

Supervision Skills for Probation Practitioners

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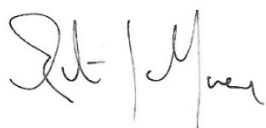
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Foreword

HMI Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth offending services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth offending services.

This report was kindly produced by Professor Peter Raynor, who has been carrying out research for a number of years on aspects of effective probation practice. The process of individual supervision has been described as a 'black box', but understanding what is inside the box and what makes it effective is an essential part of the development of probation's evidence base. Individual supervision is what most people supervised by probation services receive most of the time, and the studies reviewed here highlight the importance of investing in practitioners' skills. By recognising and enhancing the skills that they use, practitioners can be placed at the centre of strategies to improve the delivery of probation services.



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Author's Profile

Dr. Peter Raynor is a former probation officer, now Emeritus Research Professor in Criminology at Swansea University. During a long research career he has published widely on criminal justice practice and the effectiveness of probation. In recent years he has carried out the Jersey Supervision Skills Study (JS3) with Maurice Vanstone and Pamela Ugwudike and has co-edited several books on effective practice: *Offender Supervision* with McNeill and Trotter (Willan 2010), *What Works in Offender Compliance* with Ugwudike (Palgrave 2013), *Evidence-Based Skills in Criminal Justice* with Ugwudike and Annison (Policy Press 2018) and the *Routledge Companion to Rehabilitative Work in Criminal Justice* with Ugwudike, Graham, McNeill, Taxman and Trotter (Routledge 2019). He is a member of the Correctional Services Accreditation and Advice Panel and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences. In 2016 he received the inaugural Research Award of the Confederation of European Probation for the JS3 study.

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HMI Probation.

1. Introduction

The use of evidence-based practice in the attempt to improve probation's impact on reoffending became a mainstream policy following the 'Underdown report' produced by HM Inspectorate of Probation in 1998. Initial efforts were largely based on cognitive-behavioural group programmes. However, most people supervised by probation officers experience supervision as one-to-one contacts most or all of the time, and some of those who participate in programmes also need preparation, support and follow-up on an individual basis. The identification of practitioners' skills in individual supervision as an important component in effective practice came late to England and Wales in comparison with work done in other countries. This 'Academic Insight' offers a brief summary of key findings from research on probation staff's practice skills (known in North American research as Core Correctional Practices) and considers some of the practical implications. In the well-known Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) framework for effective practice, research on skills contributes to understanding responsivity, which has until recently received less research attention than risks and needs.

2. What research on skills tells us so far

2.1 International research

Recent research on skills has been of two kinds. Some research aims to identify skills in use and their impact on supervised people, while other research uses experimental designs to compare the impact of staff who receive special training in skills with others who do not receive the training, or are waiting to receive it. These approaches are sometimes combined in the same study: the earliest example of the modern approach to skills research was a study by Chris Trotter in Australia in 1993 which showed that officers trained in prosocial modelling achieved significantly better results than similar officers who had not received the training.

In 2007 Chris Trotter was one of the founder members of CREDOS, the Collaboration of Researchers for the Effective Development of Offender Supervision, along with Peter Raynor and Fergus McNeill, and over the last twelve years a number of studies of practice skills have been carried out by researchers connected with CREDOS. In Canada the focus has been on 'Core Correctional Practices' (CCPs) which are seen as comprising two kinds of skills:

- 'Relationship Skills' to engage service users in relationships which are 'respectful, caring, enthusiastic, collaborative, valuing personal autonomy and... motivational'; and
- 'Structuring Skills' which aim to facilitate changes in attitudes and behaviour: 'prosocial modelling, effective reinforcement and disapproval, skill building, cognitive restructuring, problem solving, effective use of authority, and advocacy-brokerage' (Bonta and Andrews, 2017, p.177).

An early meta-analysis by Dowden and Andrews (2004) showed that work with offenders which used these core practices led to lower reconviction rates, but the skills component of projects was often neglected or unreported. The most comprehensive study of the effects of training people in CCPs has been Bonta's STICS study in Canada ('Strategic Training Initiative in Community Supervision'); other evaluated projects include STARR ('Staff Training Aimed at Reducing Re-Arrest'), EPICS ('Effective Practices in Community Supervision') and PCS ('Proactive Community Supervision'). Reviews of these and other studies can be found in Chadwick, DeWolf and Serin (2015), Toronjo and Taxman (2018), and Raynor and Vanstone (2018). They all show significant positive results, with officers trained in various versions of core correctional practices achieving better outcomes:

'when officers received training in core correctional practices, the offenders they supervised experienced lower odds to reoffend'

(Chadwick et al, 2015, p.296)

2.2 Nearer home: the Jersey study

The nearest of these studies to the UK has been the Jersey Supervision Skills Study (JS3) carried out in the Channel Island of Jersey and reported by Raynor, Ugwudike and Vanstone in 2014. This was an observational study which aimed to compare staff who used a wide range of skills with those who used fewer skills, and to see if there were differences in outcomes. It was based on analysis of 95 video-recorded interviews using a 63-item checklist covering nine skill clusters: interview set-up, non-verbal communication, verbal communication, effective use of authority, motivational interviewing, prosocial modelling, problem-solving, cognitive restructuring and overall interview structure. Advocacy and brokerage were not scored as a separate skill cluster but were included as individual items under some other skills; it could be argued that they deserve more emphasis in jurisdictions where access to welfare provision is difficult. The checklist (Raynor, Ugwudike and Vanstone 2009) and a short manual for checklist users (Vanstone and Raynor, 2012) are available on open access, free of charge, on the Jersey Probation and After-Care Service website.

In the meta-analysis by Chadwick et al. (2015), the average difference in recidivism rates when comparing outcomes for trained staff with those for untrained staff was 13 per cent which compares quite well with the effect sizes typically reported for group programmes. JS3 reported the largest difference, with supervision by more skilled staff resulting in a two-year follow-up reconviction rate of 26 per cent, compared to 58 per cent among similar offenders 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. Further studies using the JS3 type of design would be desirable to see if such large differences are typically found.

Another encouraging finding in JS3 was that because staff were assessed over a number of interviews, it was clear that staff who had low average scores on the 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 this 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 report explores some attempts to do this.

2.3 Applying the lessons

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 advance staff development 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, later expanded to SEEDS by the addition of a focus on staff supervision). The staff training drew on STICS 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 adequate comparison groups and systematic assessment of staff skills before and after training) and

full outcomes have not yet been reported: probation services in England and Wales have been occupied with other major changes.

Other examples of applying skills research to staff development have been promising. When the data-gathering phase of the Jersey research was finished, the Jersey probation staff asked to be trained to use the checklist themselves to assess their own and each other's interviews. Training was provided, and since then (a period of roughly seven 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 they 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.

This staff development process can also provide 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 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 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".

Other applications of skills research in staff development include translation and roll-out of the Jersey material in France, and in Finland where it forms the basis of a computer application issued to all officers. In Sweden a version of STICS (known as KRIMSTICS) has been rolled out and evaluated, with generally positive effects though with no significant changes in reconviction yet reported. These and other developments reviewed by Raynor

and Vanstone (2018) allow considerable confidence that improvements in practice are achievable using these approaches to skill development.

2.4 Skills, personal attributes and values

When we talk about 'using' skills, this does not usually mean selecting a skill from a behavioural repertoire like selecting the right spanner from a toolbox. What we are really talking about is skilled interviewing and interaction, and this is related to personal attributes and aptitudes. Some people intuitively and spontaneously engage and influence with or without training, but most people can benefit from being more aware of what they are doing in their professional roles, how they impact on others, and what options they have for making their contacts more productive. Analysing recorded interviews with an experienced colleague seems to be one effective way to do this. Training makes it more likely that people will choose a helpful approach, and for some people this will become something they do without having to think about it. People show natural variations in aptitude but most people can improve. Not everyone will improve to the same extent or maintain the improvement successfully, and some people might improve from a low starting point without reaching a level at which they can be consistently effective, but the message from research is that on average, training initiatives have led to real improvements and have enabled people to exercise a positive influence leading to reduced offending.

As well as personal attributes, people have values and personal commitments to what they want to achieve. These will not always coincide: some people have well developed skills of engagement and influence and use them for anti-social purposes, like confidence tricksters, card sharps and doorstep fraudsters. Readers will easily think of other examples in the public eye. Others have prosocial goals but lack the interpersonal awareness or skills to be as helpful as they want to be. Effective practitioners need skills as well as values and commitment, and now we know more than we used to about the relevance and impact of skills.

3. Conclusion and practical implications

Recent and current research give us good reasons to expect that an investment in practitioner skills could, if well managed, have a significant positive effect on the effectiveness of probation services. The research shows that staff who consistently use a wider range of skills, with high levels of both relationship skills and structuring skills, usually help the people they supervise to achieve, on average, lower reconviction rates. In addition, practitioners can be trained to improve the range and level of skills they use in their individual supervision of service users. When practitioners' views are reported they show that after initial anxieties, attention to skills is usually welcomed. The advantages are clear: improving the effectiveness of staff who are already employed and paid looks like a cost-effective strategy.

However, it also presents challenges to organisations: this type of staff development, which requires staff to take what often feels like a risk by exposing their practice to scrutiny, needs an environment in which staff feel safe, valued and supported by trusted management. It is likely to work best in organisations which are well informed about effective practice and committed to its development, and with practitioners who are resourceful, well informed and creative. There is also evidence that improved skills are more likely to be maintained and used when staff have access to regular supervision by experienced colleagues who have a good understanding of practice skills.

Initiatives and experiments need to be set up in a way which lends itself to evaluation (for example, with appropriate comparison groups and adequate recording of data) so that impacts can be identified and measured. Unfortunately, attention to evaluability has sometimes been missing in probation initiatives in England and Wales, and this means that learning opportunities are lost. In addition, a focus on practitioners' skills suggests a shift away from managerialist top-down approaches which rely on the elaboration of guidance and procedural requirements. Instead, a full implementation of what we now know about skills would put the trained, skilled and resourceful front-line practitioner where she/he belongs, at the centre of evidence-based effective practice.

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