

'Twenty year stretch': a probation officer's view from the front line

Mike Guilfoyle says we should treat 'offenders' as people first.

I have just left the Probation Service after nearly 20 years 'stretch' as a front-line probation officer. On my last day, I was asked to see an 'offender' reporting to the office for a colleague. Peter (not his real name) looking very much like one of the gasworks gang (for readers of the Beano!) remarked when I informed him that I was leaving the Service, 'I can see you are old school because you treated me like a person not an offender'. This personalist perspective was underlined some time ago when I occasioned on Mark Johnson's searing autobiography Wasted (2008) which very much captures the central point of this article. That in using the term 'offender' we describe what the person has done, not what they necessarily have become. This 'underside' vignette is apposite and significant in that it chimes in well with how even in the briefest interactional moments aiming to make a positive difference in the complex emotional process of change, needs to remain firmly rooted at the forefront of probation practice, in spite of some of the more disfiguring organisational make overs that have beset the modern Probation Service (Wargent, 2007).

In this brief article, I hope to derive some perhaps unsurprising but important implications for future practice and policy formulation, drawing on a practitioner's backlocker. Namely how by drawing on my practice experience, working in a person-centred, strengths-based, and collaborative way, we can better support the belief that helping people, the personal touch, who

offend rather than 'managing' them, leads not only to better outcomes in terms of desistance from offending but helps to support a shift to a more pro-social identity (Philips, 2007).

That said, one concerning aspect of the penal professional field appears to be the paucity of ethnographic research on the responses of practitioners to the way that Probation staff do their job. Which is all the more surprising given that Probation staff work with almost three times as many people as are sent to prison each year and reducing reoffending is a definable core responsibility, with Probation's occupational culture now subsumed under the creaking correctional carapace of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) launched in 2004.

The historical value of the ability of workers to build relationships with people under supervision, which underpinned the motivation for change to take place, has had something of a contextual battering in recent times, often marginalised in the rush to technocorrectional managerialism (Whitehead and Statham, 2006) but the 'high noon moment' for probation's future may have passed. Under the guise of a reemergent interest in the casework relationship dubbed in the ugly nomenclature 'offender management', there has been a welcome return to the central importance of continuity of contact

and the quality of the relationship between probationer and practitioner. This has been amplified in my practice experience working alongside newer entrants to the Probation Service who, although aware of the government's control mantra, punishment in the community, still hold fast to a humanistic ethos that views helping people in the widest sense as a necessary precursor to the long process of behavioural change for those under supervision. Maintaining an attitude of constructive defiance to some of the cruder one-size-fits-all government fiat on service delivery does not come without some cost for professional survival! Daringly a human service approach has crept back into the vocabulary of many probation staff. The propensity for organisational amnesia in NOMS has been one of its many egregious shortcomings (McKnight, 2009). Whether there is the capacity to

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undertake such work with soaring caseloads and sinking morale is of course another story.

This approach of course needs to be seen as going

beyond the individual and desisting and 'staying out of trouble' from offending requires much more than just individual changes. A broader engagement with the social problems, 'wicked issues', associated with the complexities of criminal behaviour and the community's response to them is clearly needed. I am far from sanguine about the way probation has been swept along by the contemporary culture of control. With a new coalition government taking up office the recession led expansion/contraction of the penal system and the creation of a minimalist state has yet to play out on the ground. Which may prompt a call for more sophisticated research on how best to mobilise the right kinds of help for those who offend, whether under some form of statutory supervision or not, from others including user groups, who

remain very much neglected stakeholders, with what is likely to be limited professional resources available. Although interestingly enough the Probation Service was created 100 years ago in 1907 by a reforming Liberal government!

So how do probation staff succeed in winning over people by example, 'having a talk'? Certainly 20 years represents a lot of persistence and persuasion, as compliance with court orders, in my practice experience, is seldom decided on the calculative logic of rewards or threats. Certainly bringing into play the probationers own 'theory of change' framework had always been an informing factor in my one-to-one work. But compliance is based more on normative grounds and as importantly is edged with a hard won and easily lost practitioner legitimacy, supported by a burgeoning body of research on relationship-based practice in facilitating behavioural change, which is often at variance with the limiting framework surrounding the exercise of worker discretion exemplified in the secondary imprisonment of recall to prison on licence for often minor technical violations. It is of course a criminological truism with

practitioners and academics alike that recidivism declines with time clean.

The 'meta-narrative' of public protection is writ large in contemporary probation discourse and in the light of some recent high profile cases in which a 'failure' to protect has been evident, an even more exclusionary range of toughened sanctions comes into play. Thus rehabilitative approaches that promote a strengths-based outlook need to be seen as a part of a wider credible ideological

umbrella (Robinson and McNeil, 2004). For those coming out of prison the priority must be on mobilising housing, employment, and financial assistance. As one parolee wryly said to me on release. 'You sound like a decent bloke but does the hostel know I'm coming?' How else can change towards a more pro-social identity be maintained if control over ones life remains so fragile? What happens at these key life transition points is, in my experience, pivotal if supported by effective working relationships, which can of course obtain in positive influences arising in reciprocal relationships with other helpers, families, and friends.

What is an integral part of established practice wisdom in probation (and beyond) is that the professional working relationship between helper and helped remains a powerful vehicle for change (Bentall, 2009). Particularly when as cited above the basic structural

needs of ensuring that the goals of successful personal reintegration are met. How else can one shed the stigmatising label of 'offender'? Maybe having some ceremony of de-certification along the lines

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of the way the 'therapeutic jurisprudence' of the drug courts works?

To summarise, I believe that effective empathic working relationships, 'making a difference', that are delivered in a skilled and individualised way, underpinned by credible theories of change, best support the outcome of individuals taking control of their lives. Too often I have seen the passion and enthusiasm of probation staff wasted in endless office bound

arms-length 'offender management' churning out etiolated risk assessment documents which evince little real knowledge of the person or the challenge required to change behaviour. For me, shaking off my former professional hubris, the time I have spent with the many hundreds of people under supervision has, I am sure, more than not been of more benefit to me than to them! Building on the existing strengths and resources of communities and families should go hand-in-hand with ensuring that policy makers are made more explicitly aware of what is being done in community-based interventions. But with nearly £1 bn spent on probation each year maybe the beneficial outcomes of the personal touch, face-to-face contact, currently squeezed into a miserly 24 per cent of the working time of individual probation officers, is what has in fact always been the cornerstone of actual practice, will bear greater evaluative scrutiny, and – dare I say it – in the best sense of the term offer the community the right sort of restorative payback? ■

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