

Practising Offender Supervision in Europe

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Introduction

This briefing summarises the learning from the third year's activities in Working Group 3 of the COST Action about Offender Supervision in Europe (COST IS1106: www.offendersupervision.eu). This group is focusing on the practice dimension: who is doing offender supervision and how are they doing it? This year we have continued with the work we started in year 2: that is, developing innovative research methods that can be applied to the domain of practice, and which can also be used to compare practice across jurisdictions.

In September 2014 we presented the preliminary results of our pilot research in a panel at the European Criminology Conference on *Practising Offender Supervision: Exploring Innovative Methods for Comparative Research*.

The remainder of this briefing presents reports on progress from each of our three sub-groups.

Sub-group 1: Visualising practice

This sub-group is led by Nicola Carr (UK) and Andrea Donker (the Netherlands). The other participants in the group are Aline Bauwens (Belgium), Jacqueline Bosker (the Netherlands), Ines Sučić (Croatia), Gwen Robinson and Anne Worrall (UK). This group aims to test the utility of visual methods (photography) for representing and comparing probation practice in different jurisdictions.

We began this year with a collection of almost 400 photographs, taken by 14 probation practitioners in 5 different countries. These included images of a whole range of things, including: the exteriors (and signage) of buildings where offender supervision takes place; waiting rooms and reception areas; rooms used to conduct interviews with offenders; staff rooms, offices and desks; and a range of other places and objects. As a group of researchers, we had a lot of experience of analyzing data, but whilst we were comfortable with words and numbers, we were less sure about how to engage in visual analysis, and we found the available literature was of limited assistance! Many of the

images were accompanied by some explanatory text which we had asked our photographers to supply (to help us make sense of their pictures), but we nonetheless felt rather overwhelmed by the amount – and the variety – of ‘data’ before us.

We therefore proceeded, after much discussion, to categorise our pictures according to general (and rather literal) themes, and then proceeded to verbalise our initial impressions, in an activity which has been called ‘collaborative analysis’ (Kanstrup 2002). This proved to be a very useful exercise, which forced each of us to confront our own ‘ethnocentrism’ (based on what is familiar to us in our own jurisdictions) as well as helping us to identify what appears to be similar, and what is different, between jurisdictions.

Our next step was to produce a written account of our experience with the method, which we are currently in the process of completing. This article will examine the feasibility of the method, its strengths and limitations, and begin to consider what we can learn from visual methods about the geographies and spaces of probation practice. Finally, it will discuss the potential of visual methods to contribute to comparative research on offender supervision.

Meanwhile, some of us have been experimenting with the method of ‘photo-elicitation’: that is, using some of the photographs from our collection as visual prompts to elicit discussion about offender supervision practice in different jurisdictions (Rose 2007). We hope to discuss the findings of this exercise at our next meeting in Zagreb in October 2015.

Sub-group 2: Observing practice

This sub-group is led by Johan Boxstaens (Belgium). The other participants in the group are Pascal Decarpés (France), Pana Octavian (Romania), Anita Rönneberg (Denmark), Kerstin Svensson (Sweden), Ester Blay Gil and Anna Melendez Pereto (Spain). This sub-group aims to answer the question: What kind of knowledge can be obtained about probation practice by using observations as a research method?

After completing our first research pilot using unstructured observations as a way to look at probation practice, we agreed to develop a more structured observation schedule. The idea was that by using this schedule, we would increase the comparability of the qualitative data we gathered. Some group members agreed to make a first draft of this observation schedule which was circulated amongst all group members in order to give everyone the possibility to amend the proposal prior to our meeting in Belfast (October 2014).

In Belfast, we used our time in the subgroup to finalize the first draft of the observation schedule, drawing on our experiences in the first pilot as well as existing literature. We agreed to do a second pilot to test out the observation schedule we had constructed. Between October 2014 and April 2015, the schedule was used in observational (pilot) research in four jurisdictions: Spain, Denmark, Sweden and Belgium. We also agreed to contribute an article to a

special methodological issue of the *European Journal of Probation*. Since then we have agreed on an outline for our article and four group members are currently in the process of writing it.

We used the first day of our April meeting in Athens to discuss the first drafts that had already been written and to fine-tune the outline of our contribution. We also took the time to reflect on a research report from our Spanish delegates who had managed to test our observation schedule extensively (30 observations). Finally, we discussed a presentation that two of the group members went on to give at the European Conference on Social Work Research in Ljubljana, later in April 2015. In this presentation the work we are doing for the COST Action was used as an example of an innovative method that can be used to do research – not only on probation practice – but also on social work practice in general.

Sub-group 3: Practice diaries

This sub-group is led by Tore Rokkan (Norway). The other participants are: Mariella Camilleri (Malta), Annie Kensey (France), Jake Phillips (UK), Martin Lulei (Slovakia), Sorina Poledna, Smaranda Witec and Cristina Faludi (Romania). The aim of the sub-group is to learn more about the use of diaries/narratives to describe the professional life of practitioners.

At our meeting in Malta (March 2014) we discussed the ways in which we could develop our own research instrument. We agreed on a structured format for the collection of data from participants, in connection with reflections of every day experiences included in the weekly diary and a follow-up interview. The next step was piloting in each jurisdiction. At our next meeting in Belfast (October 2014) we had a long discussion about our first pilot diary research experience and about how to analyse the data. We also agreed that we would try to get few more diaries completed (although most of us had experienced difficulties in recruiting practitioners for the pilot study). The next stage of our work will be analysis: in particular we will be looking at the similarities and differences between diaries completed in different countries (with reference to their legal system, cultures etc.).

Next steps

Each sub-group is currently preparing a written paper for a forthcoming special issue of the *European Journal of Probation* which will focus on what we have learned in the process of developing our pilot research projects. These papers will describe the genesis of each project; the issues encountered in the development of pilot work; the experience of piloting each method; and discuss the utility of each of these ‘innovative’ methods for future research on offender supervision practice. It is hoped that, by these means, we will make a contribution to one of the aims of the Action, which is to find new ways of making the normally hidden domain of offender supervision more ‘visible’, and ultimately aid public understanding of what it involves.

For more information about the Action, check out our website:
www.offendersupervision.eu

References

Kanstrup, A-M. (2002) 'Picture the practice: Using photography to explore use of technology within teachers' work practices', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 3, 2: Art 17.

Rose, G. (2007) *Visual Methodologies: An introduction to the interpretation of visual materials*. (2nd Edition). London: Sage.