

# **Convict Criminologists in the Classroom**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, with now over seven million, or one in thirty-one Americans under correctional supervision (PEW, 2009). Every year over 600,000 individuals are released from prisons that need to reintegrate back into society (Petersilia, 2004). It is not unreasonable that some of these released prisoners will aspire to careers in academia (Ross and Richards, 2003). In previous research, studies have found that criminal justice (CJ) students hold negative attitudes towards ex-prisoners, which suggest that ex-convict professors may experience opposition to the idea of having them teach courses. This exploratory research derived from survey responses highlighted in this article that found the overwhelming majority of students surveyed expressed a positive interest in and support for having a Convict Criminologist (CC) teaching in their CJ program. Utilizing a CC Perspective (Richards and Ross, 2001; Ross and Richards, 2003) we will first briefly discuss the prejudice against prisoners and ex-prisoners that is held by some faculty in criminology and CJ programs, how bias can infect the validity and reliability of research, as well as other relevant critiques advanced by CCs. We will then review our findings and discuss their implications.

## **REVIEW OF RELEVANT CONVICT CRIMINOLOGY CRITIQUES**

The term *infect* reflects current social science research on cognitive triggers. Referencing prejudicial stereotypes can trip these triggers inadvertently or unintentionally. Once tripped, a person's orientation to information and how it is processed can change without a person being consciously aware of it, as they reproduce the prejudice or bias embedded in the stereotypes (Levinson, 2008/2009). We have no reason to believe social scientists have some special cognitive immunity, thus prejudice and bias may enter the research process unannounced and unnoticed, infecting survey questions and replies. We will return to a discussion of how these cognitive triggers may affect or infect previous studies after presentation of our research and outcomes.

In the U.S., the vast majority of university faculty employed full-time as penologists are sheltered middle-class men and women. They have doctorates,

but little experience with prisons, beyond the occasional tour of institutions. Many of these so-called academic prison experts have never spent more than a few hours inside a prison or interacted with prisoners for any prolonged period. With no real lived experience with convicts, they do not understand the subjects of their studies (Irwin, 2003). Smaller groups of faculty are former employees of the criminal justice system, for example lawyers, police, or correctional officers that may have mixed opinions of prisoners.

Many academic criminologists do not value the perspective of prisoners, nor do they view prisoners as respectable people (Jones *et al.*, 2009). In addition, most prison research is motivated by political ideology, economics and/or government funding (Richards and Ross, 2001; Austin, 2003; Terry, 2003; Jones *et al.*, 2009; Lenza and Jones, 2011; see also Lenza, this issue). This research tends to focus upon generating new typologies or categorizations, surveillance technologies and the management of a vast but marginalized population of Americans under correctional control (Austin, 2003). There is a significant disconnect between academic literature and the realities prisoners experience in our nations prisons (Richards and Ross, 2001; Ross and Richards, 2003, Richards *et al.*, 2010).

Beginning in the 1970s with Law Enforcement Alliance of America (LEAA) grants for police training programs, law enforcement and CJ programs became popular majors at two-year community and technical colleges. These programs later spread to four-year universities. Today, criminology and CJ programs have expanded to offer master's and doctoral degrees. Nevertheless, as academic programs or departments they remain resource dependent on state and federal criminal justice budgets who provide the job market for their students, funding for research and agency publications of research, much of which is controlled by political agendas. It is not surprising that many criminal justice faculties either are wedded to or fail to question the political ideologies of the criminal justice agencies they prepare students for careers in, or that fund their research. To question the validity of the social identities CJ constructs and places people in threatens a system that maintains its validity through systematic exclusion of the voices of people under their control (Lenza, 2011).

Many universities, claiming to value diversity, regularly deny employment to convicted felons. In the past, the majority of academics with a criminal record stayed in the closet, choosing to keep their past secret (Jones *et al.*,

2009). Today, with the wide use of computer generated criminal background checks it is nearly impossible to conceal a criminal record in the hiring process. Eventually, the university will learn about felony convictions, even if they are old and not included in computer databases.

Most CJ students, like many of their professors, have never actually visited a prison, interacted with prisoners or been the victim of a felony. Their knowledge comes from a co-mingling of stereotypes presented in the simulated realities of mass media where movies, news, culture, and beliefs are constructed and presented carefully. Stereotypes are an element of mass media constructions and our consumption of them. They require no empirical grounding in lived reality. Stigmatizing stereotypes in particular gain their validity through cyclic repetitions stimulating fears and emotions. The meanings of these self-referential symbols often float in a netherworld, independent of knowledge or the lives of real people. In modern technologies of mass communications, all too much is in Baudrillard's (1993) term nothing more than mere "simulacra".

The stereotypical prisoner is a mixture of media representations of sensationalized crimes, political rhetoric, as well as academic studies of career criminals (Irwin and Austin, 1997). One of the best ways of defining what we are is by "pointing to what we are not" (Ericson *et al.*, 1987 cited in Greer and Jewkes, 2005, p. 29). This then creates a sense of otherness or that "they" commit crime because they are not like "us" (Garfinkel, 1956; Greer and Jewkes, 2005). This simulacra construction of "us" and "them" is false. Bohm (1986, pp. 200-201) points out that "over 90% of all Americans have committed some crime for which they could be incarcerated". There is little actual difference between the person labeled criminal and the average citizen (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967).

CC questions the validity of studies in CJ that exclude the perspective of the people placed under its control. Irwin (1987, p. 42) argues that "any approach not based firmly on qualitative or phenomenological ground is not only a distortion of the phenomenon but also is very likely a corruption". Academics that simply analyze secondary data collected or funded by correctional or government bureaucracies conduct most academic research on prisons or prisoners. The researchers sit in their university offices, far removed from the realities of the prison, and produce "statistical trivia" which is not relevant to prisoners or the underlying factors related to crime (Richards and Ross, 2001). The current research is a qualitative and

statistical analysis of CJ students' attitudes towards having an ex-convict as a professor teaching in their program.

### **ATTITUDES OF STUDENTS CONCERNING PUNISHMENT AND PRISONS**

In examining the academic acceptability of a CC in the classroom it is appropriate to explore the attitudes of CJ and criminology students themselves. This research is unique in that it is the first study of CJ student attitudes (n=186) on having ex-convicts as professors in the classroom that has a sufficient sample and methodology for valid and reliable analysis. Prior research on the academic acceptability of former prisoners as professors in the classroom has been limited at best (see Richards *et al.*, 2008).

Mackey and Courtright introduced CC John Irwin's book *The Jail* (1985) in several courses to provide students with an alternative view on relying on incarceration in dealing with crime. Irwin's book was met with open hostility by numerous students. Due to this experience the professors decided to examine if there were differences between CJ students and non-CJ students' attitudes towards punishment. They found compared to students in other majors, CJ majors, at all levels of student status, held more punitive attitudes (Mackey and Courtright, 2000).

In 2005, Courtright *et al.* (2005) hypothesized that CJ students were less able to empathize with disadvantaged populations, especially prisoners. Measuring "emotional empathy" of CJ majors to non-CJ majors they found CJ majors overall scored lower empathy scores than others students. In contrast, CJ majors enrolled at Catholic Universities, which often include a social justice perspective, displayed significantly higher levels of empathy than their public university peers.

Research conducted by Farnworth *et al.* (1998) examined students' attitudes in relation to the death penalty, alternatives to incarceration (e.g. probation), as well as attitudes towards the 'war on drugs'. They hypothesized that as students progressed in higher education it would lead to a less punitive orientation to punishment, with the exception of those with employment experience in the penal system and CJ majors. Their findings revealed that for all variables non-CJ majors were less likely to hold strongly punitive views than CJ majors. However, their analysis did not reveal any reduction in punitive views as students, both CJ and other majors, progressed in their education.

Utilizing a pretest-posttest design, Lane (1997) found that students enrolled in a corrections course about jail and prison at a California university emphasizing intermediate punishments or alternatives to incarceration (e.g. house arrest, probation or boot camp), would be increasingly likely to accept the less punitive punishments. This shift in belief to less punitive punishment only held for nonviolent offenders. Student support for a strong punitive emphasis for violent crimes did not change.

Research undertaken by Miller *et al.* (2004) concluded that most university students, CJ majors or not, commonly do not have an educated understanding of crime in America or comprehend many of the problems within the correctional system. Interestingly, they found CJ majors were just as misinformed and inaccurate in assessments of the reality of crime within prisons as non-CJ majors. They argued that if educators do not address this misinformation within the classroom, they “create a vacuum in which the students are never challenged to rethink the realities of crime compared to the myths” (Miller *et al.*, 2004, p. 314). From this review of research on CJ majors’ attitudes on punishment and empathy for prisoners, we initially assumed that CJ university students would be resistant to having an ex-convict as a professor teaching in their program.

## FINDINGS

To measure CJ majors’ attitudes and perceptions of ex-convicts, a short survey of socio-economic questions and an open ended question was developed. “How would you react to a course being taught by a former convict?” Surveys were distributed to a random selection of upper level CJ courses, at a mid-sized, mid-western university. A total of 197 student surveys were distributed to sophomores, juniors and seniors enrolled in upper level CJ classes. Students were informed it was an attitudinal survey on having an ex-convict professor teaching classes. Participation was voluntary. A total of 186 valid surveys were returned.<sup>1</sup>

As part of a qualitative review (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) of responses by students to how they would react to a course taught by an ex-convict professor, the data was coded into three mutually exclusive dimensions: 1) not an issue; 2) hesitant; and 3) would drop the course. Surprisingly 67.7 percent reported no problems with an ex-convict professor teaching in their program. More surprising were the numerous responses received within this

large majority of CJ majors that expressed views that an ex-convict professor would enhance their understandings of the criminal justice system.

Within the 67.7 percent of CJ majors expressing no problem with an ex-convict professor teaching, 61 percent provided responses that expressed views that a former convict professor could bring a different perspective into the classroom that would enhance their understanding of the criminal justice system. In addition, some of these students believed there was ideological bias in the classes of traditional CJ academics that constricted learning. One student wrote: "They [the former convict] are probably more knowledgeable than some of the professors I have had in past experience. Teachers who seem to be cops are not open minded about ideas. More strict on what they believe to be right and wrong". Another student noted: "The ex-convict would have more experience and a better stand point then a regular prof [essor]". One student added: "I think it would be interesting to get a different perspective on things, other than what we are taught".

Overall, it is the firsthand experience a former convict would bring to the class that students believed would be most beneficial to them. One student wrote: "an ex-convict professor would have more insight [and] firsthand experience. [And could] teach us about prison culture [along with] reasons for recidivism that a "book" teacher couldn't provide". Another replied: "I would be interested in their teaching point of view. I think it would be a good window to some real world experience".

Other students added that they would receive a better education learning CJ from an ex-convict:

...[learning] from a person, who actually knows [firsthand] instead from a person who only knows through research and study.

The ex convict would know both sides of the law.

Firsthand knowledge is better than any textbook or college degree.

To actually hear what goes on in a prison / jail, well I can't even imagine.

Another student expanded their remarks, noting: "I think there are things to be learned from these people [ex-convicts] as much as anyone else. A convict has inside knowledge of the system and can bring another perspective to research this student would have no problem enrolling in a class taught by an ex-convict. If the class is not too difficult then yes".

Another dominant theme was the belief students expressed in rehabilitative change, which are similar to findings by Richards *et al.* (2008). One student wrote:

They might have made a bad decision but now reject that choice. I would enroll in that class because I would like to hear their side of the story and learn more about why they were in that position. [After all] everybody gets a second chance, but 3 strikes and your out. I want to hear everyone's story and try to learn from everyone I can.

A second student noted: "It would be different but interesting. I think it would be inspiring to see an ex-convict reformed enough to actually teach a class effectively". A third student stated: "Peoples [sic] past shouldn't carry to the future if they're changed [...] as long as he/she has received proper education, this student would welcome an ex-con as an instructor". A fourth student responded: "To grasp the ideas of why the person did what they did in their past and what caused them to change. It would be a little frightening because of their past but interesting as well".

Students, who expressed less enthusiastic views or were hesitant about an ex-convict professor, were coded into the hesitant category, which comprised 26.9 percent of the respondents. Their main concern was that an ex-convict professor might introduce too much bias into the classroom material or they could be hesitant having them teaching, dependent upon the nature of the crime they committed. One student wrote: "He'd probably be biased but would have good insight". A second student responded: "Depends on [the] crime & time served [a] murder[er] teaching after 5 years [I would be] pissed off, former drug abuser, cool, people change". A third student stated: "I'd be fine with [an ex-con teaching class] as long as he knew what he was talking about [...] No[t] so for some crimes (murder child molesting etc.)". A fourth student wrote: "It depends on his crime. I would find it ironic".

A small minority of students, comprising 5.4 percent of those who completed the survey, responded that they would immediately drop the course upon learning of a professor's status as a convict. One student wrote: "I would be shocked that the university was paying an ex-convict let alone hired one to teach me my education". A second student stated: "I wouldn't like it. Laws need to become harsher to where [...] ex-convict will loose the opportunity to become a teacher". A third student responded: "I would have a definite problem w/it [...] there is no such thing as an ex-convict".

In our statistical analyses of students responses to having an ex-convict professor, the following independent measures were included in both a one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and a multinomial logistic regression (Aldrich and Nelson, 1985): age (1 = 18-21, 4 = 31 or older), gender (female = 1), race (minority = 1), self-reported socioeconomic status (1 = poor, 5 = wealthy), current or prior work in the criminal justice system (1 = yes), full time college enrollment (1 = yes), class standing in college (1 = junior, senior or graduate student), and a measure of political conservatism (1 = conservative).

Surprisingly, the strongest independent variable in our analysis was racial minorities, who were significantly more likely to place an ex-convict professor either in the “not an issue” category or “would drop course” category, compared to a response in the “hesitant” category. The other significant variable was students with upper class standing. Third and fourth year students were significantly less likely to report that an ex-convict professor is not an issue than indicating that they would drop the course. No other independent variables were significant in either statistical analysis.

## DISCUSSION

This research clearly established that a large majority of the CJ majors sampled had no issues with a CC teaching in their program. Further, many of the CJ students surveyed expressed interest or even preference for the educational insight a formerly incarcerated professor could bring to their educational experience. As noted by Ross (2003) many of the portrayals of prisoners and prisons are often a distortion of reality. Students themselves seem to have an awareness of this distortion of reality prevalent in CJ and criminology courses. Our question clearly asked the students to provide their thoughts about a professor who was an ex-convict, teaching in their program. Yet, we did not receive many responses reflecting the predominant stereotyping of prisoners as less than others individuals. Why?

Our exploratory findings run directly counter to previous research indicating CJ students do not value or have empathy for the experience of prisoners (Mackey *et al.*, 2005) and that CJ students are hostile to the writing of an ex-convict criminologist like John Irwin, due to being blinded by their strong punitive attitudes (Mackey and Courtright, 2000). We have no reason to believe the CJ students sampled in this study are vastly different than the CJ students in previous studies completed at other universities.



What we do believe is that most CJ and criminology faculty are unaware of or have not considered how language and the use of stigmatizing stereotypes can trigger an auto-prejudicial framing and processing of information (Levinson, 2008/2009). In most CJ and criminology academic programs there is hardly a subject addressed that does not carry an assumptive categorization of prisoners as some form of degenerate other. Convicts endure profound degradation ceremonies (Garfinkel, 1956), as they are processed through courts, jails and prisons that have no common comparison in free society. Middle-class faculty, many born to economic and social privilege, have never experienced the degradation of their master identity or humiliation of living for years under the rule of authoritarian order and control. Even if they are theoretically empathetic to the plight of prisoners, they may still not have the insight, experience or awareness to represent that reality in a valid way to their students. For example, they do not appreciate or comprehend the intellectual life of prisoners, or how some convicts learn humility and then reach for books to educate themselves.

Instead, most university faculty teach textbook CJ, using literature that is loaded with prejudicial terms (see Richards, 2009, pp. 142-143). Faculty can reify these prejudicial terms in lectures and class discussions, and thereby reinforce the stereotypes learned from crime movies, and spark emotional resentment and distrust of felons and convicts (e.g. terrorist, serial killer, child molester, sex offender, murderer, rapist, drug addict and thief). Arguably, most CJ faculty never consider that the textbooks they use systematically reflect the same cultural stereotypes of prisoners projected in the mass media, such as the idea that criminals are necessarily dangerous and dishonest.

We know that individual and group attitudes have an element of reflexivity in their social expression. People reflect on who they were and who they want to be. Mead wrote (1934, p. 311): “he can undertake and effect intelligent reconstructions of that self or personality in terms of its relations to the given social order, whenever the exigencies of adaptation to his social environment demand such reconstructions”. He later elaborated on this idea further, noting: “A past never was in the form in which it appears as a past. Its reality is in its interpretation of the present” (Mead, 1938, p. 616). Student attitudes in a classroom are not predetermined outcomes. Rather, faculty as teachers construct the social environment of the classroom and

thereby create the exigencies in the construction of selfhood that students must adapt to through reflexive reconstructions of their selves in the asymmetrical power relations of teacher-student interactions.

Our research suggests that the problems of prejudice and bias in CJ student attitudes towards prisoners is not necessarily embedded within and arise from students. It is troubling to read the work of faculty and researchers who do not even question the validity of the prejudicial stereotypical framings of prisoners' social identities that have been institutionalized in their academic disciplines (criminology and CJ). This is consistent with faculty and department self-interest due to their resource dependency upon agencies of coercive social control. In effect, academics still think and write "cop shop", teaching the same to their students. This is the very language that inflicts and enforces stigmatization, as well as suffering upon the millions of men and women that are labeled as felons and criminals (Hulsman, 1986).

The simple wording of the research questions in this study, of an ex-convict as a professor teaching CJ or criminology classes, was a construct that avoided triggering prejudicial cognition in most students, and allowed them to consider the proposition on its own merits. Opening that doorway to critical reflection on the merits of such a professor for their education resulted in strong positive responses from CJ students. Our findings suggest that a large majority of CJ students are quite capable of rejecting the dominant stereotype of a prisoner as one committed to crime and unresponsive to rehabilitation. The overwhelming majority of CJ students sampled clearly valued the perspective and experiences an ex-convict professor would bring to the classroom. Such findings, if supported by additional empirical studies that come to similar conclusions, could influence hiring policies in colleges and universities.

A small minority of CJ students sampled, 5.4 percent, were totally against the idea of having an ex-convict as a teacher. By introducing ex-convicts into the classroom, this could help this minority of students to face their fear of stereotyped others and thereby possibly reconsider their preconceived ideas. University classrooms are an ideal setting to expose and dismiss stereotypes and myths surrounding ex-convicts. Well-educated students could help to transform social control agencies and eventually lead to a more humane criminal justice system (Lenza and Jones, 2011).

## ENDNOTE

- <sup>1</sup> The vast majority of the sample was between the ages of 18 and 26 (90 percent). Women and minorities comprised 43 percent and 24 percent of the sample respectively. Class standing was relatively evenly split, with 54.8 percent having junior or higher student status. A large majority of respondents were full-time students (88.2 percent) and 29 percent of subjects reported a conservative political viewpoint.

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