McNeill, F., Farrall, S., Lightowler, C., and Maruna, S. (2012) Reexamining evidence-based practice in community corrections: beyond 'a confined view' of what works. Justice Research and Policy, 14 (1). pp. 35-60. ISSN 1525-1071

http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/67399/

Deposited on: 13 September 2013

Re-examining 'Evidence-Based Practice' in Community Corrections: Beyond 'a confined view' of what works

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Biography (of lead author)

Fergus McNeill is Professor of Criminology & Social Work at the University of Glasgow. His professional experience includes working for a number of years in residential drug rehabilitation and as a criminal justice social worker. His research interests and publications have addressed several of the interfaces between criminology and social work, including sentencing, corrections and youth justice. Latterly his work has focussed on the policy and practice implications of research evidence about the process of desistance from offending. His latest book is *Offender Supervision: New Directions in Theory Research and Practice* (with Peter Raynor and Chris Trotter, published by Willan in 2010). In recent years, Fergus has been invited on many occasions to provide advice, training or support to policymakers and practitioners in corrections and criminal justice around the world.

Abstract

This paper aims to re-examine the development and scope of evidence-based practice (EBP) in community corrections by exploring three sets of issues. Firstly we examine the relationships between the contested purposes of community supervision and their relationships to questions of evidence. Secondly, we explore the range of forms of evidence about that might inform the pursuit of one purpose of supervision -- the rehabilitation of offenders – making the case for a fuller engagement with 'desistance' research in supporting this process. Thirdly, we examine who can and should be involved in conversations about EBP, arguing that both ex/offenders' and practitioners' voices need to be respected and heard in this debate.

Keywords

Probation – Community Corrections – Desistance – Rehabilitation – Evidence Based Practice

Introduction

Questions about the role of evidence in criminal justice policy and practice have been around for a long time. One of the founding fathers of classical criminology, Cesare Beccaria, writing in 1775, put it this way:

> 'Would you prevent crimes? Let liberty be attended with knowledge. As knowledge extends, the disadvantages which attend it diminish, and the advantages increase... Knowledge facilitates the comparison of objects, by showing them in different points of view. When the clouds of ignorance are dispelled by the radiance of knowledge, authority trembles, but the force of the law remains immovable' (in Priestley and Vanstone, 2010: 11).

Alongside his early endorsement of the role of science in promoting public safety, Beccaria demanded clarity in the law, due process in its administration, and certainty and regularity in its delivery of punishments, limited by the principles of parsimony and proportionality. So, for him, as for many that have come after him, delivering criminal justice must be about both evidence and principle; both science and law; both the empirical and the normative.

It is with this central set of relationships in mind that we begin this discussion of 'evidence-based practice' (EBP) in the field of community corrections[1]. More specifically, we aim to look at EBP from three different points of view. Firstly, we seek to examine the relationships between the purposes of community corrections and the ways in which we might assess its effectiveness; we argue that these purposes are multiple and contested and that the types of evidence in play are therefore varied and diffuse. Relying on any one measure will fail to capture the complexities of the task. Secondly, even in focusing on one purpose (reducing reoffending so as to better protect the public), we suggest that 'what works' evidence drawn from *evaluation* studies has serious limitations, and that it must be supplemented with evidence from *explanatory* studies that explore how and why people desist from crime. Finally, we argue that evidence from research is not the only evidence that matters in advancing practice; both ex/offender and practitioner voices need to be taken much more seriously if we are to develop systems and practices that fit the realities of people's lives. In our concluding discussion, we discuss a transatlantic 'knowledge exchange' project, 'Discovering Desistance', through which we are currently trying to open up debates and developments around evidence-based corrections.

Evidence and purposes

Although in most jurisdictions the origins of probation ideals and practices lie in 19th century penal reformers' attempts to improve the treatment of and

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[1] We use the US term 'community corrections' in this paper to refer to all forms of offender supervision in the community, whether on probation or parole. We also use the term evidence-based practice (EBP) throughout given its familiarity. However, we prefer the more modest term evidence-informed practice, partly in recognition of the role of other forms of evidence (i.e. beyond research evidence) in service and practice development.

prospects for prisoners (during their sentences and after release), the 20th century development of formal statutory probation and parole systems in many jurisdictions and nations around the world produced considerable variations in their formal purposes. Moreover, the purposes of community corrections have changed over the course of time, reflecting different social, cultural and political conditions.

In relation to community corrections in the USA, Taxman, Henderson and Lerch (2010) describe three movements in the field from enforcement (focusing on compliance with conditions, external controls and the delivery of visible punishment) to accountability through treatment (focusing on placing responsibility on the offender but with encouragement to participate in relevant forms of treatment) to a hybrid model (combining aspects of the accountability model with a wider range of rehabilitative efforts extending beyond treatment programmes). Taxman, *et al.* (2010) explicitly discuss the adoption of evidence-based practices (EBPs) in this third movement but note considerable variation in the ways in which correctional administrators engage with evidence in the service of different goals. Crucially, they argue that which forms of evidence matter depends on which goals are being prioritised.

Readers of this journal may be less aware of similar tensions that exist in probation in Europe. Drawing on his survey of probation systems with van Kalmthout, Durnescu (2008) distinguishes, on the basis of their expressed purposes and 'missions', between four main types of European probation services which prioritise respectively: promoting the use of community sanctions and measures (often as a way of reducing the costs of imprisonment); assisting judicial decision-making; rehabilitation/public protection; and punishment or enforcement. Clearly this taxonomy is not without its problems – each of these purposes may be pursued in quite different ways, and several of them may be pursued in concert.

As well as their formal purposes in law and policy, the delivery of community corrections is also profoundly affected by the occupational, organisational and professional cultures within which it is delivered. For example, in some countries and justice systems (including our own – England and Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland) probation has had longstanding historical links to social work. Where those links have proved durable or influential (see McNeill, Bracken and Clarke, 2010), the provision of guidance, care and assistance to 'offenders' has often been seen as the most important job of probation services.

However, even in such countries, many commentators agree that community corrections has become increasingly focused on reducing risk and on public protection or public safety (Robinson and McNeill, 2004). Thus, as Garland (2001) and others have argued, though rehabilitation survives as a purpose of community corrections, both its focus and its methodologies have changed (see also Robinson, 2008). Rehabilitation, so it is argued, has become something that is done to offenders in the putative interests of others; offenders are not the intended beneficiaries of rehabilitative efforts – they are the targets of such

efforts. The focus is less on restoring the errant citizen and more on protecting the law-abiding one.

In brief then, the purposes of community corrections vary across both time and place and they are multiple and contested here and now; even a brief discussion of one purpose (rehabilitation) reveals important shifts in its substantive meaning and intent. In the context of a paper about EBP, the key point to take from this discussion is that the relative priority given to different objectives for community corrections impacts profoundly on the kinds of evidence at stake in evaluations of the services concerned (see also Durnescu, 2008). By way of illustration, the following table represents a development of Durnescu's taxonomy of purposes and suggested measures of the effectiveness of probation:

Table 1: Purposes and Measures

Purpose	Measure
Promoting community corrections	Increased 'market share'
Assisting judicial decisions	Judicial satisfaction with reports; improved decision-making
Rehabilitation/public protection	Reduced reconviction/improved community safety
Punishment/enforcement	High compliance, efficient enforcement
Offenders' welfare	Improved inclusion and well-being
Victims' interests	Victim satisfaction with process and outcome
Reparation	Constructive and proportionate redress provided

Clearly, this table obscures the conceptual and practical complexity of developing robust methodologies for evaluating the effectiveness of community corrections under any of these models; the central point is that different purposes suggest different definitions and measures of effectiveness and therefore engagement with different forms of evidence (see also McNeill, 2000).

Perhaps what is most notable about this table is that the principal measure used in most of the research literature on 'what works?' or EBP (that of reconviction, more of which below) speaks to only *one* of these purposes, that is 'rehabilitation/public protection'. Bearing in mind Beccaria's injunction to show objects from 'a different point of view', it is worth stressing that there are at least six other ways here to engage with what evidence-based community corrections might mean:

1. To what extent are community corrections (or community sanctions) successfully reducing over-reliance on imprisonment as a sanction?

2. To what extent are probation and parole reports contributing to fairer and more legitimate judicial or quasi-judicial decision-making about sentencing and release?
3. How and to what extent is compliance with community sanctions (probation and parole) being maximised?
4. To what extent is correctional supervision supporting the social integration (or re-entry) of probationers and ex-prisoners?
5. To what extent are victims of crime (and communities concerned about crime) satisfied with the role of community corrections in the justice process and with the outcomes that services deliver?
6. To what extent are people on probation and parole paying back or making good for their crimes? How effectively are correctional agencies supporting that process?

However, having opened up the possibility of thinking about evidence and effectiveness in diverse ways, we want (paradoxically perhaps) to turn back to the more familiar question which underlies EBP in this field: What works to reducing reoffending? In the next section we argue that, important though it is, this question is too narrow and that it invites a reliance on one form of evidence when, in fact, research has much more to offer.

Which evidence?[i]

Even when we zero in on just one purpose of community corrections (protecting the public by rehabilitating offenders), there remain myriad points of view from which we can question and examine the role of evidence, and the forms of evidence in play. The question which has pre-occupied both researchers and practitioners since (at least) the 1980s is 'what works?', or more specifically, 'what works to reduce reoffending?' In this section of the paper, we aim to explore two basic but important limitations of the evidence base that this question generates; firstly and briefly, we examine methodological problems about how we know if and when something has 'worked'; secondly, we outline conceptual problems with the assumption that interventions themselves 'produce' change in any straightforward sense. This section then concludes with a brief discussion of how we might reconceptualise and redesign services to support change, rather than assuming that they can produce it.

Measuring what works?

Crime is not a fact that exists independently of how we choose to define it; rather, it is (at least in part) a social construct. We do not choose to pursue all interpersonal or social harms through criminalisation; the explanandum of crime theories (the thing they try to explain) is itself socially conditioned. This single insight has profound consequences. It affects and infuses the normative contexts of rehabilitative work (including raising difficult questions about who and what gets selected for penal 'correction' and who and what does not) and it creates a series of complex methodological quandaries.

Not least amongst these is the fact that our dependent variable of choice for evaluating 'what works?' in terms of rehabilitative strategies – recidivism – is revealed as being deeply and irrevocably flawed. Though we often use it as such, it is *not* a straightforward measure of behaviour change (far less of positive shifts in identity). Whether we think of recidivism in terms of re-arrest, reconviction or re-incarceration, it remains a measure of a series of interlocking social reactions to perceptions of behaviour (which, depending on exactly what we are counting may include witnessing crime, reporting crime, detecting crime, apprehending and arresting suspects, prosecuting accused persons, sentencing offenders and convicting offenders)[2]. Worse still, many studies suggest that this social processing of perceived behaviour (by witnesses, police officers, prosecutors and others) is very uneven – some people are much more vulnerable to criminalisation and penalisation than others (see, for example, McAra and McVie, 2005).

By way of medical analogy, judging rehabilitative interventions by recidivism is a bit like judging the success of health interventions by whether anyone shows up at the doctor again (for any reason, not just in relation to the problem that has actually been treated); judging them by re-incarceration is like judging medical treatments by re-hospitalisation (again for any reason) after treatment. The reliance on recidivism also misses the point that even if it were a good proxy for reoffending, the 'mere' absence of offending does not in and of itself signal progress towards long term or permanent desistance from crime or, putting it another way, long-term committed compliance with the law. If we have that longer term objective in mind, which is more significant: a minor lapse by someone sincerely committed to but struggling to change, or a crime-free lull while a committed offender regroups and plans a serious crime?

There are other methodological problems not just with recidivism as a measure (or range of possible measures) but with the attribution of reductions in recidivism (however it is measured) to intervention. Randomised control trials are, of course, designed to allow us to have confidence about the attribution of effects to interventions rather than to extraneous influences, but RCTs are notoriously difficult to establish in criminal justice contexts – for both practical and ethical reasons (many of us being content neither with the random allocation of punishment nor of measures intended to protect us). And even when they can be designed and delivered properly, RCTs are often compelled to sacrifice low external validity (which limits our capacity to make good use of their results) for high internal validity (which us allows us to be confident about their results), or vice versa (Hollin, 2008).

Of course, none of this is to suggest recidivism doesn't matter. It *does* matter in two important senses; first of all, assuming that people have been properly arrested, convicted or incarcerated, it means that someone has suffered victimisation. Leaving these individual human costs of reoffending aside, at the

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[2] As such, it violates 'Sellin's dictum' which states that '[t]he value of criminal statistics as a basis for the measurement of criminality in geographic areas decreases as the procedures take us farther away from the offence itself' (Sellin, 1931: 346). I am grateful to Elvinas Blazevicius for bringing Sellin's dictum to my attention.

societal level, the costs of reoffending are huge. The UK Ministry of Justice, for example, in a country of just 60 million people, estimates these costs as $10-15Bn per annum. But secondly, even accepting its limitations as an outcome measure, interest in recidivism at least implies an interest in whether or not the person has somehow changed during or through the intervention. Offender change (as opposed to mere control) is a crucially important means by which community corrections can contribute to reducing crime and victimisation (and to effective reintegration) – and to reducing fiscal pressures. Supporting long-term change through community supervision holds out the prospect of enabling ex/offenders to progress not just to the point where they are no longer harming others, but to a position where they can become net contributors to their communities – both socially and financially.

Looking beyond recidivism, one of the most promising developments in the field of 'offender management' in the UK is the opening up of a debate about how best to measure not just the reduction of harms/costs (via reduced recidivism) but also the presence of goods/benefits that criminal justice services might deliver. What might be the positive goods that community corrections or offender supervision might seek to build? One possible answer might be found in the notion of good citizenship and seeking to measure whether and to what extent supervision enables people to progress to a position where they are able to fulfil the responsibilities *and* enjoy the full benefits of citizenship in democratic societies. Perhaps beginning to think more creatively and more clearly about how to capture such progress holds out the prospects for a more rounded conception of whether and how supervision is or is not 'working', and of whether and how all of the parties involved – ex/offenders, families, communities and the state – are playing their part in making this progress possible.

Producing change or supporting change?[3]

The second issue to be addressed in this section concerns not methodological problems with evaluating 'what works' but conceptual ones. 'What works?' is inescapably a question about interventions, systems, practices – the mechanisms which we expect (somehow) to produce the outcomes that we are after. The implicit model of producing outcomes is crudely summarised in Figure 1 (below).

In simple terms, the idea is that if we put the 'offender' through a programme which conforms to EBP principles (more of which below), s/he is more likely to stop offending; to become a 'desister'. The offender him or herself is the target of the intervention; the role of evidence is to make the intervention or programme more effective.

One of us (McNeill) recently had the experience of undergoing rehabilitation (for a chronic back problem). The practitioner (a physiotherapist in this case) first spent some time carefully developing a shared understanding of the genesis of

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[3] This section draws heavily on an article published in the European Journal of probation (McNeill, 2009a) and on a longer literature review (McNeill, 2009b) on which that article was based.

the problem; then, she moved immediately into teaching new skills that McNeill could use to prevent a recurrence (core stability exercises). She also reinforced the learning with homework and exercise sheets. In subsequent sessions, she carefully reviewed progress and extended the skills development; she tested McNeill's capacity for different forms of exercise, and she discharged him after several sessions with no recurrence of his difficulties.

Figure 1: Offender Interventions
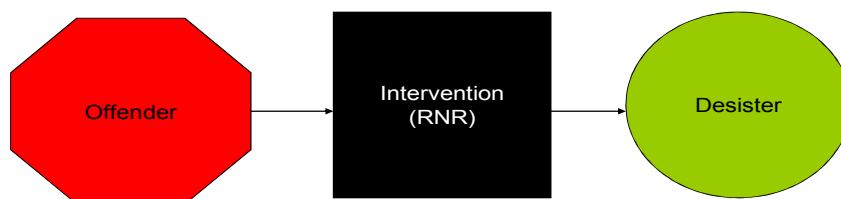
But did she *produce* this positive change? Arguably, however good the quality of her practice, however evidence-based her approach, the success of her rehabilitative intervention depended (and still depends) on other factors. Is McNeill motivated enough to do his exercises every day? Is his employer providing him with a workstation that is properly designed to avoid or minimise back problems while he spends long hours writing papers like this? Does he have a lot of heavy lifting to do in the garden or because he is about to move house? Do his kids still insist that he carry them up to bed at night?

So, positive change has occurred (at least in the sense of a stronger back that seems less likely to spasm), but it seems that the claims for the intervention should be moderated a little. It was a good quality, evidence-based intervention, but the outcome for McNeill depends at least as much on him, on the extent of his engagement with the intervention and on the contextual factors that his life and lifestyle provide.

If this example seems a little remote, it's worth noting that a number of similar complicating factors have also emerged in the practical experiences of delivering EBPs in corrections and in the evaluation research which has sought to account for the sometimes limited impact of offender programmes. First of all, researchers have learned that more attention needs to be paid to the offender's motivation and to the impact of his or her social context on the outcomes of the intervention (Farrall, 2002) – in other words on what he or she brings to the programme and on the wider context in which he is she experiences it. Secondly,

it is now well understood that there is more to effective programmes than designing them well; they also need to be run well and that requires the right organisational arrangements, the right staff skills and the right sort of qualities in the relationships between offenders and probation staff – both within programmes and beyond them (Raynor, 2004a, 2004b, 2008). McNeill's physiotherapist couldn't have done much good without having had the right sorts of training and access to the right sorts of equipment, and without spending enough time to understand the problem properly.

Arguably, the delay in recognising the significance of these sorts of additional ingredients in the recipe for effective correctional practice is a result of thinking too narrowly about interventions or programmes and not broadly enough about the change processes that they exist to support. Criminologists have become increasingly interested in understanding and explaining these change processes – referred to as processes of desistance from crime (perhaps the pre-eminent US work in this vein is Laub and Sampson, 2003). Note the change in the verbs used in the last sentence; this body of evidence is not about *evaluating* practices, systems or techniques; it is about *understanding* and *explaining* the processes that practices, systems and techniques exist to support.

Figure 2 (below) represents the fictional criminal career of a very persistent offender. The person in question commits his or her first crime at the age of 8, the offending escalates during adolescence; it peaks at 18 and plateaus until 25 after which it tails off, eventually ending at age 30. The area under the curve represents the volume of offending for which this person is responsible. Obviously, there are only two ways that criminal justice interventions can, in theory, reduce this volume. They can push the curve towards the horizontal axis, thus reducing the volume of crimes committed in each year; or, they can push the curve towards the vertical axis, thus reducing the length of the criminal career. Better still, they can do both.

Figure 2: The criminal career of a very persistent offender
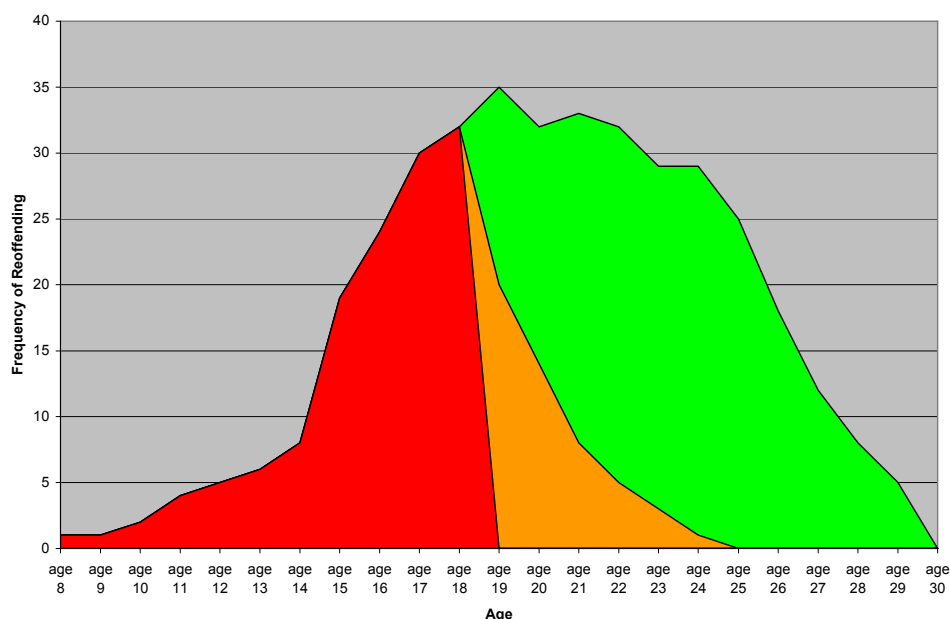
In an ideal world, the effect of a perfect correctional intervention is represented by the red area under the curve. The offender gets probation at age 18 and by age 19 his or her rate of offending has reduced to 0. In the real world however, protection through change looks more like the amber area under the curve. The offender stays active until 25, but the volume of offending tails off much more rapidly than it would have done without intervention – the volume of offending without any intervention is represented in the green area under the curve. Even in this less perfect midway scenario, the green area shows the significant volume of offending that might be reduced where an intervention supports change and slows down an offending career. So, what do we know from those studies that have explored the ending of criminal careers, the process of desistance which we are trying to accelerate? In this paper, only the briefest of summaries can be offered (see Farrall and Calverley, 2006; Maruna, 2001).

First of all, some have suggested that there is a difference between primary desistance, meaning a lull or crime-free gap in a criminal career, and secondary desistance, meaning a change in the way that an ex-offender sees him or herself (Farrall and Maruna, 2004). Essentially, secondary desistance is about ceasing to see oneself as an offender and finding a more positive identity; it is about successfully peeling off the criminal label that criminal justice systems are so effective at applying. Though not all researchers concur that this kind of reconstruction of identity is a *necessary* aspect of desistance (see Bottoms et al., 2004; Laub and Sampson, 2003), it is at least more likely to be necessary for those whose offending has been persistent and who have deeply entrenched criminal identities, but not for those whose engagements with crime and justice have been more transitory. With respect to persistent offenders, it can be argued that secondary desistance should be the holy grail of correctional services because secondary desistance is about the internalisation of change and the fundamental redirection of the ex/offender's life. As such it also represents the most secure basis of public protection because the ex/offender has changed in a lasting way; a way that will endure long after short-term controls and constraints have been removed.

Getting there, however, is very difficult. Taken together, the research suggests that the process of desistance, again focusing on those who have developed persistent offending patterns, is typically characterised by ambivalence and vacillation (Burnett, 1992; 2000; 2004). It is not an event; it is a process of progress and setback, of hope and despair.

Theories of desistance tend to focus on the significance of aging, on related life events and social bonds, or on related narrative changes in the offender and his or her sense of self (Maruna, 2001). Most scholars now tend to stress the interplay between these three factors (Farrall and Bowling, 1999); it is not just getting older, getting married or getting a job, it is about what these kinds of developments mean and signify to ex/offenders themselves and whether they represent compelling enough reasons for and opportunities to change the pattern of one's life.

Given the significance of these subjectivities, it is interesting, but perhaps not surprising, that hope plays a key part in these processes (Burnett and Maruna, 2004; Farrall and Calverley, 2005). Desistance can, it seems, be provoked by someone believing in the ex/offender; someone who perhaps carries hope and keeps it alive when the ex/offender cannot do so for him or herself. Of course, the brutal reality is that the social circumstances of the lives of many repeat offenders suffocate hope.

Against this backdrop, Maruna (2001) describes the prognosis for many persistent offenders as 'dire' (precisely because of the criminogenic backgrounds, environments and traits that they experience). Perhaps because of their experience of adversity, we know from research and practice experience that persistent offenders are very often highly fatalistic; or to use psychological terms, they have 'low self-efficacy' and an 'external locus of control'. They don't feel that they determine the direction of their own lives. Rather, life happens to them. Yet Maruna (2001) discovered that, despite this background and previous outlook, desisters somehow manage to acquire a sense of 'agency' – of control over their own lives.

But desistance is not just about the acquisition of new personal narrative and a new sense of personal empowerment; far less is it simply about the acquisition of the new skills that offender programmes typically focus upon. Desistance requires *social* capital – relationships, connections and networks that facilitate positive change -- as well as changes in the capacities or human capital of the ex/offender (Farrall, 2002, 2004; Laub and Sampson, 2003).

Finally, there is some evidence that for many ex/offenders desistance is about personal redemption, not necessarily in the spiritual or theological sense but rather in the sense of finding a way to 'make good' on a troubled and troubling past by making a positive contribution to families or communities now (Maruna, 2001). Psychologists refer to this as 'generativity'; it takes little imagination to see the generative potential that resides in community corrections and indeed generativity may provide one hypothesis about why reparative community penalties sometimes outperform rehabilitative ones in terms of reducing reoffending (McNeill and Maruna, 2007).

Going with the grain

Instead of thinking of rehabilitative intervention as something that produces change desistance studies enable and encourage us to recognise that change happens over the life course, even for most persistent offenders. Rather than change being the result of intervention; change can exist before, behind and beyond interventions. The question for practitioners ceases to be one of 'producing' change (as it were against the grain of entrenched behaviours and lifestyles) and becomes one of accelerating change (as it were going with the grain of emergent or incipient change processes).

Drawing on the desistance studies cited above, and many others, a body of scholarship has emerged which, following Farrall's (2002) injunction that

practice should become 'desistance-focused', seeks to interpret desistance research for practice (for example, see Maguire and Raynor, 2006; McCulloch and McNeill, 2008; McNeill, 2003, 2006, 2009b; McNeill and Weaver, 2010; Porporino 2010; Weaver and McNeill, 2010). This work tends to stress (albeit to varying degrees) seven central themes:

1. Since desistance is an inherently individualised and subjective process, approaches to intervention must accommodate and exploit issues of identity and diversity. (Weaver and McNeill, 2010).
2. The development and maintenance not just of motivation but also of hope become key tasks for workers (Farrall and Calverley, 2006).
3. Desistance can only be understood within the context of human relationships; not just relationships between correctional workers and ex/offenders (though these matter a great deal) but also between ex/offenders and those who matter to them (Burnett and McNeill, 2005; McNeill, 2006).
4. Although correctional practitioners have started to focus more on offenders' risk and needs, ex/offenders also have strengths and resources that they can use to overcome obstacles to desistance – both personal strengths and resources and strengths and resources in their social networks. Supervision needs to support and develop these capacities (Maruna and LeBel, 2003).
5. Since desistance is about discovering agency, interventions need to encourage and respect self-determination; this means working with ex/offenders not on them (McCulloch, 2005; McNeill, 2006).
6. Interventions based only on human capital (or developing ex/offenders' capacities and skills) will not be enough. Interventions needs to work on social capital issues with communities and offenders (Farrall, 2002, 2004; McNeill and Maruna, 2007; McNeill and Whyte, 2007).
7. Correctional services (and judicial systems more generally) need to find ways to recognise and 'certify' progress and change, and to use language that conveys belief in the possibilities of 'redemption' rather than language which reinforces offending identities (Maruna 2001; Maruna and LeBel, 2010; Maruna, 2011).

Though there is not enough space here to elaborate in detail on the practical applications of these principles, it is worth stressing a few key implications.

Figure 3 (below) presents the three necessary and sufficient pre-conditions for change, at least as argued in social casework theory over four decades ago (Ripple et al., 1964). The person doing the changing needs to be motivated. They need to have the capacity to change – meaning in this context the requisite set of skills. Human capital is another term for these personal resources that inhere within individuals. But people who want to change also need to have access to opportunities. The term social capital refers to the resources that inhere within social networks and relationships.

In terms of the practice of supervision, these three preconditions entail three roles or tasks for community corrections staff; they need to be counsellors who

can develop and deploy motivation; they need to be educators who can develop and deploy human capital; they also need to be advocates who develop and deploy social capital. Or at least, if they cannot be all of these things themselves, they need to be able to help the ex/offender access all of these things. By way of illustration, think of Figure 3 as a cross section of a rope. The rope won't be strong enough to pull the person towards change unless the strands are woven together. Someone needs to do the weaving and keep hold of the rope – especially when there is a strain in the process or an obstacle that the person needs to be pulled over (see McNeill et al., 2005).

Figure 3: The preconditions for change
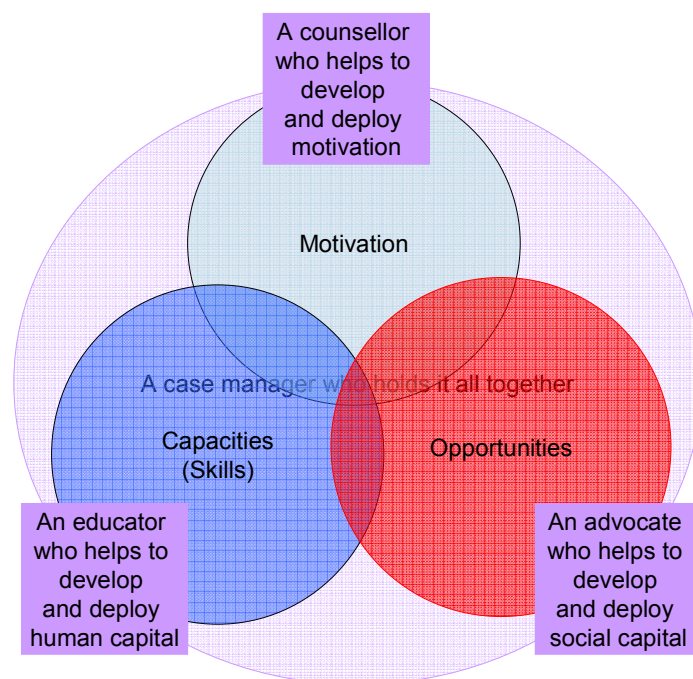
Traditional intervention programmes to address 'criminogenic needs' can and do play a key part in developing human capital. Typically, they assist ex/offenders to think more clearly and to problem solve more effectively; they also challenge attitudes and values that may be supporting criminal or antisocial behaviour. But even advocates and defenders of the Risk-Needs-Responsivity model (e.g. Polaschek, 2012) have recognised that the RNR model is, in practice, somewhat weak in respect of the issue of offender motivation and that, as such, the principle of responsivity – which involves using methods that effectively engage offenders – is as yet underdeveloped. Ward and Maruna (2007) have recently argued convincingly that the Good Lives Model of Offender Rehabilitation (GLM) may address this weakness in existing approaches.

The GLM represents a relatively recent development in the field (Ward and Brown, 2004; Ward and Marshall, 2004; Ward and Gannon, 2006; Ward, Gannon and Mann, 2007). It draws on the developing field of 'positive psychology' to offer a strengths-based approach to rehabilitation. In setting out the general principles of the model, Ward and Maruna (2007) articulate several basic assumptions. Essentially, the GLM assumes that people (including offenders) are

predisposed to seek certain goals or primary human goods including, for example, life, knowledge, excellence in play and work, agency or autonomy, inner peace, friendship, community, spirituality, happiness and creativity. Secondary goods, such as certain types of work or relationships, provide particular ways and means for us to pursue and achieve primary goods. Because primary human goods are plural, there are many possible sources of motivation for human behaviour.

The GLM rests on the assumption that interventions should aim to promote an individual's goods as well as to manage or reduce risk. A major aim of rehabilitative work is to enable an individual to develop a life plan that involves ways of effectively securing primary human goods without harming others. However, this is not just about tackling risk factors; it is about the holistic reconstruction of the self that requires practitioners to consider and address individual, relational and contextual factors; attending to both characteristics and environments. Similarly, risk must be understood not as an attribute of offenders but in a multifaceted and contextualised way. Finally, the approach requires an explicit focus on conceptualising a good life; taking account of strengths, primary goods and relevant environments, and encouraging and respecting individual's capacities to make choices for themselves.

In the practice model that develops from these principles and assumptions, the practitioner must balance the promotion of personal goods (for the ex/offender) with the reduction of risk (for society). Too strong a focus on personal goods may produce a happy but dangerous offender; but equally too strong a focus on risk may produce a dangerously defiant or disengaged offender. The practitioner has to create a human relationship in which the individual offender is valued and respected and through which interventions can be properly tailored in line with particular life plans and their associated risk factors. So, although, as with RNR, interventions should be structured and systematic, they should also be shaped to suit the person in question. The language used by the practitioner and their agency should be 'future-oriented, optimistic and approach goal focused' (Ward and Maruna, 2007: 127) in order to foster motivation.

Individual case planning then proceeds by exploring presenting problems and criminogenic needs and then by establishing the function of the offending – that is, the primary human goods to which it directly or indirectly relates. Once the reasons for offending, the level of risk and the flaws in the individual's life plan have been understood, the practitioner should identify their strengths, positive experiences and expertise. Next, the effort shifts to exploring primary and secondary goods and how they might be better met. There should then follow some consideration of the individual's environment and its likely impact on their life plan, before in the final phase of assessment the practitioner constructs an intervention plan based on all of the above considerations.

The recognition of the significance of relationships in and environments for positive change within the GLM is an important development and one which chimes with the emphasis on social capital in the desistance literature. We have already noted that the latter term refers to the resources that inhere in social

relationships and networks characterised by shared norms and reciprocal bonds (see Putnam, 2000; McNeill and Whyte, 2007). Social capital theorists have delineated three types of social capital, two of which are most relevant here; bonding social capital refers to close ties with family and friends, bridging social capital refers to more distant ties, for example with a wider network of acquaintances and colleagues (for more detail see McNeill and Whyte, 2007, chapter 9). Unsurprisingly, research indicates not just that high crime communities have low social capital but also that persistent offenders tend to have very little social capital – or at least very little licit social capital. Their damaged ties even to close friends and family force them to rely on illicit and criminal networks, damaging their prospects for desistance (Webster et al, 2006). It follows that supporting desistance requires probation services to help offenders and ex-offenders, where appropriate, to repair the bonding social capital represented in family ties and to prepare for and develop ties with the new families that they form as they establish intimate relationships and become parents. However, this social capital building should also extend to the development of bridging social capital, meaning wider community ties forged with and through employers, NGOs, faith communities and so on. Both by developing their positive contributions to families and by building positive ties with communities, probation services can create channels for the generative activities that seem to be important to those desisting from crime in helping them to see themselves as positive contributors to communities rather than risks or threats to them (McNeill and Whyte, 2007).

Summing up, we have tried to show in this section that the question of 'what works?' is a somewhat problematic basis for EBP in community corrections. It is beset with methodological problems linked to recidivism as an outcome measure but it also has conceptual limitations. We need a much broader engagement with evidence about how and why people make positive changes in their lives; how they desist from crime. We need to work out the practical implications of that evidence – and it seems as if that evidence already pushes us far beyond debates about programmes to change ex/offenders and into debates about how to motivate change, and how to engage with the family and community contexts in which change is embedded.

Whose evidence?

In this brief final section of the paper, the emphasis shifts from exploring the range of purposes that shape the relevance of evidence, and the range of forms of evidence that speak to even one purpose, to the question of *whose* evidence, expertise and experience should shape correctional policy and practice? The answers to this question will, of course, vary depending on the purposes at stake. Judges, victims and communities, for example, must be crucial participants in relation to some of the purposes of corrections discussed in the first section. But, for the sake of consistency and clarity, we retain the focus here on the rehabilitative purpose of supervision.

Observant readers will have noticed already that desistance research (at its best) draws on the voices of ex-offenders and those that have supported them to

change, so it is perhaps unsurprising that it also leads us towards a recognition of important forms of knowledge and expertise that have been routinely neglected or marginalised in much of the research on rehabilitation (and on criminal justice more generally). These are those forms of knowledge and expertise that come from the life experiences of ex-offenders and from the professional experience of correctional practitioners. They are, admittedly, more local and personal forms of knowledge than those generated by research, and they may not necessarily be a reliable basis for generalisation and grand theory-building, but they are nonetheless critical to the 'co-production' of credible, viable and productive plans and services for supporting desistance at the personal and local levels (Weaver, 2011).

There is some research evidence that neglecting such voices is counterproductive. For example, the evidence from recent reform efforts in community corrections in the UK and elsewhere (McNeill et al, 2010), and from the broader literature on research utilisation (Buckley and Whelan, 2009; Nutley, 2007; Landry et al., 2001; Shonkoff, 2000) suggests that top-down processes of EBP implementation often fail to generate the kinds of commitment and enthusiasm from practitioners (and service users) that are critical to the success of such efforts.

Perhaps underlying these practical constraints on the effectiveness of a one-sided conversation between research and practice, others have suggested that a mechanistic conception of getting research into practice is also problematic both conceptually and ethically. Such an approach fails to recognise the ways in which practice in human services is itself often at least as much intuitive as it is analytical, as well as being inherently moral, reflexive and dialogical rather than instrumental and didactic (Schwandt, 2005). In other words, effective practice can't be produced in a research lab and brought to the field; rather, it must be co-constructed in the human interactions that constitute the field.

It follows that developing the discussion about the implications of desistance theory and research for corrections requires not a desistance-researcher monologue aimed at the field, but rather a dialogue involving academics, policymakers, managers, practitioners, ex/offenders, and their families and supporters.

Generating this kind of conversation is the central aim of an ongoing 'knowledge exchange' project entitled 'Discovering Desistance'[ii] . This project (partnered in the USA by Prof Faye Taxman's Center for Advancing Correctional Excellence at GMU: http://www.gmuace.org/) aims to explore the experience and knowledge of these different stakeholders in relation to desistance from crime and how correctional supervision in the community can best support it. To this end, the project has three key elements:

1. Developing, with key stakeholders, user friendly methods of disseminating existing research about desistance from crime and about supporting desistance in offender supervision. This has involved us in working with ex/offenders, practitioners and an independent film

       production company to make a documentary film about desistance which is due for release in July 2012;

2. Fostering dialogue and communication between stakeholders about desistance and how best to support it, drawing not just on research but on the experiences of managers, practitioners, ex/offenders and their families. One part of this dialogue is the 'Discovering Desistance' blog site (see: http://blogs.iriss.org.uk/discoveringdesistance/) where academics, ex/offenders and practitioners have all made key contributions to developing the discussion.

3. Running a series of stakeholder workshops (across four jurisdictions) which aim at the co-producing a set of clear recommendations about the further development of 'practice for desistance'; and beginning to delineate the features of an organised framework for offender supervision practice to support desistance. This is the focus of the ongoing final stage of the project in Spring/Summer 2012.

The 'Discovering Desistance' project is intended as a precursor to subsequent work focused more closely on the development of means of embedding the knowledge developed in this first project within relevant organisations in each jurisdiction involved – England and Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland and the USA. This incremental, relational and systemic approach to 'knowledge exchange' or 'knowledge mobilisation' builds on the reflections of Nutley et al that for 'knowledge to be used it needs not only to be embedded in relationships but also interwoven with the priorities, cultures and contexts of organizations and systems' (2010: 135-6).

The project represents perhaps just the beginning of a serious attempt to *co-produce* new approaches to policy and practice. As well as being committed in principal to co-production, such an approach is itself evidence-based. Our method is broadly based on the analysis of 'knowledge to action' models by Best et al (2009) which emphasises three approaches to supporting research use: 'linear models' focus on research dissemination in order to lead to action; 'relationship models' focus on building relationships between policy, practice and academia; 'systems models' focus on the way in which knowledge is embedded into organizations and systems is the most important factor in improving knowledge use. Rather than regarding these as competing models, the 'Discovering Desistance' project aims to combine elements of them. Though the effective dissemination of desistance research is a key aspiration of this project, the evidence clearly demonstrates that 'even good dissemination is not enough if policy and practice change is the goal' (Nutley 2003: 9), therefore, we aim to move beyond dissemination. The aspiration is not so much to 'transfer' knowledge from research into practice as to bring different forms of knowledge together to generate new insights for and from practice.

Recently, the National Institute of Justice in the USA, under the leadership of the eminent desistance scholar, John Laub, has advanced the case for a 'translational criminology'[iii]. As Laub argues:

> 'The idea of translational criminology is simple yet powerful. If we want to prevent, reduce and manage crime, scientific discoveries must be translated into policy and practice. Translational criminology aims to break down barriers between basic and applied research by creating a dynamic interface between research and practice. This process is a two-way street — scientists discover new tools/ideas for use in the field and evaluate their impact. In turn, practitioners offer novel observations from the field that stimulate basic investigations. This is the knowledge creation process'.

This is very much what we have in mind in 'Discovering Desistance', except perhaps that rather than seeing this as a two-way street, we regard it as a more complex intersection, where other voices, experiences and forms of knowledge (critically those of ex-offenders) also need to be heeded.

Importantly, Laub also suggests that:

> 'Another goal of translational criminology is to address the gaps between scientific discovery and program delivery and effective crime policy. This is the knowledge application process... It is not just about finding the evidence that something works; it is figuring out how to implement the evidence in real world practice settings and understanding why it works. Moreover, this facet of translational criminology places a priority on applicability; that is, research with the potential for real world implementation, which is attractive in an era of shrinking resources'.

Clearly this resonates with the arguments advanced above, as well as bringing us neatly full-circle; that is, back to recognition that whatever new approaches emerge, they need to be properly tested and evaluated. Again however, we want to push a little further. Drawing on contemporary debates about the proper role of a 'public criminology' in creating the conditions under which 'a better politics of crime and regulation' (Loader and Sparks, 2010: 117) might emerge, we hope not just to develop new practice approaches, but to generate new insights – even new ways of thinking together about social and criminal justice 'problems' and 'solutions'. After all, in the policy arena, social science research is more likely to have an 'enlightenment' rather than an 'engineering' impact:

> 'it is not the findings of a single study nor even a body of related studies that directly affect policy (or practice). Rather it is the concepts and theoretical perspectives that social science research has engendered that permeate the policy making process...' (Weiss 1979: 429-30).

Conclusions

This paper has taken what might seem to some a slightly unusual path. Rather than trying to present that latest evidence from research in EBPs in community corrections and issuing academic advice on what policies or practices to adopt, we have tried instead to respect Beccaria's injunction and to open up new

vantage points from which we might examine the claims of evidence on policy and practice.

We have focused here on just three sets of questions. Firstly, we explored the links between evidence and purposes, arguing that since the purposes of community corrections are multiple and contested, a range of approaches to measuring effectiveness is required. Secondly, focusing on just one of the purposes of community corrections – reducing reoffending -- we exposed some of the methodological problems that lie behind exploring 'what works?' and suggested a wider engagement with evidence about how and why people desist from crime. That evidence base pointed us towards practices that support ex/offenders to develop new skills and change their behaviour, but also towards interventions that can motivate people and build hope, and that engage with the relational and social contexts of change. Finally, we argued that the development of more effective practice in community corrections (as in other domains) is less about getting research evidence into practice and more about academics, ex/offenders, practitioners and others working out how to co-produce change together.

In relation to this venture, Beccaria again has some wise words for us here:

> 'Ignorance may be less fatal than a small degree of knowledge, because this adds, to the evils of ignorance, the inevitable errors of a confined view of things...' (Priestley and Vanstone, 2010: 12).

We are all vulnerable to developing 'a confined view'; to privileging our own perspective; to preferring to rely on the small degrees of knowledge that we accrue as individuals. And we all stand the best chance of avoiding the errors attendant on taking such 'a confined view' by exposing ourselves to the views of others. This is not to suggest that all forms of knowledge should be assessed and used in the same ways – and, of course, it is not to refute the need to expose and reject policies and practices based in ignorance or error, whatever their source. But it is to argue for the learning that comes from mutually respectful dialogue, since it is in that dialogue that the prospects for progressive community corrections resides.

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[i] This section of the paper draws heavily on another recent paper (McNeill, 2012) in Legal and Criminological Psychology. I am grateful to the editor of that journal for permission to re-use some of that material here.

[ii] The project is funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council, award no. RES-189-25-0258.

[iii] See: http://nij.gov/nij/about/speeches/translational-criminology-3-1-2011.htm