

Reviews

Beresford, Q and Omaji, P, *Rites of Passage*

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The authors of this book were inspired by Patrick Dodson's call upon the Department for Community Services in Western Australia 'to examine why Aboriginal children are more susceptible to offending behaviour than their non-Aboriginal counterparts [and] to properly consider socioeconomic and cultural matters in addressing this problem'. Beresford and Omaji set out to do just that, undertaking their own research into the issues by reference to government reports, and conducting interviews with Aboriginal youth, parents and community workers. What emerges is a detailed discussion of the causes of Aboriginal youth offending set in the context of mainstream criminological and sociological theory.

The research material is presented around a number of factors which are recognised indicators of social disadvantage. Chapter One highlights scapegoating of Aboriginal youth by the media which strengthens a law and order approach to juvenile offending. All too familiar statistics of over-representation of Aboriginal youth are recited, and are linked to negative media stereotyping. A crisis in parenting skills within Aboriginal communities is identified as a factor in Aboriginal youth delinquency in Chapter Two. This crisis is attributed to government policies which saw the removal of those who are now parents from their own family networks. The authors draw on psychological theories of parent/child relationships to explain the consequences of this removal. Educational disadvantage and discrimination described in Chapter Three is seen to originate from institutionalised attitudes of the education system which treats Aboriginal children as inferior. The resulting alienation of Aboriginal youth from the schooling system is seen to lead to their delinquent behaviour. Poor interactions between police and Aboriginal youth is discussed in Chapter Four, supported by excerpts from interviews with Aboriginal young people. The criticism of discriminatory policing practices and aggressive tactics used by police with Aboriginal young people echo the findings of other studies (Cunneen 1992), and the delinquency of these youth is seen as the predictable reaction. Welfare and justice theoretical models preface a critique in Chapter Five of Court responses to Aboriginal juveniles, and reiterates themes of cultural alienation from these formal justice processes. Chapter Six explores more general social disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal youths. The authors use subculture theory and principles of strain theory to explain the impact of long-term unemployment and racial prejudice which excludes Aboriginal youth from mainstream society and leads to the development of values outside of society's norms. The lack of links to any cultural base shows itself in the identity crisis of Aboriginal youth, manifested in criminal behaviour and substance abuse.

The final two Chapters outline solutions for the depressing (and familiar) picture painted throughout most of the book. Beresford and Omaji are, not surprisingly, highly critical of systemic government failures across welfare, education and justice areas. They call for a twofold response: one which addresses broad underlying issues of social disadvantage, and a specific focus on intervention and rehabilitation for Aboriginal youth already in the system. They also challenge the Federal Government to take more pro-active

responsibility in relation to Aboriginal youth affairs in line with their powers under the 1967 Referendum.

Clearly, *Rites of Passage* would be a valuable text for students of criminological theory, rich as it is in the demonstration of how a number of mainstream theories such as strain theory, subculture theory and labelling theory can be applied to a certain group of people. However, this was not the major aim of the book, and whether the authors have actually achieved their purpose in writing it is questionable.

There is no doubt about Beresford and Omaji's intentions to expose and explain Aboriginal youth offending in ways that challenge government, police and judicial responses to Aboriginal juveniles in Western Australia (and arguably, nationwide). Likewise their conviction that these problems stem from ongoing racial discrimination and social disadvantage which has been built up historically is evident. Yet their concerns about negative stereotyping may in fact be reinforced by the book. The reader is left with an overwhelming impression of Aboriginal people as helpless, criminalised victims at the bottom of the social strata of Australia on all indicators. This emphasis carries two dangers. First, it is likely to reinforce in the minds of those readers not favourably disposed towards Aboriginal youth the stereotyped prejudices they already hold. The 'facts' contained in such a book could be used as evidence of Aboriginal criminality, without any willingness to take on board the authors' contextual arguments about that information.

More importantly however, the general impression left by the book is that governments, both federal and state, are charged with "fixing the problem", and the main problem is defined as social disadvantage. The very idea that non-Aboriginal people or government institutions can provide those solutions must be viewed with caution. The clear message emerging from Aboriginal communities over recent years is that self-determination, not merely self-management, is the key to redressing historically built social disadvantage. One wonders that Beresford and Omaji seem to have stopped short of this obvious conclusion from their research. They themselves were aware of the frustration expressed by Aboriginal people about being subjects for yet another investigation of their suffering (p 19). Aboriginal people are justifiably sceptical about the benefits of such research to them.

The ultimate inability of this book to stand out as groundbreaking advocacy for Aboriginal justice lies in the theoretical approach favoured by the authors. The subject is founded in mainstream criminological and sociological theory, rather than a context of colonisation, cultural alienation and indigenous rights to self-determination. The resulting conclusions, namely, alleviation of social disadvantage by government provided solutions for Aboriginal people which they may get to manage, does not go far enough. This highlights the need for more research into such issues by Aboriginal people themselves, so they can form their own solutions.

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