

Book Reviews

Coaching Behind Bars: Facing Challenges and Creating Hope in a Women's Prison*

Clare McGregor

Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press, 2015

ISBN: 978-0-335-26442-1, 136 pages, paperback, £23.99

'No one is beyond hope, even behind bars.' Clare McGregor's final sentence in *Coaching Behind Bars* seems to me the most appropriate starting point for this review of a book that will appeal to a wide range of readers, particularly to those of us who have been fortunate enough to have experienced the wit, wisdom and resilience of the women who find their way into the criminal justice system.

The writing style is easy but elegant, blending gentle, sometimes self-deprecating humour with an incisive knowledge of behavioural psychology and the confidence of someone who is master of her craft: in this case, coaching. It was a nostalgic read, as the themes reflected many aspects of the work that have been part of my career development. One of my earliest posts in the Irish Probation Service was in the Women's Prison. Interestingly, it is now known as the Dóchas Centre, *dóchas* being the word for 'hope' in the Irish language. Many years later, I oversaw the delivery of a coaching programme for managers in the Probation Service. It never occurred to me that the discipline of coaching might be transferable to work with women in prison. This book draws from the author's personal experience to tell us just how it can be.

Clare McGregor tells the story of how she came to provide a coaching programme to women incarcerated in Her Majesty's Prison and Young Offenders' Institution Styal, located in Cheshire East, 12 miles from Manchester city centre. As a coach, she had worked with professionals who were already highly effective but wanted to move up another level (as

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an executive coach once said to me, ‘to play at the top of their game’ – and there will be no further metaphors from sport).

The recession took its toll on her business but also provided McGregor with time to draw breath and conceive a plan to make coaching available to those who were at rock bottom, with no belief or confidence in their capacity to change their life script. Such a plan could be regarded as naïve at best, and at worst completely mad, but the Governor of Styal was receptive to the approach.

The charity, Coaching Inside and Out (CIAO), was established in 2013 and the author and her colleagues found themselves behind bars, negotiating unfamiliar processes, a new language and all of the challenges of locating the client at a particular time and in an appropriate space.

By 2015, 25 coaches had worked with women, average age 34 years, serving a range of sentences for a variety of offences, but with no recent history of violence. (By the way, I too visited HMP Styal when I worked in probation in England. These shared strands are now getting eerie!)

McGregor’s belief, confidence and clarity about coaching practice, where the wisdom and power lies with the client and not the coach, underpins her writing and is patently visible in the direct quotes from the women that punctuate and elucidate the narrative. The emotional/physical deprivation, loss and abuse characterising the lives of so many of these women stands in stark contrast to the success and privileges that the usual recipients of coaching enjoy. In her earlier practice, McGregor focused on supporting high performers to achieve even greater effectiveness within their organisations. She is now looking through a very different lens when she says ‘If you work from what some see as the bottom up then you are working where there is the most potential in our society: potential we cannot afford to waste.’

The description of engagement with the women is really interesting, particularly for those of us who have struggled with introducing new programmes/approaches to address offending. While the aim of the coaching with these clients (they are not referred to as offenders) is not to stop them offending but to assist them in reaching their potential, there is a confidence that the process will help to stop people committing crime. The standard ‘coaching programme’ offered is usually six hours over a number of sessions, at three-week intervals. The unexpected releases and transfers were just another reality of prison culture to which coaches learned to adapt, working within each session to awaken, if not unlock, individual potential for problem solving.

At one point one woman says, 'You ask all the right questions.' As McGregor tells us, these key questions are the essence of coaching. What do you want to change? What's holding you back? What assumptions are you making? What strengths do you have? How can you achieve what you want? The Outcomes Star, which looks at key life themes, is used at first contact to help the women to consider what it is they want to change and to identify their own goals. Their narratives are testament to how the realisation of the possibility of change can fuel the energy and personal resources to make and follow through on positive choices.

The chapters entitled 'The Pain' and 'The Problems' are not easy reading as they go to the heart of the lived experiences of these women. Self-harm, mental health issues and substance misuse are just some of the manifestations of prisoners' attempts to manage their lack of self-esteem and often extreme feelings of self-loathing. It can be difficult, ironic as it may seem to members of the wider community, to keep women safe in custody.

When I worked in the prison, I insisted on hearing the early news reports and remember the immense sense of relief when there were no reports of self-harm or suicide. The feeling of loss and sadness is pervasive but there is no sense that the coaches are overwhelmed by these accounts, nor have they lost sight of the harm caused by these clients. Many of Biestek's¹ principles of social work seem to underpin their practice, with individualisation, client self-determination and acceptance at the very core of the coaching relationship. What is particularly striking is how the coaches managed to communicate high expectations in a way that engendered and fostered self-belief. The author reminds us of how positive it can be when others express their confidence in your abilities and you realise that you can do it after all.

Reading the chapters, I was acutely aware of the efforts that the coaches made to understand prison culture, its language, its values and its unwritten rules. In an institution where security is paramount, the 'professional outsider' cannot be effective, or even function, if trust and respect are absent from the relationships with the guardians of that security. While there were sceptical, sometimes amusing, comments from staff, the appropriate attention given to building those relationships was beneficial. The fact that the women valued the coaching clearly served to strengthen those bonds.

¹ Biestek, F. (1957), *The Casework Relationship*, Chicago: Loyola University Press.

We have to remember in any discussion about relationships that, sad as it may seem, the best family for many of these women is in Styal. The book does not elaborate in any detail on the interactions with other services in the prison (including Probation). It does stress the importance of alignment with other professionals and the recognition that identified goals can connect/reconnect the women with relevant support services either inside or outside the prison walls.

The practice framework described, often through the voices of the clients and the coaches, clearly demonstrates how the coaching conversation can galvanise and harness individual strengths that have remained untapped for a multiplicity of reasons. I was amused to hear the author say how quickly the women sense if you are ‘for real’ – I felt that same feeling of fulfilment and, dare I say, self-satisfaction from a prisoner’s words of endorsement – ‘she’s sound’. McGregor’s writing is both real and sound and, while her enthusiasm for her subject is awe-inspiring, she clearly states that coaching is not a panacea.

This is an enjoyable and demanding read. It is essentially about asking the right questions rather than providing the answers. The wisdom and the tapestry of reflections stimulate the reader to pause and reflect in turn. I appreciated, not for the first time, the honesty, the insight, the compassion and the belief in human redemption that unites us criminal justice practitioners. I think you will too.

Critical Perspectives on Hate Crime: Contributions from the Island of Ireland*

Edited by Amanda Haynes, Jennifer Schweppe and Seamus Taylor

Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017

ISBN: 978-1-137-52666-3, 524 pages, hardback, £66.99

Critical Perspectives on Hate Crime discusses and explores the subject of hate crime from an all-Ireland and multidisciplinary perspective. The text is divided into three parts and chapter contributions are offered from various disciplines including criminal justice, sociology, law, social policy and practitioners.

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Within the island of Ireland, the concept of understanding and respecting diversity lies on a wide continuum. The UK's decision to leave the European Union saw a spike in the number of reported hate crimes and has visibly highlighted the presence of explicit and implicit bias, prejudice and discriminatory attitudes. It is accepted that this same conscious and unconscious intolerance towards difference is a problem in an all-Ireland society.

This book offers various insights and overviews into the development of a cross-border approach to understanding and tackling hate crime from various contributors. The Republic of Ireland stands as a jurisdiction without hate crime legislation. Perspectives are given on the possible disappearance of the hate crime element in this context. Conversely, hate crime is embedded as a crime 'aggravated by hostility' within the criminal justice field in the North of Ireland. Viewpoints are offered that in spite of its existence, the legislation is under-utilised and should not be viewed as a stand-alone. This is explored further in a post-conflict era where communities have been affected by sectarianism and violence.

The range of identity groups who experience hate crime are outlined. Chapters include discussion around racialised communities, Irish Traveller and Roma communities, people with disabilities and the LGB community. Other chapters are devoted to the unique experiences of the transgender community and exploration of how sex workers are exposed to harm and violence.

The book approaches various themes arising from the aspiration of inclusivity and the acceptance and embracement of diversity. Some of these themes call for the need to send a message of intolerance on hate crime by highlighting the role of hate in legislation. Others call for the need for strategic policy and practice responses. Others pose the debate and links between legal and educative solutions. Preventative measures to hate behaviours are tentatively approached, and the role of interventions to challenge intolerant attitudes and promote diversity for those convicted of hate crime is meditated on.

The subject of hate crime deserves absolute priority, and this book advocates discourse, understanding and action on tackling it. The contributors provide interesting insights and interpretations and allow for further shared learning and collaborations in an all-Ireland and a global context.

Parole and Beyond 2017: International Experiences of Life After Prison***Edited by Ruth Armstrong and Ioan Durnescu**

Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017

ISBN: 978-1-349-95117-8, 319 pages, hardback, €83.00

If I had a euro for every time a prisoner has said ‘This is it, done with prison, never coming back’, I’d be writing this from somewhere with a guaranteed summer, like Barbados or Skibbereen. Even if I had a euro for every time it impressed as a genuine intent, I would boast a good farmer’s tan. Unfortunately, if it was only paid according to success, I might stretch to a weekend in Ballybunion ... off-season.

It has often struck me that we often meet the best of our clients in prison. They attend for appointments, engage attentively and appear highly motivated. Many offenders thrive on the stability, structure, support and attention to basic needs of food and shelter. Though, obviously, drugs are available, there are many who establish greater control over addictions and, sometimes, detoxify effectively. As many of my and my colleagues’ clients nestle back into prison, it is clear that many ex-prisoners do not manage when they return to their communities. Ask any probation practitioner and you will hear several themes recurring almost universally as to the factors contributing to further offending and incarceration. This collection looks to put some of these questions to the ex-prisoners themselves, collating the experiences of ex-prisoners struggling to put their lives back together.

With greater frequency than in previous years, many prisoners leave Irish prisons with some form of Probation Service supervision. Courts are increasingly using recent legislation providing for Part-Suspended Sentence Supervision Orders. Life-sentenced prisoners are subject to supervision when released on parole and, for a number of reasons, structured supervision programmes on release, such as Community Return,¹ are viewed as the way forward. Within this context, this anthology of papers on post-release supervision in different jurisdictions is timely.

In this book, edited by Ruth Armstrong and Ioan Durnescu, there are reports and narratives relating to several international jurisdictions. The title, *Parole and Beyond*, could be seen as somewhat misleading, as

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¹ McNally, G. and Brennan, A. (2015), ‘Community return: A unique opportunity’, *Irish Probation Journal*, vol. 12, pp. 141–160.

not all subjects fall within a parole-type experience, most strikingly in the accounts of ex-prisoners in Sierra Leone. The accounts of ex-prisoners' experiences include reports from England, Denmark, Netherlands, USA (with two entries), Australia, Chile, Scotland, Romania and, as mentioned, Sierra Leone.

Each research project covered applies a different methodology in data collection, varying from structured, singular interview to more immersive projects. Beginning with an overview of the populations involved and outlining the nature of the supervision type, each author looks to illuminate the reported experiences of prisoners returning to their communities. Within a general approach, there are specific enquiries into the ex-prisoners' experience of statutory supervision, whether by Probation Officers, Parole Officers, designated social workers or similar experts. Through the accounts of these men and women, the policy, the direction and purpose of post-release supervision is defined.

Throughout the studies, there are differences in the approach of different jurisdictions to the re-entry of prisoners to their communities. Some jurisdictions have an authoritative, monitoring function, with a primary focus to ensure compliance with terms of release. Respondents in several case studies report that full compliance is either impossible or made so by the innate contradictions between different, contemporaneous conditions. Other jurisdictions seem to stress support, rehabilitation and problem-solving as primary responsibilities of post-release supervision, but the contradictory and unfocused observations persist. Though there are massive differences between the life experiences of people living in Scotland, Romania, Sierra Leone and Bible-Belt USA, there is a consistency running through these studies identifying universal difficulties faced by prisoners at release. One such theme is the manner in which they experience and interpret supervision by statutory agencies.

With regularity, each study identifies respect as an issue of primary concern for the ex-prisoners. Respondents spoke favourably of their interactions with supervising officers, regardless of the purpose or effectiveness of such interventions, where they felt treated with respect. Worryingly, sometimes the absence of overt rudeness and disdain was enough to contrive a respectful relationship. Other themes of significance from a practitioner's viewpoint include confusion on the part of the ex-prisoners regarding the purpose of supervision; a lack of clarity about what constituted successful compliance; and a sense that post-release supervision was designed entirely to control behaviour and, occasionally,

to sabotage the efforts of those released from prison to move on with their lives. Where offenders spoke positively about the experience, they mentioned, consistently, the relationship with their supervisor and a sense that the official both cared about and listened to what they had to say.

Regarding attempts by ex-prisoners to establish lives without offending, a number of issues emerge with consistency in all studies. For many prisoners, returning to situations of poverty and exclusion was cited as having major significance, making change an extremely fraught endeavour. The stigma of conviction exacerbated existing barriers to education, employment and, in a general sense, inclusion within society. Returning to the same locations, surrounded by the same peers and accessing the same activities all served to undermine attempts to re-identify as non-offending, constructive citizens. Those who stood the best chance of avoiding further conviction seemed those best placed to alter their self-identification, whether through employment, familial relationships or, as in one of the American studies, spiritual conversion.

Many respondents spoke to the researchers of the means by which the institutions of state sought to hamper rather than support change, to reinforce the ex-prisoner's identity as an offender and a criminal. Where individuals made efforts to support positive reintegration, underlying societal forces regularly proved of greater influence. In the latter instances, it seemed that there was little preparation for life after supervision ended. Ex-prisoners managed to avoid reconviction while subject to supervision orders and, possibly, swift return to prison, but regularly returned to old habits when the perceived heat was off.

Another theme that emerges is that of arbitrariness, that conditions can be placed on offenders in a 'one size fits all' arrangement. People, for example, who did not identify themselves as problem drug users were compelled to attend addiction services. A further issue was vagueness of recommendations, non-specific to the individual, and the lack of client participation when devising action plans. I know from experience that prisoners often approach me to clarify what is meant when prison or parole authorities determine they should 'engage with services', a blanket catch-all condition that means little to the individual.

Working within a prison, it is obvious that post-release supervision regularly ends with the offender's return to prison. This book outlines many of the reasons for this. Structured, personalised and participatory release plans seem more effective in supporting ex-prisoners in holding on to the 'ex-'. Where supervised release is most effective, in my experience,

is with life-sentence prisoners. Lifers are not released with insecure accommodation and uncertain daytime activity. More time and energy is spent in explaining the terms and parameters of supervision. More support is available to, generally, an older and more mature client group.

In summary, there is certainly a bleakness in these accounts of ex-prisoners and their struggles after release. The book is notable in giving time and a voice to people who are more easily disregarded because of their past transgressions. Many questions occurred to me while reading the book. It did prompt a pause for reflection on my own practice and to consider how my interactions are perceived and experienced by clients. Particularly, it reinforced my sense that rather than support people to change, we often intervene in a manner that expects them to be different. There are lessons to be learned from the stories and experiences in this book.