Book review
Reimagining probation practice: Reforming rehabilitation in an age of penal excess

Edited by Lol Burke, Nicola Carr, Emma Cluley, Steve Collett and Fergus McNeill. Routledge. 2022

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As a probation pracademic (probation practitioner turned academic) my levels of expectation for this innovative book were high, given the team of editors and contributing authors. I have not been disappointed. The promise to provide a ‘comprehensive and positive reimagining of probation practice in England and Wales’ is duly fulfilled and acts as an antidote to fatalistic and dystopian views found on social media in recent months. Such views have been in response to Dominic Raab’s changes to the parole system which have silenced practitioners and cast shadow on their professional expertise (Inside Time, 2022), the spectre of ‘One HMPPS’ that many interpret as yet another attack on the distinct probation occupational culture that is independent from the Prison Service (Probation Institute, 2022), and the never-ending onslaught of negative inspection findings that highlight the impact of a diminished workforce on probation’s ability to work effectively with those subject to statutory intervention (HMI Probation, 2022).

Crucially however, this book does not trumpet a utopian view of probation practice. Instead, it remains grounded in the reality of a service recovering from the rupture of TR, and ongoing ordeal of unification. In the introductory chapter, the editors do not shy away from the magnitude of the endeavour to reimagine rehabilitation and the role of probation within this. Instead, they illustrate the overlapping complexity of the process of personal development and desistance from crime, alongside the importance of social integration and social justice (see pg. 22). This recognition of the complex processes and structures which probation practice inhabits, would have been helpful to me in my time as a Probation Officer when faced with the emotional dissonance arising from the policy instructions I was mandated to implement; so often at odds with the values that motivated me to continue trying to support those who were disenfranchised and discriminated against by virtue of their involvement with the criminal justice system. The recognition of the impact of 20 years of ‘unprecedented attention’ of probation acknowledged and unpacked by the editors, was assuaging given that I joined probation in 2001: constant change was the soundtrack to my entire probation career and provides the ongoing mood music for my endeavours as a probation educator and researcher.
Alongside the recognition of probation’s politically inflicted tumult, there is also a clear ‘laying down of the gauntlet’ in terms of pushing for greater recognition of the long-lasting impact of penal supervision on those subject to criminal justice intervention and the role of social inequality and exclusion as barriers to desistance from crime:

‘[p]robation should have a campaigning role beyond individual advocacy and should not be afraid of speaking out about the inequalities, marginalisation, exclusion, discrimination and injustices that can negatively impact on the daily lived experiences of those under their supervision’ (p.233)

I agree, and envisioning probation as a force for promoting equality and inclusion is clearly enshrined within the Probation Institute Code of Ethics. I wonder, however, how plausible this is, given the Probation Service currently has no formal statement of corresponding values, and its staff are effectively silenced (or driven to anonymous posts on social media platforms) through fear of being held in breach of the Civil Service Code. Whilst this is recognised by the editors in their concluding chapter, I was left feeling uncertain on how this particular thorn in the side of probation can be reimagined.

Undoubtedly however, the overall approach of the book is refreshing, with each chapter exploring a probation ‘setting’ rather than focussing upon specific groups of individuals, which so often fails to recognise the intersecting needs and experiences of those subject to probation intervention. Authors have constructed their arguments around the conceptual framework provided by McNeill’s (2012) ‘four forms of rehabilitation’. This is successful in providing an overall coherence and unity to the book whilst showcasing the breadth of probation work. It is also an effective counter to the stereotypical and tired representations of probation work in the media which all too often centre on individuals cleaning graffiti, and therefore represents a possible way in which to engage the wider community in the ‘civic narrative’ advocated in the introductory chapter. Maybe a future edition could look to include chapters related specifically to the work of probation practitioners in prisons as part of the OMiC model and those situated in Victim’s Units to add further valuable contributions and insight to the multi-faceted work of modern probation.

On a more pragmatic note, this approach is an absolute gift to a probation educator who is conscious of the limited time PQiP students have available to engage with the academic component of their qualification. I find myself faced regularly with the challenge of providing relevant and engaging literature that is both meaningful to contemporary probation practice, and easily accessible to those trying to navigate the demands of study and work.
The inclusion of practitioners as co-authors will, I hope, encourage our learners to see that academics can ‘work with’ practitioners as opposed to just ‘do’ research about them (and yes this is a respectful nod to Burke and Collett, 2010). I only hope the Probation Service will ensure PQiP students have the time they need to engage with such an important resource, not only to help them with their academic studies, but more broadly to support them to feel part of a probation culture that continues to be under the ‘heavy hand of the Prison Service’ (p.3).

Given my current role as a PQiP tutor, I was drawn to the chapter dedicated to reimagining probation training, and the concerns presented by Burrell and Petrillo in relation to the rushed, ‘increasingly functionalist’ (p. 176) and ‘impersonal’ (p.182) nature of the qualification. As someone who joined probation in 2001, I was part of the ‘culturally distinct group’ (Nellis, 2003, p.944) that completed the Diploma in Probation Studies (hotly contested at its point of conception in 1998) and prior to the move to online learning. I benefitted therefore from interaction with passionate academics (such as Mike Nellis) and space for discussion with my peers as part of my professional development. Like Treadwell (2006), I appreciated the attempts of the academics I encountered (in person) to ‘mount a sufficient critique’ (p. 8) of the occupation I had chosen to join, and I believe that a return to face-to-face teaching is required to better support our learners with the hard work of developing their professional identity, values and skills required to support ethical practice. Like Burrell and Petrillo, I agree that online education and training has its place; but just because we can do something, does not mean we should if more appropriate alternatives are available.

Conclusion

I end my review where this insightful and uplifting book begins:

‘This book is dedicated to probation practitioners whose contribution often goes unrecognised. In particular to those who have worked throughout years of organisational upheaval and who have served as frontline workers during the pandemic’.

I agree whole heartedly. This book is dedicated:

- Dedicated to recognising probation practitioners as committed, innovative and deserving of significant investment to support them in delivering legitimate and relational-based rehabilitative work.
- Dedicated to positioning probation practice as a rehabilitative endeavour and challenging the Probation Service to recognise the need to engage meaningfully with the communities within which it operates to address social inequity and address ongoing discrimination of those with criminal convictions.
- Dedicated to challenging penal excess and supporting individuals subject to criminal justice intervention with the complexity of personal development and desistance from crime in a hostile societal context.
This book is written for probation (as a distinct occupation and rehabilitative endeavour) by those who know and understand probation in all its intricacy, whether this be through research, professional practice or both. Read it. You will not be disappointed. It might even make you feel hopeful about the future of probation practice and ‘the national service of second chances’ (Lammy, 2020): no easy feat in the current context. Meanwhile, I hope to see you in the queue for the ‘Desistance Centre for Probation’ (p.231); we all have something to offer if we want to see probation survive and thrive in the future.

References


