

Offender Supervision in Europe

F. McNeill and K. Beyens (eds.), (2013)

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Offender Supervision in Europe is the published result of a conference held in Liverpool at Hope University in 2013. The conference, held under the same title, discussed the work undertaken by the European Society of Criminology's Working Group on Community Sanctions and Measures into offender supervision.

The editors pose two initial questions. Why should there be research into offender supervision in Europe and why is it that there is a paucity to date of such research? It could be said that the first question answers the second but of course the real reason lies elsewhere. Despite the fact that the numbers of adult offenders under supervision have grown rapidly across most European jurisdictions in recent years the research emphasis has been on mass incarceration rather than mass supervision. The effect of this accentuation on imprisonment is significant. It skews academic, political, professional and public representations and understanding of penology. Consequently, argue the editors, there is a failure to deliver the kind of analyses that are required in order to address the challenge of delivering justice in financially straightened times.

Given this acknowledged paucity of research it comes as no surprise to the reader that the editors willingly admit that this volume: "represents a sort of feeling around in the dark for the edges of our understanding," the edges of which are nearer than we think! It matters greatly that we are still feeling around in the dark. Without a critical appreciation of supervision it is not possible to influence and inform its development. Along with the strong economic argument for supervision there is a much wider agenda of how such research - as highlighted in this volume - informs the social and political institutions of the state, particularly in relation to penal policy. The stakes therefore are high.

Whilst contributing to the albeit slim body of knowledge around European supervision the book readily acknowledges it raises more questions than answers. What it does set out for the reader is a series of questions which will direct further research. Take, for example the "European idea" highlighted by Christine Morgenstern and Elena Larrauri which they believe, still has something to offer. It is based on common values of human rights (of which the European Convention of Human Rights is its most visible entity) and that context of valuing human rights can provide a framework for the human rights of all citizens, within which the rights of

offenders under supervision are included. Whilst agreeing with Morgenstern and Larrauri that there is something, of varying depth, around the European idea, how much of this will be under threat from those who disagree with many aspects of European co-operation remains to be seen post Euro 2014 elections.

Offender Supervision in Europe identifies research challenges. Firstly, it is difficult to make comparisons with research studies across Europe because the studies are presented in their own social, political and legal context. As Ioan Durnescu, Christina Enengl and Christian Grafl observe comparing studies in different jurisdictions can be quite artificial. Most start from different questions and employ different and sometimes not entirely reliable methodologies that are rooted deeply in their social context. Therefore, from an experiential point of view, it is quite likely that offenders in differing countries will interpret and experience supervision in distinct ways even when it is delivered in an apparently similar manner. Or, to put it more simply, we risk comparing apples with pears. Secondly, where the few comparative studies that have been made are of great interest the next step should be not only to study the 'objects' of interest; institutions, cultures and practices of supervision in different places but the relationships between the objects and the conditions that have shaped them. The next stage then, is to develop new comparative and methodological approaches and analytical frameworks that can be used as a basis for refining and generating new knowledge. Achieving this aim will rely on addressing some basic questions relating to comparative research. In other words answering the "why should we compare? How should we compare? and Who compares from which perspective and How can we make sense of these comparisons? The challenge to research here lies in how these comparisons can be meaningfully made across the participating European countries.

It is probably stating the obvious therefore that the challenges for developing critical and comparative research are significant and *Offender Supervision in Europe* does a good job in highlighting these challenges which as the editors acknowledge was pretty much what they set out to do. With challenges come opportunities and what comes out clearly in this volume is the intent and desire to get to grips with dominant Anglo-Saxon hegemony of penological theory. By adopting a multi-disciplinary, multi-cultural and holistic approach there is the potential to produce a culturally sensitive and 'truly interpretive' approach to comparative penology. This is not to imply, as Gwen Robinson and Kerstin Svennson point out, that the local studies cannot be used beyond a local context and say something more general about a topic of offender supervision. What is required is to make the research truly representative of the differing states including the non-Anglo-Saxon communities that make up Europe.

There is much of interest in this highly readable volume. It is perhaps more of interest to the academic and policy maker than practitioner although again, as Robinson and Svennson note, research on practice should be interesting and useful for practice especially where it is claimed that practice is based on research or is evidence based. However, notwithstanding the sometimes thin distinction between the three disciplines the next phase of work undertaken will be of significance to the probation community as a whole.