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What matters is what you do: the rediscovery of skills in probation practice.

Peter Raynor and Maurice Vanstone

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the recent emergence of practice skills or ‘core correctional practices’ as a focus for research and staff development in probation work. Starting with the gradual discovery of an empirical approach to practitioners’ use of skills, the article reviews recent research on the nature and impact of skills in effective practice and argues the case for their development as a key strategy for improving probation services, provided that management systems adapt to recognise and encourage them.

Introduction: skills without evidence

What do probation officers actually do when they interview their probationers? Does it matter what they do? Could they do it better, and if so how? These questions are as old as probation services themselves, but have acquired a new relevance through the development of empirical research on probation practice. If the 1990s were the decade of cognitive-behavioural group programmes, the more recent decade since the foundation of this Journal has been the decade of ‘core correctional practices’, or skills. In order to explain why this new focus has emerged, we have to step back in time a little to explore its origins.

The eclectic mix of theoretical and practice models employed from time to time by a variety of helping professions, and emerging knowledge of, and insights into, the processes of desistance combine to formulate an illuminating context within which to view the story of skill development in probation practice. The first draws us towards resilient, committed

practice allied to expertise in helping people to make changes to their life trajectory, and the second towards empirical evidence that links cessation of offending to enhancement of social and human capital (Maruna and Farrall 2004). Moreover, the desistance paradigm provides a useful reality check about the extent to which the application of helping skills alone can resolve the complexities inherent in the changes needed to lead an offence-free lifestyle (McNeil 2006).

Before elaborating on the long-standing interest in skills in probation work, it is worth pausing to reflect on the relationship between on the one hand, learned skills and on the other, human qualities mined from life experience. Often they are presented as competing rather than complementary elements of effective helping. That skills are an important ingredient of practice is a truism not always obvious from a perusal of pertinent research evidence and literature. Egan (1990: 11), in elaborating the case for more training for helpers, not only provided a three stage problem-management model for effective helping, but prefaced it with the acknowledgement that helpers 'are not as helpful as they could be' and that most research failed to highlight the skill level of practitioners as a dimension of effectiveness. The other factor, experiential personal development, a prerequisite for the capacity to communicate qualities of non-possessive warmth, empathy and genuineness (Truax and Carkhuff 1967), emanates from both training and life experience itself. Its significance is underlined by Truax and Carkhuff's reference to the conclusion of Whitehorn and Betz in their pioneering work at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore in the 1950s that successful therapists 'were warm and attempted to understand the patient in a personal, immediate and idiosyncratic way [and] by contrast, the less successful therapists tended to relate to the patient in a more impersonal manner, focusing on psychopathology and a more external kind of understanding' (81). Little light is cast on the degree to which the qualities exhibited by successful helpers was the result

of training and the consequences of life experience itself, but the Baltimore study makes it hard to gainsay Whitehead's (2010) argument that however technically skilled modern day probation workers are, if they are mechanistic and bureaucratic in their approach to supervision, they are likely to be ineffective in engaging individuals in a meaningful process of change. That is a point returned to later in this article, but first some history that helps to explain the present.

Attention to the need for the application of knowledge and skills in probation practice is not hard to find, but it is fair to say that up until at least the 1960s skill as an element of a probation officer's work was assumed. McWilliams (1986) traces an early commitment to social science and attributes it to what he terms the 'scientific charity' of the late 19th century, and in particular, the Charity Organisation Society. Richmond (1917) refers to the dissatisfaction of the societies, both in America and England, with their work and shortcomings in levels of skill, and highlights their efforts to give structure to experience through the example of an argument for systematic inquiry contained in the 1896 Occasional Papers of the London Charity Organisation Society. As far as the probation service is concerned, an interest in psychological theory is evident very early on in its history. Leeson (1914), in what might be called the first textbook on probation, created a checklist for enquiry replete with the language of scientific diagnosis and, spurred on by his enthusiasm for the system in America, proposed entrance examinations for would be probation officers as part of his campaign for the creation of a professional service in which they were educated and trained. A few years later, the Report of the Departmental Committee on the Training, Appointment and Payment of Probation Officers (Home Office 1922) concurred, and the Probation Rules of 1926 put forward the idea of officers being provided with supervision by more experienced colleagues. For the next forty years or so, the drive to enhance the quality

of practice through increased knowledge permeated probation discourse, but pseudo-scientific aspirations, later superseded by what McWilliams (1986: 255) terms 'psycho-social diagnosis', were nevertheless interlaced with moral and religious judgements. The second 'textbook' on probation (Le Mesurier 1935: 61-62) places the contention that 'the foundation of successful probation work must be the religious spirit in the best sense' beyond dispute, and moreover, assumes that the personal adjustment accruing from this (religious faith) will be communicated automatically to the probationer. Juxtaposed to this is a nod to the importance of psychological understandings to the process of *raising* behaviour 'to a higher standard' but those understandings, it is emphasised, should not be based on 'a deep and thorough study of this subject, which is one for trained experts'.

The heyday of treatment (Vanstone 2004) was ushered in by the Home Office's expansion of in-service training and the burgeoning influence of the psychoanalytic nostrums of the Tavistock Clinic (King 1964). Casework, the emblem of the *professional* probation officer, dominated and was sustained in an evidence-free bubble, and as Bean (1976) pointed out it eschewed the wider social context and derived power from an inadequate theoretical base and a degree of pseudo-expertise. It led to a situation in which largely unseen practice, based on a curious catalogue of theories, could purport to be expert and obscure the reality that it was, by and large, acted out within a largely inconsistent practice framework and a Service that fell well short of being a learning organisation (Vanstone and Seymour 1986). Innovation, experimentation and a desire for learning certainly existed, and much of this was driven by the Regional Staff Development Units established in 1969; but it was idiosyncratic, haphazard and rarely survived beyond the energy and commitment of individual method champions.

Empirical investigation begins

Halmos (1965: 109) famously asserted that ‘the very concept of “an applied sociopsychological science” is somewhat blurred at the edges’ and his critique is best remembered in his own words:

‘Entirely *outside* the framework of any conceivable empirical science, the counsellors, on their own admission, depend on acts of faith, on moral affirmation, and on *a priori* digging-in-of-heels, rather than on the technological and instrumental wielding of discursive, scientific, and mathematically expressive knowledge or, for that matter, of any kind of empirical knowledge.’

Even those involved in one of the rare examples of pursuit of that empirical knowledge, Truax and Carkhuff (1976: 141), acknowledge its limitations. While showing that the evidence supports empathy, warmth and genuineness as key components of effective helping, they stress that future research needs to clarify ‘the exact behaviors and characteristic relevant to change’. Their exhortation was heard by some in the United Kingdom. Priestley and McGuire (1983: 1-2), in setting out a template for the acquisition of helping skills, explained that disparity in the quality of helping was ‘the starting point [and the book] is principally concerned with what helpers *do* and how well they do it, rather than the kinds of people they happen to *be* or hope to become’.

Curiosity about what skills might help people resolve problems and stay out of trouble is evident in experimentation in a number of approaches to practice, for example, Task Centred Casework (Dobson 1976); but innovation that stemmed from that curiosity was dominated by programmes created by a number of people both in the United Kingdom and Canada during

the late 1970s and early 1980s. Their story has been told many times so, for the purposes of this article, need a cursory (and by no means exhaustive) reminder rather than elaboration. This summary concentrates on the experience of England and Wales where the authors' practice and research has been mostly located, but some parallel developments can be seen in other jurisdictions.

Building on Canadian Life Skills innovation, and consisting of 'methods and material drawn from a wide variety of sources in social work, psychotherapy, education and training', the Social Skills and Problem Solving Programme (Priestley et al. 1978: 4) was premised not on professional assessment but on 'the experience and perception and personal definitions of the people who have the problems'. With a timely reminder of the prime purpose of probation supervision, their later Offending Behaviour Project undertaken in the South East of England ushered the offence to centre stage (McGuire and Priestley 1982). With eyes fixed firmly on the effectiveness of helping, Singer (1991) constructed, ran and evaluated an Alcohol Education Group, and Davies and Lister (1992) oversaw and evaluated Offending Behaviour groups run in the West Midlands during a period of seven years. Meanwhile, in Canada Ross and his colleagues (1988) formulated the significantly influential Reasoning and Rehabilitation programme (R&R) framed by the finding of their own review that of '95 intervention studies which satisfied the reviewers' stringent criteria for methodological rigor in program evaluation, 86% were successful' (Ross and Fabiano 1985: 72). Subsequently, the Mid Glamorgan Probation Service purchased and modified the R&R manual, trained most of its staff in the approach and rolled out the resulting Straight Thinking on Probation (STOP) programme across the Service. Evaluated in collaboration with Swansea University, it became an influential practice model throughout England and Wales (Raynor and Vanstone 1996). Finally, the FOR a change programme founded in significant part on the principles of

motivational interviewing was administered to short-term prisoners by prison and probation staff in the United Kingdom's phased Pathfinder Project (Fabiano and Porporino 2002; Clancy et al 2006). Several other well-designed programmes have since been accredited and adopted in UK probation.

The Probation Service's embrace of programmes did not occur without some controversy. Critics, some of whom were involved in the emerging desistance theories, challenged programmes for concentrating on human capital to the exclusion of social capital, and, they argued, reviving the treatment or medical model of practice (Mair 2004; Farrell 2002). Some programmes preceded the popularisation of desistance theories, but even then, as closer reading of the original texts attests, those involved recognised the importance of the social context of people's lives and its relationship to offending (see for example, Ross and Fabiano 1985). Indeed, attention to what became known as criminogenic factors is woven into many, if not all of the programmes referred to above, but no doubt that argument will rumble on.

What might be less contentious is the contribution of the programmes to a rational and tangible framework for working with people on supervision, their maintenance of the desire to be effective in helping people resolve their problems, their emphasis on the enhancement of practitioner skills and their stimulation of a desire to understand the anatomy of those skills. It is important to acknowledge these positives as well as early demands for detailed understanding of relevant skills (Priestley and McGuire 1983). However, Dowden and Andrews (2004) were probably correct when they asserted that a growth in interest in the precise behaviours and characteristics of effective practitioners is relatively recent. With some justification, it can be described as the missing jigsaw piece in thinking about effectiveness. In the search, Truax and Carkhuff (1967) led the way and some did follow,

notably Andrews and Kiessling (1980) in their evaluation of the Canadian Volunteers in Corrections scheme (CaVIC).

In the CaVIC study, a comparison of the effectiveness of probation officers and volunteers, the researchers were interested particularly in what would later be labelled as core correctional practices (CCPs) (Dowden and Andrews 2004): namely, effective use of authority, reinforcement of anti-criminal behaviour (subsequently described as prosocial modelling), the use of resources within the local community, problem-solving and positive relationships with probationers. The comparison groups comprised 96 probationers supervised by a group of 14 officers and 94 probationers in contact with a set of 60 volunteers. Volunteers saw the probationers twice as often as the probation officers and based their contact on 'socioemotional' relationships as opposed to the authority and structured counselling of the officers. The researchers found no significant difference in levels of effectiveness, but did find that 'officers' behaviors which were associated with a reduced chance of recidivism include discussions of the probation order (authority), problem solving with a concrete community focus, differential reinforcement of the probationer's prosocial and antisocial expressions and the explicit verbal expression of prosocial sentiment' and that behaviours such as reflection and paraphrasing associated with 'the active listening strategy of the non-directive, client-centered schools of counseling' (Andrews and Kiessling 1980: 457) were associated with an increase in the chances of recidivism. Unfortunately, it appears that the lessons of that research about the nature of these essential practice skills went unheeded because in a meta-analysis some years later, Dowden and Andrews (2004), confirmed a positive relationship between the application of each facet of CCP (with the exception of effective use of community resources) and reduction of offending, but found that their use was confined to only 16% of the studies reviewed. A decade earlier Trotter

1993) took the notion of prosocial modelling and demonstrated its particular effectiveness when applied by appropriately trained practitioners. In addition, moving away from probation officers for a moment, research on judges by Christian Pfeiffer in Germany showed that ‘liberal’ judges, who were more communicative and more positive in their expectations of offenders, elicited significantly better compliance from offenders than ‘authoritarian’ judges achieved (National Institute of Justice 1996). Similar evidence that judicial involvement can have a positive impact when judges have appropriate attitudes and communication skills has emerged from other studies, including drug courts (McIvor 2010) and Parish Hall Enquiries in the Channel Island of Jersey (Miles and Raynor 2014).

These findings, put together with more recent work on other important factors such as empathy and the skills of motivational interviewing (Raynor et al 2014; Fabiano and Porporino 2002), define what is meant by what Andrews and Bonta (2003) call ‘high quality relationships’ except for one characteristic that is implicit rather than explicit. Even some of the critics of What Works have conceded that it is highly unlikely that people can be helped towards desistance within a poor quality relationship (Farrall and Calverley 2006), a conclusion seemingly confirmed by just over two thirds of the 60 probationers in Rex’s (1999) study who linked their optimism about leading offence-free lives to a meaningful, understanding, respectful and collaborative relationship with their probation officer. Implicit in that is the practitioners’ belief in public service, dedication, motivation and, to use a forgotten notion, vocation. We will return to that later in the article, but first we bring our history up to date by reviewing some of the recent and current research.

The last decade (approximately)

In 2007 a group of probation researchers and practitioners convened by Fergus McNeill, Peter Raynor and Chris Trotter met in Prato in Italy to explore new approaches to the study of probation supervision. As well as England, Scotland and Wales there were participants from Australia, Canada and the island of Jersey. We were aware of Trotter's well established and continuing work in this field (see, for example, Trotter and Evans 2012; Trotter et al. 2015), and of the beginning of the STICS study in Canada ('Strategic Training Initiative in Correctional Supervision': Bonta et al. 2011); we also discussed the early stages of the Jersey Supervision Skills Study (JS3; Raynor et al. 2014, Ugwudike et al. 2014) and we tried also to incorporate insights from desistance theories (Maruna and LeBel 2010) and 'good lives' models (Ward 2010).

For those of us who had been doing research in England and Wales, the impetus to study one-to-one supervision came partly from the problems experienced in a national 'what works' programme which had been running since 1999 based largely on cognitive-behavioural group programmes. Although a number of good programmes had been developed and accredited, implementation had mostly produced disappointing results: many of the wrong people were made to undertake them, due to the absence of standardised risk-need assessment in Britain at the time, and far too many people failed to complete them (Hollin et al. 2004; Raynor 2004). We knew that for most people, most of their contact with probation services was still through one-to-one supervision, and we were not convinced by the arguments in the Carter Report (2003) which seemed to see individual supervision simply as a largely administrative process of 'offender management' to get people assessed and allocated to the right programme or 'intervention'. Research on 'core correctional practices', although seemingly not familiar to English Government researchers, already suggested to us that individual supervision should be seen as an intervention in its own right, with its own potential for positive impact on

people under supervision. As our research network expanded to include the United States we became aware of other initiatives exploring the potential of individual supervision, such as PCS ('Proactive Community Supervision': Taxman 2008), STARR ('Staff Training Aimed at Reducing Re-Arrest': Robinson et al. 2012) and EPICS ('Effective Practices in Community Supervision': Smith et al. 2012). In this acronym-rich field we could not be without an acronym ourselves, and the research network established in Prato became CREDOS, the Collaboration of Researchers for the Effective Development of Offender Supervision. So far, three books have arisen from work closely associated with CREDOS (McNeill, Raynor and Trotter 2010; Durnescu and McNeill 2014; Ugwudike, Raynor and Annison 2018) and strong links have been made with European researchers, with many CREDOS members belonging also to the Community Sanctions Working Group of the European Society of Criminology.

In the slightly more than ten years which have elapsed since CREDOS was established (during which this Journal has also emerged as a significant contributor to the research literature), several of the studies which were in their early stages then have been completed and results have been published. There is not space here to provide a detailed review of the results of each, which can be found in the sources cited above. Most of them are also discussed in the most recent CREDOS book (Ugwudike, Raynor and Annison 2018). Although they all differ in a number of respects, the general tendency of the results is consistent with the earlier meta-analysis by Dowden and Andrews (2004): people who are supervised by more skilful staff tend to re-offend less, and staff who are trained to be more skilful achieve better results than those who have not been trained. Most of these studies are included in a meta-analysis by Chadwick, DeWolf and Serin (2015) which concludes that 'when officers received training in core correctional practices, the offenders they supervised experienced lower odds to reoffend' (Chadwick et al. 2015, 296).

In this meta-analysis the average difference in recidivism rates was 13%, which compares quite well with the effect sizes typically reported for group programmes. JS3 reported the largest difference, with supervision by more skilled staff leading in a two-year follow-up to a reconviction rate of 26% compared to 58% among those supervised by less skilled staff, but it should be remembered that this was not primarily a study of the impact of training: observation of the use of skills was used to divide staff into more skilled and less skilled groups for comparison, whereas random allocation to trained and untrained groups, as used in other studies, will result in a range of baseline skill levels in each group. Whilst there is clear evidence that average skill levels were raised in trained groups, it is possible that this was not likely to result in differences as large as those obtained by simply identifying and comparing more skilled and less skilled groups. This would help to explain the larger difference observed in JS3, but also suggests it would be very ambitious to try to reproduce such a large effect by training. Smaller but still substantial improvements are clearly achievable. In addition, further studies using the JS3 type of design would be desirable to see if such large differences are typically found. A further encouraging finding in JS3 was that because staff were assessed over a number of interviews, we were able to see that staff who had low average scores on our skills checklist were often scored more highly on some individual interviews, suggesting that training for these staff would involve using their best skills in more of their work rather than trying to impart skills which they *never* used. Of course the real test of the practical usefulness of his kind of research is whether it can be applied on a large enough scale to result in more effective and helpful services, and the next section of this article explores some attempts to do this.

The skills revolution in practice

To make a difference to the effectiveness of correctional services and the lives of the people they supervise, research needs to be applied on a large scale in the real world of everyday practice. This is easier said than done: the original roll-out of cognitive-behavioural programmes in Britain, which was expected to improve the Probation Service's impact, had largely disappointing results because of a flawed implementation process (Raynor 2004), and it is generally recognised that there is often a 'practice integrity' gap between knowledge about effective practices and their application and implementation (Bernfeld et al. 2001).

The encouraging findings from research on skills and 'core correctional practices' have led to a number of initiatives designed either to implement successful training programmes on a wider scale or to develop staff development initiatives by adapting the approaches used in research. Many of these projects are described in Ugwudike, Raynor and Annison (2018). In England and Wales the National Offender Management Service (as it was then) developed a scheme influenced by STICS to train staff in interviewing skills: the SEED programme (Skills for Effective Engagement and Development [Rex and Hosking 2014], later expanded to SEEDS by the addition of a focus on staff supervision). The staff training drew on STICS and on earlier British training programmes on motivational interviewing, pro-social modelling and cognitive-behavioural methods, and was welcomed by participants who were very positive about the focus on skills (Sorsby et al. 2018). Evaluation of the programme did not include some of the features of the STICS evaluation (such as systematic assessment of staff skills before and after training) and measurement of outcomes also proved difficult, but some evidence has been presented indicating better compliance with supervision by people supervised by SEED-trained staff (Sorsby et al. 2016). Since SEED was piloted, probation services in England and Wales have been disrupted by a privatisation programme which is now generally regarded as a failure (House of Commons 2018) and it is not clear how, if at

all, the promising start made by SEED will be followed up. Probably it should be seen as one more episode in a long history of implementation failure; however, it is clear that staff believed they benefited while it was available.

Other examples of applying skills research to staff development have been more promising. In Jersey the first phase of the JS3 study involved collecting 95 video-recorded interviews plus some information about each interviewer and interviewee, and developing and applying a 63-item checklist for use in observation and rating of the interviews. When we finished collecting interviews we assumed that staff would be relieved that they no longer had to record them. On the contrary, one of us shortly received a telephone call indicating that the staff wanted to be trained to use the researchers' checklist (Raynor, Ugwudike and Vanstone 2009) and manual (Vanstone and Raynor 2012) themselves. Training was provided, and since then (a period of roughly six years) the staff have consistently applied the research instruments to video recordings of their own interviews. The process is now part of staff supervision: normally three times a year each officer will watch one or two of their own recorded interviews with the Senior Probation Officer, both will complete the checklist and will then discuss what they have seen and how they have rated various aspects of the interview. All the staff participate in this, although a few chose not to be involved in the original research. One staff member dislikes being recorded but participates through live observation instead. On a few occasions the supervision sessions have included peer supervision in a three-way meeting, but this is not the normal expectation.

This process has provided useful feedback for the researchers and may eventually inform revisions to the checklist and manual. Interviewees are asked for consent to recording, and few refuse: some officers have never had a refusal, and a small number of research interviews

with service users have suggested that for most it is not a major issue ('I'm not bothered' said one). The senior officer started the process of discussing recorded interviews by recording one of his own and inviting the team to assess it, and he remains consistently positive about the value of the approach: he has indicated that he would like to use it six times a year with each officer rather than three, but time is a constraint as it can take up to 90 minutes to view, score and discuss an interview. He would like in due course to see if more facilitative technology can be introduced to make the whole process easier. Overall, the benefit for him is that he is 'pleased to see staff getting something out of it' and it is a 'privilege' to share their work in this way.

Officers describe their experience in generally positive terms, but with some individual differences in how they see and use the process. Recent interviews with four officers provide a number of examples. One is a convert who has 'changed her opinion' of the value of video recording: initially worried that 'it was going to be used to pick up weaknesses and deficits', she now believes it is 'important to our development as practitioners', she has 'gained confidence', become 'more professional' and believes that the process improves the experience of supervision for clients. Watching interviews with her senior colleague helped her own professional development and 'gives [the senior officer] confidence that I'm some good'. Another officer is a 'big fan' of the approach, prefers supervision by the senior officer rather than peer review, and sometimes sees things in recorded interviews that he was not aware of at the time: 'sometimes I direct the interview too much to avoid issues I don't want to get into.' Others made similar comments: 'It's definitely helped my development', 'I find it really useful to learn what I'm doing well and what I'm not', 'If I get most of it right I'm doing OK'.

One consistent theme was that officers reported they did not ‘cherry-pick’ the best interviews to record for supervision. One said that she picks interviews to record ‘when I think it’s going to be challenging, or when I’m really stuck’. Another picked an interview with a probationer who had misled her and was still offending. Some described looking for opportunities to use skills which they needed to improve, and one officer also used the checklist independently on her own interviews and kept copies of them all. The senior officer also keeps copies, with officers’ permission, and these may be the focus of some future research.

Jersey law requires that all publicly funded research should be published, and the Jersey checklist and manual were published by the Jersey Probation Service on an open access basis. As a result it has been available for use as a whole or in part by other researchers and jurisdictions. Sections of it have been used in Belgium and Catalonia (Blay and Boxstaens, 2018) and in Romania (Durnescu 2018), and it was used in full in another Catalan study (Nagdev 2018). More comprehensive attempts to use the full checklist and manual in nationwide staff development efforts are in progress in France (Herzog-Evans 2018) and in Finland (Andersson 2018). In France, the translation of the checklist and manual into French (Raynor, Ugwudike and Vanstone 2014; Vanstone and Raynor 2014) and a visit by French probation experts to Jersey in 2015 have resulted in widespread interest as part of an ‘industrial scale’ training programme (Herzog-Evans 2018) and a slightly adapted version of the checklist is to be used in a study based on audiotaped interviews. Recently Jersey probation staff, accompanied by Chris Trotter, presented their work on ‘Core Correctional Practice’ to a conference in Rennes in May 2018 (the latest of many international presentations).

Finland shows what is probably the most systematic large-scale use of the JS3 material so far, at least so far as we know (Andersson 2018); the open access status of the documents mean we may not always know how or by whom they are used. A training seminar presented by one of the research team in Helsinki in 2014 led to a pilot and to translation of the materials into Finnish, followed by a decision to use the checklist in all probation offices. A series of two-day training events for probation officers and managers was held in 2016 and 2017, and participants in these events became trainers for the rest of the Service. Following a decision that all probation officers should have the experience of being observed and acting as observer using the checklist, an electronic version of the checklist was produced, and approved in September 2018 by the board of the Prison and Probation Service and the Probation Officers' trade union. This is to be followed in November 2018 by discussion at the National Probation Seminar to identify good practices in the use of the checklist, with input from Jersey's Chief Probation Officer, Brian Heath.

In Sweden, the Probation and Parole Service has worked with Bonta and his colleagues to implement a version of STICS, known as KRIMSTICS. This has followed the original model more closely than SEED did in Britain, and a pilot trial was carried out in 2011-2013 with evaluation based on random allocation to training. To quote the English summary of the research:

‘Results showed that KRIMSTICS-trained corrections officers, in comparison with corrections officers without training, worked systematically in accordance with RNR and used cognitive behavioral techniques in supervision sessions. Further, corrections officers in the experimental group used established strategies – mainly in the form of therapeutic and teaching-oriented interactive styles combined with good relationship

skills – which are beneficial in forming a therapeutic alliance. Corrections officers in the experimental group also focused on the clients’ personal responsibility and behavioral control. These strategies are fundamental in enabling offenders’ behavioral change.’ (Starfelt Sutton and Jakobsson 2018).

This is similar to improvements seen in the original STICS project, but unlike STICS there was no significant difference in re-offending rates between those supervised by trained officers and those supervised by others. The researchers suggest this may be due to baseline levels of relationship skills being quite high among Swedish probation officers before the training. (Similarly in JS3 the officers in the study differed less in relationship skills than in structuring and change-promoting skills.) Overall, the pilot led to a decision to implement KRIMSTICS throughout the Swedish service in 2014-2017, with continuing evaluation.

These examples show how research on skills is beginning to be translated into large-scale practice in Europe, usually with clear improvements for service users as a result. Some similar results are reported in the USA (Toronjo and Taxman 2018) and Australia (Trotter 2018), indicating significant convergence around approaches which can genuinely improve the effectiveness of probation services. Also this is a particularly cost-effective approach to improvement, since it relies on improving the effectiveness of existing staff who are already on the payroll.

Finally in this section we need to recognise that although staff development programmes based on the improvement of skills are clearly promising, they cannot be expected to succeed in all circumstances and contexts. Exposing one’s own practice to assessment and criticism is accompanied, for most staff and particularly when first introduced, by feelings of anxiety and

the sense that they are taking a risk. If substantial numbers of staff are to move beyond this and begin to feel the benefits of a focus on skills, it is important to ensure a facilitative context. Indications so far, mainly from Jersey, are that this should include a reasonably stable work environment, manageable caseloads, supportive management which is trusted by staff, and a shared curiosity about effectiveness and about how to improve performance. This ‘culture of curiosity’ has been identified as a feature of some earlier successful innovations (Raynor and Vanstone 2001) and is more likely to be encouraged by professionally led programmes of incremental evidence-based improvement than by politically driven attempts at rapid ‘transforming’.

Leaving the political context aside for the moment (it is discussed more fully in Vanstone and Priestley [2016] and Raynor [2017]) it is clear that the effective implementation of staff development depends to a substantial extent on the organisational setting – its culture, its approach to management, its values and its professional focus. The attempt to identify well-functioning organisations and measure their activity has been a challenge for audit and inspection systems in many countries. One of the most promising recent approaches has been the Correctional Programs Assessment Inventory developed in Canada (Gendreau and Andrews 1989; Gendreau et al. 2010) which aims to provide evidence-based assessments of organisational culture, programme implementation and maintenance, management and staff characteristics, risk/need practices, programme characteristics, core correctional practices, interagency communication and the use of evaluation. (‘Program’ and ‘programmes’ here do not mean simply offending behaviour group programmes, but all structured and replicable interventions with supervisees.) Work has recently started on the use of the CPAI and similar tailor-made instruments in a British context, supported by studentships from the Economic and Social Research Council (Kerr 2016; Ugwudike and Morgan 2018). They incorporate

assessment of core correctional practices, or skills. Their particular relevance to the relationship between organisational context and successful improvement is proposed by Bonta and colleagues (2013), who argued for the use of the CPAI to identify those probation agencies where STICS was likely to be successfully rolled out, and to distinguish them from others where implementation failure was likely.

Management and development

As the research referred to in this article suggests, the skills of practitioners offer a possible strategy for improving the effectiveness of attempts to reduce recidivism. However, the detail of that research also indicates that improvement in skill levels is not in itself enough: a probation service needs an approach to management and organisation that places the effective practitioner, rather than the managerial system, at the centre. Such a change will also demand a particular kind of practitioner. Andrews and Kiessling (1980) positioned core correctional practice at the heart of work designed to help people live law abiding lives, and they had something interesting to say about the effective practitioner:

‘That person is relatively sensitive to rules and convention yet warm, tolerant, flexible and sensitive in interpersonal styles [...] makes use of the authority inherent in his (sic) position, demonstrates in a vivid way his own prosocial attitudes, values, beliefs, and enthusiastically engages the client’ (463)

Working with troubled, often poor and disadvantaged people is demanding, stressful, risky, frustrating and emotionally draining. It needs a particular level of motivation and devotion. Undoubtedly, it should be supported by the pay structures, career opportunities and entry level qualifications appropriate to a profession. In addition, it should be seen, to use a now

unfashionable term, as a vocation, but vocation comes with a responsibility to achieve the best possible practice. This is a responsibility best borne by pragmatic idealists, that is people who want to improve society and seek to find practical, effective methods consistent with their values. To put this another way, probation services need people with both the right values and the right skills. People with the right intentions but lacking skills will find it difficult to achieve the effects they want; people with excellent interpersonal skills but the wrong values are more suited to become confidence tricksters, who win your trust in order to deceive, or perhaps professional poker players, who aim to understand their opponents while still wanting them to lose. In fact modern society offers many opportunities and roles to such people, but being a probation officer should not be one of them.

To begin the systematic application of what we now know about skills, staff will need to become used to a new kind of assessment, but the evidence from Jersey and elsewhere shows that they can. What they do not need is the kind of chaos inflicted in England and Wales by the Government's failed 'Transforming Rehabilitation' programme. However, the changes recently announced (Ministry of Justice 2018) appear likely to lead to a more stable situation at least in Wales, where both authors of this article live and work. This presents the possibility of a genuine focus on effectiveness, not simply rhetoric about it.

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