A COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH TO THE REDUCTION OF SEXUAL OFFENDING: CIRCLES OF SUPPORT AND ACCOUNTABILITY.

In their introduction, Hanvey, Philpot and Wilson assert that this text is not an academic study, but rather, they hope, an accessible read which will appeal to a range of professionals and lay persons interested in the emerging practice of circles as a method of addressing sex offending (p15). On many levels they have achieved this aim, providing a succinct overview of the origins of circles of support and accountability; their context, practice and evaluation within the United Kingdom. The accessibility of the book is heightened further via fascinating illustrations in the form of a number of cases studies of offenders and volunteers engaged in the circles process, relating their real life experiences, triumphs and challenges.

However, what the authors may have underestimated is their audience’s capacity to engage in the theoretical principles which support such work, and the interests and benefits of doing so. A deeper understanding of why, and how, this method of community reintegration appears to be effective in certain circumstances would surely enhance any arguments for its ongoing development and financial investment? In fairness, several passing references are made to concepts of desistance and the Good Lives model (Law and Gannon 2011), but there is little expansion on this as a framework within which to consider the reintegration and rehabilitation of sex offenders. To this extent, the practice of circles is more firmly set by the authors within the context of risk assessment and offender management, rather than fully considering the implications of an alternative, strengths-based, empowerment model of reducing re-offending, which moves offenders forward to an offence-free, positive construction of themselves.

In a similar way, the connections with restorative justice principles receive a rather brief and broad treatment at the start of chapter one. In my view, Braithwaite’s (1989) concept
of reintegrative shaming has a more vital place in such a discussion, offering clear contrasts with the disintegrative shaming described in Philpot’s discussion of the media in chapter seven.

The discussion of the more recent political backdrop to this initiative is also overly simplified. The overarching aim of victim reduction and multi-agency public protection responsibilities are strongly reiterated throughout the book, with the improvements and gains to be had for the offenders involved in circles primarily being seen as a secondary, subsidiary consequence by those in officialdom. Whilst the authors acknowledge that drivers for the wider adoption of circles are influenced by conflicting views on their purpose as a model for community re-integration or a crime reduction intervention, which in turn influences methods of adaptation and measurements of effectiveness (p164-165), they are predominantly referred to here as an integral part of a wider package of sex offender management. A package which also includes other measures such as statutory service assessment and supervision, registration and monitoring. A more dissenting challenge to the preoccupation of the criminal justice sector with a risk model approach to sex offender management would have been refreshing.

Nevertheless, this remains essential reading for the criminology student and the criminal justice practitioner. It will certainly be of interest to members of the general public who remain open-minded to the possibility that a more holistic approach to managing those perceived to pose the greatest risk of harm demonstrates potential for greater community safety as opposed to the increase in risk that may come from further isolation and exclusion.

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References
CRIME SCENE INVESTIGATION: METHODS AND PROCEDURES.

An informative reference tool, Pepper succinctly guides the reader through the myriad methods and techniques used by modern forensic investigators. From first approaching the crime scene through to appearing in court, Pepper’s book provides the reader with checklists, wider legal context and common mistakes. Thus, the book potentially offers a reassuring guide for novice forensic investigators to consult when unsure about a situation.

The book also contains features which make it even more appealing to the novice investigator. These tools, which include self-assessment questions, help to ensure that reader has understood each of the book’s sections and make the possibility of revising from the text simple. Pepper also refrains from using technical jargon which keeps the text accessible, even to those with no previous forensic knowledge. Lastly, the book includes basic diagrams and pictures which help clarify the more difficult ideas. Together these tools also make the book potentially useful for students wishing to become crime scene investigators (CSIs) or who are studying towards any degree in forensics.

However, there are a few negatives which any professional or student who picks up a copy should be aware of. Whilst Pepper’s succinct and accessible style makes the book appealing to new students or new CSIs, it does not treat all areas in sufficient depth. For example, the section on blood analysis is short and seems to assume prior knowledge on the part of the reader. Such assumption of prior knowledge happens in other areas of the text as well. At times, Pepper seems to be more concerned with supplying the reader with condensed historical contexts or personal anecdotes than with useful explanation of method and procedure, and the science that underpins them. This mean that students will need to undertake further reading and consult other texts as there is not enough depth to the information contained within this book. In addition, crime scene investigators utilising the text have to ignore the background sections which are informative but distracting when looking for guidance on how to undertake evidence collection. Therefore, in my view, it is hard to see Pepper’s text as a definitive guide for either students or CSIs.

Despite these limitations, Pepper’s book is authoritative, engaging and interesting and it is suitable reading for both students and new CSIs as it will help both of these groups clarify their knowledge of certain techniques. It is not a definitive guide to crime scene investigations, but it does provide a useful starting point for those readers new to
forensics and as a useful refresher for those who have forensic experience. In conclusion, it is a useful book and study tool as long as it is used in conjunction with other sources of information.

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GOOD PRACTICE IN ASSESSING RISK: CURRENT KNOWLEDGE, ISSUES AND APPROACHES.

Risk is undoubtedly a popular subject for academic theorising, but it is equally a very important influence on practice for a range of professions and professionals. This book should satisfy both academic and practitioner readers with extensive coverage of a range of important and topical issues. Importantly, it comes at a point where some professionals, such as probation officers, are being asked to rediscover their ability to exercise greater degrees of professional judgement. The exercise of that judgement has, of course, been constrained in recent years by influences such as the powerful risk agenda. This book offers a number of chapters which should encourage practitioners to challenge what has become a constraining and cautious orthodoxy, as some risk supporters might argue, without putting the public at greater risk.

This book aims to encourage a positive approach to risk taking. A number of chapters discuss the need to move away from defensive practice, for example, by working to empower and engage service users such as young people deemed to be ‘at risk’. Chapter three notes how young people themselves may be as risk averse as practitioners, as they may be unwilling to take the risk of leaving their present situation behind. The use of biography and narrative is suggested to avoid the compartmentalisation of complex situations, as risk assessment is re-defined as something done with rather than to those under review. There is much criticism of standardised risk assessment artefacts which ‘stifle outside the box thinking’ (chapter five) and ‘privilege predictability rather than uncertainty’, often failing to acknowledge that ‘risk is part of the subjective experience of being human’ (chapter two).

There is a strong theme of developing social capital and resources in building resilience to risk. The public health approach to high risk of harm offenders (chapter 10) reports how engaging with offenders in a pro-social way encourages a positive response to offender managers and develops self-risk management. Several chapters identify risk as something that people might suffer from as much as perpetrate on others, and this is notable in discussions on young people and those who are the subject of intimate partner violence (chapter seven). Here it is stressed that victims’ perspectives on risk may be more relevant than assessments predicated upon conventional and even specialist artefacts. It is not denied that a number of these instruments have assisted decision-making across the board in a range of agencies but, at the same time, as noted above, they may have constrained and stifled professional risk-taking, or, as noted in chapter 5, negated the...
'smell of practice’ or that embodied knowledge that comes from direct working with people.

It is important to remember the socially-constructed and politically-contested nature of risk. Practitioners operate in a world of targets, management rather than leadership (chapter eleven) and competing moral, ethical and cultural standpoints. It is equally important to take account of Maden’s words (chapter six) that ‘...there are few absolutes in risk management. There is usually a spectrum of reasonable decisions rather than a single right answer’. He also reaffirms what he describes as the rarely explicitly stated priority of preventing a repetition of violence, with obviously the huge potential for blame that might arise if a case ‘goes wrong’.

Of course many of the approaches outlined in this book themselves carry a risk. That risk is of a serious harm occurring in a case where greater professional judgement has been exercised or less attention paid to risk assessment artefacts. Although as Maden reminds us, ‘prevention does not depend upon specific prediction’, it is undoubtedly the case that the media and, therefore, the public will construct blame for professionals for the actions of others – for failing to predict and to prevent. The final chapter picks up on the theme of ‘organisationally dangerous practice’, where practitioners are victims of ‘professional dangerousness’, which means being battered by the system in which they operate. The return of ‘risk-taking’, once the hallmark of a professional practitioner, is very much a current agenda. At the same time, the cautious and blaming culture is never far below the surface and could, as it has previously, ensure a swift return to number-driven assessments and resource allocations. This book argues for a different way which is about engaging with service users and staff, in building resilience and avoiding a risk-deficit approach by undertaking an examination of strengths and positive factors.

This is a book for academics and practitioners, but I feel the latter may benefit most from the text. It offers a range of ideas and suggestions for breaking free from the risk agenda without taking unnecessary risks with people’s lives. It is about looking for ways to improve protection by helping staff to perform better and users to be more involved in their own risk management. As the final chapter notes, it is about empowerment rather than enabling, it is not about doing what you are told to do, but doing what needs to be done and then thinking how it might be done better in the future. It is very much about a reassertion of all that is best about professionalism in practice.

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ONCE UPON A GROUP: A GUIDE TO RUNNING AND PARTICIPATING IN SUCCESSFUL GROUPS (SECOND EDITION)

To put it mildly, this is a short, succinct and straightforward ‘guide’ to all that is groupwork. Descriptively, the publishers blurb provides an accurate resume of the contents:

Once upon a Group is a short, light-hearted guide to groupwork, providing an easily-digestible way of understanding group dynamics, the practicalities of running a group, and how to participate in one. It covers how and where to set up a group, including the type of room used, the size of the group and the arrangement of chairs, and the importance of boundaries and rules within a group. It also covers issues such as communication, sensitivity, listening, leadership, decision-making, labelling and stereotyping, and forms of participation, among many others. Each topic is illustrated with a lively drawing to communicate the ideas presented. This second edition also covers diversity throughout and how to apply the ideas in the book to different settings.

Once upon a Group can usefully serve as an aid-memoire and is certainly not an instruction manual or a textbook on groupwork. Even the bibliography provides only very limited signposting for anyone wanting further detail.

That being said, it is very readable and the illustrations reinforce the narrative in an amusing and memorable style. Once upon a Group will provide indications of key matters to think about for the novice groupworker; for the more experienced it offers pertinent reminders and prompts about practices and considerations that may have become too familiar, taken-for-granted or simply forgotten.

I own an earlier edition and have always regarded the handbook, Once upon a group: exercises (Kindred and Kindred, 1998) to be an essential companion to the Guide, providing the substance for implementing the directions in the primary text. I would hope that there are plans for this to be reissued to sit again alongside the present text.

In its search for directness and clarity, there is, in my view, a drift towards being somewhat over simplistic, for example, in the comments about the impact of gender in
the sections on co-leadership and subgroups. The authors claim that the work is based on research: it is not evident what this was nor where it is applied in the text.

For a book that was first published, in 1984, on a self-help basis and distributed through personal contacts and practitioner networks, it is highly creditable, and a reflection of the extent of its take-up over the years, that it has become an established work in the groupwork field incorporated into the JKP stable. However, the impression is that the updating has consisted of ‘adding on’ rather than taking the opportunity to reconsider the basic tenets it sets out in the very different context of the second decade of the 21st century. For instance, new technology and social media barely make an appearance: even mobile phones are not mentioned in the section on “interruptions”!


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