

Inspired by North American research, the use of programmes based on cognitive skills in probation and other community interventions is the crux of the revival of claims that rehabilitation can work (Nellis, 1995). Like rational choice explanations of criminal behaviour, these programmes are grounded in cognitive psychology, and, setting clear

work of a group of Canadian psychologists. Over the past decade they have actively promoted rehabilitation and treatment effectiveness based on appropriate cognitive psychological principles, as well as the systematic classification of offender risk and need (Andrews & Bonta, 1996). The proponents of cognitive skills have become more confident and powerful over the past ten years, to the extent that this work now dominates correctional research at the federal level, and heavily influences practice at the federal level and in some provinces. (In Canada those sentenced to two or more years in prison become a federal prison and parole responsibility, those under two years serve sentences in provincial prisons and under provincial parole.)

papers in 1990 (Andrews et al 1990, Andrews, Bonta & Hoge, 1990), and have been followed by a prolific flow of studies laying out the principles of effective intervention.

Meta-analysis is problematic; it requires decisions about the selection of studies and programmes in the first place. Projects which are not well known or publicised, very small, or poorly documented tend not to be included, whereas long-term or large-scale projects including big samples are more likely to be included; those which do not use quantitative methods are specifically excluded. Those undertaking meta-analysis make judgements about the appropriateness of the treatment offered. It is assumed that reduced reconviction rates is the only programme outcome to be considered as a measure of success. Difficulties confronting the development of projects and their implementation cannot be measured by meta-analysis. A treatment programme may well be effective in a number of ways, but implementation problems may have affected the measured outcome. All of this suggests that while, as a technique, meta-analysis seems to provide a clear and objective picture of successful treatment programmes, it involves subjective assessment and a number of biases in its selection of programmes (Mair, 1995).

The chosen studies were based on highly selected populations and programmes primarily conducted with young males in the USA. Few programmes for women or girls were examined, nor were the implications of racial and cultural differences considered. This literature minimised the significance of race and gender, failing to mention the gender of the populations studied. This is a male and majority model of research, which assumes it is objective and neutral, uses

## Thinking about cognitive skills? Think again!

**Kelly Hannah-Moffatt and Margaret Shaw raise doubts about the current vogue for cognitive skills based probation practice.**

short-term goals in controlled group settings, try to change patterns of thinking and behaviour seen to be associated with re-offending. Operating in prison as well as community settings, when targeted at those offenders with the greatest risk of re-offending, they claim to deploy the most efficient use of scarce programme resources and be more successful than other types of programmes.

The basis on which much of this work has been developed is rarely questioned in the understandable rush to try out new ideas, especially when backed by apparently solid and grounded research. This research, and the push to apply it in criminal justice settings, is the

### **Weakness of meta-analysis: ethnicity**

This group has attacked mainstream (sociological) criminology with its concerns about rehabilitation, and dismissed any criticism of their work as 'knowledge destruction'. The core of their work stems from meta-analyses of large numbers of treatment programmes conducted from the 1960's to the 1980's in North America. This technique enables different programme features to be coded in terms of their size, population, content and style and comparisons to be made in terms of their reconviction outcomes. They concluded that programmes based on cognitive psychology principles, targeting skill development, were the most promising, while those based, for example, on individual counselling, what they term 'vague' group work, or psychoanalytic principles were rated as particularly ineffective. The results of these meta-analyses were published in two

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instruments designed on and for male (white) populations, and assumes that women’s or minority group experience is the same as that of the majority male. Parole prediction scales and most risk assessment tools have similarly been developed and tested on the majority white male population, have not been validated for Aboriginals or women, but are used generically. Yet, in Canada, Aboriginals, often living in different conditions from those of the majority, are heavily over-represented in the sentenced population in prisons as well as under community supervision. In addition there are growing numbers of other minorities in this population. It is doubtful that Aboriginal offenders will respond to programmes grounded in a white culture, just as there is mounting evidence that other minority groups are diagnosed and treated differently from the majority white population, and may well have different treatment needs and responses (eg. Bhui, 1999).

### **Weakness of meta-analysis: gender**

There are also a number of problems with the assumption that treatment programmes delivered to young (or adult) males are appropriate to the needs or learning styles of, for example, adult women. Much of the literature on the needs and experiences of women in the criminal justice system, and on their pathways into crime, indicate that there are very large differences between men and women. Women’s substance abuse, their health needs, their experiences of sexual and physical abuse, their poor

educational and job levels, to say nothing of their parenting responsibilities are all significantly different (Hannah-Moffat and Shaw, 2000). When asked, many women prefer individual to group counselling, at least initially, and respond well to treatment approaches which the cognitive skills literature rejects (such as non-directive client-centred counselling and holistic approaches).

### **Recognising social and economic constraints**

The cognitive skills approach ignores social and economic constraints in offenders’ lives, the poverty and disruption in their families and communities and the discrimination and racism which they have experienced. To give priority to such programmes over job skill training or low-cost housing, for example, implies that the attitudes and thinking patterns of individuals are the root of re-offending. The Canadian literature on cognitive skills is very denigrating. It identifies poor thinking patterns and inadequate individuals and discounts the situations, the economic pressures, the family pressures, the racism, systemic and individual, which confront individuals in the criminal justice system. It assumes that some re-thinking will enable offenders to over-come such hurdles and discounts the positive effects of programmes other than on offending in the lives of those individuals.

While more recent Canadian studies have begun to address programmes for women and Aboriginal offenders, there is still an assumption that they can be to ‘fitted in’ to the dominant cognitive skills approach with strict adherence to the principles of treatment delivery, ‘rigorous’ testing and

evaluation and accreditation to ensure that the master patterns are maintained. The history of criminal justice is full of brave claims and promising programmes. It is important to temper the current rush to see cognitive skills as the answer to the probation officer’s prayer. ■

*Kelly Hannah-Moffat is a professor in the Department of Sociology, University of Toronto; Margaret Shaw teaches in the Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Concordia University, Montreal.*

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