

Developing a Convict Criminology Group in the UK

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INTRODUCTION

This article explores the idea of developing Convict Criminology (CC) in the UK as a means to educate policy makers and the general public about prisons and prisoners. Since its inception in the United States in 1997, CC has grown with increasing momentum (Richards and Ross, 2001; Ross and Richards, 2003; Jones *et al.*, 2009). Led by former prisoners, this theoretical perspective and social movement takes a critical approach to criminal justice issues, challenging the traditional understandings and representations of crime, the criminal justice process, prisoners and ex-convicts.

CC approaches existing policy, research and political commentary with a critical lens (Jones *et al.*, 2009, p.152). Additionally, and equally important, CC also has a generative element, whereby Convict Criminologists also act as mentors, guiding and supporting former prisoners who have recently entered into academia. Whilst CC is a refreshing alternative to the typically ‘managerial’ research generated in the United States (for a critique see Austin, 2003) two significant questions that beg consideration are first, whether there is a need to develop CC in the UK. More specifically, is there a need for a UK based CC movement with its own physical presence and identity? And second, even if there is a demand for such a movement in the UK, how viable is it to develop CC here? Specifically, are the resources present and what structural constraints are likely to impede its development? This paper seeks to address these questions.

AN INSIDER PERSPECTIVE: THE AUTHOR’S BACKGROUND

It seems a little strange to me that I am advocating CC as you know little about my background. Arguably, the two are inseparable so here is some context. In 1998, I walked out of the prison gates, straight into a university unaware of what lay ahead and what course my life was to take. One thing is for sure – I was out of my comfort zone and as I walked through the university gates I thought “*what the f--k am I doing here*”. At this point, my old life appeared quite attractive despite my general discontent for it, and my strong urge to change and lead a more fulfilling life.

Whilst I would not say crime was my profession as such, as a tradesman working as a roofer since leaving school at age fifteen, I was always involved in some form of ‘illegal activity’ with my mates. Typically, these activities were usually motivated by the desire for financial gain, but of course, were also inextricably linked with other complex factors, such as status, identity and masculinity – a relationship that has been well documented by a variety of criminologists (Irwin, 1970; Messerschmidt, 1993; Katz, 1988; Collinson, 1996). Therefore, violence and aggression were also part of my life, manifesting themselves in a variety of ways. Having had such experiences, and subsequently having made that transition into ‘conventional life’, I believe that like many others before me, I can utilise this personal experience to, as many a Convict Criminologist has commented, “*tell it like it is*”.

The benefits of personal experience when studying prisons, prisoners and criminal justice issues have been articulated in detail by a number of CC authors (see Ross and Richards, 2003), and whilst I may retrace these steps a little, my primary aim is to strengthen my argument as to why it is necessary to have a CC group in the UK. To do this I will use the current state of affairs in the criminal justice system / penal system as the background context. And I will mainly utilise my experiences and observations of working in the ‘field’.

My opportunity to work in the field of prisoner / former prisoner resettlement came in the latter stages of my PhD and was a result of a combination of two things: my status as a former prisoner and my doctoral research topic. The PhD focused on former prisoners’ experiences of self-change and identity negotiation. Moreover, it explored what it is like to live with the status of ex-prisoner (ex-convict), exploring how these ‘forced’ identities are negotiated in everyday life. And whilst the combination of these two things (ex-convict status / PhD in desistance) arguably gives me some credibility in the field, it was not an area of interest originally. In fact it had not even crossed my mind as my academic background is not criminology. Rather I have an undergraduate degree in psychology and master’s degree in cognitive neuropsychology.

So why the switch many have asked? This is a question I find difficult to answer when replying to people who do not know about my past. Indeed, as Jones (2003) and Goffman (1963) before him have articulated, the stigmatised often live in two worlds, one where everyone knows of the

stigmatising condition and another where no one knows. After completing my master's degree it became apparent that my past criminal convictions were preventing me from pursuing careers in my chosen field. In other words, my convictions for drug trafficking and violent behaviour meant I was prohibited from working with vulnerable populations such as children, the mentally ill and patients with damaged brains or brain abnormalities. As a consequence I could not be licensed to be a clinical psychologist or clinical neuropsychologist. Of course, my criminal convictions have no direct relevance to these cohorts or any other vulnerable population, but regardless I am prohibited from working with them professionally, as current legislation, including the *Rehabilitation of Offenders Act* (1974) and *Enhanced Disclosures Act* (1996) dictates.

Despite the dramatic pro-social changes I have made in my life there are still legal impositions, dictating what I can and cannot do in terms of career and social activities. It was this social exclusion and prejudice that led me to follow the line of inquiry that I did, exploring self-change and desistance, undoubtedly a means of making sense of my situation as well as a career move. Of course, in many respects I am glad that my path took this turn, because the combination of my academic training and personal experience have given me insight into the appalling state of affairs of the criminal justice and penal system. This insight is used in my consultancy work, where I conduct research in prisons, primarily focusing on prisoner resettlement and ex-convict reintegration / resettlement and desistance. Additionally, I am also involved with and have strong associations with UNLOCK (National Association for Reformed Offenders), a charity that works to improve the lives of those in prison and 'reformed offenders', via their advocacy work, projects, and services. I argue that my insider perspective allows for a better understanding of the criminal justice process, as seen through my experientially based critical lens.

Therefore, for me this provides further evidence that we need a CC group here in the UK, with the courage to expose issues and concerns through their research and advocacy, disseminating this knowledge, and bringing it into the public domain and into mainstream society's consciousness. We need to weave the CC Perspective into the fabric of the criminal justice system, following a more authentic approach as articulated by Richards and Ross (2001, p. 1) when talking about the American corrections crisis: "We need to be more honest and creative with respect to the research we conduct

and the policies we advocate, implement and evaluate”. Whilst applicable to all areas of the criminal justice process, it is as these authors comment, particularly important in the resettlement and ‘rehabilitation’ field, the need for greater transparency and scrutiny of the evidence base utilised to inform policy, resettlement initiatives and strategies are long overdue. This change, in my view, can only come about by developing a CC movement in the UK. The time for a refreshing, new radical approach to criminal justice issues is now and I will support this argument through the use of my personal experiences, as well as some research based evidence. The following observations reinforce this.

THE STATE OF PLAY

The UK prison population (England and Wales) is currently peaking at over 86,000 (Ministry of Justice, 2011) and is showing no signs of a decline, with reconviction rates of adults aggregating at 49 percent within one year of being released from prison. For those serving sentences of less than twelve months, reconvictions increase to a staggering 66 percent. Those who have served more than ten previous custodial sentences have a rate of reoffending of 79 percent (Ministry of Justice, 2010a, 2010b). The National Audit Office (2010) has estimated that reoffending by former prisoners costs the economy £9.5 to £13 billion a year.

The overall average cost per prison place, including prison related costs, but excluding health and education expenditure, is £45,000 per annum (Hansard, 2010). Despite this substantive drain of public monetary resources and clear evidence prisons are ineffective and counter-productive, as evidenced in the reconviction rates, but also by many authors (see Burnett and Maruna, 2004; Cavadino and Dignan, 2006; Liebling and Maruna, 2005), the UK boasts one of the highest rates of imprisonment in comparison to our European counterparts (Walmsley, 2008). Arguably, this reflects the on-going trend for successive British governments to take a more punitive approach to penal issues, apparent in their right wing ideologies and conservative policies.

Yet similar to the United States, a consequence of the rising prison population here in the UK, is the growing number of prisoners or former prisoners turning to academia. Although the numbers are unquantifiable, as presently there does not appear to have been a systematic attempt to

explore just how many people have shifted in this direction, some evidence of the growing numbers are apparent in the numerous voluntary sector initiatives that have ‘sprung up’ with the aim of assisting and/or supporting prisoners and ex-convicts with gaining entry to higher level education, primarily university (e.g. The Prisoners Education Trust and The Longford Trust). Moreover, a few universities facilitate prisoner or ex-offender entry / learning by providing long distance courses and/or widening participation schemes (e.g. Open University and the Open Book Project at Goldsmiths College, University of London). And whilst the amount of ex-convicts entering graduate studies is likely to be smaller than in the United States, the numbers appear to be growing.

Further evidence of this comes from my personal experiences, first, through my engagement with the ‘ex-offender’ circuit (conferences, advocacy work, research and so on) where I have met a number of university-educated ex-convicts, and second, through individuals contacting me. In the last five years a number of ex-convicts undertaking undergraduate or post graduate degrees have contacted me primarily because of my research on desistance, but also as a means of making a connection with another ex-con in academia.

Importantly, whilst a number of ex-convicts have undertaken undergraduate degrees or master’s degrees, some have used them as a springboard for careers in the voluntary sector, delivering services to prisoners or ex-convicts, campaigning on their behalf for advocacy groups and/or working with penal reform groups. These individuals have much to offer organizations that clearly recognise the importance of direct experience, and see such individuals, or “professional-ex’s” as Maruna (2001) describes them, as an invaluable resource.

Although in my experience the numbers are limited, a small yet growing number of former prisoners have PhDs or are working towards completing a PhD. Therefore, whilst these may lead the way for an evolving CC movement in the UK, it is paramount that over here, just like in the United States, the core of our British CC Group be the ex-convict graduate students and academics, supported by a larger group of non-con academics and knowledgeable practitioners, with or without a ‘past’. The crucial thing is that we all share the same critical perspective and the intellectual orientations of the CC movement.

FINDING MY INTELLECTUAL HOME IN CONVICT CRIMINOLOGY

I first came across CC a few years ago when I was still doing my PhD, courtesy of a colleague at UNLOCK. Coming into criminology from psychology things were pretty new to me, and in many respects quite different, but what surprised me the most was the number of former prisoners I met. Some were in the early stages of their academic careers, whilst others had used academia as a springboard for their careers in other domains such as the voluntary sector. Typically, these individuals worked in some generative capacity with prisoners, ex-convicts and/or (former) substance abusers. Consequently, I thought that as a group these ‘enlightened’ individuals could be a useful resource, using their direct experience and academic skills / knowledge to inform our existing, and often misguided understandings of crime, criminal justice issues, the penal system and resettlement / desistance. Of course unbeknown to me, such a group had already been formalised and was fully functioning a decade or so earlier, much to my joy and delight, but also to my great relief. Instantly, I felt some kinship with my peers in the United States and when reading the accounts of ex-convict academics many of their experiences resonated with mine.

Similarly, like many of the Convict Criminologists in America, one of the biggest issues for me and other former prisoners I have spoken to was the disparity between our lived experience of crime, prisons and life thereafter, and the mainstream criminological literature. This disparity has been voiced by many a Convict Criminologist and neatly articulated by Mobley (2003) who points out that much of the criminological research conflicts with the former prisoners’ lived experience. He goes on to point out how existing taxonomies are used to categorize social phenomena and that these have been refined with scientific ‘precision’ over the years, to the detriment of ‘real’ substantive knowledge and insights (i.e. the flesh and bones of human lives). To me this rings true, especially in my given area criminal desistance. Yet despite this strong conceptual argument, I have often wondered why CC has not been pushed forward over here in the UK. I like many others am frustrated, angry and dissatisfied with the way things are with the state of affairs. Why is CC not having more of an impact here?

I think this is down to a number of reasons, but primarily because whilst exceptional work is being produced from members of the group

over in the United States, little of this work appears to be filtering over to here in the UK. Moreover, criminology students are not being exposed to CC in the UK. Why? Possibly because the work generated by Convict Criminologists in the United States is arguably more relevant to the American criminal justice process and not always translatable to issues in the UK. Furthermore, the lived experiences of prison life, whilst universally resonant on many levels (see Gaucher, 2007), can be and is more divergent locally. Therefore, not only do we need research accounts by ex-convict academics to enrich our understandings of prisons and criminal justice issues (Ross and Richards, 2003), we also need ex-convict academics that have experienced them in different jurisdictions. In doing so, a strong evidence based challenge and critique, by 'informed experts', can be directed at the existing dominant forms of dealing with criminal justice/penal issues both in government and academia.

Whilst there are some highly regarded and prestigious criminologists producing critical work that directly challenges the dominant models, policies and practices utilised by the government and its associative agencies, in my experience the impact this is having is negligible. This is not a reflection of the individuals generating this exceptional work or the work itself. Rather, it is a reflection of the outdated and misinformed ideologies maintained by successive governments and the 'mechanical mindset' of many of those working in the departments dealing with criminal justice issues (e.g. Ministry of Justice (MOJ), National Offender Management Service (NOMS), Probation, resettlement departments).

For example, despite the strong evidence that a strengths based approach (Burnett and Maruna, 2006; Maruna and LeBel, 2003) to resettlement and desistance can and does significantly reduce reoffending (see Maruna, 2001; Maruna and LeBel, 2003; Veysey *et al.*, 2009) current 'evidenced based models' utilized to facilitate prisoner reintegration and reduce reoffending (i.e. deficit models) are typically used with knowledge of their ineffectiveness. Unlike strengths based approaches, which view the ex-convict as a stigmatised person, requiring a range of opportunities to facilitate and develop a meaningful, pro-social self-concept (Maruna, 2001), deficit models utilise risk-needs based strategies in an attempt to contain or control the 'problem' person. In other words, they view the prisoner or ex-convict as a set of risk factors, rather than a human being, who has strengths and skills, and the potential for self-change.

Undoubtedly, there is a small group of enlightened academics and civil servants that work to improve prison conditions and help prisoners. Unfortunately, they are outnumbered by a much larger group of academics and public servants that do their work without caring what happens to prisoners or ex-convicts. The failure of rehabilitation and resettlement strategies provides them with job security and career promotion in a penal system that grows on failure (Richards and Jones, 1997, 2004).

In my view we need to develop our own CC movement in the UK. This will be an academic movement with the passion and drive to ‘take the bull by the horns’ and directly challenge as Ross and Richards (2003) put it, managerial criminology, criminal justice and corrections. We clearly need a group of academics, working collectively who like the group in the United States, will take a critical stance and challenge existing (mis)representations of crime, prisons, the criminal justice system, prisoners and ex-convicts. Moreover, we need a CC group that will push forward alternative strategies and initiatives that are more cost effective and humane.

DEVELOPING CONVICT CRIMINOLOGY IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

So with the earlier arguments in mind, I, along with some colleagues have set on the path to developing CC in the UK. My initial attempts to do this involved ‘testing the water’ and asking colleagues what they thought about the idea of starting a CC group in the UK. This was received well, and there is some talk of trying to find CC a ‘physical’ home at a London based academic institution. Naturally, the criminologists in this department are of a critical orientation, with some familiar with CC and its intellectual underpinnings. My conversations have also extended to others and unsurprisingly, there is much interest and excitement at the prospect of developing CC here in the UK, by both ex-convicts in the early stages of their academic careers and non-con academics.

Moreover, as the word begins to spread and as a direct result of a presentation a colleague and I gave on CC at the British Society of Criminology (BSC) conference in July 2011, more and more people are being exposed to it. I am finding that CC is of particular interest to ex-convicts who are now undertaking master’s degrees or completing their PhDs. Importantly, this has two significant implications. First, the more people involved in the group the

more robust its physical presence or identity, and second and relative to this, the stronger the group identity the stronger the collective action. Specifically, the group on one level provides a 'sense of belonging' to a cohort of individuals who in many respects share similar experiences of (and are resisting) social exclusion (Leary, 2007) and a morally deficient label. On another level, it reinforces an individual's identity, attitudes, morals and values, motivating them to act accordingly (Ellemers *et al.*, 2002) in a proactive manner for just causes and for social benefit.

Yet despite the overwhelming psychological benefits of being part of this group, the 2011 BSC conference presentation, although well received, highlighted some issues. Before I outline these, I should briefly mention that the presentation included my colleague Rod Earle describing his transition from prison to university. He also talked about his research on prisons and reflexivity. I presented on the intellectual and historical underpinnings of CC, and then provided an argument as to why it was important for CC to have a physical presence and identity in the UK. The presentation generated much interest and a number of academics passed on their contact details, asking us to keep them up to speed with the group's development.

However, a few academics, including an ex-convict academic, whilst positive about developing CC in the UK, also raised concerns. They approached the idea with caution, primarily because they are concerned with how it may impact on their ability to gain research funding or employment. This experience resonates with the experiences of some of the ex-convict academics in the United States, in particular when the CC book was being put together, as articulated by Ross and Richards (2003, p. 8): "professionally, a number of convict professors expressed concerns that by appearing in this book they might be denied access to government research grants".

So an issue here is whilst a CC cohort in the UK appears to be a very good idea, some people may be a little cautious when considering whether to associate themselves with such a group. Considering that the number of former convicts with PhD's are likely to be considerably less than in the United States, this could be a problem. In my experience, those former prisoners that have recently entered academia or are on their way to obtaining PhD status, are more forthcoming than the more established academics with a 'past'. Therefore, my one concern relates to how many people will join and be actively involved with the group.

THE IVORY TOWER IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Whilst, the services on the ground require radical reform, and in many instances need to be more transparent and open to scrutiny, it is the systems in place at a senior level that require dramatic reformation. For changes to occur on the ground, significant changes need to be made at the top level of the criminal justice system. Drawing parallels with the United States and considering the notion of managerial research (Austin, 2003; Richards and Ross, 2001), arguably much of the prison research in the UK is dominated by government funding and/or carried out by researchers who subscribe to conservative ideologies. Until recently, researchers employed by the MOJ or Home Office conducted much of this research internally. It is only now that the MOJ are working towards ‘farming’ this research back out to the academics, rather than the researchers they employ or ones that are on their ‘payroll’. This shift came to light at the 2011 BSC conference I attended, where representatives of the MOJ talked about reforming the CJS, their new strategies for rehabilitation and research funding.

My first reservation was well, who would get the funding for this research? Of course many of the people the MOJ had funded over the years are established academics that have a ‘good’ working relationship with the MOJ and churn out research that is in keeping with the pre-existing government’s key ideologies. Any research that does not fit with these is likely to be ‘under publicized’. Moreover, I very much doubt that they would entertain a bid from a group of researchers that come from a critical tradition, particularly ones that are pushing forward a radical new approach like CC.

My second reservation concerns the internal workings of the system. The MOJ and many of the other government departments are quite insular and dare I say incestuous. In my experience, employees are usually graduates from top tier universities, are typically white and middle class, and arguably have little grasp on the reality of the social worlds of those at the lower end of the social hierarchy. In contrast, the vast majority of prisoners in jail or prison in the UK are from the working class, the unemployed, ethnic minorities, the socially deprived and the socially excluded (Jacobson *et al.*, 2010; Cavadino and Dignan, 2006). Considering this, and as articulated by many a Convict Criminologist, most of the politicians and many of the researchers, are far removed from the realities of prisons, prisoners and

life after prison (Austin, 2003; Mobley, 2003). Therefore, it is difficult to see how, without the involvement of 'us', the knowledgeable experts (ex-convict academics), policy makers can devise and implement effective policies and strategies to improve prisons and resettlement.

Senior level staffs at the MOJ, the politicians and many of the researchers who are typically of similar a background, but more importantly of a particular 'mind set', determine the 'rules' and dictate what is 'best' for the 'uneducated majority'. This is particularly distressing to me when I walk into prison and observe their ineffective policies and strategies based on 'managerial research'. To me the solution is simple. All the MOJ and politicians need to do is employ some ex-convict academics, who could use their 'expertise' to help devise effective and humane means of dealing with the pre-existing penal and rehabilitative issues (see Richards and Ross, 2003a, 200b).

Rather than do this, government administrators are more concerned with job security. The system in my view maintains the power status quo by moving its 'specialised workers' (i.e. civil servant) from one department to the other and typically only recruiting individuals of a particular 'social constitution', thus in many respects maintaining the 'old boys club'. Therefore, what we have here are people in senior positions that are arguably not suited to the job, and new employees with little experience with prisons and prisoners.

The former point was apparent at the recent BSC conference when of the head of research for the MOJ stated that a few years earlier she was head of research at the treasury. And whilst research skills are transferable, intimate knowledge of one domain does not make you an expert in another that has little or no relation. Despite the many issues with this, importantly, this has grave implications for the type of research that gets funding and who gets that funding. Moreover, when commissioning research, it is my view that much of the funding will out of habit go to the same people, because they have a 'proven track record'. This is regardless of the fact that the scientific inquiry, and subsequent policies and the strategies generated by these individuals have been ineffective. But if a senior level official lacks expertise in the area, in this instance criminal justice issues, it makes sense to stick with convention, rather than take a refreshing alternative approach.

Again applying what Richards and Ross (2001, p. 177) state about American corrections to the UK, if we are serious about addressing the crisis facing criminal justice and the penal system, "Then we need to be more honest and creative with respect to the research we conduct and the

policies we advocate, implement and evaluate'. To do this we need a CC group here in the UK that will push forward such radical reform.

So my point is that if the MOJ or other government departments dealing with criminal justice issues, penal issues and resettlement/desistance are not willing to hire ex-convicts with university degrees or fund ex-convict academics to do honest and creative research, then I can foresee our failing approach to criminal justice and our penal system reaching the point of 'no return'. The implications of this for society in terms of economic and public welfare are catastrophic.

A LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL?

Yet contrary to what I have been arguing, the MOJ and Home Office do appear to recognise the value of personal experience. Recently, I was part of a delegation that went to the MOJ to talk about my experiences of the disclosure process (Criminal Records Bureau). I was also part of a delegation that went to the Home Office to talk about the *Rehabilitation of Offenders Act* (ROA, 1974) and its impact on our lives as 'ex-offenders'. Additionally, some high profile former prisoners in 'the field' have acted as consultants, advising government, politicians and judges on numerous issues (e.g. policy, prison conditions, resettlement issues) and have been key advisors on public inquiries commissioned by the government. A perfect example is Bobby Cummines OBE, an ex-gangster and currently the chief executive of UNLOCK, who boasts an impressive list of key advisory roles (see UNLOCK, 2011). But importantly, as far as I am aware, these positions are always temporary and short-lived. Surely, in addition to the ex-convict researcher, the ex-convict advisor would be an invaluable resource to the MOJ, and of course by employing him or her as a full time civil servant, the MOJ would be setting a good example to others. Specifically, to actually employ an ex-convict in a full time position would set a precedent and would demonstrate good practice to other employers.

PEER RESEARCH

The use of personal experience in the research process and its benefits has been articulated by many authors, particularly in the realms of qualitative research (Kvale, 1996) and of course is a defining principle of CC. Whilst

in the UK, I am only aware of a handful of former prisoners who have actually obtained PhD's and a few others that are about to start a PhD. I am also aware of the growing number of ex-cons that are being employed on research projects as peer researchers. The level of peer researcher involvement varies depending on their research skills although regardless, their contributions are invaluable.

The use of peer research is becoming increasingly popular, in a variety of domains, for example, in studies of homelessness (e.g. de Winter and Noom, 2003), sexual behaviour (e.g. Price and Hawkins, 2002) and more recently studies focusing on prisons and prisoner resettlement (Sheffield Hallam, 2005; Jacobson *et al.*, 2010). In all these instances, the 'ex' is typically viewed as the expert and is involved in the design, data collection and other intellectual activities, using their expertise to inform the projects. In the context of prisons, prisoners and resettlement, and conducive with the CC Perspective, former prisoners are viewed as 'experts'. Whilst the intellectual contribution peer researchers provide is priceless, of equal measure, is her or his ability to engage with the participant and to establish rapport. In my experience as a peer researcher in the past, I believe I brought to the table a level of authenticity and trust. Disclosure of my ex-convict status meant that I was seen as trustworthy and genuinely there for the right reasons, for the benefit of prisoners and ex-convicts.

The peer research interviewer and the prisoner or ex-convict interviewee have a shared understanding of crime and prisons, and can usually identify with each other on a number of levels. Hence, these interviews generate high quality in-depth data. This includes significant insights that non-con interviewers may have not been able to evoke, due to issues of trust or lack of familiarity or connection to the interviewee's life world. Indeed, research participants have stated that they would not have been so forthcoming in their responses if I had not disclosed my ex-convict status prior to the interview.

Yet despite this ability for peer researchers to bring us closer to the 'lived experience' of the phenomena, thus providing a more in-depth understanding of our 'object of inquiry', the sustainability of this invaluable resource is uncertain in prison research. Well at least for me and a few of the other ex-convicts that are involved in prison research. Whilst I have been able to visit a number of prisons over the past year or so, as part of a research team, this may be coming to an end. In the past, all the prisons we have visited have been given full details of our criminal records and we were given access

to each individual prison at the governor's discretion. Recently, I made an application to the MOJ for a generic security clearance. This is a standard procedure, where a prison researcher may apply to the MOJ for security clearance to most prisons, thus overcoming the complications of going through the same access and security process with each individual prison when doing research there. I, along with another ex-convict, was refused, yet the principal investigator, a non-convict academic got clearance.

So here we have the contradiction. On the one hand, the use of ex-convicts experiences is viewed as invaluable not only by liberal minded academics, but also by those in authority (i.e. politicians, the MOJ, the Home Office, policy makers and the like). On the other hand, its these very people that devise and implement the policies and other initiatives (e.g. security clearances) that constrain ex-convicts by excluding them from a myriad of social events, institutions, and social systems. Clearly, Johnson (2002) hits the nail on the head when he states that former prisoners suffer from a presumption of moral contamination.

Yet interestingly, the immorality of those in the corridors of power go unnoticed or if noticed is met with little consequence. You do not have to look to far to see these 'blatant double standards'. For example, look at the 'out of control' traders and speculators who brought the economy to its knees, the super rich tax cheats (Barber, 2011), the recent problem regarding fraudulent expenses claims made by some Members of Parliament, not to mention the scandalous allegations against Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation group.

So clearly in light of this and the other issues considered in this article we need to push forward CC here in the UK. As with the main group in the United States, the principle concerns that need to be addressed here are captured in the passage by Jones *et al.* (2009, p. 152) below:

How the problem of crime is defined; the solutions that are proposed; the devastating impact of these decisions on the men and women labeled criminals who are locked in correctional facilities, separated from loved ones, and prevented from fully reintegrating into the community; record high rates of incarceration, overcrowding of penal institutions, and a lack of meaningful programming inside and outside the prison; and the structural impediments to successful re-entry that results in a revolving door criminal justice system.

CONCLUSION

This article supports the idea that there is a need to develop CC in the UK, with its own physical presence and identity. And whilst undoubtedly there is much overlap and similarity between criminal justice and penal systems in the United States and the UK, there are clearly some significant differences that are untranslatable. These differences manifest themselves in a variety of ways, for example in terms of policies, legislation, prison conditions and regimes, resettlement services and strategies, and dominant models of rehabilitation. Therefore, it is clear that whilst we can learn much from the main CC Group in the American context, we also need to follow our own unique modes of scientific inquiry, utilising these to develop our 'local' understandings of crime and criminal justice issues, and using this research to improve our prisons, policies and resettlement / rehabilitative strategies. It is clear that this is the only way forward if we are going to make radical changes to our failing penal system.

However, whilst I advocate a UK based CC group, it must be noted that that this group would need to be part of the 'mother' group in the United States, naturally following the same underlying principles and intellectual orientations. Therefore, CC UK would be part of the wider CC social movement and only differ in the fact that it deals with issues unique to the UK. Like the wider movement, British CC should consist of ex-convict academics, non-convict academics and practitioners in the 'field', who share the CC philosophy. This collection of individuals with diverse backgrounds will provide a solid foundation for the group and be an invaluable resource when it comes to taking a critical lens to, as well as challenging, pre-existing ways of understanding and dealing with criminal justice and penal issues. Indeed, I have worked with many a non-convict academic, some from more 'privileged' backgrounds, who have given me much insight and knowledge. So diversity in the group is critical.

So now the time has come to push CC forward here in the UK and whilst I am excited, I am also apprehensive because I am uncertain of how things will work out. I know that there is a growing interest in CC, not only from ex-convicts going through academia, but also established academics. Therefore, I believe the time has now come for a radical and refreshing alternative approach to come into to play.

ENDNOTE

- * The views expressed in this article are the authors alone and not particularly representative of the other academics working to develop the British Convict Criminology group in the UK.

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