Probation practice as social work – viewpoints of practitioners in New Zealand

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Abstract

Earlier arguments advanced by Gibbs and King (2001) regarding the status of probation practice as social work are considered drawing upon information collected from probation officers and service managers as part of a doctoral study on probation practice and the contribution of leadership to the achievement of effective service delivery. The findings are presented under three headings: social work values and beliefs; social work training; and the knowledge base for practice. The participants asserted that probation practice should draw upon a range of knowledge, including social work and psychology. They expressed their concern at the emphasis placed on the relatively narrow psychological framework currently embraced by the Probation Service and the consequent lack of engagement of alternative explanations of deviance. The participants also suggested that social work knowledge provides an understanding of human behaviour that can be used to inform practice, and that social work theories provide a frame of reference upon which to base effective, accountable practice that will decrease the uncertainty of a practitioner's work with clients. It is concluded, on the basis of the evidence presented, that there is overall support for the contention that probation practice is social work.

Introduction

For some years there has been an ongoing debate in New Zealand as to whether probation practice should be viewed as a field of social work practice aligned with criminal justice, or as a distinct form of practice in its own right. Since the mid-1990s in particular, the challenge to develop scientifically validated practice knowledge has resulted in social work and psychology competing for ascendancy in their capacity to inform both probation policy and practice. In light of this struggle, this paper examines the viewpoints of a sample of probation officers and service managers to determine whether they consider probation practice to be social work. This self-construction is important because it affects the degree to which staff are aligned with the direction of practice promoted by senior managers; and because the degree of alignment will, in turn, affect the level of staff commitment towards implementing official policies and practices.

Gibbs and King (2001) posed the question 'Is probation work social work?' In tackling this question they identified and reviewed the long-standing influence of social work values, theories, knowledge and skills as a foundation for probation. They commented that while many New Zealand probation officers do not have formal social work training, the in-house competency-based training model developed by the Community Probation Service is 'largely based on the NZQA (New Zealand Qualifications Authority) social work standards'. They also noted that probation work had always been 'underpinned by social work values' such as belief in the worth and intrinsic value of people, respect for clients and the right to self-determination. (Gibbs and King, 2001, p. 14). Debate regarding the credibility of these values has been pointed out in arguments advanced by Nellis (1995) regarding new values developed from a criminological framework (e.g. anti-custodialism, community safety and restorative justice) that are thought to more accurately reflect the focus of contemporary probation practice. In regard to the skill base for probation, Gibbs and King (2001, p. 14) observed that 'the range of social work skills that social work students are currently taught are entirely applicable to probation work'.

An informal survey of 14 probation officers indicated overall support for 'the idea of social work as a basis for probation work, especially in terms of principles, training and the skills used' (Gibbs and King, 2001, p. 15). However, Gibbs and King drew attention to probation officers' diminishing awareness of social work as a basis for probation, associating this with a shift from the traditional welfare and client-centred focus to a concern with effectiveness and an emphasis on punishment and surveillance. The introduction of new systems, terminology and a lack of social work training were also identified as influencing the level of association with social work. In relation to professional identity, Gibbs and King (2001: 15) noted that most probation staff, including those trained as social workers, did not view themselves as belonging to either 'the profession of social work' or 'the Association' which supports social workers. Furthermore, the New Zealand Association of Probation officers had 'fizzled out through lack of membership activity and…discouragement from the agency' (Gibbs and King, 2001: 15).

The status of probation as social work has also been raised indirectly by a number of New Zealand researchers in their discussion of other issues. For example: Dale (1997), investigating probation intervention with violent offenders, developed and assessed an intervention model against best practice standards drawn from social work; Nash (1998), considering the development of social work qualifications, noted the influence of academics with probation experience in the United Kingdom who played key roles in developing social work education in New Zealand; and O'Donoghue, Baskerville and Trlin (1998) and O'Donoghue (1999) located professional supervision in the Community Probation Service firmly within the social work arena.

Method

The information presented in this paper was collected as part of a doctoral study on probation practice and the contribution of leadership to the achievement of effective service delivery in the New Zealand Probation Service during a period of major change (Dale, 2006). The following three aspects of the participants' construction of probation practice are relevant to this paper:

- their understanding of the professional foundation of probation;
- the values and beliefs that inform their practice; and
- their concept of best practice, which embraces their understanding of the knowledge base, the models they use in everyday practice and their views regarding the construct of practice wisdom.

The research participants comprised a purposeful sample of 27 probation officers and eight service managers involved in front-line service delivery. They were recruited (with the approval of the general manager), from among those employed in the Northern and Southern administrative regions of the New Zealand Community Probation Service. Qualitative data was collected in March and September 2001 via personal in-depth interviews and augmented by focus group discussions.

The age distribution of the two groups of participants was more or less as expected; while the probation officers were spread over all of the specified age groups (20-50+) with half under age 40, the service managers were slightly older with none under 30 years of age. Overall, 58 percent of the participants were female and 42 percent male. However, it should be noted that whereas the majority of the probation officers were female (62 percent), the majority of the service managers were male (57 percent). Only two (7.7 percent) of the probation officers and none of the service managers identified themselves as Maori – a significant feature given the ethnic composition of the client population (48 percent Maori). Although a high proportion (70 percent) held a tertiary qualification, just 26 percent of the participants held a social work degree or diploma. Finally, 50 percent of the probation officers had up to five years' experience in the Probation Service, and 38.5 percent had 11+ years. In comparison, only one service manager had up to five years' experience with the others almost equally divided between 6-10 and 11+ years' experience. Overall, it stands to reason that those appointed to the position of service manager would be persons with more experience of employment in the Probation Service, and therefore somewhat older as noted above.

Research findings

The participants' views are presented in three parts concerning: the social work values and beliefs that inform their practice; social work training; and the knowledge base required for practice.

Social work values and beliefs

Social work was identified by the participants as offering applied training and to be especially relevant in relation to the development of the client-practitioner relationship that provided the nexus for effective practice. Their responses indicated an alignment with the core ethical mandates of social work and demonstrated a strong client focus (based upon recognition of the individual's potential to achieve positive change) that reflected a commitment to client empowerment to achieve self-determination. Comments made by three probation officers are illustrative of these views:

> People can change and it's motivating them to change [that] is [probably] the most powerful value that I have.
> This has got something to do with the expectation that the person can change and that they'll be instrumental in that change.

> I try to empower; I believe in empowerment of the individual to make their own choices. I try to encourage people to work in the system how they can best succeed through it.

There was clear evidence that the participants held client-centred values and these influenced their interpretation and construction of practice. For example, they expressed concern that: the client not be likened to a commodity to be manipulated in order to achieve organisational objectives (such as programme volume targets); respect for the client be demonstrated by separating the person from their behaviour; and, as illustrated in the following comments by two probation officers, that the unique worth of each client be recognised:

> The basic values are still the same pretty much: valuing other human beings; respecting their rights and their abilities to manage their lives. Just honesty and an openness in our approach to people.
> We also need to value our client or else what are we doing here? Why are we here?

The participants were also concerned about the diminished status of social work (discussed below) and there was a feeling that any previous sense of professional identity – in particular an alignment with social work – had been challenged by the introduction of more prescribed practice models such as Integrated Offender Management (IOM). It was concluded from observations such as these that many probation officers have experienced and continue to experience tension in practising within a framework that is not fully congruent with a social work model. This concern was expressed clearly by one probation Officer who said that there was:

> Tension between how I would professionally identify myself, and the knowledge base and skill base and the ethics on which I base my practice – tension [as] to what level I am recognised as a professional person and am able to implement that profession in my work, and to what extent I've become a departmental lackey who follows a manual without question.

For another probation Officer the influence of IOM compromised the autonomy she associated with her social work orientation:

> The psychological flavour that's coming through is prescriptive and (coming from a social work background and social work qualifications)…it sort of takes away some of my autonomy as a worker.

Social work training

The Probation Service domain of practice has been defined by the work of probation officers who are currently not required to possess any entry-level tertiary academic qualification or specific vocational training. Historically, the probation officer position has been oriented towards a predominantly social work role and since the 1950s has, arguably, been significantly influenced by social work practice theory. In the 1970s, probation officers were employed under the Social Workers Occupational Class and were required (upon recruitment) to complete a three-month generic social work training course provided by the Department of Social Welfare. Campbell and Marra (2001) note that from the mid 1970s the development of social work programmes at tertiary educational institutions resulted in the direct recruitment of staff qualified for social work and significant numbers of existing staff received support to gain social work qualifications. In 1978 special 'student units' were established in four probation districts and, until disestablished in 1993, they provided fieldwork training and

placement experience for students undertaking degree and diploma courses in social work. In the early 1990s social work achieved legitimacy, albeit briefly, as a professional foundation for practice when (in keeping with developments within the broader social service sector) the Probation Service introduced the Level B Social Work entry qualification and in-post sponsorship of degree and diploma courses. Although this policy was abandoned in 1995 and later replaced by an internal competency framework, relationships between the tertiary institutions and the Probation Service have proved to be enduring with probation still being regarded as a social work 'field of practice'.

As one would expect, therefore, the participants were concerned at a perceived lessening of emphasis on social work training by the Probation Service. For example, many of them observed that the applied nature of social work training prepares the individual for practice, bridging the potential gap between theory and practice:

> The social work training is practice-based so there is no vacuum between the practice and the theory. Social work [training] has held me in really good stead for coming to probation.
> I do think that probation is a specialist form of social work rather than a separate entity in itself. I think that social work should provide a certain knowledge and skill base [we require] for working with individuals.

The foundation of this concern was located in the argument for a broader perspective and basis for practice, in particular noting the relevance of social context in explaining client deviance and in the understanding of practice validity (i.e. probation is not just about a clinical treatment model). However, it was also noted that social work courses might not provide a sufficient criminal justice component such as an understanding of legislation and Probation Service policies and procedures.

Knowledge-base for practice

The responses of many participants evidenced a relatively sophisticated construction of individual practice frameworks based on their experiences within the Probation Service, and an awareness of change in the meta-narrative underpinning the construction of practice. There was agreement that a generic probation officer requires a considerable breadth of knowledge that draws upon a range of disciplines and sources, all of which are important. For example, it was argued that:

> …having social work and psychology, a mixture of both uses all the strategies that are around.
> It's important to understand all of them. The model I feel most comfortable with at the moment is a holistic model, which accounts for all perspectives in equal portions, including spiritual, which you could reframe into cultural.

Indeed, a cautionary note was offered by a number of participants regarding the selection of just one approach at the expense of others. For example, two probation officers said:

> I'd hate to put it in a box and say that everyone must have a social work degree or have a sociology or psychology degree. We run courses for things that fill the gaps.
> I think that you need to have some evidence to back up your decision to use a particular model. But at the same time I think you need to be quite flexible in terms of your approach…one model doesn't fit all [cases].

The change in the meta-narrative underpinning probation practice, from one informed predominantly by social work to one resting upon a psychological framework, was viewed critically as being reductionist. Staff with a strong allegiance to social work as a profession felt as though they had been devalued and their practice perspective discounted. A service manager pointed out that (at the time of the interview) the General Manager of the Probation Service did not appear to see the value of social work training for probation officers and that the Service no longer offered encouragement for staff to study social work. The Probation Service was seen to be moving toward a narrower range of knowledge and skills, and the service manager expressed concern at the lack of engagement by the Probation Service of alternative (e.g. social, structural and cultural) explanations of deviance:

> It seems that probation is no longer an evolving tradition. It's sort of a 'one stop shop' explanation of crime, [a] cure for crime. It's a kind of intellectual totalitarianism around deviance. They don't encourage people to do a Diploma in Criminology or social work degree – it's a McDonaldisation of the Probation Service; we've got it as long as it is on the menu.

A second service manager demonstrated an awareness of the politicisation of practice and expressed caution that the knowledge base should not be restrictive:

> We've been through a period of right wing governments with very many individual rights – individual responsibility-type philosophies over all policies. In the Probation Service we've come into this time of psychologically-based individual treatment, individual responsibility, totally ignoring other social factors. I believe in the individual's responsibility for their own behaviour; we don't want to get into explaining it totally by the fact that they're poor or unemployed. However, I think we do need to redress the balance so [that we can consider and tackle questions such as] what's the impact of social issues on crime? On people's behaviour?

A third service manager framed probation practice as a specialism within the broader field of social work, stating that:

> This notion of forensic social work is where I'm heading at the moment. There's a foundation body of knowledge in social work and our speciality is probably going to have a significant emphasis on the psychology of criminal conduct. We would be employing qualified social workers who, when they come to us, do further study on the psychology of criminal conduct and its application.

Conclusion

A question surrounds the continuing usefulness and viability of social work as a foundation for probation practice in light of major changes in the practice context since 1990 and the challenge for the Probation Service to maintain credibility within an increasingly politicised criminal justice sector. Should probation be viewed as a field of social work practice aligned with criminal justice or as a distinct form of practice? Gibbs and King (2001:16) concluded that:

> No-one can deny the strong social work heritage of probation and for us, the answer to the question 'Is probation social work?' is a definite yes and that probation can only function effectively in the new millennium by continuing to draw upon social work values, knowledge and skills.

Is their conclusion supported by the evidence presented in this paper? Overall, the answer to this question is in the affirmative for two reasons. First, the participants' responses provide substantial support for the view that probation practice draws upon social work theory and practice. In particular, their responses indicate that:

- there is alignment with the core ethical mandates of social work;
- the applied nature of social work training is viewed as providing a bridge between theory and practice that is relevant to probation practice; and
- that they were concerned about the perceived recent diminution of social work.

Second, the participants demonstrated their awareness of change in the meta-narrative underpinning probation practice and responded by:

- asserting that probation practice should draw upon a range of knowledge, which included social work and psychology; and
- expressing their concern at the emphasis placed on the relatively narrow psychological framework of IOM and the consequent lack of engagement of alternative explanations of deviance.

Issues surrounding the construction of probation practice (notably the type of knowledge and training that should inform practice) are by no means unique to New Zealand. In the United Kingdom the failure of social work education to meet challenges facing probation, such as the politicised nature of the practice environment and the need to engage other approaches to working with clients, resulted in the introduction in 1997-98 of a tertiary level Diploma in Probation Studies as the entry qualification for probation officers to replace the Diploma in Social Work. There has since been ongoing debate about the adequacy of this approach (Bhui, 2001; Nellis, 2001, 2003; Smith, 2005).

Implications for future practice development

A substantial challenge emerges regarding the future of the Community Probation Service in New Zealand. This challenge concerns the development of practice which should be flexible and incorporate international influences while remaining responsive to features and events that reflect the dynamic character of the local environment. There is a need to challenge and enhance the new meta-narrative in a way that: recognises the unique character of probation practice; meets the requirements of practice validity; and wins commitment from probation staff. While the positive contributions of business management and psychology should be retained, there is a need to include social work perspectives. Social work knowledge provides an understanding of human behaviour that can be used to inform practice, and social work theories provide a frame of reference upon which to base effective, accountable practice that will decrease the uncertainty of a practitioner's work with clients. The values, beliefs and ethical code that underpin social work are also important to winning the 'hearts and minds' of probation officers.

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