

Book Review

Beyens, K., Christiaens, J., Claes, B., De Ridder, S. Tournel, H. and Tubex, H. (Eds.) (2013) *The Pains of Doing Criminological Research*. Brussels: Brussels University Press.

There are two things that make an immediate impact on picking up this book. Firstly, the eloquence of the title, neatly encapsulating the reality of the process of undertaking criminological research whilst also, rather wittingly, evoking Sykes (1958) often referred to pains of imprisonment. The second feature is the apparent collectivism involved in drawing the text together. Edited by no less than six individuals, many of the chapters are multi-authored as well. On closer inspection however, the diversity that I had expected disappeared. All of the 22 people who have contributed to *The Pains of Doing Criminological Research* are associated with the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and are members of the research group Crime and Society (CRiS) based there. This realisation concerned me. Based on the experiences of people drawn from such a small pool this could make the text too restricted in focus. Such specificity also however piqued my interest. Working on this book must have been an intensive endeavour, what learning was included within its pages?

In the introductory chapter, Beyens, outlines the premise of the text, who it is targeted at and its inspiration. Interestingly, and in keeping with the focus of the book, the pains of writing are elaborated. In Belgium, as elsewhere, there are pressures to produce certain types of outputs. This, Beyens argues, is detrimental to the scholarly efforts most researchers are involved in. The new managerialism that has crept into academia is critiqued and instead a 'slow science movement' is called for. Although I am unconvinced by such a nomenclature in terms of resisting the constraints that relate to writing up research and getting published; the argument that the Web of Knowledge citation system has become all important, while being simultaneously, detrimental to new knowledge, is a compelling one. This is a system riven with bias; towards older, more established journals, towards North America (and English-language outputs more generally), while books, one of the core means by which disciplines have advanced, are side-lined. Such concerns regarding the underlying politics of knowledge production and the commodification of intellectual work remains relevant across locations and disciplines and reminded me of the question posed by Lyotard over 30 years ago: 'who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided?' (1984: 9). The opening chapter therefore did much to diminish my initial worry that this book might be too parochial.

The format of the book is somewhat unique. Set out alphabetically by author, no themes are drawn out to create sections, instead, following the introduction there are 11 chapters covering an array of topics. It is explained that such decisions were based on the editing process, which also included decisions to allow different writing styles and little streamlining of chapters. Such free choice is admirable and contests expectations of what an academic text should be like, in addition, it made for a variety in presentation. Excerpts from field notes, research diaries, the use of individual case-studies and autoethnographic writing are all

utilised. Although I have to admit that the more cynical side of me wondered if this approach was the result of having too many editors, making it difficult to reach decisions.

Chapters are relatively wide-ranging (a number relate to prison research) and include contributions about gender and prison ethnography, participant observation in police work, research in private security organisations, emotions, research on ‘non-national’ prisoners, the impact of being a prison psychologist, the experience of being an ‘ex-convict turned researcher’, and data collection, reporting and theoretical issues. Interestingly, it is noted that access to both police and prison organisations is achieved with relative ease in Belgium – this is in stark contrast with the situation in many other countries where gatekeeping to key criminal justice agencies is increasingly restrictive.

The chapters presented are a somewhat mixed bag. Although all have something to commend them it is worth noting that the collection is written largely, although not exclusively, by novice researchers. The ideal audience I would therefore suggest are those who are embarking on research careers or undertaking post or under-graduate studies. It does contain some standout contributions. I particularly liked the chapters on gender and prison ethnography where the ways in which gender shapes interactions during prison fieldwork is explored from both a male and female perspective. Machiels chapter reflected on his experience of carrying ‘out research as an ex-convict on the identify work of other ex-convicts’. Decoene’s chapter on criminological-psychological casework was both interesting and informative and offered a glimpse into the world of a prison psychologist in a way that has seldom been achieved before. The openness with which the chapter is written provides new insights into the work and impact of being a prison psychologist, a professional group who wield great power within prison but have not attracted, or invited, significant criminological attention.

The final chapter I’d wish to draw attention to is Steenhout’s discussion on publishing research results. Working as a ticket inspector on the Belgian railroads Steenhout undertook covert participant observation research on aggression towards railroad staff. On publication of her results the railroad company claimed that she had not been objective enough (an epistemological problem), and as a woman she had a ‘tendency to categorize actions as being aggressive, even though they are not’ (an ontological problem). These disclosures make for a fascinating read. Although I can imagine that such a response from a powerful stakeholder would have been highly intimidating, especially as research credentials and personal identity are being attacked.

So, what learning was included within this book? Quite a lot I would say, especially for those setting out on a research career. Moreover, this text embodies some of the pains of criminological research itself, I assume for example, that it has not been written in any of the author’s first language. Ultimately, this is a brave attempt to make inroads into the criminological discipline at a point in time when innovation has been marginalized. Nonetheless, the lack of a concluding chapter to round this eclectic collection off is a failing which innovation cannot excuse.

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References

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