

Book Review: Women, Stigma and Desistance from Crime

Gilly Sharpe - *Women, Stigma and Desistance from Crime: Precarious Identities in the Transition to Adulthood*, Routledge: London (October 31st 2023); 216 pp, ISBN 9781138642430, Hardback price £135, Ebook price £35.99

In *Women, Stigma and Desistance from Crime*, Gilly Sharpe tells a very important story with care and compassion about a group of formerly criminalised young women in England. Retracing 36 of the 52 young women who she originally interviewed in 2005-6, Sharpe sets out to explore where these young women are now and the pathways they have taken on the road to desistance. The enduring impact of stigma is a central part of the analysis. Indeed, a key aim is to illustrate how criminalisation and stigma shape, and are shaped by, class-based condescension, welfare inaction and disciplinary punishment.

This book is a remarkable achievement on a number of levels. Empirically, it makes a valuable contribution with respect to the relatively neglected focus on women's desistance. Methodologically, the substantial work involved in following up a group of women seven years later to offer a longitudinal analysis cannot be underestimated. Meanwhile, conceptually, the dual-focus on stigma and desistance advances our knowledge in this area. Contextually, there is a distinct focus on a group of individuals who were girls during a very specific and punitive time period in youth justice, and who moved to adulthood during a very particular social context characterised by austerity and a harsh climate of welfare cuts and conditionality. Moreover, institutionally, this book

encourages us to cast our gaze beyond a narrow focus on the criminal justice system and consider wider institutional dynamics across our systems of welfare and punishment. In short, the contribution is immense and wide-ranging.

In making the argument that stigma *is* punishment, this book is clearly about challenging stigma and, taken to its logical conclusion, offers policy and practice directions that could lead us to what Tyler (2020) describes as anti-stigma practice. As Sharpe outlines from the outset, “stigma constitutes additional punishment, and it may haunt women long after crime has been left behind, diminishing their own lives, as well as those of their children” (p.10). This is a powerful theme running through the book. So too is the concept of time and the related focus on different institutional dynamics, with this work revealing how stigma may be reproduced over time across welfare, education and justice settings.

The conclusion that education and welfare interventions may be experienced as no less punitive, and often *more* punitive than penal ones is compelling. In particular, I think the focus on “welfare inaction or abandonment” as Sharpe describes it is very important to understand. Indeed the failure to both recognise and meet girls needs, including their victimisation, in for example school and/or care settings can set the scene for enduring mistrust and lack of faith in those in power and authority. As is described powerfully in the case of one of the young women, Aisha, it can link to sexual violence and exploitation of girls being ignored and overlooked, and helps us to understand something of the processes underlying a victim-survivor’s decision to go “no comment” in the police station.

In exploring young women's transitions to adulthood, key topics focused on include exclusion and criminalisation in an age of austerity, maternal identities and the legacy of education and welfare interventions. Whilst criminal justice involvement may be relatively short as it was for many in this study, welfare stigma has the potential to endure across the life course. The chapter on maternal identities and maternal judgements illuminates this particularly well. Sharpe describes clearly how class-based judgements of maternal deficiency can cast a long shadow and endure long after criminal justice contact has ceased. This focus on class judgements as a central theme comes through very strongly in the book and is another strength. A little less is said about racialised judgements, which no doubt reflects the sample of women in the study who were predominantly white, although some important reflections are still made.

With respect to care-experience, insightful comments are shared about women's perceptions of what had been written about them in social worker assessments. Of course, these official records or care files can function as a site of stigma too - a place to perpetuate negative gendered judgements. This is problematic for various reasons, but perhaps particularly if the 'paper self' becomes a principal way to get to know an individual. There is wider work to encourage more trauma-informed language in record-keeping now, and increased recognition that the person whose file it is may one day want to read it. Without this, it is not surprising to find women and girls feel angry when they perceive that written accounts about them are inaccurate or incriminating as is described in Alice's case - with her anger at what a social worker had written about her being deeply felt several years later.

Unjustifiable judgements and anger are mentioned at various points, and my sense from reading this book is that some of the women within it have a lot to feel angry about. A real strength of this work is in how it is contextualised in a very particular moment in time. The then-girls grew up at increased risk of being drawn into a punitive youth justice system, and then made the transition to independence during a period of austerity and wide-ranging cuts to services and support. Reflecting on matters such as the normalisation of food banks, a progressively cruel benefits system and the real-term fall in wages, Sharpe argues that if policies aimed at deliberately reducing prospects for encouraging desistance were designed, they would look a lot like these.

Within the current social and economic context, Sharpe compellingly describes the increased class contempt in unequal societies for those at the bottom, and the corresponding lack of sympathy and solidarity for those who are disadvantaged. Also described is the almost deliberate cultivation of welfare stigma.

In short, this is an extremely thought-provoking book and an impressive piece of work, which deserves to be read very widely. It has important implications for research, policy and practice, including the need to prevent unnecessary criminalisation wherever possible. The new Westminster government would do well to take heed of the insights shared.

Tyler, I. (2020) *Stigma: The Machinery of Inequality*, London: Zed Books.

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