Approaching Responsivity: The Victorian Department of Justice and Indigenous Offenders

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Offender rehabilitation has developed a stronghold on correctional practice in the past two decades. Further strengthening this grip have been three main principles for effective practice; risk, needs and responsivity. This paper will focus on the responsivity principle, which dictates that effective rehabilitation involves consideration of an offender’s cognitive behavioural characteristics and appropriate program delivery. In particular, this paper will analyse how this task has been approached by the Victorian Department of Justice in relation to Indigenous offenders. Drawing on recent interviews with Justice staff, it will be shown that Justice’s approach to being responsive to the needs of Victorian Indigenous offenders is more complex than addressing cognitive behavioural characteristics and program delivery. It involves meaningful interactions that extend beyond the Department of Justice and Indigenous offenders to include Indigenous communities.

Introduction

The move by correctional agencies to apply principles for effective offender rehabilitation to their objectives and frameworks is not a recent occurrence. While this move has formed the focus of much research, the principle of responsivity, one of the key principles for effective practice, has received very limited consideration in regard to its practical application by institutions and the resulting lived experiences of offenders. Addressing the institutional aspect, this paper explores the Victorian Department of Justice approach to the principle of responsivity in relation to Indigenous offenders. The paper does this by discussing the narratives of Victorian Department of Justice staff in regard to their direct and indirect work that attempts to respond to the needs of Indigenous offenders and the influences on this work. It is argued that the formal and informal interactions that occur between the Department of Justice and Indigenous communities as well as between the Department of Justice and Indigenous offenders, has moved the practice of responsivity into a more comprehensive area of response than that which is outlined in the correctional literature.

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This argument is developed over the three parts of the paper. Part one provides the background for the move towards offender responsivity and outlines the two models that have been incorporated into the Victorian Reducing Re-offending Framework. The second part outlines the methodological approach taken, including the description of the sample, interviews and analysis. Part Three draws on recent interviews with Justice staff and critically explores how the Victorian Department of Justice has approached the principle of responsivity in relation to Indigenous offenders.

The Development of Offender Rehabilitation

‘With few and isolated exceptions, the rehabilitative efforts … have had no appreciable effects on recidivism’ (Martinson, 1974 p. 25). This single quote is arguably the most well known and most commonly referred to conclusion that has been drawn in the history of offender rehabilitation development. So quickly accepted and unchallenged were these words of Martinson that they sparked an international era of ‘nothing works’, which hindered interest in offender rehabilitation for 20 years. Indeed, it was not until the development of meta-analysis in the 1990s, which allowed data to be aggregated across a number of comparable studies, that conclusions in stark opposition began to be drawn. As positive findings became more frequent, a renewal of interest in offender rehabilitation occurred. This interest saw the forgone conclusion that ‘nothing works’ open up into a focused exploration of ‘what works’ in offender treatment and practice.

Emerging as a response to this issue of ‘what works’ was the Risk-Need-Responsivity Model (RNRM). This model was developed through a combination of the results from the aforementioned meta-analytical studies into successful rehabilitation (Andrews, Bonta and Hoge 1990), and the theory of the Psychology of Criminal Conduct (PCC). Briefly, the PCC is based in the area of personality and social learning psychology and therefore views behaviour in relation to personality and social constructs, such as low self-control and antisocial cognition (Andrews and Bonta 2003). In its current configuration, the RNRM uses this empirical and theoretical base to propose three principles for effective practice.1

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1 The original Model included an additional two principles for effective practice: professional override and program integrity. Although these aspects are acknowledged in discussions of effective practice, they no longer form part of the RNRM.
Risk-Need-Responsivity Model

The first principle for effective practice is the risk principle. This principle dictates that the offender’s level of risk should reflect the relative risk of re-offending that the offender poses. Hence, risk is attributed through classification procedures and results in different levels of treatment, with intensive treatment reserved for those offenders classified as ‘high risk’ (Andrews et al. 1990, p. 20).

The second principle for effective practice is the needs principle. This principle distinguishes between addressing those needs which are criminogenic and those which are non-criminogenic. In the RNRM, the primary focus is on addressing the criminogenic needs of the offender. Hence, the dynamic factors of the offender (such as anti-social attitudes and associates) are targeted because this model is premised on the belief that, when addressed, they lead to a reduction in recidivism. In contrast, the attributes of the offender (such as low self-esteem and anxiety) are sidelined because they have not been shown to reduce recidivism (Andrews et al. 1990; Ward and Stewart 2003).

The third principle for effective practice is the responsivity principle. The RNRM outlines this principle as the need to address the responsiveness of offenders to particular programs by acknowledging the variances in their personality and cognitive-behavioural characteristics (Andrews et al. 1990). In particular this principle entails consideration of the internal factors (such as intellectual functioning) and external factors (such as programme delivery) that may reduce the offender’s response to interventions (Ogloff and Davis, 2004 p. 233).

While the RNRM definition of responsivity has overwhelmingly dominated the correctional literature on ‘what works’, and as a result international correctional practice of offender rehabilitation, a second model for effective practice also emerged in the last decade that provides an alternative approach to responsivity; the Good Lives Model.

Good Lives Model

The Good Lives Model (GLM) focuses on enhancing the offender’s life (for a full review of this model see Ward 2002 a and b; Ward and Brown 2003, 2004; Ward and Stewart 2003). This model views offending as caused by an individual’s inability to satisfy their basic human needs, such as relatedness or autonomy, through pro-social channels. Thus, in this model, criminogenic needs are understood to be internal or external obstacles that frustrate the individual’s ability to fulfil his/her basic human
needs (Ward and Stewart 2003). Differentiating itself from the RNRM, the GLM takes a broad approach to enhancing the offender’s capabilities, rather than focusing merely on these obstacles to reduce recidivism. In this way it is hoped that offenders will no longer need to adopt anti-social strategies to fulfil their basic needs.

Whilst the GLM does not specify a ‘responsivity’ principle as such, it does provide an alternative understanding of the process of making offenders and programs responsive to one another through this concept of offender enhancement. The GLM proposes that, rather than viewing the internal and external conditions of the offender as obstacles that need to be addressed in order to move offenders through the system with maximum responsiveness to programs, these points should be seen as indicators of what should be possessed by the individual. This model provides guidance for how to identify such indicators and further, what conditions and developments are required in order for the offender to achieve enhancement (or responsiveness) in both the correctional setting and in their normal environment (Birgden 2002; Howells et al. 2005; Ward 2002b; Ward and Brown 2003, 2004; Ward and Eccleston 2004; Ward and Stewart 2003). The GLM therefore sees ‘responsivity’ as both a penal mechanism and an indicator of the characteristics and attributes that need to be enhanced in order for the offender to be more responsive to life’s challenges when released. Furthermore, this dual purpose of responsivity means that, although the GLM appears to contrast with the RNRM, by locating risk management within the GLM approach, one can actually capitalise on the benefits of both models (Ward 2002a). Hence, whilst these models are distinct in parts, they should not be seen as dichotomous.

Corrections Victoria, situated within the Department of Justice2, appears to have accepted the non-dichotomous relationship of the RNRM and the GLM in their recently developed offender rehabilitation framework, Reducing Re-offending Framework: Setting the Scene (Birgden and McLachlan 2004). This Framework attempts to integrate the two models and therefore provides offence-specific programs which aim for risk management, in addition to the provision of offence-related programs which aim to enhance the offender’s capabilities. However, as this Framework has not been further developed since the original scene was set, (or at least any such developments have not been made public) there is very limited indication of how the responsivity principle will be addressed within this integration.

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2 The Victorian Department of Justice encompasses police; courts; prisons; emergency services; regulation of gaming, racing, liquor licensing and trade measurement; and victims’ services.
Exploring Indigenous Responsivity in Victoria

The above review indicates a lack of research on the practical application of the principle of responsivity. The research outlined in this paper attempts to address this gap by exploring how the Victorian Department of Justice has approached the practice of responsivity in relation to Indigenous offenders. But why focus on the approaches to Indigenous offenders? First, this focus is driven by a personal commitment to exploring how correctional agencies have attempted to address the disgraceful figures of Indigenous over-representation in the criminal justice system.

Second, correctional interaction with Indigenous offenders is a drastically under researched area and it is hoped that, by showing what is occurring now, new developments can take place and progress can be made towards reducing this over-representation. The third reason for this focus relates to the move by correctional agencies to become more culturally appropriate - a move which, in part, provides an example of a modern application of responsivity. Occurring simultaneously to the renewed interest in offender rehabilitation was a move towards correctional practice which can be considered ‘culturally appropriate’. Zeller (2003, p. 175) provides a useful explanation of the process of becoming culturally appropriate, proposing that agencies must:

(a) become knowledgeable about the group they are working with, (b) be self-reflective and recognise biases within themselves as well as within their profession, and (c) integrate this knowledge and reflection with actual practice.

In Victoria, the move towards culturally appropriate practice has come in response to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC). While there is insufficient space to provide a complete overview of the numerous findings and recommendations of the RCIADIC, it is important to note that one of the main contentions of the Commission was that the criminal justice system was insensitive to the cultural needs of the Indigenous population and as a result, ‘too many aboriginal people are in custody too often’ (RCIADIC National Report Volume 1, Para 1.3.3). In response to these findings and recommendations, the Victorian Department of Justice has developed two sequential Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreements: Phase One (Department of Justice 2004) and Phase Two (Department of Justice 2006). The purpose of both phases of the Agreement is to move towards a culturally appropriate Victorian Department of Justice which addresses over-representation of the Indigenous population through appropriate initiatives across the criminal justice system.
Clearly, elements of this move to becoming culturally appropriate reflect the concepts encapsulated in each Model’s approach to responsivity. Specifically, they mirror the concept of responsive program delivery that is focused on the unique characteristics of the offender. Yet despite the similarities, there have been very few studies to date which have explored the commonalities in these correctional practices (see Day 2003; Day et al. 2003). Hence, by looking at how the Victorian Department of Justice has approached being responsive to Indigenous offenders, this research can reflect on the ways in which the ‘mainstream’ approach to responsivity has been changed and adapted in an attempt to be culturally appropriate for Indigenous offenders.

Method

The aim of this research is to explore how the Victorian Department of Justice has approached the offender rehabilitation principle of responsivity in relation to Indigenous offenders; that is, to explore what actions and interactions have been made by the Department of Justice in the name of being responsive to Indigenous offenders.

Participants and Procedures

In order to address the aim of the research, semi-structured interviews were conducted at the Victorian Department of Justice in May-June 2007. Participants comprised a non-random sample of 15 Justice staff who worked in Indigenous areas. Seventy-five percent of staff interviewed identifying as Indigenous. This sample was broken into two groups: (1) head office management, which included staff working in the areas of policy, evaluation and monitoring, community programs and Indigenous services; and (2) people who worked directly with Indigenous offenders and communities, which included members of the Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee and Aboriginal Wellbeing Officers.

Upon approval from both the University of Melbourne and the Victorian Department of Justice Human Research Ethics Committees, participants were recruited directly via telephone and email, and then through snowball sampling. Potential participants were advised of the topic of the research, the ethics approval received and the expectations surrounding their involvement. These expectations included setting aside a one to two hour period to partake in the semi-structured interview.
The interviews focused on four main issues in relation to approaching responsivity: (1) the role of the participant in the Department of Justice, the background they bring to that role, and the units and people they are responsible to and for; (2) the economic, social and political influences on the work they do in relation to Indigenous offenders; (3) the direct and indirect contact with Indigenous offenders that occurs both on a typical day and less frequently; and (4) what it means for the Department of Justice to be responsive to Indigenous offenders and what it means for Indigenous offenders to be responsive to Justice.

Analysis

Once the interviews were conducted, the data collected was analysed through a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis. This approach is based on the belief that when conducting a piece of research that seeks to explore the way in which rationalities ‘inscribe themselves in practices or systems of practice’, as has occurred with responsivity, one must explore how this occurs through a ‘production of truth’ (Foucault 1991, p. 79). Very briefly, for Foucault (1998), truth has no centre; it has no meaning on its own. Rather, truth is akin to a vessel, encapsulating a particular knowledge - and discourse surrounding that knowledge - which is contingent upon practices deemed acceptable at the time. Therefore, the discourse analysis undertaken focused on how Victorian approaches to Indigenous responsivity can be seen as ‘truths’ which encapsulates particular knowledges, such as ‘what works’ and culturally appropriate practice, and how responsivity in this context is contingent upon the approaches towards Indigenous offenders deemed acceptable in the 2000s.

Victorian Indigenous Responsivity: Results and Discussion

The interviews conducted with the Victorian Department of Justice staff demonstrated a clear gap between the narrow, undeveloped definition of the principle of responsivity in correctional literature and the multifaceted practice of the principle in Victoria. While the literature has stagnated around variances in cognitive behavioural and personality characteristics and matched program delivery, the practice of responsivity in relation to Indigenous offenders has grown to encompass a variety of interactions and relationships between Justice, Indigenous communities and offenders. While there is insufficient space to discuss the full extent of the principle of responsivity’s growth, this paper will demonstrate this growth in relation to the unique interpersonal interactions that occur between the
Department of Justice and Indigenous communities, as well as between the Department of Justice and Indigenous offenders.

*Formal Actions and Processes: Interactions between Justice and the Indigenous Community*

The interviews indicate that the Victorian Department of Justice has a variety of formal actions and processes which aim to facilitate responsivity between Justice and the community. These actions and processes take the form of structured, institutional responses to the needs of the community in relation to Indigenous offenders and are the products of the specific initiatives and agreements that Justice has undertaken in relation to Indigenous offenders.

The main responses identified by participants were: the development of the Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement, Phase One and Two, and the initiatives comprised therein; the formation of Koori reference groups and the Koori Caucus; and the yearly, bi-yearly and more frequent meetings and conferences for Department of Justice staff working with Indigenous offenders. These formal actions and processes were seen as the way in which the mainstream mechanisms of government take shape and function within an Indigenous area.

However, what became apparent from the discussions with staff was that, while these formal processes where indicative of the hierarchical and bureaucratic nature of all governments, they also needed to incorporate informal and interpersonal interactions if they were to succeed in responding to Indigenous people and having Indigenous people respond to Justice. As will now be shown, the Aboriginal Justice Forum exemplifies how responsivity has been approached by the Victorian Department of Justice through a move from formal interactions of Justice with Indigenous communities to informal and interpersonal relationships with people.

The Victorian Department of Justice conducts an Aboriginal Justice Forum four times a year, which runs for approximately two days each time. The Forum comprises key members of signatory agencies and key members from governmental and non-governmental Indigenous bodies (such as the Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee (RAJACS) and the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service). Over the two days of the Forum, time is also set aside for a Community Forum. Here the community has the opportunity to raise and discuss the issues they are facing in their local areas.
While the Aboriginal Justice Forum is a formal process, consisting of agendas and items for discussion, in order to facilitate discussion and develop a level of trust and partnership with Indigenous communities in Victoria, these formalities are complimented by a range of informal and interpersonal interactions. For example, on the first night of the Forum, a dinner is held where everyone is welcome to attend, including members of the community. At the dinner there is typically ‘Kooriokey’ where everyone in attendance sings together. The significance of these breaks in formalities was clearly expressed by participants:

> It blows people away because you can just see the change for all those who were feeling a bit more stiff and threatened, and then they start doing that [singing together] and they become friends ... we had people at the last one from Queensland, who came to observe us, who just couldn’t believe what happens. The interaction, the openness, the accountability, the degree to which the community were empowered to be equal powers in that process was very, very strong.

Hence, the combination of formal and informal interactions between the Department of Justice and Indigenous communities at the Aboriginal Justice Forum provides the means by which Justice has approached its task of responding to communities in meaningful and culturally appropriate ways.

In addition to the need to move towards formal and informal interactions, responsivity is also practiced in the Victorian Department of Justice through the shift in decision making power from Justice to the Indigenous communities. This shift is best exemplified through the development of the RAJAC network. All six of the RAJACs were established through the first Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement. The network spans the state of Victoria and is responsible for developing and monitoring the local and regional Justice Plans. The RAJACs represent Indigenous communities and their localised needs. All participants of the study acknowledged and discussed the large influence of the RAJACs on the responses of Justice to Indigenous offenders and communities. As one participant explained, ‘If the RAJAC, the Chair people, want something done, then it will get done if there is funding’.

Notably, this influence signifies a further change in direction in relation to the Department of Justice’s relationship and interaction with Indigenous communities. While the RAJAC network was established as part of the Victorian Department of Justice and, as such, is still in part responsible to Justice, the RAJACs also represent the various local needs of the Indigenous communities of Victoria. The development of the RAJAC network should therefore be seen as a shift away from Justice
determining what is best for the community and towards the community making their own decisions about what they need. Hence, in the case of Victoria, the principle of responsivity also incorporates this shift in decision making, for without this change, the Indigenous community would not ‘respond’ to Justice and, in turn, Justice would not be able to ‘respond’ to Indigenous offenders or communities.

These two short examples of the Aboriginal Justice Forum and the establishment of the RAJAC network have clear implications for the practical application of the principle of responsivity. First, through the involvement and partnership of Indigenous communities in Justice decision-making and monitoring, the principle has expanded beyond the confines of being a specific offender rehabilitation principle applicable only to offenders and program deliverers. Instead, the principle has come to signify a relationship between Justice and the communities. Second, this expansion in the focus of responsivity has been complemented by the changes in the direction and nature of interaction between Justice and communities. Now, in order for Justice to provide programs that attempt to respond to the needs of offenders, it must first seek to respond to communities by allowing them to make their own decisions about what is needed.

The necessity for the dual expansion of the principle of responsivity to incorporate these culturally appropriate issues in practice is clearly expressed in the following statement by a participant concerning what has been done by Justice in relation to being responsive to Indigenous offenders:

I think there are a number of ways that we have done it. Obviously partnership is at the heart of it, and the real information sharing, the openness, the transparency, the involvement in all critical decisions that effect people, and the capacity building. By making sure we are supporting the community’s ability to participate, recognising straight away that there is a huge unequalness that sits in that relationship, so unless we are very careful to try and ensure that the community side is empowered and is supported, then it is meaningless to just put people around the table.

Hence, the practice of the principle of responsivity in relation to Indigenous offenders means that communities must be involved and engaged in a way that addresses the power imbalance between the community and the Department of Justice, and that encourages the community to identify and prioritise the issues facing it.,
In addition to the interviews indicating a broadening of the meaning of responsivity to include community participation and direction, there have also been developments in relation to the direct interactions that occur between the Department of Justice and Indigenous offenders.

The way that all interviewed staff contextualised offenders evinces the direct development to the principle of responsivity. When participants were asked about how they balanced the fact that the people they were dealing with were both Indigenous and offenders, every person indicated that this was done by foremost viewing them as Kooris, or as Indigenous, and then understanding their offending behaviour. As one participant explained;

I see them primarily as Kooris, and as people, not as prisoners. But at the same time I have to acknowledge that the issues they have are because they are

Therefore, rather than remaining within the confines of the RNRM’s standard definition of responsivity - that is, as addressing the personality and cognitive-behavioural characteristics of offenders - the Victorian practice of the principle necessitates that these internal characteristics be viewed as only a small part of a whole person who is first and foremost Indigenous, and who needs to be responded to as such.

Complementing and, in many cases driving this change in focus from the internal characteristics to the whole individual, was the personal relationship that many of the Koori staff in the Department of Justice have with Koori offenders. Koori staff consistently indicated that during their lifetime most had experienced a family member or friend entering the criminal justice system. Many Koori staff believed that this experience enabled them to look at the system differently and with a better understanding. In addition, they frequently noted that one of the primary reasons they had chosen employment with the Department of Justice was because they wanted to address the disadvantage faced by Indigenous communities, which they understood on a personal level. Interestingly, while non-Indigenous staff was not able to share this personal involvement, references were made to a broader motivation. Indeed, the majority of non-Indigenous staff interviewed commented on their own drive to address Indigenous disadvantage within their own ways, with one participant referring to this as an ‘ideological commitment to human rights’. Hence, in addition to the Victorian Department of Justice’s practice of approaching Indigenous offenders as Indigenous people, it also means, in part, that Justice
interactions with Indigenous offenders are facilitated and driven by very personal and shared experiences of staff, which is further complemented by personal and shared commitments to addressing disadvantage.

Conclusion

The ‘what works’ movement has seen the literature on offender rehabilitation grow at an exponential rate, allowing for principles of effective practice to emerge. However, while this literature provides correctional agencies with concise definitions, it falls short of clarifying how these principles work in practice. Consequently, while the review of the principles at the beginning of the paper showed that responsivity referred to the consideration of an offender’s cognitive behavioural characteristics and appropriate program delivery, how this consideration has been approached by correctional agencies and the implications of this approach for the definition of responsivity has not been explored. In response to this deficiency, this paper outlined a research study which specifically explored how the Victorian Department of Justice approached the principle of responsivity in relation to Indigenous offenders.

The results of this study signify that the specific definition of responsivity provided by the literature is too narrow when applied to the Victorian Department of Justice’s approach to Indigenous offenders. Indeed, it appears that the principle of responsivity in relation to Indigenous offenders moves away from the confines of offender rehabilitation and towards a multi-level, culturally appropriate institutional response to Indigenous communities and offenders. Hence, in this context, responsivity not only means that Indigenous communities must be involved as equal partners in deciding how to respond to Indigenous offenders, but the Department of Justice must also be responsive in its approach to communities by changing the bureaucratic and formal ways that generally typify its interactions.

The results showed further extension to the principle of responsivity in relation to the specific interaction between the Department of Justice and Indigenous offenders. First, rather than focusing on the personality and cognitive-behavioural characteristics of the individual, and compartmentalising them in the process, the interviews demonstrated that responsivity to Indigenous offenders means that these individuals need to be understood as people, and as Indigenous, with a shared history of disadvantage. Additionally, this perception of a whole person contextualised by a long history of disadvantage was further supplemented by a
personal and shared level of experience and understanding by staff at the Victorian Department of Justice. Clearly, the changes that have occurred in relation to Justice’s response to communities and to individuals demonstrate a liberation from the confines of the concept of ‘responsivity’ defined in the literature and towards the development of a responsivity that has meaning and context based on interpersonal interactions and understandings that are meaningful.

On a final note, the purpose of this study was to address the gap in the literature surrounding the practical application of the principle of responsivity by examining how the Victorian Department of Justice has approached the principle of responsivity in relation to Indigenous offenders. This purpose was fulfilled by interviewing Department of Justice staff who worked in Indigenous areas, and exploring the actions and interactions made in the name of responsivity. However, this is only the first step in exploring the practical application of the principle of responsivity in this area. It is recommended that further research draw on the approaches identified by this study and examine if these actions and interactions by the Department of Justice have been experienced by Indigenous offenders and communities as responsive and effective.

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