

Kris Olsson's *Kilroy was Here*

Michele Jarldorn

Flinders University, South Australia

Correspondence to: michele.jarldorn@flinders.edu.au

When I was approached to write a classic book review, what immediately came to mind was *Kilroy was Here*, a book I first encountered while taking an elective in my BSW degree. Not a scholarly monograph or a social work text book, *Kilroy was Here* is, on the surface anyway, a beautifully crafted biography of an extraordinary Australian woman, Debbie Kilroy. Kilroy is a former prisoner who survived the system and whose life's work is dedicated to radically changing that same system. However, for me, the book is much more than a good read. It served to consolidate the connection between theory, practice and experience in profound ways.

Coming to university as a "non-traditional" mature-aged student, while posing numerous challenges, furnished me with the ability to connect the dots between the theories and lived experience of oppression. My most profound learning in my degree came from my second-year elective, a Women's Studies topic, *Sex, Gender and Identities*. Taught by Dr Heather Brook, who later became my primary PhD supervisor, the topic and the content helped shape who I am as a social worker, academic and activist in various ways. Using an intersectional feminist perspective, the topic gave me the tools to identify overt and covert connections between power and gender. Using various creative approaches, Heather demonstrated the ways in which gender, race and class influence how social problems are created, addressed and resolved. One of the most memorable sessions in that semester was about the role of prisons in society. It began with each of us being handed a sheet of paper which included the name, age and background of an Aboriginal person who had died in custody. In a deeply moving

acknowledgement, we took turns to stand up and read aloud their names and their background information. This simple, respectful activity humanised and dignified a group of people who tend to be represented merely as numbers and statistics. Later in that same lesson, Heather talked about her recent attendance at an international conference where she had heard feminist responses to prison and the criminalisation of women. She spoke specifically about Kilroy's achievements, and the book which she had just finished reading, *Kilroy was Here*.

Kris Olsson's *Kilroy was Here* captures integral moments and turning points in Kilroy's life, while at the same time presenting a time-capsule of Australia's recent gendered, racist and "classed" history. Scattered through the chapters are many examples where Kilroy was failed and abused by individuals as well as by the education, welfare and criminal justice systems. From the time she entered a Catholic infant school, Debbie's experiences of formal education were rarely positive. She liked climbing trees with the boys and most of her mates were Aboriginal kids – she rejected the nuns' expectations of ladylike behaviour and from an early age was not afraid of questioning, or challenging authority, especially if she thought they were being arbitrarily unjust. As she grew older, Debbie's distrust of, and resistance to, authority, grew. She began skipping school to be with her mates and refused to obey her parents. By her early teens, Debbie had learned to hate school and regularly truanted as a result. Her parents were often worried sick about her safety and their inability to rein in her behaviour. So, when social workers and the police recommended that

Debbie undergo a psychiatric assessment to search for a possible reason for her behaviour, they agreed. Like most working-class families, they had been socialised to privilege the opinion of professionals such as social workers, teachers, psychologists and lawyers. At just 13 years of age, Kilroy entered Wilson Youth Hospital for what her parents were told was an “assessment”. Upon her entry to Wilson, Debbie was stripped, showered and deloused, she suffered brutalising physical and emotional abuse and neglect until her first discharge some three months later.

Wilson Youth Hospital was part of a raft of institutional responses to social problems that was commonly used in Australia, that have since been the subject of a Royal Commission. Wilson was a government-run “child guidance hospital” which claimed that it could “treat” delinquency. Staffed by a combination of medical and security personnel, Wilson provided a scientific, institutional approach to social problems in Australia, described by Ashton and Wilson as an “unholy union of welfare and punishment” (2014, p. xi). Between July 1975 and April 1977, Kilroy was readmitted into Wilson at least seven times, creating a continuum of violence. Kilroy’s mother was interviewed for the book and, reflecting on her decision to give permission for her daughter to be “assessed” at Wilson, she said, “I would have painted the house hot pink if the social workers had told me it would fix her” (Olsson, 2005, p. 15).

Research (Halsey & Deegan, 2015; Carrington, 1993) shows being locked up as a juvenile puts people at enormous risk of entering prison as an adult. In her late twenties, married and the mother of two young children, Kilroy was imprisoned in Queensland’s notorious Boggo Road Prison. As the following excerpt shows, adult prisons can seem like a natural progression for someone who has spent a significant period of their adolescence in the “care” of the state:

...those first few days in prison were a process of desensitising, layer by layer,

of stepping into the patterns of prison life and out of patterns of life outside. This wasn’t so hard for someone who had spent her formative years in a brutalising institution, much of it in isolation. She wasn’t afraid. It was, at some level, like going home. (Olsson, 2005, p. 112)

Not only did Kilroy survive prison, she demonstrated her fierce and unfaltering loyalty to her people, by fulfilling a promise that many make but rarely follow through with. Kilroy has devoted her post-release life to supporting criminalised women to have a voice, providing them with judgement-free support and advocacy. She has done this through the organisation she was integral in creating: Sisters Inside, recognised internationally for its work that is grounded in human rights and is driven by, and for, criminalised women. More broadly, she has contributed to policy, research and the work of the United Nations in their measures aimed at upholding the rights of criminalised and disadvantaged women.

What lessons informed my social work identity in this book? Firstly, it helped me to understand that it is not just the abuse suffered by the individual that causes pain and trauma, but the collective experience of witnessing others being hurt and abused and the associated feelings of helplessness – of being unable to do anything about it. When Kilroy is quoted as saying, “whatever normal is, institutions and violence don’t breed it when it comes to relationships” (Olsson, 2005, p. 175), she is telling us that being institutionalised creates long-term damage to people’s ability to identify and maintain healthy relationships. For criminalised women, this is often operationalised through stigma, as their treatment in institutions by the criminal justice system leads them to believe that they do not deserve happiness, or to be loved or nourished. I have worked alongside women who, like Kilroy did, appear to internalise that, for some reason they deserve their punishment – no matter how cruel or usual it becomes. Often it is deeply felt guilt over losing their children, as this excerpt suggests:

Separation from her children is usually the first and biggest loss a woman experiences when she goes to prison. Both the woman and her children are capitulated into a cycle of grieving that starts with the shock of arrest and the trauma of a trial, and continues on through the stage of imprisonment and gradual release. Women are often overwhelmed by guilt and anxiety about the children; they have lost their parenting role and identity along with their freedom and dignity. Children of all ages suffer dislocation (if they are placed with a carer) and teasing at school; they feel anger at their mother for the separation and shame, and pain at the separation from her and often from her siblings. (Olsson, 2005, p. 193)

Demonstrating that being shoehorned into formal education is not the only way to attain knowledge, Kilroy is a street-smart human rights activist, committed to advocating for the rights of disadvantaged women. She can be likened to what Gramsci (1957) defined as a “street level intellectual”, having the ability to see through layers of control and “civilised oppression” and get right to the heart of the matter – a straight talker respected by her community and importantly, trusted by them to speak truth to power. Later, Kilroy enhanced her personal strengths with formal education, through a series of vocational certificates, earning a degree in social work and studying law, becoming the first former prisoner in Queensland to be admitted as a legal practitioner.

This book conveys an authentic truth about women’s experiences of release from prison. For example, often people appear to have changed post-release and may not seem to embrace the prospect of freedom, described as being “institutionalised”. For those of us who have never been held in a prison, it can seem a simple task to instruct former prisoners to shrug off this feeling if they want to successfully reintegrate into the community. Kilroy’s story makes very clear why this is impossible. The book demonstrates

the usefulness of peer-to-peer support, the precariousness of funding – despite service delivery successes – when an organisation works in the advocacy space and the benefits of being a politically savvy activist. More broadly though, it articulates a critique of charity and social control methods of social work intervention and clearly demonstrates the damage to individuals, families and communities created by the prison industrial complex and its neoliberal relative, the welfare industrial complex. Most of all, the book taught me to always question claims about “evidence” and evidence-based practice. We should always ask ourselves, “whose evidence do we take as authentic” – those who collect statistics and turn them into research – or the real-life experiences of people closest to the issue?

For any reader, the book is a page-turner, a compelling story of survival over adversity and disadvantage. Engaging with this book sent me on a direction of learning that I had not contemplated I would take and, I think, has made me a better social worker all around. The book presented to me for the first time the perspectives held by the prison abolition movement and led me to read the work of Angela Davis (see for example Davis, 2003, 2012), which ultimately informed my PhD research and my work outside of academia. *Kilroy was Here* should be a must-read for any social worker who works with, or is interested in, working alongside women who have spent time in prison.

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