

Probation Service Users: to empower or to exclude

Anita Gibbs suggests that the probation service could achieve more by involving service users.

The Probation Service has shifted from its roots in social work and the use of benevolent care and control activities towards a corrections focused agency, charged with the task of reducing re-offending and protecting the public. But does this changed focus give the Service any rationale for practice which excludes Probation Service users - a term I use in place of the more usual 'offenders', 'clients' or 'cons' which are in themselves demeaning and exclusionary? Or can the Service renew its long held commitment to anti-oppression and empowerment? The Probation Service is implicated in the exclusion of service users, but it can reclaim principles of partnership, inclusion and compassion.

How the Probation Service excludes service users

The broader social, political and legislative context, within which the Probation Service operates inevitably dictates and constrains its role and practices. Within a climate of punishment, correctionalism, individual pathology, and a media obsession with so-called dangerous populations victimising the innocent public, the Probation

Service has done little to challenge these ideologies and misinformed public perceptions of service users. The climate of managerialism, standardisation, enforcement of orders, centralisation of offices and cost-cutting has seen the Probation Service diminished in its capacity to provide a full range and depth of services, to help service users back into work, their homes and community. The introduction of new technologies of control, many warmly embraced by probation: curfews, electronic monitoring, intensive forms of supervision or tracking, drug treatment and testing orders, gives a clear message to service users that they are not to be trusted, continue to pose a threat to everyone, including their families, and that the Probation Service will monitor their daily (and nightly) activities.

The Probation Service and its highly trained professional workforce has an obligation to supervise service users under a legal mandate 'to reduce re-offending' and as a consequence has a great deal of power and authority through its staff, to either include or exclude service users. Hence probation practitioners have the ability: "to define correct behaviour, to impose behaviour, to offer and refuse help, to impose sanctions, to gate-keep resources, to define or reinterpret problems, and to define solutions" (Braye & Preston-Shoot, 1993).

Community penalties, especially the newly developed 'What Works' programmes (Home Office, 1999), focus on correcting individual attitudes and behaviour but have a

tendency to neglect the social and personal context of crime (Smith & Stewart, 1998). People who come to probation wanting to address their problems may well be told that benefit, housing or child care needs are not relevant to their offending behaviour and must be dealt with by another agency. Hence service users are not treated holistically, rather they are case managed and referred on to another agency (which may help if it does not have a long waiting list!) In such a climate of blaming and moral superiority how can service users feel they have any rights or capacity to complain, disagree or contribute positively to supervision?

Empowering service users

The Probation Service has had a long history of helping (Celnick & McWilliams, 1991), and many probation staff practice from an ethically sound and principled value-base: promoting the welfare of service users and attempting to bring about some alleviation of the effects of poverty and disadvantage. However a renewed emphasis on partnership, user rights and users as citizens (Broad & Denney, 1996; Gibbs, 1999) could be a remedy to the aggressive, excluding action towards service users by the criminal justice system. Major areas in which this could be achieved are:

- **'Being heard'** - service users should be enabled to voice their definitions of problems, disagreements with reports or supervision programmes, and their views on the standard of service they receive. Probation staff and the Service as a whole could be more active in setting up user advocacy and self-help groups to increase levels of participation and consultation.
- **Activities** - the Probation Service is already obliged to explore and reduce offending by service users but this need not be its only focus. Offering a range of education, employment and community

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based opportunities would ensure a community oriented focus for the Service. Service users can usually offer concrete suggestions as to the type of activities that may assist them. Activities should be designed to enhance user strengths, not keep a tally of how many unaddressed problems they have.

- **Process** - a partnership-based and reciprocal relationship is possible between probation staff and service users but has to be underpinned by a supportive agency environment. Open planning, negotiation, mediation and honesty should support assessments and intervention.
- **Control and power-sharing** - shared control, decision-making and power can occur in a service committed to just, restorative and community oriented practice. For example, service users should be consulted about programme development, content and process because they are the main recipients of the service and their likely successful completion will depend on the ability of the programme to maintain their interest and meet their needs.

Conclusion

Whilst a political and social climate continues its exclusion of people who offend, the probation service is still in a position to be the humane face of criminal justice; its workforce can remain committed to do no harm (Celnick & McWilliams, 1991) and counter the correctional negativism of policy and practice in criminal justice. Probation Service staff will still need to confront and set boundaries but by adopting an empowerment focus the Service will uphold the dignity, self-respect and hope of service users, a group of people who are usually the most unforgiven group of citizens in our society.

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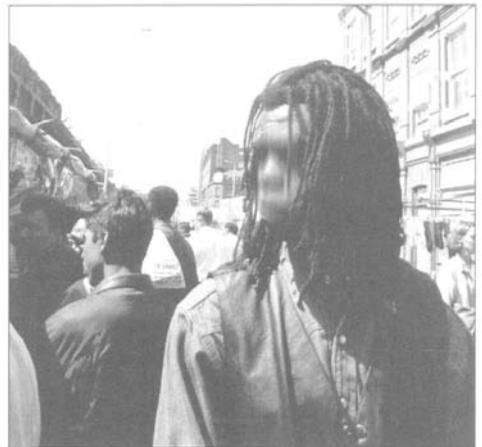
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Anansi and the offending behaviour programme

Diane Campbell and Georgia Johnson of the Association of Black Probation Officers argue the need for a Black perspective in Offending Behaviour Programmes.

Ms A, a 35-year-old Black female offender came from abroad with her family as a young girl. Soon after the family's arrival, Ms A's father died, and as a result her mother suffered a nervous breakdown from which she never recovered. Ms A was placed into local authority care where her different culture was the object of ridicule. This led to difficulties for her and she learnt that the only way to survive was through violent means. Since that time she has been in and out of prison for offences of violence. At no time during her contact with the probation service was she assessed as being suitable for a community penalty.

Ms A had also been the victim of domestic violence. Her current offence was for stabbing her current partner and at the pre-sentence report interview Ms A presented as being defensive and somewhat resigned to receiving a custodial sentence. On this occasion though Ms A was assessed as being suitable for a groupwork programme. But what sort of programme? Should she be placed on a general offending behaviour programme for women, where she may have the



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opportunity to work on some of the difficulties she has faced as a woman, or a Black offenders programme where she would have the opportunity to address the effects of racism on her life, but, as a woman, she might be in a small minority ?

The need for a Black Perspective

It is our contention that the Home Office's current menu of accredited programmes are only partially suitable for Black offenders. While they address the offending element they lack a Black perspective. By this we mean, “developing a world view which is informed by a person's experience of racial oppression, their desire to comprehend and articulate that experience, and their wish to eradicate the social relations which give rise to racism” (Dominelli, 1995).

At present the Home Office has stated that “programmes should take into account needs and accessibility issues for all offenders in an effort to minimise disadvantage”. Our concern is that the growing standardisation that now pervades the service and is a feature of the accredited programmes, means that any focus on the needs of particular minority groups or individuals will be lost. This will in turn affect the accessibility of accredited programmes to these groups and individuals in the future.

In the past programmes designed specifically for Black offenders have focused too heavily upon the effects of racism and many still continue to do so. This

overemphasis on race often has serious consequences because: the offender feels that this approach is as superficial as the denial of racism; it lets the offender 'off the hook'; other elements of identity are ignored, e.g. gender, sexuality; and the offender is inappropriately invited to 'play the victim' about race issues. This has been confirmed by Lawrence (1996) who found that workers rated the effects of racism higher than did offenders. He therefore argues for the need to look at the perceptions and assumptions of those who design programmes for Black offenders.

A new approach

In our view the way forward is for programmes designed for racially mixed groups to encompass a component designed to put a Black perspective. Groups should separate members along racial lines when addressing race issues, and Black group leaders adopting a less eurocentric style of delivery should work with Black offenders.

Let us look more closely at the factors mentioned above.

The inclusion of a Black perspective fosters a healthy respect for the lifestyle and culture of all participants. Indeed, the probation service may be working with more racially motivated or aggravated offenders than conviction rates would suggest.

The separation of groups along racial lines. At this point we should make our position very clear. We are not

advocating programmes specifically designed for Black offenders as we feel that this would further alienate Black offenders and fail to reflect the reality for all group participants of living in a racially mixed environment. Nevertheless we believe that Black offenders need the space to learn without inhibitions and not feel compelled to 'play the victim' about race issues.

Black group leaders. There is a clear analogy here with the use of female staff to run women only groups.

A non-eurocentric delivery. An appreciation of different learning styles is required. Cultural reference points familiar to group members need to be incorporated and the methods through which moral messages are conveyed in different cultures can have an important role to play. An example might be the Anansi stories which have long been a traditional way of passing on moral messages from one generation to the next for those of Caribbean origin. Many cultures use story telling or metaphor to a far greater extent than the British. This approach could be adopted as a style of delivery with Black offenders. There may be wider lessons to be learned from this in professionals dealing with the speech forms and learning styles of working class people more generally.

It is time to re-examine the 'one size fits all' assumptions behind the development of existing cognitive behavioural programmes. They may be designed to take into account the needs and accessibility issues of all offenders, but they are designed on the assumption that the standard offender is white and male. While it is certainly true that

white male offenders make up the majority of group participants in this country significant numbers of Black offenders are finding that their needs are not being adequately met by current programmes.

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