

Prisoner Leaders: Leadership as Experience and Institution

Edited by Marion Vannier and Paula Harriott

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This innovative book explores the nature of prisoner leadership, that is both the exercise of power and influence within the informal prison culture as well as more formal roles such as peer support and representation.

The book is edited by Paula Harriott, who has served a prison sentence and subsequently has become an activist, broadcaster and is CEO of the charity Unlock, and Marion Vannier, who is a distinguished scholar currently a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Manchester and a UKRI Future Leader Fellow. The book chapters are co-produced by authors who have experienced imprisonment and academics. The approach invited the authors to capture personal experience and reflections while also situating this within the sociological literature on prisons. The editors describe this process as 'participant action research' and 'collective auto-ethnography', terms that root the work in an endeavour to understand lived experience in prisons. While this approach may not be entirely new, for example a similar approach was taken in a special edition of Prison Service Journal (issue 272), it is rare and is put to a specific use in this book. There is no question that the method has yielded valuable insight and puts into action a commitment to greater inclusivity in prison research.

The chapters cover a range of aspects of prisoner leadership. This includes the use of formal peer support and representative roles in areas such as prison education and drug treatment. These are roles that have long been recognised as having a positive benefit both for the leaders themselves and for those they are supporting. Yet the book does not solely focus on these ways in which leadership is co-opted and harnessed by the institution. Chapters also explore the ways in which informal leadership is exercised within the prisoner culture. This includes the recognition that those involved in drug economy develop and deploy leadership skills including entrepreneurship, creativity, problem solving and conflict resolution.

A particularly bold chapter is that focussing on prison violence. It would have been easy in a book like this to ignore the use of violence in prisons and instead to focus on more prosocial leadership, but this book does not choose the easy path. The chapter on prison violence by Usman Ahmed, Caragh Kyle, Olga Sánchez de Ribera and Nicholas Trajtenberg Pareja, examines formal roles such as violence reduction representatives, but also describes how people in prison deploy violence as a power resource to provide them with influence both with the prison authority and within the prison culture. The authors of this chapter argue that within the power structures and culture of prisons: 'Potential leaders sometimes have no other choice but to take extreme measures' (p.39). The chapter is in some ways a work of 'ultra-realism' in that it seeks to explore the uncomfortable reasons people act in harmful ways. In this chapter, it is suggested that prisons undermine effective leadership in the context of violence through neglect (that is ambivalence and suspicion of prisoner leaders), imposition of

restrictive models that stifle authenticity, and inadvertently fostering violent behaviour among prisoners (through cultural expectations and the pervasiveness of violence). The analysis could be criticised for potentially legitimising violence by describing it as necessary, underplaying the dangers of unregulated and arbitrary violence, and minimising the contribution of the imported hyper-masculine prisoner culture. This is nevertheless a thought-provoking and intellectually bold chapter, characteristic of this book overall.

Further chapters explore gender and race. In relation to gender, Mundill Mahil and Emily Turner, describe that leadership in women's prisons is particularly characterised by advocating for others. Leadership is collaborative, culturally sensitive and relational. Ben Okoli and Kimmett Edgar's chapter on race opens with reference to the prison writings of George Jackson, an example of how American culture dominates the framing of race and imprisonment. There are limits to the use of such analysis given the differences in history and society. The work of artist and film-maker Steve McQueen has attempted to give greater prominence in popular culture to the history of racial oppression, resistance and empowerment in Britain. His TV film collection *Small Axe* (2020) includes stories from courts, police and prisons, illustrating how racial power and criminal justice are entangled in distinct ways in British history. The chapter argues that race is a salient factor, that is that prison culture makes Black men's race a central factor in their everyday lives. This can sometimes mean that negative, racialised judgements are made about conduct, behaviour and potential. Understanding and nurturing Black leadership, it is argued, can be

humanising not only for individuals but for the wider culture.

Collectively, the chapters comprising this book offer a serious and thoughtful examination of prisoner leadership. The book recognises that leadership may be institutionally sanctioned and formal but may also emerge organically within the informal hierarchies and power structures. Individuals will import skills and experiences that enable leadership,

and their capacity to exercise this or the way they do so, may alter over time. The nature of the prison environment also plays a role in the type of leadership that is fostered and encouraged. Leadership is shaped by an interplay between individual, cultural and institutional factors.

Marion Vannier and Paula Harriott have produced a novel and insightful book that will be of value to prison practitioners, researchers

and those interested in leadership, prison cultures and the potential of lived experience.

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