

U THINKING IN PRACTICE SEMINAR ONE: B

May 11th 2009
University of Birmingham

Speakers: Professor Hazel Kemshall, De Montfort University. Dr Kerry Baker, University of Oxford. Jason Wood, De Montfort University. Paul Mason, Senior Consultant, GHK Consulting Ltd

SEMINAR PAPERS:

The participants in this seminar had a busy and interesting day. After the speaker's presentations (see below) four workshops took place two looking at practice issues and two looking at management issues. Papers from the day included here are as follows:

		Page No
ABSTRACTS:		
Understanding Risk Decisions: From Risk Tools to Context and Contingency	Hazel Kemshall	2
(Re)Conceptualising Assessment Tools: Understanding and Explaining Offending Behaviour.	Kerry Baker	2
Young People, Risk and Responsibility	Jason Wood,	3
Techniques for Engaging Young Offenders: In Search of Evidence,	Paul Mason, GHK Consulting.	3
WORKSHOPS:		
Summary of discussion in the practice issues workshops		4
Summary of discussion in the management issues workshop		6

ABSTRACTS:

Understanding Risk Decisions: From Risk Tools to Context and Contingency

Professor Hazel Kemshall : DeMontfort University

The paper explored the role of context and contingency in risk decision making, and how this can impact on both the decisions made by offenders and also by staff. A focus on context and contingency helps us to understand why the notion of the 'rational actor' is something of a myth, but conversely that when people act against risk information/advice/education they are not necessarily acting 'irrationally'. Rather, they may be acting rationally if only one understands their starting point, the constraints on their choices, and how people actually weigh up and act on risk information. The 'rationality mistake' is often made by policy makers and senior managers when introducing risk tools, and risk policies, with attendant frustration and blamism of staff when things do not go according to plan. Similarly, probation staff can presume rational choice from offenders and then encounter frustration when offenders seen to act irrationally or against 'good advice'. Decisions are also made in social networks, and within existing systems and procedures, this can mean that changes in risk procedures can be stymied by existing rules, both formal and informal and policy change and training does not always reap the expected rewards.

The paper also explored the important role of flexibility and critical thinking about possible risk outcomes in assessing complex situations risk factors in situations of uncertainty. Risk assessment using 'decision trees' was explored and the potential benefit for complex cases was reviewed.

(Re)Conceptualising Assessment Tools: Understanding and Explaining Offending Behaviour.

Kerry Baker Oxford University.

Assessment tools are currently a central element of practice in probation and youth justice services and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. The impact which such tools have on practice depends partly on how practitioners perceive them and it was suggested in this presentation that we perhaps need to think again about the way in which they are used. The purpose of assessment is to develop understanding of offending behaviour and to guide interventions but the current use of assessment tools is focused too much on moving quickly to decisions about action and may not give sufficient attention to the task of understanding

behaviour. This can be illustrated using the metaphor of a ‘sat-nav’ i.e. practitioners may see assessment tools as a way of getting to the destination (in this case, the risk classification and the intervention plan) but may not really understand how they arrived at that point. It was suggested that more attention needs to be given to helping practitioners see assessment tools as a means to develop knowledge rather than just as a way of finding the ‘right’ answer. This will require a greater focus on promoting explanation and analysis of information. It is also time to reconsider the role of narrative in assessment – how can we make more use of narrative in assessment whilst ensuring that practice remains focused, rigorous and analytical?

Young People, Risk and Responsibility **Jason Wood, De Montfort University**

This presentation is based on qualitative research with nearly 100 young people and explored how they define and experience active citizenship. The study explored the interplay between risk taking and social responsibility. Of key importance, the risks that young people pose and the extent to which they acted in socially responsible ways were defined differently by young people and adults, often leading to tensions. Practitioners need to maintain a critical approach to understanding definitions of responses to risk, including seeking a better of understanding of how young people articulate and rationalise their own experiences.

For more information about the study, please do get in touch with Jason – jjwood01@dmu.ac.uk.

Techniques for Engaging Young Offenders: In Search of Evidence, **Paul Mason, GHK Consulting.**

In his presentation Paul Mason reflected on the findings from an evidence review, conducted for the YJB’s Key Elements of Effective Practice (KEEP) series, entitled ‘Effective Techniques for Engaging Young People who Offend’ (YJB, 2008). The presentation highlighted the lack of evidence about the effectiveness of different techniques of working with young offenders and those at risk. Evaluations and studies of effective interventions fail to explore this essential element, beyond discussing the more general issues of implementation or programme fidelity. The review was commissioned as a ‘systematic evidence review’ but this approach could not be applied. The presentation put forward the argument that evidence from practice literature as well as research studies should be considered as valid. It contains valuable learning and systematic reviews have a limited

value for practice. Guidance for evidence-based practice should draw upon a range of sources if it is to reflect and inform the realities of practice.

Paul.Mason@ghkint.com

Engaging with risk: limitations and opportunities of risk assessment tools

Summary of discussion in the practice issues workshops.

The seminar focused on recent practice literature which re-asserts the centrality of engagement and effective working relationships with offenders as a key component for positive outcomes. It explored the potential to respond more appropriately to issues of diversity and to move away from a ‘one size fits all’ approach to risk decision making as part of service delivery. Participants represented operational managers, performance managers and practitioners in both Probation and Youth Justice. Following on from the morning speakers, participants were asked to self-select a workshop in order to focus on either management or practice issues arising from the morning presentations. Those relating more to practitioners included:

- Threats to professionalism and a narrowing and limiting of the task
- A negative impact on the engagement and rapport established with offenders
- Not seeing the offender in context
- A restrictive and unhelpful approach to supervision planning
- Defensive rather than defensible practice

Some of the problems identified

(i) Lack of conscious application of theory

Discussion: Day to day assessment practice may be underpinned by a range of theoretical concepts, but this is obscured by the OASys or Asset format and process. This may mean that theory is being applied superficially or in a limited or discriminatory manner. This may lead to a neglect of the complex picture and a tokenistic adoption of “theory” in this context may be used to reinforce assumptive thinking in terms of “character” and “type.”

(ii) Attention of the agency to completion rather than quality.

Discussion: Training for OASys has departed from the accredited training the trainers programme and in many areas has become didactic and task centred. Some practitioners are completing assessments without any solid grounding in relevant theories of behaviour and risk prediction.

(iii) Varying knowledge bases

Discussion: Assessments in the prison and in the community will be completed by practitioners with varied experiences of training and varying levels of qualification, so that they bring different amounts of knowledge and skill to the task. This affects completion but is often unacknowledged.

(iv) Limited engagement and rapport

Discussion: When using OASys the process orientated approach impacts upon the rapport being built with an offender and engagement as a valued concept of professional practice is also often lost. This is also true of supervision planning using OASys the pull though document was not considered to be a user friendly, accessible format The routine use of standardised worksheets as a method of “evidencing” that interventions have taken place point to a climate of defensiveness rather than defensible practice and further inhibit individualised relationship building with offenders.

(v) Lack of professional confidence

Discussion: Practitioners can feel unsure of the degree of professional autonomy and discretion they possess and how to exercise it well. Even simple changes to the methods they employ to gather information on an offender, at the initial assessment stage, may feel like a challenge to the organisational orthodoxy.

Some Solutions

(i) Improving thinking about assessment and planning.

Discussion: Understanding the offenders ‘story’ in more depth was felt to be important it required practitioners to think more creatively about processes of information gathering and timescales and about the active involvement of the offender in the process. This was sometimes likely to be at odds with organisational expectations. Suggestions included a greater use of home visits, contact with significant others, information sharing and reflection with other agencies and colleagues, further time spent building a rapport and maximising engagement.

(ii) Space for professional development

Discussion: There are implications for training and development, for the supervision of staff and for the way practice is quality assured and targets set. Practitioners may be more willing to engage with new emerging ways of thinking with time and space for reflection, exploring how theory may link to and indeed build upon existing thoughts and practices.

(iii) Using varied methods

Discussion: Practitioners want to actively engage offenders in the process of change from assessment onwards and to use different methods for example eco maps and the rapport and empowerment established on some of the non accredited programmes for female offenders. There are implications for the use of work sheets as a way of evidencing practice; how else could interventions be recorded and integrity maintained, while allowing more diversity and individuality in approach?

(iv) A whole organisational approach

Discussion: Following the mornings inputs practitioners agreed that how you thought about the process of assessment and intervention and how you saw the place of risk assessment tools would affect the way you went about the job. While this was a new idea that wasn't fully developed in the discussions, there was a consensus that an understanding of the task that moved beyond the functional and the completion of a technical process should be reflected at all levels of the organisation, not just by practitioners but by, policy makers and managers.

Engaging with risk: limitations and opportunities of risk assessment tools: Summary of the discussion in the management issues workshops

The seminar focused on recent practice literature which re-asserts the centrality of engagement and effective working relationships with offenders as a key component for positive outcomes. It explored the potential to respond more appropriately to issues of diversity and to move away from a 'one size fits all' approach to risk decision making as part of service delivery. Participants represented operational managers, performance managers and practitioners in both Probation and Youth Justice. Following on from the morning speakers, participants were asked to self-select a workshop in order to focus on either management or practice issues arising from the morning presentations. Those relating more to management included:

- Increased complexity of what is expected – "time chained to PC"
- ASSET /OASys - be clear about what tools do and do not say
- Is political rhetoric setting the agenda?
- How do managers help practitioners shift from feeling that there is no time to thinking about quality assessment?
- How can the supervision process help?

Some of the problems identified

(i) Lack of time to do a good assessment due to the amount of paperwork.

Discussion: Some Police Forces have abandoned specific targets in order to free up time. Might the Probation Service do this? "Unless we can find a way of spending more time with offenders we're on a hiding to nothing". Does a full OASys have to be undertaken on each offender? Can more flexibility be given to offender managers?

(ii) Who is doing the face-to-face work?

Discussion: Irony of the most skilled practitioners not interacting with offenders as much as less well-qualified PSOs. Quality seen as getting alongside people/focusing on the relationship rather than producing "clone-like people who do it by the book".

(iii) Design of OASys / ASSET

Discussion: OASys can hinder the thinking process of the assessor; for example, it does not allow practitioners to complete their offence analysis at the end of the assessment process based upon all the information they have gathered. ASSET is more flexible.

Developing practitioners skills and knowledge

(i) Initial Training and Induction

Discussion: From the start practitioners need to understand the purpose and the limitations of assessment tools and how they fit into the wider picture of work with the offender. They need to understand that record keeping, analysis and practice are all part of the same process: that the practitioner pulls the information together and does the analysis, the tool only records the analysis.

(ii) Time Management

Discussion: There needs to be a balance between time spent on researching, recording and analysing information and time spent engaging the offender on ongoing work. It was questioned whether concentrating on getting everything right in the tools changes anything in terms of the outcomes for offenders.

(iii) What is a 'good enough' OASys/ASSET assessment?

Discussion: Expectations must be clear; practitioners need to be helped to see tools as live documents that need regular updating rather than just being used for initial assessments and reports, and to understand that their OASys /ASSET assessments will be used elsewhere, and that this wider usage is part of their purpose.

Supervision and quality assurance processes

(i) Understanding the purpose of assessment

Discussion: Supervision should reinforce a basic understanding of the assessment process and how tools can help but should also address quality more holistically – quality assurance as well as quality control. Emphasis should be on evidence of analysis e.g. Is the Risk of Harm assessment linked to the sentence plan? Supervision is an opportunity to have a conversation with the member of staff about this aspect of their work and how s/he arrived at the judgements represented in the plan. It was questioned whether reading assessments alone was enough to give an insight into the standard of information gathering. Should practitioners be observed from time-to-time?

(ii) Supervision and high risk

Discussion: Are we 'skilling up' workers sufficiently to challenge and confront offenders? It takes good management structures to ensure that practitioners are taken away from their comfort zones, and also the style of the supervisor is important when it comes to challenging officers about their practice. It is also the role of a supervisor to help practitioners hone their skills - some practitioners get stuck and have to be helped to develop.

(iii) Supervision and diversity

Discussion: Managers need to address issues in supervision that the tools cannot address - such as diversity issues that may affect the interaction with the offender and therefore the analysis. (e.g. gendered perspectives on risk). Routinely reading assessments increases managers' awareness of perspectives and potential bias. Does OASys allow a rounded picture of the individual offender to be drawn? Some felt there was sufficient room to add comments but practitioners need to feel empowered and confident enough to do this. This relates to the need for practitioners to understand why they are using OASys. The boxes should not drive the assessment but support systematic recording and analysis.

(iv) Danger of defensive completion:

Discussion: Use of OASys for SFOs leads to writers either leaving things out - for fear of opening up a set of problems they cannot or are not confident in addressing - or trying to cover everything at the expense of analysis / clarity in their assessment. In Youth Justice there is a feeling that the scope of assessments is being broadened to pay more attention to safeguarding (after Baby P). It was argued that whilst this is a valid use, many of the young people entering the youth justice system present challenging behaviour as a result of

unresolved issues they themselves were facing as small children and this presents a challenge to practitioners who have to balance the offending issues (the reason why the young people are being assessed) and deeper and more complex psychological as well as welfare concerns which may not be their direct responsibility to address.