Education and incarceration: an interpretive study of prisoners’ narratives

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Abstract
The study had two aims. The first aim was to develop and present an understanding of the lived experience of selected individual prisoners relating to their formal education and vocational training. The second aim was to identify points of potential heuristic interest relating to ostensible needs for social action to reduce the incidence of juvenile and continuing engagement by individuals in criminal activities, and to address education and vocational training issues relating to the integration or reintegration of incarcerated offenders into the wider Australian society after their release from custody. A constructivist conceptual framework was adopted to guide the selection of the methodology of the study and the interpretation of the data obtained through implementation of the methodology. The methodology involved analysis of written transcripts of audio-recorded self-narratives of selected prisoners to generate the data used in the study. Prisoners from three Queensland correctional centres for adult males were selected for participation in the study primarily on the basis of their personal history of juvenile and continuing engagement in criminal offending principally associated with obtaining financial income, and their willingness to voluntarily participate. Participants’ self-narratives, relating principally to their lived experience of formal education and vocational training, were audio-recorded in individual, relatively unstructured interview sessions with the researcher. Written transcripts of the audio-recordings of interview sessions with a total of 15 participants were selected for analysis on the basis of their apparent relevance to the aims of the study. Two general types of narrative analysis methods were used to analyse the transcripts. The first of these was simple inspection of each transcript, which was used to identify categories of background information about the participants, including selected inferred general characteristics of such prisoners, and to identify instances of the content of these categories in individual cases. Inferred characteristics of prisoners were constructed from a review of literature relating to prisoners in Australia, and were selected for inclusion in the study on the basis of claimed relationships between people’s experience of disadvantage during their juvenile years and their engagement in a criminal career which they began in their juvenile years. The second general type of narrative analysis which was used in the study was interpretive narrative analysis. Two forms of interpretive narrative analysis were used to construct concepts from the individual transcripts. Three types of concepts, labelled ‘specific topics’, personal meanings’, and ‘social meanings’, were constructed. An understanding of the lived experience of each individual participant was constructed as an interpretive synthesis of inferred
background information about the participant, and specific topics, personal meanings, and social meanings which were constructed from the transcript of his narrative. Apparent relationships within and between sets of data constructed in the study were examined with reference to outcomes of a review of literature relating to topics of social disadvantage of people in Australia and of prisoners in Australia. These apparent relationships were examined in order to identify points of potential heuristic interest relating to ostensible needs for taking social action. Apparent relationships between specific topics, personal meanings, and social meanings, within each type of concept and between each type of concept, in the whole set of data constructed in the study were examined first with reference to the literature. Following this examination, apparent relationships amongst inferred characteristics of the participants, and between inferred characteristics and specific topics, personal meanings, and social meanings in the whole set of constructed data, were examined with reference to the literature. From the outcomes of these examinations, speculative suggestions were made regarding the need to take social actions aimed at reducing the incidence of engagement in a criminal career beginning in the juvenile years, and at reducing the incidence of recidivism by ex-prisoners who have a personal history of engagement in a criminal career which began in their juvenile years.

The researcher’s constructed understandings of the lived experiences of the participants, relating to their basic formal education and vocational training, demonstrated a highly individualised nature of meanings by which participants seemed to have conceptualised their experience. There appeared to be considerable diversity of these meanings amongst the participants. However, several common themes appeared to have emerged. Of the approximately 67 per cent of participants who had a personal history of juvenile and continuing engagement in criminal activities, 90 per cent appeared to have experienced social disadvantage, including some form of educational disadvantage, during their childhood. Seventy per cent appeared to have conceptualised their experience in terms of a specific meaning of disadvantage or of a specific meaning of lost opportunity. Eighty per cent appeared to have conceptualised their experience in terms of a general meaning of conformity to norms of conventional Australian society. Seventy per cent had voluntarily participated in at least one formal education or vocational training program during their incarceration.

The findings of the study seemed to indicate a need for social actions aimed at reducing the incidence of continuing engagement in criminal activities beginning in the juvenile years, and at facilitating the successful integration into society of offenders
who have a personal history of continuing engagement in criminal activities which began in their juvenile years. These types of actions would appear to include identification of incidences of individuals’ childhood experience of social disadvantage, and interventions at the family and school levels to address such disadvantage, and a comprehensive, individualised, holistic, approach to prisoner education which is designed to facilitate prisoners’ achievement of legitimate, personal satisfying careers after their release from custody.
Statement of originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

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GUID 1651609

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## Introduction

Specific topics constructed from individual transcripts

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## Conclusion

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# Chapter Eight: Personal meanings constructed from the transcripts of the participants’ narratives

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Personal meanings constructed from individual transcripts

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## Conclusion

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# Chapter Nine: Social meanings constructed from the transcripts of the participants’ narratives

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