

---

Volume 16

Issue 2 *Special Issue on Social Care, Social Policy and Social Justice*, Guest Editors Karen Smith, Anne Marie Shier, Margaret Fingleton and Kevin Murphy

---

2016-9

## Book Review: Schinkel, Marguerite (2014) *Being Imprisoned; Punishment, Adaptation and Desistance*

Cindy O'Shea  
UCC, c.oshea@ucc.ie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijass>

---

### Recommended Citation

O'Shea, Cindy (2016) "Book Review: Schinkel, Marguerite (2014) *Being Imprisoned; Punishment, Adaptation and Desistance*," *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies*: Vol. 16: Iss. 2, Article 7.

doi:10.21427/D7613J

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijass/vol16/iss2/7>

**Book Review: Schinkel, Marguerite (2014) *Being Imprisoned; Punishment, Adaptation and Desistance*, Palgrave MacMillan, UK.  
ISBN No: 978-1-137-44082-2**

Review by: Cindy O'Shea, University College Cork  
c.oshea@ucc.ie

© Copyright Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies ISSN 1393-7022  
Vol. 16(2), 2016, 91-93

In '*Being Imprisoned, Punishment, Adaptation and Desistance*' Marguerite Schinkel examines the interpretation of prison sentencing through the eyes of prisoners themselves. Based on interviews with 27 male prisoners in Scotland, the study has two key purposes: firstly to look at how these men made sense of their sentence, how it impacted on their sense of self, their future and how they coped with the lived experience of prison life by creating meaning from their experiences. The second purpose is to provide an examination of the most commonly used justifications of punishment and is grounded in research and literature which intersects along 3 key themes i.e. Desistance, Effects of Imprisonment and Philosophy of Punishment. The author contends that the division of these critical themes misses the vital linkage in understanding the concepts of justice and the meanings attributed by prisoners themselves. In other words she argues that the human element and factors which influence the core 'recipients' of justice are often overlooked.

It is her contention that unless we examine the full range of contributing factors, but particularly the view of the prisoners themselves, that prison sentencing as a punishment can never achieve its goal of punishment nor its goals of rehabilitation and reintegration. In this book Schinkel argues that by bringing the stories of prisoners together with the various strands of research on prison life, desistance and the purpose and legitimacy of criminal punishment a real difference can be made to studies and understanding of prisons, penology and crime and punishment. If society sees the role of punishment through imprisonment as meaningful to the long term goal of 'rehabilitating' criminals and thereby reducing crime in the wider societal context, then the actual 'participants' must also feel there is a sense of legitimacy to their 'punishment'. Real change for those punished through imprisonment is inextricably linked to how they construct meaning of that sentence in terms of its impact on their lives, support relationships and future opportunities. Above all their perceived link between the justification and 'fairness' of the sentence in proportion to the crime as well as the experience of serving that sentence has a contributing impact on desistance from crime post release and allows for a more thorough understanding and examination of desistance as a concept. It is only through this integrated understanding and the examination of the sum of the parts that meaningful change can happen in the development of policy and in practice, thereby contributing more purposefully to a more meaningful and longer lasting impact on social justice.

Set across six chapters the book brings the reader on a journey through the literature, arguments and debates in criminology and in current research trends in punishment and penology. It is a very informative book for beginners as well as providing thoughtful insights for those more attuned to this field and sets out numerous debates, showcasing the work of various researchers and top thinkers in the fields of desistance and punishment. Chapter 1 introduces the audience to the research, the participants and to the approach taken. It introduces

debates and understanding of sentencing, desistance, the world of the prisoner and the specific Scottish context, providing a rich backdrop to frame the prisoner experience. This chapter identifies the questions being asked and the specific target groups and how they are categorised. The work focuses on 27 long-term (serving 4 years or longer) male prisoners at three different stages of the prison experience, namely, men at the start and at the end of their sentence and men on licence (released from prison on parole, subject to recall to prison if conditions of parole are violated, equivalent to 'temporary release' in Ireland). This approach was taken to examine how meaning changes over time and gives great scope to understand how experiences change and meaning is constructed as a sentence progresses.

**Chapter 2** offers an extensive literature review examining what is known about how prisoners think about crime and punishment, exploring the philosophy, purpose and experience of prisons and explorations of how prison environments and experience can contribute to positive rehabilitation. While numerous qualitative research papers exist Schinkel feels that the voices of Prisoners are not heard often enough and indeed are underrepresented focusing instead on comparative explorations of purpose and meaning versus actual experience. This is identified as a gap in the literature and as an opportunity for better understanding. In comparison she states that the nature and purpose of prisons, the impact of imprisonment and the nature of power and experience are well documented, although there are considerable inconsistencies and a lack of cohesive responses and examination of the topic. This chapter brings various research strands together in one place and effectively demonstrates the missing links, the inconsistencies and the overarching focus on an examination of the purpose of prison as a form of punishment. Schinkel contends that qualitative themes form a secondary and apparently less important role in prison research and contends that it is only in the introduction and understanding of the lived experiences, through the stories of the people affected, that we can hope to consider the full picture.

**Chapters 3, 4 and 5** bring us to the core of the book namely the prisoner voices. Taking the key themes of rehabilitation, deterrence, incapacitation (consequentialist justification of punishment) and retribution identified as terms most commonly cited as the purpose of punishment in the public domain, (Schinkel, 2015, p28), the author begins to hear the responses and stories of the men as they explore the links between the stated purpose of punishment and their own experiences. Chapter 3 particularly focusses on setting the context of these themes from a research and debate perspective cross-referenced with the narratives of the men.

Chapters 4 and 5 go on to develop aspects of the stories in greater detail, namely meaning and acceptance, environment, relationships and interventions. This method gives us an in-depth insight into the perception of the prisoners at the various stages of the sentencing process and is further enhanced by grounding the voices in the current debates and 'knowledge' about crime and punishment as stated in research but also reflected in public policy and debate. This cross-referencing method is very effective as it brings the research alive through the stories and the experiences of the men, giving it a reality and richness often lacking in dry academic debate.

In the **concluding chapter**, Schinkel draws her findings together to make comments and recommendations on key themes arising from the contextualization of the stories within the research framework and debates, connecting systematic tendencies with subjective experiences. Themes of consistency in sentencing, greater individual attention, relationships with staff, methods to continue relationships with family and loved ones and rehabilitation are clearly identified in the final analysis and the implications for criminal justice policy and practice are discussed.

Overall the strength of the book lies in the voices of the prisoners. Their experiences and stories demonstrated insights and possibilities to build on the actual experiences of punishment and its effectiveness. The author uses these cleverly as examples and challenges to the current research debates. While quite obviously the book has been developed from a PhD thesis it could be argued that the density of the exploration of the academic debates reduces the impact of the book since the audience may be limited to those in an academia. This is a pity as the book has much to offer by way of critique of the purpose and impact of prisons and could practically offer valuable insights to policy makers and those who consider the nature and impact of punishment on perpetrators of crime.