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## **'We're not trying to turn them into middle-class Guardian readers': constructing the offender in the probation 'classroom'**

Emma Perry

*Roehampton University, London, United Kingdom*

### **Background**

Since the election of the 'New Labour' government in 1997, a range of cognitive-behavioural programmes has been implemented by the Prisons and Probation Service on a national scale as part of the 'What Works' criminal justice agenda (Mair, 2004). Drawing heavily on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), the programmes view the individual in pedagogic terms rather than as a client in need of therapy (Goldstein, Glick and Gibbs, 1998). As such, they aim to 'teach' offenders new skills in order to change their behaviour and reduce the likelihood of re-offending. However, the programmes have been criticised for 'teaching by rote', failing to motivate individuals who often had negative experiences at school (Mair, 2004), and taking a mechanistic 'one size fits all' approach to rehabilitation and learning (Clarke et al, 2004). Feminist critics such as Shaw and Hannah-Moffat (2004) have claimed that the programmes ignore issues of gender and cultural diversity. Farrant (2006) has also noted that very little research currently exists with regard to gender and the 'What Works' movement in probation. As such, she has convincingly argued that further work from a feminist perspective needs to be carried out in this area.

The vast majority of research into cognitive-behavioural programmes currently relies on quantitative methodologies and experimental research designs (Clarke, Simmonds and Wydall, 2004). Although qualitative research studies have been undertaken with regard to more conventional forms of education for offenders, such as the learning of literacy and numeracy in a prison context (Brazier and Hurry, 2006; Wilson, 2007), there is a regrettable lack of research which focuses on educational programmes for offenders who are given non-custodial sentences. Very little research also exists which considers an ethical exploration of the notion of 'learning' in the context of a probation sentence, particularly bearing in mind that this learning is compulsory, and non-attendance could lead to imprisonment. Finally, the majority of critics, with the notable exceptions of Kemshall, (2002) and Kendall (2004), have failed to locate the programmes within their social and political context. Therefore, this paper takes a feminist post-structuralist approach in order to gain fresh insights into this traditionally 'scientific' and quantitative area of study.

### **Research Questions**

The data has been drawn from a larger study, which focuses on how previous educational experiences have informed probationers' constructions of their current learning. It also explores the way in which gender is 'performed' in the probation 'classroom' by group members and probation staff. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will be focusing on the perspectives of Programmes Facilitators in relation to how they defined the programmes (for example, discussing the extent to which they saw the programmes as educative or therapeutic), how they defined their own role in the rehabilitation process, how they constructed the group members themselves, and the extent to which these discourses were gendered, classed, and 'raced'.

### **Methods**

The fieldwork for this research was carried out with one probation area in the south of England, across four centres in the county, between May and November 2008. Three groups were observed: two Enhanced Thinking Skills (ETS) programmes, and one Aggression Replacement Training (ART) programme. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 11 Programmes Facilitators (3 men, 8 women/11 white) and 17 group members (15 men, 2 women/1 asian, 16 white) at the end of the programmes. Access was restricted, so sessions were watched on a monitor outside the room. However, full and informed consent was granted from participants in advance and I was able to spend

time with group members both before the session and during breaks so they became familiar with my presence and the purpose of my observations. The observation itself consisted of viewing 5, 2 hour sessions of each group at different stages during the programme. Fieldnotes were made during the sessions and were divided into categories with an emphasis on the study aims. Interviews were recorded, and following the transcription of interviews, the data was analysed using discourse analytic techniques (Burman and Parker, 1993; Taylor, 2001).

## **Frame**

The paper draws on Foucault's (1991) notion of 'governmentality' and researchers working within the 'sociology of punishment' (Garland, 1996; Rose, 2000; Sullivan, 2001) in order to locate the programmes within the neo-liberal political context from which they have emerged. Drawing on Kemshall's (2002) work, I suggest that techniques used by Programmes Facilitators such as 'motivational interviewing' operate as strategies of neo-liberal 'responsibilization' (Rose, 2000). I also draw on this framework in order to question some of the psychological and scientific 'truths' discussed by facilitators, namely the 'cognitive deficit' model of offending (Ross and Fabiano, 1990) which views offenders as having 'deficits' such as impulsivity and egocentricity, which can be 'treated' by participating in the programmes. Drawing on radical post-structuralist challenges that have led to theorizing gender as socially constructed, 'disembodied' and 'performative' (Butler, 1990), this paper will also suggest that the discourses of facilitators were often deeply gendered and essentialist in their nature. For example, female group members were regularly positioned as either 'mothers', 'sex objects' or 'alpha males' by facilitators.

## **Research findings**

Facilitators explicitly positioned offenders as irrational, impulsive and animalistic. These pathologising discourses were also gendered, classed and 'raced', and group members were unproblematically constructed as working class, white and male. Strenuous attempts were made by facilitators to avoid the language of 'school' and 'education'. Similarly there was also an attempt to avoid the language of therapy and counselling, and facilitators often stressed the fact that they were 'not psychologists'. In order to avoid the traditional discourses of education and therapy, a discourse of 'facilitation' was relied upon extremely heavily by staff members. Facilitation was constructed as enabling, benign and invisible. It was seen to appeal to universal and basic human values, but as a result it also tended to ignore issues of social identity, and complex interrelated issues of gender, class and ethnicity.

This paper hopes to contribute to an understanding of the cognitive-behavioural programmes, by using a feminist post-structuralist critique in order to illustrate the ways in which programmes facilitators drew on programme manuals and policy discourses in order to construct offenders as having 'cognitive deficits' and who were in need of being 're-moralized' by probation practitioners.