
The Jersey Supervision Skills Study

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This article is an expanded version of the short report on this study published by the Ministry of Justice as Offender Engagement Research Bulletin 9: Observing Supervision Skills: the Jersey Study (London, MoJ 2011). Peter Raynor, Pamela Ugwudike and Maurice Vanstone are based at Swansea University, and Brian Heath is the Chief Probation Officer of Jersey.

BACKGROUND

In Swansea University we have a long-standing interest in the effectiveness of probation practice and have made a number of contributions to the ‘What Works?’ literature, including an early evaluation of a cognitive-behavioural programme (Raynor and Vanstone 1997) which emphasized the contribution to success made by effective case management and individual supervision. This was also one of the first studies of probation practice in Britain to make use of video-recording of programme delivery. We had also experimented with practical approaches to the teaching and learning of individual interviewing skills (Raynor and Vanstone 1984). From 1996 onwards we became involved in a research partnership with the Probation and After-Care Service in the Channel Island of Jersey, which was an early and exceptionally committed pioneer of ‘what works’ and of practice evaluation. Dr. Ugwudike joined our research team in 2008 while completing her own research on compliance with supervision (Ugwudike 2010). The current supervision skills study is one of a number

of studies done by Swansea researchers in the Channel Island of Jersey, which is self-governing with its own legal system and a small Probation and After-Care Service closely aligned with the Courts, as Probation Services in England and Wales were until 2001. Previous work in Jersey has concerned risk/need assessment and the effectiveness of supervision (see, for example, Raynor and Miles 2007), and the supervision skills study grew out of a shared perception that developments in evidence-based practice in England and Wales had not yet paid sufficient attention to the impact of skilled one-to-one supervision. We were particularly influenced by the concept of ‘Core Correctional Practices’ (CCPs) developed by the late Don Andrews (Dowden and Andrews 2004), and we had already applied the concept of CCPs in a study of Parish Hall Enquiries, which are a very successful method used in Jersey to resolve offences informally and locally. Would it be possible, we wondered, to carry out a systematic study of the skills and methods used by probation staff in individual supervision?

THE STUDY

The original aim of the study was to collect about 100 videotaped interviews and to develop a checklist which could be used by observers to identify and note the skills and methods used. In particular, we wanted a checklist which would provide a reasonably accurate assessment but was simple enough to be used quite quickly by experienced observers, since we envisaged a possible use for such checklists in the observation of practice for staff development purposes. Participation in the study was voluntary, and the early stages were mainly spent developing the checklist and observing the interviews (for a fuller account of this part of the study see Raynor, Ugwudike and Vanstone 2010). The current version of the Jersey Supervision Interview Checklist, known as version 7C, attempts to strike a balance between comprehensiveness and user-friendliness, and covers sixty-three observable skills or practices grouped into seven skill sets: interview set-up, non-verbal communication, verbal communication, use of authority, motivational interviewing, pro-social modelling, problem-solving, cognitive restructuring, and overall interview structure. Some of these (the first four in the list above) can be described as ‘relationship skills’, used primarily to promote communication, co-operation, trust and motivation; others are ‘structuring skills’ intended to help probationers to change their thinking, attitudes and behaviour. Observers note which skills are used (which sometimes involves a judgment about whether they are appropriately used) and, for research purposes, positive observations are added together to give section sub-totals and an overall total. Eventually we were able to collect and analyse a total of 95 interviews by fourteen different staff. No individual members of staff are identified in the reporting of results.

RESULTS SO FAR

Analysis of this material is still continuing, but some interesting findings have already emerged. Staff varied considerably in the skills they typically used in their interviews, ranging from some with average checklist totals below 40 out of a possible 63, to others with average totals close to 60. Most were quite consistent in their scoring, indicating that those who used a wide range of skills typically did so across a range of different interviews. Staff varied

more in their use of ‘structuring’ skills than in ‘relationship’ skills, which almost all staff used frequently. This possibly reflects the social work training that most of the participating staff had received: in Jersey, as in England and Wales before 1997, it is normal for probation officers to hold a social work qualification. We are also interested in whether differences in interviewing practice affected the outcomes for offenders. So far we have been able to examine changes in assessed risk levels in the caseloads of those officers in the study who supervised probation orders. Jersey uses LSI-R (the Level of Service Inventory Revised) rather than OASys, and people on probation are routinely re-assessed. Past research has shown that changes in LSI-R scores in Jersey are related to differences in actual reconviction rates: reductions in risk lead to lower reconvictions (Raynor 2007). In the skills study, results so far indicate that officers with above average checklist scores also have, on average, greater reductions in assessed risk within their caseloads (average reductions of 2.37 points on LSI-R scores, compared to an average of 1.3 for officers with below average checklist scores. A reduction of 2.37 points is approximately equivalent to an 11% reduction in the average LSI-R score at the start of probation supervision in Jersey, or very approximately a reduction of between 4% and 5% in expected reconviction). Owing to small sample sizes these results fall short of statistical significance, and more analysis is planned including, after a suitable period, a reconviction study. We are also interested in encouraging wider use of the checklist (for staff development purposes only, not staff appraisal or management) and sharing of data. Any organisations interested in using the checklist should contact Brian Heath.

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