

Skills and Training in British Probation: A Tale of Neglect and Possible Revival

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ATTENTION TO SPECIFIC practice skills in the training of probation officers in Britain has been inconsistent, variable, and even haphazard. (The following comments apply mainly to England and Wales; Scotland has no separate Probation Service and uses Criminal Justice Social Workers instead.) Like most welfare services in Britain, the Probation Service enjoyed a period of major expansion and professionalization during the third quarter of the twentieth century, and people seeking appointment as probation officers had to receive appropriate training, either on the small courses run by the Home Office (the responsible government department at that time) or, increasingly, in the rapidly-expanding university social work courses. The Home Office courses were specifically for probation; the university courses were increasingly wedded to the idea of social work as a generic profession, and offered probation as a minority option with varying degrees of specialization.

By way of illustration, one of the authors of this article was sponsored by the Home Office at the beginning of the 1970s to train as a probation officer on a university social work course, in which the main elements of specialization were practical placements in probation teams and 10 lectures on criminology. He joined the course expecting to receive at the end of it a Home Office Letter of Recognition, but by the time the end came two years later the social work profession had succeeded in introducing a new generic qualification, the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work, and rather to his surprise he was awarded one of these instead. In Scotland the process of unification went further and the separate

Probation Service ceased to exist: Criminal Justice Social Workers there train on social work courses with specialist input. In England and Wales the unification process helped to fuel decades of debate about genericism versus specialism, practical training versus academic knowledge (sometimes presented as a choice between teaching social work or teaching *about* social work), and whether the Probation Service should be seen as part of the criminal justice system or part of the Welfare State (of course it was both all along).

Much of this discussion and debate had little to do with the practicalities of probation work or its effectiveness (largely undemonstrated at the time). Many of the leaders of the profession, like many of the university social work teachers, were enthusiastic adherents of the theories of psychodynamic social case-work that had reached Britain from the United States, and many of their students, particularly after the 1960s, added critical social theory and concerns about poverty and social justice to the mixture. By the 1980s most universities that trained social workers were also training probation officers on the same courses, and the Conservative government of the time became concerned that training probation officers on social work courses made them too left-wing, too lacking in specialist knowledge, and not “tough” enough. One Home Secretary (the Minister in charge of the Home Office) tried to abolish probation officer training completely. Eventually these political debates led to the situation we have today, in which probation officer training is separate from social work training and offered by only three universities, largely by distance learning, and

most of the universities that carry out research on probation work do not provide initial training for any probation officers.

Throughout this period the question of practice skills was largely left to supervisors of practical placements, who became known as “practice teachers” and were experienced probation officers but could be adherents of a variety of different models of practice. The psychodynamic tradition placed a useful emphasis on the quality of relationships and on paying attention to what offenders said, but it also tended to assume that insight alone would bring about change in thinking and behavior, and it understated the need to help offenders learn new ways of thinking and behaving. Ideas about more effective ways of working based on social learning theory eventually entered the probation field from psychologists such as Philip Priestley and James McGuire, whose book *Social Skills and Personal Problem Solving* appeared in 1978 (Priestley, McGuire, Flegg, Hemsley, & Welham, 1978) and was an immediate hit in probation services, backed up by their own short courses. These inputs were generally at the level of post-qualification and in-service training: A few academics and trainers tried to introduce skill-centered training to basic qualifying courses for social workers and probation officers (see, for example, Raynor & Vanstone, 1984), but the necessary small-group work was hard to sustain with the limited resources available to most social work courses.

By the time British probation became committed to evidence-based practice and “What Works” in the 1990s, this was seen as mainly to do with cognitive-behavioral group programs and the skills needed to deliver them.

The ordinary process of one-to-one supervision of offenders by probation staff, which all supervised people experienced regardless of whether they did programs, was not seen as a contributor to effective rehabilitation, until very high attrition rates on programs began to redirect attention to the individual supervision process. Some British probation researchers began to use the concept of “core correctional practices” (CCPs) derived from Canadian research (Andrews & Kiessling, 1980; Dowden & Andrews, 2004; Raynor, 2004a, 2004b) and these practices were eventually mentioned in official guidance (National Offender Management Service, 2006).

According to Dowden and Andrews (2004), the CCPs are:

- Effective use of authority
- Anti-criminal modeling and reinforcement
- Problem solving
- Use of community resources
- Quality of interpersonal relationships between staff and client

Andrews and Bonta (2010) further categorize the CCPs into relationship and structuring principles.

Relationship Principles

The CCP “quality of interpersonal relationships” is a component of relationship principles. This CCP involves using effective communication techniques such as being respectful towards the clients, showing enthusiasm and empathy, facilitating collaborative decision making, and recognizing that the client is an autonomous individual. While relationship principles comprise the CCP “quality of interpersonal relationships,” the remaining CCPs constitute structuring principles.

Structuring Principles

The CCPs “effective use of authority,” “anti-criminal modeling and reinforcement,” “problem solving” and “use of community resources” are structuring principles. “Effective use of authority” involves being “firm but fair.” This means that practitioners should clarify rules and expectations (see also Trotter, 1996). “Effective use of authority” also involves using compliance strategies that demonstrate disapproval but are not domineering or abusive. “Anti-criminal or prosocial modeling” involves exhibiting or demonstrating prosocial behavior and using structured learning processes to help offenders develop prosocial skills. Structured learning is a form of learning through process: The practitioner defines the skill to be learned, models the skill, and uses role-play

scenarios to encourage the client to practice the skill. Structured learning also involves providing feedback to the offender on his or her progress. Effective “reinforcement” involves responding to an act of noncompliance by disapproving of the behavior and encouraging the client to reflect on why the behavior has attracted the disapproval of the supervisor. This CCP also involves showing approval once the client exhibits the desired prosocial behavior. It also involves rewarding prosocial behavior (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Dowden & Andrews, 2004). Structuring principles comprise additional CCPs: “problem solving” and “use of community resources.” “Problem solving” entails helping clients learn how to solve problems using prosocial strategies. The CCP “use of community resources” or “advocacy/brokerage” involves referring clients to agencies and services that can help them address their criminogenic and other needs.

Cognitive restructuring and motivational interviewing are not listed as CCPs, but they represent structuring principles. Cognitive restructuring is a technique for helping clients learn how to replace potentially harmful thoughts with less risky or prosocial thoughts (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). Motivational interviewing is a strategy for encouraging clients to progress from a state of not being ready or willing to change to a state where they become open to the need to change and actively participate in the change process (Emmons & Rollnick, 2001; Miller & Rollnick, 2002). It is a technique that relies on the practitioner’s ability to develop a rapport with the client, show empathy, and challenge resistance not by being confrontational, authoritarian, or punitive but by using questioning styles that help the client focus on the change process. Motivational interviewing techniques also include encouraging the client to recognize the discrepancy between his or her current and desired states. Practitioners should demonstrate that they believe that the client is capable of making the desired attitudinal and behavioral changes. In other words, they should support the client’s self-efficacy. The overall objective of motivational interviewing is to help the client develop the self-motivation required for positive behavioral and attitudinal change.

The official recognition of CCPs in the NOMS document mentioned above (see, National Offender Management Service, 2006) led some experienced practitioners to believe that their long-established social-work skills were being recognized at last, and this was at least partly true, though CCPs went

further than traditional social-work practice. However, the overall picture well into the new millennium was that little consistent attention was paid, either in training or research, to the quality of individual supervision skills. Quality was understood more as a matter of meeting enforcement targets and filling in assessment forms correctly.

One exception to this, originating within the British Isles but outside England and Wales, was a study that we carried out (with Maurice Vanstone of Swansea University) to examine the skills probation officers use during supervision. Proceeding on the basis that the evidence-based and multidimensional CCPs are useful skills for promoting attitudinal and behavioral change in offenders (Dowden & Andrews, 2004), we devised a checklist that is based on the CCPs and used it to observe and assess supervision sessions in the Jersey Probation and Aftercare Service (JPACS).

The Jersey Supervision Skills Study

The study was commissioned by JPACS, which is located in the island of Jersey. The island is the largest of the Channel Islands in the United Kingdom. It is a relatively small island covering only approximately 45 square miles. Its entire population was approximately 98,000 in 2011 and it has a relatively high (by European standards) gross national income per capita. The probation service is small, with a revenue budget of approximately £1.6 million and a professional staff of 21, of whom 16 are trained probation officers. The clients supervised by the service typically have previous criminal convictions (Jersey Probation and Aftercare Service, 2011). Unlike several Western jurisdictions, the service is accountable to the judiciary. It is not an agency of a government department. Therefore the service is not subject to undue political pressures.

The Jersey Supervision Checklist

The study sought to examine whether probation officers in JPACS employ the CCPs during supervision sessions. We devised a checklist that is based on the multidimensional CCPs, and we used the checklist to observe and score videotaped supervision sessions for compliance with CCPs. Initial attempts to apply the checklist met with suspicion from some probation officers. For these officers, their reluctance to participate stemmed from the understandable fear that the recorded interview sessions would eventually be used by management for staff appraisal purposes. After reassuring the

officers that the objective of the study was to contribute to staff-oriented self-assessment processes, we were able to secure their active participation and support.

To enhance inter-rater reliability, the three of us involved in the study piloted the checklist by scoring the same sessions and then comparing our scores. We also presented the checklist to a meeting of the Collaboration of Researchers for the Effective Development of Offender Supervision (CREDOS) held in Glasgow in 2008. Membership of CREDOS comprises researchers from 10 different countries who have contributed significantly to the field of offender rehabilitation research, and they were able to help us to develop better assessment of structuring skills. We eventually arrived at a seventh version of the instrument, which we developed even further with more piloting until we were satisfied that we had attained an adequate degree of inter-rater reliability. We named the final checklist The Jersey Supervision Checklist Version 7 (C). The checklist comprises nine groups of skills:

- Set up
- Non-verbal communication
- Verbal communication
- Use of authority
- Motivational interviewing
- Prosocial modelling
- Problem solving
- Cognitive restructuring
- Overall interview structure

The checklist assesses not only skills and practices but also the context of the interview. For example, the first item, “set up,” assesses the physical setting of the interview. The item was included in the checklist because the emerging evidence suggests that a client is more likely to feel assured of privacy and confidentiality, and consequently to disclose useful information, if the supervision setting is one in which there are limited external distractions like phone calls and other parties entering the room (Taxman, Shepardson, & Byrne, 2006). The item “set up” also assesses whether the seating arrangement is such that there is appropriate distance between both parties (not too wide or too close) and they appear relaxed. Similarly, the item “overall interview structure” enables the assessor to examine the overall context of the interview. To devise this item, we drew on research evidence indicating that effective skills such as CCPs are best applied in a context that promotes active client participation. This is more readily achievable if the interview is structured appropriately, so that the practitioner

summarizes the key themes covered in the previous interview, sets out the objectives of the current interview, encourages disclosure, gives some feedback to the client, schedules the next interview, and gives the client tasks for the interim (Taxman et al., 2006).

In terms of the remaining Checklist items, it is clear that using Andrews and Bonta’s (2010) taxonomy of CCPs, the remaining items can be classified as relationship and structuring principles. As such, the items “non-verbal communication and verbal communication” are relationship principles that have been described above. Equally, the items “use of authority,” “motivational interviewing,” “prosocial modeling,” “problem solving” and “cognitive restructuring” are structuring principles. It is worth noting that the Checklist item “problem solving” assesses not only whether practitioners help clients learn how to solve problems using prosocial strategies but also whether the practitioners apply the CCP “use of community resources” or “advocacy/brokerage.”

Applying the Jersey Supervision Checklist Version 7(C)

The Checklist comprises the nine categories listed above made up of 63 individual items—see Table 1 below. The observer scores the checklist by observing a supervision session and, when the practitioner exhibits a skill in the checklist, ticking the relevant subcategory. For example, if a practitioner “models alternative thinking,” which is a subcategory of “cognitive restructuring,” the observer ticks the subcategory. Each tick represents a score and the total score obtainable is 63, which is the total of the subcategories (see Table 1).

TABLE 1.
Checklist items and maximum scores obtainable

Skill clusters	Number of items/possible scores
Set up	4
Non-verbal communication	5
Verbal communication	10
Use of Authority	5
Motivational Interviewing	9
Prosocial modeling	5
Problem solving	10
Cognitive restructuring	7
Overall interview structure	8
Total	63

Findings

After piloting the checklist, we used it to observe 95 videotaped supervision sessions by 14 different probation staff. The clients’ risk assessment scores before and after supervision were also recorded. Our current findings are based on observations of 10 officers who recorded 5 to 15 interviews each. The findings show that the Checklist does reveal differences between participating practitioners who use more of the skills in the checklist and those who use fewer skills. We found that officers who used more of the skills and as such obtained average checklist scores that were close to 60, used the skills consistently across several interviews. In Table 2, it is clear that the checklist shows differences between the officers according to the skills they use.

Table 2 reveals the mean scores the 10 practitioners received compared to the maximum scores they could have obtained for each of the checklist items. The table also shows the average scores a high-scoring officer received compared with the average scores of a low-scoring practitioner. In addition, the table shows that although the lower-scoring practitioner attained quite good scores on the skills that make up the relationship principle, namely non-verbal communication and verbal communication, the lower-scoring officer attained lower-than-average scores on the skills that represent dimensions of the structuring principles. These are prosocial modeling, problem solving and cognitive restructuring. This finding in respect of the low-scoring officer in Table 2 was consistent for most of the lower-scoring officers in the study. By contrast, Table 2 demonstrates that the high-scoring officer maintained consistently high scores across the entire skills-set. Again this finding appeared to be the same for all the high-scoring officers. It follows that a key difference between the high-scoring officers and the lower-scoring officers is that unlike the lower-scoring officers, the high-scoring officers tended to use the range of skills that make up the structuring principle. It is quite possible that both high-scoring and lower-scoring officers tended to score highly on the skills that constitute relationship principles because the training scheme in place for probation officers in JPACS is grounded in social work principles, which emphasize the importance of developing good working relationships with clients.

TABLE 2.

Mean scores for group of 10 staff members compared with possible scores

Checklist Item	Possible Scores	Mean Scores	Higher Scorer	Lower Scorer
Set up	4	3.9	4	3.5
Non-verbal communication	5	4.7	5	4.2
Verbal communication	10	7.8	9.8	6.5
Use of Authority	5	4.5	5	4.7
Motivational Interviewing	9	6.2	8.8	3.7
Prosocial modeling	5	3.8	5	3.5
Problem solving	10	5.7	7	3.5
Cognitive restructuring	7	3.2	7	0.0
Overall interview structure	8	6.2	7	5.9
Total	63	45.9	58.6	35.5

The Impact of CCPs on Risk Scores and Reconviction Rates

The study used two outcome measures to assess the impact of CCPs. The measures are the initial and follow-up risk scores of the clients supervised by the participating practitioners, and the clients' reconviction rates after one year.

Initial and follow-up risk scores

JPACS uses the Level of Service Inventory—Revised assessment tool (LSI-R). The LSI-R is used to assess the client's risk and needs, and it is a good predictor of reconviction (Andrews & Bonta, 1995; Miles & Raynor, 2007). Studies have shown that people who attain lower LSI-R scores as supervision progresses tend to reconvict less (Raynor, 2007). As Table 3 indicates, when we looked at interviewees who had both initial and follow-up risk assessments, we found that clients who were supervised by high-scoring officers (that is, by officers who attained above-average checklist scores) had greater reductions in their LSI-R scores compared with clients who were supervised by the lower-scoring officers. In other words, the clients supervised by the higher scorers achieved more positive behavioral and attitudinal change.

Initial and Post-Supervision Reconviction Rates¹

Our recent reconviction analysis focuses on 75 clients for whom we had interview assessments and reconviction data. This is a lower number than the total of interviews because a number of clients appeared in more than one interview, and in those cases only the score

¹ For a fuller account of our reconviction study, please see Raynor et al. (forthcoming).

from the first interview is used. We controlled for risk, and we found that clients who were supervised by the higher-scoring officers had slightly higher initial risk scores compared with the initial risk scores of the clients supervised by the lower-scoring officers. As Table 4 shows, the clients supervised by the higher-scoring officers had substantially lower rates of reconviction compared with the reconviction rates of those who were supervised by the lower-scoring officers.

In sum, the clients supervised by the higher-scoring officers performed substantially better. This result supports the view that supervision skills make a real difference, and the focus on CCPs is justified by results.

TABLE 3.

Mean initial and follow-up LSI-R risk assessments of people interviewed by 7 staff with below-median skill ratings, compared with interviewees of 7 staff with above-median skill ratings (N of staff = 14; N of interviewees = 54)

Interviewed by:	First LSI-R	Second LSI-R	Change	Significance of change (t-test)
Staff using fewer skills (N=23)	20.7	19.0	-1.7	Not significant
Staff using more skills (N=31)	20.6	17.2	-3.4	p = 0.003

TABLE 4.

Two-year reconviction rates of people interviewed by 7 staff with below-median skill ratings, compared with interviewees of 7 staff with above-median skill ratings (N of staff = 14; N of interviewees = 75)

Interviewed by:	Not reconvicted	Reconvicted	% reconvicted
Staff using fewer skills (N=23)	15	21	58%
Staff using more skills (N=31)	29	10	26%

Significance: p = .004

Conclusions

The Jersey study has led to a number of publications, including a chapter in the edited collection *Offender Supervision* (Raynor, Ugwu-dike, & Vanstone, 2010) and a forthcoming article in a criminological journal (Raynor, Ugwu-dike, & Vanstone, forthcoming). However, so far the most immediate practical effects have come from dissemination of the checklist used in the research (the Jersey Supervision Interview Checklist version 7c: Raynor, Ugwu-dike, & Vanstone, 2009) and the manual prepared in the late stages of the project to facilitate use of the checklist by practitioners (Vanstone & Raynor, 2012). This manual, based on our own procedures and criteria used during the interview analysis stage of the research, was produced when, rather to our surprise, the probation staff in Jersey asked to be trained in the use of the checklist. We had thought that they would be relieved that the study was over, but instead they spotted the potential of the interview analysis process to aid staff development, which had up to then been a theoretical possibility in our minds rather than a practical project. The result was that one of the authors led a training day in Jersey in which groups of probation staff watched recorded interviews and completed checklists, with lively discussion of the assigned scores. The other author led a workshop at a conference in Scotland to introduce participants to the process, and the chief probation officer of Jersey showed a

recorded interview for assessment at a conference in Australia. The latest information from Jersey is that the Checklist is being used there in staff development. We should not, perhaps, have been surprised that probation staff showed more obvious enthusiasm for practical applications of the research instruments than they had shown for the time-consuming and inconvenient business of collecting our research material.

We are still at an early stage in the dissemination of this research, but there have already been some impacts beyond Jersey. The project has been discussed in the international research network CREDOS (the Collaboration of Researchers for the Effective Development of Offender Supervision) and interim results have been presented to the National Offender Management Service in England and Wales, which has itself initiated an Offender Engagement Programme (OEP) to enhance probation officers' skills in direct work with offenders and to reinstate skills at the center of the offender management process. The Jersey project has been one influence on this program (others were the work of Chris Trotter in Australia and the work of Jim Bonta and his colleagues in Canada) and one of the authors has been appointed to an advisory group for the project, as well as giving advice on the training component of the program, known as SEED (Skills for Effective Engagement and Development). The results of the OEP are awaited with interest and may prove important in the development of British probation. This rediscovery of skills is undoubtedly welcome, but the fact that it is happening as a part of post-qualification in-service training raises questions about the effectiveness of probation officers' initial preparation.

Probation services in England and Wales are facing a period of unprecedented change: The current coalition government in London is engaged in a widespread program of competition and privatization in public services, and it is likely that up to 70 per cent of the Probation Service's work will in future be undertaken by private companies. The future shape of training for the staff of these new services is as yet unknown, but much of their work will be similar to the work of probation staff today—indeed, some of them will be the same staff. We can state with confidence that skills will still be important, and that skilled staff will produce better results than unskilled staff. Current plans indicate that at least part of the income of new service providers will depend on how successful they are in

reducing re-offending, and attention to staff skills may be a cost-effective strategy, but it is still impossible to predict how these issues will be addressed, or whether this will be done any more effectively than in the past.

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