Community justice in Australia: Developing knowledge, skills and values for working with offenders in the community

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Community Justice in Australia is an excellent and accessible book that provides a helpful description of community justice in Australia as well as covering research, theory and practice skills relating to community justice more generally. This seems essential reading for those involved in criminal justice in Australia, particularly those working to address offending behaviour. It has wider relevance, as the Australian context will be of interest to an international audience, particularly in relation to innovations and topics concerning the indigenous population. However, its relevance goes beyond this, as the book includes a number of sections that engage with contemporary research and theory on criminal and community justice which will be of interest to academics, practitioners and policy makers around the world.

The book opens with a helpful overview of definitions of community justice. In my view, community is a term that is often used to make certain polices or interventions seem more positive, friendly or palatable. In the Scottish context in which I am based, this is exemplified by Community Payback Orders replacing most forms of community sentences, and by the recent Community Justice (Scotland) Act 2016. My take is that references to community justice often really mean criminal justice in the community where community is shorthand for not in prison.

As Stout explains, community justice is much more than simply those activities that occur outside of prisons, and involves real engagement with community dimensions, community engagement in the development and operation of responses to crime, as well as broadening into notions of social justice.

The book touches on many issues that are interesting, inspiring and, at times, scary. I was interested in the various definitions of imprisonment given in legislation in New South Wales, which included forms of restriction in the community (p. 34). In my mind, these stretched the notion of prison in ways that could be particularly misleading to the public. The Koori Courts constitute an indigenous version of a justice response that was particularly interesting (p. 43), involving less formal settings and including indigenous elders, making the process more culturally appropriate and demonstrating more successful outcomes. The Collingwood Neighbourhood Justice Centre in Melbourne was also a vision of justice that could be replicated in other jurisdictions (p. 44). It seems to take a holistic approach to responding to crime, aiming to be proactive, involving citizens and aiming to focus on community dimensions related to crime. I was shocked to see that boot camps were used relatively recently and endorsed by the Australian Government, given that the evidence is that these are generally ineffective at addressing offending behaviour and can even increase offending rates (Latessa & Lowenkamp, 2005).

A key issue that came up throughout the book related to the situation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. This raised concerns about the criminal justice response,
particularly due to the over-representation of people from these backgrounds who are
drawn into the criminal justice system or
imprisoned. It was helpful to view this from
a community justice standpoint, including
how responses could consider indigenous
concerns and perspectives. The critique of
restorative justice was particularly interesting,
as this is often seen as a way of bringing back
indigenous responses to crime, or responding
to offending in culturally appropriate ways,
yet this is not necessarily the case. Moreover,
the evidence presented by Stout suggested
that the restorative justice responses tended
not to reduce re-offending, which departs
from evidence in some other jurisdictions and
meta-analyses (e.g., Strang, Sherman, Mayo-

The book includes a great, critical
discussion regarding notions of risk and
risk assessment, which would be of interest
to criminal justice practitioners anywhere.
The discussion on pro-social management
was particularly interesting to me, and
involved the argument that the management
of community justice services ought to
mirror some of the ways in which such
services engage with service users, treating
colleagues with respect and working
constructively towards resolutions. The
final chapter on practice skills is particularly
good, illustrated with a case study and
bringing together evidence and theory on
effective practice skills. Again, this chapter
will have relevance to community justice
practitioners in any jurisdiction.

I would have liked the book to move beyond
current practice, and to have developed a
vision for what community justice could
be. This would be more than good quality
criminal justice in the community, but
rather co-produced community justice that
embraces a high level of engagement and
partnership, and that engages with the
issues of risk aversion, indigenous rights,
and equality that are touched on at various
points throughout the book.

Overall, this is an excellent and comprehensive
book, clearly essential reading for
community justice practitioners in Australia,
but with relevance to those working in the
field in any jurisdiction around the world.

References
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Ariel, B. (2013). Restorative justice conferencing (RJC)
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