

Volume 2 | Number 2 | June 2014

scottish justice matters



HEALTH AND (IN)JUSTICE

Edited by Andrew Fraser and Maggie Mellon

Featuring: Health Inequalities • Older Prisoners
Mental Health • Drug Misuse • Neuroscience

ALSO: Current Issues • History • International

ISSN 2052-7950



9 772052 795005

BOOK REVIEW

Understanding Penal Practice.

Ioan Durnescu and Fergus McNeill (eds), 2014. Routledge, Abingdon. Available in hardback and as an e-book.

A **BOOK** aiming to increase our understanding of penal practice without concentrating primarily upon prisons is to be welcomed. Focusing on community supervision this volume scores a hit from that perspective alone. However, the book has a broader ambition: it seeks to shift the debate from 'what works?' to 'who works?' by considering where community supervision practitioners are drawn from, how they are trained, and what motivates them. The subsequent question is: how can they be supported to work better? To achieve this shift the editors challenge us to move beyond merely evaluative to more critical and exploratory research, and offer us the work of internationally renowned academics and practitioners.

The book is divided into two sections. The first includes contributions from America, Japan, Canada, Romania, France, Germany, Belgium and the UK. Chapters encompass the ideologies of probation and parole systems, staff training, motivation and organisational pressures, volunteers, the perils of siting probation within prison services, and the importance of relationships to probation. It also addresses quality in probation practice and the role of social work within the criminal justice system.

The second part, concerned with what practitioners need to improve practice, is also geographically diverse, including a Europe-wide perspective deriving from the European Probation Rules. This part focuses on how professionalism is defined and developed, highlighting the crucial link between supervision skills and outcomes, and considering specific tools to aid engagement and effective practice.

This is a volume of many strengths: it is well-structured and keeps its focus on practitioners to enable in depth consideration. Many authors are engaged in ongoing and innovative research,

which provides an immediacy consistent with the desire to move practice forward. The down side of reporting current research early (e.g. Durnescu et al, Hermanns et al) is that the evidence may be somewhat tentative, but can nevertheless suggest new ways to understand the core motivation, professional skills and ultimately the effectiveness of probation practitioners.

The book is timely in the Scottish context, when community justice is being closely scrutinised and is about to undergo a major transformation. McNeill's chapter on criminal justice from a Scottish social work perspective offers an insight into professional cultures and identities which may be especially relevant. Key themes in community based penal practice that apply across jurisdictions emerge very clearly, including the shift towards evidence based practice and the importance of desistance theory. The predominance of the risk-needs-responsivity model (RNR) and the importance of relationships recur in several chapters, providing a contemporary context. There is also a welcome focus by several authors upon the practicalities of helping probationers or parolees to desist from offending. Housing, friends and family, debt advice, the problems of illiteracy and dyslexia are all identified as needs to be met by referrals to appropriate services. This reminds us that no matter how well motivated, trained and supported, penal practitioners cannot do the job alone. Thus, Vogelvang urges the adoption of a 'support paradigm' to promote social inclusion, consisting of a series of networks with the offender at the centre.

'What works?' is not a foolish question, but taken on its own is limited, and it is instructive to engage with research going beyond evaluation. The various projects described in



Understanding Penal Practice involve a wide range of methodologies: interviewing, observational and mixed methods research along with appreciative inquiry in both the Shapland et al chapter on quality in supervision, and Lieblich and Crewe's chapter on prisons, which reports fascinating results about the nature and quality of relationships between professionals and their clients, and, like other chapters, inspires further reading on the subject.

The book is about professional practice with offenders but the offender is something of a silent partner despite the argument that desistance is co-produced (Weaver). If involved, the offender is simply observed either directly (Phillips, Trotter), in video analysis of interviews (Ugwudike et al), or in a fictional case study used by Chu et al to exemplify the Good Lives Model. This muted voice sits unevenly with emphasising the importance of relationships although, as Weaver acknowledges, it reflects the book's focus on practitioners.

From the outset the editors were clear about their aims. The project is well-conceived and well executed and has resulted in an important collection that should be read by policymakers and community justice practitioners, in addition to a broad range of academics.

Dinah Aitken is a studying for a PhD at the University of Edinburgh.