

Book Reviews

Becoming a Social Work Manager¹

Angie Bartoli

St Albans, Herts: Critical Publishing, 2025

ISBN: 978-1-915713-75-9, 132 pages, paperback, £15.99

‘Leadership in social work isn’t about power – it’s about people.’ This is the central theme of Angie Bartoli’s book, *Becoming a Social Work Manager*. An informative, reflective read, grounded in real-life examples, it provides good insights for those navigating the transition from practitioner to manager in social work practice.

This book is designed for social workers stepping into management roles, with attention to the emotional and relational complexities of leadership. It describes the relational, evolving practice of leadership as rooted in ethics, communication and care.

The book is structured thematically and revolves around four key transitional themes:

1. Preparation for the role
2. Navigating multiple identities
3. Managing people
4. Prioritising self-care.

Each theme is explored through accessible chapters. The use of case studies helps to ground the theory in practice. This approach is especially useful for those who are reflective practitioners or who prefer learning from lived experience.

In the first theme, preparation, Bartoli invites readers to reflect on their motivations for entering management. She challenges the assumption that

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being a good practitioner automatically means that you will be a good manager. Instead, she encourages intentional reflection and prompts the reader to engage in self-reflection about their intentions.

The second theme, multiple identities, particularly resonated with me. Social work managers often find themselves caught between conflicting roles – peer v. supervisor, advocate v. enforcer. Bartoli gives voice to these tensions without judgement. For example, she acknowledges the discomfort of supervising former colleagues and provides tools for maintaining clarity and consistency. This part of the book is particularly good for new managers who might feel alone in this in-between space.

The third theme, managing people, emphasises that effective people management in social work goes far beyond delegation and performance reviews. Social work leadership is about supporting emotional wellbeing, enabling reflective practice, and building a culture of learning and mutual respect. Her insights into supervision – particularly reflective supervision – are especially strong. This chapter provides tools to handle interpersonal conflict, motivation and burnout, all while maintaining humanity.

In the chapter on self-care, Bartoli debunks the myth that managers must sacrifice themselves for their teams. She stresses the importance of boundaries, emotional regulation and supervision, for managers as well as frontline staff. She discusses the emotional labour of leadership and encourages managers to model healthy, balanced practice. I found this especially relevant in a post-COVID world, where burnout is rife and work–life boundaries are increasingly blurred.

What stands out in Bartoli's language is its clarity, warmth and accessibility. She writes in a supportive tone. Her style is straightforward but thoughtful, making the book suitable for students, newly appointed leaders, and even seasoned managers looking to reflect.

The book also engages with contemporary practice – most notably, the shift to remote and hybrid work due to COVID-19. Bartoli explores the impact of remote supervision, virtual communication and leading through uncertainty. This makes the book feel up-to-date and relevant.

One of the book's greatest strengths is its consistent grounding in social work values. It never loses sight of the profession's commitment to empowerment, dignity and justice. Bartoli consistently reminds the reader that these values should guide managerial decisions, whether you are supervising a team member, making a disciplinary call or designing a rota. She reminds us that relational leadership is ethical leadership.

That said, the book is not without its limitations. While Bartoli to some extent addresses people management and conflict, I would have liked to see a more in-depth section on managing difficult staff behaviours or performance issues. These are often the most stressful parts of being a manager, and they deserve more attention. Similarly, a more detailed toolkit for handling team dynamics or resistance to change would have added further practical depth.

Another minor limitation is that the book leans heavily on anecdotal examples, which are relatable but may feel repetitive to readers looking for more structured, step-by-step guidance or formal models. While the emotional tone is a strength, some readers may crave more measurable strategies or clearer policies for use in organisations.

Despite these limitations, I found the book incredibly helpful and highly recommend it – especially for practitioners who want to remain reflective and ethical as they take on new responsibilities. It offers both reassurance and challenge. It validates the messy, emotional reality of social work leadership, while also pushing readers to think more intentionally about their impact. It encourages readers to lead with empathy, to reflect rather than react, and to remember that their identity as a social worker does not need to be left behind when they become a manager. In fact, Bartoli argues that it is those very values that will make you a strong leader.

This book makes a compelling case that good management in social work is not about hierarchy – it's about holding space, making hard decisions through a compassionate leadership style, and creating environments where both staff and service-users can thrive. It blends personal insight, case examples, theory and practice, and should, I feel, be required reading for any social worker looking to take the next step in their career.

Sentencing Serious Sex Offenders – How Judges Decide When Discretion is Wide²

Dermot Griffin

Bristol: Policy Press, 2025

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In this slim volume, Dr Griffin uses a focused lens to look at the broad issue of sentencing discretion by judges in Ireland. By looking specifically at those most serious cases which resulted in sentences of fifteen years to life, he takes the reader on a journey through the various factors that influence sentencing decisions, placing judicial discretion within a wider context of socio-political discourse and judicial jurisprudence. We may think of decisions that judges make as individual and subjective, but in fact judges are making decisions in the context of the wider sentencing canon. It should be interpreted as collaborative and reliant on the input of other professions such as Probation Officers, mental health professionals and members of An Garda Síochána. In the Central Criminal Court, a very small number of judges (one judge was responsible for 45 per cent of sentences) have developed a significant level of expertise. Since 2008, judges have a duty to explain their sentencing process.³ Through this requirement, we can better understand how judges balance ‘retribution, rehabilitation, incapacitation and deterrence’ (p. 27) in their sentencing.

Griffin specifically examines 108 cases from 1985 to 2022, in higher courts, resulting in these longer sentences. These are the most ‘truly egregious cases’ (p. 2). He chooses these cases because they provide good data in terms of sentencing judges’ remarks, appellate judges’ remarks and media coverage. These are exclusively sentencing decisions in sexual offence cases.

Judicial discretion is controversial and is often the subject of commentary in the press, where the public or the victims express a view that the sentence does not reflect the seriousness of the crime. Critics would suggest that judicial discretion can lead to ‘inconsistent, unfair and arbitrary decision making’ (p. 4). Meanwhile, experts would refer to the ‘practice wisdom’ (p. 5) of the judges in these higher courts. Quite often, there is room for discretion within the rules. The book takes us through the principles of sentencing, incorporating the purposes of punishment. One of the findings of this book is

² Reviewed by Daragh Bailey – Regional Manager the Probation Service.

³ DPP v Farrell [2010] IECCA 68.

that discretion allows for more consistency than one might assume when first examining the practice.

A Sentencing Guidelines and Information Committee was set up in 2019. However, it has yet to issue guidance. What we do have, since 2014, is sentencing bands which judges are invited to consider when considering the case. The study covered sentences of rape, rape under section 4, aggravated sexual assault, and defilement of a child under the age of 15, as these are offences where sentences of fifteen years to life are available to the court. Interestingly, from a probation perspective, is that in over half of these cases (52 per cent), judges suspended part of the sentence, often with probation supervision (38.5 per cent) to manage the risk of reoffending.

While judges may impose concurrent or consecutive sentences, in the cases considered in this study, consecutive sentences would have resulted effectively in a life sentence. Therefore, they have not been utilised by judges in these cases, as per the sentencing principle that consecutive sentences should not result in a *de facto* life sentence. Where there are multiple victims, individual victims may feel that the sentence imposed on their particular count does not represent justice to them; judges are, however, hampered in their decision-making by this sentencing principle.

The rules of evidence are not as strict in sentencing hearings, and defendants can bring in a wide range of what they consider mitigating evidence. In these sentencing hearings, the principle of proportionality is demonstrated through examining the mitigating and aggravating factors and the gravity of the offence. Some factors, such as alcohol consumption, may be an aggravating or a mitigating factor, depending on the individual's relationship with alcohol and whether they were acting out of character. There is considerable discussion exploring the range of aggravating factors, such as grooming, threats and plying with alcohol or tricking victims; these are all aspects of Probation Officer offence analysis and recommendations. This is very interesting when it comes to the gravity of the offence, as it is not just the seriousness of an offence but also about harm caused to the individual and the circumstances of the defendant, as well as any aggravating factors. These issues are often seen separately outside of court but to a judge these aspects are merged.

Of the cases in this study, 43 per cent were appealed, which means that there is quite a lot of discourse among judges, which provides the sentencing canon. In 50 per cent of the appeals, the perpetrator received a reduced sentence. During the time period in which these cases occurred, a change in

guidance was established through the appellate court, which established a guilty plea as a recommended mitigating factor in sentencing. This guidance has seemingly impacted on the appealed cases in this study. However, this guidance is no longer applied in all cases.

Griffin looks separately at cases involving adult victims and those involving child victims. Adult-victim cases often involved random attack from strangers, a relatively unusual occurrence within sexual offending. International research has shown that judges do not see intimate partner rape as equivalent to stranger rape, and Dr Griffin questions the potential impact of 'rape myths' (p. 11) on the 'sentencing canon' in Ireland. An implication for probation practice may be to examine whether such bias is evident in our assessments or reports. The 'breadth, depth and depravity of offending' (p. 11) was the focus for judges in sentencing cases with child victims. All child-victim cases in this study involved multiple offences. The relationship to the child was often an aggravating factor (position of trust or authority). Judges also considered the scale of the harm caused and the level and extent of violence involved.

This book highlights that sentencing is not as individual and subjective as one might imagine, but in fact reflects the multiple purposes and stakeholders involved in the process. It is collaborative and sits within a sentencing canon based on prior cases and judges' expertise. This research demonstrates that sentencing is more consistent than inconsistent and that judicial discretion supports this consistency. This book is highly informative and can help us, the Probation Service, to locate pre-sentence reports as an essential tool in sentencing.