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Chris Trotter

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# Social Work Education, Pro-Social Orientation And Effective Probation Practice

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**Chris Trotter discusses the practical implications of his research in Victoria, Australia, which found that social work and welfare trained probation officers were more likely to learn and make use of effective practices, which were in turn linked to significantly lower rates of re-offending.**

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This paper is about effective practice in probation work. It reports on a study undertaken in Community Corrections in Victoria, Australia. Although 'Community Corrections' replaced the term 'Probation Service' some years ago in Victoria, the structure of the Service is similar to that of the Probation Service in the UK. It provides supervision of offenders on community corrections orders and parole, and co-ordination of treatment programmes. An important point to note is that, unlike in the UK, Victorian probation officers are not required to have a specific professional qualification to obtain employment in Community Corrections. They tend to have backgrounds in a range of disciplines including, for example, criminology, social work, youth work and psychology.

'What is effective practice?' is of course a complex question, and the complexities of measuring effectiveness in probation work are well articulated by McNeill (2000) in an

earlier edition of *Probation Journal*. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper effective practice is defined in perhaps limited terms, as that which leads to reduced rates of re-offending. The reduction of re-offending is viewed as one legitimate aim of probation.

Some of the research, particularly the more recent meta-analyses, suggests that correctional interventions including probation supervision may be effective, ineffective or even harmful, depending on how the intervention is structured and delivered (Andrews *et al*, 1990; Andrews, 2000; Gendreau, 1996; Lipsey, 1991). This paper provides a summary of a study conducted in Australia in the early to mid-1990s which supports this view; it also discusses why some probation officers choose to make use of more effective practices and some choose not to. It then discusses some impediments to and strategies for implementing more effective practice.

## The Victorian Study

The methodology and results of the study have been reported in detail elsewhere (Trotter, 1995, 1996, 1999a) and a summary only is presented here. The study was based on the hypothesis that probation officers would be more effective if they made use of certain practice skills. These included:

1. Modelling pro-social values and alternatives to criminal behaviour, reinforcing and rewarding pro-social expressions and actions of clients (for example, empathy for victims or reduced drug use), and challenging pro-criminal actions or expressions; and,
2. Working through a problem-solving process which focuses on offence-related issues, but which also allows clients to define their problems in their own terms.

The project involved: offering training to probation officers in the skills outlined above; gathering data on the extent to which they used the skills through analysis of file notes and client questionnaires; finding out how clients responded to the use of these skills; and analysing police records to determine whether there was a relationship between client recidivism and the use of those skills.

It was clear that those probation officers who used the skills and who undertook training in the model had clients with lower recidivism. It was also apparent that a number of factors influenced whether or not the probation officers made use of the model.

## Resistance to Effective Practice

The issue of resistance to effective practice in corrections has often been discussed, particularly in response to the continued presence of punitive programmes which

seem to exacerbate offending rather than address it (e.g. Tonry & Hamilton, 1995). Whilst it might be argued that our knowledge about what does and does not work is in a developmental stage, it seems clear that some things work better than others. Why then do some individual staff and some corrections departments continue to make use of ineffective practices? If something works, why not do it? The Victorian probation study sheds some light on these questions.

The study involved offering a five-day training course on effective practice to a group of 32 probation officers and asking them to make use of what they learned with their clients. Each of the probation officers was invited to make use of the skills with their next ten clients and participate in ongoing skill-based seminars. The workers and clients were then followed up over 12 months and 48 months.

Eight probation officers were promoted, transferred or left the service within the first six months and were therefore excluded from the project. Of the remaining 24 officers, 12 withdrew, offering a number of reasons for doing so, including pressure of work, pending leave and so on. So half of the probation officers who undertook the initial training course chose not to use the practices and their clients subsequently offended more. After one year, 40% (42 out of their 105 clients) had committed further offences, compared to 25% (26 out of 104 clients) for those who continued with the project,  $p = .02$ . The offence rates for the clients of those who withdrew from the project were similar to the randomly selected control group (37%, 58 out of 157 clients). The differences between the groups were sustained after four years.

If it were possible to determine why these probation officers chose not to use the principles, this might help in future attempts to foster effective supervision practices. The data was therefore examined in an attempt to identify differences between those who continued with the project and chose to use the principles and

those who chose not to continue.

A number of factors were examined, including years in the job, attendance at training courses, type of education and personality characteristics of workers. There were no identifiable differences between the groups in terms of years in the job or previous training. Those who continued with the project were not more or less experienced, or more inclined to seek out training. There were differences, however, in terms of academic background and personality characteristics. Two things in particular stood out – type of education and the pro-social orientation of the worker.

## Educational Background

The probation officers in the study included people with:

- Four year degrees in social work
- Two and three year degrees or diplomas in welfare
- Degrees and diplomas in criminology and criminal justice
- General arts degrees (a few with psychology majors)
- Diplomas or degrees in youth work
- No tertiary qualifications

There is some reason to believe that social workers and welfare trained staff might be more inclined towards the use of the effective practice skills than those trained in other disciplines. Problem solving is one of the key components of the effective practice model offered in the Victorian project, and is an approach largely developed in social work. In fact problem solving is arguably the predominant social work method (see Trotter, 1999b).

There is some research support for the importance of a human service (or treatment or welfare or counselling) component of effective corrections programmes (Andrews, 2000; Bondeson, 1994; Will, 1995). Even the most punitive programmes seem to do better when they

have a treatment or welfare component. This is pointed out, for example, by Will (1995) in relation to intensive supervision programmes and by McKenzie (1995) in relation to boot camps.

There is also some research support for the notion that social workers might have clients who offend less. A Swedish study (Bondeson, 1994) found that social workers who were lay supervisors in probation had clients with significantly (about 40%) lower re-offending rates in comparison to police officers who were also employed as lay supervisors in probation.

The Victorian study also supports the value of welfare education. Social workers and welfare trained staff were more likely to stay in the project (5 out of 12 compared to 1 out of 12). In total 98 probation officers were included in the sample (including those who withdrew from the project and those in the randomly selected control group). Data was collected on the educational background of 85 of those probation officers (at the time of data collection 13 staff were on leave or were unable to be contacted for some other reason). Nineteen of the 85 staff had qualifications in social work or welfare. As shown in Table 1 the ratings by research officers of file notes suggested that welfare trained staff were more likely to use the effective practice skills, particularly the problem solving skills.

**Table 1 – Welfare Education and Use Of Casework Skills**

	Welfare Trained Staff	Other Staff
Mean rating out of 10 on overall use of casework skills observed in file notes, $p = <.05$ .	3.8	2.8
Mean rating out of 3 on frequency of file notes referring to problem solving, $p = <.05$ .	1.74	1.58
Mean rating out of 3 on frequency of file notes referring to pro-social modelling, ns.	1.61	1.49

The 94 clients supervised by welfare trained staff also offended less frequently than the 225 clients supervised by staff with other training as shown in Table 2. (Note that the breached measure includes breaches of the probation/parole order by further offence or by failure to comply with conditions.)

**Table 2 – Breaches By Education Of Probation Officers**

	<b>Welfare n = 94</b>	<b>Other n = 225</b>
Breached 1 yr <.05	26% (24)	38% (86)

In summary, probation officers with a background in social work and welfare were more likely to involve themselves in the training, more likely to make use of the effective practices and more likely to have clients with low breach rates. This seems explicable in terms of the nature of social work education and in terms of the research about effective practice.

## Personality Characteristics

Studies by Andrews *et al* (1979) and Trotter (1990) have suggested that probation officers who score high on the California Personality Inventory (CPI) socialization scale are more likely to model and reinforce pro-social actions and expressions of clients. The CPI aims to measure the extent to which people have a pro-social or pro-criminal disposition. People who rate highly are more likely to have a law-abiding ethic, to be socially sensitive, empathic, optimistic and self confident (Megargee, 1972). Those who rate lowest on the scale are long-term prisoners. A large number of studies of validity and reliability have been done on the socialization scale (*ibid*).

In other words, it seems that some probation officers have a more pro-social disposition than others and those workers are more inclined to use the principles of

pro-social modelling. This was again seen in the Victorian study. Those probation officers who had a more pro-social disposition and scored highly on the scale, were more likely to show evidence in file notes of using the principles of pro-social modelling and reinforcement. The study showed that the mean socialization score for officers using pro-social modelling was 35.7, compared to 33.8 for those who did not use it.

Where workers scored high on the socialization scale they were also more likely to participate in the project. The mean scores for those who participated in the project and those who did not were, respectively, 36.69 and 32.34. As in the earlier Victorian study (Trotter, 1990) probation officers who scored high on the socialization scale also had clients with lower breach rates. Those with low socialization had clients who breached (including re-offences) at a rate of 42% (33/79), while those with high socialization had clients who breached (including re-offences) at a rate of 30% (35/115).

In summary, those who scored high on the socialization scale were more inclined to use the principles of pro-social modelling and reinforcement, more inclined to participate in the project and more inclined to have clients with lower breach rates.

## The Influence of Training

It is apparent, therefore, that there are factors which pre-dispose probation officers to use one or other of the effective practice skills. It is interesting to consider whether the training they received also contributed to their effectiveness. Does the development of an effective Probation Service rest simply on getting the right staff or can staff be taught to be effective?

The data does suggest that the training made a difference. A logistic regression analysis taking into account whether or not

workers participated in training, their socialization scores, type of education and risk levels of clients, suggests that training was a significant factor associated with lower recidivism (Table available from the author).

Whilst educational background seemed to predispose workers towards the use of the model, the regression analysis suggests that the recidivism rates were more related to participation in the skills training and worker socialization levels rather than the welfare education itself. It seems that the effectiveness of the welfare trained probation officers relates to their willingness to participate in training, their greater use of problem solving and their higher socialization levels (36.1 for welfare and 34.8 for other probation officers  $p = .06$ ).

## Conclusion

What does all this mean? The use of certain skills by probation officers is related to reduced offending by clients. These skills include pro-social modelling and problem solving. This seems clear and has been demonstrated a number of times (e.g. Andrews *et al.*, 1979; Trotter, 1990, 1996). It is also consistent with the increasing volume of research about what works (e.g. Gendreau, 1996; McGuire, 1995). It is also clear that some probation officers are more disposed towards the use of these skills than others.

What does this suggest about selection and training? It seems that the link between social work and probation is a productive one. Social work and probation work has a long history in the United Kingdom and to a lesser extent in Australia. These links may be for good reason. It is interesting to note that in New Zealand in the mid-1990s a decision was made that all probation officers would be trained as social workers and considerable energy and expense was devoted to this process.

It is important to point out that this study did not provide any comparison between social work and welfare trained probation officers, with probation officers with training in psychology or other counselling courses. It may be that other courses of this nature provide probation officers with the 'human service' skills in the same way that social work courses do.

This study does suggest, however, that probation services would do well to continue to employ staff with social work or welfare training, or alternatively develop other methods of assessing the problem solving or 'human service' skills of potential probation officers.

It is apparent that pro-social probation officers do better. Is it practical or desirable to use the CPI socialization scale in the selection of staff? Three separate studies conducted in Australia and Canada have suggested that this would lead to reduced client re-offending rates. On the other hand, whilst the socialization scale has been tested with large samples in many different settings (Megargee, 1972) it was developed more than forty years ago and it seems dated. It also requires supervision by a psychologist to administer and score. There may also be some potential industrial issues in using psychological scales to select staff. Nevertheless there is a good argument for asking potential staff to at least demonstrate their knowledge of and interest in the principles of pro-social modelling and reinforcement.

This study also provides support for the value of training in effective practice skills. It is apparent that training helps probation officers develop their skills whether they have social work or welfare education or whether they have high or low levels of socialization.

Finally, it is apparent that a combination of selection and training in effective practice skills has the potential to make a real impact on recidivism rates in probation. All that is required is the willingness to develop the practices on the part of politicians, administrators and probation staff.

## Author

Dr. Chris Trotter is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at Monash University, Caulfield 3145, Australia. He previously worked as a Probation Officer and Manager in Community Corrections. E-mail: [chris.trotter@arts.monash.edu.au](mailto:chris.trotter@arts.monash.edu.au)

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