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Reviews

Book Review

Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood. Adaptation, Identity and Time

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As the above title suggests, *Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood* is an account of the experiences of men and women who were given long life sentences at an early age. In particular it questions 'how they cope with its burdens, how they deal with issues of selfhood and meaning and how they establish a social lifeworld within a carceral environment' (p. 2). Written in an incredibly fluent and engaging way, the book, as stated in the Foreword by Erwin James, a man who has himself served 20 years in prison as part of his life sentence, challenges public perceptions of prison against the reality of life imprisonment. Rather than it being from an academic or practitioner viewpoint however, the book offers the voice of those who are currently serving the longest sentences in prisons in England and Wales.

The book starts with a useful introduction which provides not just an extensive literature review on the topic but also sets the contextual frame for what follows. So, for example in 1968 there were only 489 prisoners serving life or equivalent sentences in prison in England and Wales. In 1979 this had risen to 1,322, stood at nearly 2,000 by the end of the 1980s and had reached 7,046 by 2019. Time served in custody has also

increased: in 2003 the average minimum term (excluding whole life) was 12.5 years with this increasing to 21.1 years just a decade later. The lifer population has therefore massively increased with many of these prisoners receiving such sentences when in young adulthood. For the purposes of the book, the voices of those found in the text are those who received a life sentence with a tariff of at least 15 years when they were aged 25 years or less. In chapter 2 we are told how at the time of the study there were 808 prisoners who met this criteria. Between February 2013 and December 2014, 309 men and 21 women, across 25 prisons took part in the study. The chapter also looks at a number of issues such as how access to the prisoners was achieved, issues relating to ethics, research design and details about the interviews and survey questions. In addition to introducing the research, chapter 2 is also an excellent resource for those carrying out similar research and I would especially recommend it to PhD students embarking on empirical projects.

Before embarking on sharing the generalised data, chapter 3 provides pen portraits of six individual participants. While there are many, many more voices in the book, this chapter is really interesting because it allows the reader to understand the life histories of these individuals. Selected to cover the range of participants in the study, taking into account sentence stage, gender, ethnicity and attitudes towards conviction, we learn how Seb (20s, early stage) was excluded from school, moved out of the family home in his late teens and had a history of drug-use. Gail (30s, late-stage) like many of the women in

the book had a childhood marred with violence and abuse, while Campbell (30s, mid-stage) was convicted of murder under the principles of joint enterprise. Interestingly half of these individuals were convicted on the basis of joint enterprise, which is representative of the larger sample.

Chapters 4-8 then present the main findings of the research. Chapter 4 — the early years — talks about 'biographical rupture', where the 'sheer length of the sentence and the enormity of the offence compounded and intensified the standard 'pains' of imprisonment' (p. 79) resulting in 'some distinctive adaptive responses' (p. 79). The chapter through the voices of the participants talks about the initial entry shock, the acute stress reaction when they received a life sentence and the pains of serving a long indeterminate sentence. In sometimes harrowing detail, the participants talk about PTSD, recurring nightmares, losing contact with family and loved ones, how substances were used in the early years 'to kill reality' (p. 103) and their attempts at suicide, which were made to relieve not just themselves but also their families and friends. Chapter 5 — Coping and Adaption — then moves to describe how the participants change as they move through their life sentence. Rather than living with shock, denial and anger, the chapter, again through candid quotes, shows how the participants start to 'survive' and swim rather than sink. Coping strategies employed by some of the participants include becoming a Listener, completing accredited offending and education programmes and how life became a little easier when they were housed with other lifers. Others

speak about the 'emotional and spiritual journey' (p. 133) which helped them to come to terms with their situation and cope better with being imprisoned for such long periods of time. As time went by, more prisoners were thus reconciled with the 'permanence of their circumstances' (p. 136). However, even though at this mid-stage point many had come to terms with the sentence, they hadn't come to terms with what they had actually done. As one participant explains: 'I killed someone. How can anyone ever come to terms with that type of offence' (p.137). The chapter also touches on victim awareness activities and the therapeutic community at HMP Grendon. In short, the chapter shows how prisoners moved from 'coping survival' to 'coping-adaptation' (p. 154), with the latter achieved through the regaining of control, hope and purpose.

Chapter 6 — Social relations — looks at the changing nature of friendship and kinship relationships experienced by long term prisoners. Perhaps not surprisingly, 'separation from loved ones and close friends was among the most painful aspect of long-term imprisonment' (p. 210). This included missing people, worrying about people outside, worrying that you are losing contact with people and concerned that a loved one would die before release. The chapter, as with others, offers insightful quotes and interestingly shows a difference between men and women, especially in relation to women and their children and the desire to stay in contact with and have a meaningful say in their

children's lives. For the men, it was more about being 'a better son' (p. 224). The chapter also explores friendship, with many participants experiencing the loss of good friends on the outside and for some the deepening of friendships on the inside. Chapter 7 looks at how identity and selfhood changes for those serving long-term imprisonment, including 'losing themselves' (p. 253), dealing with the label of 'murderer', a renarration of themselves and finally for some becoming 'a better and more 'authentic' person: the real me!' (p. 252). The final substantive chapter then looks at time and place and in particular, how the participants managed and defined these concepts during their sentence. This included 'temporal vertigo' (p. 291) for those at the beginning of their sentence with many expressing an inability to look much beyond today and a feeling that prison was 'dead time' (p. 302). There was also a need to 'kill time' (p. 302) whether that was done through sleeping, drugs, education, exercise or reading. As the sentence progressed, some participants began to see prison as home and were able to see time in bigger blocks whether that be in 'sport seasons' or 'seasonal patterns' (p. 305). Mid-late stage prisoners also used significant target points to map time such as the halfway stage or the sentence length being in 'single figures' (p. 306). The participants at this stage of their sentence also reported being involved in activities because of the desire to be involved, rather than just to kill time. Many also

noted how they had matured while in prison, although also said how at the same time they had stood still when compared to friends and family on the outside. Time then took on a new urgency for those prisoners nearing release.

The book ends with an insightful and interesting conclusion chapter. Its thesis, I think, can be summed up in the following quote:

While prisoners in the early sentence stage were, in effect, treading water, being passively carried by the tide, or trying to swim against its flow, those who were further into their sentence accepted that they would not escape the water. Instead they submitted to the current, while at the same time seeking to use its energy to their advantage (p. 326).

The book is highly recommended. I really enjoyed it and learnt a lot from the voices of the participants. It will be useful for academics, undergraduate and postgraduate students, penal practitioners and those interested in our penal system and in particular our prisons. It should also be mandatory reading for those who set minimum life sentence tariffs, politicians (especially the current government who seem to be keeping populist punitiveness ever more alive) and all those who think that our prisons are like holiday camps.

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