

Reflections on work with vulnerable women

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Reflections on work with vulnerable women: connecting, cans of worms, closures and coping.

Abstract

This paper brings a close analysis to bear on tensions in the main discourses within probation and the wider criminal justice system, namely between punitive, target-driven approaches and the opposing gender responsive, strengths based, humanitarian, individualised ones. Drawing on a pilot study, which is an early part of the author's PhD, the article explores how probation practitioners attempt to work constructively within the constraints of statutory supervision and how the pressures and dilemmas are managed. Qualitative research methods were used whereby data was collected through videoing the supervision sessions of probation officers and women service users, as well as participant observation at probation meetings and in probation offices. Preliminary findings present new perspectives on current debates. Approaches of holistic women's centres are looked at alongside those of probation. The paper argues that rather than imposing a probation framework onto these voluntary organisations it is their philosophical underpinnings and structures, placing individuals' social needs at the forefront of practice with women and supporting practitioners to do so, which should be adopted formally within probation settings - Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) and the National Probation Service (NPS).

Holistic women's centres; probation; qualitative research; support; women service users; vulnerability

Introduction

This article focuses on the relationships between women undergoing statutory Orders in the community and their probation officers (POs). I refer to the findings of a pilot study, part of an ongoing PhD, where the fieldwork took place between September 2012 and April 2013 (so prior to the Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) reorganisation). Women offenders' situation within the wider organisational and political context is examined first and then within the probation environment. One-to-one work is explored through videoing supervision sessions, participant observation in probation offices/meetings and interviewing participants. The study concludes that as a skilled and specialist field of work, dealing with vulnerable, disadvantaged and chaotic individuals, constructive organisational structures including in-built practitioner support are warranted. In the short-term the majority of women and their offences are categorised as low risk but this ignores the extensive long term personal damage and the 'knock on' effects within Society (Goldhill, 2009: 17). In the current climate, which prioritises high risk and prolific offenders for financial and political gain, work with women constitutes an area that can easily be de-valued and marginalised.

Small numbers within the Criminal Justice System have contributed to women being either ignored (Devlin, 1998) or treated in the same way as men (Corston, 2007). The Criminal Justice Act, 1993, with its emphasis on 'prison works,' led to a dramatic rise in female incarceration for crimes with low risk of harm but high risk of repeat offending (Gelsthorpe, Sharpe and Roberts, 2007). Over this period increasingly masculinised discourses featured in the criminal justice arena, centralising and supporting 'punishment in the community' and 'What Works' agendas (Farrant, 2006). Opposition from academic analysts - Mair (2004); Bhui, (2006) and Stanley (2009), who vehemently refuted the evidence base, went largely unheeded. Within the Offender Management Model (NOMS, 2005: 13) lip service was paid to Dowden and Andrews' (2004) core correctional skills which included modelling prosocial

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behaviour to form 'warm, open and enthusiastic relationships'; however day-to-day reality of offender management was accredited programmes, National Standards and enforcement, characterised by rigid and mechanistic designs (Farrant, 2006; Fitzgibbon, 2007).

Feminist commentators rejected such approaches in working with women, highlighting the necessity for relational interventions (Rumgay, 2004; McIvor, 2007); a stance similarly embedded in Corston's (2007) review. Corston argued that women's penalty had always been run on dictates from powerful men and this was proving especially destructive for vulnerable women. Raised within the report is the debate weighing the advantages of voluntary over statutory provision; this discussion also achieved prominence in the TR disbandment of the probation service (Grayling, 2012).

Corston, alongside certain academics (Gelsthorpe, 2011; Gelsthorpe and Hedderman, 2012), proposed that women offenders should largely be dealt with through non-statutory providers. At the same time they express concerns about the wider payment by results and privatisation initiatives, namely that TR favours large business interests over the small local schemes currently providing alternative community resources for women service users (WSUs) (Gelsthorpe and Hedderman, 2012). A further criticism is that, by dividing up the probation service, women represent even smaller groups in Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) and the National Probation Service (NPS) and so become easier to overlook (Women in Napo, 2014).

The probation context

What Works (WW) alongside risk, needs, responsivity (RNR) was introduced to embed 'effective practice' founded on research (Chapman and Hough, 1998). The evidence base was underpinned by meta-analytic quantitative data derived from cognitive behavioural interventions with young white male offenders (Shaw and Hannah-Moffatt, 2004). These approaches were then applied to female offenders, and justified on the grounds of 'gender-neutrality' (Blanchette and Brown, 2006: 46). The new risk assessment tool, the Offender Assessment System (OASys), operationalised in 2001, developed similarly; its focus was on criminogenic needs or dynamic risk factors, which were to be targeted by POs. As part of the politically punitive climate, risk of re-offending and risk of harm were prioritised; non-criminogenic needs, such as low self-esteem, victimisation and poor health, which affected women most, became categorised as of little or no importance. Shaw and Hannah-Moffatt (2004: 100) view these developments as gender (and race) blindness rather than gender neutral. Qualitative research has highlighted the importance for women of a therapeutic alliance within supervision (Blanchette and Brown, 2006: 130). By channelling service users away from one-to-one work towards accredited groupwork, the What Works agenda effectively ignored women's desistance pathways.

WSU involvement in What Works accredited programmes is outlined briefly here. Worrall (2002: 141) explains that 'all-women' groups had to reinvent the wheel each time to persuade managers that such programmes 'did not imply managerial weakness in the face of subversive radical feminism'. Few 'women only' groups materialised, partly due to low numbers and geographical dispersal but also to the accreditation panel's repeated rejection of women's programmes for lacking cognitive behaviourist input. The panel's position was that offender programmes could and should simply be tweaked for women (Roberts, 2002; Worrall, 2002b: 142). Having no credible options for women, POs were left with serious ethical dilemmas. Should they subject WSUs to techniques irrelevant to their needs and so likely to be ineffective? Should they insist on WSU attendance in groups where they would

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be the sole female amongst men, many known to be misogynistic, sexually objectifying and domestic violence perpetrators (Roberts, 2002)? Roberts contends that with no meaningful community options on offer, sentencers necessarily resorted to custodial sentences and unsurprisingly this contributed to the dramatic rise in the female prison population (Carlen, 2002; Prison Reform Trust, 2013).

2007-2014 Provision for women in the community

The tone of Corston's report launch in 2007 was critical of imprisonment but also intimated that statutory community provision was unsatisfactory in social justice terms. Compared to provision offered by the Asha women's centre in Worcester, a holistic service focusing specifically on women's needs (Roberts, 2002), probation was portrayed as falling short in its response to women's broader needs. Gelsthorpe (2011: 128) promoted the development of links with voluntary sector providers and depicted the 'imaginative partnerships between women's centres in the community and criminal justice agencies' as notably more productive than lone statutory involvement. Voluntary sector approaches provided 'a greater degree of flexibility and freedom to meet women's real needs' (Gelsthorpe 2011: 136). As noted above, scepticism has crept in over whether such objectives will be realised under the TR agenda (Gelsthorpe and Hedderman, 2012).

Research has tended to be critical of probation, indicating that women themselves prefer contact with voluntary organisations. Calderbank, Fuller and Hardwick (2011: 60) found variable responses to women by offender managers - 'We were somewhat surprised and disappointed by the generally low knowledge base amongst some offender managers on how to deal with women offenders'. In a review of 'poor frontline service responses to adults with multiple needs' (Anderson, 2011) it was stated that- 'POs confirmed offenders' perceptions that they were more concerned with monitoring than offering support....' (Communities and Local Government, 2010 cited by Anderson, 2011: 20)

Holistic women's centres have not escaped criticism. The House of Commons Justice Committee (HCJC) (2013) viewed them as under-used and unsustainable. A study of Together Women (TW), showed effectiveness in preventing reoffending was unproven and low awareness of the project existed amongst the magistracy; those sentencers who knew of the scheme were reluctant to use it because of it being neither mandatory nor restricted to offenders (Joliffe, Hedderman, Palmer and Hollin, 2011). Examples of lack of communication between probation workers and women's centres and cynicism amongst POs about the centres' worth are noted (Calderbank et al., 2011). The national spread of HWCs is uneven, with centres tending to be positioned only in larger towns and cities, creating a post code lottery (Goldhill, 2010). Twenty out of thirty five Probation Trusts had no women's centre projects and nine no gender focused Specified Activity Requirements. (HCJC, 2013). Radcliffe, Hunter and Vass (2013) argue that the evidence base for the effectiveness of HWCs is poor, due to lack of data. Ongoing funding is invariably uncertain leading to redundancies, wastage of experience and talents and having to adopt statutory partnerships' modus operandi in order to survive (Goldhill, 2010).

Worrall (2002b: 148) argues that social justice needs to be actively targeted towards women as a counterbalance to the 'disproportionate...violence and abuse, disproportionate responsibility for parenting and disproportionately limited access to employment'. Doubt has been cast on whether it is possible for either statutory or voluntary organisations to address deep-seated social needs where 'community' is fragmented and unsafe for women (Malloch, McIvor and Burgess, 2014). Notwithstanding these valid arguments, basic good practice is required where individuals can experience fair treatment, feel respected, and are helped to

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obtain a measure of control over their lives. Conversely serious further offences (SFOs), political and public attraction to punitiveness, heavy workloads and targets constrain officers' attempts at constructive interventions. The tick box mentality of What Works militated against the establishment of functional relationships and an understanding of the complexities surrounding the individual (Fitzgibbon, 2007). Even during What Works' high point, at the start of the millennium, many officers continued to view relationships as the lynch pin to productive work and prioritise prosocial modelling and legitimacy (integrity and fairness as authority figures) when and wherever they could (Bottoms, 2002: 101; Annison, Eadie and Knight, 2008: 268). A recent sea change around desistance theories placed professional judgement, offender engagement and relational supervision back on the probation agenda (NOMS, 2010, Rex & Hosking, 2013). This cultural renaissance legitimates relational styles of intervention, seeing them as crucial to supervision and sustaining longer term and broader aims of integration into main-stream society.

Commentators claim that establishing a 'secure base' is fundamental to enabling engagement with vulnerable individuals (Ansbro, 2008; Plechowicz, 2009). Plechowicz's research at a women's centre (2009) found this was provided through consistent, positive, and trusting relationships with practitioners. Staff changes are inevitable but symbolic continuity can be achieved through transparency, clear explanation of what is happening and why and fully briefing the new practitioner taking over the case, so that the individual does not have to revisit old ground (Ansbro, 2008). If not, it is argued that unhealthy experiences of inconsistency and accompanying responses are simply replayed in supervision, in families and on the streets.

These aspects affect both men and women but those working with WSUs face additional moral predicaments. It is debatable how women's victimisation issues should be dealt with - ignored on the basis that they are irrelevant to the criminogenic need criteria in current risk assessment tools, or alternatively highlighted as linking directly or indirectly (through coercion or drug misuse as a coping strategy) to their offending behaviour (Hollin and Palmer 2006; Blanchette and Brown, 2006: 111; Corston, 2007). Engagement with female service users can be hard to establish (Batchelor, 2005) and complex victimisation issues contribute to women being portrayed as difficult, demanding and time-consuming clients within the probation setting (Horn & Evans, 2000; Warner & Gabe, 2008; Hedderman, Palmer & Hollin, 2008).

Background to the pilot study

Rarely is everyday practice observed or analysed, making it difficult to know exactly what takes place behind the closed doors of probation supervision. Heidensohn (2012: 127) acknowledges how problematic it is to access women in the community (as compared to female prisoners) and consequently minimal research has been carried out on supervision interaction. Several research studies include interviews with POs but Rex and Trotter (cited by McCulloch, 2010) found that officers' statements are not necessarily consistent with their practice.

Qualitative research methods were employed to gain a more in-depth understanding of the participants' perspectives – their thoughts and feelings throughout the process. Ruch (2011) describes the messiness of supervision so the videoing of interview sessions aimed to explore and improve understanding of multiple, contradictory meanings and motivations. Each volunteer was to take part in a semi-structured interview; and participant observation took place through attendance at meetings and spending time informally with officers; this was recorded in field notes. POs who had a particular interest in working with women put

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themselves forward for the study and they selected those WSUs on their caseloads who attended regularly, were not in immediate crisis and agreeable to being filmed. All parties were assured of confidentiality and anonymity (through pseudonyms), clearly outlined in a participant information sheet and consent form ethically approved by the author's university and participating agencies.

Discourse analysis was used to investigate how individuals within the pairings positioned each other and identities became established. Observed in the pilot is the making of relational connections; the way that POs listen to and address women's personal and social issues sensitively. From the PO perspective, women's harrowing narratives may impact powerfully on their own emotions; with POs supporting WSUs so substantially it examines if and how workers harness support for themselves.

Summary of pilot participants and data

Table 1

| PO (Trust) | SU | No. of Observations | PO interviews | SU interviews |
|-------------------------------------|----------|---------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Jemma A Probation Trust (APT) | Shirley, | 1 | Yes | No |
| Di (APT) | Siobhan | 3 | Yes | Yes |
| Lesley (APT) | Tina | 3 | Yes | Yes |
| Tash B Probation Trust (BPT) | Jessica | 0 | No | Yes (x2) |

At the time of the fieldwork the three APT female POs were in their late 20s with no personal caring responsibilities for family outside work; they had qualified on the Diploma in Probation Studies (DipPS). When the DipPS was originally set up in the late 1990s it replaced the social work award to emphasise probation as a discipline focused on punishment, thus distancing itself from social work (Nellis, 2001: 416). Increasingly concern was expressed about a lack of certain skills to deal with 'human relationships' (Treadwell, 2006: 11). However, it should be remembered that many university teachers, practice supervisors and practitioners trained in the social work tradition and passed on to the next generation of POs the value of 'therapeutic' interaction (Annison, Eadie and Knight, 2008). The participating officers were all experienced, having been qualified between three and six years, and were working in towns without an HWC. Brief details of the 3 WSUs follow here -

Shirley, aged 53, was sentenced to a Community Order with supervision for domestic violence against her husband. She has 2 grown-up children and although separated from her husband she has moved back into the family home with her son whilst her ex-husband was living with his new partner. He subsequently started a Court process to reclaim the property. Shirley has been a heavy drinker for several years and has suffered on-going domestic abuse from her ex-husband.

Siobhan, 18, lives independently in a small, privately rented flat. She has emotional and financial support from her mother and is completing a retail apprenticeship. She was

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sentenced to a 12 month Suspended Sentence Supervision Order (SSSO) and 100 hours unpaid work for an unprovoked assault with a bottle on another young woman after drinking heavily. She has a background in fighting and heavy drinking during her teen years which led to prior involvement with a Youth Offending Team (YOT) in another area. Her father is an alcoholic and epileptic and although he stayed at home, ostensibly to care for Siobhan when her Mother went out to work, in fact he frequently needed to be cared for by his daughter.

Tina, 28 years old, is a prolific shoplifter for which she is on a 12 month Community Order with a supervision requirement. She lives with her 5 year old daughter, Sonia, in a privately rented flat 3 miles out of town. Her ex-partner, Nik, Sonia's father, was emotionally and physically abusive when they lived together and is now unreliable in his financial and practical support of Sonia. Her shoplifting was originally to fund a crack cocaine habit, more recently said to provide Sonia with clothes, but Tina has hinted about a lapse into drug use. Tina was also abused in a non-specified way by her step-father.

Jessica, aged 50, imprisoned for 17 years for murder, was on life licence. She had known her current PO, Tash over a number of years and had received counselling from a voluntary sector mentor. In interview she stated that she had suffered sexual abuse as a child.

Connecting

Consistency is now viewed as central to service user engagement. This is not always within PO control; a number of factors can detract from the trust and respect required for connecting in a practitioner/service user relationship. The data illustrated some of these points. Jessica found the senior manager's approach towards her at their first meeting to be rushed, unfair and incomprehensible -

She decided that no, the licence isn't getting changed, no your curfew isn't getting knocked off, and yes you are getting a final warning. I thought hang on you don't know me....

The senior manager was by-passing significant prosocial principles and thus for Jessica the legitimacy and fairness of all authority figures in the probation service came into question (Bottoms, 2002: 101).

Harshness in sentencing is another area where legitimacy may be lacking and individuals judged not purely on offending but on the perceived absence of stereotypical female characteristics; this is epitomised by the concept of double deviance (Heidensohn and Silvestri, 2012: 351). Substance misusing women frequently fall into this category. Tina, for example, was up-tariffed to a medium level Drug Rehabilitation Requirement (DRR) for shoplifting, despite being able to prove that she had been drug free for several months. In Siobhan's case, she received an additional 70 hours of community payback and an extension of her SSSO, for an offence committed prior to the current one despite consistently positive reports from her PO. The police also informed her employers of the offences, which prevented her obtaining a job reference so job hunting became problematic and dispiriting.

A logistical structural challenge for probation workers is the presence of men in waiting areas (Storer, 2003). Tina and Siobhan acknowledged a sense of resignation to the 'looks' they received from male service users, viewing it as part and parcel of their punishment; they both added that their POs never made them wait for long.

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Despite these negative aspects the POs in the study succeeded in establishing solid connections where the women felt respected and heard. This is implicit in the comments from Siobhan, Tina and Jessica talking about their probation officers -

Di listens to me and anything I say to her she'll try to sort it out for meShe [Di] knows a lot about me...I don't feel uncomfortable telling her things...she knows pretty much my life story. Well, when I first come in at the beginning she obviously had to ask me a lot of questions and I answered them. I felt comfortable with her right from the start (Siobhan, APT)

I would give her a 10 [on a continuum of 1-10 with 10 being the highest] (Tina, APT)

Tash knows when I'm having a tantrum. She'll sit there like "finished now? Let's get on now". I mean that's me, everybody has different relationships with different people; it's just that she sticks with the boundaries but she knows how to deal with it, but she knows I have to let off steam and to some people it can come across as aggressive but she knows that it's not. It's just me getting things out of my system (Jessica, BPT)

Cherry (2005) emphasises the importance of motivational interventions working hand in hand with prosocial modelling. A constant stream of motivational utterances were demonstrated alongside reinforcement of self-motivation maximising opportunities to praise and boost self-esteem -

Di: I'm impressed that you've got the motivation after work to go swimming **and** go to probation

Siobhan: It's got to be done

Di: You do a lot more than a lot of people your age do

Siobhan: I don't think so

Di: Oh, I think so (Siobhan smiles)

In Jemma's interview she tries to empower Shirley to resist her husband's bullying and avoid resorting to alcohol. Jemma uses reflective listening, offers Shirley more frequent contact with her (which is readily agreed to) and continues to elicit self-motivating statements -

Shirley: Completed it, all done, finished. Absolutely wonderful and I have not had a drink (mutters). And he says I'm alcohol dependent. You know this could be a lapse for me but I'm determined it won't be.

Jemma: That's so good to hear

Shirley: I'm so determined this will not make me lapse. I'm not going there Jemma.

Jemma: You're determined since the end of the relationship and this could be the most difficult time. Clearly it is a difficult time. But you're determined not...

Shirley: Not. Definitely not (*goes very quiet*). No, I don't want to drink, not going to, no

Motivational work also focuses on discouraging certain behaviours but this takes place alongside empathy and the promotion of positive factors. Lesley, for example, reinforces for Tina that her daughter must come first, whilst recognising that situations for the child, such as bedwetting, arouse in the mother memories of her own neglect and physical punishment as a child. Lesley utilises the motivational technique of 'developing discrepancy' (Miller and Rollnick, 2002: 22) reminding Tina how she may gain materially from shoplifting but is risking devastating consequences for her daughter, as well as herself, if caught and imprisoned. In the following interchange Lesley encourages Tina to resist negative criticisms from Nik, her ex-partner, which she is using to justify her offending; simultaneously reinforcing Tina's progress -

Tina: I feel like a little girl, cos I feel like I'm being manipulated by some...somebody, yeah, him.

Lesley: So what could you...what things could you say to yourself to kind of prevent you from going into a place where you feel like you're losing control, going back to old behaviours, because you have been doing it for 9 months so what statement could you be saying to yourself, how do you challenge those negative thoughts?

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Tina: I know that it's not true. I know that I was tested. I know I went to Court, I know I went every week and got a certificate. I know that my daughter doesn't look like a tramp [*voice gets stronger as she goes through the list*].

A common thread of past childhood maltreatment and current domestic abuse was apparent for all women service users in the pilot, aligning with the research literature revealing high levels of victimisation amongst women offenders (Blanchette & Brown, 2006; Gelsthorpe, Sharpe & Roberts, 2007). For women tackling past or present abuse disclosing sensitive backgrounds necessitates a safe environment (Plechowicz, 2009; Malloch & McIvor, 2011). The pilot data shows that certain topics, such as domestic abuse (DA), were spoken of freely and confidently in supervision by both participants (PO and WSU). However, when POs attempted to refer WSUs on to specialist services this became problematic. Shirley was signposted to a voluntary agency; but she refused to work with them once they told her they wanted her to move into a refuge. From their perspective she was placing herself at risk of serious harm from her ex-husband by remaining in the property and standing up to him. Shirley's point of view was that remaining in the home represented not giving in to him, as had happened repeatedly in the past. It would also have rendered her homeless.

Cans of worms

Unlike DA, questions around childhood sexual abuse were not initiated or pursued readily by POs, despite the benefits of openness being recognised.

...it's not something you should never discuss, it's a bad thing. The more freely you can discuss something the better she feels about it. You feel that everybody's shying away from saying what the issue is... (Di)

In my time, since I've worked with women I've never had a disclosure...never. Whilst they have an element of trust in probation I think they do see us as law enforcement and when we talk about sexual abuse the sort of things I find out about women it's not about childhood sexual abuse, it's more about prostitution (Lesley)

At the probation women's services meetings I observed child sexual abuse and self-harm were recognised as practice areas where POs lacked confidence advocating that POs should be more proactive in exploring such issues with women. In a recent report about disclosures of childhood abuse it is noted that victims feel embarrassed and ashamed by their experiences and want practitioners to ask 'more questions to uncover the nature of their depression and self-harming behaviours which stemmed directly from the abuse' (Allnock and Miller, 2013: 7).

Approaching these delicate matters POs spoke of their fear of opening the proverbial 'can of worms' or Pandora's box, fearing they would leave WSUs more vulnerable than before.

I was sitting here thinking how much do I undig this without making her feel unsafe because I wanted to ask more questions but I was scared about where it would go...if I go somewhere how do I get out of that? What I tend to do is keep quiet so giving her the time if she wants to (Lesley)

Both Di and Lesley felt that sexual abuse should be an area confined to specialist counselling. This may relate to their own anxieties as much as those of the women:

...feeling like whoa because I don't know if I managed it OK...emotionally it impacts on me that level of sharing...for me it's like it's outside my parameters. I think she needs ongoing counselling (Lesley)

However, Di noted how rare it is for women to agree to counselling sessions and if they do agree they may not attend which means that probation are left to pick up the pieces.

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It does feel that sometimes everything comes down to probation. You're the only constant person who *has* to be in their life (Di)

Closure

Planned endings are vital for successful completions in secure professional relationships. Psychotherapeutic literature supports this focus on preparation for the final stage of the therapeutic alliance (Etherington and Bridges, 2011) where endings are a time for review and transformation. This is a subtle process requiring considerable skill in encouraging moves towards local community provision. Probation guidance advocates introducing women to 'mainstream services' offering a 'bridge' to the community (Ministry of Justice, 2012). It states that POs should be preparing women for closure and separation from the first interview and giving reminders throughout the supervision time-span.

Yet even within strong relationships the data shows that endings can go awry. Lesley observed that women hold back important personal information until the last few weeks and individuals frequently place themselves in breach during the last days of the Order. When Lesley visited Tina at home for her final appointment Tina admitted that she had been arrested again for shoplifting, joking poignantly -

I think I'm addicted to probation

Jemma miscalculated the length of time that Shirley's Order had left to run and was unwell for the final appointment so no 'ending' took place. From what she said about Shirley's complex needs this can only be seen as another 'let down' in Shirley's life. Cherry (2005: 127) refers to this as a 'micro-message', unrealised and unintended by the PO but which carries meaning that damages self-esteem and recreates distrust. Lesley devised a built-in structure to prevent this happening; this involved sending an individualised farewell letter summarising the woman's achievements, pointing out areas for future development and providing contact information for support in the community. She also offered an additional invitation to the woman to attend a final meeting. Di's approach was to talk about endings as part of the supervisory process, constantly reminding the individual of the date, what needed to be achieved before then and intertwining praise and encouragement within the discussion.

Siobhan: When I was younger I thought it was funny the first time...but now I'm older I don't want it.

Di: So let's focus on getting to July, keeping you out of trouble and a fun summer ahead

Organisational demands prevented continuity in Di and Siobhan's relationship. With re-structuring Di chose to move to another team; she suggested the move was motivated by improved career prospects through work with higher risk males. This meant giving up supervision of her WSUs with little warning. Aware of the importance of endings she offered 3-way handover review sessions with the new officers and the women.

Coping

All 3 APT POs commented on the difficulties of working with women because of the emotional input required. Opinion was divided over the amount of support, encouragement and relational supervision (dealing with feelings) that should be received from management -

I took something personal to my Manager and he was very practical. I would have liked him to say - Are you OK? It's hard to say I'm not coping...Especially with women offenders we encourage them to talk about themselves, their feelings, but we don't necessarily get that ourselves. I'd like it to be there if I needed it. I wouldn't want to be counselled. There should be flexibility to move between the emotional and the business (Jemma)

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Lesley felt that the female SPO in her office had a better understanding of WSUs, advocating women-only slots; she felt her male counterpart was more reticent and less knowledgeable. However, Di spoke highly of her male SPO's influence and felt that the imminent inclusion of the manager in open plan office arrangements would improve the situation as he would be party to colleague discussions. Di felt more frequent formal supervision would be unnecessary. Coming from a large office there was already 'masses of support' from all levels, not only her colleagues and line manager but also from a senior manager

...she has a lot of interest in the women and she'll come up and ask me how the women's programme's going, she wanted to meet with me...she shows an interest, that way you feel that you are supported and valued (Di)

Day-to-day emotional support appeared to come primarily from close colleagues. Lesley stated that when making a decision she would be more likely to approach her fellow POs than the SPO. Di described a constant stream of valuable office discussion but of greatest importance was her close working relationship with another PO, Leanne -

... you're having a really bad day with G and at some point Leanne will say - 'I'll pick the phone up' and so she'll have it for a while and sometimes...a different look on the situation can be really helpful, we just support each other really. I think that's the only way, otherwise you take it home with you and it's not healthy (Di)

Supervision with her Manager took place every 6-8 weeks but this was not viewed as reflective time to offload emotionally but rather a space to review rapid changes in service users' situations. Di felt that the hectic nature of the team meant that -

You talk to your Manager as and when things come up so whereas you used to save your cases and deal with them all at once...you talk almost daily, hour by hour about them so supervision is less of a focus.

Other ways of keeping physically and mentally healthy were through exercise -

You're human, things will play on your mind but I do things like go to the gym, you're so distracted by doing something else that you lose it for a little while (Di)

It emerged from participant observation that for POs with ambitions to rise through the ranks, revealing a need for relational supervision from managers could appear as a character weakness, standing in the way of promotion, instead of a reflective aid to promote sanity and good practice. If the culture of the organisation conflates expression of feelings with vulnerability, as Knight (2014) suggests, this may reinforce officers adopting a defensive position. Close friendships and healthy lifestyles may feel more comfortable in discussions about keeping stress at bay. Colleague support, although valuable, may be transitory with organisational upheavals leading to frequent role changes.

Relational supervision from managers was seen as desirable but uncommon -

Managers are good at what they do but it's not their function automatically to say - 'How is this making you feel?' and I think it probably should be...there should be some way of talking things over and letting off steam (Lesley)

Lesley became distressed at what had been covered in supervision, listening to Tina's account of the childhood physical abuse from her step-father and neglect from her mother. Alongside concern for the service user was Lesley's sense of unease over her own feelings of sadness and helplessness. She wanted more acknowledgment and reflective input from managers -

'having someone else say - you did that really well.... but what about that?'

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Discussion and Conclusion

Although the data set in this pilot project is limited in size it has been very rich. This suggests that further investigations, using this methodology with more in-depth analysis would be valuable.

Organisational agendas surrounding restrictive measures may present barriers to forward looking, strength based interventions but this research shows how POs manage the tensions. Ironically the compulsory nature of supervision can facilitate women's attendance and the subsequent acceptance of PO support and seek to prolong the statutory relationship in preference to establishing connections to community provisions. HWCs have several advantages over probation with a clear gender-focused discourse, encompassing all-women environments, gender-centred training, consistency, flexibility, small caseloads, and clinical supervision for staff. However, several years on from Corston's Review, despite growth in the number of HWCs, there are still relatively few of these facilities; those that do exist serve larger urban areas, leaving smaller towns and rural regions under-resourced. The literature shows commentators' misgivings that TR will prioritise large corporations over small-scale provisions for women, despite their popularity, because of the emphasis on short-term goals and supposed financial savings from large private businesses.

The considerable PO skill and commitment, creatively engaging the WSUs as individuals was apparent throughout the study. However certain organisational features clearly present barriers to effectiveness. Currently probation is not structured in a way that enables open-ended contact so closure can be problematic. Unless the woman reoffends, completion of the Order means the end of the relationship. For some women this may be appropriate but for others endings may be experienced as separation and abandonment, similar to childhood situations, which can catapult them back into chaotic lifestyles and reoffending. Individuals, with attachment patterns characterised by insecurity, may experience the temporary nature of supervisory relationships as an extension of loss experiences. Roddy's (2013) research into counselling domestic abuse clients, asserts that women in this position benefit from non-time limited services where contact remains an option for as long as they want. At the current time this option is unthinkable within probation.

Alternative gender-focused initiatives are emerging such as certain hours/days designated as 'women only' and women being seen away from probation premises. Yet such developments are often short-lived, dependant on the enthusiasm of a particular manager or commitment of specific officers and not conducive to chaotic service users. Individual POs are often left to their own devices to deal with deep-seated and disturbing narratives; some may decide that a humanitarian, relational, approach comes at too great a personal cost. CRCs and NPSs will need to confront these issues, through education and supervision, if women's 'needs' are to be addressed. A coordinated response is required; one that takes on board lessons from the women's centres but is embedded structurally within organisations rather than reliant on practitioners' goodwill.

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