


ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Making Good to Making Space: Lived Experience and the Convict Criminology Tradition

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Received: 4 March 2026 | Revised: 4 March 2026 | Accepted: 11 May 2026

ABSTRACT

Making Good's 25th anniversary offers an opportunity to revisit one of criminology's most consequential texts through the lens of lived experience scholarship and convict criminology. Few works have done more to transform the epistemic landscape. Maruna's landmark study repositioned the formerly imprisoned subject as a meaning-making actor, legitimised experiential narrative within mainstream criminology and lent scholarly gravitas to a movement whose claims had long been dismissed or marginalised. This article argues that *Making Good* prefigured many of the epistemic and political commitments later developed within the lived-experience turn, while its redemptive framework also reflects the limits of its early desistance context. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, it develops the concept of a legitimacy economy of lived experience to examine how redemptive testimony continues to shape, and sometimes constrain, the terms on which experiential knowledge achieves institutional recognition.

1 | Introduction: 'From Making Good to Making Space'

Popular culture commemorates its milestones with anniversary tours, remastered albums and deluxe box sets. Criminology celebrates somewhat differently. Yet if *Making Good* were a record, 2026 would mark its 25-year anniversary edition: expanded, remixed and still shaping the sound of a generation. This article is offered in that same spirit; one track in the wider anniversary tour honouring Shadd Maruna's landmark text and the intellectual legacy it continues to shape. It is not the headline act, admittedly, but a willing performer somewhere between warm-up set and tribute band: revisiting *Making Good* through the lens of lived experience scholarship and convict criminology and asking what its redemptive refrain has made possible and what it may now constrain.

Few works in late-modern criminology have exerted the durable conceptual and empirical influence of *Making Good*. Its articulation of desistance as a narrative process of identity reconstruction

helped reposition the formerly imprisoned subject from actuarial risk category to meaning-making actor, challenging enduring myths of the irredeemable offender and insisting on the proximity between the common criminal and us (Maruna 2001). In doing so, Maruna not only galvanised desistance research but also contributed to a broader epistemic shift within criminology, namely, the recognition that experiential accounts of crime and punishment are analytically indispensable to understanding change.

Crucially, however, this article's argument is directed less at what *Making Good* itself claimed than at what criminology, criminal justice and its institutions subsequently did with it. The redemptive template was not prescribed by Maruna. By legitimising experiential narratives within mainstream criminology, Maruna's work has helped create the conditions in which lived experience is now widely recognised as knowledge production across research, policy and practice. Reflecting two decades later, Maruna describes this as a 'remarkable movement' around lived experience and the growing recognition of the 'wisdom, skills,

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and expertise' of people with criminal legal system experience across justice domains (Maruna 2025, vi). Participatory research, peer work, credible-messenger initiatives and co-production practices now operate within precisely the epistemic space that *Making Good* helped open—one in which experiential narrative became legitimate criminological knowledge, but, this article argues, legitimate on particular terms. Those terms matter. Within expanding lived-experience spaces, a particular template of legitimate experiential voice has consolidated: one organised around redemption, generativity and pro-social reintegration and one that continues to shape expectations of credible testimony—often privileging reform narratives while marginalising accounts grounded in unresolved harm, anger, resistance or structural critique.

Revisiting *Making Good* at its 25-year milestone therefore offers more than commemoration. It allows us to situate Maruna's contribution genealogically within experiential criminology, to examine how redemption became a dominant grammar of experiential legitimacy and to ask what forms of experiential knowledge remain constrained by it. This argument should not be read as a critique of *Making Good's* core claims but as a reflection on the institutional afterlives of its success. The article moves through three moments: a genealogical reconstruction of experiential criminology before and around *Making Good*, a close reading of the redemption script as narrative template and an argument for what a post-redemptive lived-experience criminology might look like, not the abandonment of Maruna's legacy but its extension into less comfortable terrain.

2 | Prehistories and Genealogies: Experiential Criminology Before and Around *Making Good*

Experiential knowledge has long circulated within criminology, yet historically it occupied a marginal epistemic position. Much early prison sociology was written about prisoners rather than with or from them, and institutional or administrative perspectives often displaced experiential accounts of confinement (Clemmer 1940; Sykes 1958; Cohen and Taylor 1972). Experiential criminology was therefore never absent but unevenly recognised, present in practice long before it was stabilised as epistemology. Recent historical scholarship demonstrates that lived-experience participation in criminal justice long predates both convict criminology and contemporary participatory movements (Buck et al. 2026), rooted in traditions of insider knowledge that mainstream criminology has been slow to acknowledge.

Scholars such as Tannenbaum (1922) and Irwin (1970) foregrounded the lived worlds of criminalised subjects and the social processes of criminalisation, while mid-20th-century prison sociology drew heavily on the experiential knowledge of those imprisoned even when not always explicitly framed as such. Earle (2018; Earle et al. 2023) traces this to a longer lineage of insider prison sociology and interactionist criminology, arguing that criminology has long depended upon experiential proximity to imprisonment, whether acknowledged or not. Convict criminology later emerged in part from frustration that mainstream prison research ignored what prisoners themselves knew about the everyday realities of imprisonment (Ross et al. 2014).

The formation of convict criminology in the late 1990s nevertheless marked a decisive epistemic shift. Rather than implicitly drawing on insider knowledge, convict criminologists explicitly asserted that the lived experience of imprisonment constituted a distinct and necessary standpoint for understanding punishment and penal institutions (Ross and Richards 2003; Ross et al. 2014). Experiential authority here was explicitly political, oriented towards exposing penal harm, inequality and the hidden realities of carceral life rather than demonstrating personal reform.

Making Good entered this intellectual terrain not as the origin of experiential criminology but as a pivotal translation. Maruna's analysis centred on the subjective narratives of desisting individuals and argued that long-term change depended on the construction of a coherent, prosocial self-story (Maruna 2001). By embedding lived experience within the narrative psychology of reform, *Making Good* rendered experiential accounts culturally and academically legible in ways that earlier insider traditions had struggled to achieve. At the same time, the redemptive structure of desistance narratives, emphasising agency, generativity and giving back, stabilised a recognisable form of credible ex-offender speech (Maruna 2001). It opened the door, and simultaneously shaped the grammar required to pass through it.

3 | The Redemption Script: Narrative Structure and Legitimacy in *Making Good*

If *Making Good* translated experiential accounts into the psychological language of desistance, it did so through a distinctive narrative form—the redemption script. Maruna's core empirical and theoretical claim is that sustained desistance depends less on the objective circumstances of change than on how individuals interpret their past, present and future selves. Long-term desisters, he argues, construct a coherent self-narrative that reinterprets criminal behaviour as inconsistent with a 'true' prosocial identity and frames desistance as the realisation of that authentic self (Maruna 2001). Desistance thus becomes intelligible through storytelling.

Within this structure, Maruna identifies several recurring elements. Central is the belief in a 'true self', a fundamentally prosocial identity obscured but not destroyed by criminal behaviour (Maruna 2001). Closely linked is what Maruna describes as an optimistic perception of personal control though he immediately qualifies this, with the phrase 'some might say useful "illusion"' (Maruna 2001, 88). This qualification matters. Elsewhere Maruna observes that desisting ex-offenders display 'an exaggerated sense of control over the future and an inflated, almost missionary, sense of purpose' and that their highly positive accounts 'bore almost no resemblance to the ugly realities of the ex-offenders' lives' (Maruna 2001, 9). He describes this as 'willful cognitive distortion', a rather more ambivalent and sociologically sophisticated position than the desistance literature has generally carried forward. Finally, redemptive narratives emphasise generativity: a commitment to 'give something back' or contribute positively to others as a means of affirming reform (Maruna 2001).

Drawing on Foucault and discourse theory (Foucault 1977, 1981), Maruna argues that redemption narratives are constrained by the social availability of tellable stories, and that 'the power of the

dominant discourse is to include some stories as tellable and to exclude others as marginal and abnormal' (Maruna 2001, 8). This is not a peripheral caveat but a theoretical foundation of *Making Good* and one that the book's institutional reception subsequently largely set aside. Desisters must tell their stories in ways that are recognisable and acceptable within dominant moral frameworks, but Maruna himself understood this as a condition of power rather than simply a feature of individual psychology.

What the field largely carried forward was the template without this self-critique, a schematic redemption script from which the Foucauldian awareness, the structural framing and the 'useful illusion' qualification had been quietly removed. It is this institutionalised version of the redemption script, 'Maruna-without-the-caveats', that has travelled most durably into contemporary lived-experience criminology, shaping expectations of legitimate testimonial in ways that exceed and sometimes distort the original text. The redemptive template itself long predates Maruna, rooted in religious, rehabilitative and penal discourses that have always required reform narratives as the price of reintegration, but *Making Good* gave it academic legitimacy, psychological vocabulary and a narrative architecture that made it newly portable across institutional contexts.

4 | From Desistance to Legitimacy Economy: Redemption in the Lived-Experience Academy

Contemporary lived-experience criminology has expanded the institutional terrain in which experiential narratives circulate. Across criminal justice policy, research and practice, people with lived experience of criminalisation are increasingly positioned as 'experts by experience', knowledge producers and agents of reform. Yet as lived-experience scholarship makes clear, the incorporation of experiential expertise is uneven, conditional and shaped by institutional expectations about what legitimate lived experience should look like (Antojado and McPhee 2025; Schreeche-Powell 2025). The contemporary lived-experience landscape increasingly extends beyond testimony towards participation and leadership in knowledge production itself. Collaborative and co-produced prison research now seeks to address what scholars describe as 'knowledge inequities' between academic researchers and criminalised participants, positioning lived experience as co-equal expertise rather than data source (Vannier and Harriott 2025).

Within this expanding landscape, the redemptive narrative structure identified by Maruna persists as a dominant template of credible experiential voice. Lived-experience participants are frequently invited into academic, policy or service contexts on the basis of transformation: stories of desistance, recovery, giving back and moral growth. As lived-experience scholars note, inclusion often depends upon presenting experience in ways that are legible to institutional audiences and compatible with prevailing reform agendas (Buck et al. 2022; Darley et al. 2023; Schreeche-Powell 2025).

This dynamic produces what can be understood as a legitimacy economy of lived experience, drawn from Bourdieu's analysis of symbolic capital and the social fields within which its value is produced and exchanged (Bourdieu 1986, 1991). In Bourdieu's

framework, symbolic capital is not intrinsic to its bearer but is conferred through recognition by those with the institutional authority to legitimate it. Applied to lived-experience criminology, experiential authority functions as precisely this kind of capital with its value set by institutional gatekeepers rather than by experiential communities themselves. Its currency is the credible reform narrative: coherent, forward-looking, demonstrably prosocial. Its exchange conditions favour accounts that reassure institutions of transformation over accounts that confront institutions with harm. And its effect is to make inclusion conditional: those whose experiential narratives most closely approximate the redemptive template gain access to platforms, roles and recognition, while those whose accounts resist that template, grounded in anger, ambivalence, structural critique or non-linear trajectories may find the terms of exchange less favourable.

Such conditionality is not merely external. Lived-experience scholarship documents how individuals themselves experience pressure to frame their narratives within acceptable trajectories of growth and contribution. Buck et al. (2022) describe tensions between empowerment and tokenisation, noting that experiential inclusion can simultaneously validate and constrain voice. The result is a double bind: The experiential voice is invited precisely because it is authentic, yet the terms of invitation require that authenticity to be performed in ways legible to institutional audiences (Goffman 1959). The lived-experience participant is caught between incompatible roles, authentic witness and credible reformer, whose demands cannot be simultaneously satisfied without cost.

The continuity with the redemption script is structural, not merely analogical. Just as Maruna observed that desistance narratives must align with culturally available discourses of reform to achieve recognition, contemporary lived-experience legitimacy depends upon alignment with institutional narratives of rehabilitation, improvement and transformation. The grammar has not changed; the institution requiring it has expanded. Experiential authority circulates through forms of speech that reassure systems as much as they critique them. Redemption has become not only a personal narrative but an institutional entry requirement. This institutional logic does not remain at the level of structure alone—it is experienced and internalised by individuals navigating its demands.

5 | Making Space: Recognition, Resistance and Epistemic Justice Beyond Redemption

If *Making Good* helped stabilise a redemptive grammar of experiential legitimacy, the maturation of lived-experience criminology invites a widening of what counts as credible experiential knowledge. Moving from making good to making space requires not the abandonment of redemption but the recognition that experiential authority exceeds it.

Three overlapping principles help conceptualise this shift, best understood not as parallel planks but as a progressive argument. Recognition is the necessary first move: decoupling experiential credibility from redemption performance and affirming the epistemic validity of lived experience irrespective of demonstrable reform. A recognition-based approach treats experiential insight

as epistemically valuable in its own right, including accounts grounded in harm, ambivalence, survival or unresolved injustice. Resistance becomes possible once recognition is established: if experiential authority no longer depends on institutional reassurance, then accounts that confront rather than accommodate (those grounded in anger, structural critique or refusal) can enter criminological knowledge on their own terms. Convict criminology has long positioned experiential knowledge as a standpoint from which to expose penal harm and challenge dominant punishment narratives (Ross et al. 2014). Earle (2018) traces this resistive potential through the figure of the convict criminologist who occupies a double exposure, having been both inside and, later, a researcher inside and who brings to criminology an epistemological challenge that conventional ethnography cannot fully replicate. A resistance-oriented framework therefore legitimates experiential accounts that confront institutions rather than reassure them, including narratives of anger, betrayal or systemic violence that fall outside redemptive tropes of recovery and contribution. Epistemic justice names the systemic condition that enables both: a redistribution of authority within knowledge production itself (Fricker 2007), such that criminalised people are positioned not merely as invited contributors but as co-equal architects of criminological inquiry. Epistemic justice requires institutional actors to interrogate their own gatekeeping functions, and to ask whose reform narratives they are implicitly requiring and which experiential voices their processes render inadmissible before they have even spoken.

Taken together, these principles move experiential criminology beyond the singular figure of the redeemed ex-offender towards a plurality of experiential standpoints; survivor, critic, resister, non-desister, system-harmed subject. They acknowledge that criminalised lives do not always conform to coherent trajectories of reform and that experiential insight often emerges precisely from spaces of contradiction, struggle or structural constraint. Making space therefore means creating epistemic room for experiential knowledge that does not resolve into redemption. This is not straightforwardly a matter of institutional will: The redemptive template persists in part because it reflects the deep structural logic of institutions whose function is the management and reform of criminalised subjects and which therefore have systemic reasons to prefer narratives of transformation over narratives of harm or critique.

Revisiting *Making Good* through this lens clarifies both its enduring significance and its enabling role. Maruna's work transformed criminological understandings of desistance by foregrounding narrative identity and experiential meaning-making, helping move the formerly imprisoned individual from object to agent of criminological inquiry. Its legacy lies in legitimising experiential narrative as knowledge while inadvertently stabilising the narrative conditions under which that knowledge would later be recognised. Marking its 25th anniversary provides an opportunity not only to celebrate this legacy but to extend it. The question now is not whether redemption matters but whether criminology can sustain a plurality of experiential grammars without collapsing them into reform. As lived-experience criminology continues to expand, its epistemic promise lies in accommodating experiential voices that exceed redemption as well as those that embody it. Moving from making good to making space does not displace Maruna's contribution, it situates it within an evolving genealogy

of experiential criminology and invites the next phase of its development. If the anniversary tour honours the original record, making space ensures that new tracks, discordant, unresolved or resistant as well as redemptive can also be heard. The best anniversary editions, after all, do not simply remaster the original. They recover the b-sides, restore the studio outtakes and remind us that what made the record matter was never only its most radio-friendly cuts. *Making Good* gave criminology a powerful and enduring melody. Making space asks what else was always being played alongside it.

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