

Arts in Criminal Justice and Corrections: International Perspectives on Methods, Journeys and Challenges, Edited by Amanda Gardner and Laura Caulfield

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It was the first day of my study I had planned as part of my PhD research. I had prepared all the materials the night before, took an early train to ensure I was on time, went through all the checks at the prison gate, set up my room and waited for the first participant to come in for their interview. I welcomed him with ease, introduced myself and went through the consent form. I turned on the audio recorder. ‘It’s just like the fucking police’. My heart sank. I don’t think I told anyone about how big a misgiving this interaction felt, not until much later when I had a couple of research projects under my belt. This memory came back to me as I read Amanda Gardner and Laura Caulfield’s edited collection, ‘Arts in Criminal Justice and Corrections’. The most distinctive element of the collection is that it is not a traditional edited collection of studies, rather it is a collection of essays about how the researchers have developed their methods of research over their careers (and there are careers of various lengths and kinds represented throughout the text). Many of the contributors acknowledge the messiness of undertaking research including the feelings of unease when something is not said quite right, when an ethics approval gets revoked or the tensions felt when navigating stakeholders and funders.

One of the first reflections I had when reading the newly edited collection is the affinity the editors hold for each other as scholars. The writing style of the editors is genuine and often funny (disclosure, I read this book while travelling and laughed out loud a number of times. It also gave me plenty of moments to pause and reflect). The collection is international (featuring scholars from the Australia, Belgium, New Zealand, UK and USA), and interdisciplinary; contributors include practitioners, researchers and people who were once incarcerated (often combinations of the aforementioned categories). The book is divided into three parts that take the reader through essays on ‘The impacts of the arts in criminal justice and corrections’, ‘The researcher’s journey’ and ‘Foregrounding the People in Arts Spaces’. A technique I’ve not seen elsewhere in an edited collection is undertaken by editor Amanda Gardner; they write a profile of the author that follows each chapter. It’s more than an extended bio, rather it is clear that Gardner has undertaken a good long chat with each contributor that results in a commentary piece of the individual researchers across the collection that shows not only how they have developed their research over the years, but also how experiences in research has shaped them as scholars. There is sometimes repetition of what the authors have discussed in their chapters in these profiles, but they do also give insight into the personality and experiences of the individual. While reading them, I felt like I was meeting some new researchers and learning a bit more about the colleagues I already knew.



For scholars working in this field, and connecting areas, the book opens with a chapter detailing the history of arts in criminal justice and corrections, mostly as experienced in the UK and USA. Considering the range of scholars in different careers, and at different stages, the collection has a chapter for everyone including musicians, artists, music therapists, practitioners and researchers. That being said, I recommend reading the book in its entirety to gain a picture of how practitioners and scholars navigate and reflect on their experiences in this field. The personal journeys shared are an enjoyable way to learn more about methods and theories that may not be your own specialty, and honestly, it's quite refreshing to hear about research that does not always go right and how people navigate that often tricky path.

Contributors to the collection carefully reflect on their experiences, question their assumptions about research methodologies, the exhausting work of theory development and demonstrate a real growth of practice in each chapter. For example, Henley's chapter on Cultural Historical Activity Theory and Simpson's chapter on their development of a Narrative Research Tool gives insight into different ways of considering arts work with participants and practitioners in prisons today. Autoethnography is discussed by Daniels and Gardner, but also gamification in co-designing bags and furniture with prisoners by Gamman (and the complexities of practice this can present). PhD Researcher Marynissen et al discuss at length the value of using a realist lens as a method neutral approach. Theory and methods nerds rejoice!

It's refreshing to see that some authors in the collection aim to challenge the 'oppressive system of prisons and punishment', although that does not seem to me to be the overall focus of the book. Indeed, the text as a whole does not question society's reliance on prisons, nor acknowledge the perpetuation of the prison system by the ever-growing arts and justice sector, although there are individual contributors who express concerns about this; Cohen's work on using collaboration as a tool for transformative justice being an example. Ultimately, this collection makes an enjoyable and accessible read for new researchers, and for experienced academics alike. I wish such a text had existed when I was doing my PhD, I would have welcomed such openness about the messiness of methods in practice when I was a young researcher; assurances that despite the planning and careful detailed work, sometimes things do not go the way you expect them to, and actually, it is in those spaces of unease and fumbling that a person can grow as a scholar and researcher.

Kirstin Anderson has taught for twenty-four years in schools, universities and prisons. She has a PhD from the University of Edinburgh, and led the first empirical study to look at music education and music making in Scottish prisons. Kirstin has written about education and arts in prisons, public health and criminal justice, prison overcrowding, and prison abolition.