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From Exclusion to Inclusion:

The role of Circles of Support and Accountability

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This article presents findings from a recently completed research project on Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) and their work with sex offenders. CoSA is a community based initiative which first emerged in Canada in 1994, before being piloted in England and Wales in 2002. CoSA uses volunteers to work with convicted sex offenders who are living in the community.

The majority of the sex offenders, or Core Members as they are referred to in CoSA, join CoSA following their release from a custodial sentence, though some Core Members will have received sentences which they serve in the community. Each CoSA project has at least one CoSA coordinator who is responsible for recruiting, training and selecting the volunteers who will work with the Core Member in the 'Circle'. A Circle is made up of four-six trained volunteers and one Core Member. The volunteers work with the Core Member to help them resettle into the community after their conviction. CoSA projects also work with the police and probation services to ensure that any relevant information on the Core Member is fed to the volunteers, or to statutory agencies. At a national level, *Circles UK* is the umbrella organisation of all regional CoSA projects in England and Wales.¹

The statutory management and supervision of sex offenders in the community is primarily undertaken by the police and probation services. The prison service also has a requirement to work with the police and probation service within the Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA). These arrangements have very much focused on the 'containment' philosophy whereby convicted sex offenders are managed and monitored in the interests of public protection. The perceived limitations of such an approach were seen as a partial reason for the

emergence of CoSA in England and Wales. Combined with an emerging body of research advocating a more holistic and long-term view of reintegration and resettlement,² CoSA sought to fill the gap in assisting Core Members in their reintegration post-conviction. This article is based on research into CoSA carried out by the author as part of his PhD studies and as part of a wider national research project.³

What are Circles of Support and Accountability?

CoSA are voluntary arrangements to help sex offenders as they reintegrate into society after their conviction and return to the community. Offenders are invited to join a Circle of volunteers who befriend them and advise them in their efforts to re-integrate back into the community. The idea started in Canada with the Mennonite religious group seeking to provide an alternative environment to the widespread hostility and even vigilantism directed towards high risk sex offenders when they came out of prison. Early research of CoSA found strong support for its work. In one of the first qualitative studies of 12 Core Members, 10 felt the circle had aided them by offering practical and or emotional support, while six of the Core Members felt they would have re-offended without their circle.⁴ In a more recent evaluation of the model, CoSA participants showed an 83 per cent reduction in sexual recidivism compared to sex offenders who had not participated in CoSA.⁵ Starting with three early pilot projects in Hampshire, Thames Valley and through the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, the number of projects in the UK has grown to 13 active projects and one emerging project. At the time of writing, approximately 400 Core Members have or are currently participating in CoSA in England and Wales.⁶ Each of these projects are accredited by *Circles UK*, and follow a nationally agreed *Circles UK* Code of Practice.

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1. See *Circles UK* web site at <http://www.circles-uk.org.uk/>
 2. Ward, T. and Maruna, S. (2007) *Rehabilitation*. Oxon: Routledge.
 3. Thomas, T. Thompson, D. and Karstedt, S. (2014) *Assessing the impact of Circles of Support and Accountability on the reintegration of adults convicted of sexual offences in the community*. Leeds: University of Leeds. Thompson, D. (2016) 'Moving on After Getting Out: Support and Accountability for Convicted Sex Offenders'. *PhD Thesis*. University of Leeds.
 4. Cesaroni, C. (2001) 'Releasing Sex Offenders into the Community Through "Circles of Support" – A Means of Reintegrating the "Worst of the Worst"'. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*. 34 (2) 85-98.
 5. Wilson, R.J. Cortoni, F. and McWhinnie, A. (2009) 'Circles of Support and Accountability: A Canadian National Replication of Outcome Findings' *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*. 21 (4) 412-430.
 6. Personal Communication with *Circles UK*.

Early CoSA projects in Canada aligned closely with the principles of restorative justice (RJ).⁷ However, the association to RJ is not a traditional one. Whereas most RJ schemes occur at the beginning of the criminal justice process, CoSA is innovative in being an 'end-point' scheme. Moreover, CoSAs RJ commitment was never stated as being to work as a direct service to the victim. Instead Core Members seek to restore and repair damage they have caused to the community in the form of their 'volunteers'. Thus, the Quakers believed the work of CoSA could successfully prevent sexual reoffending and in doing so prevent future victims.⁸

In recent years CoSA has been increasingly linked to 'strengths-based approaches' and the Good Lives Model in particular.⁹ In utilising trained volunteers from the community, the Circle provides instant social capital to Core Members who might otherwise be quite isolated. The Core Member receives advice on practical matters such as accommodation, finances, health matters, employment and also receives emotional support where possible — all this constitutes support. The Core Member is also reminded of his or her offences and his or her behaviour is observed, challenged and reported on if necessary. This constitutes the accountability role of CoSA. The Circle in turn receives support and training from a CoSA coordinator.

The Research

For this research, interviews were conducted with 70 individuals participating in or involved in the delivery of CoSA throughout England and Wales. The interviewees comprised of 30 Core Members, 20 volunteers and 20 'stakeholders'¹⁰ from 11 CoSA projects. A further short questionnaire was also used to collect basic demographic information on Core Members and volunteers. The research team also received permission to access administrative data held by CoSA projects of each Core Member interviewed. The research team used semi-structured interviews developed with the principles of Appreciative Inquiry

(AI) in mind. AI is a form of interviewing which encourages participants to focus on and recall the positives or 'best' experiences rather than just focusing on the negatives. In this research it was combined with the use of generative questions. The use of generative questions adds an additional dimension by encouraging participants to reflect on what might be, or how things might be improved.¹¹

Themes common to all interviews included initial expectations of CoSA and why individuals stated they wanted to become involved. All groups were also asked about their experiences of CoSA meetings, the concepts of Support and Accountability and their perceptions of how CoSA can assist in Core Member reintegration. Core Members were also asked about their experiences of other interventions and their future plans. Eligibility to participate in the study was based on Core Members being aged over 18 years and having been a participant in CoSA for approximately six months. Access to all groups was facilitated in cooperation with CoSA coordinators. Each interviewee received an information sheet detailing their role in the research and requirements. Core Members also received £20 in gift vouchers to cover any travel expenses. This is a common practice in criminal justice research.

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The Findings

Key findings from the Volunteers

One of the most unique aspects of the work of Circles is the use of volunteers to work with individuals who have been convicted of sexual offences. While volunteers have a long history of working with offenders in the criminal justice system, their use in the contemporary era, working with high-risk sex offenders is virtually non-existent. This and the high levels of hostility towards sex offenders by the general public — reported in the media — prompted the researchers to explore volunteer motivations for joining CoSA and their experiences of training. The research also explored volunteer experiences of working in a Circle, their relationship with Core Members and other volunteers, and how they perceived and recognised signs of success. The research also probed volunteer understandings of the

7. Hannem, S. (2011) 'Experiences in Reconciling Risk management and Restorative Justice: how Circles of Support and Accountability work restoratively in the Risk Society' *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 57 (3): 269-288.
8. Nellis, M. (2009) 'Circles of Support and Accountability for Sex Offenders in England and Wales: their origins and implementation between 1999-2005'. *British Journal of Community Justice*, 7 (1): 23-44.
9. Carich, M. Wilson, C. Carich, P and Calder, M. (2010) 'Contemporary Sex Offender treatment: Incorporating Circles of Support and the Good Lives Model' in Brayford, J. Cowe, F. and Deering, J. (eds.) *What Else Works? Creative Work with Offenders*. Cullompton: Willan.
10. Stakeholders are taken to be the police, probation officers, project coordinators, and senior managers with funding responsibilities
11. Bushe, G.R. (2012) 'Foundations of Appreciative Inquiry: History, Criticism and Potential' *AI Practitioner*, 14 (1): 8-20.

central concepts of support and accountability and how they managed this in their working with Core Members.

All of the volunteers were highly enthusiastic about the work of CoSA and in their efforts with Core Members. When asked about their motivations for participating in CoSA, almost half (N= 8) stated to have initially done so in an attempt to progress their career by gaining experience working with offenders. The remaining volunteers stated a more altruistic or outwardly motivated reason. Interestingly, we found that many of those volunteers, who joined CoSA with the intention of gaining career experience, later exhibited more altruistic tendencies which led them to want to continue in CoSA for some years. For instance, two volunteers explicitly stated joining simply to gain experience for their CV, proclaiming:

I thought it would look good on my CV as much as anything and I suppose now I've finished my degree and I've continued it. I think I still do it because I think it works and you can see the changes in a Core Member (V17).

I am in university as well so it was a good opportunity to get a bit of experience in as well as doing my course...I suppose at the start it was to support a future career but now I suppose it is that I would like to carry on regardless really (V4).

The relationship between the volunteers and CoSA coordinator was often spoken as a factor behind volunteer motivation. In some cases it was the 'sales-pitch' or enthusiasm of the CoSA coordinator which encouraged the volunteers to join CoSA, for others it was the knowledge and ever-present support of CoSA coordinators that volunteers valued.

Nearly all of the volunteers reported a degree of anxiety about meeting the Core Member for the first time. Building a relationship with the Core Member was seen as vital and the meetings were the primary means to do this. What constituted a good meeting varied between the Circles and the individual needs of Core Members, though free-flowing and humorous meetings were seen as important. As the duration of the Circle progressed, and the relationship becomes more established, volunteers

and Core Members would meet outside of the formal meeting rooms. These activities included visiting libraries, art galleries and bingo, as well as cafes. Some volunteers spoke of tailoring the venues to the needs of the Core Members, for others the change of venue away from the formal settings was seen as pivotal in developing the Core Members' social skills and relationships, but also in helping them to recognise the progress they were making. Activities outside of the formal setting also had an accountability function for some volunteers as they were able to monitor how the Core Member would react in social settings.

Volunteers had a realistic assessment of what they could achieve with Core Members. The majority did not claim to be able to control or force change in the behaviour of Core Members, instead the volunteers felt they could influence positive behaviour through pro-

social modelling. In addition, the volunteers implied the work of the Circle produced a number of subtle positive changes among all Core Members such as changes to their appearance, mannerisms and provided a degree of structure to their life. Thus, the Circle provided Core Members with an alternative environment to that offered by other professionals in supervision and management meetings or through treatment programmes.

In doing so, CoSA, in line with

the principles of re-integrative shaming¹² expresses society's disapproval for criminal behaviours while accepting the convicted and stigmatised individual back into society. Through this process, the Circle helps to prevent future offending through a process of active reintegration.

Although the word 'accountability' is an integral part of the title Circles of Support and Accountability, there was some confusion amongst the volunteers regarding the meaning and limits of the word. For some volunteers 'accountability' involved past behaviours and actions which contributed to and formed the Core Members original offence, others saw accountability as being about Core Members present and future behaviours. Despite such uncertainty, volunteers provided accounts and situations where Core Members had been challenged and held to account and this had some effect on Core Members attitudes and behaviours.

Building a relationship with the Core Member was seen as vital and the meetings were the primary means to do this.

12. 'Re-integrative shaming' is a form of shaming that still wants to rehabilitate as opposed to 'disintegrative shaming' which just shames and leaves the offender with the consequences i.e. the stigma and possible move toward more criminal subcultures – see Braithwaite J (1989). *Crime, Shame and Reintegration* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Key findings from 'Stakeholders'

'Stakeholders' is the term used here to refer collectively to the professionals who work with Core Members and CoSA volunteers. Professionals include coordinators of CoSA Projects, Police Officers, Probation Officers and MAPPA Coordinators and Senior Managers. Only the CoSA project coordinators have a direct role in the activities of the Circle, while Police and Probation Officers have a more distant role from the actual Circles but have clear views on the work they do. MAPPA and Senior Managers had very little involvement in the running of Circles but had an awareness of the fit of CoSA in broader risk management and criminal justice structures.

The role of CoSA coordinators was pivotal in gaining a positive reputation of the CoSA project. All of the CoSA coordinators had previous or current employment as a Probation Officer. This status as a trained probation officer facilitated positive relations with the Police and Probation Service. The role of the CoSA coordinator was diverse and did not just involve them managing the Circle but also recruiting and training volunteers, administrative tasks, marketing the project as well as 'pulling' together all the individuals and agencies to ensure a good service is delivered. All stakeholders spoke highly of the work of CoSA with many believing/stating CoSA added an extra dimension to the work that they themselves could do with sex offenders. The extensive professional training given to volunteers, combined with the common-sense views which volunteers brought to the Circle were stated as particularly beneficial to the 'package' of measures provided to Core Members. Perhaps most illustrative of this contribution was explained by one CoSA coordinator who stated:

Quite often the volunteers go 'You what!' and they give very real reactions to that. But if they did that to police and probation you get a very deadpan professional response of 'Oh right OK, well you know what we need to do now' (C3).

Because of the 'good deed' of working with Core Members, most of the stakeholders stated some level of concern about wanting to protect the volunteers from anything untoward from Core Members. This could be inappropriate attention towards the volunteers from Core Members (i.e. grooming or offending) or through the consequence of Core Members actions (mistreatment). Police officers usually saw protection in

terms of ensuring that the volunteers had sufficient information about the potential Core Members. In contrast, Probation Officers were concerned to directly intervene if they saw any risk to the volunteers, and if necessary even by stopping a Circle. The work of volunteers was also regarded positively by all stakeholders, with many being surprised by the levels of commitment offered by volunteers. At the same time, some stakeholders, especially police officers admitted to having initial doubts over the motivations of volunteers to do this type of work and the level of training they received. One explanation for this is the lack of involvement criminal justice professionals have in the recruitment and training of volunteers.

Core Members' Perspectives

A recurring feature of interviews with Core Members was the discomfort, uncertainty and fears that their 'new' status as sex offenders gave them.

Many had lost family, social networks and the familiarity of a home town. The media hostility towards sex offenders on an individual level added to their feelings of rejection. A number of Core Members (N= 10) also reported being required to move to a 'new' and unfamiliar place as a result of the conditions imposed. The result was all Core Members reported high levels of

isolation, increased by their self-imposed withdrawal from the community. In this context then, the offer of support from CoSA represented an opportunity to overcome or at least counteract some of the barriers to their reintegration. This optimism of the improvements CoSA could offer came despite many Core Members reporting initial uncertainties of the role of CoSA, such as the members of CoSA providing 24-hour surveillance or the Core Member even being handcuffed to the volunteers during meetings! Fears were also abound amongst Core Members about how volunteers would react to, and judge Core Members.

Early meetings were the most 'scary' for Core Members. This is understandable given the requirement to disclose their offences and risk factors to a group of strangers. As one Core Member explained: 'You're in the hot seat and that's what it felt like [with CoSA] that I was in the hot seat you know what I mean, that I was getting a psychological evaluation at times' (Eddie). As the length of the 'Circle' progressed, meetings would move from discussing their past offending to a variety of 'general' topics. Core Members reported the meetings with the Circle to be different to those they had with statutory agencies, with the CoSA meetings being more

The role of CoSA coordinators was pivotal in gaining a positive reputation of the CoSA project.

comfortable and settled. However, volunteers could and often did challenge Core Members about their thoughts and behaviours since the last meeting. In most cases Core Members remarked that this induced stress but recognised this to be part of the role of CoSA and was of some value later on.¹³

The value of participating in activities outside of the formal meetings was of great significance to the Core Members. Many of the Core Members in CoSA did not have the finances or social networks to enable them to visit a coffee shop, art galleries, or sporting events. Meals with the volunteers to celebrate birthdays and seasonal events were also popular. For Core Members, these activities took the focus away from their offending and were seen by Core Members as activities which 'normal' people would do. The relationship Core Members had with volunteers was on the whole positive. Core Members were especially appreciative of the time given up by the volunteers, for the advice and support from volunteers and the creation of a 'safe' environment for Core Members to meet, discuss, and practice appropriate social norms.

A further finding of the research focused on Core Members understandings of Support and Accountability. Given the centrality of Support and Accountability to the work of CoSA, Core Members understandings are important. Support was well understood by all Core Members and they provided numerous instances of support being received from the Circle. Accountability on the other hand was a more difficult concept for them to understand. Most Core Members initially were confused by the very word accountability and its meaning as Anthony and Christopher illustrate:

I don't even know what it means! (Anthony)

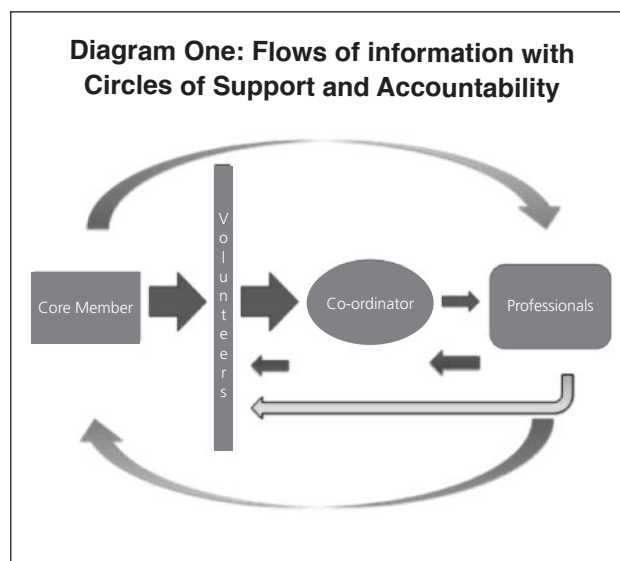
Blimey I would have to get a dictionary out to figure it out (Christopher)

Despite this, throughout the interviews, Core Members were able to give examples of where the volunteers had challenged them about risky behaviours or held them to account for their past offending. When asked who was responsible for accountability in the future, the majority of Core Members stated it was only themselves who were responsible for their actions and it was they who made their own decisions, therefore accountability lay with them. The value of CoSA came in the form of advice and support from the volunteers which contributed to more accountable decision-making or a more accountable lifestyle. Core Members also

reported to have improved their working relationship with statutory agencies such as the police and probation and being more appreciative of themselves. For a small number of Core Members the changes they identified were not solely the result of the CoSA, but also could be attributed to the influences of family, statutory agencies, and learning from treatment providers. Overall CoSA, the volunteers and CoSA coordinators were seen positively by the Core Members.

Information Exchange

The Circle is in effect an information exchange mechanism whereby personal information on Core Members can be passed to the professionals supervising and managing them in the community. Police and probation officers can then use this information as part of their risk assessment work and the supervision and management work that follows. This element of information exchange is what contributes to the 'accountability' part of CoSA. Information on Core Members will also pass the other way from the professionals to the volunteers that make up the Circle for them to know who they are working with. An illustration of the information flows involving CoSA can be seen in the diagram below.



Conclusions

The extent to which CoSA in England and Wales could ever adopt a fully RJ approach is questionable given the growing punitive response to the supervision and management of sex offenders. The top-down implementation of the CoSA pilots in England and Wales also affected the level of RJ principles. However,

13. Thomas, T. Thompson, D. and Karstedt, S. (2014) *Assessing the impact of Circles of Support and Accountability on the reintegration of adults convicted of sexual offences in the community*. Leeds: University of Leeds.

as this research has found, and the title suggests, CoSA does adopt the inclusionary ethos of traditional RJ approaches.

The research and report focuses on the national experiences of those who are involved in CoSA using accounts from Core Members, volunteers and stakeholders. Rather than being an assessment of the impact or efficiency of CoSA projects in reintegrating Core Members, lowering recidivism or other factors, the research assessed the experiences of those being in and working with a Circle, those who organised the Circle and those who worked with CoSA in statutory agencies. The accounts provided show strong support for the work of CoSA among all participants, in particular, the Core Members. CoSA was seen as especially useful in helping Core Members to break the vicious cycles of isolation and stigmatization that sex offenders experience on their re-entry into communities. On a cautious note however, even where subjective accounts suggesting Core Members benefit from a certain type of intervention, without objective measures of behavioural problems, recidivism, and

other indicators, the extent to which this is true will remain contested.

The research found strong support for CoSA among professionals working within the criminal justice system. Not only have projects routinely established a reputation for themselves as reliable partners, but in light of the current developments in probation provision and the desire to expand provision to the private and voluntary sectors, Circles UK and CoSA projects are well placed for these changes because the volunteers are committed to what they do with CoSA.

One of the weak points of CoSA has always been its ad hoc funding arrangements. The Ministry of Justice has always been verbally supportive of CoSA but when it comes to funding it has only supported the central Circles UK office. Elsewhere, throughout the regions, the projects have had to find their own funding; not the easiest task in these times of austerity. Indeed, as of 31 March 2015, Correctional Services Canada, ceased funding 14 regional CoSA projects operating under CoSA Canada, illustrating the fragility of CoSA provision worldwide.



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