

# Review

**Stephen Farrall (2002) *Rethinking What Works with Offenders: Probation, Social Context and Desistance from Crime*, Willan, Cullompton, ISBN 1-903240-95-6**

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Does probation work? Why do some offenders go straight after completing the probation sentence, and why do some persist in offending? What is the use of probation in reducing offending behaviour? What are the key factors contributing to desistance from offending? With the support of empirical findings Stephen Farrall has successfully answered these vexing questions. *Rethinking What Works with Offenders* is a thought-provoking research monograph which investigates the complex issue of offending and re-offending amongst a selected group of probationers in the British context. More specifically:

the purpose of this book is to explore and throw further light on the processes that occur during probation supervision which are either conducive to desistance or which contribute to further offending (p 3).

This book is divided into four parts, namely 'Introduction', 'Probation, motivation, and social contexts', 'Persistence and desistance' and 'Conclusions'. Part 1 consists of three chapters which provide readers with background information about the research study. Chapter 1 reviews the research literature surrounding the 'What Works' initiative in offender rehabilitation, largely from the American and British experience. Two main types of research, namely the criminal career paradigm and evaluation research are identified. The former articulates a wide range of individual and social factors associated with desistance whereas the latter assesses the impact of specific criminal justice interventions such as probation on subsequent offending.

Farrall then goes on to introduce his research aims, participants and overall methodology. His study followed a total number of 199 probationers aged from 17 to 35 in six different probation areas in England from the beginning of the probation order (now renamed Community Rehabilitation Orders, see Chui & Nellis 2003) to the completion of the order. It entailed a four-year examination and sought to track the progress of probation from a developmental perspective. In addition to conducting face-to-face interviews with the probationer, probation officers were interviewed to identify the reasons for offenders' motivation to change, and explore their changes in belief and attitudes towards offending. As expected, rich data on the offenders' and their supervising officers' perception of probation and risk of re-offending were collected.

Chapter 2 deals with three concepts, namely realism, criminal careers and complexity. They not only present portions of the data analyses undertaken but also intend to 'open probationer's "black box"' (p 44) which the author has identified as a major gap in 'What Works' literature. However, Stephen Farrall tells readers very little about how to unpack the 'black box' of probation intervention. Without knowing what actually happens in probation intervention it is indeed difficult to assess its impact on offenders (Mair 1997). Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology and sampling strategy of the study in great

detail though some of this information has been given in the introductory chapter. There were three sweeps of interviews with probationers altogether, but the details such as the research instruments used in the second and third sweep of data collection are not given. Likewise, this chapter fails to analyse useful information such as the age and gender of the supervising officers interviewed, and most importantly the issue of reliability was not dealt with either.

Part 2 contains six descriptive chapters which aim to report the research findings systematically. While Chapter 4 investigates the outcome of probation in terms of its success or failure in stopping probationers from re-offending whilst on probation, Chapter 5 examines the obstacles to desistance faced by the probationers. The findings contained in Chapters 4 and 5 are not new to those who are familiar with the probation studies. For example, about one-third of the offenders continued to re-offend whilst on probation, and one of the main obstacles to desistance is drug or alcohol abuse.

The findings reported in Chapters 6 to 9 are of great value to criminal justice practitioners because they point to future possibilities for working with offenders in the community and in the prison. Chapter 6 looks at the role of supervision in resolving obstacles to desistance from the officers' and probationers' reports, and then discusses the methods used such as making referrals to other agencies and using activities to tackle obstacles. Chapter 7 is concerned with the motivation of the individual probationer. Apart from the influence of probation supervision, there is evidence from case studies that engaging in a new relationship, assuming new family roles, and maintaining stable employment status are major factors to motivate offenders to deal with offending behaviour successfully. Chapter 8 further considers how the probationer and officer worked together and addressed social and personal problems in order to resolve obstacles to the process of 'going straight', and case studies were given to illustrate a number of ways probation could make a difference in promoting compliance. For instance, improving the social and personal circumstances of the probationer is one way of overcoming obstacles to desistance and thus increasing the likelihood of success. Simply motivating offenders to solve their own problems would not be sufficient. Chapter 9 attempts to analyse how the motivation of an offender, probation intervention and the changes in personal and social circumstances interact to explain why some probationers managed to be successful in desisting from crime. While I appreciate the author's great effort in analysing and presenting research data in these chapters, the presentation surely would be better if repetitive arguments were avoided at various places in different chapters.

In Part 3, while Chapter 10 seeks to explain why some probationers manage to desist, Chapter 11 discusses the factors associated with re-offending. The most significant factors to explain desistance are stable employment and accommodation, attachment to a partner, and initial motivation to change. Based on the probationers' reports, some common factors to explain persistence in offending are the previous criminal conviction, reporting a drug problem, probationer's lack of motivation and so on. For many probationers, probation supervision plays a relatively minor role in accounting for desistance. Though various jargons such as logistic regression and multiple regression analyses have been used in these two chapters, some elaborations on how these analyses were conducted would be handy to those readers who are not familiar with these quantitative data analyses. Given the small sample size, it is uncertain how generalizable these findings are, and readers should interpret these findings with caution.

Part 4 contains a concluding chapter which summarizes what has been discussed in other parts of the book and draws out the lessons from the research. One important lesson learnt is that 'probation should assess what people require in their lives to ensure that they stop

offending and then attempt to produce these features in their lives in such a way that they do actually stop offending' (p 227). However, this is not meant to be a prescription to working with offenders but should be one of the guiding principles of effective probation practice.

Overall, *Rethinking What Works with Offenders* is an interesting reading for students who wish to acquire a good understanding of what probationers and probation officers thought of probation in the late 1990s in England. However, readers should bear in mind that, with the inception of the National Probation Service in April 2001, probation practice in England and Wales has changed remarkably in its philosophy and governance (see, for example, Ward, Scott & Lacey 2002; Chui & Nellis 2003), and in the way probationers and probation officers perceive the goal of probation. In this respect, more of this probation research should be welcomed.

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### REFERENCES

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