting people to either help themselves or to navigate their way through the myriad obstacles they face, I am convinced that insufficient is being done to actively confront and challenge the systemic forms of oppression and discrimination that our contributors illuminate. To focus solely on overcoming these obstacles at the individual level runs the risk of accepting the status quo as it is, thus colluding with the social attitudes and societal practices that diminish the rights, resources and opportunities for desistance and reintegration available to marginalised groups. It is not just people who have to change, but the systems and practices that make it difficult for them to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.phillymag.com/news/2013/10/24/mayor-nutter-lets-call-returning-citizens-instead-ex-offenders/>

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