

Arianna Kajal Hernandez & Eva Tanz

Nuances of identity, gender, and coping behind bars – A review of *Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood* by Ben Crewe, Susie Hulley and Serena Wright

Ben Crewe, Susie Hulley & Serena Wright, Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood: Adaptation, Identity and Time, Palgrave Macmillan 2020, 333 pages, eBook €74.89, hardcover €46.79, ISBN 978-1-137-56601-0.

Prisons and what happens behind the walls are often removed from the public eye. Rarely do we get a glimpse of insiders' perspectives. *Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood: Adaptation, Identity and Time* by Crewe et al. (2020) hones in on the sociological subtleties of prisoners' testimonies of coping and survival in the specific jurisdiction of England and Wales. The authors build on prior major studies on life sentences, a centrepiece for inquiry in the long-standing discipline of prison research. *Long-Term Imprisonment and Human Rights* delves into the topic (Drenkhahn et al., 2014). Through interviews with prisoners serving life terms across 11 continental and post-Soviet European countries, the work assesses whether institutional living conditions are congruent with international norms and standards of human rights. Other works, such as van Zyl Smit and Appleton (2016, 2019) employ data collection and legal analysis, empirical and doctrinal alike, to survey the human rights implications of life imprisonment on a global scale, writing on its intersection with (in)justice.

The three authors of *Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood* are based in the United Kingdom: Ben Crewe and Susie Hulley are affiliated with the University of Cambridge, where Crewe is both Professor of Penology and Criminal Justice and Deputy Director of the Prisons Research Centre, and Hulley is a Senior Research Associate. Serena Wright is a Lecturer at the Department of Law and Criminology at the Royal Holloway, University of London. Their book is part of the 'Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology' series, which showcases themes of scholarly interest, such as punishment, media and crime, critical criminology, aging in prisons and specific penal systems around the globe.

Crewe et al. (2020) embody aspects of the participatory action research model of criminology, wherein they humanise individual offenders, those impacted by criminal policy the most (see Dupont, 2008). This work elaborates on Crewe (2013), which states that "listening to [prisoners'] life stories in an active and attentive way is a powerful act" as "[they] are so used to being disbelieved, un-recognised, and un-trusted" (p. 20). Thus, rather than being complicit in allowing prisoners' voices to languish in the shadows of big data or a statistical category, Crewe and his colleagues listen closely and play an active role in amplifying what they hear, even in the participants' own words. Crewe et al. (2020) employ cross-sectional mixed methods to uplift and give tactful nuance to the voices of 309 men and 21 women in 25 different institutions

in England serving life imprisonment that began when the offenders were 25 years old or younger (p. 30). Through surveys and semi-structured interviews, the team bridges our perception of the “faceless, nameless, voiceless criminals safely locked away” with textured narratives of their lived experiences of lengthy tariffs (p. v).

Crewe and his colleagues transcend the notion that to produce scientific knowledge, the modality must be impersonal and detached from investigators’ lived experiences (see Jewkes, 2012). The authors heed a call for criminologists to explore dimensions of autoethnography and reflexivity with their research participants and are transparent about their impressions of rapport with them (Crewe et al., 2020; Jewkes, 2012). This is noteworthy given that in criminology and criminal justice, qualitative research constitutes a small share of published literature whereas quantitative methodological approaches are most prevalent (Tewksbury et al., 2010). While the latter can be leveraged for statistical inference, there is increasing regard for an open and critical discussion of criminologists’ emotional labour or the extent of their emotional involvement as they strive to achieve their research aims (Phillips et al., 2020).

The authors unpack recurring themes and coping strategies in five key chapters (p. 30). ‘The Early Years’ highlights emotional challenges, reactions and responses that are unique to prisoners’ psychological survival of the initial years in long-term imprisonment. ‘Coping and Adaptation’ elaborates on how prisoners manage to maintain a sense of control, meaning, purpose and hope in their confined circumstances. ‘Social Relations’ centres on how prisoners’ relationships with family and friends, both inside and outside of prison, change throughout their tariff. ‘Identity and Selfhood’ details how the prisoners reconcile their previous self-concepts with the severity of their murder offences and lengthy tariffs. Lastly, ‘Time and Place’ examines how institutionalisation interacts with prisoners’ perceptions of time when significant events are lacking and they cannot come into contact with changes (e. g. technological) beyond the prison. We will now turn to how Crewe and his colleagues’ cogent life history interviews with prisoners, as well as their acute analysis of factors such as gender and positionality, enable readers to grasp prisoners’ conceptions of time and the pertinence of a joint enterprise conviction.

Considering that the 21 female participants in the study comprise 72 percent of the women serving life in England and Wales (Crewe et al., 2020, p. 30), it is distinct how the research participants’ demographic is represented. Yet it is not the first time Crewe and his colleagues convey the gendered nature of life imprisonment, which heightens their awareness of distinctions between and among the groups (see Crewe et al., 2017). Certain patterns emerge in how men and women interact with their prison cohorts. For example, female inmates have relationships that emulate those of a mother and a daughter, whereas hypermasculinity is normalised in men’s prisons. Female prisoners are more likely to have histories of domestic violence, which frequently results in severed social ties with the outside world. On the other hand, the authors emphasise how male prisoners’ parental bonds, especially with their mothers, tend to become more emotionally intimate during their tariffs.

Crewe et al.’s myriad anecdotes regarding prisoners’ self-concepts demonstrate the psychological adjustment required to bridge their actions, i. e. committing a murder, with their pre-offence constructed identities and self-perceptions. Prisoners generally grapple with integrating a label of “murderer” into their identities; some report how the stigmatic connotations affect or “dim” their personalities and manifest in a loss of “existential confidence” (p. 253). Put simply, prisoners also question their preconceived notions about whether they are still a good person in light of their offence (p. 271). Research suggests that the label of “criminal” has far-

reaching collateral consequences in social domains ranging from voting rights to housing (Moore et al., 2016). Previously we were unaware of the distinctions between prisoners' ability to come to terms with their conviction based on the extent of their involvement in a crime and the sentence they received, i. e. joint enterprise convicts and their counterparts.

Crewe et al. introduce us to how the variable of joint enterprise, wherein two or more people are liable for a single criminal act, influences prisoners' ability to accept their conviction and integrate their circumstances of imprisonment into their identities. The authors' narration of joint enterprise convicts' dissonance between the sentence they received, the subsidiary role they played and perceived penal (il)legitimacy moved us (pp. 82-83). Though we were aware of prison reform movements, we were not conscious of the little-to-no divergence in the severity of sentences between those who play principal roles in murder and those who are less involved. Crewe and his colleagues' portrayal of the joint enterprise convicts' negative sentiments, namely the relationship between sentences perceived as unfair and prisoners' capacity to accept them, aligns with scientific findings on fairness (see Tyler, 2003). Another area of concern is the consequences of a disproportionate scale of punishment to an offence, or legal (il)legitimacy, on an individual and societal basis (see also Hulley et al., 2019). Through thoughtful anecdotes from the incarcerated men and women themselves, the authors also stimulate further inquiry into themes that transcend the legal order and penal situation, such as men and women's conception of time.

By weaving individuals' reflections into their life trajectory narratives, the authors accentuate inmates' collective need to find a figurative rope onto which to hold, which inmates (re)construct over time. "Surviving", which is compared to the stages of grief (Crewe et al., 2020, p. 94), is customary during the early stages of imprisonment, along with resistance to rumination about the inmates' current and remaining time left to serve. To illustrate one of the "psychic defence mechanism[s]" (p. 116), as described by Crewe et al., inmates proceeded with the appeal process irrespective of whether they could plausibly win. Thus, it speaks to the emotional denial that men and women use to fend for themselves against time as their adversary (p. 102). The researchers exemplify how prisoners cope with being in limbo by use of practices, such as faith, mindfulness or education, as the outside world carries on.

Through a drawn-out period of reckoning with one's guilt and remorse or trying to make amends to facilitate social reintegration, research participants assert that more than ten years of imprisonment is "counterproductive" (p. 322). As one prisoner, who was in his 20s and roughly halfway through his sentence, states:

"I did what I did, so I deserve to be punished for it, basically, so I deserve to be here, [but] I don't feel I deserve nineteen years. I don't think that amount of time is good for anybody, really. If you can't rehabilitate someone after ten years, then there's no hope for them, really." (p. 322)

Men and women in custody are occasionally reminded of how the lives of people in their pre-offence social network continue without their participation and enjoyment. For instance, as one's son or daughter grows up, marriages take place or school friends become parents while prisoners feel at a standstill. In the context of forgiveness, Crewe et al. (2020) offer a refreshing perspective – humanising the prisoner's stories and uncovering their remorse could open a "way towards creating the space in which forgiveness might be possible" (p. 322). However, as one prisoner mentions, "[w]ith murder, you'll never come to terms with it, because it's an in-human act" (p. 257).

Life Imprisonment from Young Adulthood focuses on the lived experiences of the prisoners without diminishing the severity of their offences and reverberating consequences on families, both of the inmates and victims. As the authors point out, no length of time “can heal the trauma or cure the pain of victimhood” (p. 322). The book raises the question of what the aim of punishment is and for whom, whether it be directed towards the prisoner to ensure desistance, retribution or deterrence (Fletcher, 1998; Packer, 1968). There is no answer to how many years are sufficient to meet the objectives of the imprisonment or “correction” of offenders (Crewe et al., 2020, p. 323). However, we are now equipped with previously unknown accounts and figures concerning the balance between serving a sentence for one’s crimes and ensuring it is enough to prevent one from again inflicting harm on people, yet not too much to have an opposite or null effect.

Overall, Crewe et al. (2020) beautifully intertwine stories of the prisoners within theoretical frameworks on long-term imprisonment. By leveraging life story interviews, they depict how lengthy tariffs influence not only the prisoners’ lives and social dynamics but also society at large. The fact that prisons are both removed from public view, yet taken for granted as a social institution and accepted at face value by policymakers, points to a literal “blind spot” (Elias, 1978, as cited in Garland, 1991). By validating prisoners’ feelings and vulnerabilities, the reader is reminded to identify our “sympathetic limitations” and give critical thought to the real-life consequences of policies on human beings (Garland, 1991).

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Kontakt | Contact

Arianna Kajal Hernandez | German Chancellor Fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation | Department of Criminal Law and Criminology | Freie Universität Berlin | ariannakajal@zedat.fu-berlin.de

Eva Tanz | Research Associate | Department of Criminal Law and Criminology | Freie Universität Berlin | eva.tanz@fu-berlin.de