Is probation work social work?

Anita Gibbs and Denise King

Anita Gibbs is a lecturer in Community and Family Studies at the University of Otago and Denise King is a junior research fellow in the same department and a probation officer.

This article seeks to ask the question: Is probation work social work? It arises from the authors' involvement with UK and NZ probation services over the last 16 years and from conversations with probation staff in New Zealand, who, in the main, believe in a social work value and skill base for probation. Yet, when one considers the shifts in aims, philosophies and practices of probation work in New Zealand, from altruistic and benevolent origins, to current correctional and authoritarian auspices, it is sometimes hard to see what social work has to offer. This piece, in promoting a debate on this issue, will explore key aspects of probation's traditional alliance to social work, how things have changed, what probation staff currently think and some key questions for future dialogue and research.

If we ask the question ‘Is probation work social work?’ then by necessity we need to explore what social work is, especially if social work is given a narrow definition which does not acknowledge control as an intrinsic factor in social work practice. The International Federation of Social Workers definition is: the promotion of social change and problem-solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (ANZASW, 2000: 2).

More realistically, but controversially, a social work role in New Zealand would also include elements of control, boundary setting and a clear mandate to work with involuntary clients – otherwise we would wipe out over half the readership of this journal, who regard themselves as social workers. If probation work is seen to be controlling but not punishing or overtly coercive then maybe it can still be regarded as social work?

Roots, traditions and eras

The roots of probation, globally as well as here in New Zealand, lie in the notion of ‘advise, assist and befriend’, a term used to described the befriending and care work undertaken by the earliest probation officer volunteers and police court missionaries (Campbell and Marra, 2000; Parsloe, 1991). The traditional aims of the first probation services set-up in 1878 in the States, 1886 in New Zealand and 1887 in the UK, were founded on moral and spiritual ideologies and included: the provision of help for offenders, through advice, assistance and befriending; the statutory supervision of offenders; the provision of alternatives to custody for offenders; and the reduction of crime through the above activities (Bottoms and McWilliams, 1979).

Probation work traditionally, has been social welfare oriented and client-centred – hallmarks of social work.

However, probation work has shifted from its care and welfare origins through a series of what one may call paradigmatic eras: reform; rehabilitation and treatment; ‘nothing works’; radical non-intervention; and effectiveness or ‘what works’; the latter including an emphasis on punishment and surveillance (Campbell and Marra, 2000; Gibbs, 2000). The reform, rehabilitation and treatment eras were premised on personalist or client-centred values and the recognition of social disadvantage experienced by clients, as well as beliefs in the clients' capacity to change. Unfortunately in the 1970s, after research indicated that ‘treatment’, especially psychodynamic therapy, was not effective at reducing offending, a new era of pessimism emerged: the ‘nothing works’ era. During this time, enlightened social workers and probation officers chose socialist, community oriented and radical non-interventionist ways of working with offenders, so as to minimise the damage done to offenders by a criminal justice system which did not work. The research indicating that ‘nothing worked’ was eventually discredited and an era of effectiveness emerged instead. This era, mainly from the 1980s onwards, has largely been based upon evidence of successful reductions in re-offending, through the development and implementation of cognitive-behavioural programmes like Straight Thinking. The ‘what works’ movement as we now know it, is committed to the gathering of concrete scientific evidence of effective practice with offenders, linked to reductions in offending. Unfortunately, and often misleadingly, ‘what works’ is associated with a significant increase in demanding, structured and surveillance oriented methods of practice, which some probation officers find challenges their social work and especially client-centred value-base.

The new philosophies for probation work, both nationally and globally are: public protection, the prevention of re-offending, risk assessment and management, punishment in the community through increased surveillance and tougher penalties, and services to victims or assisting the offender to face responsibility to victims (Buchanan and Millar, 1997; Parsloe, 1991). The social work basis of probation, some
acknowledge the relevance and value of social work as there seems to be so much to link the two?

There are other important considerations in our discussion of probation work as social work - those of professionalism and relationships with ANZASW. On the whole, most probation staff, including those trained as social workers, do not view themselves as belonging to either 'the profession of social work' or 'the Association' which supports social workers. Some probation officers were involved with the New Zealand Association of Probation Officers (NZAPO) but this body fizzled out through lack of membership activity and, according to a few staff, discouragement from the agency. Many probation staff now belong to the Public Service Association (PSA) but otherwise appear to be in a vacuum regarding their affiliations to unions or the profession. Probation officers are reluctant to join the Association but we do not know why – perhaps the Association is perceived of as not having relevance to probation. The issue of registration is likely to affect probation – will probation officers be expected to register as social workers or not? Perhaps the Association needs to do more to offer support, assistance and information to probation officers to enable them to increase their sense of social work professionalism?

What probation staff think

In all of this there is the voice of the probation staff themselves – what do they think? We decided to do an informal snapshot survey of probation staff, mainly local, to gauge their responses to the question: Is Probation Work Social Work? We telephoned or emailed 14 probation staff asking the key question and then asked them briefly to explain the reasons for their answer. Of the 14 we asked eight said unequivocally yes, one said no and five said yes and no.

The kinds of comments we received from the 14, who were mainly probation officers, included:

- In theory probation is social work, in practice it is not because of the (time) constraints.
- There is no time for real social work... real social work is about casework skills, and linking with wider community networks.
- Probation has the same kind of assessment, case management, case planning aspects as social work.
- Probation uses the same kind of philosophy as social work.
- The agency has moved away from recruiting social workers... people who are recruited with no social work experience do not have a societal focus... the agency has steered away from it's social work values and ethics base.
- The use of social work skills is important rather than having an identity as a social worker.
- I brought my philosophy, background and training in social work into probation.
- The nature of probation work is changing... more social control, monitoring and client contact being whittled away by procedures and systems... it's not what I came into probation for... more groupwork would help use the social work skills I have got.
- The training and education of PO's is not that closely aligned to current social work training. The issue of the involuntary nature of the relationship [between PO's and clients]... it's not a purely helping relationship... there has always been a tension.
- We don't seem to do what other social workers do – the practical stuff... welfare assistance.

One probation officer felt that changing roles of the probation officer, from traditional case/social workers to community brokerage roles in the late 1980's and more recently to psychological assessor and service provider roles, were an indicator of the diversity of the skills required of probation officers. It now seems that the traditional idea that an offender will relate to 'his or her' probation officer has become a thing of the past, especially as offenders are likely to be assessed by one PO, seen by another PO in their first few weeks, and by several other PO's or other staff, as they complete one of the many alternatives to custody on offer. Other probation officers noted there was scope for using social work in periodic detention, parole supervision and community programmes but that in supervision social work had diminished because of the control and systems aspects. Indeed a number of probation staff complained that the introduction of new systems, especially computerised case recording and monitoring, had diminished the amount of quality time that they could spend face to face with clients.

Overall, probation staff, albeit mainly probation officer staff in the Dunedin locality, support the idea of social work as a basis for probation work, especially in terms of principles, training and the skills used. Also the term social change was used by many of our respondents, to affirm probation's commitment to change work and rehabilitation at the individual and societal levels. However, the changing focus of the service, the range of roles adopted by probation officers, the introduction of new systems and terminology, and the lack of social work training of the majority of the workforce, are factors which have seen a diminishing awareness, and reality, of social work as a basis for probation.

Key questions and the future

This piece has sought to provoke a debate on the importance and relevance of recognising probation work as social work. The discussion promotes a number of key questions which could be followed up by further debate in this journal or research. The questions are:

- What does social work have to offer probation?
- Has probation lost its social work value base?
- Does probation want to remain linked to social work?
- Is there a separate probation identity distinct from social work (and if so what is it?)
- Is probation work punishment or social control only and therefore not social work?
- Do probation staff want to practice or register as social workers?
- If not social workers, then what – criminologists?
- What kind of training should probation officers have?
- What kind of probation service do we wish to create in the future?
would suggest, is no longer the norm, instead a penal policy framework, and psychological and criminological practice orientations, have displaced social work. Whether this is reality in all areas of probation work is contested by many probation staff and managers. The influence of managerialism and market-mechanisms in the 80's and 90's have forced these changes upon the probation service, whether probation staff have supported them or not (May, 1994). The challenge facing today's probation workers however, is to maintain what they see as a social work value-base in their work with clients, while at the same time, serve a government committed to the 'correction and reduction of offending behaviour' and the protection of the public. This tension, between care and control, has in fact, always been part and parcel of everyday probation work as well as most forms of statutory social work, so the argument that the 'new' philosophy of correctionalism is forcing probation staff to be punitive and therefore not behaving as social workers is not wholly accepted. How far has the community probation service moved along the punishment continuum? This is up for debate!

**Values**

The notion of values is critical in any serious discussion of whether probation work is social work. A number of writers (Bottoms and McWilliams, 1979; Farooq, 1998; Senior, 1984; Williams, 1995) argue that probation work has always been underpinned by social work values of: belief in the worth and intrinsic value of people; respect for clients; the right to self-determination of clients; the importance of partnership with clients; a right to equality of opportunity and freedom from oppression; and a belief in the capacity of clients to change – and that these values can be maintained into today's hard-line penal climate. Others, however, argue that new values for probation should be instituted from a criminological framework, for example, the values of anti-
custodialism, community safety and restorative justice advocated by Nellis (1995), values which reflect the current focus of today's probation work rather than values that rely on a social work foundation.

There are strong advocates who also argue that crime is very much a social phenomenon (Bottoms and McWilliams, 1979; Smith and Stewart, 1998) and that if the social context and social lens of understanding is removed from probation work, then all that will remain is probation work which only challenges individuals to change their lives, as well as a probation workforce which uncritically analyses offenders' problems from a micro perspective, and does not include a community focus at all. The focus on the social ensures a broad range of interests and can be inclusive of offenders, victims and their whanau and communities. If the probation service loses its social work heritage then potentially it loses its capacity to act as a social change agent (Spencer, 1995), or become involved in partnerships with the community and families to reduce crime more broadly (Bottoms and McWilliams, 1979).

**Theories, knowledge and skills**

Alongside social work values, probation has long drawn upon social work theories, knowledge and practice approaches, in its work with offenders. These too are now challenged as being outdated or less relevant. Most probation officers who do the face to face assessments and intervention work with offenders have undergone professional / tertiary training in social work. They are therefore familiar with key social work knowledge: sociology, psychology, organisational studies, indigenous theory, policy, law, and community social work for example; and methods: such as psychodynamic practice, task-centred casework, cognitive-behavioural groupwork and family work - the list is extensive.

In the UK, probation training has had a rather unhappy 'divorce' from social work, with probation officers now completing a probation diploma rather than social work diploma. The main reason for the split was that generic social work training was seen to lack appropriate criminological and criminal justice knowledge to prepare probation officers sufficiently for practice. Rather than beef-up the generic social work courses the two streams separated. Now, newly qualified probation officers have their career choices narrowed to work in the probation service and perhaps some youth justice but not to work in a range of other social work contexts. In New Zealand, many probation officers and most other probation staff are not social work trained and often undergo their own in-house competency based training, which is, incidentally, largely based on the NZQA social work standards. There is still an issue, however, according to probation managers, of the lack of specific criminal justice training for probation officers provided by the tertiary education process. If social work educators wish to encourage prospective probation officers to train with them then perhaps at least some specialist training could be provided. It is unlikely that New Zealand will go down the same lines as the UK but on the other hand it would be good to see more collaborative work with probation to develop some specialist courses.

The range of social work skills that social work students are currently taught are entirely applicable to probation work. These skills include: the ability to make assessments, problem-solve, plan and carry out a range of interventions; interpersonal skills; communication skills; writing; sensitivity; ability to set boundaries; critical analysis; work with individuals, groups and families. All of these have been identified by researchers as being used by probation officers and social workers in their practice with offenders (Boswell, 1996; Cheetham, 1998; Davies et al, 1989). In the light of this, the question of whether probation work is social work can be turned on its head to ask instead: What is missing from social work as far as probation is concerned? Or: What else can social work offer probation? Why should probation NOT
Pease (1999) argues that probation's future does not lie in an obsession with effectiveness rather it lies in a moral justification for existence based upon altruism for victims and offenders and in being a helping service to the courts. Spencer (1995) and others (Smith and Stewart, 1998) argue that probation needs to continue to have its social focus, to ensure that the broader aim of crime reduction across societal, community, familial and organisational boundaries is addressed. Whatever the future holds, 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 if continuing to draw upon social work values, knowledge and skills.

References


