

Book review:

Robinson, Anne (2011), *Foundations for Offender Management: theory law and policy for contemporary practice*. Bristol: Policy Press

Foundations for Offender Management: theory law and policy for contemporary practice, is an essential and thought-provoking read that could benefit students pursuing a career in criminal justice or those involved in delivering criminal justice interventions. The book provides an uncomplicated, secure base from which those embarking on a criminal justice career can explore the workings of the criminal justice system in general, and the probation service in England and Wales particular. A useful tool, the book is an inspiring yet uncompromising voice of wisdom that stirs the imagination of practitioners, moving them from inertia to action, as agents of criminal justice and advocates for social justice.

The author writes convincingly from what appears to be both an academic an experiential knowledge base, adding legitimacy to the text, thus making it a useful tool for professionals in the field.

The text is divided into three sections along the broad theme of offender management: key considerations, key law and policy and key areas of practice. Part one encompasses four chapters, part two eight and part three six, enabling readers to navigate the book logically but at the same time permitting them to locate particular topics of interest promptly.

Part one and its inclusive chapters, provide a stimulating and provocative read, inviting practitioners engaged in offender management, to be aware that the context in which their work with offenders occurs, is not a ‘value-neutral’ sphere. The author urges those who deliver criminal justice intervention to execute their responsibilities with an inquisitive mind and a willingness to explore the value laden context in which they work, as agents and advocates of both criminal and social justice.

Casting a retrospective glance at some of the values that drove the development of work with offenders and the ethos of early probation intervention, readers are encouraged to creatively examine how offenders’ rights can be proactively promoted within what may be now considered a risk averse, public protection and punitive climate. Against the backdrop that the fear of crime and a preoccupation with risk, has created a conducive environment for the proliferation of a public protection agenda, the author argues that legitimate rehabilitation and the path to safer communities, lies in enabling offenders to pursue and access the basic ‘goods’, that sometimes elude them. There is a strong message that offender management which promotes long term change, balances rather than dichotomies offender’s needs against public protection, is more likely to produce the result we so badly desire, safer communities. Strong arguments are made for a better understanding of the

process of desistance and the significance of facilitating the development of human and social capital, as part of effective offender engagement.

The Offender Management and Risk, Need and Responsivity models of offender engagement are disentangled in the glare of evidence from the desistance literature, highlighting factors believed to promote enduring change. Benefits and limitations of hegemonic models of offender management are examined alongside a request to creatively complement these theories with research and approaches that facilitates the creation of non-offending identities. Attention is drawn to the significance of a positive therapeutic alliance in the construction of a redemptive script and belief in self efficacy. The author also presents sound theoretical arguments in concert with practical examples of how principles of the Good Lives Model (GLM) could be applied to a wide cohort of offenders. This first section, in my opinion, is where the book is most valuable to practitioners who may find the subsequent two sections, more descriptive.

In the penultimate section the author revisits the subject of human rights, but at this juncture, explores topics such as equalities, risk and dangerousness. Other relevant laws and policies applicable to work with offenders such as safeguarding, procedures at court and community sentences are discussed including custodial sentencing, engagement and enforcement. In relation to risk assessment, the approach to standardized assessment and assessment tools is examined including the notion that these tools are not value free. Equally, practitioners are asked to reflect on some of the wide-ranging influential factors that support the cataloging of certain types of offences and offenders as risky. The author argues that it is a risky business to evaluate risk on the basis that individuals belong to certain categories, instead, risk should be judged on behaviour, thus making the book a voice of reason in a climate of change.

Although the usefulness of the concluding section of the book may be more valuable to student readers, dealing with matters such as victim work, work with substance abusers, mental health or sex offenders, it also serves as a useful reminder to the experienced practitioner. For those readers new to the subject of offender management, probation or the criminal justice system, the latter chapters provide an informative and interesting read. In particular, students pursuing a criminal justice course of study or a probation qualification, will find the book to be an essential tool, offering a functional awareness of the works undertaken with offenders.

The book is unabashed in tackling complex subject matters such as equalities, going beyond the legislative framework to explore pertinent problematic areas issues such as dual discrimination and anti-discriminatory practice. Having established a constructive definition of race and ethnicity, the author cogently argues that work with offenders should promote social justice that recognizes and celebrate identity and diversity. Emphasis is placed on the need to be aware of the diverse processes of criminalisation and the dangers of assumption, based on belonging to certain groups or sub-cultures. Often ignored groups, for example females from minority communities and offenders with mixed ethnicities, are singled out for discussion, raising a well deserved awareness.

There are also sober messages that senior management in probation, who would do well to pay attention to, particularly since the service operates within tight fiscal constraints, a climate of contestability, and what appears to be a constant struggle to prove its worth and assert its identity. Although seasoned practitioners may find the earlier chapters very thought provoking and even inspirational in places, as previously mentioned, they may find some chapters, particularly in the second and third sections, quite descriptive. Other areas such as risk assessment may require further expanding to satisfy the pallet of the inquisitive or informed reader. For example, in chapter seven (Dealing with risk and danger) the author raises an interesting point: the distinction between

risk of harm and risk of serious harm. However in my view, a more detailed explanation and or clarity regarding risk of serious harm would be useful.

Having had a stalled journey traveling the trajectory of the “what works” pathway; Offender Management is now at an interesting intersection with the signboard pointing towards “who works”. One of the strengths of the book, is that it incites the practitioner to revisit some of the core values that facilitate positive therapeutic alliances, giving the offender a central place in offender management. Overall, a very thought provoking, informative and functional book that would be a useful tool for academics, practitioners in the probation and prison services and other roles in related fields.

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