

THE AMBIGUITIES OF  
DESISTANCE

## Praise for *The Ambiguities of Desistance*

David Honeywell's book provides a uniquely critical and reflective exploration of desistance which is both experientially grounded and research-informed. Written in a direct, engaging and challenging style, it deserves to be widely read by scholars, students and practitioners – indeed by anyone and everyone concerned both with supporting desistance from crime and with changing how we do justice. This book is full of voices we need to hear and heed, not least the author's.

–Professor Fergus McNeill, *University of Glasgow*

Desistance theory has always benefitted from both the autobiographical perspectives of former prisoners as well as systematic academic study, yet in this fascinating new work, David Honeywell combines both of these sources of expertise, drawing on his own lived experience and rigorous research. The intersection of the two makes for a challenging, original and groundbreaking work and a model for keeping criminological research relevant and vibrant.

–Professor Shadd Maruna, *Queen's University Belfast*

In one of the finest books ever written about imprisonment, *Men in Prison*, Victor Serge declares 'A victory over jail is a great victory'. In this book David Honeywell follows Serge to present his own personal victory and those of others who have emerged from imprisonment and made their way through a university education. These remarkable journeys from institutions at the base of society to those nearer its top are gathered as evidence of the complications of desistance. Dr Honeywell offers the reader rare insights drawn from his own incarceration and his subsequent contributions to convict criminology. Like Serge, Honeywell takes his own prison experience and combines it with others into a particularly vivid and triumphant account of lives that prison did not destroy. Share his victory and theirs when you read this book.

–Dr Rod Earl, *The Open University*

# THE AMBIGUITIES OF DESISTANCE

Ex-offenders, Higher Education  
and the Desistance Journey

BY

**DAVID HONEYWELL**

*University of Manchester, UK*



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr David Honeywell** is a Research Assistant in the *Division of Psychology and Mental Health*, in the University of Manchester, UK. His current research involves working with suicidal prisoners. He also has a background as a criminology lecturer and has worked at Universities of York, Durham and Hull where he has taught crime and deviance, criminal justice and prisons and desistance. As a convict criminologist, he draws on a unique blend of sociological academic qualifications and his lived experience as a former offender and prisoner to identify, analyse and understand the complexities of desistance from crime and challenges prisoners and ex-prisoners may experience.

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## PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHIES

In this section I have included the ‘Participants’ Biographies, including their demographics such as class, race, gender and sexuality which the participants were asked to identify themselves.

- Carla, 22, was a white, English, middle class, lesbian female. She was sentenced to 18 months’ imprisonment for perverting the course of justice (i.e., making a false rape allegation). She also had substance and alcohol abuse issues and also struggled with her own identity as a lesbian woman. She found prison liberating as she was able for the first time in her life explore and express her sexuality with other women. She now works with a major charity that helps other individuals who are experiencing the same issues.
- Charlie, 40, was a white, English, middle class, heterosexual male. He was sentenced to three years’ imprisonment for wounding with intent to cause grievous bodily harm. He has struggled to acknowledge his offence and feels shame and guilt over it. He comes from a tightly knit and supportive family which has helped him to rebuild his life. Charlie had gained a degree in criminology before he offended which was related to his work with probation. Prison gave him a new and more positive perspective of his clients. He is now working towards a doctorate.
- Chloe, 38, was a white, English, middle class, heterosexual female. She was sentenced to six years in prison but did not want to disclose any details of why she was imprisoned because of the traumatic memories it invokes. At the time of writing she worked for a prison reform charity but has since moved jobs. She has been successful in higher education gaining both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.
- Clarissa, 41, was a white, English, working class, heterosexual female. She was in custody 11 times for offences ranging from shop lifting and possession to driving while being disqualified. She has continued to work for the council and has enjoyed delivering guest talks to college students about her previous struggle with substance abuse. Clarissa was a victim of child sexual abuse and later developed drug issues. Education provided her with

opportunities not least, including accommodation where she was able to escape a volatile relationship.

- Dafydd, 27, was a white, Welsh, middle class, heterosexual male. He was sentenced to 14 months' imprisonment and was handed a 4-year driving ban for dangerous driving. He came from a stable middle class background but as a youth had begun truanting with other school friends which was the start of his offending. He arrived at a D Category prison almost immediately after being convicted. Dafydd immediately experienced a privileged prisoner status because of his previous academic achievements and because he had been a full-time university student at the time of his arrest.
- Debbie, 42, was a white, English, working class, heterosexual female. She was sentenced to 18 months in prison for theft from her employer. Education enabled Debbie to transform her life where she has now become an entrusted and successful employee working with ex-offenders, homeless and substance users.
- Dylan, 27, was a white, English, working class, heterosexual male. He served a 15-month prison sentence for violence. He came from a family who were involved in criminality and he had a difficult start at university after disclosing his past during a seminar. He eventually graduated with a degree in criminology and has continued to postgraduate study. Dylan has had to struggle against his past and present barriers, but as this study has demonstrated, he has shown resilience which was developed from education and overcoming hardships.
- Gemma, 34, was a white, English, working class, heterosexual female. She served five prison sentences over her lifetime for drug-related offences. At the time of my study, she was working with individuals with substance abuse issues. Despite her obvious transformation, she has experienced continual stigma and discrimination from the area where she grew up and is well known for her former offending. She began a Leadership and Management degree but only completed part of it as she gained employment.
- Germaine, 29, was a white, English, working class, heterosexual female. She was sentenced to 12 months' imprisonment for drugs offences. She was a high-profile case because of the severity of criminal activities of her family, which made it difficult for her to hide her past. Germaine is interested in fashion and design which led to her gaining a degree. She has financial struggles which at the time of the interview were preventing her continuing on to postgraduate study.
- Gerry, 36, was a white, English, working class, heterosexual male. He served several prison sentences for theft, burglary and street crime. He was

what traditional sociologists would have described as a typical recidivist who continued to re-offend, deliberately choosing deviant behaviour [which included drug dealing] over legitimate means. But although there were predictors and causality of his offending, eventually, he decided to stop. He has since worked for the council and has been successful with continual employment.

- Jimmy, 47, was a white, Scottish, working class, heterosexual male. He served four prison sentences, the last being for five years. He admittedly has never fully desisted but no longer commits acts of violence. He became a teetotaler many years ago as this was his main offending trigger. He has now succeeded in gaining a degree in design and continues to find new projects and enjoys being dad to his small boy.
- Ju Ju, 67, was a white, English, middle class heterosexual male. He was sentenced to seven years and six months for statutory rape. He was British born but has resided in New Zealand most of his life. He was the oldest of the sample and has enjoyed a lifetime career as a psychologist and researcher. Education has been an important part of his life before and after prison which has enabled him to immediately overcome the barriers that others have encountered during their entry into university.
- Judy, 41, was a white, English, middle class, heterosexual female. She had spent time remanded in custody, had served a three-month prison sentence and had spent time on probation for shop lifting. Since Judy was interviewed, she has moved jobs but made her career that helps others from going along the same path as herself. This redemptive approach was distinctive for many of the others also and a main theme within this study.
- Len, 48, was a white, English, working class, heterosexual male. He served a life sentence for murder and continues to deal with the psychological problems that led to his offence. Len has had many internal issues to deal with and even felt education was more of a curse as it opened his eyes to the cruel world he once inhabited. Education, however, still gives him a goal to succeed and he continues his education which he feels has given him structure.
- Melody, 44, was a white, English, working class, heterosexual female. She served a four year prison sentence for violence and fraud. She discovered she had been adopted around the age of six and relates this to her deviance. However, it would seem that it is socially linked but the important

point is that for Melody this link to her birth family gives her sense of identity.

- Peter, 58, was a white, English, middle class, heterosexual male. He was sentenced to three months in the 1980s for incitement to commit arson. He came from a privileged background and had a very good early education. Peter did not have an ongoing criminal lifestyle and therefore felt somewhat unrepresentative for this study. Although during his early years he was sent to prison, this was more of a mere glitch during his more rebellious teens. He has continued to become successful in academe and contributes widely to criminological research.
- Ruby, 40, was a white, English, working class, heterosexual female. She served several short-term prison sentences for shop lifting, assault and drug use. She has worked with other individuals with substance abuse issues and is now a trainee probation officer. It was essential for Ruby to demonstrate her independence and gain a degree in criminology and sustain successful employment.
- Sid, 47, was a white, English, working class, heterosexual male. He was sentenced to three years' imprisonment for drug dealing. He is a university lecturer and a convict criminologist who gained a degree in criminology and continued his education to doctoral level. Sid is active in prisoner and desistance research and has been instrumental in networking and mentoring of other individuals who have left prison.
- Stacey, 26, was a white, English, middle class, heterosexual female and one of the youngest of the sample. She had the longest criminal record than the others with over 100 convictions which included mainly violence and criminal damage. Her background gives a fascinating insight into the pains of teenage angst, living in care and decline into criminality. Education was her catalyst for change which was influenced by her mentors with shared lived experiences.
- Tariq, 28, was an English born Asian, middle class, heterosexual male. He was sentenced to two years' imprisonment for violence and disorder. He was the only ethnic minority in the sample, yet his narrative still provided an interesting insight into some of the cultural differences for desisters. He had good support from his family which is supported by other desistance studies. Tariq was also one of the few who already had a university education before he went to prison. He continues with education and has been involved in local community police initiatives and is now working towards a doctorate.

- Tom, 60, was a white, English, middle class, heterosexual male. He was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment for repeated sex offences. Since leaving prison, he has made progress in academe which boosted his self-esteem and gave him the confidence to confront his past. And although he has experienced more restrictions than anyone else due to the nature of his offences, he feels that higher education enabled a complete transformation of self.

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I would like to thank my mother for all the support she has given over the years. Without her continual belief in me and refusal to give up on me, my life chances would have been very different. Also thanks to my sister Carol who has shown more courage than I ever have and who supported me throughout the financial struggles of funding my PhD.

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I would like to say how much I am enjoying working with my current team at the University of Manchester on our project about prisoner suicide called PROSPECT. This research is incredibly important, and I feel very lucky to be part of it. A particular thank you to Dr Dan Pratt who not only believed in me

but also has made a huge contribution towards the new era of desistance theory, which Professor Shadd Maruna foresees as being mainly steered by ex-prisoner desisters. Dr Pratt has contributed towards this by enabling someone in my position to be a part of such an important study within such a prestigious university for which I will be eternally grateful.

Finally, I would like to thank all my students past and present who make my job so worthwhile. The continual cohort of students and popularity of criminology not only made my life transition from prison to university possible, but also my students' energy and enthusiasm has always kept me on my toes. I know at times we do not see 'eye to eye' but the unique bond I have always had with my students and their interest in my lived experience as a former prisoner has been heart-warming to say to least.

A final thanks to all those who have unknowingly and knowingly helped me through my desistance journey.