



The impact of skills in probation work: A reconviction study

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Abstract

This article reports on the results of a quasi-experimental study of practitioners' skills in probation work. Videotaped interviews were produced by a group of probation officers and analysed by researchers using a checklist designed to identify the range of skills used in one-to-one supervision. Reconviction rates were found to be significantly lower among those whose supervisors were assessed as using a wider range of skills. The article also reviews the recent history of research on practitioners' skills in probation, and considers the implications of positive findings from this and other studies.

Keywords

Core correctional practices, effectiveness of probation, practitioner skills, rehabilitation

Introduction: A Black Box in Search of an Evidence Base

This article reports on a study of the skills used by probation staff in one-to-one supervision of offenders, and on the impact of their work. Very few such studies have been done, which is perhaps surprising since one-to-one contact is the main method used to supervise millions of people subject to probation and similar community sentences worldwide, and has been since the origins of probation in Massachusetts a century and a half ago. To understand the lack of research on this subject, we need to consider how evidence-based probation and the associated research have developed since they were confronted by a series of 'nothing works' research reviews in the 1970s (for example, Martinson's in 1974 and, in Britain, Brody's in 1976. Similarly influential reviews, with

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similar findings, were carried out in the closely related field of social work, for example by Fischer in 1976). The main challenge to these conclusions came from psychologists working in criminal justice, who carried out meta-analyses to identify the components of successful programmes in use with offenders.

Their conclusions were published in comprehensive surveys such as those by Andrews and his colleagues (1990), by Lipsey (1992) and by many others: McGuire in 2002 identified 30 of them, almost all with positive results demonstrating some effect of intervention, and more have been carried out since. The 1990 review by Andrews et al. proposed the Risk-Need-Responsivity or RNR model of effective rehabilitation which was to guide many developments over the following two decades: in a nutshell, they proposed that individuals presenting higher risks should receive more intervention, that help should be targeted on areas of need which contributed to offending and that the methods used should be appropriate to individual learning styles. The attempt to identify components of successful intervention led particularly to the development of manualized programmes, in which practitioners were guided by training and prescription in the use of appropriate content and methods, usually delivered in groups (Hollin and Palmer, 2006).

In England and Wales the Probation Service, threatened with marginalization by the 'tough' Home Secretary Michael Howard following his 'prison works' speech (Howard, 1993), embraced these new developments with a slightly desperate enthusiasm and tried during the late 1990s to transform itself rapidly, through a centralized managerial strategy, into an evidence-driven service informed by 'What Works'. The term 'programme', properly meaning any planned and replicable work with offenders, instead became virtually synonymous with 'cognitive-behavioural group programme'. An influential report by the businessman Patrick Carter in 2003 portrayed the business of probation and prisons as 'offender management' to assess people and assign them to appropriate programmes or 'interventions' which were seen as the main agents of change (and could perhaps be procured from the private sector). The idea that offender management and personal supervision could themselves be agents of change was barely considered, in spite of the fact that this was what most offenders under supervision actually received most of the time: indeed it was historically central to the whole concept of probation. For example, Max Grünhut's influential definition stated in 1952 that the essence of probation was 'conditional suspension of punishment, and personal care and supervision by a court welfare officer' (1952: 168).

Other reasons why 'What Works' came to be dominated, for a time, by group programmes can be found in the methodology of research into the effectiveness of human services. When Fischer (1976) reviewed a series of studies of the outcomes of social work which showed no net benefit, he commented that the absence of an overall effect could be masking positive effects of better practice which were being cancelled out by negative effects of poorer practice. In other words, unless we knew something about the nature and quality of inputs, which we usually did not, it was difficult to interpret the information we were able to gather on outcomes. Manualized programmes offered a partial solution to this problem, since practitioners' methods were taught and prescribed and, typically, 'programme integrity' (i.e. delivery as designed) was monitored (Hollin, 1995). This meant that researchers could have a clearer picture of inputs and could develop a focus on the effects of particular methods. In England and Wales the early

implementation of 'What Works' was informed particularly by programme evaluations (Underdown, 1998), and no comparable studies of the relationship between specified inputs and measured outcomes in individual supervision were carried out. The work of individual probation staff with individual people under supervision remained a 'black box' (Bonta et al., 2008) and 'in search of an evidence base' (Burnett, 2004). For a more extended discussion of why staff skills and characteristics have attracted different amounts of attention at different times, see Durnescu (2012).

The recent revival of research interest in the effectiveness of individual supervision flows from a number of sources. First, we would point to the seminal work on 'Core Correctional Practices' (CCPs) carried out by Canadian researchers, and particularly to a meta-analysis published by Dowden and Andrews in 2004 which aimed to identify and quantify the impact of staff skills in a large sample of evaluation reports. The authors found that CCPs contributed significantly to reductions in re-offending, but that research on the effectiveness of criminal justice programmes often ignored them, unlike (for example) psychotherapy research: 'the emphasis placed on developing and utilizing appropriate staff techniques has been sorely lacking within correctional treatment programmes' (Dowden and Andrews, 2004: 209). A second source of interest in individual supervision in England and Wales was the emerging critique of Carter's proposals and of his lack of emphasis on the rehabilitative potential of anything other than 'interventions' (Hough et al., 2006; Maguire and Raynor, 2010). Even the National Offender Management Service's National Offender Management Model (Grapes, 2006) paid lip service to the idea of CCPs, though without any focus on their measurement or development, while experienced practitioners recognized some CCPs as the same social work skills which had been taught and valued when probation work was still seen as a branch of social work. A third strand of support for work on individual supervision came from writers who were interested in desistance from offending and in the role of individual agency in the process of desistance (e.g. Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2006). Although generally critical of the RNR tradition, the desistance theorists did argue that the right kind of individual supervision was one of several factors which could significantly facilitate the onset and maintenance of desistance (Burnett and McNeill, 2005; Weaver and McNeill, 2012).

By 2007 several researchers in different countries were making progress in specifying one-to-one inputs by studying individual supervision skills, using various methods. For example, in Canada Bonta and colleagues were analysing audiotapes of interviews in the course of an experiment to assess the effects of a training programme (known as STICS, the Strategic Training Initiative in Community Supervision, which was designed on RNR principles): the results were published by Bonta et al. in 2011. In Australia Trotter, who had earlier carried out a well-known study of pro-social modelling (Trotter, 1996), was engaged in a new study of skills in the supervision of young offenders using direct observation (Trotter and Evans, 2012). In the USA others were working on experiments designed to evaluate the effects of training in appropriate skills (e.g. Robinson et al., 2012; Taxman, 2008). Many of these researchers were in contact with each other through the research network CREDOS (the Collaboration of Researchers for the Effective Development of Offender Supervision: see McNeill et al. (2010) for a collection of papers from the CREDOS conferences). The study reported in this article also began in 2007, and we hope it contributes to this new and productive focus on effective individual supervision.

The JS3 Study

The Jersey Supervision Skills Study (known as JS3) is based on 95 video-recorded interviews with people under supervision or pre-sentence investigation, provided by most of the probation staff who have responsibility for supervising offenders in the British Channel Island of Jersey. The aims of the study were to document and measure the use of interview skills by participating staff, and to ascertain whether differences in observed skills were related to differences in outcomes for people under supervision. A subsidiary aim was to develop a checklist for the observation of skills which could function both as a research instrument and as a training resource for practitioners themselves. Care was taken to keep the identities of staff and interviewees confidential: both are represented in our database by numbers, and the corresponding list of names is separately and confidentially stored. A few staff did not join the study; those who did join regarded it as important that results should not be shared with Probation Service managers except on an anonymous basis. Video recordings were preferred because, unlike live observation, they provide a permanent record which can be used to carry out other research in the future, and which allows repeat viewing if necessary. They also allow assessment of non-verbal content which is not available in audio-recording, and because the Jersey staff were asked to record both themselves and (with consent) the interviewees, it was possible to observe the interviewees' reactions. Also, from a practical point of view, video recording made it possible for observation of interviews to be carried out by researchers in Swansea.

A checklist was developed to structure and quantify the observation of skills. This development was a long process, described in more detail in Raynor et al. (2010): the choice of skills to observe was strongly influenced by Dowden and Andrews's concept of 'core correctional practices' and by many discussions in CREDOS and elsewhere, as well as by experience of using practical methods to teach interviewing skills to social work students (Raynor and Vanstone, 1984). The fact that the checklist eventually used in the study is designated 'Version 7c' gives some indication of the amount of work needed before it was considered fit for purpose. The Swansea-based researchers then, in effect, trained each other in its use through joint observation of seven interviews, comparing and discussing scores until we were satisfied that we were using the checklist in similar ways. Later this experience was used to produce a manual (Vanstone and Raynor, 2012) to assist people who might want to use the checklist for research or particularly for staff development. The checklist is designed for use by people with some relevant experience and requires the observer to make judgments on 63 items grouped into nine clusters. Each of the 95 interviews was assessed by at least one of the three Swansea-based researchers and assigned a quantitative score on each of the nine skill clusters. These assessments were then kept confidential until the main data-gathering stage of the study was over. Some of them were then shared and discussed, on request, with the officers who produced them.

The first part of the study, in which we aimed to measure and compare the skills used by different staff in a range of interviews, was based on 88 of the 95 interviews in order to ensure that each staff member was represented by at least five interviews. Some contributed less than five, and are omitted from this analysis. In the second part of the study, where we considered outcomes for interviewees, individuals who were interviewed more

than once were counted only on their first appearance in the database in order to avoid double-counting, and the analysis is therefore based on 75 interviewees for whom we had initial interview ratings and a two-year reconviction follow-up. For most of these we also had risk/need assessments in the form of scores on the Level of Supervision Inventory – Revised (LSI-R; Andrews and Bonta, 1995). This is the form of offender assessment routinely used in Jersey, where it has been validated as a reconviction predictor (Raynor, 2007; Raynor and Miles, 2007). It is widely used internationally as a basis for matching samples in reconviction studies, since it takes into account standard static predictor variables such as criminal record in addition to dynamic social and personal risk factors. Other reconviction predictors often used in research in England and Wales such as OASys (Debidin, 2009) and OGRS (Home Office, 1996) are not used in Jersey and have not been validated there. In Jersey the LSI-R has also been shown to have dynamic predictive validity: in other words, reductions in risk measured on re-assessment are associated with lower reconviction rates than those predicted by the initial assessment, and increases in risk are associated with higher reconviction rates. The LSI-R assessments in this study were carried out by a number of different officers, not necessarily those who did the interviews, and all were carried out before staff knew their own (or any) interview ratings. Information on the interviewees' reconvictions was also collected from a comprehensive criminal justice database to which Jersey Probation and After-Care Service has access, by staff who knew nobody's skill ratings. Overall, this study therefore has a quasi-experimental design, with comparison groups approximately matched by risk, and outcome data collected without knowledge of inputs. The interviewees were also broadly representative of people subject to community sentences in Jersey: their average initial LSI-R score was 18.8, compared to an average initial score of 17.2 for all community sentences in Jersey in the most recent general reconviction study (Miles et al., 2009), and 41 per cent of them were reconvicted within two years, compared to 34 per cent of all probationers in 2009 and 41 per cent of all community sentences in 2003 (Miles and Raynor, 2004).

The Results: Skills Used by Probation Staff

Analysis of the results was carried out in two parts. The first part, based on interviews by the 10 staff members who had provided more than four interviews each for analysis (88 interviews altogether), aimed to establish what skills were observable in the interviews and whether staff were consistent in the skills they used. Five interviews were taken as the minimum required to make a fair assessment of skills. The results are set out in Table 1.

Table 1 lists the skill clusters addressed in our 63-item checklist, and divides them into 'relationship' skills (for example, demonstrating attention, concern, understanding, respect and a positive attitude) and 'structuring' skills (intended to influence or change thinking and behaviour. Some researchers in this field use the term 'structuring' to refer mainly to structuring the interview itself, but we have used it to designate all those skills which aim mainly to promote or facilitate change). Readers interested in the full detail of the 63 items, including definitions and the advice to observers on what to look for, can find this in the manual prepared for users of the checklist (Vanstone and Raynor, 2012) which is obtainable from the Jersey Probation and After-Care Service. The table shows

Table 1. Skill clusters with potential and average scores ($N = 88$).

Skills	Maximum possible	Average from 10 staff with >4 interviews each
Set up of interview (R)	4	3.9
Non-verbal communication (R)	5	4.7
Verbal communication (R)	10	7.8
Effective/legitimate use of authority (R)	5	4.5
Motivational interviewing (S)	9	6.2
Pro-social modelling (S)	5	3.8
Problem solving (S)	10	5.7
Cognitive restructuring (S)	7	3.2
Overall structure of interview	8	6.2
Total	63	45.9

Note: R = 'relationship' skill or responsive skill; S = 'structuring' skill, intended to prepare for or promote change.

that on average, the staff scored more highly in the relationship skills than in the structuring skills. This may reflect the fact that most Jersey probation officers have qualified as social workers (as probation officers in England and Wales did before 1998) and relationship skills tend to feature strongly in social work training, whereas several of the structuring skills are more likely to be encountered, if at all, in post-qualifying or in-service training.

In addition, staff were found to vary considerably in the skills they were observed to use, with checklist scores (averaged across all an individual staff member's interviews) ranging from 58.6 for the highest-scoring staff member to 35.5 for the lowest. The higher-scoring staff tended to use a wide range of skills in all their interviews, with high scores on structuring skills as well as relationship skills, while the lower-scoring staff tended to score low particularly on structuring skills. The higher-scoring staff were also more consistent in their use of skills: for example, the two staff with the highest average scores had scoring ranges of 56–60 and 49–61, and the two lowest had much wider ranges at 25–46 and 23–42. To sum up the findings from this part of the study (some of which is discussed in more detail in Raynor et al., 2010) we aimed to discover what skills staff were using. What we found was that some staff consistently used a wider range of skills than others, and did so across a range of interviews. This raised the possibility that if the inputs from staff differed in this way, the outcomes might also be different.

Interview Skills and Reconviction

Table 2 shows the reconviction rates, over two years, of interviewees in interviews which received below-average skills checklist scores compared to those in above-average interviews. Higher skill ratings are significantly associated with lower reconvictions. Table 3

Table 2. Two-year reconviction rates of people subject to interviews with lower (below average) skill ratings, compared to interviewees in higher-rated interviews (*N* = 75).

Interview skills	Not reconvicted	Reconvicted	% reconvicted
Lower	17	19	53
Higher	27	12	31

Note: Significance: *p* = .044.

Table 3. Two-year reconviction rates of people interviewed by seven staff with below-median skill ratings, compared with interviewees of seven staff with above-median skill ratings (*N* of staff = 14; *N* of interviewees = 75).

Interviewed by	Not reconvicted	Reconvicted	% reconvicted
Staff using fewer skills	15	21	58
Staff using more skills	29	10	26

Note: Significance: *p* = .004.

compares interviewees of staff members who typically scored below median levels with those of staff who typically scored above the median, and shows a similar result, with significantly lower reconviction among those interviewed by staff with higher skill ratings. This is in spite of the fact that the interviewees of higher-scoring staff had slightly higher initial risk scores than those interviewed by lower-scoring staff: the average initial LSI-R score for those interviewed by higher-scoring staff was 20.1, compared to 17.6 for lower-scoring staff. This would lead us to expect, other things being equal, a slightly higher reconviction rate in the higher-skill group: in other words, the opposite of the observed result. (These figures differ from those in Table 4 because not all interviewees who had an initial assessment also had a second assessment, and only those who had both assessments are included in Table 4.) Logistic regression analysis also confirmed the presence and size of a ‘skills’ effect independent of initial risk: the relationship between interview skill scores (reversed to correlate with reconviction rather than desistance) and reconviction is significant at .005 with an odds ratio (Exp[B]) of 1.085, while initial LSI-R scores are significant at .036 with an odds ratio (Exp[B]) of 1.081. A similar analysis using a dichotomous variable grouping staff above or below median average scoring, as in Table 3, showed a relationship between low scoring and reconviction significant at .002, with an odds ratio (Exp[B]) of 6.303.

The difference in reconviction outcomes is marked, and greater than many treatment effects reported for programmes (McGuire, 2002). Of course this does not show that the difference in outcomes is entirely due to experiencing interviews which scored higher on our checklist. There may be other factors involved which the checklist does not cover, such as improved family relationships, employment or other positive life-changes, but it is also possible that these co-vary to some extent with skill levels if skilled supervision helps people to make use of opportunities for positive change. This would be consistent with suggestions made by desistance theorists (such as Burnett and McNeill, 2005) about the importance of the relationship with a helpful and supportive supervisor. Much

Table 4. Mean initial and follow-up LSI-R risk assessments of people interviewed by seven staff with below-median skill ratings, compared with interviewees of seven staff with above-median skill ratings (*N* of staff = 14; *N* of interviewees = 54).

Interviewed by:	First LSI-R	Second LSI-R	Change	Significance of change (<i>t</i> -test)
Staff using fewer skills (<i>N</i> =23)	20.7	19.0	-1.7	Not significant <i>p</i> = .003
Staff using more skills (<i>N</i> =31)	20.6	17.2	-3.4	

remains to be understood about the processes which link skilled helping to better outcomes, but it seems clear from this and other studies that there is a connection between the skills used by staff of probation and similar agencies and desistance from offending by the people they supervise. Similar substantial differences in outcome have also been reported in studies comparing staff trained in appropriate skills with those who have not received training: for example, recidivism rates of 25.3 per cent after staff have received training compared to 46.7 per cent before (the STICS study, Bonta et al., 2011) or 'failure' rates of 16 per cent for moderate risk offenders supervised by appropriately trained staff compared to 30 per cent for the randomly assigned comparison group (the STARR study, 'Staff Training Aimed at Reducing Re-arrest', Robinson et al., 2012).

Interview Skills and Assessed Risks

Table 4 shows initial and follow-up risk/need assessments for interviewees of lower-scoring staff compared to those of higher-scoring staff. Not all interviewees in the study were subject to both assessments, but among those who were, greater reductions in risk levels were found among those interviewed by higher-scoring staff. This is consistent with the reconviction findings. A previous interim report on the JS3 study (Raynor, 2011) found slightly greater reductions in assessed risk in the caseloads of higher-scoring staff. Table 4, concentrating on interviewees only, shows a larger difference, with a statistically significant reduction for the interviewees of higher-scoring officers. Table 5 confirms the relationship between risk assessments and actual reconvictions: initial assessments, follow-up assessments and change in assessments are all correlated with reconviction, but the closest correlation is with follow-up assessments, possibly because they can reflect changes during supervision. Also shown here, for comparison, are the strong negative correlations between high checklist scores and reconviction, and between high-scoring interviewers and reconviction.

Particular Groups of Skills and Reconviction

Table 6 shows the correlation between each of the skill clusters introduced in Table 1 and reconviction over 12 months and 24 months. *All* the skill clusters measured by our checklist are positively correlated with avoiding reconviction (which can be regarded as a very approximate indicator of desistance from offending) but only some reach statistical significance. At the 12-month follow-up the statistically significant correlations were more

Table 5. Correlations with reconviction at two years.

	Coefficient (r)	Significance (one-tailed)
First LSI-R	.197	.053
Second LSI-R	.450	<.001
Change in LSI-R	.245	.037
Interview skill rating	-.272	.009
Interviewer above median	-.332	.002

Table 6. Skill clusters from interview checklist correlated with non-reconviction at one year and two years.

	Non-reconviction: by one year	Sig.	by two years	Sig
	Coefficient (r)		Coefficient (r)	.
Set-up of interview	.019		.078	
Non-verbal communication	.093		.330	**
Verbal communication	.160		.263	*
Effective/legitimate use of authority	.147		.169	
Motivational interviewing	.125		.201	*
Pro-social modelling	.195	*	.094	
Problem solving	.214	*	.254	*
Cognitive restructuring	.214	*	.173	
Overall structure of interview	.145		.131	
Total	.230	*	.272	**

Note: Significance: **p* < .05; ***p* < .01.

common among the ‘structuring’ skills, while at the 24-month stage we see more significant correlations among the ‘relationship’ skills. Only problem solving and the overall total score are significant in both follow-up periods. It would be unwise to infer too much from this without further studies: the coefficients are not large and the differences between significant and non-significant correlations are mostly quite small. We have also shown already that the greatest impact is attributable to interviewers who consistently show a wider *range* of skills: in other words, all the skills can be important and they seem to work together. However, some possible interpretations suggest themselves.

Some skills may have a shorter-term impact than others: for example, new ways of thinking may not all be retained without reinforcement and follow-up (see, for example, Raynor and Vanstone, 1996). Other skills may primarily help to build a relationship which probationers remember, and which may underpin long-term impacts of the kind described by Farrall (2012), helping people to believe that they have a choice and are capable of leading a different life. There are also strong grounds for thinking that relationship skills and structuring skills need to be used together. Common sense tells us that

we tend to resist or ignore demands from people who do not care about us, or towards whom we feel mistrust or hostility. Good relationship skills may be a precondition for the most effective use of structuring skills rather than a strong source of change in themselves, at least in the short term. It is not possible to test these ideas from the data in this study, since most staff scored quite high on relationship skills and there were no staff who combined a high level of structuring skills with a low level of relationship skills. It also seems likely that both sets of skills are needed to produce the best results, and this is supported by a recent study of intensive parole supervision in which officers with a strong 'law-enforcement' orientation and officers with a strong 'social casework' orientation both produced much poorer results than officers with a 'balanced' approach (Paparozzi and Gendreau, 2005). Studies of prisoner resettlement have also suggested that the best results are found when attention to welfare needs is combined with approaches designed to influence thinking and behaviour (Maguire and Raynor, 2006).

Implications

First we must acknowledge some obvious limitations. The Jersey Probation and After-Care Service is not large, having about 21 professional staff of whom 16 are trained probation officers, and not all staff volunteered for inclusion in this study, so our sample size is limited. Also, the recorded interviews do not necessarily represent a random sample of each participating staff member's work. Interviewees were not randomly assigned between lower-skilled and higher-skilled interviews, nor could they have been. However, the risk assessments and the gathering of reconviction data were carried out independently of the assessment of interviews, by staff who did not know how their own or anybody else's interviews had been assessed, and the initial risk assessments of the two groups of interviewees are, on average, slightly higher for those in the higher-skilled interviews, so any resulting bias would have been in the opposite direction from the observed result. As Paparozzi and Gendreau (2005) point out in their evaluation of an intensive supervision project, the classic meta-analysis by Andrews et al. (1990) showed that the reliability of findings was not materially reduced when treatment and comparison groups were matched on risk rather than randomly assigned. More recently Hollin (2008) has argued that well-designed quasi-experiments can be as productive as random allocation studies, and 'propensity score matching' (i.e. matching by risk) has been used in recent Ministry of Justice research (e.g. Sadlier, 2010).

It is, of course, possible that some interviewees also had contact with probation staff other than those whose interviews with them are recorded in our database; however, it is clear that in the vast majority of cases we have an interview with either the main supervisor or, in the case of some one-to-one programmes, the programme tutor, who would be the main contact during the programme. A search in probation records identified only three cases in the reconviction study database in which the interviewee's main current experience of supervision would have been with a staff member other than the interviewer who provided our recording. All three of these interviews were assessed as using a below average range of skills, and two out of the three interviewees were reconvicted, so the outcomes were similar to those from main supervisors. While it is not theoretically possible in this type of study to be certain that all conceivable confounding variables

have been eliminated, the most obvious ones (differences in initial risk, and contact with others) do not appear to provide any plausible alternative explanation of the findings. A more important limitation, perhaps, is that we cannot say much about causality: the question of *how* skilled interviewing makes an impact on the behaviour of interviewees is a rich field for future research. However, to sum up, our results from this study support the belief that skills matter in probation work: when practice is more skilful, reconvictions are reduced.

More research should be carried out to test this in other jurisdictions and to refine further the observation and measurement of skills, not only in order to increase knowledge but also to contribute to the practical use of this information in staff development. Our checklist was designed to be used not only by researchers but also by experienced practitioners with a minimum of special training, and work of this kind has already begun. Because such approaches rely on honesty, openness and objectivity, the checklist is not suitable for managerial tasks such as staff appraisal, since this would create incentives for distortion. We think it is most likely to be useful in practice supervision based on direct observation, and particularly in peer supervision where staff work together to understand and enhance skills.

It is also important to remember that although we can distinguish skills for analytical purposes, practice is holistic and extends beyond the interview: other activities are involved, and although it seems plausible that skilled interviewers will also be skilled in some other work, this remains to be demonstrated systematically. We do not claim to have identified all the relevant skills. We should also beware of over-extending the idea that practitioners *use* skills in the way that a mechanic uses spanners, or that they typically engage in conscious selection of an appropriate skill from a menu of possibilities. Skills are part of the person in a way that spanners are not. What we were observing could be better described as *skilful interviewing* rather than *using skills in interviews*, and it is likely that when appropriate ways of behaving are well learned and incorporated into a repertoire of interactions their 'selection' and 'use' can be and feel spontaneous. One advantage of video-recording, apart from the permanence of the record, is that small and significant details can be captured which might not normally be remembered by participants, and may have escaped conscious attention even at the time.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that skills can be developed through conscious attention and specific training. This is important, since a demonstration that probation staff show different levels of skills with different effects is more useful if there is a realistic prospect that average levels of skill could be raised to approximate more closely to those at the higher end of the distribution. It is, paradoxically, encouraging that staff with lower than average checklist scores were often inconsistent in their scoring: some of their interviews were assessed at a higher level than others, indicating that they were sometimes showing a wider range of skills. Training could therefore be based partly on encouraging more use of skills they already have rather than concentrating on *new* skills. It is also encouraging to note that other studies have found that staff who are trained in appropriate skills produce better results: Trotter (1993) showed some years ago that probation staff trained in pro-social modelling had lower re-offending rates among their supervisees, and more recent examples are Taxman's (2008) study of structured probation supervision, the STARR study (Robinson et al., 2012) and the STICS study (Bonta et al., 2011)

mentioned at the start of this article. Although they differ in the details of skill assessment and measurement, all these well-designed studies support the main finding of the current study that more skilled officers produce better results. They also show that levels of skill can in fact be improved by appropriate training.

Why Jersey?

Finally, some readers of this journal will undoubtedly be asking themselves ‘Why Jersey?’ Why not some more ‘mainstream’ location? Some British readers may still assume that London is somehow the centre of the probation universe, in spite of ample evidence (some reviewed in this article) that most of the cutting-edge probation research now happens elsewhere. For the benefit of those who think of Jersey primarily as a holiday destination or as a centre of the financial services industry, the Island also operates a full range of public services, and its long history of self-government has allowed indigenous developments to flourish. Its probation service has been committed to evidence-based practice and ‘What Works’ since the early 1990s and has worked in close partnership with criminologists in Swansea to evaluate its work and to develop an evidence base for its practice. Working as part of the judicial system rather than as part of Home Affairs (the Jersey equivalent of the Home Office) it operates as a small team of staff, mostly trained in the social work tradition, who are trusted to use a good deal of professional discretion (subject to very regular supervision and regular contact with sentencers) and who operate largely without political pressure. This creates a good environment for partnership between practitioners and researchers, and previous studies have covered service evaluation, risk and need assessment, the work of the honorary police and the youth justice system (Evans et al., 2010; Miles and Raynor, 2004; Raynor and Miles, 2005, 2007). Overall, Jersey provided opportunities for an innovative study of this kind which could not easily be matched on the mainland of Britain.

Interest in undertaking a study of individual supervision came from within the service itself, and although some staff were hesitant and the study started slowly, they are now using our interview skills checklist for peer observation of each other’s interviews. This environment lends itself to an open and exploratory style of research, which is difficult in jurisdictions which insist on a much more bureaucratic approach to the procurement and governance of research (Raynor, 2008); these tend to predetermine methodology and timescale at the point of invitation to tender, which is a problem for studies such as this where even the feasibility of some of the methods is unknown at the outset. The procurement culture does not coexist easily with the ‘culture of curiosity’ (Raynor and Vanstone, 2001) in which evidence-based practice flourishes. Nevertheless we would suggest that such a study might be highly relevant in England and Wales. The present government in England (which also controls non-devolved services, including criminal justice, in Wales) is committed to reducing re-offending rates (Ministry of Justice, 2010). One cost-effective route towards achieving this might be to focus on developing staff skills, and this is one of the aims of the Offender Engagement Programme currently underway in part of NOMS (Rex, 2012); however, other parts of the organization are busy with a different strategy based on contracting out large sections of the Probation Service’s work to private sector corporations. For those who doubt the relevance of research carried out in

Jersey on the grounds that the background of probation work there is different, we would point out that observers with long experience of probation see much in common there with practice as it might have developed in some parts of the mainland if probation services had remained local and aligned with the courts rather than centralized under Home Office control in 2001. The lessons of the evidence-based approach might have been learned better without attempts by headline-hungry politicians to impose a more punitive culture. That, however, is another story, and beyond the scope of this article.

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