Welcome to the first edition of the journal. It was the belief of a few students that to get even more out of our studies, also, further access to the academic world, that something like this should come into existence for students. The mission of this journal is to give way to a generation of students who feel they too have a voice they want to get out there and produce work to a set standard ready for further advancement in the academic arena.

Why write for an academic journal?

A good question to ask. All academics have to start somewhere, so why not have a base on which to start, rather than waiting for others to ‘potentially’ pass on your work for submission if they feel it is good enough or simply having to produce work for publication as part of your advanced learning. It was the belief of the heads of 5 committees based at De Montfort University, Leicester University, Hull University, Keele University and Nottingham Trent University, that this could be the golden opportunity for all criminology students up and down the UK to finally have a grass roots level access to getting their work both, peer reviewed and published on-line.

Why then should students feel compelled to write for a journal that is run by students and not an organisation? Well, we are still peer reviewed by teaching academics, and other academics up and down the U.K., this helps with getting wider participation of critical analysis of your work, and the feedback that you get will hopefully allow the you to look at your work in a different way and also become more critical of the work you produce. Many academics try to help teach you to become more critical of what you read, and how you produce good critical work, aside from lecturers (see; Newburn, 2013, Bryman, 2012, Cotrell, 2008). As Sandra Wlaklate (2011, p. 200) mentions, “30 years ago in the United Kingdom there were no undergraduate courses in criminology, though post-graduate training was available.”, which is why now, 32 years later, it seems only fitting to take another leap.

Contemporary criminology has changed and developed significantly over the past few decades, and since most students currently studying criminology will themselves become the next stage of its evolution, it seems only fitting then, that we should be able to get our ‘foot on the bottom rung of the ladder’ as early as we...
which we all so eagerly cling on to the hopes of attaining.

We invite all students who are studying criminology, sociology, psychology, law and politics, or anyone who is interested in crime and criminology. The only boundaries are that you have to be a student, undergraduate, or postgraduate.

Thank you

I would like to take this point to thank a few people who without their help advice and encouragement this would not have been possible. Their continued support throughout this endeavour has seen my interest and passion increase, and helped when I thought this would not get off the ground.

First has to be my lecturing staff at De Montfort and their continuing support for our society and the passion they show for the subject when teaching, I hope I can only but make you proud and live up to your ever-increasing high standards. Secondly will be the team of academics who have shown such commitment and interest in this project and helped push me to my limits on becoming a better academic and researcher, thank you to, Alicia Crowther, Joseph Payne, Deborah Jones, Lynsey Black, Victoria Silverwood, Nathan Kerrigan and Linn Pitts, to name but a few. Lastly, the committee members from all societies that are involved on the productions of the journal, and the support and willingness they have shown to work together, irrespective of our institutions, teamwork at its best.

We hope you enjoy this the beginning of our endeavour to help everyone get a foot in the door of the wider academic world.

reference


Article one

Sex Work in the 21st Century- A Case for Worker Centred Policy

By Nicola Byrne

‘Prostitution is an evil of which any society that claims to be civilised should seek to rid itself of’ (Wolfenden Committee, 1957:23 in Hubbard, 2006:4).

The way in which British Law constructs sex work as a deviant act is complex and outdated. Despite the 21st century housing a very different population and mix of social attitudes, contemporary legislation is still almost entirely based on outdated Victorian laws; laws that stated women who acted in a ‘riotous and indecent’ manner face the possibility of arrest. This narrative identifies the polarising theoretical ideologies of those with an abolitionist perspective and those who assert that sex work is a form of legitimate labour- a rational choice for women.

Sex work interventions have been traditionally linked with other acts of criminality. For example, drug use, which permeates many different sections of society, and trafficking by organised crime groups, which impacts various informal labour markets. These criminal acts are not mutually exclusive with sex work, so separating them from sex work will build a case for the re-examination of policy and legislation relating solely to the selling and purchase of sex. This narrative will build a case that sex work legislation has been built on ideology and morals that are now greatly outdated. Theoretical perspectives vary greatly, from those who wish to abolish sex work to those who wish to decriminalise it. Examining how theoretical perspectives inform policy, it is possible to look to other countries for examples of good and bad practise. This will conclude that in order to formulate sex work policy for a diverse 21st century society, legislators need to place
individual sex workers rights and safety at the centre of debate, and not the margins.

Sex work is the term given to the consensual exchange of sexual services for money between adult men and adult women (Sanders, 2005). There are six distinct sex markets that are found under the umbrella term ‘sex work’. These are licensed saunas, independent escorts, individuals working from home, working premises and street work (ibid). Some other sexual services can also be defined as forms of sex work, such as lap dancing, web cams, phone sex lines, to name a few. The focus of this narrative is on sex work that would historically have been referred to, and in certain areas still is referred to, as prostitution.

Sex work is ‘legally regarded as a private transaction between two consenting adults’ (Campbell and O’Neill 2006:3), this is not illegal. However, sex work is legislated and regulated by a series of public order offences that make working as a sex worker safely impossible. Street Offences Act 1959 and the Sexual Offences Act 1985 seek to regulate any offences that may ‘impinge on the wider public’ (Campbell and O’Neill, 2006). Whilst these acts sought to keep sex work off the streets, the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001 went one step further and made advertising sexual services in a public space an offence worthy of arrest (ibid). Sex workers partners are also subject to legislation under the Sexual Offences Acts 1956 and 2003, regarding them as individuals who seek to profit off their partners sex work and so therefore exploiting them in the same way it is viewed sex workers are exploited by pimps or brothel owners. The same Act criminalises the running of a disorderly house – a property which is used for the purpose of sex work by more than one worker (Campbell and O’Neill, 2006). This leaves a situation where it is almost impossible to work legally and safely, to try and do so would isolate the worker from partners, family and other workers; increasing the risk to her own safety as she works alone.

Campbell and O’Neill (2006) highlight the flawed nature of current sex work legislation and its beginnings that are based upon the morals of the legislators. The Wolfenden Report (1957), that informed the 1959 Street Offences Act, justified interventions in sex work markets to protect ‘the right of the normal decent citizen to go about the street without affront to their sense of decency’ (1957:23 in Campbell and O’Neill, 2006:4). The Wolfenden Report promoted the process of cautioning sex workers, offering a chance at self-redemption, further perpetuating the idea of the immoral fallen woman (Campbell and O’Neill, 2006). In many ways sex work perspectives are still informed by this same sense of morality and protection of public decency.

There are two broad and opposing perspectives on sex work; the abolitionist perspective and the view that sex work is legitimate work. The abolitionist perspective of sex work views the act of selling sex as the ‘absolute embodiment of patriarchal male privilege’ (Kesler, 2002:219). This perspective views sex work as a threat to the moral fibre of everyday life, in the same way that the Wolfenden report implicated prostitution in the wider process of post war moral decline; which the Wolfenden panel believed led to the breakdown of families (Sanders, 2005; Campbell and O’Neill, 2006). Abolitionists disregard sex workers voice and choice to work as sex workers, objectifying them and denying them agency. By silencing the workers voice abolitionists become moral entrepreneurs, the term Howard Becker assigned to those ‘who assume authority for knowing what correct behaviours are, who label others as deviant and who head moral crusades against social evils’ (Agustin,2007:161).

At the forefront of the abolitionist crusade against sex work is what Agustin (2007) describes as feminist fundamentalism. This is the idea of the female as a victim and the male as a perpetrator; Women always good, versus men who are always bad. Here women are viewed as an ‘essence’ that is violated by patriarchy everywhere (Agustin, 2007). This essence removes difference between women, so patriarchal violence against one woman is violence against all women. However, in becoming this united force, feminist fundamentalism removes any acknowledgement of intersectionality; the voices and experiences of non-white, non-middleclass, non-heterosexual and non-Euramerican are silenced (ibid). This perspective becomes problematic when it is held by those in influential, decision making positions. Such positions, such as deciding which women’s organisations get funding, can directly influence policy. If the right women’s organisations, that follow feminist fundamentalist ideals, are given opportunity to grow, their voice
becomes louder and more influential (Agustin, 2007). This influence creates policy, such as the 'end demand' or Nordic model of sex work policy currently legislated in Sweden. This model 'criminalises the men who purchase sex rather than the women who provide it’ (Goodyear and Cusick, 2007:52), in effect it tries to end the demand for sex workers. This approach, formalized in Sweden under the Violence Against Women Act 1999, is not centred on harm reduction for women, ignores sex worker welfare and safety, and drives sex markets in to underground harmful places (Goodyear and Cusick, 2007: Sanders and Campbell, 2007).

The perspective of sex work as legitimate work identifies the hazardous problems with the abolitionist perspective and forms an opposing position; in doing so it gives sex workers back their agency, the possibility of de-stigmatization and the introduction of worker rights (Sanders, 2005). This approach supports the decriminalization of sex work, so that sex work can be viewed seriously as a rational choice for women, within the constraints of race, sex and class (ibid). Sex work, when approached this way, can have the risks traditionally involved with selling sex reduced dramatically. Once a legal profession the stigma against sex workers will reduce, ‘it will enhance women’s choices, and help to make the streets safer, develop community based support programmes, and improve relations between sex workers and residents’ (Goodyear and Cusick, 2007:52). It is for these reasons that the United Nations favour consensual prostitution as a human right (Raymond, 1999; Sanders, 2005).

Whilst it is common for activists and policy makers to look to other countries in policy discussions, New Zealand's decriminalization model is often ignored. Although it is agreed that decriminalization will not completely end street prostitution, leaving some women still facing the dangers posed by working on the street, sex work as an occupation in New Zealand is regulated by health and safety standards; built on evidence based best practice (Goodyear and Cusick, 2007). Placing the rational agent as central to risk avoidance, as in a social constructionist perspective, but also noting the social constraints of the environment is a key feature of legislating sex work to reduce harm (Sanders, 2005). Programmes borne from this rationale are those that focus on managed zones and regulation of premises (Goodyear and Cusick, 2007).

It is worth noting here that managed zones in practise such as those introduced in Zurich, Switzerland have been placed on the margins of societies in industrial zones (Foulkes, 2013). This is a direct response to street sex work and associated risks, and does not address the needs of women who work in premises with lower levels of risk but poor working conditions and little recourse against unscrupulous agents or managers (Sanders and Campbell, 2007). Managed zones are the displacement of sex work out of urban centres and in to zones on the outskirts, whilst offering a safer alternative for the individual, will not lure all sex workers away from the night time economy of the city or change the working conditions of those who work indoors.

New Zealand’s politicians acknowledge that ‘decriminalization in 2003 was not related to sexual morality, but to a duty to place the welfare of the vulnerable and marginalised first’ (Goodyear and Cusick, 2007:53). In order for Britain to move towards legislation that tackles real issues that face sex work, it is essential to remove legislation that is based upon 19th century religious morality. A breakthrough has already been made on a local level with the conception of the Mersey Model of sex work in 2006. This model constructs violence towards sex workers as a hate crime, due to the stigma sex workers face and the marginalizing effect this has (TSSWP,2013; WSWTP,2012). This means that the priority is ‘the safety of sex workers over lesser crimes related to sex work’ (WSWTP, 2012:19). Additionally the police link to the National Ugly Mugs scheme, a non-governmental scheme that accepts reports of violent clients and relays details to registered sex workers; enabling them to take precautions if approached by the same client, reducing risk (WSWTP, 2012). This programme and the implementation for the Mersey Model has seen great success, with 400% increase in reporting of crimes against sex workers and a conviction rate of 67% for rape cases, compared to a national average conviction rate of only 6.5% (WSWTP, 2012). The social effect of such results is a new culture of trust between sex workers, the police and organisations.

A positive national step in the management of risk associated with sex work would be to roll out the Mersey Model and formalise it in to an Act of legislation. Sex work...
is often examined within the dynamics of other illegal activities such as drugs, organised crime and trafficking. These are the criminal elements to sex work that should be treated separately, as if sex work is decriminalised and sex workers less marginalised, the profession would not be as vulnerable to such links (Sanders, 2005).

‘Legal remedies are neither appropriate nor effective in enforcing moral norms or resolving social issues. The welfare of these women must always be our primary concern, and the first priority in harm reduction is the removal of prostitution from criminal law’ (Goodyear and Cusick, 2007:52).

The criminality associated with sex work, as it stands currently, can trap women in to a perpetuating biography of criminality. Receiving fines for defying current legislation which they then need to work to pay, and once a criminal record has been acquired it is harder to gain legitimate employment; a catch 22 situation. O’Neill (2001) noted that ‘most only work on the street for a short period only, ultimately moving to other forms of sex work or leaving the profession entirely’ (Hubbard and Sanders, 2003:76). Criminal records and the stigma associated with sex work can make what should be a relatively short street career in to a much longer and therefore riskier enterprise.

Sex workers are a diverse and multi-facetted group. Therefore, it is unrealistic to assume a one size fits all solution would be the best route forward for government legislation. However, when assessing the policies and legislation of the past, that have focused more on protecting moral decency rather than protecting actual women, it is clear that sex work policy needs to change. It is now the 21st century; attitudes towards sex and morality have changed greatly since the 19th century Victorian Vagrancy and Contagious Disease Acts. The population is diverse, and in any other realm of social policy equality and diversity is championed. Sex work legislation has not felt the promotion of equality and diversity, it has not 'moved with the times'. Assessing the changing needs of society we have to question, who are the various Acts of legislation that police sex work protecting? And, whose version of morality and decency are they promoting? These Acts have relied on an assumed community of whiteness, aspiring to middle class values of morality. In following feminist fundamentalist ‘moral entrepreneurs’ the lived experiences and diversity of sex workers are denied; putting them in greater risk, as they move further in to the margins of society.

This narrative is not an exhaustive account of sex work legislation. Rather it discusses how theoretical perspectives, particularly those that stem from moralistic and extreme ideology, can become influential within policy. This occurs when the lived experiences of sex workers are silenced by abolitionist perspectives directing research funding allocation and the funding streams of women’s projects. New Zealand’s 2003 government and the Merseyside police of 2006 took brave steps to move the construction of sex work from an ‘affront to public decency’ and towards an approach to sex work that places the safety and rights of the individual at the centre. Further work is required, by researchers, non-governmental organizations and those in power, in order to produce crucial sex work policy for the 21st century.

Bibliography


Article two

Doing time with lifers:

An Autoethnography about the experiences of life sentence prisoners, self-identity, masculinity, education and desistance.

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Abstract

We constantly here the public’s outcry that ‘life’ should mean ‘life’ and that anyone convicted of murder should never see the light of day again. This study draws from intense autoethnographic interviews with prison inmates serving life with the aim of estimating the effect of incarceration on their lives while in prison and after release. Between January and July 1996, I spent seven months in Acklington prison, Northumberland, where I was serving a five-year prison sentence for ‘wounding with intent to cause grievous bodily harm’, which could have resulted in me taking someone’s life – in which case I would have been a lifer myself. During my time in Acklington, I became acquainted with several life sentence prisoners who I spent my days with on what was known as ‘E’ Unit or the ‘lifer’ unit. Seven months later, I was transferred to Wealstun (open) prison, near Wetherby. Some of the lifers I had got to know in Acklington were also transferred to Wealstun as...
part of their resettlement. While in Wealstun, I became enrolled as a social sciences student through the education department and began writing freelance for magazines. Having already gained the lifers trust, I embarked on a research study of my own over the next 18 months. My study enabled me to make comparisons between lifers and fixed termers and at the same time use what I learned from them as part of my own journey to desistance.

Keywords: turning points, prison, prisoners, lifers, offending, desistance, life story interviews, autoethnography, ethnography

Prisoner security categories in the United Kingdom

Category (A) prisoners are those whose escape would be highly dangerous to the public or national security.

Category (C) prisoners are those who cannot be trusted in open conditions but who are unlikely to try to escape.

Category (D) prisoners are subject to approval, given ROTL (Release On Temporary Licence) to work in the community or to go on 'home leave' once they have passed their FLED (Full Licence Eligibility Dates), which is usually a quarter of the way through the sentence.

Introduction

During my term at Wealstun open prison where I spent most of my sentence with the lifer community, there were approximately 34 lifers, most of who I had already met during my time in Acklington. Wealstun had two sides to it, the closed side for category (C) prisoners and the open side for category (D) prisoners. Once lifers were permitted their category (D) status, they were allowed home leaves, community visits and work within the local community. All the lifers had been convicted of murder. Their backgrounds were all very similar in that most were not only first time offenders, but also perpetrators of crime passionelle. Some had killed their spouses and some had killed those they caught cheating with their spouses. However, not all of them had committed this type of crime. One had murdered two police officers; some were in my opinion, just manipulative and evil, but the group who I associated with had all basically ‘flipped’ during a domestic argument.

Most had served an average of 15 years except one who only served eight – his crime being euthanasia on his wife. Out of all the lifers that resided at Acklington some of who were later transferred to Wealstun open prison, associated on a daily basis with approximately eight of them, got to know many more, but became closest to two in particular who I shall call Mike and Ben. Here I have used pseudonyms for almost everyone I’ve mentioned in order to disguise their identity with the exception of those who are already widely publicised by the media. I made it clear to them of my intentions to become a researcher and writer and that I would greatly appreciate their support. They were all nearing the end of their tariffs and were at that time, category (C) prisoners. Had I met them at the beginning of their sentences they would have been Category (A) prisoners and held in high security dispersal prisons such as Wakefield in Yorkshire or Frankland in Durham.

Learning about what made lifers ‘tick’ was not born out of some kind of sympathy
for their plight. Apart from wanting a career in research and writing, I had an invested interest to learn as much as I could from a personal standpoint by analysing lifers because I thought it might help me to understand myself. I felt the way to do this was by exploring the minds of those who had crossed the line and killed another human being and whose behavioural patterns and violent actions mirrored my own.

I knew I could soon be fast heading for the same fate as they had and so by observing them and listening to their stories intently, I was able to learn a lot about myself more than any other time in my life. As this journey of mine continued, I became more introspective as many of their traits and experiences that led them to their predicament were all too familiar. The hardest thing to admit to myself was that in many ways I was even worse than some of them. They had ‘flipped’ once in their lives which had cost them their freedom and I know that some of them felt deep remorse. What I did was pre-meditated and I felt no remorse whatsoever, but I knew I had to change.

Education

I turned to education and writing in an attempt to steer myself from the person reflected in the mirror – as many of my ‘lifer’ friends had themselves. Not only did I think that education might provide me with opportunities later in life but that it might also change my cognitive thinking and help me to become more logical and less impulsive and erratic. I also started writing for magazines from my prison cell. Little did I expect that 16 years later, I would write and publish my autobiography, *Never Ending Circles*. I honed my craft from the prison environment. Writing enabled me to record what I learned from my fellow inmates and my personal experiences of incarceration, but I was also able to use pen and paper to escape my environment. Writing became my way of psychological survival and a way of documenting my experiences through letters and diaries. It had a therapeutic impact on me by offering a channel to express my innermost thoughts on paper whereby I could offload my emotions within my own private world. It also led me into a dark place where human suffering and murder had taken place that most people only ever get to hear and see about on crime documentaries and movies and read about in newspapers, magazines and books.

Reading was also an important past time in prison for me. It not only helped to pass the torturous hours but incarceration often makes a prisoner turn to expanding his/her literary skills. I was on average reading a book a day. I am pleased I did because through my new thirst for learning, I located several autobiographies of infamously reformed criminals such as former bank robber turned journalist and author, John McVicar, who escaped from Durham prison in 1968 and later published his autobiography *McVicar by himself*. There was also infamous Glaswegian gangster turned artist and sculpture, Jimmy Boyle, who published his story, *A sense of freedom*. Both books had a positive influence on my life; albeit not until years after I had first turned the pages.

This combination of learning from crime memoirs alongside interviewing and recording conversations from lifers who I was now sharing my life with, gave me an amazing insight into a mysterious world of long-term imprisonment and the effects it had on people’s lives. From notoriously reformed criminals to unknown prisoners who had found God and then published their memoirs for the prison Chaplaincy to distribute; I was gaining a unique and invaluable insight (Fellows:1996).

As I began to learn more about my fellow inmates, I wanted to use my writing skills to become their voice through which they could share their experiences. Although I had many other influences over the years, the lifer sub-culture made the biggest imprint on my life at that time. One day, one of them handed me a 100,000 word manuscript he had written about his life and though I never got through it all, it reinforced my desire to write my own memoirs one day. Most were educated to a high standard with some achieving one or more degrees through the Open University while some were accomplished writers, freelancing for magazines. One of the lifers contacted the education officer in charge of Open University...
applications on my behalf which resulted in me being accepted on to the Foundation course in social sciences.

E-Unit

Before being transferred to the ‘lifer’ ‘E’ unit, I had been inducted then allocated a cell on ‘D’ Unit. My first diary entry read: “I’m going to stay behind my door for the next three years.” Such were my feelings of paranoia and anxiety. I felt too uncomfortable mingling on the ‘dog-eat-dog’ landings of ‘D’ Unit with all the gangs of short termers running around making everyone’s lives a misery. To them, prison was just a game! Three days later I was scheduled to be transferred to the more settled ‘E’ Unit where the lifers were housed. Who in the general public would understand this? In their minds the worst criminals are those who kill, but if they were to spend a week inside a prison, they would soon prefer to be in the company of convicted killers to petty criminals. Of course this is generalising because it all depends on the individual characters and their maturity. It is also worth bearing in mind that because these lifers were first time offenders, they didn’t share the same inherently erratic behavioural patterns as the persistent short and fixed termers.

Once on ‘E’ Unit, I felt an immediate sense of calm. Being on ‘D’ Unit had been like being back in the psychiatric hospitals I had been a patient at amongst all the paranoid and schizoid personalities. At least in hospital patients were on prescribed medication. On ‘D’ Unit, they were popping all sorts of pills, mainly Temgesic (a strong pain killer) just to get through their days. Drug taking and pill popping was the scourge of prison life. You could have a normal conversation with someone one day then next time they would be different and perhaps even aggressive towards you. On ‘E’ unit, even my cell had a calming effect on me. It was dark where the last occupant had covered the window with a thin bed cover. The hot steel pipe made it warm and cosy – at least for a prison cell anyway. It needed a good paint but I felt I could serve my time there and not feel intimidated by the crazy activity around the landings. The peacefulness was only occasionally disrupted by other fixed-term prisoners who unfortunately were also allowed to reside on E-Unit. Drugs were rife but apart from some cannabis smoking, lifers didn’t partake generally in this sort of activity. It wasn’t worth the risk.

Some of the lifers in Acklington were eventually de-categorised where they spent the remainder of their sentences in open prisons. However, some were kept as category (C) prisoners for longer until they were deemed suitable for open conditions. Some had already in the past been released on licence but later been recalled (re-arrested) and returned to prison for not adhering to the conditions set out by the Home Office.

On licence

Released lifers are subject to a life licence which remains in force for the duration of their natural life. They may be recalled to prison at any time to continue serving their life sentence if it is considered necessary to protect the public. Therefore, they don’t need to commit another crime to be sent back to prison. They don’t need to go back to court or be questioned by police. A mere sign that a lifer is going back to their old ways is enough to have them re-arrested and returned to prison. For example, while on licence, their lifestyle and behaviour must be exemplary – usually completely opposite to the lifestyle they were leading when they offended. At the time they committed their offences, drugs, alcohol and/or violence may have been partly or all significant factors in their offending. Such factors are known as ‘triggers’. Therefore, while on licence, you must do all you can to avoid old habits by changing your behavioural patterns. One of the lifers in Acklington had been recalled from a hostel where he continually breached the...
rules by being drunk on the premises. He was returned to Acklington prison and had been there several years by the time I left. I can relate to this on a smaller scale. This passage taken from my book *Never Ending Circles*, describes my experience of being recalled from licence:

My parole licence was supposed to last for ten months. Unfortunately, my probation officer was concerned about myself and the safety of others, so he contacted the Home Office. After only six months, the Home Office recalled me back to prison. One night around 7:30 pm, while I was getting ready for a night out, there was a sudden knock at the door. When I moved the curtains, I could see from the window a police sergeant. I knew why they’d come. They were unaware of why they had been sent to arrest me, but I knew my parole had been revoked, so I was taken back to Durham Prison to complete another pointless four months.

(Honeywell, 2012: 112-113)

In England and Wales, the average life sentence is about 15 years before the first parole hearing, although those convicted of exceptionally grave crimes may remain behind bars for considerably longer. Ian Huntley was given a minimum term of 40 years. Some receive whole life orders and die in prison, such as Myra Hindley. Life imprisonment lasts until the death of the prisoner, although in most cases the prisoner will be eligible for parole (officially termed ‘early release’) after a fixed period set by the judge. This period is known as the ‘minimum term’ (previously known as the ‘tariff’). In some exceptionally grave cases however, a judge may order that a life sentence should mean life by making a ‘whole life order’.

Sampling

As for the lifers in Acklington, it was clear to me that some would have been better suited in psychiatric hospitals. I am no psychologist or psychiatrist but I have seen enough to know the signs. It was evident from the outset that they had a lot to tell and that no one else had really listened to them before. I needed to gain their trust. I was the same age as most of them and I had committed the same offence as most of them too. I was luckier than all of them because my victim had survived my attack. I set about choosing my friends very carefully indeed by getting to know them over several months.

I knew that had I gone head first into trying to get inside their heads, it could have had catastrophic consequences. It would take me a lot longer to befriend some than others. There seemed to be a lot of back biting and prison grapevine gossip between the lifers too. Prison had made some of them very bitter and angry over the years by the systems rules and regulations and also the breakdown of marriages and family relationships with their children, siblings and parents.

I knew my personality would clash with those who blamed everything and everyone but themselves, so I avoided them. I became friends with a Geordie lad called Paul. His heart was in the right place and he was telling people I was an author. I liked the fact that he looked up to me because I could use this to gain his trust and get introduced to others through him. He was eight years into a life sentence for murder but wouldn’t reveal enough for me to be able to ask him questions about his crime. Two days later Paul brought Mark to my cell. I had seen him around. He was on the same landing as me in the end cell. He was about five feet three inches tall and portly with severe eczema and bodily hygiene problems. He never spoke a word to anyone. I had looked through his spy hole several times and all I ever saw him doing was standing and staring out through the bars of his cell window.

Mark revealed to me he was a paranoid schizophrenic. “They won’t move me to a hospital,” he said. I sensed a real disturbed character beneath the surface. I ten
too uneasy in his presence so I took it no further. My instincts were right. Six months later, the prison staff would be forced to hospitalise him when he boiled over and had a major melt down smashing everything in his cell. It must have taken the whole unit staff to restrain and remove him to the hospital wing. How many more are like this? How many more ticking time bombs in prison are just waiting to explode?

Paul on the other hand got his comeuppance when it was discovered his murder victim had been a disabled person. It had been a well-known former gangster associate of the Kray and Richardson gang, Dennis Stafford, who exposed him. He did it with others too after obtaining disc files from his trustee job in the governor’s office. Stafford was the highest profile lifer I became acquainted with during my time in prison but I doubted very much that I would manage to get inside his head. He was famously jailed for the nicknamed, ‘One-armed bandit murder’ through the connection to the gaming industry, involving the supply of fruit machines, also known colloquially as one armed bandits, to social clubs. The cold-blooded gangland execution that inspired the Michael Caine thriller Get Carter, involved East End villain Stafford, now 81, who claimed that he and a friend, Michael Luvaglio, were framed for the shooting of fellow gangster Angus Sibbet in January 1967. The case was one of the most notorious killings in the north east, and the first gangland killing sparking fears that organised crime was gaining a foothold in the north east. Luvaglio’s Italian surname sparked the headline ‘The Mafia are coming.’ The trial was one of the biggest seen in the north east.

During my time in Acklington, I spoke to Dennis many times and got the impression he was somewhat aloof to the rest. When I asked him about the Krays, he told me they were just illiterates. He was unpopular amongst other lifers who felt he had special privileges. For example, he was the only prisoner with a computer in his cell at a time when computers were still fairly new. He said he was allowed it because he had arthritis in his fingers so found it difficult pressing down the keys on a typewriter. One day, through sheer jealousy, someone smashed it up after Dennis had left his cell door open when he went for shower. I could see he was getting special treatment. One day he proudly showed me his identification badge with his new job title working as an administrator in the governor’s office. Clearly a big mistake. Stafford was later transferred to Ford open prison – a more privileged open jail than such as Wealstun. His autobiography Fun Loving Criminal was published in 2007.

I continued looking for willing participants who I felt comfortable enough with and vice versa for me to delve into the darkest corners of their minds. Simon was eleven years into his life sentence. It was so hard to believe he was even in prison – for anything at all. Small in stature and of slim build, with a good head of curly hair and softly spoken demeanour, he did not fit the mould of what is perceived as ‘a criminal type’.

He came across as a gentle natured person and very well educated. He was studying for a degree through the Open University. We talked about education a lot and how difficult prison was to deal with emotionally. He said to me: “I think the more intelligent you are, the harder ‘doing time’ is.” I felt he had a point.

He told me how one day he banged on his ceiling because the prisoner above him was playing his music too loud. Apparently the other prisoner was so enraged by this, he stormed down to Simon’s cell and blacked his eye. Simon didn’t retaliate. Simon explained the devastating consequences getting into trouble can have on a lifer’s sentence. I was beginning to realise that they constantly walked on eggshells.

Lifers who tried to buck the system were not only risking their freedom, but were looked down on by their fellow lifers. This was a complete contrast to fixed-termers who revelled in trying to ‘beat the system’. However, as many others over bygone years had learned the hard way, this is an impossible task.

As one prison officer pointed out in conversation one day, “It’s always at the final hurdle lifers screw up.” He was referring to one who absconded from Wealstun with only months to serve after having already served many years.

I had to be selective who I wrote about for the sake of both parties. I could have ended up opening a can of worms. I then met Ben. He was a handsome fellow
with long curly black hair with a pleasant smile and demeanour. He was very quiet but very approachable once he showed he liked you. He had a wife who since his incarceration had started co-habiting with his now former best friend. He was loyal and trustworthy but his personal life and prison had embittered him over the years. He had explained how the fact his so-called best friend had been the cause of this. Added to this, many years of long term imprisonment had added to his cynicism. I would later learn his entire history. The problem was he was so quiet and withdrawn in many ways it became nauseating at times. He could be so difficult to get through to and sometimes I just wanted to shake him. I suppose I felt like this because we became good friends, so there was an emotional attachment between us. He admitted to me that this was why he killed. He said it was because he was incapable of opening up: “I just used to bottle everything up and allow it to fester,” he said. When I asked him how he now dealt with it, he said he was able to because he had done an ‘assertiveness’ course in prison.”

This helped him learn to offload and not bottle things up. I understood this perfectly having had been in the same predicament. This demonstrated how such courses can benefit some prisoners. Courses like this run by the Probation Service are usually criticised as being nothing more than a way of controlling prisoners to keep them in order (box ticking exercises). From a prisoner’s perspective they are seen as the only way they have any chance of keeping their privileges or being considered for parole.

I wondered if this ‘bottling up’ that Ben had described was a common trait amongst violent offenders. Men are not great communicators at the best of times and I was aware that there was a huge problem with communicating skills amongst offenders. All said and done, one of the most interesting aspects to the lifer’s characters was their ordinariness. This made their lives seem even more tragic and male prisons even more fearful places to be as well as clearly demonstrating that there is no such thing as a particular ‘type’ in prison and more alarmingly, anyone could one day find themselves serving life for murder or manslaughter.

It could happen to anyone

It was this ordinariness that became the most critical part of my observations. None of the lifers I got to know most intimately were career criminals, persistence offenders or even bad people beneath the surface. Therefore, arguably, anyone could find themselves in their predicament and serving a life sentence. Mike who I mentioned earlier and another lifer called Les, both could have been charged with manslaughter and been released years earlier. How many people in the heat of a moment, say things such as, ‘I’ll kill you!’? People never really think about it. They just say it. Mike had been over heard saying this to his victim three weeks before shooting him in the arm with a double barrel shotgun. He told me it was his intention to just wound him. He did exactly that but later his victim died from his injuries. I couldn’t help but wonder, if he was trying to fool me or himself. Was he in denial? I thought. Then again, why would he need to fool me? He was going home in a few weeks time. He could have been in denial I suppose, but all lifers were continually subjected to regular, thorough psychological assessments before they were allowed to be released back into society. Any signs of denial or lack of remorse was enough to delay their release. I believed him.

He seemed a completely together, confident, and assertive person. In fact, he was so unlike a lot of the others, he was shunned by some of the other prisoners and accused of being a ‘grass’ (informant). I never believed this. The point here though is that when people say things in the heat of the moment, they have no idea of what fate could await them. Of course, Mike did deliberately cause the injuries to his victim but even if someone else had pulled the trigger, he still would have been the police number one suspect because there were witnesses to his prior threats.

Days later I was arguing in my cell with Les. “You should never try and solve things with violence!” he blasted. “Sort it out! Shake hands and make up or walk
away.” Not the usual reaction from a prisoner, I thought. I was angry that someone had called me behind my back so I was thinking of giving him a ‘dig’ the next time I saw him. Not very professional for a writer/researcher I know, but I was still a prisoner and the way you are perceived by your fellow inmates is crucial. No signs of weakness can be shown. Most of the things you fight about in prison, wouldn’t even faze you in the real world. Everything is so magnified in there.

I was bewildered as to why Les was taking this to heart. I couldn’t understand why he was getting so worked up about it! Breathing heavier and faster as he became more anxious, he suddenly revealed to me he had killed a man over a spilled beer. An altercation resulted in a punch up where his victim had hit his head on the pavement. I didn’t press him on the subject any further. I did wonder though why he was a lifer and not serving a lesser charge of manslaughter. I now realised though, why he had got so agitated with me. I do myself now when talking to young men who brag and flex their muscles, trying to demonstrate their masculinity.

It just goes to show how every weekend brawl could so easily result in a death and life sentence. Every lifer’s story could so easily have been mine and every other person who gets into a drunken brawl; domestic argument; or feud. We all take our freedom for granted but in a split second, lives can be lost and those responsible, imprisoned for decades.

Self identity

It soon occurred to me that another one of the most outstanding differences between lifers and the rest of the prison population, was their appearances. None of them gave an aura of aggression, looked thuggish, or acted tough. Most fixed termers tried to give off a persona as being hard – A ‘don’t mess with me’, image. They would muscle up in the gym, shave their heads and swagger along the landings. None of the lifers possessed any of these traits. Perhaps they had in the past though. I began to realise why their self-image and how they were perceived by others was so important to them. They were mentally preparing for their release and so had set about adopting a new identity with a clean cut image. I first noticed Mike who later became my cellmate one Saturday afternoon in the television room when I saw him unlocking and entering a small cupboard area in the corner. I realised he was loading a video for the scheduled movie showing. He was a handsome man; physically fit looking and very clean cut with a small moustache immaculately groomed as was his hair. He projected a lot of self-confidence. One day we were lying on our beds watching television and talking when I told him how I had actually thought he was a member of staff when I first saw him. He gave me a broad grin. He took it as a compliment. After years of incarceration, it was important to some of the lifers that their identity be transformed even to the point of being more akin with their jailers than their inmate colleagues.

He told me that he didn’t want to look like a criminal (by that he meant thuggish in appearance). Mike went to a lot of trouble to hone his self-image. He would never shave his head or muscle-up in the gym as he felt this gave off that thuggish appearance. Ironic I thought, that a prisoner who was serving life for the ultimate crime, shared the rest of society’s perception that criminals possess a certain image.

He said that once he was released, he wanted to reintegrate quietly with his new wife without any stigma attached. He said: “I want people to just see me for what I am now – not what I was.” I was warmed by his genuineness and determination to become accepted by others as a respectable family man. For him, establishing the right impression was an essential turning point for his new life. It was a major personal transition from his prisoner identity to that of a married, family man. This has been well researched by John Laub and Robert Sampson whereby a small number of factors are sturdy correlates of desistance (e.g., good marriages, stable work, transformation of identity, and aging). The processes of desistance form
crime and other forms of problem behaviour appear to be similar. (Laub and Sampson: 2001). Clothing was also an essential identity statement for prisoners. In Wealstun, we were all allowed to wear our own clothes. Many of the inmates would go to great lengths to wear particular labelled clothing as a way of displaying their individualism and wealth. The whole importance of a wealthy image amongst prisoners was very competitive. By displaying wealth, other prisoners would view them as serious criminals. Mike was certainly no exception either but for him, it wasn’t about impressing other prisoners. He didn’t even want to be viewed as a criminal – let alone a serious one. For him it was about the opposite. Being smartly dressed in his own clothes made him feel less of a prisoner. He and I both knew that there was not really a criminal ‘type’ and that it was the public’s perception that he was pandering to.

Testing the boundaries

Lifers nearing the end of their term in open prisons were allowed regular home leaves where they got to spend five days at a time with their family. They were also allowed community visits every week where they were able to spend up to six hours on a Saturday with friends and family outside the prison. Sometimes the worry, strain and feelings of uselessness not being able to deal with family crises as they arose would cause some to abscond. For some lifers, the alternating lifestyle of freedom such as working in the community, spending days and nights with family and friends on home leaves while residing in prison was just too much to deal with.

Some were just allured by other things such as one Liverpudlian prisoner, who with only three months remaining of his 17 years, absconded. He had been given the privilege of working outside the prison in a local café. The allure of a sexy waitress was too much to resist. They ran away together, eloping somewhere far away. It couldn’t have lasted though. I couldn’t imagine a life of always looking over your shoulder wondering if one day you will be caught and suddenly returned to prison until it’s decided you can be released again.

That was always the threat for lifers. Lifers don’t have a release date. They have an approximate length of time they must serve (tariff) before being considered for parole but nothing is written in stone.

Friendships could also be tested to the absolute maximum at times. One day in Acklington, Ben was brutally assaulted by his cellmate and friend, Sean, over nothing more than an innocuous remark. As usual – as most offenders do – Sean blamed it on something else other than himself. Quick to back him up, a fellow lifer friend of Sean, used the tragic Dunblane massacre which had happened on that day as an excuse for his outburst. He said his mind was so disturbed by what had happened with him being a father himself. I thought to myself what a ridiculous excuse it was. There were lots of prisoners with children in there who hadn’t randomly attacked their cellmates.

They were mainly broken men with amputated spirits. Most had lost families, wives, children who had either disowned them or died. The most tragic case was of John who had allegedly done his time as part of a biker’s pact. An allegedly innocent man who during his stint in prison, had lost his wife to cancer. When he was finally released after serving 10 years, he lived for only a few weeks as a free man after contracting terminal cancer himself.

Others who I acquainted but never got to know well, included one of the grimmest and most detestable lifers I had the displeasure to meet. He was a short, stout, arrogant Italian. He had chopped his wife’s head off and drove his car around with it in a carrier bag on the passenger seat, days before being caught. He was one of those I gave a wide birth to. There was also a lifer who was a former prison officer who had decapitated his wife. He was in fact the first lifer I ever met face to face and spoke to, but I was unaware of who he was at the time. Once again, you wouldn’t have imagined that he would ever have had so much as a parking fine.
Another was serving life for a religious killing. He was a Sheik who used the
English name, Peter. I nicknamed him, ‘the turbanator’. He had served eighteen
years of his life tariff for taking his ceremonial sword to a family member and severing his
head. When I approached the subject, this was all he was willing to disclose. His
jolly demeanour and clean cut image again made it difficult for me to see him as a
convicted murderer. I felt that none would ever see the inside of a prison again
unlike the rest of the population. Of all the lifers I studied, none ever showed any
signs of aggression to myself or other prisoners. These were not your typically
violent criminals despite having committed the ultimate crime of murder.

This was the most eye opening period of my life and if there was ever a
deterrent from crime, then seeing how long term imprisonment had ravaged these
men’s souls was it. Had it not been for my own mental health issues, I would have
turned my life around there and then, but once I was released, my personality
disorder reached its height. Several years down the line, their words of wisdom
would have a much greater impact on me which I have continued to emulate.

Mike was released after serving 13 years and was looking forward to starting a
new life with his new wife Sarah. She was a lovely person. I met her several times
on visits and later outside once I was released. They looked very much in love and
I hoped they would be very happy. It made me reassess my personal life as well.

I kept in touch with Mike until I left Newcastle in 2000. The last I heard, he and
Sarah were happily married and he had even learned to drive at the age of 45. I
never heard from Ben again but I heard he had been released. Nor indeed did I
hear from any of the others who had all tried to move on with their lives in one way
or another. I passed my Open University social sciences course in 1997 and was
offered a place at Northumbria University to study criminology. In February 1998, I
was released and several months later, enrolled on my degree course in
September that year. This was the biggest break I had ever had, so going
backwards was no option. Unfortunately, although my lifer friends had opened my
eyes by giving me a snap shot of what I could become if I didn’t change my ways,
I didn’t change for several more years to come.

Conclusion

It is very rare to be able to have a snap shot of your own future. We can all
imagine how we may turn out, but the unique factor here was that I was looking at
mine through the eyes of people I shared identical behavioural patterns with.
Several months after leaving prison while studying at university, I was given one
the most inspirational books I had ever read called, Psychological survival: the
experience of long-term imprisonment by Stan Cohen and Laurie Taylor. The
publication of the book came about after sociologist, Laurie Taylor, took the
unusual step of starting sociology classes in the maximum security E-Wing of
Durham prison, whose residents included Scotland Yard’s, Public Enemy No.1,
John McVicar – though not for long as McVicar tunnelled his way out soon after
the classes began. The formal boundaries between teacher and learner were
blurred within weeks, and the classes soon developed into unprogrammed
discussions and then into an extraordinary research project, culminating in the
aforementioned book. The second edition, published in 1981, includes a postscript
by McVicar who by this stage had traded in his sawn off shotgun for a typewriter.
Laurie Taylor’s journey into Durham’s E-Wing and beyond, involved friend and
colleague Stan Cohen, a sociologist at Durham University. The Cohen and Taylor
collaboration continued for many years and resulted in several major publications
inspired by the Durham Prison experience, including the book Escape Attempts:
The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Everyday Life.

Although this was a text that one of my criminology lecturers had suggested I read,
it meant a lot more to me than merely being just another book from my reading
list. Although I was no qualified researcher at the time I was in prison, I had a thirst
for knowledge and a burning desire to become one. As far as I am concerned, I
began my criminology career from prison with the best access to my study sample.
you could wish for. However being a fellow inmate made objectivity almost impossible as I got deeper into it. As I got to know each lifer, it became more difficult to believe they had committed such terrible crimes. The fact I had only escaped the same life tariff myself for a vicious attack made it easier for me to be accepted by them and to accept them. They always associated with one another and rarely with fixed-termers. It was a very closely knit circle and it took a lot for an outsider to be accepted. It was evident they regarded me as being ‘almost’ one of them.

I used what research tools I had at hand to the best of my ability. I was already part of the environment with willing participants and some basic knowledge of research skills through my social sciences study and intense reading. As Cohen and Taylor had conducted their research while working as teachers in Durham prison in the 1960s, I did mine as a serving prisoner. I continued my journey through Higher Education which had provided an escape from my damaging lifestyle and since my entry into education 15 years ago, I have become acquainted with other offenders both male and female who have also followed the same path as I and very successfully. From the two years I spent with the lifers, I learned about the value of education and how it had enabled them to focus their minds over a long period of imprisonment. For me it opened doors and enabled me to forge a new identity and become accepted within a new culture despite my past and later even embraced for it amongst the criminological industry. According to Bayliss (2003), while the prison population in the UK continually increases, there is also an increasing demand for access to higher education from prisoners and ex-prisoners. However, although we have this growing trend of more ex-prisoners entering higher education and gaining degrees; we have no knowledge of the demographics or the experiences they have moving into/through higher education and into employment (Aresti: 2010). Findings on this would be invaluable for such as the Prisoner Education Trust in terms of funding, UNLOCK National Organisation for Reformed Offenders, policy makers and politicians. Recent surveys have shown the positive affects education has on ex-offenders self change and rehabilitation. Based on this evidence, education could have huge implications on reducing offending (Aresti: 2010). In the last few decades a growing body of literature has focussed on investigating how criminal offenders desist from crime (Farrell and Calverley: 2006; Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002; Laub and Sampson, 2001; Maruna: 2001; Uggen, Manza and Behrens: 2004). Understanding the factors that lead to criminal desistance (desistance) is vital to the development of interventions that reduce re-offending. Such a reduction obviously has a number of implications for society, in terms of economic gains and issues of public welfare. With the ever increasing prison population in England and Wales currently peaking at 87,000 (Ministry of Justice: 2013), and established reports suggesting that over 58% of prisoners are reconvicted within two years of release (Social Exclusion Unit, SEU: 2002) the need to understand the processes underlying desistance has become a critical point of inquiry. Despite the rapid growth in literature on desistance, an area largely neglected until recently, is the subjective experience of desistance (Aresti: 2010). Moreover, investigating subjective desistance through ex-prisoners experiences through education would provide invaluable findings.

Bayliss continues that while more prisons are being built and the accompanying rise in prison population, the efficacious role of prison education is becoming increasingly important. Having been sidelined in the past, the education of prisoners is now receiving closer government attention in the UK. The discourse of prison education mirrors the instrumental approach of learning for work taken by the government, because the primary task expected of prison education is to increase the chances of employment by ex-offenders and hence reduce recidivism. If this link were established it may convince policy makers, prison staff and inmates of the further benefits of prison education. Hence, prison education could be liberated by loosening its constraints of providing mainly basic skills classes, to becoming integrated within all prison activities and by having more involvement with the outside community.

The demand for higher education from prisoners and ex-prisoners, has continued to grow with the apparent growing numbers of Voluntary Service Organisations such as Prisoner Education Trust, Longford Trust, Open Book, working in the field. (see Prisoner Education Trust). However apart from Bayliss’s work with lifers, it would appear that little academic work or scientifically verifiable or pe...
reviewed work has been done in this field. Several surveys have been conducted by charities on serving prisoners and their educational requirements and benefits, but very little scientific academic research has been done on post-release prisoners; what impact education has had on their lives and the barriers they face when entering the career market.

Also due to the growing trend of prisoners entering higher education, the newly UK Convict Criminology organisation was established; closely associated to the US version (see: Ross and Richards: 2002). In the USA, in the late 1990s, Convict Criminology organisation was formed by several ex-convict PhD graduates who had become academic criminologists. The ‘New School of Convict Criminology’ is a relatively new and controversial perspective in the field of corrections and the academic field of criminology. It challenges the way crime and correctional problems are traditionally represented and discussed by researchers, policymakers, and politicians.

The use of ‘New’ is mirrored on Taylor, Walton, and Young’s (1973) seminal work The New Criminology. This monograph generated considerable controversy and intellectual debate in their discipline. These authors were critical of positivist, functionalist, and labelling approaches that failed to consider how the criminal law, policing, and corrections were socio-political constructions of class domination and the logical priorities of capitalism. Their use of the word ‘school’ is similar to the Frankfurt School and the New School of Social Research, which suggests a collective effort grounded in a creative and critical research tradition. (Richards and Ross, 2001:186).

More recently, the government produced a review on offender learning which stated that re-offending blights lives and communities, carrying personal, social and economic costs of between £9.5 billion and £13 billion a year. Enabling offenders to have the skills that will make them attractive to employers so that they can find and keep jobs on release or whilst serving a community sentence – becoming an asset rather than a burden to society – makes sense (Tickle: 2012).

The Prisoner Education Trust survey conducted in 2009, called, Brain Cells: Listening to prisoner learners, demonstrated that an overwhelming number of respondents, including 33% doing distance learning, were positive about their educational activities, finding them ‘useful and worthwhile’ and a constructive way to use their time. Not only were respondents gaining qualifications, which they have every reason to hope will improve their prospects of finding worthwhile employment on release, they also reported that their self-esteem has been boosted and an appetite for learning stimulated. (Prisoner Education Trust: 2012). Offenders must want to change but equally, support must be in place for newly released prisoners. In order for someone to change, they must also be allowed to re-integrate into society by being given access to work, education and housing.

References


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