Book Review

Race and Probation*
Edited by Sam Lewis, Peter Raynor, David Smith and Ali Wardak

Race and Probation sets out to explore probation’s work with Black minority ethnic (BME) and racially motivated offenders. It sets the scene for this task by briefly identifying BME people’s experiences of the criminal justice system and highlighting the importance of a greater understanding and awareness of this reality to the implementation of effective probation policy and practice.

The subject is addressed within four distinct but related sections. Part 1 provides a detailed background to the subject matter (Chapters 1 to 3), Part 2 explores the needs and experiences of BME offenders (Chapters 4 to 7), Part 3 looks at more recent developments in policy and practice (Chapters 8 to 11) and Part 4 is a summary chapter outlining conclusions.

Part 1 takes the reader through probation’s historical record of responding to race as well as the criminal justice system’s response to racially motivated offending. It also focuses on evidence of racial discrimination within the criminal justice system and the probation service. In relation to probation, it concludes that the responsibility to address racism has fallen primarily upon the shoulders of Black and Asian staff, with policy and practice being driven by local responses, as in the case of community unrest. Credit is given to probation for a degree of exploration of the issues that has not been evident within other agencies. It is proposed that incidents of racially motivated offending are

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hard to find due to anxious probation staff lacking confidence in how to address racist offending particularly within a groupwork context. Racist attitudes remain hidden at all levels of probation. Chapter 3 asks penetrating questions about probation’s contribution to the interactive nature of law enforcement which can perpetuate a complex cycle of discrimination. There are lessons which can be applied locally, not only in relation to racism but also in relation to sectarian offending and the role of probation.

The first two chapters of Part 2 rely on research carried out by Calverley et al. in 2004, which was sponsored by the Home Office. These chapters explore the criminogenic needs of Black and Asian men and the extent of social exclusion they experience on probation as well as issues of confidence and ‘legitimacy’ as related to the criminal justice system. After a complex analysis of the research it is indicated that the criminogenic needs of BME probationers are on average lower than their white counterparts but yet they receive similar community sentences to white offenders with higher criminogenic needs. The possibility therefore has to be considered that BME people receive ‘differential sentencing’.

Chapters 6 and 7 focus on the experience of female minority ethnic offenders and those of mixed heritage respectively, and reinforce the need to break out of traditional views of BME groups. The combined effect of a young increasing population experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and discrimination from criminal justice agencies, the authors of Chapter 7 propose, will ‘contribute to their increased representation among the offending population’.

Part 3 commences with an examination of recent developments in exploring, designing and delivering programmes for BME offenders. Despite attempts to tackle discrimination, Chapter 8 again reminds us of Black and Asian people’s negative experiences of the criminal justice agencies and argues that the responsibility to address this falls upon local service responses.

Chapters 9, 10 and 11 explore issues of specialist provision for BME offenders, minority ethnic people’s experiences of supervision and programmes and what might be effective in working with racially motivated offenders respectively. The importance of locally relevant information to commission culturally specific work is stressed but it is acknowledged that more questions are raised than answered in terms of the benefits of specialist services for BME offenders. In terms of
groupwork, there is support for mixed groups but it is suggested that programmes should include some content relevant to minority ethnic offenders such as the effects of racism. In working with racially motivated offenders the concept of shame is explored and how it can build into the more familiar cognitive-behavioural work looking at the offender’s emotional responses and self-control. It is argued that for probation to be effective in this work it needs to move beyond the enforcement of orders and punishments and to engage with those it supervises in a more complex way, daring to suggest that probation develop again the old practice of using relationships within probation practice.

Part 4 rehearses the key messages of the book, which are summarised in a brief five-page chapter. This is helpful in that, although the content of many chapters is readable and immediately accessible, some of the detailed studies contained within the book are more difficult to penetrate.

For those used to dealing with research as a matter of course the detailed nature of some of the material may not pose a problem. For the practitioner keen to get to the key concepts that will inform their work, this level of detail may provide more of a challenge. For this very reason Race and Probation meets a broad spectrum of needs. What the book unquestionably does is provide material that raises the challenge of addressing race and crime at a personal and practitioner level, at an organisational and policy level and with those we supervise to reduce offending. At a time when the peoples living on this island are increasingly diverse, in a way that could not have been imagined even a short time ago, the information in this book is well worth reading and should not be ignored.