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Deconstructing Diversity

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Deconstructing diversity

What does 'diversity' mean in the probation service? The 'New Choreography' (2001), the National Probation Service's three year strategic framework, lists three imperatives associated with 'valuing and achieving diversity': 'simple justice', 'business effectiveness' and 'earning the confidence' of the public (p. 33). In other words, an inclusive service, an organization that harnesses the strengths of people from a wide range of backgrounds, and a service that all parts of the community can identify with, believe in and therefore support.

These are all honourable and essential objectives. However, they are less expansive than they seem at first sight. One alternative, though admittedly less concrete, interpretation of diversity is that it represents the explicit recognition that excessive uniformity – of message, of ideas, of practice – is a weakness. This is not to dismiss the value of a unity of purpose, common goals and consistently good practice. But, just as in nature, over-reliance on a single attribute (great strength, speed, etc.) is to risk extinction, so the probation service may find that the loss of creativity and local knowledge associated with the quest for consistency is ultimately counterproductive. 'Creativity' in this case is not, incidentally, a euphemism for poor or unaccountable practice – rather the intention is to acknowledge the great challenge of retaining motivated and fulfilled practitioners and managers, who feel they can contribute their individuality to an organization, when its energies are focused on achieving consistency by tackling bad practice rather than achieving excellence by encouraging innovation. This is a major challenge to many probation areas unable to retain excellent staff who see little opportunity in the short term of using their critical thinking and innovative abilities for the benefit of the service.

The stress on uniformity is most obviously reflected in the probation service's increasing centralization and the growing strength of managerialism, which also discourages deeper consideration of causation and context. Centralization has, in some respects, been a positive development, particularly given the fact that the current government was hardly likely to pay much attention to the lobbying of 42 separate services. However, a centrally managed bureaucracy is not conducive to an organization sensitive to local communities, and able to respond to their diverse needs and experiences. At least not without extremely well-conceived and well-led

local diversity strategies – about which, incidentally, the editorial board would like to hear more.

This contradiction – between the commitment to diversity and the centralized, managerialist bent of modern probation – lies at the heart, not only of probation diversity strategies, but also those of other ‘modernized’ public sector organizations. Understandably, it receives little attention in official documents such as the New Choreography, which have narrower, politically influenced goals. However, some understanding and debate about this tension and the problems it throws up seems essential to progressive organizations striving, within undoubted constraints, to achieve true diversity. Such an open and honest debate may go some way to persuading the more sceptical thinkers and the innovators that they still have a future in a dynamic probation service.

In this context, Bill Jordan’s paper in this edition assumes particular significance. In ‘Criminal justice, social exclusion and the social contract’, he presents a challenging, politically and historically aware paper, which analyses the foundations of contemporary criminal justice policy. He argues that the emergent social contract inevitably propels us towards a ‘war against the outsiders’, including immigrants and offenders, who are seen as a threat to our property rights. This tendency is in accordance with the liberal political philosophy first formulated by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke in the 17th century, and still running through modern political thought. Jordan considers the implications for probation practice and management in broad terms, leaving the extrapolation of more detailed conclusions to those people working within the system. One such conclusion could certainly be that an acceptance of the uncontextualized definitions of diversity, as expressed in the New Choreography and no doubt in other strategic plans for a range of criminal justice agencies, ascribes too much importance to some policies and practices that contribute little to the valuing of difference. For example, the visibility of skilled women or black people in the higher echelons of probation management is certainly to be welcomed, but does little in and of itself to achieve an appreciation of the importance of diversity within everyday probation practice. ‘Diversity’ as a concept and as a strategy for change can easily be hijacked by the imperatives of managerialism, losing its force as a means of promoting social justice, and becoming rather a means of achieving narrower organizational aims and objectives, which provide the surface appearance rather than the deeper essentials of diversity.

Three articles in this edition focus on the need to reach out more effectively to local communities. In ‘Welsh language, identity and probation practice’, Iolo Madoc-Jones and Julian Buchanan implicitly address all of the objectives outlined in the NPS diversity strategy. They argue that insufficient provision for Welsh speakers in Wales is not only unacceptable in terms of equal opportunities, but also counterproductive in terms of effective practice. Colm Power’s ‘Irish Travellers: Ethnicity, racism and pre-sentence reports’ draws on a major national study on the social marginalization of Irish Travellers. The author discusses the ‘criminalization’ of Travellers and their negative portrayal in court reports, arguing that the probation service must draw on the knowledge of local community groups with specialist knowledge if it is to minimize discrimination in assessment, and to build

more confidence amongst this community. In similar vein, Canan Mortimer's Practice Note, 'Working with Turkish speaking refugees and asylum seeking offenders' illustrates the value of developing 'dynamic profiles' of different local communities, and appointing specialists such as those mentioned in Power's article.

The dangers of standardised approaches to offending behaviour are addressed in 'Broadening the agenda around what works for black and Asian offenders' by Pauline Durrance and Patrick Williams. The authors argue that the debate about what works for black and Asian offenders has reached premature conclusions, and that the potential merits of other approaches, particularly ones that place more stress on social and cultural context, have not been properly examined. Another article that aims to widen debate is Eva Steiner's 'Early release for seriously ill and elderly prisoners: Should French practice be followed?' The author discusses the legal and political obstacles to ending what might be considered under the Human Rights Act to be inhuman or degrading treatment of very sick and frail prisoners. Claire Taylor's 'Justice for looked after children?' explores the complex and too often over-simplified link between experiences of public care and criminality. In common with Durrance and Williams, she stresses the importance to effective interventions of seeing children in full social context.

Simultaneously disturbing and inspiring, Rebecca Dittman's 'Policing hate crime' is an extraordinary piece of biographical writing, which provides a unique insight into the stresses and dangers of being different in a society that still retains so much fear and paranoia about non-conformity. Though very different in tone, the other Comment article, 'Diversity in community justice' provides some similarly unique and intriguing insights, as David Ramsbotham recounts his former plans to make the prison service more responsive to the needs of minority groups through an ultimately abandoned inspection programme.

All of the articles in this edition demonstrate the profound challenges of meeting the objectives of the New Choreography, and how much reflection, knowledge and application is required of those charged with delivering on them. As ever, the editorial board would welcome the comments and contributions of managers, practitioners, academics and policy-makers alike.

Finally, this edition is dedicated to the memory of Patricia Otukoya, who first suggested a special issue on the theme of diversity and discrimination. Patricia's death last year, while still in the prime of life, was a shock to everyone who knew her, and she is remembered with great fondness by her many friends and colleagues at the Probation Journal and beyond.

Hindpal Singh Bhui