

THE REALITIES OF CRIME, PUNISHMENT AND DESISTANCE: FIRST HAND PERSPECTIVES

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Introduction

This is the first open access issue of *EuroVista* and the first European academic and professional journal in which those persons who are more often than not the *subject* of academic study and professional practice are themselves the *principal contributors* to this special issue. It is something of a coincidence that the open accessibility of this journal occurs at this time but it is also fortuitous because it is hoped that the content of these stories will resonate with a wider readership than academic and professional journals characteristically do. Indeed, we hope that while this issue will be of interest to academics, policy-makers and penal practitioners, these narratives might also be used as a focus of discussion between teachers and students and between practitioners and service users as well as engender public interest in and deliberation on the issues and insights the authors illuminate.

The principal focus of this special issue is on the realities of crime, punishment and desistance articulated from the experiential perspective of 38 different people from diverse social, geographical and cultural perspectives. To set the scene for what follows, this preface to these contributions provides a brief overview of the existing empirical and theoretical context prior to elaborating the rationale underpinning this special issue and the methods through which it came together.

Empirical and theoretical context

While the term 'desistance' refers to cessation of offending, studies of desistance focus on the process by which people come to cease offending behaviour and sustain that cessation of offending behaviour. Explanations as to how and why people give up crime variously emphasise the significance of advancing age and maturation; life transitions and the social relations and structural enablements associated with them (i.e. in terms of the influence of shifting social relationships or participation in employment); changing motivations and

subjective perceptions of the self and others and concomitant changes in personal and social identity. However, there is considerable disagreement about the relative contributions of these different internal, interpersonal and external factors in the desistance process with different theories proposing that one or other is of particular significance – often at a given time, or in a given situation. Other desistance studies have sought to identify the temporal sequence through which changes at the level of personal cognition or self-identity and self-concept occur, and how they might precede or coincide with changes in social bonds (LeBel *et al.* 2008). Moreover, when the nuances of different people's life stories or personal narratives are elaborated, the common elements of the desistance process can be very differently experienced and constituted, depending on the socio-structural, cultural and spiritual positions that people occupy and move through as they negotiate their personal and social lives. Nonetheless, notwithstanding differences in experiences within and across the diverse populations of people who desist, and differences in the breadth, depth, emphasis and scope of empirical enquiries and theoretical explanations of desistance, it is generally acknowledged that the process of desistance is an outcome of an interaction between individual choices, social relations and wider structural and societal processes and practices.

Uggen *et al.* (2004), for example, show how age-graded role transitions across socio-economic, familial and civic domains relate to identity shifts over the life course. However, the reduced citizenship status and the enduring stigma and discrimination (both interpersonal and institutional) that people experience as a consequence of their involvement in the criminal justice system, means that their rights, capacities and opportunities to fully participate in these domains are greatly reduced. These status deficits can undermine people's commitment to conformity and create new obstacles to desistance, social integration and the assumption of pro-social roles. Among other effects, these obstacles represent a major problem because of the important role of social recognition (or lack thereof) (Barry 2006) or societal reaction in supporting (or undermining) new self-conceptions and the reinforcement of pro-social identities (Maruna and Farrall 2004). While, on the one hand, recognising and engaging positively and respectfully with people's individual life experiences or personal narratives is important, it is equally important that we

acknowledge and challenge the myriad forms of oppression that devalue certain identities and lifestyles while overvaluing others.

Rationale

The voice of the people with convictions - or at least data from people with convictions - has been integral to desistance research, less so in the strand of it that derives from “criminal careers research” (heavily influenced by rational choice theory), more so in the strand influenced by narrative theory, which requires detailed attention to people’s life experiences. More commonly, however, their words are fragmented, lifted out of context, and trimmed to support particular criminological theories or policy initiatives in ways that undermine the idea of taking their perspectives seriously, of understanding or respecting the person who lives the life and speaks the words.

The relative neglect of properly rounded ‘[ex]offender’ perspectives in the desistance literature is not only disappointing but somewhat unexpected. Indeed, narrative, life (hi)story or (auto)biographical method has had a respected place in criminology, particularly in the USA (Bennet 1981), with whole books being based around one person’s account of their involvement in crime (see for example *The Jack Roller* by Clifford Shaw (1930); *The Professional Thief* by Edwin Sutherland (1937); and Klockar (1974) *The Professional Fence*), some of which were studies of desistance *avant la lettre*. Despite the belated discovery of (auto)biographical method by British sociologists of deviance in the 1970s, the more widely read accounts of offenders’ lives by Tony Parker (Soothill 1999), and some influential prisoner autobiographies (McVicar 1974; Boyle 1977), such literature has since become more marginal in criminology. This mostly reflects its perceived lack of fit with the conventions of scientific method, the belief that because individual subjective accounts lack validity, reliability and generalisability they have nothing of comparable worth to recommend them to academics and policy-makers (Stake 1978; Goodey 2000; Maruna and Matravers 2007). However, the institutional dismissal of this literature may reflect something altogether different, and although there is a long tradition of “prisoner autobiographies” contributing to debate on penal reform (Nellis 2012), Garland (1992:419 cited in Morgan 1999:329), is right to suggest that offenders’ voices have also been subordinated in the ‘criminological monologue’, not so much for what they lack

methodologically, but because of their potential threat to expert (or even common-sense) discourses:

' ... if only they were allowed to speak [offenders] might challenge some of the certainties with which we divide the world into normal and abnormal, right and wrong' (Garland 1992:419).

The silencing, dismissal and marginalization or conversely amplification, prioritization and valorization of voices based on social location or identity is not a phenomenon peculiar to criminology. Issues surrounding voice, legitimacy, authority, authenticity, representativeness and interpretation have long been discussed - not least in the context of identity politics wherein 'the problem of speaking for others' (Alcoff 1991) and, relatedly, the complexity of what it means to speak for oneself, or even for 'us' – from within a group - is the subject of considerable debate (see for example Alcoff 1991).

In this collection of first-hand accounts we are not prioritising or valorising one voice or 'group' of voices over another as a means of shedding light on the realities of desistance (see relatedly Weaver and Weaver 2013), nor is our concern with issues of generalisability or with who is speaking for whom. Rather, our intention is 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). So, in taking [ex]offender perspectives seriously, as an outcome of our desire to better understand the person who lives the life and speaks the words, this special issue of *EuroVista* presents the narratives of 38 men and women from around the world whose linking feature and narrative focus is their experience of crime, punishment and desistance.

Method

Through our professional and personal networks (see acknowledgements), we solicited contributions from people who are either in the process of desisting and/or who have desisted, to recount their experience of giving up crime in their own words and style. We had no specific pre-existing criteria for our contributors who include men and women of different ages from Belgium, Canada, the Czech Republic, England, Hungary, Ireland, Italy,

Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Scotland, Slovakia, Spain, the USA and Wales. There are distinct variations in literary style, narrative voice and structural form across the accounts; some accounts have been translated into English, others have been written in English as a second language, others have been co-authored and produced as a biography after an in-depth conversation with the original contributor or produced and presented as an interview. Some contributors have written from prison or from the perspective of community supervision while others reflect on a journey that began many years ago. What they all share is a desire to tell their story in their own words. It was our desire to listen to their stories in whatever way they wanted to tell them that both provided the impetus and guided us in putting this special issue together.

We had no pre-existing sense of what people's accounts should contain and as the stories speak for themselves (even if their impact may have wider effects) we also make no effort to impose or assume any sort of thematic or theoretical connection between them such that would indicate any degree of order or intentional sequencing of accounts in this issue. Indeed, the myriad of similarities and differences that unite and distinguish the narratives in this collection defy the imposition of a prescribed route through them. Nor do we seek to analytically refract them through the lens of our social location and all that that implies. However, at the conclusion of this issue, I reflect on the effects and impacts these stories have had on me and the meanings they hold for me as a listener. After all, it is in the act of speaking and in the art of listening that meaning is co-created in terms of 'what is emphasised, noticed and how it is understood' which will be differently experienced by each of us, affected as it is by the location of both speaker and hearer (Alcoff 1991:12-13).

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