

Improving Criminal Justice Workplaces: Translating theory and research into evidence-based practice

Paula Brough, Jennifer Brown and Amanda Biggs

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This book, written by eminent criminal justice researchers Paula Brough, Jennifer Brown and Amanda Biggs, provides an excellent review of research drawn from organisational psychology and criminal justice systems (CJS) and a comprehensive coverage of key aspects of organisation culture from many countries across the world. It does, however, by necessity and by paucity of search elsewhere remain fairly restricted to the Western world. Much of the research and thinking, however, is translational and can be re-worked to respect particular cultural differences.

The book is organised around three core themes: framing, scanning and forecasting. This allows the authors to identify many common organisational and cultural problems in CJS, to investigate existing research and, importantly, methods employed in undertaking that research. The existing research focuses on problems resulting from a prolonged period of austerity in public services and cover economic and social factors, changing levels of crime in these times, scientific trends and threats to the assumed legitimacy of and trust in CJS. The search for alternatives, or forecasting, explores the place of worker resilience, organisational justice - whether that is distributive, procedural, informational or interpersonal – rationale choice and (de) professionalisation and (de) regulation as concepts exploited within neoliberal society, especially New Public Management, the deployment of incentives and performance related measures. A central strength of this well-researched volume is its intent for the research to be used to develop practical outcomes and to enrich the experience of those working within CJS and by dint of that to enhance the quality of those services and their outcomes.

The first part of the book, concerned with framing the problem, acknowledges the stresses and pressures of the 21st Century. Confronting some of the pernicious outcomes of such working conditions – a lack of trust arising from ‘us and them’/‘uniform and suits’ mentalities, bullying, stress and burnout, for instance – and promoting the meaningful engagement of employees within their CJS agencies I emphasised throughout this section, whilst recognising that over-engagement can backfire and result in some of the pressures that lead to disengagement and interpersonal as well as organisational dystopia. Leadership is differentiated from management as the current trend towards the ‘emperor’s new clothes’ dictates. The buzz words of ‘transformational and ‘transactional’ leadership are used but I am not as convinced by the arguments stemming from them, preferring perhaps to employ Occam’s razor and parsimoniously hark back to the personal characteristics to which the authors refer. These features concern self-awareness, relational transparency, appropriate communication and moral perspectives – personal qualities desirable for an effective and humane CJS not specifically leadership ones.

The second part of the book is interesting and has a clear practical application for CJS practitioners and policy makers. A range of evaluative and research techniques are considered alongside research examples that illuminate the state of play of innovation and research in contemporary CJS. Of course, some of this makes sorry reading when the actual conditions of CJS are considered but it also offers hope for change. The

advantages and disadvantages of service evaluation, focus groups, consultancy, survey research and Delphi technique research are rehearsed. This section offers timely and important advice for those committed to enhancing CJS.

In the final part problems and solutions to some of the challenges facing CJS are explored. This section pulls together the research collated throughout the book and expatiates on different forms of organisational environment, how these could be enhanced through work-life balance, changing workplace conditions and diminishing toxic environments that breed bullying culture and unreasonable expectations.

CJS require creative environments and solutions. This book offers a plea for international development and sharing good practice and research that address current and emerging issues such as the retention of staff, increasing diversity across the staff group, changing cultures and working within the context of continuing austerity, increased workloads. It succeeds well and will form a valuable text to trigger debate and reform within contemporary CJS.

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