

Making the Case for an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Approach to Probation: From Reformation to Transformation

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Summary: This paper, in exploring the relevance of strengths-based approaches to probation, argues that in moving towards a strengths-based methodology and away from a deficiency approach that problematises offenders, Probation Services can expect to maximise potential for promoting pro-social behaviours. This approach situates the offender in the position of ‘co-producer’ and active citizen working towards just outcomes, and asserts that Probation Services through their professional support staff are key partners in this co-production, and play a critical catalytic role in supporting offenders to move towards active citizenship. The work of thought leaders in the field of strengths-based work with marginalised cohorts – such as John McKnight – suggests that activating such active citizenship and co-production must ultimately involve connecting offenders with the very communities against whom they have committed an offence. This paper explores this restorative process, and how it can be applied alongside a strengths-based practice framework. Additionally the means by which probation work can extend beyond one-to-one client-oriented service to include community-building/social inclusion work is discussed.

Keywords: Offenders, strengths-based approach, learning conversations, asset mapping, motivation, social inclusion, community.

Strengths-based approach

A strengths-based approach to probation operates on the assumption that people, regardless of their offending behaviour, their families and their communities have valid and valuable resources for their own empowerment, and, further, that all professional interventions should

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aim to activate those resources purposefully (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan and Kisthardt, 1989).

Hence the strengths perspective invites a different way of looking at offending individuals than would be the norm within society generally. In contrast to a deficit perspective that sees offenders as problematic and deviant, it argues that people, regardless of their crime, must also be seen in the light of their talents, competencies, possibilities, visions, values and dreams, activated or otherwise – however grim or oppressive their circumstances may be – if sustained rehabilitation is to be achieved (Clark, 1997). In fact the more difficult the circumstances are, the more important it is that professional intervention be oriented towards investing in the capacities of such individuals, their families and communities, so as to empower them to be their own primary investors in workable and sustainable solutions and life choices (Lee, 1994).

Table 1 gives an iteration of a strength-based perspective, expressed in what is termed a bill of rights for youth in the juvenile justice system. It offers a useful comparator for existing rights-based thinking in the field and, among other things, reminds us that offenders, as well as having a right to receive services, also have a right to contribute to their own care and reform.

As Table 1's Bill of Rights suggests, a strengths-based practitioner is invested from the outset in identifying, connecting and mobilising the strengths of the individual offender, and indeed the community around them. The relationship that is nurtured is not based on external control and compliance, but on finding out what the person (beyond the label 'offender') cares about enough to act upon (Green, Moore and O'Brien, 2007). The primary occupation of this relationship-building phase is to discern what the person receiving professional probationary help is motivated towards, and will therefore use their own agency and strengths to attain (Saleebey, 1997). What will they produce? What will they co-produce?

Probation and justice professionals play a vital role in supporting offenders to unpack such questions, and indeed in bridge-building between marginalised 'offenders' (Sullivan and Rapp, 1994) and their communities.

Learning Conversations: The Key to Unlocking Motivation

Uncovering what people care about enough to contribute to the probation process is not easily done, and certainly not likely to be

Table 1. Strengths-based bill of rights for youth in the juvenile justice system

1. I have the right to be viewed as a person capable of changing, growing and becoming positively connected to my community no matter what types of delinquent behaviour I have committed.
2. I have a right to participation in the selection of services that build on my strengths.
3. I have a right to contribute things I am good at and other strengths in all assessment and diagnostic processes.
4. I have a right to have my resistance viewed as a message that the wrong approach may be being used with me.
5. I have the right to learn from my mistakes and to have support to learn that mistakes don't mean failure. I have the right to view past maladaptive or anti-social behaviours as a lack of skills that I can acquire to change my life for the better.
6. I have the right to experience success and to have support connecting previous successes to future goals.
7. I have the right to have my culture included as a strength and services that honour and respect my cultural beliefs.
8. I have the right to have my gender issues recognised as a source of strength in my identity.
9. I have the right to be assured that all written and oral, formal and informal communications about me include my strengths as well as needs.
10. I have a right to surpass any treatment goals that have been set too low for me, or to have treatment goals that are different to those generally applied to all youth in the juvenile justice system.
11. I have a right to be served by professionals who view youth positively, and understand that motivating me is related to successfully accessing my strengths.
12. I have a right to have my family involved in my experience in the juvenile justice system in a way that acknowledges and supports our strengths as well as needs. I have a right to stay connected to my family no matter what types of challenges we face.
13. I have the right to be viewed and treated as more than a statistic, stereotype, risk score, diagnosis, label or pathology unit.
14. I have a right to a future free of institutional or systems involvement and to services that most centrally and positively focus on my successful transition from institutions.
15. I have the right to service providers who co-ordinate their efforts and who share a united philosophy that the key to my success is through my strengths.
16. I have the right to exercise my developmental tasks as an adolescent; to try out new identities; to learn to be accountable and say I'm sorry for the harm I've caused others – all of which is made even more difficult if I'm labelled a 'bad kid'.
17. I have the right to be viewed and treated as a redeemable resource and a potential leader and success of the future.

Source: Based on a perspective developed by Laura Burney Nissen, 1998, www.reclaimingfutures.org/solution_sbr

achieved by conducting an inventory of all that is wrong in the person's life. Common sense alone would caution against such a starting point, especially if the primary purpose of the probationary process is to motivate the person on probation to change; hence the importance of starting with strengths. Moving from theory to practice, this section of the paper explores some tools for conducting a strengths-based learning conversation.

When people have been mapped by their deficiencies, it is often difficult to pinpoint what they care about enough to act upon (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). The purpose of a learning conversation is therefore to intentionally work with the individual to discover their implicit motivations. There are three key questions within any effective learning conversation which move in that direction (Green et al., 2007), as follows.

- What do you care about enough to act on?
- What do you have to offer?
- What will it take for you to join in action with others who share your interests?

Suffice it to say that how these questions are framed will vary depending on the interaction, the local situation and what the broad objective of the conversation is at any given time. The more open the questions are, the better (Clark, 1997); it is easier to start by finding out what an offender cares about in their lives generally, and then to home in on what they care about within the probation context; reversing this sequence rarely proves fruitful.

One of the key features of a strengths-based learning conversation is its emphasis on motivation. In this regard a distinction is drawn between an interviewee's opinion about what someone else should act upon on their behalf, and what they themselves are prepared to act upon.

Such conversations recognise that there are three key motivators to action:

1. what we want to see happen (our dreams for the future) and are prepared to move towards
2. what we do not want to see happen (our concerns for the future) and are prepared to move away from
3. what we are willing to contribute (our strengths/capacities) to move towards our dreams and in addressing our concerns.

These motivators are universal and based on the realisation that everyone cares about something enough to act on it, regardless of their criminal records. Engaging someone within a probation context with such questions serves to shift the power dynamic away from the client/professional dependent relationship (Mathie and Cunningham, 2002) and towards a relationship where both parties are engaged in co-producing a positive probationary experience. Underpinning strength-based learning conversations is an innate recognition of the limits of professionals and institutions in effecting sustainable reform; a recognition that change of this kind can occur only from the inside, out (McKnight, 1995).

The work of the Resilience Research Centre¹ offers an interesting perspective on conducting strengths-based learning conversations in their broadest context. It documents the complexity of young people's lives when growing up in adverse circumstances. The Centre has designed what it refers to as nine 'catalyst' questions aimed at prompting the development of resiliency and engagement in such young people, and understanding positive deviance.² The nine catalyst questions are as follows.

1. What would I need to know to grow up well here?
2. How do you describe people who grow up well here despite the many problems they face?
3. What does it mean to you, to your family, and to your community, when bad things happen?
4. What kinds of things are most challenging for you growing up here?
5. What do you do when you face difficulties in your life?
6. What does being healthy mean to you and others in your family and community?

¹ The Resilience Research Centre (RRC) brings together leaders in the field of resilience research from different disciplines and cultural backgrounds. Partners across six continents employ methodologically diverse approaches to the study of how children, youth and families cope with many different kinds of adversity. The RRC's focus is the study of the social and physical ecologies that make resilience more likely to occur.

² Positive Deviance (PD) is an approach to personal, organisational and cultural change based on the idea that every community or group of people performing a similar function has certain individuals (the 'Positive Deviants') whose special attitudes, practices/strategies/behaviors enable them to function more effectively than others with exactly the same resources and conditions, often in spite of significant adversity.

7. What do you do, and others you know do, to keep healthy, mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually?
8. Can you share with me a story about another child who grew up well in this community despite facing many challenges?
9. Can you share a story about how you have managed to overcome challenges you face personally, in your family, or outside your home in your community?

These questions offer a rich framework within which the interviewer and interviewee can begin to understand how resiliency operates – often as an invisible asset – in communities and within individuals. Inquiring in an appreciative³ way can reveal this and in turn provide the interviewee with very valuable information about how to contend more productively with adversity (Fraser and Galinsky, 1997).

At a more interpersonal level, learning conversations can often simply focus on the capacities of the offender. Not surprisingly, many offenders are radically disconnected from their capacities (gifts and talents) and therefore find it extremely difficult to identify their strengths. Nevertheless, assisting an offender to identify their strengths is an important building block in the move towards identifying what they can and want to contribute to society. Interestingly, this approach has the potential to supersede the imposition of community service as a punishment, since it liberates latent desires within offenders to contribute to their community (based on what they care about), as against compelling them to do so.

The Assets-Based Approach

The strengths-based approach, in its call for a reform of professional intervention at both policy and practice levels by shifting the focus away from deficits and towards strengths, provides us with a positive starting point in working with individual offenders. However, it falls short in offering useful comment on how professionals can mobilise communities to take on their responsibility in co-creating an enabling and accountable environment within which probation can be a ‘life-giving’ experience.

³ Appreciative Inquiry (AI) provides practitioners with a comprehensive process-oriented set of tools for conducting learning conversations that result in positive self-motivated action. For a detailed account of the AI approach visit: <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu>

Here is where the Asset-Based Critique takes over, in that it goes further in criticising the consumerist society where professionalisation (producers of solutions) often unintentionally prohibits communities (consumers of professional solutions) from believing they have anything to contribute to the production of more just communities. For many the current probation experience is a one-to-one affair, solely between the offender and the professional, despite the fact that offences largely occur within a community, perpetrated by a disaffected member of a community, onto a community, and in turn more often than not result in offenders being further distanced by that community (Wolin and Wolin, 1993).

Here the lessons of restorative practice come centre-stage. Fundamental among them is that the production of justice is everyone's business; it is a community affair, and its restoration requires contribution from all stakeholders, including but not only the 'offender' and the 'victim'.

Evidence abounds that 'recommunitisation' is central to rehabilitation (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993; Block, 2008). The journey from the margins of community life into the centre as a contributing active member will not be achieved solely by building bridges between offenders and probation professionals, regardless of how skilled those professionals may be. The bridge-building must be primarily between offenders and their families and communities. Key to starting this process is the intentional liberation of the self-efficacy of offenders: the agency to make self-motivated pro-community contributions that build up their sense of belonging – but here too, communities and families have a key role to play.

An often cited African proverb holds that it takes an entire village to raise a child, which prompts the question: what role does the village have when the child or young person transgresses? Currently in most jurisdictions it seems we rely heavily on the intervention of professionals acting on behalf of the state in such circumstances. Against this prevailing trend, Asset-Based Community Development approaches contend that two tools are required to build just and safe communities (McKnight, 1995). One tool is the agency of the criminal justice system; the other is the agency of just, community-led responses.

The *Report on Restorative Justice* (2007), produced by the Joint Committee on Justice, Equality, Defence and Women's Rights, cites figures from the UCD Institute of Criminology, noting that 25% of the

Irish prison population will reoffend within one year and approximately 50% will reoffend within four years. Based on these figures and the other findings presented in the report, it goes on to assert:

as a result, there is a growing need for new and innovative methods that will improve the Irish criminal justice system's ability to administer justice to victims, offenders and communities in as fair and effective a manner as possible.

The language in the above quote reveals a dynamic that can unintentionally restrict efforts at constructing genuine partnerships between the criminal justice system and communities, in that it places the state in the position of 'administrator' – i.e. the producer of justice – and the victims, communities and even 'offenders' in the role of passive recipients. Yet the act of restoring justice is one that calls on all parties to contribute towards a solution; to become co-producers of justice where the shared commitment to restore justice is more compelling than the seeking of retribution.

This concept of co-production is of central importance, in that it posits that justice, as well as health, economic well-being, public safety and education are not solely 'products' or services produced well or badly by the state, but in both their presence and absence are complex social, economic, environmental and health-related phenomena that require genuine partnership between citizens and government (McKnight, 1995).

Indeed, central to McKnight's argument is the assertion that systems cannot provide 'care'. That is not to say that they do not employ caring people, who care deeply about their jobs and the people they serve; his point is that systems (or institutions) by design cannot care in the same way that a family member, a loved one, or even a neighbour can.

The primary role of a system is to provide a service that addresses needs that citizens/communities cannot address themselves, and wherever possible to support and where appropriate to catalyse communities to become strong, inclusive and hospitable places. A system will therefore never be able to create the sense of belonging or community that can provide the essential nutrients for offenders to grow towards active citizenship: only citizens within communities can provide that.

Offenders, like all human beings have three levels of need:

1. needs they can meet themselves, or have met within a family, friendship or community context: e.g. a sense of belonging, often met when one is actively involved and included in a local club or association
2. needs that can be met within a partnership between civic contribution (inclusive of their own) and state/professional support: e.g. back to education within a community context where formal learning is linked to productive community activities, where for example workshops are not isolated from the neighbourhoods they operate in but actively pursue opportunities to contribute, wherein for instance a woodwork class becomes the place where an offender learns to build and design a community playground
3. needs that can only be met by professionals: e.g. medical intervention.

It would be naïve in the extreme to suggest that offenders do not require specialist professional intervention in a range of areas, from, for example, dental to psychiatric care; such interventions are an important part of recovery and restoration (Benard, 1994). The point here is not to denigrate professional intervention, but rather to highlight the fact that it is not a cure-all for the ills of society (Watson, 2002); that individuals, families and communities also have a valid and vital role to play. The question then is: how can we as professionals activate such a partnership so as to ensure that where it is appropriate for the tool of community response to be employed, we support communities to step up to the challenge?

The first step in doing so is simply to place a value on community-building work. Currently it would appear that there is a disproportionate investment of time and resources in one-to-one and group work (where in some instances offenders are aggregated with other offenders in workshop formats) (Green et al., 2007), with little invested in intentionally broadening the circle of such an individual's participation in community life, inclusive of the local economy (Putnam and Feldstein, 2003).

Asset Mapping: The Missing Link?

Assuming that is accepted that reconnecting offenders with their communities is a worthwhile undertaking under the aegis of probation,

the previous section of the paper argues that building such a bridge must start with the identifying, connecting and mobilising of assets. How, then, can we identify, connect and mobilise the untapped reservoirs of assets such as care that exist in communities and harness them towards a more productive probation experience?

ABCD asserts that there are at least five core assets within every community, regardless of its demography and socio-economic status (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). As they relate to probation, they can be articulated as follows:

- individual local residents with skills, abilities and assets (gifts) who believed that they could make a difference with regard to the probation issue, and/or in the life of someone within the probation system
- small groups of individuals (citizen-led clubs, groups) getting together (associations) to pool their gifts for a common cause (unpaid), who when asked are often prepared to go beyond their stated mission – especially when appropriate support is provided – to support someone within the probation system
- agencies and other formal organisations (government, non-government organisations (NGOs) and businesses) with paid staff, and a defined mandate – technically referred to as institutions that may have nothing to do with probation *per se*, but that either institutionally see it as part of their corporate social responsibility or, through interested staff, wish to make a non-financial contribution
- physical assets and resources such as buildings, land and other infrastructure, such as a community garden. Connecting the assets of offenders with physical assets, especially ones that have not been fully realised, can provide a context for power probationary experiences (see the Seattle Artworks below by way of example)
- economic exchange, both formal (purchase of goods and services) and informal (bartering, timeshare, swapping). Supporting an offender to make a contribution at the economic level that both meets their needs and connects them into productive and reciprocal relationships at community level provides a powerful context for social as well as economic inclusion.

All success stories relating to just outcomes of which I am aware are about unconnected assets becoming connected. Each of the five assets

outlined above provides an essential but often untapped resource towards a positive probationary experience; how that looks in practice will naturally vary. In reality it may even be missed, because it unfolds in such an organic fashion; often beyond the normal scope of agency oversight, as typified by the following hypothetical example.

Luigi is the owner of a local takeaway and has employed Pat (offender) on a part-time basis. Recognising that Pat is isolated and stigmatised, Luigi links him in to a number of social opportunities, including playing five-a-side football on Saturday mornings with a number of his life-long friends, many of whom coach for a local football club. In turn Luigi's friends influence the club to include Pat – a gifted football player – to assist alongside an experienced coach. Pat becomes connected to the community, in a safe way, based on his skills and talents.

Of course many such arrangements are already in place and in the main are working well, but rarely appear as measures of success in our key performance indicators (KPIs).

What ABCD offers is a way of more systematically and consistently engaging offenders and communities in these kinds of relationships. The tool of asset mapping used in ABCD – a detailed description of which falls outside the scope of this paper – provides an evidence-based framework that effectively allows us to build a bridge between marginalised 'offenders' and their communities, despite their past wrongdoing, and misgivings on the part of the community. The asset-based approach when applied in general practice results in a broadening of the circle of participation for labelled individuals, and the building of a solid path towards active citizenship at the centre of community life.

One example of community assets being brought together to build a bridge with 'offenders' into the centre of community life comes from the South Downtown (SODO) neighbourhood of Seattle. In response to growing concern about the negative appearance of the gateway into the city of Seattle as a result of graffiti, Mike Peringer – who at the time worked in a local factory on 5th Avenue South – wanted to create an urban art corridor with the backs of the warehouses that faced onto the railway tracks as his canvas.

What distinguished Peringer's response to graffiti and anti-social behaviour from standard mural programmes that have become

commonplace was his commitment to including those who previously were labelled as offenders in the process of restoring the appearance of the neighbourhood. From this commitment, the ArtWorks programme was born in 1995. Working closely with King County Court judges, the programme provided an alternative sentence.

The ArtWorks programme offers young offenders a chance to produce real project outcomes that significantly enhance participant and community wellbeing. Participants are mentored by community members and, as well as developing occupational skills, they are learning important life skills. Aside from the low incidence of repeat offending, three features are worthy of particular mention. Firstly, young people do not have to offend to become part of the programme, which means that the programme has a mix of offenders and non-offenders. Secondly, the programme has a primary focus on social enterprise: a significant number of murals are painted on hoarding boards and are sold to local building contractors who erect them on their building sites, hence making the programme self-financing and sustainable over time. Thirdly, Peringer is a citizen; he is not a professional social worker or youth worker.

The scope of this work has expanded far beyond the SODO Urban Art Corridor, and today ArtWorks creates murals for schools, businesses and parks throughout Seattle; over 2,000 young people have benefited from the programme (Peringer, 2007).

Conclusion

One of the primary positions adopted in this paper may be presented as the truism that you cannot know what an offender needs until you first know what they have. Yet with people who are labelled as ‘offenders’ we start – and all too often end – with their deficiencies, on which it is impossible to build anything, especially pro-social behaviours; hence the need for professionals to start their interventions with the strengths/assets of the person.

The second position is that all change happens from inside out, and not from outside in. Therefore we need to start with the offender, not in a passive position as a client, but in an active position as a co-producer – with the professional in a catalytic role – in restoring justice by building on the strengths of the individual.

The third position presented in this paper revolves around the importance of connecting offenders back into the centre of community life. Hence the need to complement person-centred work and restorative practice (which focuses on the offender and the victim) with community-building work that intentionally breaks down marginalisation and stigmatisation of offenders by supporting them to build productive reciprocal relationships, which open up real possibilities for sustainable reform.

In concluding, it is important to make explicit a point that has been implied throughout, i.e. the need for all professionals, including those in Probation and Justice, to guard against the inherent danger of operating within a 'silo' that obscures from vision the resources required to bring about lasting transformative change. These resources include the latent strengths of offenders, the untapped reservoirs of care within the communities with whom offenders belong, and skilled professionals who can identify, connect and activate such assets. Given that Probation services cannot hope to achieve their objectives unilaterally, but only in partnership with offenders, communities and other institutions, these assets offer an alternative path in place of reformation, towards transformation, and present real hope for a just society for all.

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