

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

November 2021 No 257

Special edition:
Sex and Gender in Prisons



Book Review

The Ambiguities of Desistance: Ex-offenders, Higher Education and the Desistance Journey

By David Honeywell

Publisher: Emerald Publishing Limited

ISBN: 9781839827877 (Hardback)

Price: £45.00

The Ambiguities of Desistance contributes to a growing body of research grounded in the lived experience of the researcher. Focusing specifically on the desistance narratives of people with convictions, this book considers challenges in accessing higher education while also drawing on other key themes which capture the struggle of negotiating between identities. Honeywell has framed this work around the 'divided self' whereby the author, as a convict criminologist, openly reflects on feeling part of his own research sample through an interrogation of the self. He describes being '*neither prepared for the unseen tensions created or the intensity of these emotions and the impact they would have*' (p.49) on his sense of self and recounts experiencing interviewing participants as having been traumatic in some instances. He states '*...at times some of the interviewees channelled [their painful narratives] by probing me about how I negotiate my past and present identities*' (p.48). This positionality permeates through the work and the author proposes that his '*personal experience and the process and subsequent immersion in the theory are an original and ground-breaking feature of this book*' (p.8). His personal experiences are particularly evident in the concluding remarks of the book which are primarily presented as self-reflection.

Honeywell directly acknowledges that desistance has been rigorously developed theoretically and that this book is

not contributing a new theoretical dimension, but rather, is further highlighting that '*desistance is an unending sentence*' (p.33) which can be an extended 'pain' to the well-documented deprivations of imprisonment. The author proposes that education can provide a mechanism of psychological escape for people with convictions, both inside and outside of the prison setting. However, drawing on the desistance literature, he acknowledges that the desire to change and being trusted by others are crucial to the realisation of utilising education in this way and progressing to employment.

This book deals with several issues concerning the 'pains of desistance'. Most prominently, the themes of university admission, painful narratives and convict criminology are discussed, underpinned by continuous self-reflection. Honeywell identifies some barriers to education, particularly presented by university institutions. While critiquing processes concerning the declaration of unspent convictions on application to university, Honeywell also advocates for the need to address disparity amongst universities about how they respond to staff and students with convictions. Further to this, he considers, through the experience of a research participant, the only partial cultural embedding of people with convictions into university life who are not accepted into student accommodation.

While attempting to uncover 'girl made good' stories, Honeywell recounts how some female research participants found solace in university residences, where they were able to access them. Specifically, in one instance, this was referred to by a participant as a sanctuary from former abusive relationships with the university

providing a dual role as liberation through educational empowerment and a safe space in the university environment. Going forward, it would be important to consider in more detail how universities are providing support to women with complex histories of trauma to ensure their wellbeing throughout the university experience.

Drawing on the 'reinventive institution' concept, Honeywell draws parallels between the university and the prison having duality in 'reinventive' and 'total' institutional characteristics. He argues that some prisons have the capacity to be reinventive through the provision of innovative educational opportunities, while some universities are more restrictive in nature.

Despite the reported barriers to universities for people with convictions, Honeywell advocates that there is a place for those with convictions who themselves become academics in the criminological discipline and that some universities embrace the histories of those whose lived experiences have become embedded in their academic practice. Interestingly however, the author notes how '*the convict criminologist can become trapped within that identity*' (p.63) through frequent reference to their own narratives in their teaching. As a result, Honeywell suggests that for convict criminologists, the process of transformation doesn't end, and this presents a specifically challenging dimension to the ongoing identity shaping element of the desistance process. This may be considered by the author for future work as an opportunity to interrogate how doctoral academic status in the possession of people with lived experience enhances the value they can offer to academia, while others with convictions may

struggle to enter academia at all. It may lead to discussions of whether there is a connection between a person's level of education and the perception of 'sufficient' desistance from the viewpoint of higher education institutions. This may contribute to the author's questioning of when desistance actually occurs (from the perspective of others), specifically through the lens of educational pathways.

Throughout this work, the author draws on the narratives of research participants, revealing more about the challenges of the desistance journey. Interestingly, Honeywell develops propositions about the power of painful narratives to evolve into resilience. He suggests that '*painful experiences can be a useful personal tool within the desistance process*' (p.39) to enable personal growth and thus, negative experiences can be utilised to strengthen determination.

In the discussion of painful narratives, important issues were raised concerning the invoking of traumatic memory through the development of academic knowledge. Through studying social science, for example, some participants developed a heightened awareness of their own lived experiences. This was illustrated by an account of a participant coming to realise injustices they had experienced as a child, with education having provided an understanding that they had been abused. Education in this sense led some participants to

open their eyes to '*all the injustices in the world*' (p.44) creating simultaneously enlightening and painful experiences. This has the potential to raise important considerations about the need for careful navigation through educational experiences that may trigger the recollection of traumatic pasts.

A core value of this contribution is the platform it creates for further questions and debates to be explored through the continued exploration of some areas of discussion. For example, from the author's perspective, '*universities are becoming more punitive towards people with convictions*' (p.23) and thus, admissions processes need to be consistently fair. In determining how this consistency can be or is being achieved, further conversation around current processes could be explored. UCAS announced in 2018 that they would no longer require all applicants to declare unspent criminal convictions as part of the application from the 2019 entry cycle onwards. Charitable organisations have begun providing guidance and training in a push to create balance between safeguarding and enabling. Nacro's *Safer admissions of students with convictions* training and Unlock's briefing (to support UCAS) on *Understanding applicants with criminal records* are two examples of steps towards Honeywell's call for more fairness in admissions processes. Examination of the impact of such initiatives would be a worthwhile undertaking

to examine the extent to which shifts in access and widening participation have occurred.

Furthermore, in this publication, the author presents an honest and transparent account of their positionality as a convict criminologist and how this was embedded in the approach to interpreting the research data, both at the time of the research and on reflection since. Having revealed the traumatic experience of interviewing participants with lived experience *and* engaging in research-led teaching at universities whereby continuous recounting of personal experience has become part of working life, the author has raised important points for ongoing discussion within the convict criminology community.

The key argument presented in this publication is that desistance is a '*never-ending experience*' (p.87) and Honeywell, through his own reflective narrative, has presented a persuasive argument that education can provide intellectual and environmental refuge and opportunities for people with convictions to carve a new or different path for themselves. However, as noted consistently by the author, this is conditional on academic institutions committing to engage in admissions processes that are transparent, fair and risk-averse in a balanced, evidence-based way.

Dr Helen Nichols is a Associate Professor in Criminology at the University of Lincoln.