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Helping, Holding, Hurting

Bill McWilliams Memorial Lecture

Cambridge, 27th June 2017

I want to thank you all for coming here today to remember and celebrate the legacy of Bill McWilliams – and I want to thank the organisers, and especially Brenda and John, for the invitation to play a part in this event. I consider it a very great honour.

I never had the opportunity to meet Bill, but I feel that somehow I have come to know him a little through Brenda and through their friends – especially Tony Bottoms and Mike Nellis. And of course, we can all have the pleasure of knowing Bill through his writing.

Those writings have been very important to me – and many other probation scholars -- for several reasons. Perhaps most fundamentally, Bill work's is significant in terms of what it stands for; it exemplifies three key virtues that I think all researchers should seek to cultivate:

- Firstly, Bill was a genuine scholar. The depth and quality of his writing reflects, I am sure, the depth of the intellectual curiosity that made him so well read. It also reflects, in turn, the care, precision and rigour with which he fashioned his own thoughts and ideas.
- Secondly, Bill was a proper social scientist. In some of Bill's empirical research papers that I have read for the first time in preparing for today, I have been hugely impressed both by the sheer volume of the fieldwork involved and by the attention to detail that his meticulous analysis of data evidences. For example, in order to understand what serving prisoners understood about

and wanted from new aftercare services introduced in the 1960s, Bill (working with Martin Davies and Ian Earnshaw) interviewed 407 prisoners in 14 prisons across the country, securing a 96% response rate from men imminently due for release in these prisons. That mammoth undertaking tells us something about Bill as a social scientist – and about the value that he placed on comprehensive and careful listening.

- Thirdly – and just as importantly – Bill’s love of and gift for scholarship was never detached from his commitment to public service. Bill applied both his considerable intellect and his energies and diligence to using research and scholarship to improve probation and thus to improve society.

For me, these three qualities – these three inter-woven commitments to genuine scholarship, rigorous social science and diligent public service – are at their most compelling in Bill and Tony’s remarkable 1979 paper on ‘The Non-Treatment Paradigm for Probation Practice’. If you haven’t yet read this paper, you simply must. I read it first as a social work student in 1992; at the time, I was still coming to terms with my own journey from the humanities (in the forms of philosophy and history) to social science and to social work practice. And here was a paper that mapped a path for me; offering compelling arguments from normative principles alongside the honest confrontation of empirical ‘realities’ – at least as we then understood them.

Just as importantly, rather than allowing the pessimism of the ‘nothing works’ era to dismantle the cases for probation and for rehabilitation, Bill’s and Tony’s genius and creativity made an opportunity out of a threat; they literally made a (moral) virtue out of an (empirical) necessity. I won’t restate the case here but, in sum, they argued, firstly, that even if

there was no evidence that treatment worked to reduce crime, that was not a good reason to deny people help; secondly, that if the idea of social diagnosis no longer made sense, then shared and respectful dialogue should shape the forms of help provided; and, thirdly, that if it was wrong and unhelpful to construct 'clients' as depending on professionals to 'fix' them, then better to plan and offer help on a more collaborative basis. Furthermore, even if none of this help could be proven to or even expected to reduce crime, that didn't mean that there were not compelling *moral* and *practical* reasons for working in this way to support people.

Any of you who have read my work, or heard me talk, will by now have cottoned on to my guilty secret... In very much of what I have written, I have simply followed this lead, sometimes updating these arguments with new evidence, particularly about desistance from crime, and sometimes trying to develop aspects of the ethical or normative arguments.

Central to Bill and Tony's argument in the Non-Treatment Paradigm – and in both of their work more generally -- lies a position or stance that I have also tried to adopt and develop; one that refuses to 'objectify' people who have offended and been penalised; and that rejects policies and practices that construct people as damaged or diminished or deficient and in need to 'expert' correctional intervention.

Instead, in the last of his famous quartet of essays on probation history, published in 1987, Bill articulated what he termed the 'personalist' approach to probation. Invoking but – typically – refining earlier philosophical thinking (in this case from no less a figure than Immanuel Kant), Bill insisted that people must be seen as *ends in themselves* and

never merely as the means to some other end -- *even* if the ends in question were laudable ones like reducing victimisation or building a fairer society. With remarkable prescience, Bill identified the dangers *both* of managerialism *and* of the then fashionably radical Marxist school; Bill identified in both a willingness to treat people as objects to be manipulated for some other purpose.

In that last of the four essays, reflecting on the collapse of confidence in the diagnostic-treatment model, Bill quotes David Millard, himself reflecting on the work of Paul Halmos:

‘However much the counsellors explained their work in the language of technology, ultimately they placed their faith in the spontaneous power of love within a relationship. The technology was... an attempt to give an extra dimension of respectability to what was basically a moral enterprise’ (Millard, 1979: 85).

In the paper, Bill continues to cite Millard, this time drawing on the work of R.D. Laing, to argue that we should not ‘worry too much about what you’ve been calling professionalism. Trust the clients. Believe what they say about their experience and trust the immediacy of your own responses’ (p86).

Client then are neither to be managed on behalf of the state nor mobilised in order to overthrow it; rather, they are to be heard and respected and, yes, loved; though I suspect the language of love here is not intended to invoke soft or sentimental fellow-feeling, but rather the hard work of seeking and finding solidarity with one another, and subsidiarity for one another, in support of our mutual betterment and in our reciprocal and collective interests.

Against the backdrop of this brief resume of some of Bill's work, I hope you'll see why it seems fitting that today's memorial lecture is not a lecture at all; it seeks to embody Bill's personalist values by enabling a dialogue between people with different forms of expertise related to probation supervision. But before we move into that dialogue, I want to offer just a few final observations in an effort to bridge the gap between Bill's work and the present day.

Firstly, it's worth noting that it has taken probation research much of 20 or 30 years to catch up with aspects of Bill's thinking. In spite of the long history of social work and probation claiming respect for persons as a core value, it is really only in the last decade or so that sustained and proper attention has begun to be paid to studying the lived experience of supervision – for those whose responsibility it is to supervise, and, even more crucially, for those who are subject to it.

We have borrowed the title of this event – 'Helping, Holding, Hurting' -- from a public lecture that I gave in Scotland in 2009. That lecture presented findings from an oral history of Scottish probation in the 1960s; a study inspired in large part by Bill's writing, but also driven by my own curiosity to see whether first-hand retrospective accounts of probation complemented or contradicted the version of history that emerges from analysing documentary sources. More recently, I have worked with colleagues in 23 European countries to develop and pilot new methods for studying probation both as a lived experience and as a constructed practice. The photographs you may have seen in the reception area are drawn from one of these pilot studies; they depict how some English, German and Scottish supervisees chose to visually depict their experiences of supervision.

Secondly – and relatedly – this shift towards studying how supervision is experienced has been mirrored -- and far exceeded in fact – by what is sometimes termed ‘the narrative turn’ in criminology and social science more generally. The central importance of the analysis of narratives will perhaps be best known to this audience in the work of desistance scholars – like Shadd Maruna, Beth Weaver and many others – whose careful attention to how and why people’s stories change as they move away from offending has done so much to inform and influence probation practice and criminal justice reform more generally.

More recently, Sarah Anderson’s award-winning *Probation Journal* article on ‘The value of bearing witness to desistance’, centres on the importance of ‘being present and being with another’ (Naef, 2006: 146), as an enactment of a ‘moral responsibility to support a transition from object to subject and to recognise and endorse the humanity of those who have committed crimes’. The echoes of Bill’s work -- and its refinement -- in Sarah’s compelling argument make me think how wonderful it would have been to hear Bill’s analysis of and engagement with desistance research; though I suspect his influence is already inherent in Tony Bottoms’ work on desistance; and certainly in my own.

Finally, I wonder what Bill would have made of how these two bodies of work – focusing on how people experience probation and how they experience desistance – help us make sense of broader currents of social change.

Just as I sometimes like to conjure up an image of Bill and Tony struggling to confront and find a way through the nothing works crisis -- in my imagination, I can see Bill today angry and frustrated with the ways in which probation’s honourable but imperfect traditions came to be

traduced and diminished by misplaced faith in managerialism, by the preoccupation with risk and, more recently, by the ideologically driven, hasty and 'evidence-lite' pursuit of privatisation. In particular, I suspect he would have been a trenchant and compelling critic of the commodification and commercialisation of probation; and of turning people into units to be efficiently processed in pursuit of profit.

We may not have Bill with us to face down the challenges of the harsh and amoral times in which we live; times in which the corruption by the market of the liberalism his work expressed seems all but complete -- but we do have the example he set and the intellectual and moral resources his work still provides.

In what remains of our time this afternoon, we're going to hear first-hand about how our panellists experienced supervision – whether as helping, holding or hurting – and we're going to try together, in memory of Bill, to keep on figuring out how to make probation better and society better.

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