

Book Reviews

Addiction Debates: Hot Topics from Policy to Practice¹

Catherine Comiskey

London: Sage Publications Ltd (Sage Swifts Series), 2020

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With the publication of this book, Catherine Comiskey has made a welcome contribution to the field of drug and alcohol services in Ireland. While Paul Griffiths of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) says in his foreword to the book that it makes a contribution internationally at a time of great flux for the world of drug use, policy and treatment, it is the national contribution it makes that is of particular interest to me as clinical lead of an Irish treatment service, Tabor Group.

Comiskey achieves the desired dynamism of setting out her work in terms of 'debates'. Each of the seven 'hot topics' forms a part of the structure of the book. She 'tops and tails', with Chapter 1 setting the motions and Chapter 9 concluding the debate and setting out a 'conceptual framework for the future'.

The hot topics are covered in Chapters 2 to 8: prohibition or legalisation; abstinence or harm reduction; drug consumption rooms and the local community; harm to children of substance-using parents; ageing drug-users; trade wars; and challenges to research policy and practice.

There is plenty to chew on here for the politicians, the policymakers, the treatment purchasers and the treatment providers, as well as those impacted by substance use. The breadth of her referencing within each chapter shows us a seasoned academic and researcher as she succinctly presents the hot topic.

Of particular interest to me, from a treatment-provider perspective, are the hot topics of treatment models, hidden harms to children, and ageing population of drug-users.

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While I am convinced that abstinence-based treatment models do need to feel the heat of these hot topics and get involved in evidence-based treatment outcomes, I consider Comiskey's presentation of the abstinence-based model to be unbalanced. It is presented as a model that is dependent for its efficacy on the policies of prohibition, the 'war on drugs', and Nancy Reagan's advice to us all to 'just say NO'. My own experience as a treatment practitioner in the abstinence-based model is that it has efficacy, is effective, is centred on the needs of the individual and the family and produces good outcomes. Its contribution to the debate had disappeared by the end of the chapter.

I would like to have heard more about Comiskey's experience of the 'controversy over treatment' and 'such heated debates from practitioners over the merits of their service', and how clients 'still feel stigmatised when they attend treatment' (p. 26).

Hidden harms to children is the hot topic of Chapter 5. Again, evidence from the USA, Australia, the UK, Scotland and Ireland is presented succinctly, and the global spectrum provided is welcome. While the scale of the challenge posed here is frightening, it is very welcome that our politicians, policymakers, treatment purchasers and treatment providers are challenged to take account of their needs and include improvements in children's experience as a necessary evidence base for the efficacy of treatment. It is good to reinforce the fact that grandparents, school and community play a part in limiting the adversity visited on children through a parent's substance use.

It is also welcome to have the perception that our drug-user is a young person challenged in Chapter 6 about our ageing drug-using population. Again, Comiskey's presentation is clear and concise and presents the reader from various interest groups with very helpful priorities from the World Health Organization, among other authorities, in responding to this client group with policies and treatment design.

There is a risk in structuring the material in terms of 'debates' and 'hot topics', as it tempts the adversary in us to come to the fore and seek to take sides and win the debate. Maybe the time has come to unite the field and overcome divisions between treatment providers, community, statutory and voluntary sectors, and treatment purchasers. There is also the necessary risk of fuelling the stigmatisation of the substance-user with such graphic and overwhelming material. Even the word 'addiction' is stigmatising and perhaps we do our service-users a favour by including them within the cohort of the population impacted by a chronic health challenge and adopting the term 'substance use disorder'.

Particularly within the Irish context, the exclusion of alcohol from the 'debate' is unfortunate.

Overall, Comiskey leaves us with rich material to contemplate and much guidance for policy and service planning into the future. Her succinct presentation of the 'People First Framework' for policy and practice development invites us all to new thinking and innovation (pages 117–9). This is most welcome.

The Desistance Journey: Into Recovery and Out of Chaos²

Graham Cambridge, Orla Lynch and James Windle

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022

ISBN: 9783031112683, 168 pages, hardback, €42.79

In the preface, the authors introduce their intention that *The Desistance Journey* should be accessible to both academics and those working with, or affected by, offending and addiction. It is a short, lucid and insightful text that is sparing in its use of jargon and gives centre-stage to the voices of people with lived experience. As the authors promise, it is a practice-friendly account of the work and findings derived from the academic work by Graham Cambridge in completing his PhD, and provides a 'multi-disciplinary holistic account of *doing desistance and recovery* [authors' italics]'.

The Desistance Journey is based on in-depth interviews with 40 men from Cork who had been involved in the criminal justice system; most served time in custody and had experience of addiction. The interviews were conducted by Graham Cambridge who was born and raised in Cork, in a similar environment to his interviewees. In his growing up in communities marked by economic deprivation, poverty, crime, addiction and marginalisation, he shared many experiences similar to those of the men he has interviewed. His awareness as an 'insider', using their shared connections and understanding, has given him unique access to their 'lived experience', to their reflections, their voices and their experience of the change journey.

Following the introduction, Chapter 2 describes current academic literature on desistance from crime and rehabilitation from addiction. Chapter 3 outlines the context of Cork City as the research site, highlighting the

² Reviewed by Gerry McNally, Assistant Director, the Probation Service (email: GPMcNally@probation.ie).

economic and social deprivation of marginalised areas, and the fact that such communities are over-represented among the people in prison in Ireland. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the methodology and findings in Graham Cambridge's research and findings.

Chapter 5 and particularly Chapter 6 are rich and insightful in their use of interviewee quotations. They describe the poverty, neglect, abuse and trauma that these men have experienced. Fear, the need for respect, self-preservation and a toxic form of masculinity are clearly at their core, men who have not only been prisoners of the State but are also prisoners in their daily lives, of the 'street rules'.

The use of vivid quotations stands out in illustrating the lived realities in their world:

'You were respected if you fought, you were not respected if you could debate, you were not respected because you were intelligent, you were respected because you were not afraid to fight.' (P15) (p. 66)

'I had a name, and a reputation, so fellas were fighting me for their reputations, at this stage it was all reputation. I was doing the macho thing again.' (P21) (p. 68)

'Respect, we got respect and we were left alone, that was the key – we were left alone.... And many a time I would have got a clatter, a beating, but I stood up again and got more respect for it.' (P39) (p. 69)

The reality of addiction is starkly visible in the interviews:

'I never committed a crime sober.... The money that I got from crime went on drink and drugs.' (P15) (p. 74)

As is the normality of prison life:

'I fitted in there. I felt like I belonged in there. I was with people who were taking drugs and had the same ideology as me. It was easy for me to fit in....' (P15) (p. 89)

Chapter 7 and the conclusion reflect the burden and challenges in desistance and change, and in sustaining each step along that difficult path. Going

straight is seen as cultural betrayal (p. 79), old loyalties can be overwhelming (p. 109) and change can be a lonely road.

There is an interrelatedness between crime and addiction, locking the individuals into a cycle. A headline message throughout the book is that you cannot have desistance without recovery. Desistance from crime was seen as a by-product of overcoming addiction. Recovery can be particularly difficult because it is so at odds with their values, behaviours and way of life (p. 127), needing a maturing process that is part of change and growing a new identity. There are difficult stages in establishing a new identity, including deconstructing and shedding the previous identity, challenging relationships and working to establish that new identity.

Throughout *The Desistance Journey*, addressing toxic masculinity, the shifting of the interviewees' view of themselves as hard-men without hope, and that locked-in identity are central and fearful challenges. One can only be impressed by the openness and frankness of the interviewees and the perspicacity of the interviewer in revealing the inner feelings, vulnerabilities and fears in that lonely journey towards desistance. It's a tough world and not everyone survives.

The closing comment makes a universal point that needs to be recognised and heeded:

In order to recover and desist you have to live *an honest life* [authors' italics]. Not doing crime, not consuming drugs or alcohol is not success ... being kind, thoughtful and introspective and contributing to society were key parts of the process.

We could all learn from that.

Congratulations to Graham Cambridge, Orla Lynch and James Windle on the publication of this invaluable book. It deserves everyone's attention and, in particular, should be an essential text for all who work with people in the criminal justice system, addiction services and community development.