

## **Book Review**

### **Fitzgibbon W (2011) Probation and Social Work on Trial (Violent Offenders and Child Abusers). Basingstoke. Palgrave Macmillan**

There are few in Britain who will not be aware of the appalling murder of two French students committed by Dano Sonnex (and his accomplice) in 2008, who was under the supervision of the probation service at that time following release from custody. And of the tragic case of Peter Connelly (Baby Peter) who was murdered in 2007 and known to Haringey Children's Services. Both services became exposed to a media outrage at staff failings and their practices were held responsible for the tragedies. This book offers a critical examination and analysis of the political and social changes that staff faced and the high expectations that came with them. The author looks at the demand for accountability that resulted from the media's public execution of staff and the dissecting of both services' working practices. The approach Fitzgibbon adopted for her study is the interviewing of practitioners, which is a welcome addition particularly as their opinions are not often heard. The author thus offers a realistic account of the politically driven practices imposed, the societal demands, and the anxieties they have created.

By employing a 'left realist' analysis, she is able to dissect the structures of the media, government, community and relevant agencies (child protection and probation) and their interactions. In doing so, she provides an overview and exploration of the pattern of changes both services have undergone and the resultant changed working methods staff adopted by selecting two comparable events that happened in the 1970s. The first event is with the tragic case of 7 year old Marie Colwell that occurred in 1973, who had been starved and beaten to death by her stepfather. The second is Graham Young, known as the 'Bovingdon Poisoner' released from Broadmoor in 1971 on licence and who subsequently poisoned several workmates.

Chapter 2 deconstructs the media as a source of information and how its relationship with the public and politics has changed since the events of the 1970s. The public and government responses provide a stark contrast between the 1970s cases to the Sonnex and Baby P cases whereby staff became vilified by the media, the public and the government. The author draws on the media vendetta towards the Director of Children's Services, Sharon Shoemsmith as opposed to London Probation's then Chief Officer, David Scott, whose resignation received a lighter response. She further explores in detail the immediate media coverage and the explicit way it drove a moral panic concerning the growth of a 'feral underclass' promoted as a threat to societal values.

The changing role of the community between the two sets of comparative cases is analysed in chapter 3, alongside familial relations and their connection to the lack of neighbourly surveillance of excessively violent individuals. Fitzgibbon offers an informative account of the increasing deprivation and fragmentation of working class communities, whilst providing a thorough exploration of the problems and expectations that professionals can face.

Chapter 4 provides a clear epitome of the political responses and inquiries that follow such tragedies. The reader is presented with an interesting and informative analysis of the different environments set 40 years apart that have shaped the political responses and the way inquiries are conducted. First seen with the Maria Colwell Committee of Inquiry (1974) brought about by local pressure, and the two separate inquiries that followed the Graham Young case into the care of mentally disordered offenders. The author moves to the Baby Peter and Sonnex cases where government responses to the media temperament were turned on practitioners and management. The Laming Report is explored and its somewhat polemic approach in telling professionals what they should do. Thus Fitzgibbon offers a valid and realistic critique of how Laming ignores Professor Munro's question of finding out why social workers make fundamental errors through a target base directive that comes before conversations with children. And as with Laming, NOMS made similar recommendations to the Probation Service through its reports following Sonnex which are also analysed.

Chapter 5 nicely follows Munro's plea in asking 'why people act as they do' (p113) in chapter 4, with the exploration of how the risk agenda has become dominant in the minds and workings of both agencies' frontline staff. It offers a realistic account through the author's research findings of the way the probation and social services are heading. Aptly entitled 'The Demise of Probation and Social Service' it provides a direct and honest account through the author's own experiences and, that of practitioners, of the organisational re-structuring alongside the increasing entourage of target based objectives. An informative overview of the shift towards risk assessments and efficiency underpinned by the public protection agenda is given with the development of interagency work. This is explored through the introduction of MAPPA and the arrangements that emerged from The Children's Act 1989; both are dedicated to prioritise public protection.

In the final chapter Fitzgibbon recognises the difficulties faced by practitioners and how they strive to develop good relations with their client groups despite the challenges they keep coming up against. She makes acute observations throughout her book on the changes and the effects of neo-liberalism that characterise the new policy agenda, that undoubtedly has marginalised communities leaving them bereft of state support and how this affects practice. Thus she offers a common sense approach of a move from the one-dimensional orientation to risk management towards multi-dimensional relationships with offenders and to help the families of at risk children by lifting them out of isolation and child abuse. This is through building strong, supportive communities and requires politicians to listen to practitioners. The final comment is made concerning the privatisation direction of probation by the coalition government, which is now being fast-tracked with privateers waiting at the door. Fitzgibbon provides a clear and concise account of the societal and political changes that both agencies have been exposed to through the endorsement of this policy that lacks awareness of the demands it will place on practitioners and their practice. The book offers substance to the research that is supported by a common sense approach and sound reasoning. Moreover, the book alerts the reader to the difficulties and level of accountability a practitioner role is subjected to whilst promoting a debate of the challenges facing both probation and social services. Fitzgibbon's findings further show that despite the struggles many practitioners face, their belief in the services they provide to their respective client groups remain. This is a very informative, readable and absorbing book and one that does not demand a practitioner's knowledge in order to gain an increased insight into the issues the agencies face and how policy governs practice.

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