

Book Review

DBH-Materialien Nr.67: Außensicht der Innensicht - Bewährungshilfe in der Erinnerung ehemaliger Bewährungshelfer, Autor: Paul Reiners

Deutsche Bewährungshilfe (DBH) is the professional association of a range of probation service providers and probation officers in Germany. ‘Außensicht der Innensicht’, translated as ‘outside view of the inside view’, is published by DBH as part of its regular series of monographs and at present is available in German only.

Paul Reiners, a probation officer for many years and now working at Bochum University, sets the scene that enables the reader to understand the development of probation in Germany post World War II. However, Reiners is clear from the outset that this book is not a history of probation in Germany; instead it makes a contribution to the history and development of probation in Germany. The book is not only aimed at those already involved in probation but a wider audience who may have an interest in the subject.

80% of current German probation officers are due to retire within the foreseeable future, and there is a real danger of the loss of their experience and knowledge. Reiners intends this book to record some of these early histories as well as to honour those who made such a significant contribution to the development of a new profession.

Over 175 pages this book is structured into five separate parts. A brief introduction that explains Reiners’ interest in the subject is followed by a helpful and succinct outline of German probation legislation. Criminological exploration of the understanding of crime, punishment, imprisonment and rehabilitation over time provide a succinct and informative mainly European context. These chapters are included to provide context to and aid understanding of the research findings and interviews. Reiners outlines his research with retired colleagues, sets out the content of his questionnaire and presents an analysis of the findings. The largest part of the book is given over to the transcripts of interviews Reiners conducted with five male and one female retired probation officers. Reiners’ respect for his colleagues, his subject knowledge, and the range of topics covered make the interviews an engaging and informative read. Research and interviews are supported by selected historical documents.

‘Outside view of the inside view’ is an interesting title for someone reviewing this book looking into a system as an outsider with limited inside knowledge. Reiners inclusion of legislation and context setting is necessary and helpful to make the book accessible to an international readership. Some of the book’s content is inevitably German specific, such as debates about civil service status and pay, and is likely to be of limited interest to outsiders.

However, this does not detract from the overall appeal of the book. The undoubted success of this book lies in the interviews with former colleagues and the passion, commitment, creativity and tenacity they brought to the work frequently in the face of much opposition and adversity.

The influence of rebuilding after World War II is evident. Comment is repeatedly made of the Allies' contribution, especially by the Americans and British, to the development and ethos of probation in Germany. The British influence in setting up probation work in Berlin is highlighted and the irony of this in the light of current threats to the Probation Service in England and Wales will not escape the reader.

I found it impossible to read the questionnaire and the interviews without responding to the questions raised, giving my own answers and comparing them to those given. The similarities and ongoing importance of issues raised remain current to practice and are applicable cross-border. It is challenging to think about such questions as: how many service users have you harmed; or what level of personal maturity does a probation officer need and can this be taught?

It was perhaps surprising, that even after retirement the emotional impact of working with service users was still evident. This included death, either the death or suicide of a service user or a service user killing whilst under supervision. Given these long-term effects this raises the questions about health and safety of retired and current staff, and how their well-being is looked after.

In their interviews colleagues talk much about the freedom that probation officers have in working creatively and imaginatively to engage with service users. The reader is left in no doubt of the value attached to this freedom to assist others to change.

This book is a very readable and informative contribution to the development of probation in Europe through the contributions of individuals, which will hopefully be translated into other languages in the future to reach a wider audience.

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