

Working with offenders

The ins and outs

THERE is a strong case for both the National Probation Service and HM Prison Service looking to areas of applied psychology to help deliver services *in partnership*. Forensic psychology is not the only area of applied psychology that is potentially germane. We now need to acknowledge the potential contributions of occupational, health, counselling, clinical and educational psychologists in both organisations.

Partnership working

With a governmental focus firmly on 'joined-up' services in the criminal justice field (Boateng, 1999) the launch of the National Probation Service (NPS) in April 2001 set the scene for closer partnership working. There has not historically been a national structure for the employment of psychologists in the probation service, but with the creation of the NPS and an increased emphasis on partnership working, a national integrated role for psychologists is ripe for development. This presents both the NPS and the Prison Service with some significant challenges and opportunities (Towl, 2000).

The idea of organisations working together in partnerships is nothing new (see Alter & Hage, 1993). In recent years there has been a plethora of publications on partnership working (e.g. Huxham, 1996), and perhaps one of the most enduring and pervasive features of the term 'partnership' is that intrinsically it seems eminently reasonable. This is important because it positions partnerships as both desirable and normative. What *is* new is the government drive in criminal justice to ensure a greater co-ordination and effective delivery of services between criminal justice organisations.

Probation services have extensive experience of working in partnership with other organisations, for example in mental health, employment and housing. The prison service also has much experience of working in partnership, for example with the voluntary sector.

One concept within the literature on partnerships that has the promise of



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providing explanatory (or at least exploratory) frameworks for improving our understanding is that of 'collaborative capacity'.

Collaborative capacity

We can distinguish between three types of collaborative capacities: strategic, governance, and operational (Regan *et al.*, 2001). Strategic capacity may be viewed as vision and leadership; governance capacity as accountability; and operational capacity as having a focus upon organisational service delivery.

A 'shared vision' or at least commonality of purpose is important in the initiation, development and sustainability of effective partnerships. Both HM Prison Service and the NPS share the organisational aim of seeking to reduce reoffending. Both also have much overlap in their stakeholder base (including victims of crime, prisoners, prison staff, Home Office and ministers). Many probation staff routinely work in prisons as well as in the broader community.

In terms of governance capacity, accountability for HM Prison Service is at a national level, and this is paralleled with the development of the NPS. Both organisations have been reshaped to ensure greater commonality of geographical boundaries using the Government Offices of the Regions. As part of the measurement of the effectiveness of public sector organisations 'performance indicators' are often used as a management tool. For example, one performance indicator for prisons is the number of escapes. With an eye to the future there may be the possibility of joint 'performance indicators' linked to reducing reoffending.

These reconfigurations of services provide the basic structure for the more

effective delivery of partnership working. There is significant potential to enhance service provision in working with offenders as a direct function of closer partnership working, thus improving the operational capacity of both organisations. One example of this would be with short-term prisoners who are not in prison long enough to undertake intensive groupwork which may reduce their risk of reoffending. With partnership work, interventions could more readily start in prisons and continue into the community.

Below I give an overview of some of the work of forensic psychologists in prisons. Much of this work could be directly applied in the probation service, enabling psychologists to make a real contribution to the NPS.

Psychological services in HM Prison Service

Overviews of the work of forensic psychologists in prisons are available in a number of sources (e.g. Towl, 1999; Towl & McDougall, 1999). What follows is intended to be illustrative of some of the work of forensic psychologists in prisons with an eye to possible developments in the NPS. One underpinning theme of the work of psychologists will be the need to have a clear focus on an evidence-based practice approach.

Risk assessment and risk management

Psychologists are well placed to advise on risk assessment and management strategies for both HM Prison Service and the NPS. Risk assessment may take a number of forms (Adams, 1999).

Perhaps one common public perception of notions of risk assessment is in relation to work with violent offenders (Towl & Crighton, 1996), estimating the probability

of the violent reoffending. Risk management would involve an analysis of what factors may increase or decrease the level of risk of reoffending and how they might impact on the overall 'management' or supervision plan for the offender. But work directed at assessing and managing the risk of reoffending is by no means the only area where an understanding of the principles of risk assessment and management may be usefully applied.

One area of work undertaken by psychologists that is perhaps less well known is risk assessment in relation to the management of major incidents, such as hostage taking or other disturbances in prisons. Psychologists can play a vital role in contributing to the effective management of such incidents (Ashmore, in press; Evans & Henson, 1999)

Another area of risk assessment and management is in working with suicidal offenders. Research into suicide in prisons

has mushroomed in recent years, and there is a good data set to draw upon to inform effective practice (Crighton, 2000; Towl *et al.*, 1999, Towl *et al.*, 2000). For example, 10 per cent of those individuals who take their own lives in prisons do so within 24 hours of arriving. There are also disproportionately high rates of suicide in local prisons when compared with other types of prison. This is perhaps unsurprising, given what may be termed a 'high-throughput' environment in local prisons, where remand and sentenced prisoners are held for a relatively short time before moving on. Offenders on probation in the community share a number of characteristics with prison populations (e.g. high levels of drug abuse) and as such are also at an inflated risk of suicide.

Lifers Forensic psychologists regularly work with life-sentenced prisoners, particularly in the area of undertaking risk

assessments (Wilmott, 1999). At the beginning of a life sentence the primary focus of such interventions may be on helping the prisoner to adapt to the prison environment (Morrissey & Towl, 1991). Some work with lifers can involve simply working towards getting individuals to engage constructively with the lifer system (Needs & Towl, 1997). This is varied and challenging work. Lifers are also a group of prisoners with an inflated risk of suicide (Crighton & Towl, 1997), so it is important when undertaking risk assessment work to focus not only on risk of harm to others but also on risk of harm to the self. There may be opportunities in the future with the prison/probation partnership for psychologists to get involved in continuing their work with lifers in community settings.

Structured groupwork In recent years there has been a significant growth of groupwork interventions with prisoners aimed at reducing the risk of reoffending. These are commonly referred to as 'offending behaviour programmes', and are cognitive-behavioural in approach. The evidence base for these is drawn largely from international meta-analyses. These include 'cognitive skills programmes' (see Blud, 1999) sex offender treatment (see Mann & Riches, 1999) and violent offender programmes (see Attrill, 1999).

In terms of future developments there are further structured interventions being designed to address other areas, such as domestic violence. Such interventions underpin much of the partnership work of the NPS and HM Prison Service. One difficulty in delivering such structured interventions is that to be effective they need to run over a long period of time. This has tended to mean that such interventions are not accessible to prisoners with short sentences or those on remand. The augmentation of the prison/probation partnership offers the (as yet unrealised) promise of the two organisations working 'seamlessly' with offenders. For example, there is the potential for a prisoner to begin an intervention whilst in prison and then continue with it in a community setting. There will be a significant growth in this area of work over the coming years, and psychologists will need to be adaptable in terms of their roles. In practice this may, for instance, mean more emphasis on equipping and supporting other grades of staff to undertake more of the direct work with offenders. This is an area of work where there will be much shared learning

as a direct function of the partnership between the NPS and HM Prison Service.

Managing change in the public and private sectors

Change management within psychological services must be seen within the broader political, managerial and professional context of developments across the public sector in general and within criminal justice in particular. Also, from a professional perspective there is the imperative to take account of developments within the British Psychological Society.

The subordination to politics rather than the marketplace is the essential distinction between public and private organisations (Farnham & Horton, 1996). Crime and its prevention are high on the political agenda. Criminal justice organisations have been subject to some of the managerialist policies and practices common across the public sector. Essentially such approaches are characterised by applying the language of private sector management to the public sector. They have tended to be based on the notion that the private sector is efficient and effective and the public sector is inefficient and ineffective (Flynn, 1997). More recently such trite generalisations have been called into question. However, it has been acknowledged that the process of applying methods and approaches more traditionally associated with the private sector to the public sector has provided

some interesting food for thought for those who deliver public services.

While there are a small number of prisons in the private sector, the overwhelming majority are in the public sector. One of the key changes of emphasis as a result of the political and managerial background to current management philosophies and methods within the public sector is on 'value for money' and continuous improvement in the delivery of services.

Professionally there has been, and is likely to continue to be, a tightening up of professional regulation of the preparation of psychologists in working towards Chartership with the BPS. This will mean a need to place greater emphasis on training, supervision and indeed the often-neglected area of continuing professional development. The restructuring of psychological services will take account of these professional developments and seek to ensure that standards are further raised.

The organisation of psychological services

Historically, the development of psychological services within individual prisons has been somewhat ad hoc. Some prisons have traditionally been well endowed with psychologists, some not. There has rarely been a detailed and systematic consideration of the needs of the prison and prisoners, and how

psychologists may meet those needs. The sharper focus (in recent years) on performance management within the prison service has to a large degree served to call into question this quaint tradition of the deployment of psychological services without a direct link to need.

Working as a trainee forensic psychologist remains a very popular career choice among those interested in applied psychology, so there is no difficulty in getting new recruits. However, to do full justice to them and the organisation, and ultimately to the public, we need to ensure that we are sharper in developing our ability to ensure appropriate training and supervision. Putting aside the clear professional need for appropriate training and supervision, it also makes good sense in performance management terms. The performance of trainees who are well supervised is likely to significantly outpace that of less well supervised colleagues.

Structural and cultural change

One problem in the past has been the varying levels of knowledge and understanding among operational managers of what psychologists can contribute to the organisation. This issue may be viewed within the broader context of the potential development of an infrastructure for psychological services in the NPS. This helped inform the decision to set up a national structure of experienced psychologists designated 'area psychologists' to ensure that there is some strategic planning and professional oversight of how psychological services are developed and delivered at a local level.

HM Prison Service breaks England and Wales into 12 geographical areas and two functional areas – women's prisons and high-security prisons. This means that area managers can be more assured that services in their areas are being provided on a sustainable, effective and professional basis. This was not always possible in the past because of the lack of such structures and lower overall numbers of psychologists.

There are 10 probation regions in the NPS. They do not precisely match the 12 geographical areas of HM Prison Service. Four of the prison service areas fit precisely into two of the probation regions and the remaining six probation regions are coterminous with the prison service areas. In practical terms this means that there is a national structure for the NPS to tap into in the development of the infrastructure for the development and delivery of psychological services. The probation

regions will be assisted in developing psychological services working closely with staff in HM Prison Service.

In spring 2001 the first joint recruitment venture for trainee forensic psychologists in prisons and probation was undertaken. In addition to the joint initial recruitment there was a joint training for new entrants and further recruitment in November 2001. Each 'area psychologist' provides leadership for those psychologists in their domain. The area structure of experienced psychologists is in place to make links with probation services and ensure that area managers in HM Prison Service are getting effective services. They are also well positioned to provide appropriate advice and support to probation services. This provides a helpful support structure whilst some more senior posts are developed within the probation service.

The partnership between the NPS and HM Prison Service will underpin the development of forensic psychological services for both organisations. The professional head of psychology for the NPS and HM Prisons is a jointly appointed and funded role. With further recruitment due this month, there will be a range of opportunities that emerge for closer shared working in psychology. For example, there will be the possibility of secondments, in the first instance primarily from HM Prison Service to the National Probation Service. It is likely that there will be a small

number of posts for Chartered Forensic Psychologists in the probation service who will be tasked with, among other things, the role of being the supervisor for nationally recruited trainee forensic psychologists in the probation service. Also, area psychologists may wish to negotiate the development of some joint posts across both services. Additionally, there will be the possibility of looking again at some of the contractual arrangements between operational managers in prisons and probation services to include some psychological input. Arrangements are likely to differ across probation services to reflect and meet particular service needs. However, there will be strong support from the probation regions augmented by national leadership.

Future directions

In this article I have argued that the development of psychological services needs to be captured within the broader context of the modernisation agenda for the broader public sector. In particular the context of much psychological work in the future will be in developing and consolidating effective links across the NPS and Prison Service. This partnership working brings with it some significant challenges and opportunities. There is the opportunity for us to develop better-quality services and interventions that match client needs. For example, as I have described

above, there is a real opportunity to develop services for short-term prisoners by more effective partnership working across the two organisations.

We also need to develop appropriate partnerships with the National Health Service, working with colleagues to ensure that the principle of 'equity of service' is actively worked towards for prisoners. Psychologists have important potential roles in terms of delivering high-quality services in the context of multidisciplinary working. Another area of future development will be in making more effective links with the Youth Justice Board and youth offending teams. These developments will benefit from a range of professional perspectives from applied psychology. As indicated at the beginning of this article, I would expect a greater range of applied psychologists contributing to the work of prisons in future.

Finally, and importantly as a profession, we will need to ensure that we focus clearly on ethical standards of psychological practice as well as on delivering an effective service for both organisations in partnership.

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