

Book Review for Journal of Sexual Aggression

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A Community Based Approach to the Reduction of Sexual Reoffending. Circles of Support and Accountability, Stephen Hanvey, Terry Philpot and Chris Wilson, London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2011, pp.192, ISBN 978 1 84905 198 9

Review

Sexual offenders face significant barriers when attempting to re-enter society and engage in rehabilitation ([Tewksbury & Zgoba, 2009](#)). Disintegrative shaming can harm the ability of an individual to re-enter a community and thereby jeopardise the likelihood of successful rehabilitation ([Ward, Polaschek, & Beech, 2006](#)). Desistance, re-entry and rehabilitation of sexual offenders is much less understood than for example the causal factors of offending. Therefore the academic and practitioner context of this book is an exciting and fruitful arena. The book assists our understanding not just of what works to reduce re-offending, but crucially what helps those committed to create ‘no more victims’ and live an offence free life.

In a climate of worldwide austerity and financial crisis, the concept of providing support and care to sexual offenders is a difficult one for many to accept. Ask any member of the public where the government’s priorities should be in terms of allocating resources; the rehabilitation of sexual offenders will be a far from popular choice ([Ward & Maruna, 2007](#)). Still, I believe this book provides convincing arguments and defensive points to sway even the most adversarial critic. Whilst the history, purpose, mission and aims of Circles is expressed through the authors, it is the powerful authentic narrative of offenders and circle volunteers, that vibrantly illustrates, Circles in action.

The book opens with an historical trail of the origins of Circles and contrasts and compares to the current structure of Circles UK today. This chapter is a critical opening

to the book as it explains to those unaware of Circles UK, its role and purpose. The chapter goes on to contextualise the organisation within the UK's criminal justice framework. Chapter four provides detail of how circles operate with criminal justice agencies, such as Probation, Police and Prisons. It explains volunteer recruitment and offender selection along with the practicalities of how a circle begins, functions, and comes to a close. Both chapters provide substantial foundation for readers new or unfamiliar with Circles UK and the multi-agency approach used with sexual offenders.

There is substantial evidence to demonstrate that focussing on aspects of offenders' lives through, planning and implementation of strategies within the community, is more likely to assist pro-social functioning ([Ward & Maruna, 2007](#)).

While there is much work still to be done in the desistance arena, it is so refreshing to hear the perspective of men living through such experience. For those not working in the field, their narrative provides insight, enlightenment and understanding, showing the intricate complexity of such offenders. Their steadfastness yet vulnerabilities are felt in their stories, revealing like us, they are human too. Likewise the sincere manner in which the four volunteers tell their stories show that unlike societies "do-gooder" stereotype, each have valid, diverse motivations and experiences to share.

A particular strength of this section of the book is that the authors chose not to edit the narrative. Indeed, rather than focus the narrative on parts referring to circles, the free flow of the testimonies results in a genuine perspective. Both offenders and volunteers have important experiences outside of circles, allowing this authentic picture permits the reader to understand their journey up to and beyond Circles UK. It would have been crude to edit and select commentary only discussing circles however the authors have allowed the rich narrative to speak for itself. I believe this has created a far more powerful message for Circles UK.

The authors throughout the book rightly highlight that a circle cannot function in isolation but is rooted within multi-agency networks. Given that offender and volunteer narrative features so strongly within this book, I would have appreciated an account from others involved in Circles UK, such as the volunteer co-ordinator. Likewise, the voices of practitioners working alongside circles such as Probation Officers or Sex Offender Liaison Officers would have given further authority for those readers not working in the field. Additionally, it would have been quite groundbreaking to have heard a narrative from a female core member. Although with fewer convictions, this of course would require the availability and willingness of a female core members which may not have been an option for the authors.

The book closes with a short commentary of the alarmist type reporting used by local and national media to cover criminal stories, sexual in nature. The example of the abduction and murder of Sarah Payne in 2000 by convicted sexual offender Roy Whiting is a helpful one as this triggered a naming and shaming campaign by The News of the World. This type of frenzied media action plays a significant role in forming society's views of offenders. The closing chapters succinctly demonstrate how this type of moral panic and demonization of sexual offenders serves only to fuel irrational fear, and increase barriers for offenders re-enter into society. It is perhaps true that the media may not yet be ready, if ever, to accept the fact that sexual offenders are human beings, requiring equality, dignity and respect ([Laws & Ward, 2010](#)). At the time of writing this review, The Levenson Enquiry investigates both the conduct and ethical standards of British Media. The authors' closing chapters highlight the unethical and immoral behaviour of many parts of the British media in relation to suspected sexual offenders. How far Lord Levenson's enquiry will compel fair and factual reporting of sexual offence cases is yet to be known.

The authors' intended audience for this book are Circles volunteers, offenders and practitioners working within the field of sexual offending. Yet I feel it has much wider potential. Its format is logical, its message threads throughout the text and I believe the manageable style, length, use of plain English makes this book readable for far wider audiences than intended. Indeed the book makes for a great tool to promote the work carried out in the field of offender rehabilitation, to audiences with or without specialist knowledge along with professionals with the power to influence the public such as the media and government.

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