

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Trammell, Rebecca, *Enforcing the Convict Code: Violence and Prison Culture*. 2012. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 157 pp. \$49.95 hardcover (978-1-58826-80802).

Rebecca Trammell's book *Enforcing the Convict Code* is an insightful and valuable contribution to literature on violence, culture, gender and race in American prisons. Drawing on interviews with ex-inmates, Trammell's work speaks eloquently to the nuances of prison culture while rendering the complexities of inmate-on-inmate violence comprehensible to the reader. Though the focus of the book is on ex-inmates in California, many of the book's themes are relevant to the prison experience in Canada. In particular for the Canadian audience, Trammell's contribution to the qualitative literature on prison violence fills a research gap by comparing the experience of men and women incarcerated. This complements Cooley's (1992) report on victimization in male federal prisons in Canada. *Enforcing the Convict Code* will be of specific interest to criminologists and sociologists who research or teach courses on qualitative methodologies, penology or gender and violence; yet, the accessibility of Trammell's text suggests a wider currency.

Enforcing the Convict Code presents the results of Trammell's qualitative study of "how former inmates understand violence as a social process" (p. 11). The book pays particular attention to the relationship between violence, norms, and culture as former inmates perceive it and highlights issues of racial segregation, gangs, prison sex and rape, and interpersonal conflict among inmates more generally. The thick descriptions of violence and prison norms are generated from seventy-three open-ended interviews that Trammell conducted with parolees in California State. These accounts challenge a common stereotype that violence in prison is arbitrary and irrational; rather, Trammell's rich ethnographic data illuminates violence as a strategic response to problems that arise in an environmental context in which people's lives are rigidly controlled and there are limited resources for conflict resolution.

The book describes both male and female inmates as active agents who "try to control their environment by curbing the disruptive behavior of others," sometimes with the use of violence (p. 5). Her interviewees argued that "troublemakers" need to be controlled for the benefit of everyone living in the prison; in this sense, "violence does not beget vio-

lence; rather, violence prevents chaos” (p. 5). Trammell argues that strategies to control each other’s behaviour and hence some aspect of their environment in part reflects an inmate’s attempt to establish a “worthy identity” (p. 22). Further, public social control is enacted as part of a social performance that “lined up nicely with prescribed gender roles” (p. 17). For instance, while both women and men used violence to control the behaviour of others, men tended to use it more often while women tended to use rumours, gossip, and avoidance to deal with bothersome inmates. Women inmates felt that they were at a disadvantage in terms of resources for problem-solving since they were not “taught” to use violence in the same way as their male counterparts.

Enforcing the Convict Code also shows how violence can be understood within the context of prison as a hypersexualized space. In women’s prisons it is common for inmates to go “gay for the stay” (p. 77); the majority of women inmates had girlfriends and formed “families” that encouraged mentorship and civility and helped women deal with the pain of incarceration. However, many of these arrangements involve abuse and domination. Male inmates described sexual relationships sometimes formed as part of a “protective pairing” in which a weak or inexperienced inmate volunteers sex in exchange for protection. Though women inmates often described their relationships as loving, in both men’s and women’s prisons Trammell found that sexual relationships are treated as a type of business arrangement in which inmates “accepted” their role in an exchange. For this reason, Trammell notes that it is particularly difficult to assess the extent of prison sexual assaults and rape because informal norms that govern these relationships justify violence when a party to the relationship fails to keep their word. It would appear that cases where an inmate backs out of a sexual deal are not interpreted by inmates as rape; in such a situation the victim effectively loses the right to consent, which might explain in part why many instances of sexual abuse in prison go unreported.

Trammell argues that new inmates are quickly socialized and become acclimated to prison culture. Socialization through mentorship is crucial to maintaining informal norms that provide inmates with some semblance of power and control over their lives. She argues that in the absence of gender diversity among prison populations, race becomes an easy way for inmates to organize into groups. Interestingly, the book suggests that while prison gangs and groups are divided along racial lines, this division might result more from the lack of control over their environment that inmates experience than any racist sentiments they might have. She argues that “men obey the norms of segregation in a way that actually unites them against the prison staff” (p. 62) even though the ma-

jority report no personal issue with people of other races. The informal control of race relations is a means by which male inmates exercise some autonomy in their lives; consequently, formal threats of desegregation are met with resistance because they are interpreted as a “loss of power and a disruption of their informal norms” (p. 62).

The book provides new insights into the ways in which inmates socially organize and how violence comes to be understood by inmates as a source of “strength and power in an environment where they have no real, legitimate power” (p. 11). A minor critique of Trammell’s text is that qualitative researchers would benefit from further elaboration of her methodological strategies. The book opens with a tale from the field in which Trammell recalls being in “a private home with four violent offenders, including one sex offender” and that she had “just called them a snitch, and they were pretty angry” (p. 2). The reader is left hoping for more detail as to how the author was able to build rapport and gain the trust of former incarcerates. Additionally, some reflection on her status as a woman researcher interviewing men with incarceration experience would have benefitted women conducting research in this area. The final chapter “Where Do We Go from Here?” addresses issues of access and why administrators should not be reluctant to permit researchers to conduct research in prisons; this would have been an appropriate place for further discussion of methodological issues relevant to building research relationships with ex-inmates themselves.

In sum, *Enforcing the Convict Code* illustrates how violence is a socially organized, rationalized, and normalized part of prison life for both men and women, and highlights the ways in which gender expectations structure inmate interactions. Emphasizing themes of performance and identity, *Enforcing the Convict Code* clearly shows how inmates are disempowered by the prison experience and their resilience in developing strategies to maintain some sense of control over their environment. Trammell’s book renders the problematic lived experience of prison inmates directly available to the reader in a way that speaks to the continued importance of ethnographic work on prisons — an area in which more work is needed in the Canadian context.

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REFERENCE

- Cooley, Dennis. “Victimization behind the walls: Social control in male federal prisons.” A report on victimization in male prisons prepared for the Correctional Service of Canada. Department of Sociology, University of Manitoba. 1992.

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