

# Thinking About Reducing Reoffending

Martin Kettle reviews the philosophies culminating in 'What Works'.

**M**y aim here is to summarise the influence of three philosophical positions on current thinking about reducing crime, specifically in terms of what we can do with people while they are in prison. The three positions are pragmatism, individualism and rationalism.

## Pragmatism

'What Works' is a catchy way of talking about pragmatism. This concept is so embedded in our culture that it is 'self-evident' – its roots in 18th-century utilitarian thinking are no longer visible. Fully-fledged philosophical pragmatism was in fact an American development, articulated by philosophers such as Dewey in the early 20th century. It goes necessarily hand in hand with rationalism and the scientific enterprise – again looking back to the 18th century for their classical flowering.

After the invention of sociology as the 'queen of sciences' by Comte, the social sciences strove for 100 years to merit their name; IT-enabled research methods have at last provided the instruments to establish rational, replicable methods of testing hypotheses in social science and technology. Prison systems are an example of social technology and also began their modern phase of development in the 18th century.

The history of criminological research and approaches to reducing offending is, notoriously, a mirror of the cultural and intellectual contexts of that history. Physiological, medical, sociological and psychodynamic models have succeeded one another; the conclusions of research, which has necessarily been more anecdotal than systematic, have manifestly reflected the agendas of sponsors of the research as much as the reality of crime.

The growth of the research industry, above all in North America, has enabled scholars from the last two decades of the 20th century to move to a meta-analytical level (aggregating large numbers of studies) which allows some confidence in the elimination of individual bias. The exponential increases both in the number of criminological researchers and in the amounts of data that can be collected and analysed allow a degree of confidence in the scholarly consensus about what works.

## Rationalism

The ideology shaping the modern prison movement began in a singular amalgam of spiritual and rationalistic thought – an essentially Puritan ethos, typified by the Philadelphia penitentiary which was the original icon of the modern prison. People were imprisoned, preferably in solitary confinement, to reflect on both the irreligious and the irrational nature of their offending behaviour.

Bentham and others steered the tradition decisively in the rationalist direction – the spiritual interest has been fighting a rearguard action ever since. After the First World War, European culture swung violently away from the optimistic, almost triumphalistic rationalism of the 19th century into a struggle for new meanings. Criminology did the same, looking first to the social construction of crime and then to its psychodynamic roots in the unconscious or in early formation. By the end of the 20th century, however, the rationalist agenda had recovered its position in Western thought; the images of Marx and Freud lie in as many pieces as the statues of many dictators.

Cognitive science is an heir to rationalism, and is one of the most powerful academic forces of the moment (consider for example the stream of writing on how men and women's minds work, differentially or otherwise). Rationalism has in fact moved on from the 18th century view, founded in classical mathematics and symbolic logic, to a more flexible form which takes account of the increasingly dynamic perspectives of 20th century science. Cognitive science, which increasingly narrows the gap between psychology and neurobiology, exemplifies this movement.

A rational cognitive focus is prevalent in Western criminological thinking at present. The trend is strongly reinforced by the fact that the types of intervention known as 'cognitive behavioural' (those which start from the view that people's criminal actions are the outcomes of choices which are shaped by the ways they have learned to think) have been consistently shown to work in reducing short-term reoffending (at least); while no other interventions have been shown to be nearly as effective.

## Individualism

The significance of the human individual – again, a Reformed perspective soon adapted to the requirements of secularity – has risen steadily in the last three centuries, to a point where freedom is more or less defined as the maximisation of individual choice. 'Reality' TV shows illustrate this – the value of people is tested by how they manage when wrested from their normal social environment into a laboratory setting where their individual characters will be swiftly exposed.

Criminality, which for much of the 20th century was seen as a function (in the Weberian sense) of society as a whole, is now again located more firmly with the individual. To be sure, we recognise the challenge of the contexts of social and economic deprivation in which some forms of criminal behaviour are common; but we stop short of the conclusion that the adoption of a criminal lifestyle in



an optionless life setting is rational. Prison is a sort of reality TV without (and sometimes with) the cameras; a laboratory in which we can hope to help people adjust, away from their peers and the social contexts which can reinforce offending behaviour patterns, into new ways of seeing the world and their options in it.

The restorative justice movement is a reaction against extreme individualism. It holds to the view that individuals only exist within a real social context, and the artificial context of prison can never be a substitute. Families, peers and not least victims, are the flesh-and-blood context in dialogue with whom the convicted person can and should work on interpreting their own identity and actions.

### The philosophy of interventions to reduce reoffending

There is a common caricature of a range of offending behaviour programmes which have arisen from the 'What Works' movement: that they have drunk so deep at the wells of pragmatism, rationalism and individualism as to lose sight of more holistic, social and integrative perspectives. A caricature it is: no serious practitioner or researcher believes in panaceas. There are related concerns about the standardisation and commodification of interventions, reducing the scope for local initiative and personal flair, and about the narrow conception that only that which is measurable is real – these arise from the discipline of demonstrating value which society now places on its public services.

Within the limits of these broad trends, the interventions delivered in the Correctional Services in England and Wales are increasingly characterised by a concern with context, responsiveness and diversity rather than a sheer formulaic 'treatment integrity'. They are also increasingly seen as elements in a coherent unified range of interventions – educational, motivational, medical, creative, supportive, and so on – which together may over time, and with effective bridging of the gap between custodial and community life, enable the offender to change in a direction which significantly reduces their risk of reoffending.

We in the What Works movement need to be conscious of the possibility of bias arising from assumptions shaped by the three ideological strands described above; such bias could lead to dogmatism, which directly contradicts the truths articulated by these 'isms'. Encouragingly, the excitement generated by research showing that something actually works is now leading not to dogmatism but to an eagerness to embed the cognitively based programmes into a much broader strategy. On the basis of consistent and professional risk/needs assessment and planning, we can start to integrate all aspects of prison regimes and interventions in a coherent strategy to reduce reoffending.

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