

Journal of Theoretical & Philosophical Criminology

ISSN: 2166-8094

JTPCRIM, July 2016, 8:144-147

Inmates' Narratives and Discursive Discipline in Prison: Rewriting personal histories through cognitive behavioral programs

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Commentary:

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Narrative Identities is a powerful, scholarly, and insightful book that documents the dangers of applying rudimentary cognitive behavioral programs in prison in a mechanical manner. Drawing from a variety of sources, Schlosser beautifully illustrates how a correctional cognitive-behavioral rehabilitation programme can inadvertently obstruct the desistance process. While the focus of this book is on one particular cognitively-based programme, there are clear implications for prisoners throughout the world, with cognitively focused rehabilitation being the predominant treatment mode currently in use.

The book centers around Schlosser's interviews with a group of 30 inmates in correctional institutions throughout the state of Missouri. She asks what they thought had landed them in prison and what would help them stay out in the future. Keenly taking the opportunity of a non-judgmental ear, inmates freely tell the stories of abuse, drugs, violence, indifference, family killings and poverty. In her analysis, Schlosser discovers a core theme of unresolved tension in the stories of the inmates: their lives were blighted by tragedy and loss by factors beyond their control and yet each person held themselves responsible for their subsequent incarceration.

Schlosser traces the source of the internal struggle to the 'Pathway to Change' programme (and the wider correctional culture) that all individuals have to complete as a condition of their release. The programme attempts to rewrite inmates' lived realities into a one-size-fits-all explanation of their incarceration. In essence, their accounts of their lives are 'corrected' until they are consistent with an official meta-story. The meta-story states that the context within which crime occurs is always irrelevant and everything that is or has gone wrong in the inmates' lives is a direct result of their own bad choices. The Pathway to Change programme imparts the meta-story through a series of disjointed "lessons" that appear to be unrelated to the concrete details of the participants lives.

Schlosser skillful analyses the Pathway to Change programme manual and, throughout her book, weaves excerpts from interviews and programme lessons to illustrate the wide disparity between the experiences of the men and the programme

lessons. At times, the disconnection would almost be comical if the cost to self-esteem and personal integrity were less severe. For example, a lesson on 'moral decision making', tells a story of a greedy astronaut in space who is eating all of the available food. Although the idea of greed and selfishness is not ambiguous, it is over simplistic in nature and is contextually irrelevant to someone in prison. Another lesson on moral decision-making depicts a dilemma in which a married couple are trying to work out which car to buy. Although this dilemma is slightly more grounded in reality, it reveals a lack of comprehension by the programme writer of the participants' financial struggles. Schlosser suggests a more representative and useful lesson could have depicted parents trying to work out whether to use their car during the coming winter, in order to get to work on time, or to buy their children winter clothes. Time and time again, the programme comes up short in showing sufficient appreciation of the difficulties many have faced from childhood and an understanding of the participants' current circumstances. In this way, the lived realities of the men are overlooked and the context within which they committed their crimes is routinely dismissed.

As well as illustrating a disconnection between the contexts of inmates' lives with the programme lessons, Schlosser uncovers a more disturbing element of discursive discipline at play. Analysis of the programme manual and data from the interviews reveals five themes by which discursive discipline is carried out; self-blame, degradation, disconnection, detachment from reality and expert knowledge. An example of a lesson that uses degradation is one where inmates are asked to create lists of things that "make them crazy". They then pick the "funniest" thing and act out it in front of the group. These sorts of activities are often abruptly finished, with no explanation of what the lesson was attempting to address or how it might have any bearing on the participants' lives. Schlosser suggests that such activities serve to further strip the men of any remaining sense of self-respect and encourage them to adopt the "bad choice" mantra.

Schlosser hones in on the gap between individuals' personal accounts and the official metanarrative. She draws out common themes from the mens' narratives, correctional policy, and the programme manual that simultaneously bridge and widen this gap. The themes are choice, responsibility, context, goals and future. Illustrations from interviews and programme lessons are used to explain how these concepts can be viewed as poignant markers of deep flaws in correctional rehabilitation (the use of this word requiring a charitable interpretation at this point in the book). Schlosser goes on to imbed the themes (choice, responsibility, context, goals and future) within a cultural, meta-analytical and theoretical context, grounding her data in the concepts of law and morality.

Schlosser concludes the book by highlighting the need to link rehabilitation programs with realities of individuals sentenced to prison. Correctional institutions and men in prison arguably have the same ultimate goal: to assist the latter to become productive members of society through earning a stable income and having a supportive living environment. The common goal of desistance is routinely overlooked, at a significant cost to rehabilitation effectiveness and the coherence of individuals' selfnarratives. The narrative "correction" approach to behavioral change leaves confused, uncertain, and vulnerable people to make the best they can of a life in which the odds are already stacked against them.

The novelty of Schlosser's suggestions lies in reframing who is the expert. Instead of the 'armchair academic' (who in the case of this programme appears to have an inexcusable lack of appreciation for life as these men know it), Schlosser draws attention to the potential gain in listening to the people who actually live the lives subject to "correction". Schlosser incorporates the participants' insights into her list of simple and practical suggestions for improving the current state of correctional rehabilitation. The suggestions the men gave included being able to talk someone who listens without

adversely judging them, and meeting with people who had successfully desisted from further crime. Schlosser stresses that any changes to rehabilitation initiatives should not impose further costs to an already financially struggling institutions. She compellingly argues that the kinds of changes highlighted by the participants are simple and relatively inexpensive, and others such as replacing existing programme manuals containing more up to date interventions (and constructive), and employing qualified and trained staff to run them need to occur anyway. In addition, respecting the agency of individuals and building programs around their core priorities while also reducing risk represents a more positive approach. In many respects, Schlosser's proposals resonate strongly with the kind of strength based rehabilitation and desistance models that been gradually developed in correctional psychology since 2002 (Ward & Maruna, 2007).

Schlosser's writing is crisp and clear, and her message is persuasive: disregarding individuals in prison' pleas for genuine support and understanding, and promoting the "bad choice" mantra, is likely to prove counterproductive for society. It undermines attempts by the men and women released from to pursue better and less harmful lives, and ultimately, results in greater financial and personal hardship for us all.

References

Ward, T. & Maruna, S. (2007). *Rehabilitation: Beyond the risk assessment paradigm*. London, UK: Routledge