

‘Thinking about where we are heading’ – Reviewing and re-conceiving induction to probation supervision

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on action research undertaken at the South Liverpool Probation Office during the summer of 2013. The project was undertaken with probationers and practitioners together to review the induction – or “intake” - processes for Community Orders/Suspended Sentence Orders and early release from prison on licence where the probationer was subject to supervision. Perhaps more significantly, the project aimed to understand what was important for probationers and practitioners if supervisory experiences were to be commenced in a manner that would be most likely to engage and provide opportunity for ownership and co-production of their supervision and sentence plan.

KEY WORDS

Induction, action research, engagement, co-production, sentence planning, desistance practice

INTRODUCTION

As part of the South Liverpool Local Delivery Unit (LDU) 2013-14 business plan the challenge was set to develop an induction experience for probationers that would be more focused on engagement. Although examining and developing structures had always formed a significant part of reviewing practice procedures, the LDU - being the structure through which Merseyside Probation Trust attempts to make services local - had a desire to become more attuned to messages coming from desistance research on the importance of genuine probationer engagement and ownership. This might be considered a recognition of the managerialist approaches of structure and control promoted by the responsabilisation agenda (Garland, 2001) creating a lack of probationer engagement in designing services.

This desire to make induction more engaging was also important with relation to how the inductions were being undertaken. At the start of this project, the South Liverpool LDU offered one-to-one induction appointments to those commencing supervision on prison licences and to those on community sentences with supervision who were assessed as presenting a high risk of harm. Those posing a low or medium risk of harm were inducted as a group in an attempt to provide an efficient process. In both cases the primary aim of these induction appointments was to agree on the regulations and boundaries that were expected of the probationer throughout their supervision, and the conditions and requirements of their court order or prison licence. In many respects, the induction ‘process’ seemed to serve the

need for a signed agreement to use in case of need for enforcement or recall procedures rather than build a relationship with the probationer to help them desist from crime.

Within desistance approaches to probation practice there are a number of key themes emerging that could perhaps be described as based on hope and positive strengths (Burnett, et al, 2007). Stephens and Harris (2010) note the importance of drawing on the probationer's motivation to meet their own goals instead of concentrating on the more negative 'criminogenic needs'. McCulloch and Kelly (2007) relate this to the importance of engagement between probationer and worker by linking motivations and behaviours to the diverse range of 'criminogenic factors'. This requires good interviewing and interpersonal communication skills (Braken, 2003), the ability to listen (Prins, 2007) and recognition of the reciprocal nature of the worker-client relationship in terms of assessment and intervention (Barry, 2007). So the desistance approach strongly focuses on the use of a rehabilitative language signalling the idea of a new phase in the journey of the probationers life focused on their positive re-inclusion and rehabilitation, promoting "their redemption and re-inclusion within their communities" (McNeil and Weaver, 2010, p3). These factors all seem wholly applicable to building a good relationship in induction, helping in the desistance journey.

The concept of desistance as a journey (McNeill and Weaver, 2010) might suggest a re-conceptualising of what induction is all about, and perhaps *orientation* might be a better term. This is to reflect the idea that in commencing their supervision the probationer is beginning a new part of his life journey and the induction is not just about the rules and regulations for the upcoming part of the journey, but also about the direction and the pace. In other words, more fundamentally about what supervision is going to be about and tying this more closely to the sentence plan. This approach was planned to fit in with Hughes' (2012) observation that probationer engagement was different from *what works* approaches. Although relating this to sentencing planning, Hughes' helpful comment that there needs to be, "an opportunity to explore the purpose of the Order, establish relationships, and discuss and agree objectives and interventions" (p51) provided a fitting place to start a desistance-inspired induction appointment.

METHODOLOGY

One of the main intentions of this research was that it would promote an approach to starting supervision which enabled co-production and joint working and understanding between probationer and practitioner. With this in mind, the first fundamental for the methodological design was that there should be an element of pro-social modelling in the review process and that it would model an inclusive and positive approach for practitioners involved. Invites were sent to all team members in the LDU asking if they would like to take part in the review, providing they would bring one of their probationers along so they could work together to consider both their experiences and needs and co-produce. This was intended to ensure that not only would probationers and practitioners voices be heard, but that there would also be an element of modelling positive inclusive behaviour (Trotter, 2008) between the probationer and practitioner. It was hoped that in doing this, the experience of taking part in this piece of research would in itself be supportive and encouraging of the desistance journey for the probationer. It would also demonstrate a commitment to listening to experiences and responding co-operatively with practice development ideas. Reflecting this modelling, a further point emerged during the research with one probationer reporting during the interview, and some afterwards to their officers, that being involved in the review made them feel good in that they had something positive to offer. This would appear to confirm the

importance of planning a pro-social experience, as it provided the opportunity for an element of emotional reward for the probationer (Gast and Taylor, 1998). Further, it also reflected the desistance notion of social redemption for the probationer, recognising and valuing their potential for positive input into society as identified in the desistance discourse (McNeill, 2011).

Taking this approach firmly placed the project within the action research tradition, in which there is an aim to empower participants to influence and change the direction of practice (Crow, 2001). More specifically, the project took on board the methods of dialogue based on strengths, successes, values and hopes familiar to the appreciative inquiry tradition of action research. Within this tradition the dialogue is based on, “a relation process of inquiry, grounded in affirmation and appreciation” (p1, Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2010). This approach is not without critics. As McKay and Marshall (2001) have noted, action research has been criticised for being more like consultancy, lacking some of the key qualities usually associated with rigorous research along with difficulties posed by researcher bias and problems establishing a relationship with the participant. However, whilst these criticisms have some validity, the approach taken in this research was that, by entering into a dialogue researcher bias and assumptions could be tested out and corrected. In addition, the overall positive and affirming experience was of equal importance as the outcome if it were to be ethical for the participants. Nevertheless, we highlight these issues here to make readers aware of the possibility that the outcomes of the research have been influenced by the approach taken and, more specifically, the impact of the researcher, probationer and practitioner all working together to create a positive dialogue experience and thus potentially influencing each other’s input into the conversation.

Individual sessions were set up in which a semi-structured interview took place between the researcher and the probationer-practitioner pairing. In total, seven practitioners and eight probationers were interviewed (one practitioner participated with two probationers). The probationer cohort was male (as the office does not supervise females) and comprised a mixture of licensees and those on Community Orders or suspended sentences with a supervision requirement. Some had been supervised previously, others had not. The complement of practitioners included Probation Officer and Probationer Service Officer grade with a mix of experience. No practitioners or probationers were barred with the only qualification criteria being that they were experiencing supervision either on licence or via a Supervision Requirement (and hence had experienced an induction) and had a desire to contribute. Selection was done by practitioners identifying and asking those probationers who they thought would like to be involved and would be willing to share their experiences. It is acknowledged that this implies a risk of limiting the sample to only those who would be positive towards probation, but nevertheless it was felt that this was outweighed by the need for a constructive creative dialogue - not only in relation to previous experiences but also to potential changes for the future. In each case the interview was only undertaken after the probationer had given their consent to participate.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the interviews can broadly be considered in three themes; content, delivery and sentence planning.

What content is important for an induction?

Both probationers and practitioners stated that it was important to be clear and accurate in terms of the information being provided and the expectations of the probationer in terms of understanding (and not just knowing) what they were signing up to. Whilst some probationers noted that induction should give a clear idea of all the additional requirements, one in particular commented that it should be clear that the rules and regulations apply to all the requirements (and in their case the seriousness of not attending their programme). As will be discussed later, this clarity cannot be separated from the importance of the relationship in which the induction is delivered. With this more emotional aspect in mind, one probationer noted that being provided with clear expectations of what would be required of them helped to put their mind at rest.

One probationer observed that there was the feeling of signing a contract, which he didn't mind, but he suggested there should be a clear message of what he would be getting in return, again indicating the importance of understanding the dynamics of the supervisory relationship. Another probationer reflected a similar sentiment noting that inductions should be clear about each other's expectations. This theme was also identified by a practitioner who observed that inductions could feel formal, with no real benefit for the probationer.

One final practical comment made about the content would be that for 'out of area' cases (as this particular probationer was) it would be good to have some local information to help one navigate one's way around and know about and find partner agencies.

As hinted above, it was evident that apart from the practical, the cognitive and emotional aspects of induction were also important to those interviewed. Practitioners believed that openness and putting the probationer at ease were important skills for the initial appointment. This was recognised by probationers too, one commented that he felt there was a considerable effort by staff to be helpful and welcoming and another noted that practitioners did appear to care. This is perhaps unsurprising and in line with Hughes (2012) who also noted that a key theme from probationers was a need for "respect, openness, fairness and being listened to" (p. 62).

These "softer" skills are of considerable importance, and should perhaps be prioritised in that initial appointment, as probationers identified a number of concerns they had before attending for their induction. One noted that there was a feeling of entering the unknown and another described the feeling of having no idea what to expect. Yet another probationer commented that they had never had previous contact with the criminal justice system and when they left prison they were warned not to trust probation, but the experience they received upon their arrival challenged that notion. The idea of being judged was also present for a further probationer. Both practitioners and probationers concluded better pre-release contact in custody cases might help address any concerns and set up the first appointment better. As one practitioner put it, "you have different relationships with those you have met with compared to those you have not previously met". Another practitioner added, having had some contact with the probationer's family pre-release might also be of help.

These ideas of the importance of the relationship to the induction experience are in line with desistance themes; O'Connor and Bogue (2012) observe that relationships in the community are understood to work when there is trust, consistency and a feeling of not being judged along with positive guidance. So, with respect to content, the induction may act like the

provision of a map at the start of a journey highlighting some of the terrain and providing some foreknowledge of the journey that will be undertaken together.

How should induction be delivered?

There was a clear mandate from probationers and practitioners alike that one-to-one would be a more effective way of engaging with induction materials, although group delivery was acknowledged to have some potential positives, such as peer learning. A variety of reasons were offered for this preference:

- being more personal and geared towards the individual's needs and specifics of their order/licence;
- enabling more personal details to be covered which would not be shared in a one-off group;
- the feeling of being lost in a group or 'stupid' if you ask a question;
- the concern that in a group all the participants would be coming from different starting points;
- showing less clearly when probationers might not understand what they were signing.

One practitioner summarised, "group induction – more efficient but not more effective". This idea of a one-to-one approach with a view to engaging the probationer appears very much in line with the overall themes of desistance approaches (McNeill, 2011).

It is important to acknowledge however that the preference for one-to-one inductions did not appear to be based on preference for a type of induction system, or on fear of group work, but - as one probationer put it - a clear understanding that it was "not so much the process as the experience" that was important. The comments suggest that the induction experience should be tailored to the individual, and support the importance of a committed relationship between the probationer and practitioner to help build rapport and leave the probationer feeling confident they understand, and have the opportunity to ask questions about their order.

As to who should deliver the one-to-one induction there was a preference for the case manager to undertake the induction, but both probationers and practitioners felt that if understood why and communicated, there would not be any problem in seeing another officer for the induction. Perhaps the important point to consider in this respect is that of how the presence of a different officer is explained so the probationer can feel a level of consistency. Practically, consistency could also be maintained through the perception of supervision that is given by the inducting officer as a means of engaging and helping the probationer to cease offending. With this in mind, Ward and Maruna's (2007) reminders that "individuals should be treated humanely" (p68) and "as persons who have the capacity to change their behaviour" (pp68-69) are timely. The induction should not just be delivered to communicate the negative consequences of failing to follow the rules, but also the opportunity for positive change, and the commitment required and offered by both parties to facilitate this opportunity.

Some practical directions came from the discussions regarding the delivery of induction. A number of probationers and practitioners noted that the day of release, or the initial

appointment following sentence, may not always be a good point to take in all the information from induction. Probationers often felt distracted by a desire to return home when released from custody, or to have their own questions answered if on a community order. For practitioners, paperwork, such as licences, was frequently missing, hindering the explanation of the details of the supervisory regulations. This appeared to confirm the initial idea of *orientation* and completing an induction as an integral part of the order over multiple appointments, as this would cover a number of concerns raised:

- The information being shared would not need to be rushed.
- Conditions could be explained and checked for understanding over more than one appointment.
- The probationer would be able to leave the first appointment knowing who their officer would be if they had not completed the induction and at the follow up would be able to feel confident when checking understanding that they knew how their officer would interpret the rules¹.
- The induction could better accommodate relationship-building if spread out over more than one appointment as it would not just be focused on signing the rules but would allow more space for a co-operative co-produced interview.

For those in custody, pre-release contact was also highlighted. Probationers and practitioners alike recognised that if a visit could not be made, a letter or telephone call would enable a sense of relationship and continuity and would also provide an opportunity to communicate any additional licence conditions which were being sought. One practitioner also noted that asking a probationer to attend “on release” had been a useful way of preventing probationers from panicking about missing their appointment if a set time was issued.

Returning to the metaphor of a journey, it would seem that along with the provision of the map (providing the information in induction), having a real sense of time and individual focus, and interest in exploring what the journey ahead might mean for that particular individual, were the most important parts of the delivery of the induction session.

How can sentence plans be better linked to induction experiences?

An important part of this induction review was attempting to link the purpose of the order, and hence engaging in more probationer-led supervision planning, in to the induction experience. The idea of drawing on the probationer’s motivation by looking to meet their goals as well as their criminogenic needs is an important part of the desistance discourse (Stephens and Harris, 2010).

In terms of thinking about sentencing planning from the outset, it was recognised that whilst some probationers come with a clear idea in mind about what they want to achieve, others do not. A great deal of skill is often needed to tease this out, and again, induction being over a

¹ An example here is the condition not to attend the office under the influence of alcohol when a probationer has an alcohol addiction. How will their officer interpret and enforce such a requirement? Will they really expect abstinence prior to an appointment or simply a coherent presentation upon attendance?

number of appointments to provide time to do this appears to be time well spent. Farrall and Calverley (2006) suggest enabling the 'real me' to emerge was necessary to enable desistance and this is clearly something that would take time. Focusing on developing a good relationship, being clear and open, and even disagreeing about the content of a supervision plan were all identified by probationers and practitioners as a means of making a start at developing this relationship and sentence plan in which the 'real me' could flourish. This very much fits in with the idea of motivational interview being crucial to the induction and sentence planning aspects of supervision (McNeill and Weaver, 2010).

One of the aspects highlighted by probationers for promoting sentence planning as part of induction experience, was the idea of closely relating the purpose (and benefits) of being on supervision to how this works out in practice; a clear link to the idea of induction information such as expectations on what each party would bring to the supervisory relationship. This supported the idea of a 'contract' as discussed earlier, in which supervision as a *resource* was complemented by an agreed and understood standard of behaviour. One probationer very helpfully commented that practitioners needed to be alert not just to what was said by probationers in discussing what they would like from their supervision, but also to what was not being said. Others commented that being able to provide input to the direction of the supervision right at the start would be both motivational and beneficial. These ideas were also shared by practitioners with the reservation that good sentence planning needed to be developed and implemented incrementally, so as to not be overwhelming. Practitioners also felt this would be a positive way of increasing ownership communicating 'you get out what you put in' and that this was 'your order'.

A final point of consideration was again for probationers released from custody and acknowledging the work already completed in prison. Again, this identified that there are some specific requirements to be considered in the difference between inducting community sentences and prison licence cases. In some respects, the initial sentence plan being developed for a licensee may be more reflective of a review sentence plan, considering the progress already made and the journey that still lies ahead.

Once more returning to the metaphor, linking in to the sentence plan looks much like deciding together on the kit required for the journey ahead. Exploration is needed in relation to what skills and equipment the probationer already possesses and what they need to acquire or develop.

REFLECTION - DEVELOPING AN APPROACH (AND SUPPORTING STRUCTURE)

Reflecting on the above findings and the corresponding messages from the desistance discourse, a number of practical themes for structuring induction became apparent.

Evidently, a smooth, engaging induction implies starting before the probationer meets at the office. For custody cases, this requires further development of ideas around pre-release contact, a project which is now subsequently being taken up in the South Liverpool LDU. For community cases, documents have been developed for sharing with the Court that communicate elements of the purpose and expectations of the early supervisory meetings. These represent part of the flavour of what the probationer can expect of their experiences in supervision.

Once the probationer has arrived at the office it is evident that he needs to feel that (in one probationer's own words), "time doesn't matter; talking and being listened to is more important". This implies not rushing through lots of paperwork, but structuring time to talk and listen to the probationer's needs, hopes and fears as part of that appointment. From a legal perspective, rules and regulations need to be agreed upon, but there is no reason to stop this from being discussed when it is clearly communicated that they will be revisited at the next appointment, once the probationer has had time to take it all in. Similarly, any needs that have been discussed can then also be reflected upon by both parties prior to the next meeting and then taken up again. The idea is very much about relationship development and building a trusting, open supervisory relationship in which both parties feel they have a stake. Given this, it would appear one-to-one inductions are to be preferred, also taking into account the time it would take to establish a positive peer learning dynamic, which was identified by probationers and practitioners as the main practical benefit of a group induction. The idea is that supervision *orientation* is perhaps more representative of an engaging experience than supervision *induction*, which may give the impression of being more focused on the process of getting someone to sign up to the legal paperwork to start their supervision.

Considering this need for time to listen and reflect, the idea arose of spreading the induction over at least two appointments, with the paperwork being revisited on the second occasion to check understanding and to ensure that probationer's ideas about what they want from supervision are properly understood. Building on the idea of a journey, this may be somewhat reflective of planning a complex expedition. Hopes and fears need to be explored and the complications of the journey ahead considered. A wise explorer will take their time at this stage to ensure the journey ahead is successful and positive.

With all this in mind, a new induction document has been created which uses more inclusive language aimed at being easily understood and sounding more like a balanced contract. Along with clear and concise communication of rules, it includes space for the probationer to communicate their own desires for the supervision. When checked with probationers they found this helpful, commenting it was less daunting, read well and sounded more like a contract between two parties as opposed to just a set of rules being imposed. Similarly, practitioners also found the new leaflets helpful and fairer, the aim for the practitioner being that less paperwork would provide them with an opportunity to communicate the rules effectively and efficiently, but with a strong relational, co-producing focus.

CONCLUSIONS

Reconsidering induction as *orientation* lends itself to the idea of commencing a journey together. This is helpful for probationer and practitioner alike as it emphasises the joint and developing nature of what lies ahead in the supervisory relationship and experience. Redesigning, and being clear about how best to deliver this right at the start of the order is of real importance to probationers. This is when they become orientated to this part of their own personal journey, and practitioners capitalising on this point in their life may provide an opportunity to help orientate this part of the journey as one that leads away from crime. The initial observations by practitioners and probationers suggest that this new approach to induction will provide a means of enabling a positive and purposeful start to the supervisory experience. Its effectiveness will no doubt become evident as time progresses.

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