

## Book Reviews

### **Counselling Skills for Social Workers<sup>1</sup>**

**Hilda Loughran**

London: Routledge, 2019

ISBN: 978-1-138-50420-2, 322 pages, paperback, £26.39

There has been a recurring, if somewhat sporadic, debate, throughout these islands and indeed further afield, as to the relevance of social work to probation, and vice versa. Reviewing this book by Dr Hilda Loughran of University College Dublin raises the question again regarding what direct relevance, if any, there is in such a publication for probation work, whatever about its value to the field of social work more generally. This question should be considered now in the context that, in recent years, Probation Officers joining the Irish Probation Service have had to be registered social workers. This is also the position of the Probation Board for Northern Ireland. Having said that, there may well also be at least elements of a practice 'lag' in fully embracing social work theories and practice in probation work. In a similar vein, for example, 'counselling' is not a term or concept that gets used much in the world of probation practice, at least in this reviewer's experience. Having read *Counselling Skills for Social Workers*, however, this reviewer is confirmed in the book's relevance for probation work, as for the other areas of social work practice more generally.

The book is divided into three parts: (1) Counselling skills for social work, (2) The application of counselling social work to [social work] methods, and (3) Appendices. The first part describes the various skills in question, including: conversations, counselling and therapeutic interventions; talking and responding; listening; thinking; processing and reflective practice; questioning; assessing and assessment; empathy, reflection and reflective responding; and affirming, advising and motivating change. Part 2 describes

<sup>1</sup> Reviewed by Vivian Geiran, former Director (2012–2019), Irish Probation Service (email: vgeiran@gmail.com).

the application of the various skills discussed to three specific social work methods: (i) Solution-Focused Work, (ii) Motivational Interviewing, and (iii) Group Work. Part 3 comprises a compendium of various useful practice 'toolkit' components, reflection exercises, checklists, case examples, and illustrations.

Loughran adopts an accessible approach, structure and layout, in getting her message across effectively. This is achieved and supported through setting out a structure of grand theories, sub-theories, associated methods and skills. In clarifying this framework through a simple yet effective approach, the author identifies, and reiterates throughout, the core elements of what is required in working as a professional social worker. Then, in each skill area, she provides examples of how we may already practise these skills in various situations. But the crowning achievement is how the author elevates these everyday 'relatable' behaviours to the level of professional competency, demonstrating what makes professional practice unique and what that practice at the required professional level looks like. She achieves all this through the use of an effective teaching style, using examples to which the reader can readily relate, and providing excellent case studies, examples, checklists and illustrative tables and figures. All of this is backed up by appropriate research evidence, which is overlaid with Loughran's extensive experience over many years of reflective practice in different settings. This enables Loughran to 'get under the bonnet' of counselling skills in social work, and make those inner workings transparent to the student and established practitioner reader alike, as well as charting a clear path to how these essential skills can and should be developed, honed, and delivered in practice. It is evident throughout that Dr Loughran has brought to bear here the full range of her undoubted ability to review her practice critically, in the context of its theoretical foundations. She has also clearly organised and integrated all that material to develop a deep understanding of how to achieve ever-more skilful and effective interventions with service users.

Loughran states in her introduction (p. 11) that this book sets out 'to provide a theoretically informed understanding of the core skills required to provide counselling interventions that work'. The author succeeds admirably in that goal. In addition, Loughran also manages to address a number of issues core to the practice of social work, including to criminal justice social work. These include the applicability of social work methods and skills with involuntary clients, such as those under probation supervision. She also identifies the general 'invisibility' of social work skills in many respects, and

---

some practitioners' perceived aversion to theory. The latter is despite the author's assurance (p. 88) that 'theory is our friend', providing 'a connection to an appropriate methodology for intervening'. One of the many positive features of Loughran's analysis, demonstrated throughout the book, and which resonated with this reviewer, is her ability to demystify many frequently misunderstood concepts, and to debunk mythologies that have grown around particular social work methods and practices. These include, as well as issues associated with working with involuntary clients (and statutory and agency requirements arising in such contexts), consideration of the features of an effective professional relationship, including the use of empathy and self-disclosure. Unhelpful ideas that have sometimes emerged among some practitioners around the whole area of assessment, and the practice of Motivational Interviewing for example, are also addressed.

This book is an excellent addition to the social work — including criminal justice social work — practice literature. The presentation and layout are excellent, and it lends itself to use in self-directed learning, as well as being a valuable student training manual or staff development handbook. My only quibble is that there are a number of typos through the text. These are minor enough not to detract from its overall quality and value, but slightly irritating, where they do occur, in what is otherwise an excellent production. Dr Loughran's publication deserves to be widely read and used, and to sit, well-thumbed, on the bookshelves of social work students, practitioners and their practice teachers/supervisors and managers. In that context, it does indeed achieve its author's goal of providing a 'theoretically informed understanding of core [social work] skills' for effective work and productive outcomes. In addition, although the book is well founded in relevant theory, its author could hardly have made it more readable and user-friendly. This publication was a joy to read and should be a standard 'go-to' book for social work students, teachers and practitioners alike.

---

## **Uses and Consequences of a Criminal Conviction: Going on the Record of an Offender<sup>2</sup>**

**Margaret Fitzgerald O'Reilly**

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018

ISBN: 978-1-137-59661-1, 300 pages, hardback, €67.40

*Uses and Consequences of a Criminal Conviction: Going on the Record of an Offender* discusses and explores the myriad uses and possibly misuses of criminal records, predominantly within an Irish context. The text is divided into three parts, exploring initially the criminological and penological perspectives of the subject matter, and moving on to consider the criminal record from pre-trial to post-punishment, and finishing with perspectives in the aftermath of punishment and release.

The book provides a valuable insight and overview into the development of the various uses of the criminal record. It considers how these uses align themselves to legal principles, predominantly in the context of proportionality. The author gives a detailed description of the uses of the criminal record at the various stages of the criminal procedure and poses questions regarding whether and how these uses are aligned with the protections provided vis-à-vis the Irish Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights.

The interplay between governmental penal policy, proportionality, risk assessment and control are discussed throughout the book. These concepts are central to the work of the Probation Service, and especially in post-release supervision orders, with the extension of control that these orders can represent. The author discusses how the extended and perpetual surveillance and control of those who have committed offences have become key components of penal policy and practice. The extension of surveillance in the context of some of the novel supervision and post-custody criminal justice initiatives such as J-ARC<sup>3</sup> does cause this reader to reflect on whether they represent perpetual surveillance and a possible encroachment upon basic rights, or are an opportunity for individuals needing a higher level of support to continue on their journey of desistance.

<sup>2</sup> Reviewed by Leah McGuire, Assistant Principal Probation Officer, currently on secondment with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

<sup>3</sup> Joint Agency Response to Crime (JARC) is a strategic offender management initiative led by An Garda Síochána, the Probation Service and the Irish Prison Service, with the active support and engagement of the Department of Justice and Equality.

In the opening chapters, the author notes a cultural shift in the approaches taken in criminal justice practices generally, from individualised justice and rehabilitation, to an ideological focus primarily upon monitoring and controlling in the name of offender management, harm minimisation and public protection. A criminal record in these circumstances is an added burden, heightening the exclusion and stigmatisation of already marginalised persons who fall foul of the criminal justice system.

The overwhelming number of people in prison or subject to probation supervision in Ireland, and elsewhere, are working class, have poor educational achievement, more likely than not are unemployed or in low-paid work, and a high proportion have a history of drug and alcohol problems. As this book clearly highlights, they are already, for the most part, among the most deprived and marginalised in society.

The author refers to David Garland's seminal 2001 book, *Culture of Control*, where he posits the view that the fear of crime has become salient and a problem in itself. The fear of crime, in his view, contributes to insecurity, anxiety and a falling confidence in the criminal justice system to do anything about it.<sup>4</sup> Fitzgerald O'Reilly recognises the significance of that fear and how the response over time across the world has been reflected in retribution in sentencing, net-widening (more people in prison and on supervision), and an increasing managerialist and risk-averse culture in criminal justice. In societies and communities evermore fearful of crime, those labelled as offenders and punished are, in many instances, still feared, irrespective of efforts made towards change and rehabilitation.

Reading this book prompts reflection on the centrality of the criminal record across a Probation Officer's workload — from pre-sentence, to case management and final review. Risk assessment tools and case management plans, completed with reference to the criminal record, are used to aid in managing risk and monitoring progress. The well-known mantra that the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour can be like a millstone that potentially blocks the pathway to redemption and reintegration. The far-reaching impact of the declaration of a criminal record on an individual's attempts to manage their life in relation to housing, employment, banking and travel can be evermore discouraging and seemingly insurmountable. The individual with a criminal record regularly struggles to assert some of the most basic fundamental human rights that other citizens can take for granted.

<sup>4</sup> David Garland, *Culture of Control* (2001), Oxford: OUP

Fitzgerald O'Reilly's comments on the increasing retention and use of previous criminal record information, beyond the criminal justice system, arguably makes a nonsense of the possibility that an offender, having served the penalty for an offence, has paid the price for their infraction. The life-long criminal record and the increasing use of vetting, official and unofficial, ensure that a person continues to pay a high personal price for what may have been long-past misdeeds. The Criminal Justice (Spent Convictions and Certain Disclosures) Act 2016 is a welcome but very limited possibility for a few to leave their past behind. Its restrictive conditions highlight the ongoing distrust of the community and a continued labelling of the already marginalised.

This reviewer agrees with the author, and does not believe any of the noble aims of rehabilitation and reintegration are assisted by the constant shadow of one's criminal record being recalled, not only at the court house, the probation office and the Garda station, but also at the job centre, the airport or the housing authority. With a significant criminal record, however far in the past, a person cannot, in most instances, be employed as a civil servant. That means, for example, that, irrespective of other qualifications, they cannot become a Probation Officer, a post where their experience, personal change and insight could be invaluable as a role model and change agent.

As Margaret Fitzgerald O'Reilly has written previously:

There must be a balance between public concerns and allowing the individual to be integrated, rehabilitated and essentially move on with their lives. Achieving this balance has become more and more obscure as the justice system focuses its attention on control, the strategy dominating late modern culture.<sup>5</sup>

In summary, this challenging book presents a detailed breakdown of the uses of a criminal record. It begins with a methodical and practical insight into how previous convictions are considered, from pre-trial right through to sentencing. The author goes on to reflect upon the proportionality and fairness of such uses, suggesting the possibility that some equate to misuses. The question of misuse is further explored in the use of the criminal records beyond the sentencing *de jure*, beyond the criminal justice setting, and into the civil domain areas such as housing, employment and travel.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Fitzgerald (2009), 'The usual suspects: Analysing the use of past criminal convictions in the criminal justice system', The Westminster International Law & Theory Centre, Online Working Papers, available at <https://www.westminster.ac.uk/sites/default/public-files/general-documents/WILT-03-09-Fitzgerald.pdf> (accessed 29 July 2020)

---

The author invites the reader to consider not only the wide and varied facets of life that a previous conviction can impinge upon in a citizen's life but also the longevity of the implications of the conviction, long after the sentence has been served. For criminal justice actors such as Probation Officers, who believe in the capacity of individuals to rehabilitate and desire for them to reintegrate successfully into their societies, this book offers a formidable reality check, and an opportunity to reflect on their practice and the significance given to the criminal record.

This is a timely and important publication that should be read widely not only by Probation Service personnel but by policymakers and practitioners across the criminal justice system. It obliges us to consider the unintended, and sometimes intended, consequences of our actions in the light of our better aspirations towards supporting change, promoting inclusion and encouraging rehabilitation. We owe it to ourselves, our communities and each other to remove blockages and provide incentives to those who have offended and have paid a debt to society. Not only should it be read but the critical messages should be forefront in the mind of those policymakers and practitioners as we plan for a better future.

## **Imaginative Criminology: Of Spaces Past, Present and Future<sup>6</sup>**

**Lizzie Seal and Maggie O'Neill**

Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2019

ISBN: 978-1-5292-0268-7, 176 pages, hardback, £60

This book is a thoughtful and effective contribution to a growing body of work that seeks to both challenge and re-imagine the cultural and structural inter-workings of criminology as a discipline. Imaginative criminologists often argue that criminology has become overly narrow and bureaucratic as a discipline and is too closely aligned to dominant perspectives such as criminal justice and the criminal law to be able to criticise or challenge them effectively. In response, they seek to overcome these perceived epistemological and methodological weaknesses by conducting research that engages more substantively and theoretically with diverse subject matter such as the dramatic arts, fiction, film, photography and varied cultural institutions.

In their introduction, the authors note that while this book is about arguing for imaginative criminology itself as a perspective, its chief purpose is to put

<sup>6</sup> Reviewed by Brian Payne, Subject Leader for Criminology, Ulster University (email: b.payne@ulster.ac.uk).

forward a series of examples of 'imaginative criminologies' where broad contexts, both physical and imaginary (or a combination of the two), are explored in depth. 'This is cultural criminology constituted through ethnographic work' (p. 2), and certainly the book roots itself firmly in the idea that there is a symbolic dimension to what we conceive of as our social reality, ensuring that if we can understand the ways that we react as a viewer or reader to the repertoire of images, ideas and meanings available to us about crime and other transgressions, then we can also understand the broader structures and processes that can create outcomes for individuals, and frame our subsequent reactions to them as a society. However, as argued by the authors, any attempt to explore and deconstruct the spaces and places of transgression, defined as 'the breaking of boundaries and taboos' (p. 9), will require the reinvigoration of criminology through the deployment of creative approaches or the borrowing of insights from other creative fields of practice.

Chapters 2 and 3 begin this process, setting out two powerful examples where spaces of control and confinement (homes for indigenous children in Australia and Magdalene Laundries in Ireland) are understood through various mediums. Both case studies, despite not being penal in nature, can be seen as highly representative of Goffman's description of total institutions where perceived disorderly groups are segregated from mainstream society with a regime put in place that is meant to reform and improve them. Applying a critical lens to the shortcomings of criminology in attending adequately to these institutions, the authors explore the use of oral history accounts and cultural representations in the portrayal of indigenous children, and feminist histories, poems, a documentary and films in the case of the Magdalene Laundries, to highlight their importance as specific sites of social control, human rights abuse and gendered shaming. Central to this are the ways that social knowledge of the events that occurred there have been reconstructed through concepts like memory at individual, familial and national levels, all of these combining to produce a shared imagery of what occurred there and its significance.

Maintaining the focus on confinement, Chapter 4 explores the findings of a participatory arts intervention that used creative writing classes with male prisoners in HM Prisons Lewes and Durham. The deployment of imaginative criminology in this case takes the form of a range of creative participatory methods that are designed to enable self-expression and critical reflection and can enable a richer understanding of the spaces of imprisonment and the boundaries between the inside of the prison and the outside world or



freedom. These take the form of poems and stories, which are analysed through the prism of creative writing rather than as examples of rehabilitation in action. While it is recognised that the benefits of initiatives such as enhanced literacy are important from a rehabilitative standpoint, the authors explain that such writing is much more valuable as a means for shedding light on the complexities of imprisonment.

Chapter 5 continues the focus on space and place to discuss the use of film and walking ethnographies to explore the experiences of asylum seekers and migrants within border camps, mostly in Greece, Syria, and Melilla, as they interact with the material and symbolic concept of the border. Chapter 6 focuses specifically on space, place, violence and transgression, with two fascinating case studies from Canada and Northern Ireland. The imagined spaces inhabited by indigenous women and sex workers, including attempts to remember those missing or dead in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, are juxtaposed with the history of the 'peace walls' in Belfast, which have in the past been epicentres of war, violence and conflict, through diverse methods, including walking methods, photographs and interviews. Finally, Chapter 7 puts forward a rationale for the use of works of fiction as a means of doing imaginative criminology, setting out the imagining of dystopian futures in young adult fiction as an example of how this method can offer complex and layered social realities that are ripe for exposition by criminologists and sociologists.

Bringing this all together, the concluding chapter puts forward arguments for an imaginative criminology of space. By showing us how there are no limits to the types of methodologies and subject matter that can be explored, Seal and O'Neill have given us a tantalising glimpse of the ways that our criminological imaginations can be expanded, and highlight the potential benefits for the enhancement of both empirical and conceptual work that can both critically and creatively reimagine how we conceive of social justice and of the transgressions that occur within society. Whilst there is a clear roadmap for how we should use this book, the emphasis on substantive theory set against an array of complex imaginative methodologies does ensure that this book is far from a simple manual for practitioners to follow and is one that needs to be returned to on a number of occasions in order to grasp fully its complexity. Of course, this in no way limits the significance of what is an insightful and knowledgeable read that lends momentum, as well as a new body of ideas and techniques, to efforts to realise the untapped potential of criminology as a means for bringing about transformational justice.