

Listening and learning: The reciprocal relationship between worker and client

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Abstract The relationship between worker and client has for the best part of 100 years been the mainstay of probation, and yet has recently been eroded by an increased emphasis on punishment, blame and managerialism. The views of offenders are in direct contradiction to these developments within the criminal justice system and this article argues that only by taking account of the views of those at the 'coal face' will criminologists, policy makers and practitioners be able to effect real change in crime rates. The article thus focuses on the views of a sample of previously persistent offenders in Scotland about offending, desistance and how the system can help them. It explores not only their need for friendship and support in youth but also the close association between relationships and the likelihood of offending. It also demonstrates the views of offenders themselves about the importance of the working relationship with supervising officers in helping them desist from crime. The article concludes that the most effective way of reducing offending is to re-engage with the message of the Probation Act of 100 years ago, namely, to 'advise, assist and befriend' offenders rather than to 'confront, challenge and change' offending behaviour.

Keywords desistance, probation, relationships, youth offending

Introduction

England and Wales would have been celebrating 100 years of the Probation Service this year, had the National Offender Management Service not somewhat undermined its remit in 2003. The Probation Act of 1907 encouraged staff to 'advise, assist and befriend' offenders and the focus for the next 70 or more years was based on such an approach. However, the message has changed in the intervening years – notably in the last 20 or so – to one of 'confront, challenge and change' offenders (Barry, 2000: 581). Nevertheless, although we have become 'tougher' on crime in recent years, the rate of offending and the scapegoating of young people in particular has not changed considerably in the last century. One hundred years ago, young people were no less a political source of concern than they are now, and no less blamed for their predicament than they are now. One magistrate at the turn of the 20th century described young people as: 'coarser, more vulgar, [and] less refined' than their parents and no doubt young people would have contributed greatly to the fact that one in four policemen in Victorian times was purportedly assaulted in the course of duty (Pearson, 2006: 6).

This article cannot speak for those lost generations of young people who 'experienced justice' over the last 100 years, but it can highlight the views of a small sub-sample of young offenders at the turn of the 21st century about offending, desistance and criminal justice. The article argues that ignoring the voice of offenders about what works best for them in the fight against crime, losing the relationship and trust between worker and client, and undermining proactive engagement for the welfare and social inclusion of young people in favour of a focus on reactive surveillance, punishment and blame, have combined to reduce the overall effectiveness of the criminal justice system.

Moving away from getting close

Large-scale quantitative studies have, over the last 20 years or more, focused increasingly on the behaviour and personalities of offenders, almost to the total exclusion of the wider social environment within which, and often because of which, such behaviour takes place. A set of needs and risk factors have been identified by academics in the What Works literature which seemingly enables offending behaviour to be predicted, contained and modified. Trotter (1999) suggests that 'empirical practice', that is practice which is based primarily on research findings, has to work with the presenting problem rather than the whole person because the presenting problem is more amenable to measurement and evaluation than is the wider environment. However, there is also the argument that in a risk-oriented climate, technical assessment and management allows for greater streamlining and targeting of 'at risk' populations and associated budgets (Bessant, 2004). It is this type of rationale that has informed and promoted the What Works agenda, which emerged in the 1980s as a result of quantitative analyses of what *looked to be* – on the surface – potentially and scientifically effective in reducing re-offending. Andrews (1995) identified several factors which he considered 'promising targets' in the fight against crime.

These were:

- changing antisocial thinking;
- improving cognitive behavioural skills;
- reducing substance misuse; and
- changing other attributes which are linked to criminal conduct.

This list includes factors which are more or less quantifiable and require only change to the individual. They do not look at the context in which behaviour and personality development take place, nor do they address outside influences.

However, Andrews also identified less promising targets for change – which by inference should receive less attention. These were:

- increasing self-esteem (without simultaneously addressing antisocial attitudes and behaviour);
- focusing on 'vague emotional/personal complaints' that have not been linked to criminal conduct;
- improving living conditions (without simultaneously addressing antisocial attitudes and behaviour);
- increasing conventional ambition in school and work (without offering concrete support to realize those ambitions).

This second list admits that there could be factors which require change to systems rather than individuals (e.g. living conditions and educational and employment opportunities) but such factors are not readily measurable or manageable and are, therefore, less attractive to policy makers (and, to a certain extent, government funded researchers). The concurrent shift of emphasis from concern for the person to concern for the presenting behaviour in criminal justice is not happening as quickly in Scotland as in England and Wales. This is mainly because probation work in Scotland still comes under the banner of 'social work' although it is becoming increasingly separated out from mainstream social work, both in terms of funding and policy initiatives. The preferred agenda for policy makers in Scotland is now the management of risk and reducing the likelihood of further offending – irrespective of the cause of that behaviour and, more importantly, perhaps, irrespective of the views and concerns of offenders themselves.

Much youth research until recently has focused on the problems rather than the potential of young people (Miles, 2000; Barry, 2005). Young people had become passive victims of structural imbalances within society, rather than active negotiators within their social worlds, or alternatively, they were seen as manipulative actors rationally circumventing structural forces. More recently, there has been a greater awareness of the two-way relationship between, on the one hand, structural opportunities and constraints and, on the other hand, young people's ability to construct their own identities (Miles, 2000). Not only have young people been set apart in terms of their behaviour, but also in terms of their views. According to Miles (2000: 6), the sociology of subculture and the sociology of youth transitions had failed 'to accommodate actors' own accounts or experiences'. However, there is now greater importance placed on 'listening', not least because, even when exposed to the same structural constraints, people will react differently, thus emphasizing the importance of individual narratives (Leibrich, 1993; Maruna, 2001).

Criminologists are still very unsure as to why people start offending, why they continue to offend over a certain period of time and why they stop offending.

However, offenders themselves tend to have a good understanding of what they want from practitioners and politicians to help them reintegrate into their communities, and this article demonstrates the need to listen much more to the needs and wishes of offenders, not only when working with them, but also when undertaking research or formulating policy. In fact, *listening* is the one thing that offenders suggest is crucial if supervising officers are to help people to desist from crime.

Several studies of offenders' views of social work, probation supervision and reasons for offending have been undertaken in recent years (see, for example, McIvor and Barry, 1998a, 1998b; Rex, 1999; Maruna, 2001; Barry, 2006), and the so-called 'criminogenic needs' agenda does not feature highly in these accounts, as illustrated by one study outlined in the following.

The Scottish Desistance Study

In 2000–2001, the author undertook a study of 20 male and 20 female offenders' views of offending and desistance throughout Scotland. The research aims were to explore previously persistent young offenders' perceptions about why they start offending, continue offending over a period of time and stop offending, whether there are gender differences in their rationale for offending, and whether there is a common thread

between their reasons for starting, continuing and stopping offending. All of the men in the sample were accessed through an intensive probation project operating in various parts of Scotland, but because it is difficult to integrate women into predominantly male groupings for such intensive probation in Scotland, only seven female respondents could be accessed in this way. The remaining 13 young women were on straight probation in various local authority social work departments. The women were more likely to live on their own, with or without children, whereas the men were more likely to live with their parents. The young people ranged in age from 18–33, with the women tending to be older than the men at interview.

Four-fifths of the young people in this study started offending as 'children' (i.e. at the age of 15 or under), with the men more likely to start offending earlier than the women. According to both self-reported and official records on this sample's offending histories, as well as starting offending later than the men, the women were also more likely to stop offending later. The women had fewer previous convictions than the men: 18.5 on average for the women compared with 38 on average for the men. There was no significant difference in the mean average number of years that they had been offending in the past, as this was 10 years for both sexes. Ten of the men and 18 of the women suggested at interview that they had now stopped offending, with six men and 14 women claimed to have done so within the year prior to interview. However, according to official SCRO data compiled up to two and a half years post-interview, eight of the men and five of the women were still offending.

Reasons for starting offending

The peer group is already well documented as integral to a youth lifestyle and as a vehicle towards social identity and status (see, amongst others, Farrington, 1986; Reiss, 1988; Miles et al., 1998). For example, Miles et al. (1998: 83) suggest that young people establish 'reference groups' with the implicit aim of having a 'sounding board' for their developing identities. Thornberry and Krohn (1997) suggest that peer groups exert most influence during the adolescent years, partly because adolescents spend more time in group activities with same-age peers and less time with their families or in one-to-one friendships. Greenberg (1979) and Thornberry et al. (1991) also highlight the concomitant reduction in parental influence with an increase in the influence of friends. The extension of the transition period between childhood and adulthood (Coles, 1995), and the concurrent dependence on the peer group for longer periods in youth, has also 'increased the vulnerability of teenagers to the expectations and evaluations of their peers' (Coles, 1995: 593). It has been argued (Stewart et al., 1994; Scottish Office, 1998) that young men are more likely to offend for sociable reasons than are young women, and that young women are restrained by the wider condemnation that offending might involve. However, Emler et al. (1987) suggest that female offenders are more likely than their male counterparts to offend in a group setting.

The findings from the Scottish Desistance Study support the findings of Emler et al. (1987), as highlighted by the numbers of young women citing relational factors and sociability as a reason for starting offending: 19 out of 20 women compared with 12 out of 20 men. Chodorow (1974, cited in Gilligan, 1982) has suggested that women gain social and self identity more through interaction with others than do men. A woman, according to Gilligan, comes 'to know herself as she is known, through her relationship with others' (Gilligan, 1982: 12). Sutherland and Cressey's differential association theory (1970) suggests that people learn to offend in a group setting that approves of, and condones, such behaviour. Although these authors do not make gender-specific claims regarding differential association, it may be the case that young women are more likely to want to learn to conform to the group because of their greater need than young men for social identity. Nevertheless, both sexes would appear from the majority of studies to be equally influenced by peers in starting offending. Certainly, the majority of young people in this study, irrespective of age, cited friends in childhood and youth as an influence in starting offending, as the following quotations illustrate:

All my friends were going into town to shoplift and dressing smart with the clothes that they'd stole and at first I was always saying 'how could they do that? I wish I could do that'. And then . . . I was in town with my friend and she was a bit older than I was and she stole herself a big shiny necklace. She said 'just do it . . . it's easy', and I did, and it was easy. (20 year-old female)

I was hanging about with a few pals that had money . . . if my friends can buy it, I can get it for nothing, just like that . . . I just wanted to be in there too . . . I didn't want to be the odd one out. (21 year-old male)

However, the young women were more likely than the young men to be influenced by relationships rather than friendships per se, even if these relationships involved abuse or drugs. For five of the young women,

having a boyfriend who was offending was a crucial influence on them starting offending, not least when those boyfriends were encouraging them to take drugs – or, as one woman described it, ‘training’ them to offend. Whereas many of the men would not have been involved in relationships at the time they started offending (they tended to start offending earlier than the women in early adolescence), the women were more likely to be in a relationship before they became involved in offending, that relationship often being the stimulus to starting offending. As will be seen in the following, whereas for the young men being involved in a relationship might be a positive incentive to stop offending, for the young women relationships were often a negative influence on *starting* offending:

[My first boyfriend] was a drug dealer and I admired him . . . I fancied him and I thought he was cool because everybody respected him and all the people my age respected me because I was mucking about with this person. (23 year-old woman)

Reasons for continuing offending

Whilst friendship and identity were crucial in the onset phase of offending, maintaining an offending lifestyle and securing an illegal income over time became a solitary activity, with only one young man out of the 40 respondents suggesting that ‘friends’ (broadly defined) were an important reason for continuing to offend, not least because he lived in an area in which his criminal reputation was a survival mechanism. The main reasons cited by the majority for continuing offending were because it had become a habit, or because it was a means of feeding a habit. Friends were replaced by customers, and kudos by necessity. Whilst offending with friends at school was a sociable activity, few of these respondents had supportive friends during the maintenance phase of an offending lifestyle, not least because of possible drug addiction and a concurrent lack of trust amongst friends and family. Certainly the stigma attached to offending became more problematic and isolating as they got older:

I was always, like, alone and it was very difficult to, like, I don’t know, to get on with anyone, you know . . . A lot of folk looked at me differently once they’d heard that I’d been caught for something. (19 year-old man)

However, given that many young people are in a transitional phase between leaving school and starting a family of their own (or renewing contact with their birth family following a conscious distancing from the parental home in youth), it is likely that many will consider they have few stable friendships during this phase of their lives irrespective of their involvement in crime. Giordano et al. (2003) suggest that in continuing offending and in the process of desistance, there is also a gender divergence: women are less influenced by their offending peers and partners than vice versa as they get older. However, they often persevered because of the money that they could make:

I can get all the best things. I can have as much money as I want. (23 year-old woman)

A better lifestyle. . . . You can make loads of money. Plenty money. Live like a king. (21 year-old man)

. . . it gets easier and easier and then people find out and they start saying to you, get me this, get me that, so you get money and it’s more money for the weekends . . . for dope, and then it went on to harder and higher stuff, do you know what I mean? (23 year-old woman)

Reasons for stopping offending

Twice as many practical than relational factors were cited as creating the climate for desistance from offending for these young people (for example, the ‘hassle factor’ of criminal justice system involvement or the negative consequences of this on health, liberty and employment). However, relational factors were cited not so much as a cause but as an incentive and advantage of stopping offending. Whilst Gilligan (1982) suggests that men have fewer friendships than women as they get older, Shover (1996), in a study of older male ex-offenders, nevertheless suggests that the social value of interpersonal relationships for his sample of men (i.e. with friends as well as the wider community) should not be underestimated:

The extreme importance of interpersonal respect, particularly to men who almost certainly are denied it based on their location in class and moral hierarchies, cannot be minimised. (Shover, 1996: 106)

Relational factors in the desistance phase were marginally more of an influence for the young women (11/18 women compared with 5/10 men) because of now having responsibility for children, because of the positive impact of a partner or because of the support from family more generally:

Reasons for stopping? Well the kids, know what I mean. To try and make a family. . . . [My daughter] had seen so much. . . . She hadn't seen the needle or nothing, know what I mean, but kids aren't stupid. (27 year-old woman)

. . . having a son. Once he was born, then I really put the foot down. . . . Because I had someone else I had to look out for other than myself . . . my son, he was too young to look after himself. That's my job. (24 year-old man)

Whereas social control theories are not conclusive in relation to more structural 'turning points' such as marriage or employment (Maruna, 2001), they are useful in relation to the *people* who were influential in helping these young people stop offending – namely, family, friends and professional workers. Whilst one's family background and the influence of siblings and peers may well have encouraged offending in the past for these young people, as they got older they suggested that the negative influences of offending siblings and peers weakened whilst the positive influences of family and 'law abiding' friends strengthened. This may well have resulted from changes in lifestyle during the transition to adulthood, for example in leaving school and gaining one's own tenancy or finding a job.

For the women in particular, having children often resulted in their becoming closer to their own mothers for sharing childcare or for financial support (Allatt and Yeandle, 1992), but they also often moved away from the circle of friends in the area in which they were brought up because of a restricted choice of social housing vacancies or because of a conscious decision to distance themselves from peers in the fight against drug addiction and crime. In a study by Knight and West (1975), the majority of those who said they had desisted also mentioned that this was an active decision resulting from the breaking of friendship ties with delinquent peers. Indeed, Stewart et al. (1994) found in their sample of offenders that the influence of peers decreased concurrently with offending behaviour as they got older.¹ Giordano et al. (2003) found this decrease more rapid for women than for men.

Nevertheless, for some in this sample, the positive impact of conventional friends seemed to be as much an incentive to stopping offending as the negative impact of offending friends had been an incentive to starting offending. Losing close friendships through crime was sometimes mentioned as a cost:

[W]ell you get a lot of friends when you're in one sort of circle but they're not really true friends and friends that you should have and should keep don't want to know you. So you can lose a fair amount of respect. Although you gain friends, or acquaintances shall we say, you seem to lose a helluva lot of respect from the people that will care about you or people that want to know. (24 year-old man)

The social bonds of family and relationships (rather than peers per se) generally seemed more apparent for the women than for the men in the desistance phase. This may have been because the women were more likely to have responsibility for children or closer contact with their families (Heidensohn, 1996). The women suggested that they were more determined to stop offending if such offending meant jeopardizing a loving relationship with a non-offending partner. One young woman aged 23 at the time of interview, who became addicted to drugs at 17 because of pressure from her then-boyfriend, was now on a methadone programme because of encouragement from her current (non-offending) boyfriend, whose threats to leave her if she continued to offend were the major catalyst to her stopping: 'My boyfriend would say . . . if I stole, he would leave me.' Another woman, who met her fiancé a year before the interview, stopped offending at that time because of the positive change of circumstances and emotions resulting from this new relationship:

[My fiancé] brought a really different side out of me. He makes me relaxed, more calmer, and it's like as if I found someone who really cares and actually is interested in me, for who I really was. (25 year-old woman)

Improvements in relationships, either with family, partners or their own children, were cited as definite advantages of no longer offending for three men and six women:

[*Researcher: What are the advantages of not offending now?*] My son, my job, things like that. I've got my family. . . . I don't miss it. I'm quite glad that I'm away from it and I'm earning money and supporting my family with honest money, know what I mean. (22 year-old man)

I've got to think about what my family want and what I want. Do I want to go to jail all my life? No. Do I want my mother and father to come and visit me in jail? No. So if I stop offending, they won't come and see me in prison because I won't be there. (18 year-old man)

Improving one's self-respect and self-worth were also seen as advantages of not offending. Certain responses illustrated the need that many of the sample had for the praise and encouragement of family members or non-offending partners or friends. They felt they had achieved a lot by stopping offending and benefited from the positive reaction and encouragement of others. This came across strongly in what they said about not offending now:

You get respect I feel proud because you're not committing offences. You're not letting people down. (18 year-old man)

People don't look down their noses at you any more 'cos they don't see you as a hooligan. It sort of gives you a bit sort of respect. (24 year-old man)

I don't feel like scum anymore [I] feel worth something now. I can I make something of myself now. Get on with my life. (23 year-old woman)

Young people's views on good practice

As well as being asked about their own reasons for starting, continuing and stopping offending, the young people in the Scottish study were also asked about how best to explain and prevent offending amongst young people more generally. Offenders and ex-offenders have a wealth of knowledge, expertise and opinion on the criminal justice system and how young people enter and leave it. Their views as 'expert witnesses' have only recently been taken into account in the criminal justice field, although arguably they should be seen first and foremost as 'service users' rather than as 'offenders'. In this study respondents were asked not only about their own offending behaviour, but also what they thought of different disposals within the criminal justice system and how best to explain and prevent offending amongst young people more generally.

The consistency of approach between offenders' reasons for offending and those reasons that they give for other people's offending is perhaps unremarkable, but the reasons given for their own and other people's offending across the sample as a whole is worthy of note. Invariably, respondents commented on issues relating to integration, the need for social inclusion and the importance of friends and family in explaining both offending and desistance. For example, the following quotations illustrate the feelings of many about why young people start offending:

To keep up with their friends. (27 year-old female)

Maybe because he wanted a wee bit more love. Rejection of his family. That's what I think crime's all about – rejection. (18 year-old male)

I think like younger ones, like 14 and that, most of it is peer pressure and they're feared to tell their mates 'look, we're not doing it because you told us to'. They're too feared because then the whole scheme starts saying 'you're a chicken and you're this and you're that'. (23 year-old female)

Many respondents commented on the multiplicity of factors involved in why young people also stop offending:

They get older. Either they meet somebody and then they settle down and they've got other things on their mind, like bills and that, a proper house, and then they just relax. Or it just comes down because they can't steal anymore The town is too clued up to them . . . like it takes the whole town to know that shoplifter, for them to stop shoplifting in that town. (20 year-old female)

But when they broke the reasons down, certain categories emerged as to why young people stopped offending. These comprised the 'hassle factor' and the incentive of a good relationship:

. . . realizing that you're not a teenager any more and you're going to go to the jail if you don't stop Nobody wants to go on like that for the rest of their life. (22 year-old female)

I stopped because I realized there were more important things out there than getting one over on the police. (24 year-old male)

Maybe they've realized it's not worth it, or something's better. Like me, I've got something better that I thought I never could have – a good man, a lovely house, a nice life. (25 year-old female)

Respondents were asked how they felt they could help young people to stop offending and four key approaches emerged. First, the vast majority (11 men and 13 women) suggested that the best approach was for supervising officers to talk and listen to their clients, about the problems, fears and consequences of offending:

I think a lot of young people really just need somebody to listen to them. (27 year-old female)

I would just try and talk to them, tell them about what I've been through and tell them that it's not worth it and what's the point in going to jail when you can be on the outside living your life. (29 year-old female)

Young people in particular need the 'sounding board' element of a listening ear, so as to encourage personal development, learning and meaningful interaction, not least with someone who is a neutral outsider or is seen as non-judgemental. When young people talked about 'listening', they were often reflecting on past experiences as children of being ignored, excluded or misunderstood by family as well as certain professionals.

The second most popular approach to reducing crime and problematic behaviour in young people was to offer activities to reduce boredom and to give young people a stake in society:

Give them something to do. Let people wake up in the morning and the first thing they don't think about is getting wasted. They need something to keep their mind off it, you know. They need opportunities. (24 year-old male)

Third, respondents commented on the need for information and advice, notably in respect of drug rehabilitation centres or drugs awareness training, since much offending was seen as a consequence of, or associated with, drug or alcohol misuse. In this respect, proactive earlier intervention in young people's lives was seen as more effective than responding retrospectively once an offending lifestyle had become ingrained.

Fourth, many inferred that social work intervention could only be effective if it was tailor-made to suit the needs and circumstances of different young people:

Give them support that suits that individual because everybody – there's that many different people out there that need that many different types of support. But people assume, like, because like you've been sexually abused, they think you just need counselling for abuse, but there's a lot more to it. (27 year-old female)

When asked what previous disposals they had found helpful or effective, these respondents commented most favourably – and perhaps not surprisingly given how they were accessed – on probation and intensive probation. In particular, the rapport that they had established with key workers was a crucial source of support and encouragement for them in the process of desistance, a rapport that is not possible with many other disposals available to the courts, notably custody and fines:

[It] was good, I enjoyed that . . . because at that point in time I was prepared to listen, prepared to take help . . . I connected with the people there . . . I got on well with the staff . . . I liked [the project worker], although he was English. . . . (24 year-old male)

It was brilliant there, man. I learnt a lot too. I always took it in . . . I was always there. I loved it there, man. . . . It was just easy to get on with everybody It was just a lot easier, brilliant. (21 year-old male)

It was good the way [the project worker] came and I could speak to him, like I could speak to anyone but I would tell him the truth, know what I mean. He was the only person I could tell the truth to. (27 year-old female)

Community service was also considered a constructive help in aiding desistance. As two young men explained:

It gives you something to do. It makes you go out and do work . . . makes you feel better about yourself as well. (28 year-old man)

I'm going out and I'm working . . . I ken I'll no get paid for it, but I'm still in the full swing, eh. (21 year-old man)

The one disposal which elicited vehement condemnation from the majority of respondents was custody, with many saying that it made young people more rather than less likely to offend, was unlikely to give them the incentive to make positive changes in their lives, and was likely to undermine efforts at social inclusion.

Discussion

A key factor associated with desistance for these young people was the desire for 'normal' or conventional relationships with, or the support of, family, friends and significant others. Developing feelings of interdependence, social identity and empathy amongst the respondents in relation to people in their lives other than their peers gave them a sense of purpose in seeking out opportunities for integration and conventionality that offending could not give them, and such feelings are thus seen as an important factor in aiding desistance. However, the criminal justice system tended to erode those friendships and relationships because of periods of incarceration and stigmatization.

Many triggering points cited for stopping offending were 'push factors', which were reactive or resulting from adverse experiences compared with 'pull factors', which were proactive or resulting from positive emotional experiences. The majority of these respondents suggested that they made an active decision to stop offending because of the loss of control in their lives resulting from the restrictions placed on them by their reputation and lifestyle. Whilst they may have drifted *into* offending in childhood, their agency and determination to leave such a lifestyle in early adulthood was particularly strong, given that this decision meant giving up something that they were accustomed to, successful in or addicted to. However, there were few, if any, 'pull' factors involved, other than the help and encouragement of significant others, and this made their resolve to stop offending all the more powerful.

Relationships and friendships with law abiding others were not always cited as the major catalyst to desistance, but were seen very much as a pull factor, a concurrent source of encouragement and support in the desistance process. Indeed friends and relationships were seen as almost the only pull factor for this sample in desisting from crime, not least given how few were employed or had other outlets for self-esteem or self-achievement. However, in terms of *starting* offending, friends were very much both a pull and a push factor: these young people freely chose to enter both into friendships and into illegal activities in youth and they were not propelled by friends into offending but did so proactively in the company of, or in order to please, help or join with their friends, partners or siblings. However, there was, nevertheless, an element for many of feeling 'under pressure' to conform. Whilst many studies of criminal behaviour amongst young people cite peers as a major adverse influence, few actually dissect the relevance and importance of the peer group, not least in relation to sources of personal and social power and status. The blanket expression 'peer group pressure' is misleading since it does not take into account all the nuances and choices of relationship that exist amongst young people. It can equally be argued that peer pressure is not always one-sided or coercive and individual young people are not always social vacuums or necessarily vulnerable within the peer group (Ungar, 2000). Although young people may 'sacrifice personal agency' (Ungar, 2000: 177), this can often be explained as a transitional phase between dependence on family (social control and disempowerment) and independence (autonomy and empowerment). Ungar concludes that associating consensually with peers is 'a consciously employed strategy to enhance personal and social power' (Ungar, 2000: 177). To Emler and Reicher (1995), reputations as well as identities have to be established through visible activities such as being within a group setting and conforming to group norms, activities which are in contrast to and go against wider social expectations. This requires not only personal agency but also 'strategy'. In this study, three types of strategy emerged in starting and continuing offending which related to other people, namely:

- propensity to conform (to the friendship group's activities, requests or demands) for sociability reasons: they did not want to be left out, but there was also an element of social learning in conforming to the activities of the wider group;
- propensity to conform for self-preservation reasons: this was a wholly female response, instigated because of fear of reprisals or violence from their male partners or boyfriends if they did not, for example, bring in money for drugs;
- propensity to conform for personal reasons: in the transition to adulthood, self-esteem and status are crucial sources of identity and belonging, and the source of such esteem and status comes most readily from 'friends', irrespective of the 'baggage' that such friends brought with them.

Equally, these strategies could apply to stopping offending, since many sought sociability through integration and inclusion; self-preservation through giving up a drug habit of breaking away from the 'revolving door syndrome' of the criminal justice system; or personal development through a 'normal' life, pride in themselves and a sense of belonging and achievement.

Conclusions

McNeill (2006) has recently argued that probation, and social work supervision more generally, need to reinstate the relationship between worker and client as a central part of any criminal justice social work intervention, not least because of the importance of that relationship to the client:

Critically, such interventions would not be concerned solely with the prevention of further offending; they would be equally concerned with constructively addressing the harms caused by crime by encouraging offenders to make good through restorative processes. . . . But as a morally and practically necessary corollary, they would be no less preoccupied with making good to offenders by enabling them to achieve inclusion and participation in society. (McNeill, 2006: 57)

The more we adopt and strictly adhere to the quantifiable 'What Works' principles outlined at the start of this article, the more we may lose sight of the client as a *person* and probation work as a *service* to people who offend. Perhaps the message from this article is that we should go back 100 years and 'advise, assist and befriend'. Certainly, we need to think again about what probation was intended to achieve and in so doing we need to address the following three key questions: Why do young people get into trouble in the first place? What does the qualitative research tell us about why young people suggest they stop offending? And finally, what do young people themselves think is the solution to their wider social problems? Listening to what young people have to say is crucial. However, 'listening' does not feature as a promising factor in any of the What Works literature, nor is it offered as a guiding principle in the National Standards. This oversight has got to be rectified if we are to be really effective in reducing offending and alleviating related problems.

Pitts (2001) argued that:

We are witnessing the emergence of a 'one-size-fits-all' national (correctional) curriculum for offenders in prison and the community, and its corollary, a substantially enhanced capacity for senior managers to quantify and control the day-to-day, face-to-face, work of probation officers, prison officers and ancillary workers. (Pitts, 2001: 11)

Although Pitts is referring here to England and Wales, commentators north of the border are expressing similar concerns about offender 'management' developments in Scotland (Barry, 2006; McNeill, 2006). If Scotland continues down the road adopted by the English in terms of offender management, the relationship with the client will soon become obsolete. Whilst the current Labour Government is more willing than some to listen to the findings of research into effectiveness, there are still several problems remaining:

- the government still sees criminal justice policy, as opposed to social policy, as being the appropriate response to *all* the problems that offenders have;

- research into effectiveness focuses too narrowly on measurable outcomes relating to the presenting behaviour only;
- much of the research into effectiveness ignores the views of the clients themselves, possibly because their views may contradict preferred government policy on crime.

The new offender management approach within criminal justice not only devalues the service given to the client but it also undermines the professional autonomy of the worker. One recent study by Whitehead and Statham (2005) suggested that probation staff spend about 70 per cent of their time doing administrative work rather than face-to-face work. These authors describe the change in focus as:

Short-term tactical decision making that satisfies the omnipotent political machine's aspiration to be seen to be in control of crime. It recognises little of the values or human interactions which drive the engagement of individuals, ultimately reflected in commitment and loyalty. (Quoted in McKnight, 2006: 29)

Although these authors were talking about the commitment and loyalty of practitioners in their dealings with their employers, such commitment and loyalty may also be lost on young people in their dealings with the criminal justice system if the personal relationship is jettisoned completely, with obvious ramifications not only for young people and practitioners but also for society as a whole in reducing offending.

Note

1 Stewart et al. (1994) found that 45 per cent of 17 year-olds in their sample were said to have been influenced by peers ('social activity'), whereas only 18 per cent of 23 year-olds were said to have been thus influenced.

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