

Research Proposal – Durham Inside-Out

Research question

What significance and potential does literature composed by prisoners have in shaping political, social and cultural appreciations of the prisoner experience?

Introduction

The current public dialogue surrounding criminal justice is currently focused on the length of time convicts should spend in prison for a given offence, as opposed to what should happen during that time. I feel that the current lack of widespread knowledge about direct experiences of the prisons system beyond simply being locked away is preventing the necessary discussion on how prisons and the overall justice system can be made most effective in creating a safer and fairer society in which everyone can live. This proposed research could not be more important in drawing attention to what it means to be a prisoner and to the significance that prisoners' experience of 'doing time' has to all of us, both in building a system that works more effectively but also in a way that adequately represents our values as a modern society in the humanity with which we treat those in custody. It also would be important in its focus on the direct day-to-day experience of prisoners, both in providing them with the opportunity to voice their perspectives and in potentially finding ways in which to make their experiences more productive and beneficial.

Proposed Outputs

There are two proposed outputs for this research: a research essay analysing the utility and significance of selected historic literature by imprisoned writers from around the world, and a collection and review of literature concerning experiences of the first 30 days in custody commissioned from serving prisoners at institutions partnered with Durham University's 'Inside Out Project' as part of their existing "Early Days in Custody" Project.

The intended academic outcome is to broaden scholarly awareness of different types of literature composed within prisons as a distinct genre and as a powerful means of direct insight into the humanity of the prison experience and what it means to adopt the identity of a prisoner, in both historic and modern contexts. Within the specific context of the 'Inside Out Project', a possible outcome could be the employment of literature commissioned from prisoners to advance prison induction and education programmes (as a part of "Early Days in Custody"), as well as being a means for families and friends of prisoners to obtain a better impression of the first-hand experience of their relatives and loved ones behind bars. The other possible outcome could be increased public awareness and interest in literature created by prisoners.

Research Impact

This project has the potential to create a positive social impact for prisoners, particularly those who arrive in prison for the first time, friends and families of prisoners, in addition to a policy impact for prison staff and other professionals and decision-makers in the criminal justice sector. The collection of literature commissioned from prisoners on their experience of adjustment to their environment within their first 30 days of imprisonment could provide a significant contribution to Durham Inside Out's "Early Days in Custody" Project, in helping soon-to-be or newly arrived prisoners obtain a more thorough sense of what to expect, and

thus how to make the best use of their initial time. It could also go towards helping friends and families of prisoners get a better sense of what their loved one's experience behind bars is like, and perhaps broaden public awareness of the humanity within prisons. From a policy perspective, the use of literature and creative writing could be of significant use for education and prisoner voice within institutions, particularly in helping decision-makers to gain a more informed understanding of the potential direct impacts of a decision on the day-to-day experiences of an individual prisoner.

Interdisciplinary Dimensions

Although housed within the fields of sociology and criminology, the project's focus on the previous and current impact of prisoner literature is integrally linked with my disciplines of literature studies and history. Indeed, the research essay output will draw upon techniques of critical textual and historical analysis from disciplines in the humanities. The research question it seeks to address, however, lies primarily within the field of social sciences, so it is intended that this would be a novel way of contributing to active academic discussions within sociology and criminology via a more qualitative and less statistically-driven approach. This would be especially true of the collection and review of the literature commissioned from prisoners for Inside Out's 'Early Days in Custody' Project, in asking participants to creatively express their experience of entering prison for the first time beyond practical advice they would offer new arrivals. The political, legal and cultural factors underlying imprisonment, particularly within the wider public conscience and awareness of the prison system, would further enable this research to draw upon and be utilised within the disciplines of law and politics, not least in considering the intersection of an individual's personal experience with systems, structures and institutions.

International Dimensions

All scholars participating in the programme will need to include an international experience. This can be part of their research in summer 1 or within their Leadership in Action in Summer 2. Your answer to this question can encompass plans for your second summer if your project has the potential to develop in a suitable Leadership in Action experience. However if this is not possible please outline other international impacts/dimensions of your research.

The Inside Out Prisons Project entails the potential for a trip in Summer 2 to a partner institution in the United States, where the global Inside Out Network is based and was founded. This would be a highly suitable opportunity for me to consider how the findings of my UK-based research could be applied in a US context, and indeed to conduct further inquiry and data-gathering for my Leadership in Action. This would be especially fruitful in seeking to produce work that would be of increased interest and relevance to an international audience, particularly as the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, in addition to being one of the most influential democracies within the Western sphere. Some American prison literature will already have been covered within the historic literature part of the academic research project, however, the Leadership in Action project for the second summer would offer a distinct opportunity to consider the specific social and cultural contexts that have come to define the prison experience in the United States. In particular, this could look at how differing institutional cultures affect the composition of literature and its subsequent effect on wider views of prisons.

Research objectives

- To critically evaluate the historic influence and significance of literature written during imprisonment in influencing the public discourse on prisons
- To explore the extent to which prisoners held at institutions partnered with Durham University's 'Inside Out' Project can be empowered by communicating their perspective via literary means
- To draw upon literature focused on a prisoner's experience of their first 30 days in custody commissioned from prisoners held at institutions partnered with Durham University's 'Inside Out' Project to deepen and expand insight into the direct experiences of prisoners to enrich existing research on 'Early Days in Custody'

Research summary

DEFINITIONS:

"Literature composed by prisoners" - the two criteria is that the piece of literature must have been written during (or substantially drafted) during imprisonment and that it must directly relate to the prisoner's first-hand experience. Types of literature that commonly fall into this category include letters, diary entries and poetry - whereas retrospective memoirs composed after release or work not directly linked to prisoner experience (such as broader political/philosophical contemplations) are excluded.

"Political/social/cultural appreciations" - this refers to personal/ institutional/ journalistic/ critical responses or interpretations derived directly from a piece of prisoner-written literature, both contemporaneously and retrospectively. In the context of prisons, this could include responses from external contacts and actions by the state in addition to more conventional sources such as journalistic and scholarly criticism of the piece.

"Prisoner experience" - includes but is not limited to cell accommodation, catering, work, education/training, safety, self-perception/identity, maintenance of relationships with external family/friends

METHODOLOGY

Academic (research essay) component: This will consist of an analysis and comparison of the historic usage of literature by prisoners to document personal experiences, via the usage of selected case studies. The focus will be on what insights into prisoner experience can be directly obtained from the work itself, and then what (if any) impacts it made to the wider political/social/cultural understanding of imprisonment. A key difference is that this section of the research will be global in its selection of case studies and its outlook on the evolution of prisoner experience, whereas the prison-based component will by its nature be limited to institutions partnered with Durham's Inside Out Project, and thus more specific to the North East. On the other hand, the relative difficulty of seeking appropriate literature from prison composed by women compared to that composed by men could perhaps see a focus on imprisoned female voices for the prison-based research. The volume and diversity of viable literature that the prison-based component produces will likely be used to decide how wide a

range of historic work is required to supplement it, as it is intended that this component will be carried out alongside the prison-based component during the 6 weeks as long as circumstances allow.

Prison-based (commissioned literature) component: In addition to this research project, the literature commissioned from prisoners on their personal experience of the first 30 days of prison is intended to form a direct part of the Durham Inside Out "Early Days in Custody" research. In part, this will enable the beneficial outcome to be concentrated in an existing area of interest and need for the University and the Prisons Service. It will also, however, enable the project to fall within the scope of research that has already received ethical approval from HMPPS. The collection would essentially consist of a collection of anonymised prisoner-composed literature, alongside an analysis of their direct insight into prisoner experience, and their potential to influence broader thinking on life in 21st Century prisons in the North East. Some specifics of methodology have been left open to enable continual adaption to benefit from ethical restrictions, academic guidance and practical constraint. Another consideration is the length of time taken to obtain HMPPS security vetting and training - hence the need to maintain flexibility. The nature of the project does mean, however, that it can ultimately be conducted remotely during the summer if made necessary by Covid or security restrictions.