

THOUGHT PIECE

'Thought Pieces' are papers which draw on the author's personal knowledge and experience to offer stimulating and thought provoking ideas relevant to the aims of the Journal. The ideas are located in an academic, research, and/or practice context and all papers are peer reviewed. Responses to them should be submitted to the Journal in the normal way.

STILL WORKING WITH INVOLUNTARY CLIENTS

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The Government's reform plans for the Probation Service perplex, confuse and anger me. On occasions I find myself trying to explain the changes to people who, whilst knowledgeable about criminal justice, know little of probation practice or the position in England and Wales. This experience tends to highlight both the peculiar and the political nature of the Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) project. Yes, I find myself confirming, I did say that the existing Probation Service will be split between two different organisations who will arrange to buy interventions from each other. Yes, I did say that the re-offending rate of short sentenced prisoners is one of the official explanations for the abolition of Probation Trusts despite the fact that such prisoners are not currently supervised on release. Yes, I did say that existing Probation Trusts are not allowed to bid for the contracts to run the new Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) and that CRCs are not required to employ qualified offender managers.

I am currently researching the experience of probation supervision in the context of the increased involvement of voluntary organisations and private companies in offender management. In the last year I have been undertaking fieldwork talking to supervisees and supervisors. Everyone in my sample of supervisees is assessed as low or medium risk of causing serious harm and subject to a community order. In the new world of TR they, and their difficulties with – for example – drugs, mental health, domestic violence, poverty and disability, will be the responsibility of the CRCs. In interview we have talked about the different contributions to community orders made by a variety of providers and a range of workers. Supervisees have explained what they make of these contrasting inputs and how they see the role of their probation offender manager. Supervisors have spoken of what, from their perspective, makes for good practice. A number of, sometimes familiar, community justice themes are easy to identify from the interviews: these include the

balance between help and punishment, the importance of relationships and communication and the dynamics of compliance. Working with involuntary clients is another key theme and one that, in the context of the TR proposals, I find particularly interesting.

‘Working with Involuntary Clients’ is the title of a book by Chris Trotter published in 1999. After introducing involuntary clients as those service users who ‘have not chosen to receive the services they are being given’ and, indeed, ‘might believe that it is unnecessary and intrusive’ (Trotter 1999 p2), the book goes on to consider the empirical evidence for effective intervention with this group and then provides straightforward practice guidance in role clarification, pro-social modelling, problem solving and relationship building. The message of the book made sense to practitioners and influenced the content of training programmes and ideas about good practice.

The notion of being an involuntary client or supervising involuntary clients is a common theme in my research interviews. Supervisees accept that community sanctions bring expectations and requirements but speak positively of supervisors who are worth making the effort to see and flexible in their approach to running the order. Probation supervisors are described as doing their job and checking up on behaviour, but in ways that are encouraging and supportive.

Probation supervisors in my sample often argue that a distinctive aspect of probation practice is the necessity to keep delivering a service for the length of the order. Probation is perceived as the organisation that must persevere, cannot give up and has to find some ground on which to build a supervisory relationship. Many of the examples given about how to do this in practice come straight from the pages of Trotter (1999). Providing help and support within the constraints of a time-limited and court-ordered professional relationship is a skilful undertaking. It’s been the core business of the Probation Service for many years. Will it simply transfer across to be the core business of the CRCs?

CRCs inherit the offender management and supervision responsibility for all existing low and medium risk offenders, but also are charged with the new task of supervising those released from short (under 12 month) prison sentences. These supervisees strike me as involuntary clients par excellence. Having served a few weeks in prison, they find themselves faced with 12 months supervision in the community. CRCs have to find a way of delivering this supervision as new-born organisations operating in a climate of financial austerity.

Do I underestimate some of the grounds for optimism? CRCs will, initially at least, employ experienced probation staff operating within a probation culture. Maybe the prime providers who buy the CRCs will bring innovative ideas from the voluntary sector as part of their supply chain. Perhaps it is unimaginative of me to assume that a rise in workload combined with a decrease in funding must mean the provision of an impoverished service.

For good reason, much of the concern about the TR proposals has been about risk assessment and risk management and the challenges faced by the new NPS. As a consequence of my research, I am also exercised by the quality of the practice that can be

expected from CRCs. The Probation Service has developed a distinctive ability to work effectively with people who are ambivalent about change and not always easy to engage. CRCs will need to find a way of maintaining this strength of probation practice. Maintaining the skills, knowledge and values of CRC practitioners seems an important starting point: maybe everyone should be encouraged to (re)read 'Working with Involuntary Clients'?

References

Trotter, C. (1999), *Working with Involuntary Clients*. Sage. London