Book Reviews

In the last edition of the Journal Steve Taylor reviewed 'The Prisons Handbook 2002'. He was incorrectly described as being a Council Member of the PRT. He is in fact a Council Member of the Howard League for Penal Reform.

Self Esteem — The Costs and Causes of low self-worth

Nicholas Emler 2001 Joseph Rowntree Foundation York Publishing Services — A free summary, reference N71 can be obtained from www.jrf.org.uk ISBN 1 84263020 2 £15.95 (plus £2.10 p&p) from York Publishing Services. (Tel: 019104 430033)

This report written by **Nicholas Emler** of the **London School of Economics** and supported by the **Joseph Rowntree Foundation** critically examines the long held assumption that low self-esteem, particularly among young people, is a risk factor for a broad range of psychological and behavioural problems and questions the effectiveness of a myriad of interventions aimed at raising self-esteem. The report comprises five chapters. Chapter One attempts to proffer a definition of self-esteem and ultimately raises the question as to whether self-esteem can be measured. The conclusions suggest that whilst the popular view is that low self-esteem is the source of all manner of personal and social ills it questions whether systematic research can accurately assess levels of self-esteem and that this in turn depends on clarity as to what it is one is trying to measure. Broadly, self-esteem has been regarded as an attitude and measures constructed on this assumption have met the basic test. However, the author suggests that whether this attitude is a feeling or a set of judgements it also has the properties of a state and a trait. He questions as to whether variations in self-esteem are really distinct from opinions about the self that go by such labels as depression, neuroticism, self-efficacy and locus of control. In light of this the author argues that good practice in psychological measurement would be to demonstrate that similar results can be obtained using different methods of measurement. He believes that this has yet to be shown with self-esteem and suggests that we should be looking for patterns of evidence with the methods of measurement that are available. The author contends that if these patterns are coherent and consistent, then their validity is unquestionable.

Chapter Two looks at **the consequences of self- esteem**. It examines the problem of distinguishing causes and effects. It considers several possibilities of the way in which self-esteem could be related to behaviour or other outcomes. The author suggests that the fact that all research has examined possible effects of self-esteem on such outcomes as health-threatening behaviour patterns, antisocial activities, poor life-management (poor work habits) has meant that it has been conducted in such a way that it cannot distinguish between direct or indirect causal influences, mediators, correlated outcomes or effects. In particular, the author states that wherever a relationship has been found between self-esteem and some pattern of behaviour, it has not been possible to rule out that some other condition affects both self-esteem and the behaviour in question, or that this behaviour influences self-esteem.

The author believes that research that can distinguish between the various possibilities assumes particular value in deciding policy implications. He highlights two research designs as significant; longitudinal design (or prospective study) in which self-esteem and/or an outcome are, at the very least, measured on more than one occasion; and true experiment which enjoys high status in scientific research as a consequence of its unique power in deciding questions of cause and effect.

The author goes on to suggest that to review the role of self- esteem in the genesis of social problems, the best that one can do is to consider behaviours that do have clear and significant costs and about which there is enough research to allow some sensible conclusions. He examines a range of problems (such as crime (including violent crime), racial prejudice, teenage smoking and child maltreatment) but no impact of low self-esteem is apparent. In the case of racial prejudice, high self -esteem rather than low appears to be related to the outcome and in the case of violence there are indications that *high* self-esteem in combination with other factors carries a risk. With respect to teenage pregnancy, eating disorders, suicide attempts, and low earnings however, low self-esteem appears to be a risk factor. The author raises a number of questions which he considers significant for policy decisions:

- does self-esteem mediate the impact of certain of the other risk factors'? If it can be shown to do so, then we would be in a position to decide whether interventions should be directed at these more remote causes or at breaking the impact they have on low self- esteem;
- does self-esteem operate as a risk factor independently of any others and, if so, to what extent does it affect risk compared to other factors? Determining this would enable a decision to be taken with regard to whether resources should be focused on this risk factor rather than the others. However, the relative costs of alternative interventions should be considered;
- does self-esteem amplify or moderate the impact of other risk factors? If this can be determined then a focused and appropriate intervention could be devised.

Chapter Three examines the sources of differences in self-esteem. The author suggests that what has emerged about the roots of self-esteem is not entirely what was anticipated and consequently this has led to a reappraisal of the nature of self-esteem Many of the factors which might be expected to result in low self-esteem do not do so. The author considers factors that have weak effects or none including ethnicity or race, social class and gender. He examines factors that have modest effects which include concepts such as successes and failures, rejections and acceptances and appearance. Finally he explores factors that have a more significant impact, such as (the behaviour of) parents, genes and whether there are any other significant others. The chapter concludes that the largest single source of variations in self-esteem is genetic. Next in importance is the behaviour of parents and the author concludes that these effects continue into adolescence and beyond. Next, there are various circumstances, experiences and conditions that have some effect on self-esteem. The author suggests that whilst real successes and failures and appearance do matter, it is more to do with perceptions of and beliefs about these.

In Chapter Four the author goes on to consider the prospects for interventions intended to raise self-esteem. Three

sources of ideas about how self-esteem could be raised through deliberate intervention are considered, namely theory, the research evidence on the determinants of self-esteem and the methods that have in practice been developed and tried. Finally, in this Chapter the author raises the question as to whether any intervention works at all. He concludes that the effects of interventions are stronger if the intervention was specifically intended to raise self-esteem and not to produce some other change, believed somewhat erroneously, to be a product of low self-esteem. The author suggests that other factors, such as the length of the programme, the training and experience of those delivering it, or whether those for whom it is provided participate individually or in groups, have not been shown to be influential. The author also found that interventions show clearer effects if participation versus non-participation is decided on a random basis. The exception to this is that interventions work best for those identified with a relevant problem, rather than as 'prevention' programmes. The author concludes that further research needs to be undertaken on the long-term effects of interventions, their cost-effectiveness and more importantly on why interventions work.

Chapter Five provides a summary of the report and a number of general conclusions. The author maintains that in the popular imagination low self-esteem has become an all-purpose explanation for any significant social or personal problem from crime to racism and drug use. He contends that its full range of consequences has been the subject of numerous research studies and because the effects of low self-esteem have been assumed to be so damaging, there has been particular interest in identifying its causes and potential remedies. However, the author argues that a more dispassionate appraisal reveals numerous faults with the popular view and that further 'good' research is required. He does not discount the cost implications of this. However, he argues that evidence-based practice is as desirable in the mental health realm as it is in medicine and good research to provide this evidence would be a better investment of resources than unproven treatments promising what he describes as 'illusory benefits'.

The report provides a comprehensive literature review which in itself makes interesting reading and provides some food for thought. Whilst a relatively short report it does make for heavy reading in places and I found the language to be confusing at times. Overall, I have to say I was disappointed by the report. The subject matter is extremely interesting but the direction in which the author leads it is not. This said, however, I would suggest that policy makers and managers will find the report highly relevant and invaluable within the current what works arena.

Audrea Haith, *Senior Lecturer, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffied.*

Making Good

by Shadd Maruna. Published by the American Psychological Association, 2001.

Anyone who wants to know the fundamentals of what works in the rehabilitation of offenders should look to this new book by Dr. Shadd Maruna, a lecturer at the Cambridge Institute of Criminology, as essential reading. Maruna's aim is to define the difference between those who persist is criminal behaviour and those who, after significant criminal careers, eventually desist. The key processes highlighted through this research cry out to be incorporated into our day-to-day practice.

In seeking out what creates the turnaround from criminality Maruna uses the Liverpool Desistance Study, which compares the self-narratives of desisting ex-offenders to those of a carefully matched sample of active offenders. All of them had 'spent around a decade selling drugs, stealing cars and sitting in prison'. Specifically, the study looks at how these individuals framed their lives, and what enabled the ex-offenders to make good and stay that way. Self-narrative is developing an increasing profile in psycho-therapeutic work and its use in this context is timely to say the least.

This is no idealistic tract. Maruna has long removed his rose-tinted specs. As he states: 'The most consistent personal trait among interviewees in this study, by far, was a superlative sense of humour and an interpersonal assertiveness that would make most stage performers jealous.' He identifies criminogenic traits, backgrounds and environments and accepts the age-crime curve, which shows that the most crucial factor in reducing arrests for an individual is increasing age, that is, growing up. This has remained unchanged for 150 years. But Maruna can take us an important step forward and thankfully concludes that we can do more in terms of rehabilitation, and crime reduction, than wait for criminals to age.

Maruna explains that if they are to permanently reform, ex-offenders have to convince themselves that they really have changed, and in order to do this they have to make some sense of their past. So we find that in the desisting narrative, the individual emphasises how the criminal is not the 'real me'. And instead of discovering a 'new me', which feels unreal and is therefore not sustainable, desisting offenders have to reach back into their past to make contact with an 'old me' to make the change. This is always possible because offenders are more than just criminals; they have all played (and often still play) other, non-deviant roles such as loving parent, loyal friend and so on.

Having decided that this 'real me' is valid and worthwhile, the desisting criminal needs to give meaning to his criminal career to be able to manage his past, and that meaning becomes the positive path to making contact with that 'real me'. The criminality is thus not rejected but seen as having a purpose, and desistance can be fully embraced and maintained.

This is of course a vast simplification of a well-rounded and approachable thesis. But what strikes is that such conclusions, drawn from careful and legitimate research, seem at odds with much accepted wisdom, such as blaming and shaming. What Maruna has uncovered must be taken account of if we are really prepared to go with what works in offender rehabilitation, to develop programmes that are successful, and to achieve Home Office targets in the reduction of re-offending.

Such a well-researched, authoritative and highly readable book strikes at the heart of the problems we face, with the prison population at an all-time high and threatening the sector's ability to maintain regimes that are manageable, humane and effective.

Ruth Wyner, *Independent consultant and former prisoner.*

Does it really have to be like this?

Review of BBC's 'The Experiment'

The Experiment, a rehashed, glamorised and sensationalised version of Professor Zimbardo's notorious 1971 Stanford University experiment was the most brilliant rubbish I have seen this year. Marketed as some kind of bold

exploration of closed institutions, *The Experiment* provided four hours of glorious entertainment, but the makers should be careful in staking their professional reputations on it and just hope that nobody takes it too seriously.

A small group of carefully screened volunteers were selected to participate in an exciting social experiment. That was what they said about *Big Brother* when it was first screened, but the makers of that programme have since had the good sense to drop any pretence at scientific value and have accepted that 'It's only a game show ...'. In this new game show, the players were separated into guards and prisoners in a movie set prison on the George Lucas sound stage.

Although the programme had some lofty scientific ambitions, it often fell into ridicule. At one point, the master keys were stolen from the central control pod and were only subsequently returned in exchange for regular hot beverages. This reminded me of an episode in *Porridge* where McKay sneezes his false teeth into a vat of curry and has to pay Fletcher in order to have them returned. Little did viewers know that McKay's false teeth provided an insight into how valuable commodities influence power in a closed institution.

One of the eminent academics running the programme rightly claimed 'we will not have versions of *Big Brother*'s Craig and Anna'. However, the introduction of McCabe, a mysterious newcomer with a secret who changes the group dynamic then disappears as quickly as he arrives, did seem familiar. In the first *Big Brother*, Claire, with her secret plastic surgery arrived, got Craig in a lather, Mel in a strop and was then voted off in short-time. They might not have had their Craig and Anna, but they certainly had their Claire. Who knows, maybe McCabe will follow in her footsteps and turn up in a year pregnant by another one of the contestants.

The most ridiculous part, though, was 'Operation Mayhem' where two prisoners broke out of their cell and occupied the officers' mess. What was the response of the guards? One of them gave them a stern telling off for jeopardising the experiment and all the others went to bed. The makers would probably argue that what had occurred was that within the non-violent rules order had broken down. They would argue that in a real-life situation this would have been the point at which there was a riot or a breakout. Anyone watching, though, could hardly fail to notice that this really marked the point where even the participants resigned themselves to that fact that the experiment had turned into a bit of a joke.

Did the makers really expect anything different to what happened? Zimbardo degraded his prisoners right from the outset, blindfolding them, stripping them and delousing them. Simultaneously, he empowered the guards, giving them threatening looking attire and clubs and became one of them by acting as Chief Warden. Did he expect anything else other than the guards would start to assert strict, brutal authority?

The makers of this programme put the guards in a situation for which they had no training, there was no leader appointed, they had no effective sanctions and they had no protective arms. This was further undermined by the fact that they had appalling physical security (the lockable gates could easily be forced, the ceilings could be detached) and they were deliberately given poor procedural controls (the master key was kept on a hook on the control panel which prisoners could access). When the most ineffectual guard Tom Quarry decided to go mad, asking everyone 'Does it really have to be like this?', The inevitable conclusion is; yes.

The makers have claimed that the programme was not about prisons, it was about behaviour in closed institutions or more general social behaviour where inequality exists. Whether most viewers would have drawn this conclusion is more debatable. The set had been carefully constructed to resemble a prison and the participants were referred to as guards and prisoners. As one of the participants, Grennan, said , 'It's not exactly a seminary is it?'. This is important as many people would draw the conclusion that this provided a degree of insight into prisons and staff-prisoner relationships and behaviour.

However, what did the viewer see? The viewer saw prisoners who were disrespectful, dishonest, manipulative and verging on violent. They also saw guards who were helpless, disorganised and ineffectual. This programme could only support the superficial media and public perception that prisons are in perpetual crisis and criminals are worthless. Unfortunately, there is a risk that the pseudo-scientific facade would lend some spurious credence to that perception. It would be unfortunate if anyone took the programme seriously.

At times, *The Experiment* really did have something valuable to say about prisons. The most enlightening scene for me was where one of the guards, Grennan, engaged in a conversation with some prisoners about Twiglets and curry flavoured crisps. This epitomises the mixture of banality and surrealism that pervades the everyday staff-prisoner interactions. It was at times like this, when the programme and the participants stopped playing around and really started to get closer to the reality of imprisonment. However, like the fake headline 'Well Run Prison Has Quiet Day', that was never going to be a ratings winner and so we returned to *Porridge* and *Big Brother*.

Ultimately, this was enjoyable entertainment, not an experiment. At the end of the series, they tried to assert that they had cast some light upon the rise of fascism and the worst excesses of the twentieth century. In truth, this programme cast light on the more recent past; a May night in 2000 when ten young people entered a house in South London.

Jamie Bennett, *Manager of the DSPD Unit at HMP Whitemoor.*