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The 'New Careers' Experiment in Rehabilitating Offenders: Last Messages from a Fading Star

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SUMMARY

This paper traces the history, and assesses the impact, of an innovatory project in which current and ex-offenders were provided with the opportunity to gain practical social work experience and training for long-term rehabilitative purposes. Based on earlier American schemes in which members of disadvantaged or discriminated against groups received training and support for non-professional careers in human services agencies, the project can claim a measure of success. But the evidence also suggests that a demonstrated potential for individual change is not always matched by agency interests and ideologies. The findings are considered in relation to the philosophy and provisions associated with the 1991 Criminal Justice Act.

The Bristol New Careers Project came into existence in April 1973 following the efforts of NACRO and its supporters and with funding provided by the Home Office. It offered what was then a radical disposal for young adult male offenders at serious risk of receiving a borstal sentence: probation supervision and hostel residency coupled with a programme of training in practical social work. This was, in effect, an early excursion into the realms of empowerment, the aim being to build marketable skills on top of relevant life experiences, and thereby help talented but disadvantaged young offenders move from being a focus of intervention to being active practitioners in the provision of social and community services.

Although novel in the UK, the ideas on which the Project was based had originated in America during the 1960s. In an effort to combat the effects of growing poverty the US federal government had at that time

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provided funding for a wide range of social and community projects, the dual intention of which was to improve services in depressed areas and to create training and job opportunities for disadvantaged, discriminated against, underskilled or unemployed people. Legislation was enacted (see Wicks, 1978) to ensure the participation of the poor as project workers and also to encourage the kind of on-the-job training which would produce non-professional practitioners whose abilities and potential would bear comparison with their professionally trained colleagues. Such programmes thus came to be known as 'new careers' programmes (Pearl and Riessman, 1965), and the touchstone of many of these was that the life experiences of the project workers had, in effect, equipped them with insights which went a long way towards compensation for their lack of conventional professional training. Indeed this way a key principle through which—in California—the new careers philosophy was extended to offenders. There, Douglas Grant and his colleagues had developed a programme whereby selected prisoners were trained to provide rehabilitative services to other prisoners while in custody. The intention, subsequently realized by many, was that these trainees would then use their experience and training to continue in correctional or other human services work on their release from prison (Hodgkin, 1973; Briggs, 1975).

In Britain the establishment of the Bristol Project was eased, not by governmental initiative or legislation, but by the circumstances and arguments supporting the more or less contemporaneous introduction of the community service order and by the training traditions of the borstal system (Lowson, 1975). However the idea of actively training offenders for work in the human services was unusual and attracted wide attention. There were welcoming articles in the social work press (Briggs, 1973; Hinton, 1973; Davies, 1974); there was even a cautiously positive editorial in *The Times* (1973) on the concept that in many of those who had experienced troubled lives there was an untapped capacity to understand and assist others who were also troubled. The BBC produced a documentary (with the rather bleak title *This Is Your Last Chance*) and the first years of the Project's operation came under research scrutiny (Millham *et al.*, 1978). Then, as happens, interest shifted elsewhere.

Even so, for nearly twenty years the Bristol New Careers Project kept faith with the notion that disadvantaged and disaffected offenders had something to give and something to gain from acting in a supportive and caring role with others. Unlike community service—which was seen by some to embody a similar view but which, as Pease (1983) and Blagg and Smith (1989) have noted, drifted into work which was 'almost exclusively manual, menial and arduous'—the New Careers Project

held firmly to its aim of providing practical experiences which were humanitarian in kind and affirmative in purpose. But in 1992 this rather singular experiment came to an end, restructured by the probation service (which in 1981 had taken over management responsibility) to make way for other priorities under the new Criminal Justice Act. Once a bright star, to which over 300 offenders were sent by the courts and where, as a further feature of its provision, nearly 40 ex-offenders gained social work experience in a staff role, the New Careers Project has faded from view. But its disappearance, after such a well-publicized beginning and almost two decades of following its own rehabilitative course, provokes an insistent question: Was anything achieved and, if so, how? This paper explores the available evidence.

APPROACH

At the outset, there were two strands to the Project's pursuit of its new careers objectives. Principally, and by way of an order of the court, selected young male offenders who would otherwise have received a custodial sentence entered a twelve month hostel-based programme which combined work placements in settings like hospitals, schools, day centres and youth clubs, with social work skills training and personal development. These trainees were known as 'students' and the expectation was that, on successful completion of the programme, they would be sufficiently prepared for entry-level employment as unqualified workers (care assistants, for example) in an agency or organization providing nursing, social or community services. A second, less prominent strand related to those who were known at the Project as 'linkers'. Linkers were men (and later also women) with a history of past offending who were employed by the Project to counsel, advise, train, support, encourage, challenge and act as role models for the students as the latter passed through the programme. Linkers were regarded as being a step up in their own progress towards a non-professional social work career (although, in practice, this usually meant little more than prior involvement in some form of community work undertaken as part of some previous sentence). The basic idea was that their experiences as Project staff would help them to advance their skills and knowledge and increase their attractiveness to social and community agencies as competent, tested workers.

OUTCOMES WITH STUDENTS

In seeking to assess the Project's achievements with its students, it is useful to begin with the findings of the early study by Millham *et al.*

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(1978). These investigators focused on the first two years of the Project's operation and chronicle a somewhat frenetic period during which both problems and promise were richly evident. Of the latter, the Project had demonstrated that it was possible to place in the community offenders who had, until then, been regarded as difficult and troublesome and best held in custody. (At the time, this was something of a landmark.) Further, many of those who had come to the Project had shown real energy and involvement in their work with people with learning difficulties, physical disabilities, chronic ill health or social disadvantage in the settings where they were placed for three or four days a week as a core element in their training. The problems included the usual mercurial features of hostel life (compounded by the demanding training programme), a difficulty in selecting suitable students (about which more will be said in a moment), and some early abscondings. More seriously, there were indications that the students would not find it easy to break into human services work on leaving the Project. In other words, the primary objective of the new careers philosophy showed some early signs of being thwarted.

Still, Millham *et al.* reported that six of the first 23 students had gone on from the Project to non-professional social work jobs, and the proportion of the twenty-three who subsequently returned to custody (69 per cent) compared reasonably well with borstal leaver statistics. (Those available at the time showed that 63 per cent of released borstal trainees were reconvicted within two years.) In this and the fact that staffing had been strengthened and relationships with crucial agencies (prison, probation and social services) improved, they saw some grounds for optimism about what the Project was trying to do. Yet mindful of the Project's iconoclastic nature and the professional and educational interests it was challenging, Millham and his colleagues took a cautious view as to what might be achieved in the long run.

For the period which immediately followed their research, both the optimism and the caution seemed warranted. Statistics gathered at the Project showed that, for the next 31 students, eleven found social work jobs on leaving while thirteen re-offended. The trends were in the right direction on both counts but the gains, in terms of the new careers objectives, remained modest. Still, the Project could claim that nearly a third—31 per cent—of all those who had been through the programme had found some kind of work in the human services on leaving or shortly thereafter. In Table 1 the findings for the 23 students in the Millham *et al.* study are combined with those for the 31 who followed to provide a composite picture.

The type of employment which the students succeeded in obtaining on leaving the Project was much as had been expected and included

TABLE 1. *Post-project destinations for the first 54 students at BNCP*

Obtained a social work post	*Returned to custody*	*Other, eg, unemployed, work other than social work, in psychiatric care*
17 (31%)	29 (54%)	8 (15%)

care assistant posts in children's and elderly persons' homes; residential worker posts in hostels and in establishments for children and adults with learning difficulties; and—less typically—postings as a psychiatric nursing assistant, as a playleader and as an advice centre worker. But unfortunately many of these jobs were temporary—generally three to six months—and reports prepared by the staff at the Project indicate that only two students were able to use their initial posts as stepping stones to a longer period of employment. Thus, nearly seven years on, it was becoming clear that the Project's aim of making a contribution, through its students, to the development of a non-professional cadre for human services work was making little headway. There were three major barriers. From the start, the Home Office's interest had been to reduce borstal sentencing rates and, as a condition of funding, it had required the student group to be drawn from older teenage offenders at risk of entering borstal. But experience was showing what would now be easily predicted: that whatever their commitment and enthusiasm on placement and their ability to get close to those they were helping, many would need more time to achieve the kind of judgement and maturity on which effective social work practice also draws and depends. Even more critical were certain structural factors which went unnoticed at the time. Then as now the major employers were the statutory agencies (probation and social services) and at a time of increasing responsibility—as, for example, with the growing role of social workers in child protection—these agencies were looking to establish a greater proportion of professionals in their workforces, not the reverse. Finally, the credibility of a new careers approach depends crucially upon the image and momentum generated by the existence of a large number of such schemes and, lacking governmental or legislative support, attempts to develop comparable projects elsewhere were proving both patchy and unsuccessful.

These factors provided the impetus for a pragmatic change in outlook but there was an inescapable ethical issue as well. As Nicholas Hinton had put it when the Project was established: 'Clearly it would be criminal for us to train people for jobs that do not exist' (Hinton, 1973).

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The argument that was beginning to be heard was that if the Project had rehabilitative value it was in the way the practical work placements challenged the negative self-images of the students, not in its efficacy in preparing them for career opportunities which were very scarce. This of course was a perspective much more in keeping with the mainstream interests of the probation service and, by the end of 1979, discussions were already under way about the possibility of the local service assuming management responsibility for the Project. By 1981, agreement had been reached and the Bristol section of NACRO duly relinquished its oversight role.

In taking over, the local service showed a notable commitment to maintaining the placement and personal development aspects of the programme but its own approach to rehabilitation was inevitably shaped by the discussions which preceded, and the climate which followed from, the introduction of the 1982 Criminal Justice Act. Particular prominence was given to the Project's role in providing a strict alternative to custody and in offering a programme which included direct attention to offending behaviour and placement experiences which structured time, challenged attitudes and enabled a measure of reparation to be made. Training in social work skills was discontinued at an early stage and information about the work destinations of students who left the Project was no longer compiled (except informally). Instead, annual statistics relating to the numbers breached or re-arrested, or who absconded or left the Project on completion or early discharge of their orders, took precedence.

There were gradual changes, too, in student intake. With the phasing out of borstals it became possible and, in line with local priorities, desirable to raise the upper age limit to 21 and later to 25. The numbers of students also grew, partly in response to the Home Office's increasing concern with unit costs. Throughput ranged between 20 and 30 a year rather than, as under NACRO, between 6 and 10. Thus more people were being offered the Project's programme but its orientation had unquestionably altered. It was now a *probation* programme—still unique in its way, but geared essentially to the needs and interests of the courts and the service—and the students were primarily 'individuals for whom the programme is a suitable alternative to custody', not budding new careerists.

Even so, over the next decade a small minority of the Project's 'graduates'—notes kept by the Project suggest around 5 per cent of those who entered the programme—did take up social care work on leaving. But over the same period, between two-thirds and three-quarters of the entrants were annually finding their way into the breached, absconded or re-offended tables. It seems from these figures

that the more development-focused approach of the NACRO regime, over-exuberant and messy as it might sometimes have been, was more successful in altering how the students thought about themselves than was the probation service's strict alternative to custody and growing preoccupation with offending behaviour.

This is not to say, however, that the probation-led regime was having no effect on the subsequent offending rates or levels of offence seriousness for those of its students who continued to break the law. But perhaps all too typically, no formal evaluation of the Project's effectiveness in these respects was ever undertaken, either before or after it came under the control of the probation service. Rather, as Humphrey and Pease (1992) have noted about the service more generally, effectiveness tended to be seen in terms of input measures; in particular, the success of the Project in capturing potential students from the courts and thereby diverting them from custody. Data collected at the Project in 1987, 1988 and 1989—the last period for which these figures are available—showed an overall 'capture' rate of 55 per cent. A report prepared for NACRO covering the period from April 1978 to March 1980 recorded a slightly higher, though essentially similar rate of 61 per cent.

OUTCOMES WITH LINKERS

Less prominent in the Project's attempts to follow a new careers philosophy, though arguably much more effective, was its employment of linkers in staff roles. Here—and under both the NACRO and probation service regimes—the approach of Grant and his colleagues in California was mirrored more closely. That is to say, the men and women employed as linkers were older (mainly mid-twenties), were offered supervision and training while on the job and, in general, were carefully selected for the creative potential and personal style which they would bring to their work. In theory, linkers were to have achieved a measure of stability in their lives and to have had relevant social work experience. In practice, however, many took up their posts having only just completed a sentence (custodial in some cases) and few had obtained their social work experiences in what would be called a conventional fashion. It is not surprising then, that of the 36 men and women who were employed as linkers, six left the post within six months of taking it on. Table 2 provides information about the destinations of the remaining 30, so far as these are known.

Despite the uncertainty registered by the final entry, the figures in Table 2 reveal a notable achievement: more than half of those who held

TABLE 2. *Post-project destinations for linkers employed over six months at BNCP (n=30)*

Obtained or obtaining professional qualification	*Working as trainer or unqualified social worker*	*Re-offended*	*Circumstances unknown*
11 (37%)	5 (17%)	6 (20%)	8 (26%)

linker posts for longer than six months left to pursue the sort of career activities which their experience at the Project was expected to foster. In weighing up the significance of this finding it is useful to recall, once again, that most of the linkers came to the Project with a very recent history of previous offending and also that, for several, this history included serious, imprisonable offences. It is not unreasonable, then, to talk about rehabilitative success, particularly since employment at the Project was in so many cases the bridging experience between that history and training or employment in some other area of human services work. But there are factors associated with the figures in Table 2 which are worth considering further.

In particular it is of interest that at least 11 of the 30 linkers to whom the figures in the table refer were offered and took up the opportunity to enter professional social work training courses. This finding is both a measure of their own determination and ability and an affirmation of the new careers contention that among those who have experienced troubled or difficult lives there are individuals with a genuine and nurturable capacity to help others. On the other hand, the fact that most of those who have followed a human services career have sought professional qualification prompts recollection of the earlier comment about agency professionalization and the shift away from a non-professional workforce. Thus opting for professional training might also be interpreted as providing just another indication that the new careers ideal has found little acceptance in the human services field—unless, of course, there is other evidence that the combination of a professional qualification and relevant life experience is seen as valuable by employing agencies.

This issue was explored in interviews with 13 of the 16 linkers covered by the first two entries in Table 2. Those interviewed had been at the

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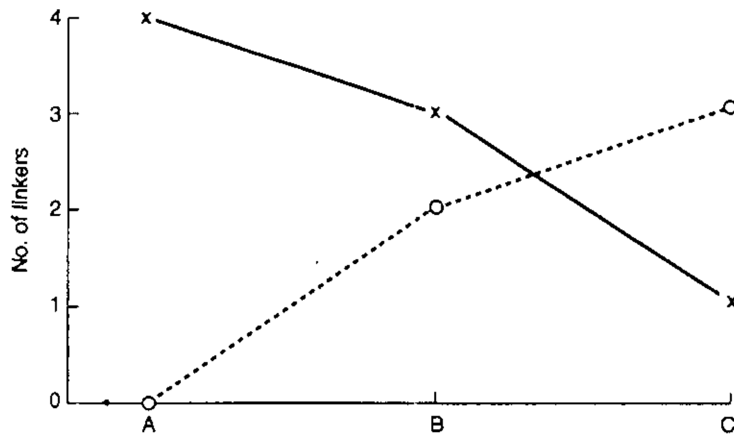

FIGURE 1. Linkers' disclosure of offending background (n=13)
Key: x=professionally qualified linkers
o=non-professional linkers
A=difficulties experienced when background disclosed
B=circumspect about disclosing background
C=open use of background

Project at different points across the span of its history and thus possessed different lengths of post-Project experience. The three who were excluded were still in linker posts at the time of the interviews and for that reason were omitted.

What emerges from these interviews is a distinction, not precise though nevertheless clear, between those who followed the professional qualification route and those who did not. But the nature of this distinction is rather different from that referred to above. Nearly all of those who took the qualification route gave evidence of a need or a tendency to be circumspect about their pre-Project background; indeed, half had learnt this the hard way when they found themselves being judged negatively when their background was known. By contrast, three of the five who had followed non-professional careers indicated that they made open and specific use of their pre-Project background, and none cited instances where disclosure had actually caused them to be treated pejoratively at work. Figure 1 is a graphical representation of these findings.

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What these linkers' accounts appear to suggest is that it is only in certain human services settings that the authentic experience of 'having seen things from the other side' is accorded any operational value in relation to an agency's aims, purposes or practices. Perhaps this is not all that surprising, but it does seem significant and it is, in fact, disappointing that the probation service—as an agency well placed to make use of this experience—is not mentioned among these settings. Indeed, of the eight linkers to have obtained the qualifications needed to become a probation officer, four specifically chose not to follow a career in the service and three of the four who did have had unhappy experiences which they attribute to their known background as former offenders. There is a sad and rather dispiriting irony in the finding that an agency which has the rehabilitation of offenders as one of its key tasks is regarded as an inhospitable base by ex-linkers whose personal accomplishments and training make them particularly well-suited for the work.

DRAWING THE STRANDS TOGETHER

While the evidence is somewhat diverse and not always clear, it is nevertheless the case that these different strands in the history of the Bristol Project point to the same conclusion. This is that the limitation of its approach is not so much with individuals who—properly selected and then given support, opportunities and encouragement—can achieve real rehabilitative change, but rather with institutions which appear to take a narrower, more pessimistic view of the connection between their past actions and longer-term potential. Moreover, there is a suggestion that this narrow outlook is most evident when control, as distinct from enablement, is an agency's dominant concern. Certainly the linkers expressing greatest satisfaction with their post-Project careers were, with only one exception, based in settings or pursuing activities in which enablement rather than regulation and restraint is the primary objective. And as has already been mentioned, the Project seemed to get further with its students when working from a non-statutory perspective.

Consistent with this overall view and worth reproducing here are the findings of an unpublished study conducted for the Project in 1986. Caddick (1986) surveyed opinions in 28 of the settings (all non-statutory) in which students from the Bristol Project had undertaken practical work placements. Obviously the backgrounds of the students were known to the agencies concerned, but their reported experience in involving the students in their activities went somewhat beyond just having a voluntary worker with a record of offending. A commonly expressed view was that the students' backgrounds were par-

ticularly valuable (e.g. 'I get the impression that people who have been at the rough end themselves see the person, cut through everything to that. . . . That's a different outlook and it's essential here') and contact with them was frequently enlightening (e.g., 'These placements seem to have broken down barriers between staff and people with a criminal background. . . It's started me thinking about the issue of criminality and how people can get caught up in it'). Back at the probation hostel, however, the students' client status was inevitably and constantly reinforced by the requirements of their probation orders—curfew, participation in offending behaviour sessions and residency with a group of other offenders. Though clearly not deliberate, such conflicting assessments of potential could hardly have been drawn more sharply than if that had been the intention.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The Bristol New Careers Project closed in October 1992 just as the new Criminal Justice Act was coming into force. In a sense this conjunction is apt: a programme in which a significant proportion of time is devoted to placement activities emphasizing individual initiative and flair sits uncomfortably alongside newer perspectives highlighting punishment in the community and the restriction of liberty, and drawing more and more on classroom-type, structured intervention packages. Of course the tension between control and creative (but risky) enablement was always a feature of the Project, but over the course of its history the need to demonstrate a certain 'strictness' of purpose grew perceptibly. For a decade the local service was successful in convincing the courts about the value of its placement-centred approach by arguing—rightly, but narrowly—that the placements were personally demanding and no soft option. But it is hard to see how that argument could have been ratcheted upwards yet again to conform with a post-Act climate in which it is stressed that it is 'important that local services communicate the restrictive elements in probation orders to sentencers' (Home Office, 1993).

And yet, paradoxically, certain proposals associated with the Act suggest a way in which the most valuable contributions of schemes like the Bristol Project might continue to be fostered. In recent documents the government has made clear its interest in partnerships between the probation service and a range of independent agencies in dealing with offenders who receive community sentences (Home Office, 1990; 1991). Not surprisingly, the service has reacted to this suggestion with concern and disquiet, perceiving it as a challenge to its own capacity to meet the needs of the offenders for whom it has responsibility. But as Smith

et al. (1993) have pointed out, there is already a significant history of partnership between voluntary organizations and agencies in the criminal justice system. Furthermore—and as demonstrated on a small scale in the previous section of this paper—at least some forms of partnership create opportunities for a more productive, less punitive dialogue about criminal justice matters in the local community. It hardly seems heretical then to argue that, with a provision to grant-aid, probation committees should consider how they might support the work of agencies which offer these kinds of opportunities, as well as encourage their employment of suitable ex-offenders as staff. There are risks, to be sure, in such arrangements—not least to the agencies which accept the service's shilling (Smith *et al.*, 1993). But the Bristol New Careers Project, at its inception, would have been a candidate for such support and, for all its limitations, the signs are that we could do with a few more like it again.

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