

Book Reviews

doi:10.1017/S1472669606220784

SHUTE, S, HOOD, R and SEEMUNGAL, F. *A Fair Hearing? Ethnic Minorities in the Criminal Courts*. Willan Publishing, 2005. ISBN 1-84302-084-0 (hbk): £35.00.

It is integral to the England and Wales criminal justice system that it is perceived by the public and defendants alike to be fair. With an over representation of ethnic minorities in our prisons it is essential that discrimination based on ethnicity is eradicated throughout the entire criminal justice system. Shute et al's book highlights the present situation regarding the perception of defendants, in particular, but also of others working within the system, of the fairness of criminal trials. The authors are at pains to point out that the discussion is not based on whether the system is in fact fair and free of discrimination, but on what people's perceptions of it actually are. Public confidence in the criminal justice system protects the legitimacy of the agencies working within it and encourages obedience.

The book is a summary of the authors' findings following research commissioned by the Lord Chancellor's Department (now named the Department for Constitutional Affairs). The empirical research was carried out in Manchester, Birmingham and London chosen for their large ethnic populations. Interviewees included both white people and people of colour who were defendant, lawyers, judges and magistrates and other employees within the system. The results documented are divided between the magistrate's courts and the crown courts. Experiences of the police service were excluded. With over a thousand people interviewed the research was relatively extensive and successfully demonstrates that perceptions of whether a criminal trial is fair have improved among the ethnic population, although there is still room for improvement.

As with all empirical work the results are limited in their accuracy. However, the authors do provide statistical relevance throughout the book and the study has to be applauded for its efforts in evaluating a current issue which has been relatively unresearched recently.

The book is clearly structured and accessible to the reader. The initial chapters outline the current relevance of the area studied and then explain the methodology used. An interesting aspect of the latter was the decision to carry out interviews with defendants directly after the completion of a case. Naturally this decision was influenced by financial factors, given the difficulty in arranging meetings at their homes for example. It may be felt that the findings are distorted to some degree. Many

defendants may have been given custodial sentences and be feeling negative towards the system as a whole. When asked questions concerning fairness and ethnicity, it could be expected that they answer more negatively than otherwise. The authors do successfully counter this by acknowledging that resentment could be deepened over time. It also enabled the researchers to generate larger samples that created greater statistical relevance.

The most substantive chapter and the heart of the book covers the study's findings in relation to defendants. This is an enlightening chapter and may prove to be of great interest to practising criminal solicitors and barristers and indeed magistrates and judges. The general conclusion of the case studies included illustrate that defendants mostly feel that the system is fair and treats people equally. On the other hand perceptions of sentencing showed that some felt that harsher sentences were attached to defendants from an ethnic minority.

The latter part of the book reflects more on other participants in the criminal justice system. It is noteworthy that witnesses, though provided with a chapter, only manage three pages. There was little difference in the perceptions of witnesses, the majority feeling that they were treated equally and fairly, regardless of ethnicity.

An inclusion of the attitudes of magistrates and judges towards the training they had received on issues of ethnicity is particularly relevant. The authors were able to evaluate how successful judicial training had been and what impact it had made. Particular comments of interest are produced in full and manage to convey the attitudes of individuals well. The authors conclude from these interviews that a "cultural change" has begun.

To establish that an ideal perception of the criminal justice system has not been achieved yet and that further work must be done, the book reproduces several interviews with lawyers. Certain comments are included in full, expressing individual lawyer's experiences of discrimination against their clients. A particular insight reflected that sentencing may be influenced by ethnicity, a perception also expressed by some of the defendants interviewed. The research suggests that this perception is held more frequently by those of black ethnicity. This is thought provoking and it is hoped that these scenarios become increasingly rare and that discrimination based on ethnicity is seen to be a thing of the past.

The authors provide a much needed update on the perceptions of fairness within the criminal justice system. In many ways it is encouraging to see a visible change here and it should provide those working in the system with an incentive to continue in the right direction. This is

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an excellent book and a worthwhile purchase for law libraries catering for academics, and criminal law firms. The inclusion of interviews with both the magistracy and judiciary also make this a text suitable for court libraries.

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doi:10.1017/S1472669606210788

HEYE, D., *Characteristics of the Successful 21st Century Information Professional*: Chandos Publishing, 2006. ISBN 184334145X (pbk): £39.95. 200p.

This book is intended for Library and Information Services (LIS) staff working on LIS enquiry desks. It is intended to act as an *aide memoire* or review for experienced staff whilst at the same time, being a “one stop shop” of information for the aspiring student of LIS. The author has taken a particularly practical approach in dealing with the attributes, skills and knowledge he suggests is necessary for success in enquiry work. It is based on his practical experience, which he hopes will provide a good overview.

This is the only book I have come across in LIS literature that starts each chapter with an enigmatic “You”. Let me provide an example: Chapter 2 is entitled “You are creative and keen to innovate”; Chapter 3 is “You are a search engine guru”; Chapter 4 is “You see the big picture” and so forth. The chapters mentioned provide an introduction to techniques on how to improve the skills discussed. The use of “you” focuses directly on the characteristics that Mr Heye feels are important for the information professional. The chapters are helpfully sub-divided by sub-headings which are accessible and thought provoking.

After reading the book, I was left with the distinct feeling that it would be usefully read by a student of LIS but that experienced LIS staff would be somewhat bemused by it. Such a strident comment needs some qualification and explanation. Let me illustrate this point of view by reference to some sections of the book.

Under the chapter heading entitled “You maintain a healthy work-life balance” there is a sub-section which

states “Release the inner child”. Mr Heye then goes on to say in relation to his sub-heading “*This may sound a bit weird, but sometimes we should give in to things we enjoyed when we were kids.....have a snowball fight, kick leaves during autumn, play with a miniature race track or climb a tree.*” Please forgive me, Mr Heye, if I say that I do not think that climbing a tree is likely to enhance my career in LIS. In the same chapter there is a sub-heading called “Exercise” where Mr Heye suggests there is a need to take exercise for one’s well-being. My immediate thought when reading this entry was to think that taking a holistic approach to advising on LIS enquiry desk effectiveness is laudable, but can be taken too far. I was left with the feeling that stating the obvious to experienced LIS staff will lead many to be dissuaded from reading this book further. (*Unless they would like to be amused at the more “obvious” comments such as “Sleep:Don’t exercise before bedtime.”*)

On the other hand, this book may have some merit if given to an aspiring and naïf LIS student. It provides advice on good practice and procedures that I did not know about when I was starting my LIS career and I would have been most grateful for a book of this calibre, magnitude and erudition at that time.

In order to test this theory, I gave this book to an LIS new starter. He was far from naïf, however, and so he found some sections of the book, which suggested that he get a good night’s sleep as part of an essential work-life balance to be a bit obvious. However, he did read it and after observing his work after he had read the book, I noticed a slight change in attitude, ability and knowledge. Whilst initial conclusions could be that this growth in his knowledge may have been attributable to what he had read, in reality, other factors intervened. For instance, from having little knowledge of working in LIS, by dint of his own ability, experience and knowledge of the law he has shown many of the “*characteristics of the successful 21st Century information professional*” without having to follow this book.

On balance, students with significant life experience will not be interested in the book.

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