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What is This?
An investigation into competency for working with personality disorder and team climate in the probation service

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Abstract
Personality disorder (PD) is highly prevalent in offender samples and is an aggravating factor for risk assessment. Working with PD may be particularly challenging and requires specific staff competencies. However little is currently known about probation staff’s competency for working with this group. Self report methodologies were used to investigate probation staff’s competency for working with PD, their team climate and the relationship between the two factors. Probation staff’s competency was not found to be significantly different to a sample of voluntary sector housing workers. No significant difference was found between probation public protection unit (PPU) and non-PPU staff or between qualified and unqualified staff. Two facets of team climate
were associated with improved competency for working with PD, but probation staff obtained low scores for one of these facets (team vision). There is a need for staff competency development in this field. A model for improved service delivery is proposed.

**Keywords**

personality disorder, probation, staff competency, team climate

**Introduction**

The current study reports on the initial phase of data collection and analysis which has been completed as part of a partnership initiative between Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust and the London Probation Service (the Personality Disorder Pathways Project). The overall aim of this project is to develop pathways through the health and criminal justice systems for offenders considered to be at high risk of causing serious harm to others and with a severe personality disorder (PD). The research presented here forms part of the baseline data analysis and investigates probation staff’s perceived competency for working with offenders with PD, as well as their perceptions of their organizational climate. In what follows the importance of both staff and organizational factors in the management of this client group are discussed, before the specific aims of this study are presented.

Within samples of prisoners it has been suggested that the prevalence of PD may be as high as 64 to 78 per cent (Singleton et al., 1998). There is currently a lack of robust data regarding the prevalence of PD within the caseload of the probation service. However, the Offender Assessment System (OASys) contains within it a screening tool to detect traits suggestive of anti-social PD; a category of PD strongly linked to criminality (referred to in OASys as Dangerous and Severe Personality Disorder; DSPD). Currently, approximately 11 per cent of London probation’s caseload reach the threshold cut off on this tool, with the prevalence rising to 47 per cent among those classified as either high or very high risk of harm (personal communication, Nick Joseph, Senior Policy Manager, National Offender Management Service, 12 April 2010).

Assessing and managing the risk an individual poses to the public is one of the primary tasks of the probation service (Kemshall, 2002). PD should be regarded as an aggravating factor, which may indicate a heightened risk of recidivism and complicate rehabilitative efforts (Howells and Tenant, 2007; Webster et al., 1997). For example, a recent investigation into serious further offences (SFOs) committed by offenders under probation supervision revealed that 46 per cent of all SFOs were committed by offenders scoring above the cut off on the OASys DSPD assessment (Craissati and Sindall, 2009). It should therefore be apparent that for probation staff, developing an understanding of personality dysfunction and its relationship to offending is of particular importance and is likely to enhance overall competency in risk assessment and risk management (Bowers et al., 2006; Dowsett and Craissati, 2008).
In addition to the risk management implications of this diagnosis, working with PD offenders is also likely to place particular demands on staff, who may face challenging interpersonal behaviour and heightened emotional states (Moran and Hayward, 2007). The complexity of this work is frequently associated with high levels of staff anxiety, stress and burnout (Crawford et al., 2009; Kurtz and Turner, 2007; Onyett et al., 1997). Perhaps not surprisingly, the literature suggests that a perceived lack of confidence, therapeutic pessimism, feelings of hopelessness and perceptions that individuals with PD are manipulative and dislikeable are all common among workers in this field (Bowers et al., 2006; NICE, 2009). Such negative appraisals hold the potential to facilitate unhelpful staff reactions, which if not carefully monitored may lead to destructive dynamics being played out within the professional relationship (Kurtz, 2005; Stalker et al., 2005). To elaborate, within psychiatric settings negative staff attitudes to PD have been associated with divisions within the staff group, workers becoming withdrawn and alienated from patients and using inconsistent or punitive management strategies. They have also been associated with an increase in patient violence and suicide (Bowers et al., 2000).

In response to these concerns, recent clinical guidelines have emphasized the particular staff characteristics and competencies which are associated with effective service delivery to this client group (NIMHE, 2003a). These have underscored the importance of emotional maturity and resilience, positive attitudes towards change, clarity about personal and professional boundaries, a responsive and empowering approach and good teamwork (Crawford et al., 2009; NICE, 2009). Additionally it is suggested that qualified and more experienced staff may hold less judgmental and negative views than unqualified staff (NICE, 2009).

Certain organizational factors have also been associated with effective service delivery. For example, Bowers et al. (2006) found that within high secure psychiatric settings a well organized and structured hospital culture was the largest predictor of positive patient outcomes. It is also suggested that effective teams should include a high level of supervision and a safe and open forum for case discussion (Moran and Hayward, 2007). Of particular importance is the containment of feelings of stress and anxiety which may be aroused by working with this client group, as well as time for reflection, the development of self-awareness and the identification and management of unhelpful dynamics (NICE, 2009).

Despite this, training which is specific to PD is currently limited within the probation service. At the time of writing this article, unqualified staff within the London area receive no PD related training. For qualified staff their professional training involves one generic module on mentally disordered offenders, with a subsequent essay (which may or may not focus on PD). In addition, there is currently a lack of research which has investigated either the impact on probation staff of working with offenders with PD or their competency for managing this group. For example, a Boolean search for articles in the Probation Journal with the words personality and disorder in the title or abstract returns only one article. It has therefore been suggested that within the probation service, although there is considerable expertise in managing risk in a general sense, there may currently be limited clinical
understanding of the relationship between PD and offending behaviour (Canton and Hancock, 2007).

In summary, there is likely to be a very high prevalence of PD on the caseload of the probation service and probation staff play a pivotal role in managing this group of offenders. The literature suggests that for workers in this field emotional resilience, more effective outcomes and improved service delivery are all more likely within a structured and supportive organizational climate where staff possess high levels of professional competency. Despite this, there is currently a lack of evidence relating to probation staff’s knowledge skills and attitudes for working with this group or their perception of their organizational climate.

The research study

The aims of the study reported here were to investigate probation staff’s competency for working with PD, their perception of their organizational climate and the relationship between these two factors.

Method

In total 150 probation staff took part in the study, of which 81 were female and 69 male. Participants were drawn from the boroughs of Tower Hamlets (N = 36), Hackney (N = 34), Lambeth (N = 39) and Southwark (N = 41). Both qualified probation officers (N = 98) and unqualified staff (N = 52) were included; this latter group including both trainee probation officers (N = 4) and probation service officers (N = 48). Only staff who regularly engage in face-to-face work with offenders and who were employed in the following teams were included in the sample; public protection units (N = 35), offender management units (N = 62), trainee probation officers (N = 4), substance misuse/prolific and priority offender teams (N = 36) and programmes teams (N = 10). A sample of non-forensic staff from a pilot study by Woodward and Bolton (2008) was also used as a comparison group for the probation sample. This sample comprised of 113 employees from a range of voluntary sector housing organizations. No further demographic information was available for this sample.

Questionnaires which evaluated professional competence for working with PD and staff perceptions of their organizational climate were administered to all participants over a period of three months. The measures administered were the Personality Disorder – Knowledge, Attitude and Skills Questionnaire (PD-KASQ; Bolton et al., 2010) and the Team Climate Inventory (TCI; Anderson and West, 1999). These instruments are described below.

The PD-KASQ is an 18-item self report instrument, which assesses participant’s perceived professional competency for working with clients with a diagnosis of PD. It is scored using a five point Likert scale and contains three subscales; a psychological Understanding of PD, perceived Capabilities for working with this client group and Emotional Reactions to PD clients. Five of the questions do not load on these scales however. For the purposes of the analyses between probation groups,
three additional questions were added to original PD-KASQ, which covered matters of particular relevance to forensic practice. These questions assessed respondent’s knowledge of the relationship between PD and general offending, sexual and violent offending specifically and also their perceived ability to access specialist support.

The TCI is a self-report instrument which is based on the Four Factor Theory of Team Climate (Anderson and West, 1998). The four factor theory is described as ‘a facet specific theory of climate for work group innovativeness’ (Anderson and West, 1998: 238). It contains four subscales which are now described:

- **Team Vision:** the extent to which organizational objectives are readily understandable to, valued, attainable and shared by the workforce;
- **Participative Safety:** the extent to which employees feel comfortable and able to participate in decision making and information sharing in the working environment. This subscale also explores the frequency with which employees interact with one another;
- **Task Orientation:** the extent to which workers are committed to excellence in their working practice, evidence reflective capacity, a tolerance of minorities and feel their competence is affirmed rather than attacked;
- **Support for Innovation:** the extent to which new and improved ways of working are supported and encouraged in the workplace.

## Results

This investigation contained three distinct phases of analysis, the comparisons concerning the PD-KASQ, those involving the TCI and the correlation between the two measures.

With regards to the PD-KASQ, no significant difference was found between the total mean scores of the probation and voluntary sector samples. However, the probation sample scored significantly higher on the Understanding subscale ($t(172.01) = 0.303, p = 0.003$). No other differences were found to be significant. No significant differences were found between the various probation staff groups as regards their total mean scores on the PD-KASQ or any of the individual subscales. The results obtained by the three specific PD related forensic competencies revealed that qualified officers demonstrated slightly higher mean scores across all three questions than unqualified officers. The differences between the PPU and non PPU staff followed a similar pattern with PPU staff obtaining very slightly higher mean scores across all three questions. However in both cases, the differences were small and not statistically significant.

The TCI manual contains interpretive ranges, based on normative samples for the four subscales. The combined probation sample obtained a total mean score in the high interpretive range for the Support for Innovation subscale. They received scores in the middle range for both the Participative Safety and Task Orientation subscales. However their total mean score for the Team Vision subscale was in the low interpretive range. No significant differences were found between PPU and non PPU...
officers for any of the subscales on the TCI. However, unqualified staff obtained significantly higher scores than qualified staff for the Team Vision subscale ($t(138) = 2.28$, $p = 0.024$). No other significant differences were found.

For the combined probation sample correlation coefficients between the total mean PD-KASQ scores and the total mean TCI subscale scores were calculated using Pearson’s $r$. It was found that there was a moderate, significant, positive correlation between total mean PD-KASQ score and the TCI subscale of Team Vision ($r = 0.361$, $p < 0.001$, one tailed). A small significant positive correlation was also found between PD-KASQ scores and the TCI Participative Safety subscale ($r = 0.176$, $p = 0.025$, one tailed). No other significant correlations were found.

Discussion

This study has investigated levels of competency for working with PD, perceptions of team climate and the relationship between these two factors within a sample of probation staff in four inner London boroughs.

Considering the methodology employed here, the large sample size is a considerable strength, as is the fact that the sample included probation staff from a wide range of frontline positions, across several London boroughs. Both of these factors support the robustness of the findings and their generalizability to other probation staff. However, there are also certain methodological limitations which merit discussion. Firstly, there were a relatively high number of comparisons completed during the data analysis and this of course raises the possibility of a type I error occurring (i.e. incorrectly identifying a significant difference between groups, where none exists). Although very few significant differences were found and many that were found were highly significant (and therefore robust), the significant results which are presented here do need to be evaluated with this in mind.

Secondly, the PD-KASQ has not yet been fully validated for use with a probation sample and it may be that certain competencies which are unique to probation practice may have been missed by this questionnaire. Additional questions relating to key forensic competencies were added to the measure for this reason. It will be recalled that there was no significant difference between the mean scores obtained by the different probation staff groups for these competencies.

Lastly, competency for working with PD has been assessed by way of a self report instrument, in which participants were asked to rate their own knowledge, skills and attitudes. It is therefore possible that the results obtained here may have been influenced by variations in how more and less experienced staff appraised their own competence. Incorporating additional methodologies to assess staff competence may therefore have improved the robustness of the results.

Competency for working with PD in the probation service

This study has found no evidence of any greater level of overall PD related expertise within the probation service, when compared with primarily unqualified housing staff working in the voluntary sector. However, despite the lack of difference in
overall competency ratings, the probation sample did obtain significantly higher scores on the Understanding subscale of the PD-KASQ, suggesting that there may be a higher level of PD related knowledge in the probation service sample.

Additionally, no significant differences were found in the PD related competency of the different probation groups included in the study. Unexpectedly, there was no significant difference between the competency ratings of qualified or unqualified staff or between PPU or non PPU staff. It will be recalled from the introduction that positive staff attitudes towards work with offenders with PD (which include feeling competent and effectual), are associated with a range of positive outcomes, including greater staff resilience and improved service delivery (Bowers et al., 2000 and NICE, 2009). However, the results obtained here suggest that there is currently a lack of any post-qualification or work-embedded learning for probation staff, which is specific to PD. Given the very high rates of PD within probation’s caseload (particularly among the high risk group), the lack of competency development for qualified staff or any evidence of higher competency within the PPU is an area of concern.

Team climate in the probation service
The analysis of probation staff’s perception of the organizational climate in the probation service has returned mixed results. For the combined probation sample, high scores were obtained for the facet of Support for Innovation, which suggests that probation staff may be particularly receptive to developing new ways of working to meet their objectives. Middle scale scores were obtained for the facets of Task Orientation and Participative Safety. This suggests that probation staff may for the most part be committed to achieving high standards, feel reasonably well supported by their colleagues and to some extent feel able to contribute to team decision making. However, the facet of Team Vision emerged as being particularly problematic. Low scores were obtained for the combined sample and these scores were significantly worse for qualified staff. To recap, Team Vision refers to the extent to which staff members have internalized organizational objectives and feel they are clear, attainable and valuable to them. The low scores on this facet therefore suggest that there may be some disillusionment among probation staff concerning the nature, value and attainability of current probation service objectives (this being particularly so for qualified officers). This is not an isolated result as it echoes the findings of a qualitative investigation by Robinson and Burnett (2007), who found that feelings of alienation and uncertainty about the primary focus of probation work were common among longer-serving staff.

Relationship between team climate and PD related competency
Partial support was found for the hypothesis that probation staff’s perceptions of their organizational climate would be positively associated with competence for working with PD. To elaborate, in the probation service improved competency for working with PD was more common among staff who felt supported by colleagues,
safe in the workplace (Participative Safety) and reported understanding, valuing and ability to attain probation service objectives (Team Vision). However, there was no correlation with the Support for Innovation or Task Orientation facets of team climate, suggesting that these factors may be unrelated to staff competency in this field.

However, despite the correlations described above, it is important to remember that one cannot necessarily assume that there exists a causal relationship between these factors, on the basis of these findings alone. While such a relationship may exist, it may also be that some other factor or combination of factors not measured by this study, might account for the observed association (such as the frequency of team meetings, or the presence of supportive managers for example). Despite this, there is a body of previous research which has proposed that staff competence would be expected to be reciprocally related to organizational climate, both in a general sense and also in the field of PD specifically (Anderson and West, 1998; Bowers et al., 2004). The associations observed in this study between PD related competence and two facets of team climate is consistent with this theoretical perspective and therefore reinforces the importance of staff support structures when working with offenders with PD, which is regularly emphasized in the literature (NICE, 2009).

**Summary of findings**

The most pertinent findings which have emerged from this study are the following. Within the probation service the overall level of self reported competence for working with PD is currently neither better nor worse than that which is found in a sample of primarily unqualified voluntary sector housing workers. There is no evidence either of greater expertise in the higher risk teams (PPUs) or of any post-qualification learning for all staff. Given the high prevalence of PD within forensic samples and the central role of the probation service in managing this group, this is an area of concern. Higher levels of PD related competence were found among those staff who reported understanding, valuing and ability to attain probation service objectives (Team Vision) and also among those who reported feeling safe and well supported in the workplace (Participative Safety). However, probation staff obtained middle scale scores for Participative Safety and low scores were obtained for Team Vision. This suggests that among qualified staff in particular, there may currently be high levels of disillusionment with probation objectives, which may serve as an obstacle to staff competency development in this field. On a more positive note, however, the high scores obtained on the Support for Innovation subscale suggest that probation staff may be particularly receptive to competency development initiatives.

**Implications for probation practice**

The results of this study suggest that there is currently a need for staff training which is specific to PD in the probation service. Ideally this training should be offered to
both qualified and unqualified officers, with particular emphasis on those working with high risk or complex cases. In addition, if probation staff are to develop the required competency and resilience to work effectively with this group of offenders, a renewed organizational emphasis on staff support structures may also be required. The literature reviewed in the introduction would suggest the need for a high level of supervision, a forum for case discussion and adequate time for reflection on case management (Moran and Hayward, 2007; NICE, 2009). It would be hoped that such initiatives would provide clarity about the focus of probation work with these offenders and allow for the containment of feelings of stress and anxiety which workers often experience in this field.

References


