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The place of the officer–offender relationship in assisting offenders to desist from crime

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Abstract For decades, the relationship between the officer and offender (variously labelled as the ‘casework relationship’, the ‘supervisory relationship’ or ‘one-to-one work’) was the main channel for probation service interventions. In the modernized probation service in England and Wales, this relationship element has been marginalized, on a policy level at least, by accredited groupwork programmes and case management approaches involving referrals to specialist and other services. However, there are now promising signs that policy makers are re-instating the ‘relationship’ between the practitioner and offender as a core condition for changing the behaviour and social circumstances associated with recidivism. This article traces the factors behind the paradigm shift from casework (in its broadest sense) to case management (more recently termed ‘offender management’) in order to identify why an element of practice once regarded as vital became discredited. It then briefly draws on findings in the mental health field and desistance research to relocate the relationship element within a practice model that is focused on supporting desistance from crime.

Keywords case management, casework, desistance, interpersonal skills, motivational interviewing, officer–offender relationship, practice skills, supervision

The various eras of probation’s history have been associated with differing paradigms for practice (McWilliams, 1987). However, the relationship between the officer and the offender, as a basis for working towards change, remained a constant, even though the theoretical rationale and required skills altered in complexity and focus. Although the approach switched from a missionary model of befriending and converting offenders, to a treatment model through social casework, there remained an underlying assumption that the relationship was ‘the probation officer’s main instrument’ (Davies, 1969: 121). In keeping with this,

when the Morison report set out government policy for probation in the early 1960s, it defined casework as 'the creation and utilisation, for the benefit of an individual who needs help with personal problems, of a relationship between himself and a trained social worker' (Home Office, 1962: paras. 54–56).

It is only in recent years that – for the probation service in England and Wales, more so than in Scotland – this one-to-one relationship has ceased to be a defining characteristic of probation work. Practitioners have continued to identify relationship building as a prerequisite to influencing change (e.g. see Burnett, 1996; McNeill, 2001; Rex, 1999) but on a policy level the ascendance of groupwork programmes, and the reformulation of probation identity in the 'language of law enforcement and risk rather than social work and rehabilitation' (Bhui, 2001: 639) served to undermine the relationship foundation of probation interventions. There are many factors in this demise, some in the recent past, and some which need to be traced back through the combined histories of the probation service, penal policy and of rehabilitation. To address these factors comprehensively would be a separate article; here, we limit ourselves to identifying major influences on levels of confidence in relationship-based probation practice. With the benefit of hindsight, and in the light of research findings in the mental health field and in the accumulating body of desistance research, our main intention in this article is to consider the position of relationship-based practice in 21st century probation interventions aimed at reducing reoffending.

A necessary preliminary is to note the tendency, in both probation literature and the 'what works' literature, for the terms 'casework relationship', 'supervisory relationship', 'counselling' and 'one-to-one work' to be used interchangeably. The concept of 'casework' is additionally problematic because varieties range from the more Freudian 'psychodynamic casework' (e.g. Ferard and Hunnybun, 1962) to person-centred models of 'social casework' which include attention to environmental problems linked to offending (e.g. Biestek, 1961), and to 'task-centred casework' (Goldberg et al., 1985). Indeed, as we discuss later, it may be partly because of narrow associations with psychodynamic approaches that confidence in 'casework' was eroded. To avoid giving the impression that we are referring simply to classical, psychoanalytic casework in this article, we use the more general concept of 'relationship-based practice'. Occasionally we shorten this to 'relationship', with the caveat that there is no intention to reify the concept. Beyond these various labels, our focus is on the interpersonal processes, decisions and activities that are enabled when a relationship (or working alliance) has been formed, and the practitioner skills and probationer responses that are expressed through the relationship.

The disappearance and reappearance of 'relationship'

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the relationship basis for probation practice fell from grace. It survived critiques of 'casework' and the period of correctional nihilism following the gloomy research message that 'nothing works' (see next section). In a 1990s review for the Home Office of the professional skills and

knowledge required for probation practice (Boswell et al., 1993), officers identified ‘relationship making’ as a key skill and ‘casework [as] their fundamental tool of intervention with their clients’ (p. 148). As the authors noted, casework, by then, had ‘come to be seen as . . . a simple relationship-making process which incorporated respect for the individual, rather than the somewhat obscure and esoteric practice of bygone years’ (p. 148). Moreover, even though the service had moved on to a position wherein nearly half of probation staff were practising specialist duties, such as civil work, community service or court-based work, most of these specialists, like their generic fieldwork colleagues, were still using one-to-one counselling as one of their methods of working. Similarly, Burnett’s (1996) survey for the Home Office found that commitment to the relationship basis for practice still endured, although staff were experiencing the encroachment of case-management approaches with varying degrees of resignation and regret:

Case-management is the way that it is going. I have no choice but to go along that way because I do not have time to work with people as I would wish. I am increasingly tending to refer . . . What gets squeezed out is actually working with the clients. (p. 19)

There’s a part of me that’s old-fashioned and believes that there is something potentially significant in the strength of the relationship between an officer and his or her client . . . It’s a kind of mentor role that I think is quite important. (p. 60)

Some 10 years on, a new or prospective member of probation staff in England and Wales would find little immediate evidence of this once vital component of probation practice. The practitioner–offender relationship is scarcely, if at all, mentioned in introductory literature about what the job currently entails; in key documents such as *The New Choreography* (National Probation Service, 2001) and *Bold Steps* (National Probation Service, 2004), and in discussion documents about NOMS (e.g. Home Office, 2004), allusions to relationships are nearly always to those with other agencies. Where the relationship between worker and offender does feature, it is likely to be in the context of control and regulation. For instance, the booklet *Careers in the National Probation Service*, in many ways the ‘shop window’ to the service for would-be recruits, depicts contact between officer and offender in terms of surveillance:

Regular close supervision by a probation officer can be a highly effective way to tackle offending behaviour. Having to engage with an authoritative professional who regularly questions the whys and wherefores of your life and faces you with the consequences of your behaviour can be very intrusive. (National Probation Directorate, 2003: 7)

This shift in focus from supportive to surveilling relationships seems indicative of how far the service has moved away from a paradigm that takes account of the ‘client’s perspective’.

Similarly, other glimpses into current practice, gleaned from websites for probation areas and training consortia and from key documents, give little hint of the support, friendliness and warmth that once characterized the supervision of

offenders. In descriptions of the role of probation officers it is as if the relationship factor has been 'airbrushed' from the image portrayed.² Indeed, an onlooker might conclude that probation staff go out of their way *not* to form a relationship with their supervisees. The London Probation Area website provides a *Profile of a Probation Officer* in which the exemplary officer tells us: 'If I were friendly with offenders, I wouldn't be effective.'³ In a memorandum to the Home Affairs Committee for the Criminal Justice Bill 2003, a long-serving probation officer regrets that frontline staff are now actively discouraged from becoming involved in and committed to cases, and likens current practice to diagnosing a fault in a motor car (Watson, 2003). The recommendation in the Carter review (Home Office, 2004b) of a purchaser-provider split forebodes the possibility of further encroachment into opportunities for the key worker to build a relationship with the offender.

In Scotland by contrast, criminal justice social work retains organizational, professional and educational ties with other fields of social work (see Robinson and McNeill, 2004). Perhaps for this reason, despite sharing the National Probation Service's preoccupations with risk assessment, accredited programmes, evidence-based practice, challenging offending, being seen to be 'tough' and protecting the public (Scottish Office, 1998), the relationship aspects of practice have not experienced the same degree of neglect or marginalization.

The comparison is interesting because some deeper digging in England and Wales reveals a new and countervailing wave of interest on a policy level in the relationship basis of work with offenders. Those who joined the service because they wanted to work directly with offenders and use their relationships to influence change, and help tackle problems linked to their offending, can take heart. Despite all the talk of purchaser-provider splits and the designation of probation staff as offender managers, 'casework' and 'relationships' are again on the lips of chief executives and service managers, and being mentioned in publications. One of the first indications of a revival of interest appeared in the foreword to the 2001/02 report of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, which was critical of the high level of investment in programmes and called for a more holistic approach, employing the traditional skills of probation officers to nurture offenders' motivation to change (Morgan, 2003). A similar reaffirmation of the value of former skills was made by Christine Knott (2004) shortly before her appointment as the new National Offender Manager. She identified 'casework' as a preferable label to 'case management', explaining that the former implies 'hands on' involvement of the supervisor, who is 'not only the referrer and the enforcer' but also 'the motivator and the reinforcer and the person who holds onto the longer-term aims of social reintegration and reducing reoffending' (p. 23). Knott observed that probation officers have suffered a crisis of confidence, partly resulting from the sense that their traditional skills in assessing and supervising offenders have been devalued, but she envisaged a 'renewed focus on the role of the caseworker' which will 're-empower' probation officers (p. 23). Indeed, in a recent literature review commissioned and published by the Scottish Executive's Social Work Services Inspectorate, the keyrole of relational and interpersonal skills in effective practice has been strongly argued and re-affirmed (McNeill et al., 2005).

Other high level executives in the National Probation Directorate, as it prepares for transformation into the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), refer to the importance in case management of ‘relating to the offender’ so that he or she feels ‘that somebody cares about them, wants them to do better’ (Mann, 2004: 44), and to the place of a ‘personal, relationship-based approach’ in offender management (Grapes, 2004). Moreover, as we write (in January 2005), *The NOMS Offender Management Model* (National Probation Service, 2005) has just been issued to all Probation Areas. This model incorporates the Dowden and Andrews (2004) model of Core Correctional Practice, one feature of which is ‘forming and working through warm, open and enthusiastic relationships’ (2005: 13). Importantly, it is noted that:

[T]he evidence upon which we have drawn all concludes that any positive impact which correctional measures can have upon offenders will rely heavily upon the personal relationships they experience with the various staff with whom they interact. The conclusion then is that the concept of Offender Management should be a human service approach – based upon those personal relationships – rather than an administrative or bureaucratic one . . . This is not to argue that sound administration, or less personal approaches like electronic monitoring have no place. Quite the contrary. But their place is *within*, rather than *instead of*, a predominantly human service approach. (2005: 25)

Perhaps then it is not an exaggeration to say that there is now a revival of interest in the officer–offender relationship and a reaffirmation of its value. Arguably, its importance has, throughout the history of the probation service continued to be recognised by frontline staff. David Smith (2004) seemed to hit the ‘nail on the head’ when he pointed out that the principles of effective practice have left out the vital relationship element:

[P]rescriptions for effective practice . . . are silent on questions of what sort of staff . . . and what sort of relationship they should have with those on the receiving end of the programme. But research as well as intuition suggest that the quality of the relationship between helper and helped (or supervisor and supervisee) matters, perhaps as much as the content of the intervention, as a predictor of success or failure of efforts to help people change. (p. 44)

James McGuire (2002) has made a similar observation about the surprising neglect of interpersonal skills and relationship skills in the body of research investigating the effectiveness of interventions with offenders, in comparison to research in the mental health field. The paper by Dowden and Andrews (2004), mentioned above, is one instance of applied research that is now addressing this omission.

Meanwhile, during the period when the relationship factor ceased to be mentioned by probation service managers in England and Wales, interpersonal skills and processes reappeared, as part of a tiered approach, under specialist labels: pro-social modelling by group leaders; ‘motivational interviewing’ by offender managers; befriending by mentors. These each bear comparison with former, standard practice. For example, there are clear similarities between the

principles and techniques laid down for pro-social modelling (Trotter, 1999), motivational interviewing (Miller and Rollnick, 2002), and client-centred social casework (Biestek, 1961).

This is not, by any means, to say that probation practice is merely returning to the place from which it departed, and that the overhaul to the probation service has been for nought. Critical friends of the service had argued convincingly that modernization was long overdue (Mair, 1997), and this modernization has led to positive results (Knott, 2004). Yet it is difficult to avoid a sense that something of critical value was in danger of being discarded and is now being rediscovered. In order to 'separate the wheat from the chaff' of old time probation, it is worth exploring why traditional practice lost its credibility.

The discrediting of traditional probation practice

Although, as the previous section has shown, it is only recently that the relationship factor dropped out of view, its demise and the associated discrediting of traditional practice was a long time coming. For the first crucial part of the story it is appropriate to revisit the probation service in England and Wales during the 1960s and 1970s in order to appreciate the 'loss of direction' that occurred at that time (Raynor, 1985). In doing this, it is necessary to disentangle relationship-based work (often described as 'casework' in its more general sense) from 'psychodynamic casework', a particular variety of casework influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis and in which, according to its purest form, offenders were treated as objects with no real insight into their own problems.

Writing at the end of the 1960s, Martin Davies (1969) suggested that, for probation officers at that time:

[T]he *raison d'être* of their profession today might be said to be the conviction that casework has an important part to play in penal affairs [. . .] The aim of everyone concerned in the sentencing process is that the individual placed on probation shall not offend again, and the officer carries out his work with this ultimate purpose clearly in view. (p. 1)

In other words, it was believed that rehabilitation and desistance could be achieved through casework, and that: 'probation is fundamentally a form of social service preventing further crime by a readjustment of the culprit' (Radzinowicz, 1958: xii). Events contributing to a switch from this rehabilitative optimism during the 1960s to the correctional pessimism of the 1970s were analysed by Peter Raynor (1985) in his now classic text, *Social Work, Justice and Control*. A major factor, of course, was the dissemination of Martinson's infamous 'nothing works' review (1974), followed by the similarly negative British review of research investigating the effectiveness of interventions to reduce reoffending (Brody, 1976). However, this negative publicity only served to confirm growing doubts that already existed at that time, in contrast to the optimism of the previous decade. Confidence was also undermined by changes in the way officers were being required to work, including suggestions that they should have a more controlling role, and in some cases

should provide compulsory supervision. This, in turn, prompted probation staff to critically reflect on the way in which they worked.

Criticism of psychodynamic (or psychoanalytical) models of working with offenders was an additional element in the probation service's lost sense of direction in the 1970s and into the 1980s. This variety of casework had been imported earlier in the century from the mental health field into probation and social services. When it emerged that there was little or no empirical support for the effectiveness of probation practice, some blamed psychodynamic casework because of its emphasis on self-understanding and introspection, rather than social functioning and practical problem solving (Fischer, 1976). In this regard, probation practice lagged behind research in identifying the structural context for crime. Commenting on this, Davies (1969) observed that:

If criminology has been bold and all-embracing in its analysis of environmental factors, casework has been always more hesitant and sometimes frankly ambivalent towards them. (p. 5)

The psychoanalytic versions of casework encouraged officers to interpret 'contradiction between the client's view of what was best for him and society's view' as indicative of the client's lack of insight into the causes of his/her problems, which were really the behavioural manifestation of the client's 'intra-psychic conflict . . . to be resolved by increasing his understanding of himself' (Raynor, 1985: 4). Indeed, probation textbooks at that time suggested that some clients might pretend they had environmental problems as a ruse to avoid casework discussions about their attitudes and psychological problems (Davies, 1969).

Disillusion with this psychoanalytic version of casework contributed to the proposal for a 'non-treatment paradigm', which advocated a collaborative approach based on shared assessment and client-defined tasks in place of a 'treatment model' in which client malfunction was diagnosed by the caseworker and the treatment decided without consulting the client (Bottoms and McWilliams, 1979). It was also a response to a broader critique of 'treatment' as a form of covert coercion or manipulation in which individuals were dealt with as objects of intervention rather than people seeking help. Other criticisms of the treatment model were that it led to inequities, discrimination and injustices because crime has social causes rather than being pathological.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that all probation officers practised psychodynamic casework or applied a 'treatment paradigm' in the manner that was being criticized. The non-treatment paradigm advocated respect for the probationer as an individual with his/her own perspective, plus open discussion with the probationer about the purposes of supervision. The humanitarian concerns that motivated many people to join the service make it likely that many officers were already practising the principles made explicit by the non-treatment paradigm. It is evident from investigations of probation carried out around at that time that everyday practice was grounded in practical problems faced by clients, rather than being an examination of defence mechanisms, transference, ego strength and other psychoanalytic processes. Davies (1969) observed that even though there was general agreement among probation staff on the 'importance

of unconscious factors in human life' and casework was regarded as helpful in 'talking through problems which might otherwise have seemed insoluble' (p. 6, emphasis in original), nevertheless 'caseworkers in practice have never entirely turned their backs on the client's environment' (p. 6). Bottoms and McWilliams (1979) themselves acknowledged that everyday work was more pragmatically based, rather than a strict adherence to the treatment model that they rejected. Indeed, Raynor and Vanstone (1994) point to this variability as a 'logical flaw in the original statement' of the non-treatment paradigm:

[T]he term 'treatment' is first used as if synonymous with psychodynamic approaches involving disguised coercion, denial of clients' views, the objectification of people, and a demonstrable lack of effectiveness when applied to offenders. The argument then proceeds, on the whole, as if these are necessary characteristics of all 'treatment', and virtually everything done to and with offenders in an attempt to change their behaviour is tarred with the same brush. (p. 399)

Perhaps because of such generalizations and confusion around what casework was, it developed a mystique (Boswell et al., 1993). Staff assumed that their colleagues were practising casework even though they never saw them doing it. As an interviewee in the survey by Boswell et al. (1993: 148) crudely conveyed it: 'Casework is like wiping your backside. Nobody ever sees you do it.' In similar admissions of uncertainty, some of the fieldworkers interviewed by Burnett (1996) acknowledged that most of the time they were not consciously drawing on theoretical approaches or established methods such as casework, and tended to work intuitively.

Even if not consciously followed by staff, one variant of casework that was promoted in the probation service of England and Wales during the 1960s and 1970s was the model formulated by Felix Biestek (1961). He defined casework as a 'two-way process' that is 'dynamic and continuing' and referred to the use of relationship as a means of enabling supervisees to develop what we now describe as their 'human capital' and 'social capital':

The purpose of casework . . . is to help the client make a better adjustment . . .
The means to this purpose are the mobilization of dormant capacities in the individual, or the mobilization of appropriate community resources, or both, depending upon the needs of each client. (Biestek, 1961: 3)

As a model for practice, this depicts a somewhat idealized image of traditional practice in which frontline staff provided a combination of individual or 'one-to-one' counselling, home visiting, family work, brokerage and practical help, as well as services to the courts. The foundation for all these roles was the development of a relationship, or working alliance, between the officer and the people in their caseload. In practice, it imposed an immensely demanding role for practitioners faced with clients whose social problems were more wide scale and entrenched than the casework textbooks allow. It is also worth noting that this conception of casework places the onus on the offender to make 'adjustment', rather than on the officer to act as advocate for social change and the provision

of opportunities for those who have been disadvantaged and socially excluded. However, probation practice was more proactive in ameliorating environmental problems and providing practical help than a narrow interpretation of this casework model allows.

Space constraints here prevent us from filling out the detail of the next chronological events that served to further undermine the standing of relationship-based practice. Various excellent sources discuss these in detail as they apply more generally to the penal system in England and Wales (see Garland, 2001) and more specifically to community sentences and the probation service (see Raynor and Vanstone, 2002). Here we can do no more than mention them in passing, in order to note their implications for the relationship-based practice. Briefly, the paradigm shift at the end of the last century from casework to case-management was particularly influenced by: (1) managerialism; (2) the move to a punitive, 'just deserts' penal policy; and (3) the revival of optimism in rehabilitation and the effective practice agenda.

The advent of Thatcherism, with its emphasis on managerial approaches and budgetary restraint in the public sector, brought the probation service under increasing scrutiny. A more target-driven approach was introduced which focused on defining inputs and measuring outputs and outcomes. As for other public professions, probation services were challenged to produce a more unified sense of purpose and to introduce new organizational structures and processes which would increase efficiency and cost-effectiveness (Home Office, 1984; Audit Commission, 1989). The cost-effectiveness of standard probation practice was inevitably called into question as part of this bid to introduce good management. Home Office research provided evidence of excessive specialism (Mair, 1995), inconsistent practice, and inequitable use of resources (Burnett, 1996). National standards were introduced to specify the objectives and delivery of probation practice, and to eliminate inconsistencies in approach and procedures.

Government policy and legislation during the Thatcher years and onward also changed the tenor of probation practice from one which was essentially concerned with the welfare of people for whom it had supervisory responsibility, to one that prioritized public protection and the delivery of punishments. Community sentences were repackaged in England and Wales as punishment. This punitive turn has been well documented by Worrall (1997) and by Rex (2002). Its particular relevance to the present analysis is that managers of the probation service sought to dissociate probation work from social work, and to present community supervision as a tough and demanding prospect, quite unlike the more familiar (if inaccurate) image of cosy meetings with a friendly officer offering support and sympathy. Structured cognitive-behavioural programmes delivered in education-like group settings, furnished this preferred image far more readily than any further allusions to 'relationship' and 'one-to-one' meetings.

Along with these incursions by central government into what was for decades a profession-led, localized service, came the more uplifting influence of a new wave of research studies demonstrating the invalidity of previous pessimistic conclusions about the effectiveness of interventions in reducing reoffending (see Raynor and Vanstone, 2002). The new evidence from meta-analytical reviews of

research gave the probation service a renewed sense of direction and optimism. More tendentiously, it also gave a boost to the anti-social work movement, because of positive findings associated with cognitive behavioural programmes in group settings: in contrast, the one-to-one counselling associated with traditional social work received a 'poor press' within the publicity given to 'what works and what doesn't'. Home Office reviews of the, mostly Canadian, research into effective practice (e.g. Vennard and Hedderman, 1998) as well as an investigation of probation practice in England and Wales carried out for HM Inspectorate of Probation (Underdown, 1998) confirmed the lack of 'hard' evidence that traditional probation practice had been effective in reducing recidivism rates.

Whether the above developments and revelations justified the near abandonment of supportive relationship-based supervision is open to debate. Further scrutiny of the research findings used to support dismissal of traditional practice provides more seeds for doubt about the wisdom of this. The negative conclusions of 'what works' reviews tend to refer specifically to 'psychodynamic counselling' or 'non-directive counselling'. The Home Office *What Works* booklet juxtaposed these against 'cognitive-behavioural, task-focused work' and emphasized that the learning styles of most offenders require 'active, participatory approaches rather than traditional, client-centred counselling' (Home Office, 1999). Yet it is a fallacy to regard client-centred counselling as non-participatory.

Such approaches (also termed 'person-centred') facilitate the participation of individuals by engaging with what matters to them, by utilizing their own frame of reference and by being flexible to issues they raise themselves rather than rigidly imposing a pre-formulated plan. Research in the mental health field shows that such an approach is particularly valuable with clients who are generally unresponsive or who tend to separate themselves from others (Duncan et al., 1997; Prouty et al., 2002). Person-centred approaches can be either directive or non-directive. Marshall and Serran (2004) note that a 'non-directive' approach is often more effective with involuntary clients, including offenders who are typically a 'difficult population to work with at least because they are often defensive and oppositional' (p. 315). Conversely, a 'directive' approach is advocated for 'motivational interviewing', but this is in the sense of providing focus and goal direction, as opposed to working in an authoritative or didactic manner: on the contrary, motivational interviewing requires the worker to use a 'quiet, eliciting style' (Miller and Rollnick, 2002).

Two studies often cited as strong evidence against the effectiveness of traditional counselling and one-to-one work – namely, the *Cambridge-Somerville Study* (Powers and Witmer, 1951; McCord, 2003) and the *IMPACT Study* (Folkard et al., 1974, 1976) – when scrutinized, are far from being straightforward investigations of what they are alleged to discredit. The *Cambridge-Somerville Study*, aimed at juvenile offenders, used a package of interventions with 'counselling' (not clearly defined) being only one element in addition to summer camps and sporting activity. Subsequent analysis revealed that the most negative effect is likely to have been peer pressure while attending the camps (McCord, 2003). The *IMPACT* study, which contributed in the UK to a growing disillusion with the

effectiveness of traditional probation practice, aimed, among other things, 'to divert the major emphasis of probation casework away from the office interview between client and officer' (Folkard et al. 1976: 13), towards what was termed 'situational treatment', defined as:

[A]nything which is said or done, not directly to the offender, but in relationship to people or circumstances in his social environment, with special references to situations of family, work and leisure. It will be concerned with practical interventions in these situations, and seek to make active use of the offender's relationships with other people' (Folkard et al., 1974: 18)

In contrast, 'individual treatment' (for the control group) is described as:

[A]nything which is said or done to the offender, within the context of the relationship between him and the probation officer, most often in the form of discussions in office interviews. (p. 18)

The findings indicated no significant difference between the one-year reconviction rates for the experimental and control cases. As such, this study was hardly conclusive evidence against the effectiveness of standard, relationship-based work with offenders.

Overall, the research evidence against the effectiveness of traditional relationship-based supervision is minimal and not very convincing (Burnett, 2002, 2004). There has never been a rigorous evaluation of one-to-one supervision in the community, perhaps primarily because generalized labels, like 'counselling', 'one-to-one work', 'casework', 'relationship-based work' are inherently vague. The evidence on their effectiveness – qualitative as well as quantitative – is likely to be conflicting because this is not a unitary approach that has been applied and evaluated, but rather a wide range of one-to-one ways of relating to different types of offenders, for varied durations and purposes and with differing aims, informed by different theories and practised by people with different levels of skill and experience. Nevertheless, the common characteristic in each of these is the potential for interpersonal processes between the practitioner and the supervisee to come into play.

Interpersonal processes that support change

The long-serving officer, mentioned earlier, who protested that offenders cannot be treated like faulty motor cars, rather spoiled the argument by then substituting an animal analogy: 'you can take a horse to water but you can't make it drink' (Watson, 2003). He is referring of course to the need for intrinsic motivation, rather than force, which, as Miller and colleagues explain 'is engaged by eliciting from, rather than installing it in, the person' (López-Viets et al., 2002: 17). To develop his argument, Watson suggests that an officer might risk 'seeming like a right mug' when s/he decides to trust the offender to co-operate with a programme of community rehabilitation, but then uses the foundation of that relationship to 'get the offender round to our way of thinking'. In this, he is illustrating the development

of a working alliance, through a process of give and take and the development of trust and moral obligation. In some support of this, Sue Rex's (1999) research found evidence that probationers appreciate the efforts that supervisors make on their behalf, do not want to let them down and so try harder to co-operate and to desist from further offending.

We can further understand this argument by applying Tony Bottoms' (2001) framework for different kinds of compliance. The achievement of a working alliance is more likely to elicit 'normative compliance', based on a sense of moral obligation, a wish to maintain the alliance, and the perceived 'legitimacy' of the conditions imposed. This is in contrast to 'instrumental compliance' influenced by deterrents and incentives, but which do not affect the person's internal value system. Research within the mental health field has found that the development of such an alliance, otherwise referred to as a 'therapeutic relationship', is a common characteristic in effective interventions aimed at changing behaviour (Horvath and Greenberg, 1994; Norcross, 2002).

To return to the other example of the disappearing officer-offender relationship (*Profile of a Probation Officer*) the practitioner who suggested that being friendly with offenders would be ineffective, further explains that 'the way probation officers work with offenders is not a "buddy-buddy" relationship. It's a professional relationship.' Again, we can understand, from the context, what the officer is driving at: supervisors do not collude with law-breaking behaviour and need some authority over their supervisees. Yet, there is a clear difference between being overly familiar and offering friendly support in the context of a professional relationship. Indeed, an unfriendly, detached probation officer could turn out to be a 'psychonoxious practitioner'; that is, one who has a detrimental rather than beneficial effect (Truax and Mitchell, 1971). In the past, when probation officers were actively encouraged to build a working relationship with their clients, the qualities of warmth, empathy and genuineness were, consciously or otherwise, able to flourish. These therapist qualities and a person-centred approach were identified in psychotherapy research, as 'core conditions' for effective work (Rogers, 1957). Indeed, several decades of research in the mental health field, helping people to make adjustments, have shown that the 'evidence for the necessity, if not the sufficiency, of the therapist conditions of accurate empathy, respect or warmth, and therapeutic genuineness is incontrovertible' (Patterson, 1984: 437).

More recent psychotherapy research and overviews reaffirm the value of the relationship basis of interventions (Hubble et al., 1999; Lambert and Ogles, 2004; Norcross, 2002). This is not to argue that specific interventions and methods are irrelevant. There has been long-term debate and research activity in psychotherapy concerned with whether any one method of intervention or approach is more effective than another in bringing about change. Controlled experimental studies have shown the superiority of some methods over others in treating particular problems; in particular, cognitive behavioural treatments have often been identified as superior to other methods (Norcross, 2004). However, the conclusion of leading authorities in psychotherapy is that there are common core conditions or processes, in addition to method, that are critical to outcome (Lambert and

Ogles, 2004). Indeed, numerous studies find that client variables (e.g. motivation, expectation, self-efficacy, chance factors) and the ‘therapeutic relationship’ or ‘working alliance’ contribute more to positive outcomes than do specific interventions. One meta-analytical review found that the percentage of success that is attributable to the various factors was as follows:

- 40% client and extra-therapeutic factors (e.g. motivation, social support)
 - 30% therapeutic relationship
 - 15% expectancy and placebo effects
 - 15% specific methods
- (Asay and Lambert, 1999)

It is clear from such breakdowns that relationship factors loom large in the assessment of outcomes.

Given such findings, there are clear lessons to be drawn for work in the criminal justice services. While practitioners in offender management are not therapists, they share a similar goal in working with people to influence changes in their behaviour, associated mental states and social circumstances. More research is needed in the criminal justice field to identify the particular interpersonal skills and processes that complement other professional skills and management procedures aimed at reducing re-offending.

Multi-level, desistance-focused practice

In much of the discussion above, our emphasis has been on the mobilization of ‘human capital’ including inner resources: self-determination and motivation, attitudes and beliefs, values and decisions. Though these are essential aspects in supporting the process of change, the evidence from recent studies concerning desistance from crime suggests that they are not enough. The recent discussion, for example, of the *Liverpool Desistance Study* in this journal (Cluley, 2004; Court, 2004; Maruna et al., 2004; McNeill, 2004) highlighted the ‘dire prognosis’ that many offenders face because of their experience of social exclusion. In practical terms, social exclusion blocks opportunities for work, better housing and an improved standard of living, thus making the conceptualization of alternative, law-abiding futures so difficult to develop and sustain. The slow strangulation of hope is accelerated by the psychological aspects of the exclusionary discourses that Maruna et al. (2004) relate in their discussion of the stories that the criminal justice system and its officers tell to offenders; too often, these are negative stories centred on danger, threat, risk and deficits rather than strengths, resources and possibilities. When these practical and psychological aspects of exclusion combine, they represent a potent barrier to change. As is revealed in the 10-year follow-up of the *Oxford Dynamics of Recidivism* study (Burnett, 1992; Burnett and Maruna, 2004; Maruna et al., 2002), too often the motivation to desist from crime is overwhelmed by social difficulties. This study tracked the criminal records of 130 male property offenders who were originally interviewed in the early 1990s. The majority wanted to ‘go straight’ but only a minority were confident of their ability to achieve

this. A key finding is that 'hope' (defined as 'the perception of successful agency related to goals' – Snyder et al., 1991: 570) is associated with lower reconviction rates. In other words, a person's sense of agency and self-efficacy is relevant to outcome following a prison sentence. However, the impact of hope shrinks as the number of exogenous problems rises.

It follows that for people who are without the basic means and opportunities to lead reasonably comfortable and fulfilled law-abiding lives, it is likely to be more urgent to provide interventions that mobilise 'social capital'. Indeed, in spite of the recognition in social casework (for example, Biestek, 1961) that environmental factors as well as personal factors should be targeted in the change process, as we have seen above, one of the greatest criticisms that was levelled at traditional probation practice was that not enough was done to address the social environmental disadvantages that hold repeat offenders back from crime-free lives (Bottoms and McWilliams, 1979). Interestingly, within the context of current debates about 'what works', the same message recurs. For example, Farrall's recent study (2004) of the effects of probation supervision on the criminal careers of 199 probationers concluded that 'probation supervision would appear to have had little impact upon the resolution of obstacles [to desistance from crime]' (p. 201). Farrall suggested that the probationers in his study, by and large, had no problems with their thinking skills and that, instead of cognitive behavioural programmes, attention should be focused on addressing their need for employment or for decent housing. This suggests the development of a key worker role to provide a continuing, supportive relationship which combines individual counselling with social advocacy. More broadly, and perhaps obviously, there is no suggestion here that providing relationship-based support to encourage individuals to desist from crime can ever be a substitute for addressing structural inequalities in society. The point is well made by Raynor and Vanstone (1994: 398) that:

Helping individuals to stop offending . . . should not detract from the need to address the social and economic context of crime.

In some respects this should be uncontroversial. The 'what works' literature, after all, promotes a 'multi-modal' approach – in other words, an array of methods and resources to meet diverse offending-related needs. For example, Lipton et al. (2002) suggest that, in addition to cognitive-behavioural work, programmes should provide pro-social modelling with positive reinforcement of non-criminal behaviour and attitudes; self-efficacy and social support, and motivational interviewing – all elements in common with traditional practice and implied by the desistance research. Indeed, individual counselling is sometimes mentioned as part of the multi-modal cognitive behavioural approach (e.g. Wells-Parker et al., 1995).

However, our view is that both the reconsideration offered here of the relationship aspects of practice and, more generally, the emerging evidence from desistance research requires more than merely adapting and developing currently prevailing notions of 'what works' and effective practice. Rather, we suggest (like Farrall, 2002) that it requires a more searching consideration of whether a new

‘desistance paradigm’ is required. Developing the case for such a paradigm and outlining its characteristics is beyond the scope of this article but, by way of conclusion, we offer some initial thoughts in this regard.

Conclusion: Towards a desistance paradigm for probation

With regard to developing the case for a desistance paradigm for probation, the first point to make is that desistance is the process that probation exists to support. Though it is not straightforward to define desistance (see Bottoms et al., 2004; Farrall, 2002), it is essentially about the processes of ceasing offending and refraining from offending. Maruna et al. (2004) suggest that it is helpful to distinguish primary desistance (the achievement of an offence-free period) from secondary desistance (an underlying change in self-identity wherein the ex-offender labels him or herself as such). Arguably, therefore, probation exists to promote secondary desistance wherever this is possible. A paradigm that emphasizes both the pursuit of that outcome and the fact that it is most often achieved progressively rather than instantaneously, has some obvious advantages over the more treatment-oriented ways of thinking underlying some aspects of the prevailing ‘what works’ paradigm. The latter approach, we would argue, runs certain risks; it over-simplifies and individualises the causes of offending, it assumes the possibility of programmes ‘curing’ these causes, it emphasizes the significance of the ‘treatment’ (and its expert provider) over the role of the (passive) subject of treatment programmes, and it too readily neglects other aspects of and contributors to the process of recovery or change. In essence, by focusing too much on the importance of the delivery of appropriate and effective treatment programmes, it unhelpfully narrows the gaze of the probation service and of the individual officer; the consequence is an unintended neglect of how the wider process of desistance might be best supported. To extend the medical analogy, this is akin to ignoring the contribution that sustained support by a caring individual, which attempts to facilitate recovery by encouraging positive adaptations to environments, by building social supports and by exploiting the body’s own mechanisms of development, adaptation, repair and recovery, might make to achieving better and more lasting results (and at lesser expense) than treatment *per se*.

With this line of thinking in mind, the second author has proposed that ‘desistance resides somewhere in the interfaces between developing personal maturity, forming new or stronger social bonds associated with certain life transitions, and individual subjective narrative constructions which offenders build around these key events and changes’ (McNeill, 2003: 151). These three planes present a triangle of desistance within which practice can be re-conceptualized.

This model confirms that ‘part of the worker’s task [will be] to build individual capacities or ‘human capital’ (McNeill, 2003: 159). However, it also implies that the desistance paradigm, even at the individual level, would require more than a focus on capacity building or skills development in the offender; rather, it requires a broader agenda that engages with the offender’s ‘narrative’ – how he or she

constructs and might re-construct their self-stories. Maruna’s (2001) work provides compelling evidence of the importance of this re-storying in the accounts of the ‘condemnation scripts’ and ‘redemption scripts’ that characterized respectively persisters and desisters in the *Liverpool Desistance Study*. Others have explored the significance of narratives and their reconstruction in other forms of social work (for example, Parton and O’Byrne, 2000). If enduring desistance (for persistent offenders at least) requires this kind of narrative reconstruction of identity, then it becomes obvious why the relationship aspects of practice are so significant (Rex, 1999). Who would risk engaging in such a precarious and threatening venture without the reassurance of sustained and compassionate support?

That kind of emotional support, however, is underwritten by practical assistance with offenders’ social needs and meaningful engagement with their social networks. In the triangle, this is captured in the plane of social bonds and life transitions (and in its interactions with subjective narratives). Help in developing or sustaining social bonds and social capital is doubly significant in the promotion of desistance. Whereas Farrall (2002) underlines its importance in overcoming practical obstacles to desistance, Rex (1999) suggests that this kind of assistance is also critical in establishing the loyalty and trust that probationers value in supporting their efforts to desist. In other words there is a synergy between acts of practical assistance and their subjective impact on the working relationship; the worker’s actions confirm his or her compassion and trustworthiness, increasing the preparedness of the offender to take steps towards desistance. In a sense, Trotter’s (1999) work on pro-social modelling builds on the same interactions; offenders are only likely to follow pro-social examples that they find credible and compelling because of their coherence and consistency.

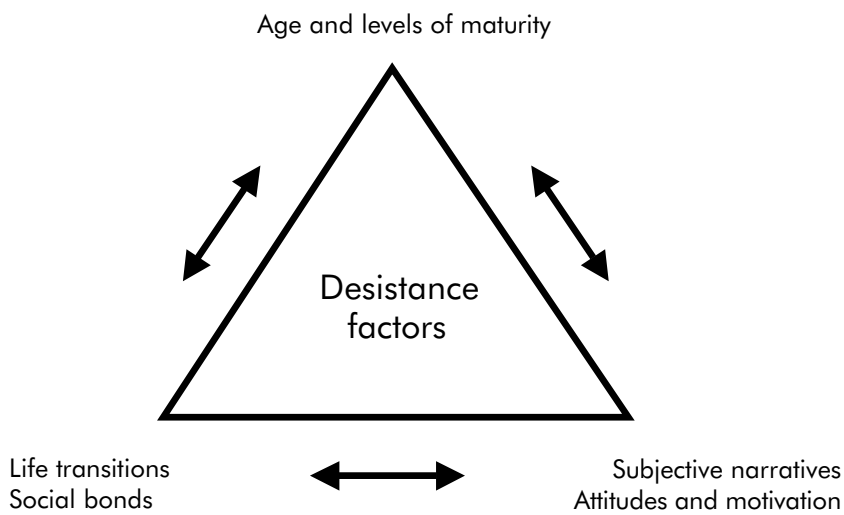


Figure 1 Constructing desistance
 Copyright 2003, McNeill, F. ‘Desistance-focused Probation Service’ in
 W. Hong Chui and M. Nellis (eds) *Moving Probation Forward: Evidence,
 Arguments and Practice*. Harlow: Pearson Longman.

In the preceding discussion we have identified a number of strands to explain why traditional practice lost its credibility. In doing so, we have sought to disentangle the officer–offender relationship, and ‘casework’ in its more generic sense, from particular psychoanalytic variants that focused on unconscious processes, treated probationers as objects and neglected environmental factors. Chief among the reasons for abandoning supportive relationship-based supervision was the lack of empirical support for its effectiveness. We have revisited studies and generalizations cited as evidence against traditional practice, and found them less convincing on closer scrutiny. Furthermore a review of findings in psychotherapy research indicated that relationship factors have more impact on positive outcomes than do specific methods in assisting changes in behaviour. Likewise, studies in criminal justice and desistance research have identified the building of a professional working alliance as a necessary basis for achieving compliance and nurturing the motivation to change. Mobilization of human capital, however, is not enough. Our review of evidence from studies of desistance from crime pointed towards the importance of also mobilizing social capital. Drawing these together, we concluded by sketching a new ‘desistance paradigm’ for working with offenders, at the heart of which is a supportive relationship with the offenders providing both individual counselling and social advocacy.

To conclude that relationships and practical support matter in delivering effective probation work is hardly startling. However, we think that these conclusions need to be re-stated because, as we have argued, they have been neglected in the service’s enthusiastic and well-intentioned pursuit of effectiveness through the design and delivery of effective programmes. In the light of the nascent revival of interest in casework in England and Wales, we hope that our analysis of the evidence about its effectiveness is robust enough to provoke a reconsideration of its significance. Moreover, we trust that this reconsideration will be informed and helpfully developed by the emerging debates in the literature about desistance and desistance-focused practice. By engaging through these debates with a broader and more inclusive conceptualization of evidence-based practice, we hope that practitioners, managers and academics can cooperate in the development of a desistance paradigm for probation. Such a paradigm seems to offer much to probation and criminal justice social work services as they negotiate yet further transitions in their characters, identities and organisational settings.

Notes

- 1 For example, the website for the Midlands Consortium:
www.probationtraining-midlandsconsortium.org.uk
- 2 www.london-probation.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=411

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