

Book Review

Tracing technologies: Prisoners' views in the era of CSI Helena Machado and Barabara Prainsack Ashgate 2012

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The contemporary media provides a plethora of images of science and scientific practice. These often revolve around forensic technologies and the potential they offer in the investigation of crime. Whereas there are numerous accounts of the perceptions of these technologies and their uses by specific interested parties, from police personnel through to juries, this book is the first of its kind to consider prisoners as stakeholders in the contemporary uses of forensic science and forensic genetics in the criminal investigative process. Taking the prisoners and their narratives seriously, Machado and Prainsack examine the understandings, histories and perspectives offered by Portuguese and Austrian prison inmates in relation to bodily traces and forensic technologies. Concentrating on their sources of forensic knowledge, including their perceptions of media representations, and understandings of forensic evidence, the authors firmly place prisoners within debates about the utility, development and deployment of forensic technologies in contemporary law enforcement. The strength of this study lies in the textured data and analysis presented. Differences in accounts are embraced and interrogated by the authors, taking us far beyond any simple or homogenous prisoners' view to seeing these actors as active agents, making sense of their practices, the practices of others and the potential of forensic technologies in diverse and interesting ways.

Machado and Prainsack use a grounded theory approach, analysing 57 qualitative interviews with male prisoners in Portugal and Austria. They are careful to situate prisoners' accounts within their national contexts, and chapters on each country provide the social, historical and legal backgrounds. Bearing in mind the differences between Portugal and Austria, the similarities across accounts and the limited areas where divergences can be simply mapped to national origin is surprising.

The authors commence their analysis by considering the sources of information about forensic technologies used by prisoners. Although not ignoring the potential educational effect of the media representations, they suggest that it is overly simplistic to view them only in this way. Instead they highlight the ways prisoners utilise diverse sources of information about forensic technologies and critically engage with media representations, making sense of them in a variety of ways. Machado and Prainsack document how prisoners compare media representations with other representations, their personal experiences and those of other prisoners, emphasising the need to for a more fine-grained consideration of claims of the educational effect. Furthermore, their accounts of prisoners' perceptions further complicates notions of the CSI effect, the idea that media representations give specific publics unrealistic

expectations of the potential offered by forensic science and forensic technologies, by highlighting the ways individuals engage with rather than simply accept media representations.

In contrast to this active and reflexive engagement with sources of information about forensic technologies, prisoners' understandings of the science behind forensic analyses, particular DNA profiling, appears far more rigid. Machado and Prainsack document how these stakeholders view DNA as dangerous and uncontrollable. Whereas leaving fingerprints can be avoided by wearing gloves, leaving DNA at a scene is seen as far more difficult, if not impossible, to avoid. Prisoners view DNA as high science and higher science than other forensic methods and evidence because analysis techniques are mainly automated. Although participants acknowledge the possibility of human error (and deliberate planting of evidence), it tends to be seen as infallible. Furthermore, by speaking to prisoners, the authors are able to highlight the ways in which DNA evidence in particular is important to how they structure their narratives about their criminal activities and, in particular, their capture and conviction. In these accounts, DNA evidence appears as more 'truthful'. Through this emphasis on DNA as high science and DNA structuring narratives, the authors suggest that in prisoner accounts DNA appears to have its own agency, independent of the individual and those who use it in their everyday work.

Through Machado and Prainsack's analysis, the role of DNA databases and DNA evidence as part of wider practices of state surveillance and crime deterrents are questioned by prisoners' accounts. Highlighting the absence of research that systematically examines the claimed benefits of increased database inclusion, these participants present an image of DNA traces making criminality more difficult, but not necessarily deterring professional criminals, i.e. those committed to a life of crime, where their forensic knowledge is linked to their professional identities. Although it should be noted, as Robin Williams does in the afterword, prisoners also have no evidence of the effectiveness of DNA databases and DNA evidence in deterring crime. Nevertheless, prisoners' accounts suggest less technologically driven solutions, such as the creation of job opportunities, might have a greater deterrent effect.

Throughout this book, prisoners' narratives demonstrate a complex interplay between the knowledge of forensic practices and the power of forensic technologies, particularly DNA profiles and DNA traces. This is evident in the authors' discussions of state surveillance and the use of forensic technologies in the exoneration of prisoners and exclusion of suspects in police investigations. Although career criminals take pride in having and gaining knowledge about forensic technologies and trace avoidance practices, Machado and Prainsack's account makes it clear that prisoners' make sense of these technologies in intricate ways. In particular, by drawing on Prainsack and Toom (2010), the authors demonstrate the ways these technologies are seen as both empowering and disempowering. Some prisoners see forensic DNA databases and DNA evidence more widely as a way of safeguarding their own rights and protecting them from unfounded accusations of involvement in specific crimes or

as a means of rectifying miscarriages of justice. Yet, forensic technologies, particularly DNA, are also seen as beyond the individual's control.

The power of forensic technologies, in particular DNA testing for identification, is reiterated in the authors' discussion of the criminal's body. Although the use of the body in civil and prisoner identification is not new, DNA's use in identification, and in particular prisoners' views of DNA as the essence of the body, are significant. Machado and Prainsack highlight how the prisoners view their bodies both as tools in the commissioning of crime but also as liabilities, because the lack of control they may be able to exert over the shedding of DNA traces or the effects of alcohol or drug consumption. They draw on participant accounts of the methods used to avoid leaving biological traces at crime scenes and to mask their physical features in their attempts to circumvent the increased reliance on DNA in identification and to exert control over their unruly bodies that could give them away.

Throughout, the prisoners' narratives raise interesting questions about the accountability of police and scientific practice. Furthermore, the way that prisoners' narratives reflect wider policy debates at national levels is an interesting finding. The perspectives offered by these actors are important in deepening our understanding of the societal effects of forensic technologies and the risks that these new technologies pose for this stakeholder group. By giving prisoners a voice in the debate, Machado and Prainsack make a valuable contribution to existing accounts of the use of forensic technologies in specific national contexts, contemporary understandings of forensic technologies and raise wider ethical questions about their use and potential misuse. With meaningful forewords and afterwords by Troy Duster and Robin Williams respectively, this is an important text for anyone interested in the sociological study of forensic science, policing, legal practice or more widely in the STS literature on the interface between science and law.

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