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Reviews

Developments in Social Work with Offenders (Research Highlights 48)
Edited by Gill McIvor and Peter Raynor
London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007, 368pp
ISBN 9781843105381 (pbk) £22.99 / US$45.00

According to its cover blurb, this book explains the organisational and legislative changes that have occurred in relation to work with offenders across the UK in recent years and outlines the accumulating body of knowledge about what constitutes effective practice in the assessment, supervision and management of offenders in the community. While the sections on policy and issues comprise contributions from eminent British authorities in the criminal justice field, the section which relates to practice: 'Assessment, Supervision and Intervention', brings in influential writers from Australia, Canada and the USA.

A rather depressing story threads through the volume. While there has been an unprecedented level of policy reform and legislation in this field, it has been largely in support of a political rhetoric of being 'tough on crime', meshing in with wider objectives for 'modernisation' of the public services. With these developments have come, variously, more punitive and coercive community sanctions (alongside a constant increase in the use of imprisonment), more structured methods of assessment and methods of intervention, new-managerialist methods of ensuring practitioner as well as organisational accountability and the prospect of contestability and outsourcing of areas of work. These issues, and others, all receive thoughtful and authoritative attention in this collection.

The contributions draw out interesting and significant distinctions across the three jurisdictions of the UK: England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. In England, embedded within this welter of change has been the demise of forms of practice with offenders grounded in social work values and methods. However, in Scotland and Northern Ireland somewhat different signals can be distinguished. While acknowledging that the broad thrust of youth justice policy in Scotland

has been in a punitive direction, Whyte, McIvor and McNeill point out, in their different chapters, how, at the same time, a rehabilitative model and its interlinkage with social work values and practices has continued to thrive and has retained a place in governmental discourse. In Northern Ireland a rather different dynamic has been at play. During 'the Troubles' when politics assumed its most turbulent form, for work with offenders to take place at all, it had to be demonstrably outside politics. In this environment, Chapman and O'Mahony argue that an inclusive community partnership approach blossomed, laying the foundation upon which a flourishing restorative base for work with offenders is now grounded.

These observations lead me to my major gripe with the book, particularly revealed in the section on 'Assessment, Supervision and Intervention'. The term 'groupwork' does not appear in the index nor, as far as I could see on reasonably close reading, anywhere in the text. This is the case even though work with groups is highly relevant to the topics considered. For instance, most of the *offending behaviour programmes,* reviewed by McGuire (Chapter 9) and assessed by the *accreditation panels,* which are themselves appraised by Rex and Raynor in Chapter 7, are formulated to be delivered to offenders in groups. The chapters on *risk and need assessment* and on *case management* pass without attention to group issues, although, surely, they must be central to any assessment of 'criminogenic need' or referral to offending behaviour programmes.

The one occasion when group issues do emerge directly is when Trotter contemplates the effect of peer group influence on *pro-social modelling* (Chapter 11). However, the context is implicitly negative: that placement with other offenders for unpaid work is associated with higher reoffending than when working alone or with 'community volunteers'.

But, even if groupwork had been considered, what methods and values might have been discerned? As Trotter observes, there is the positive potential of involvement with community groups and this underpins some of the thinking on restorative justice, as noted above, and can be found especially in McNeill and Maruna's proposals for a strengths-based *desistance-focused* approach to working with offenders. Such approaches represent challenges to the negative focus on deficits, treatments, controls and sanctions which dominate current practice,

as represented in programmes, risk and need assessment and case management, and leave open links with methods and values aligned to social work and to groupwork.

In sum, the volatility of criminal justice policy is well illustrated by this volume as are the challenges to theorists and practitioners to square a recognition of the real politic with integrity to their values and to evidence as they find it. A number of chapters refer to Pathfinder projects, set up in the early 2000s to test a range of approaches to various aspects of work with offenders, which research and experience from around the world had suggested might have potential. Regrettably the achievements of this 'rational' approach have been very mixed. Political expediency led to promising approaches being abandoned before they could be fully or fairly implemented, never mind evaluated, or, alternatively, to be 'rolled out' prematurely with disappointing outcomes.

Although it is less than two years since this volume was published, some parts now seem rather historical. The current economic downturn and its implications for crime, for criminal justice policy and for work with offenders were not even on the horizon when these chapters were written. A number of the changes which were then preoccupying the authors, notably the dismantling of the probation service, have not happened and look increasingly unlikely. Nevertheless, the volume does offer a comprehensive review of the underlying issues facing work with offenders in the UK and of the practices which are currently in vogue. It's a pity, though, that they forgot about groupwork!

Dave Ward
Professor of Social and Community Studies
De Montfort University, Leicester, UK

Addressing Family Violence Programs
Groupwork interventions for infants, children and their parents
Edited by W Bunston and A Heynatz
Melbourne. Royal Children's Hospital
Mental Health Service, 2006, 164pp
ISBN 0646464922 (pbk)

The contents of this illuminating and practical book are the product of 10 years of groupwork based interventions with children and families affected by familial violence. The book comprises 15 essays which attain credibility at both an academic and practical level. The book also has a resonance beyond groupwork interests, in that it is a powerful reminder that practitioners have a responsibility to explore difficult issues with service users at all stages of the life course in manner which allows for safe and creative engagement.

The book considers the work of three key projects that have the following unified set of objectives:

- Providing a safe space to acknowledge children's experience of living with violence.
- Building a safe connection between infants/children and their mother's/carers.
- Providing a therapeutic experience as a prelude to future work
- Educating parents about the impact of family violence on children
- Enabling constructive expression of feelings
- Challenging power, control and gender issues inherent in violent relationships. (p.15)

Wendy Bunston provides two excellent introductory chapters which provide helpful signposts to key issues throughout the book, but also provide some theoretical 'glue' to support the very practical accounts that follow. For example, she explores the issue of group leadership and highlights the benefits of practitioners leading across separate child and parent groups. It was highlighted that this allows workers to identify synergies between what children focus on and what their parents explore. It was also noted that the practitioners could model and promote the connectedness between parent and child through this approach.

The book provides a wealth of tools and tips for prospective group workers. These include relatively familiar tools such as body maps, modelling and metaphoric work. It is the use of metaphors that seems the most cogent in the work with children and there are many vivid and moving examples. In chapter 5 the authors present examples of an art therapy approach called 'Aggro Avenue' which shows the work and thinking that children undertook when drawing and narrating what scenes would happen on a street characterised by 'aggro'. These images were then shared with the parent group to raise awareness of the impact of family violence on their children. The tools described also have applicability for individualised approaches to practice and underline the creativity required to truly seek the voice of service users. For example, there is a strong sense of the pivotal and active contribution that babies make within the group tasks in terms of helping parents to understand communication.

A key benefit of having the written contributions from the practitioners involved in the group projects is that the narrative moves beyond a purely 'how to' approach, to one which allows space for reflective comments. This opens a window to how it actually feels to use the tools with service users who have experienced pain, fear and loss. This is a key strength of the book and one which will find an appreciative audience among practitioners.

Richard Ingram
Programme Director , BA (Hons) Social Work
University of Dundee