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## What matters in practice? Understanding 'quality' in the routine supervision of offenders in Scotland

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### Abstract

Little is known about the nature, character and construction of quality in the routine supervision of offenders in Scotland. Quality is an important yet contested concept with multiple facets and features, but its meanings for practitioners are under-researched. This article will present findings from a study using *Appreciative Inquiry* to reveal how Scottish criminal justice social workers attempt to conceptualise and construct meanings of quality in their daily practice with people who have offended. Our findings conclude that despite significant fluctuation in criminal justice policy and practice, practitioners' ideas of quality seem to suggest resilience to both managerialism and punitiveness. Practitioners ultimately located quality within relational processes underpinned by social work values, but also saw it as being underscored by (or undermined by the lack of) adequate resourcing, professional supervision, flexibility and training.

**Keywords:** Community corrections, criminal justice social work, effectiveness, offender supervision, probation, quality.

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## Introduction

Despite steady growth in the literature addressing desistance theory and how best to support positive changes in offending behaviour, we in fact know relatively little about the characteristics of 'quality' in the everyday routine practice of supervising offenders (Hedderman, 1998; Shapland *et al.*, 2012). This ignorance creates both academic and practical problems. For analysts of penalty, it leaves a significant part of the field (i.e. supervisory sanctions) under-conceptualised and under-examined. But, in consequence, it also means that the pursuit of better quality in practice is hamstrung by lack of clarity about its dimensions and determinants (McNeill and Robinson, 2012).

In response to this gap in academic and practical understanding, a significant study of quality in English probation practice (led by researchers at the University of Sheffield) was commissioned by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) in 2010 (Robinson *et al.*, 2012; 2013). This research explored facets and features of quality as conceived amongst 116 English probation workers drawn from three probation trusts. Permission was granted from researchers at the University of Sheffield for us to replicate the focus group aspect of their study, using its structure and questions, as well as a ranking exercise about possible dimensions of quality based on earlier individual interviews that the Sheffield team had conducted (see Table 2). With minimal adaptations to reflect the Scottish context, we borrowed the Sheffield team's methodology so as to enable a smaller-scale Scottish study which nonetheless offered the prospect of undertaking comparative analysis at a later stage. We hope, in a subsequent paper, to provide this comparative analysis; however, our present purpose is simply to present and analyse the Scottish data.

Whether in the UK or European context, Scotland has always operated a distinct system of supervising offenders rooted (at least rhetorically) in principles of social justice, civic culture, welfare and rehabilitation (McAra, 2008; but see also Croall *et al.*, 2010). Though these principles are frequently rehearsed and debated in political and policy discourses, much less is known about the extent of their substantiation in criminal justice social work practice. More specifically, a Scottish perspective on whether conceptions of 'quality' in the routine supervision of offenders reflect these distinctive traditions is crucially absent.

This study attempts to address this lacuna by exploring what constitutes or characterises quality in the routine supervision of offenders as conceived by frontline criminal justice practitioners in one of Scotland's largest local authorities. In this study twenty-five practitioners took part in six focus groups. Indeed, in taking our cue from the English study (Robinson *et al.*, 2012; 2013), we focussed on the same research questions: How do practitioners understand the meanings of quality in 1-1 supervision? What are the key facets or domains of quality in supervision? To what extent do their conceptions of what matters and what is valued about supervision differ or concur? How can the qualities of supervision best be assessed and measured in practice?

## Background

A review of social work performance in Scotland from 2005-2009 found that whilst criminal justice social work services were doing *some* effective work with offenders, the overall *quality* of work to 'prevent and reduce offending' was described as 'variable' (Social Work Inspection Agency, 2010). This report did not specify its definitions of 'quality' or 'effectiveness', but aligned overall performance with attempts to meet the Scottish Government's intended outcomes for these services: community safety, the reduction of re-offending and social inclusion (SWIA, 2010). Practitioners were understood to be better at addressing the social and personal problems of people under their supervision than dealing with attitudes and conduct linked to offending behaviour. A major criticism of criminal justice social work was said to be a general over-emphasis on outputs (number of reports completed or number of orders made), as opposed to focusing measurement in terms of more qualitative outcomes (intermediate progress; results of referrals to services; personal achievements of clients).

Shapland *et al.* (2012) argue that attempts to define 'quality' in offender supervision are largely context-specific (when considered comparatively), and that conceptions are invariably linked to nationally-specified outcomes. They suggest that notions of quality will invariably overlap with aspects of 'effectiveness' and 'What Works' (see Raynor and Robinson, 2009) and sometimes be mistaken as evidence of process outputs or efficient practice, as broader National Standards dictate (see Davies and Gregory, 2010). The rise and influence of accreditation systems for example, lead Shapland *et al.* (2012: 9) to contend that, 'Panels have acted as *de facto* arbiters of quality' – particularly in relation to the design of offending behaviour programmes. Differing conceptions of quality are therefore set against a backdrop which includes top-down policy moves to strengthen the penal arm of the state through 'tougher' sentencing (both community and custodial) and more punitive forms of supervision (Deering, 2010; and see Wacquant, 2009). Also relevant is the expanding reach of the Risk-Needs-Responsivity model of offender rehabilitation across the UK (Andrews and Bonta, 2006) and the growing influence of desistance literature (See McNeill and Weaver, 2010) upon the operation of frontline practice.

Although the extent to which these influences have produced different *practice* cultures, discourses and approaches in Scotland, England and Wales remains unclear (Deering, 2010; Mawby and Worrall, 2013; McNeill, 2004). Nonetheless, according to Shapland *et al.* (2012), this complicated background has resulted in complex and differentiated constructions of what might be thought of as 'quality' practice in offender supervision within *and* between jurisdictions.

More generally however, we know very little at present about the actual 'quality' (in whatever shape it takes) of criminal justice practice in the UK (Hedderman, 1998; Shapland *et al.*, 2012), and even less about the experience of

'quality' in the Scottish context of criminal justice social work. Indeed, although previous studies in Scotland have had much to say indirectly or incidentally about quality and in particular about its relational character, they have focused (often because of the nature of their funding) largely on the role that criminal justice social work might have in achieving outputs and outcomes (whether in relation to court reports, reducing reoffending, or supporting integration) (see McIvor and Barry 1998a; 1998b; McNeill, 2000). We hope that by exploring practitioner accounts of what matters in delivering quality, we can help to deepen understandings of routine practice.

### Methodology & Methods

When involving large organisations in research, the use of focus groups have been recommended for their economy and ability to reveal shared understandings of phenomena (Kitzinger, 1995). However, without a clear direction, critics suggest that focus groups can descend into unstructured dialogue on negative issues, deficits and failings of an organisation (Rushkoff, 2005). To limit this, we replicated the English study (Robinson *et al.*, 2012; 2013) in using *Appreciative Inquiry* - a reconfiguration of action research developed to help frame and focus discussions on the positive features of individual work within large organisations (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987). We used the same ranking exercise (Table 2) and focus group schedule as applied in the English study.

In the Scottish study, research questions were addressed by conducting structured focus groups with twenty-five practitioners recruited from six criminal justice social work teams. Data was generated in several ways: participants engaged in audio-recorded focus group discussions; they also completed worksheets and presented practice examples – all whilst researchers captured information on flipcharts. Researchers also kept field notes during each session. Our sample included criminal justice social work staff from a range of different settings (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Setting and staff composition of focus groups

Focus Group Sites	Staff Type
<i>Court</i>	<i>5x Social Workers; 1x Manager</i>
<i>Area Team (a)</i>	<i>4x Social Workers</i>
<i>Sex Offender Project</i>	<i>2x Social Workers</i>
<i>Area Team (b)</i>	<i>4x Social Workers; 1x Manager</i>
<i>Prison</i>	<i>3x Social Workers</i>
<i>Area Team (c)</i>	<i>5x Social Workers</i>
<b>Total</b>	<b>23x Social Workers; 2x Managers</b>

Qualitative software (*NVivo 10*) was used to code and provide initial analysis of datasets by the application of matrix coding queries. Quantitative data from worksheets was integrated into *NVivo 10* for comparison with coded themes.

One of the researchers (Grant) was - as a part-time social worker - currently active in the field of criminal justice. Whilst this conferred 'insider' status and probably helped with access and rapport building, it also raised the potential for bias. This was addressed through the application of reflexive strategies (Horsburgh, 2003).

Interestingly, the data analysis and initial presentation of the Scottish results was undertaken entirely by the first author without having had any access to the findings of the English study, despite the second author's participation in it; the structural similarities therefore between the next section of this paper and Robinson *et al.* (2012; 2013) are either an artefact of the methodology they share in common, or a reflection of similarities in what matters to probation and criminal justice social work practitioners across quite different jurisdictions. We intend to return to questions of comparative analysis in a subsequent paper.

In essence, this research topic is not unduly sensitive, but given the nature of employees discussing the detail of live cases - it follows that this area of research demanded careful attention to questions of maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, whilst addressing issues of informed consent. Ethical protocols had already been developed in the related English study, and these were adapted for the Scottish context. The work conformed to the standard proposed by the British Society of Criminology and was approved through a rigorous level of review within ethics committees at the University of Glasgow and the social work department where this research took place. No service users were interviewed or identified in this study. All practitioners signed a consent form. All data generated by the research was stored and destroyed in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

## **Results**

### **Quantitative Data**

This first section will focus on quantitative results from an exercise undertaken with all participants ( $n=25$ ). Participants were asked to review nineteen items and rank the extent to which they associated these items with quality in 1-1 supervision. The rationale behind the ranking exercise was determined by Robinson *et al.* (2012; 2013) who drew on an extensive literature review in developing the items, and then asked workers about which components they associated (positively and negatively) with quality in individual interviews that preceded their focus groups. In the focus groups, a similar list of items was used in a ranking exercise. Like their English counterparts, the Scottish, participants were asked to *tick* items on a worksheet

that they felt were associated with quality and to *cross* items with little or no relation. Participants then chose their top-three items associated with quality (see Table 2).

**Table 2:** Items ranked from *most* to *least* associated with 'quality'

Items	Items Ticked	Items Crossed	Number of times mentioned in top 3 items associated with quality
Engaging with the individual	24	1	12
Time to work with individual	24	1	8
Relationship based on trust / respect	24	1	7
Having clear supervision plan	24	1	7
Access to resources	24	1	5
Responding to individuals changing needs	23	2	8
Making the individuals life better	22	3	4
Being able to refer to the right people to help	22	3	3
Producing a good outcome	22	2	2
Making a difference	22	3	1
Using particular interventions / techniques	22	3	0
Reducing risk	21	4	9
Making a good LSCMI assessment*	21	4	3
Seeing progress	21	4	2
Including people important to individual**	17	8	1
Being able to exercise discretion	15	10	0
Complying with National Standards***	15	10	0
Meeting the individual in their own context	13	12	0
Getting the person through an order without breach	3	22	1

\*LSCMI (*Level of Service Case Management Inventory*) – current risk assessment tool used by Scottish practitioners – based on the Risk-Needs-Responsivity model of rehabilitation (Andrews and Bonta, 2010).

\*\*Including family members, partners or any significant others.

\*\*\* *National Outcomes and Standards for Social Work Services in the Criminal Justice System* (Scottish Government, 2010).

This exercise revealed a range of practitioner views thought to be associated with quality in practice. Whilst items associated with relational processes of engagement emerged strongly in this exercise, other items



suggesting the importance of more process-oriented elements of quality such as *having clear supervision plan* emerged with some significance. More revealing is the fact that despite a largely risk-dominated period of practice in Scotland over the previous decade (Barry, 2007), items such as *complying with National standards*, *reducing risk* and *making a good LSCMI assessment* did not feature in the top-ten items associated with quality (see Table 2); although we should note that a significant subset of our sample (n=9) did include *reducing risk* in their top-three items associated with quality. In addition, given more recent interest in desistance research within policy and practice in Scotland (see McNeill and Weaver, 2010) – and taking account of other research suggesting the constructive value in strengthening social bonds (Sampson and Laub, 1990) - it is somewhat surprising that participants did not give more weight to *the people important to the individual* and *meeting the individual in their own context*. This might suggest that practitioners view the operation of quality as one that occurs more within the supervisory space, and less within ordinary sites of social interaction.

The item least associated with quality was *getting the person through an order without breach*. This finding suggests that the majority of participants were overwhelmingly unreceptive to the idea of supervision as simply a technical exercise where formal compliance is somehow *generated* (see Robinson and McNeill, 2008). The breach process is identified elsewhere as being a constructive method of encouraging compliance (Robinson *et al.*, 2013); however, this understanding did not emerge in our study (for more detailed discussions of compliance, see Ugwudike and Raynor (eds.), 2013; Crawford and Hucklesby, 2013).

## **Qualitative Data**

This section focuses on qualitative data generated by recorded discussion in the six focus groups. It should be noted that one focus group (FG4) was prison-based, and as such, no recording equipment was permitted for use. The researcher took detailed notes on this occasion.

### **Key Theme 1: Relational Processes**

The central importance of relational practice to quality emerged as a strong finding in this research. The operation of meaningful relationships between the supervisee, the practitioner, outside agencies (third sector) and services within the umbrella of social work departments (particularly addiction services), was seen as being important to quality supervision. In particular, the majority of participants felt that the provision of quality supervision rested on a reciprocal and meaningful relationship between supervisor and supervisee - perhaps suggesting that a combination of professional skills and personal characteristics is required to help strengthen this connection. Trust and confidence in practitioners (from 'clients') were seen as crucial components in developing strong relational bonds, on which the capacity to influence, motivate and inspire change depended. As one participant put it, *"the relationship is a*



*vehicle for change, and just like that, I spend a lot of time on that relationship, because I feel that is my inroad"* (FG3: Practitioner 2).

Interestingly, whilst analyses of the pivotal space between client and practitioner have gained renewed attention in contemporary research (see Durnescu, 2012; Raynor *et al.*, 2013), our understanding of the relational space between practitioners and workers in other agencies has been less explored. This dynamic between practitioner and practitioner, or agency and practitioner, emerged as a theme worthy of further investigation. Our research indicates that relational processes other than the supervisory dyad might have some bearing on quality as it is currently understood.

We noted that several participants expressed concerns about a lack of cohesive relationships between criminal justice practitioners and childcare social workers – despite both disciplines occupying the same local authority department (in Scotland). One participant highlighted the tension between professionals when supervising a sex offender: *"If I go to CP [child protection] meetings, I feel like I'm almost vilified because I am there advocating for a sex offender"* (FG3: Practitioner 1). The same practitioner explained that whilst her objective in this case was also linked to protecting children and vulnerable victims, she felt that childcare staff did not appreciate the capacity of criminal justice social work to make a significant impact in a case like this. Other participants appeared to agree with these points - with some suggesting that whilst these two types of social worker have inter-related roles underpinned by convergent values and principles, they continue to experience tension as they struggle to understand each other's role in cases involving both people who offend and children in need. A slight contrast was observed in responses from participants who worked in multidisciplinary groups. For example, Drug Treatment and Testing Order (DTTO) teams comprise three disciplines: social work, addiction and nursing. In these teams, divergent value systems were observed; however, because workers had more regular exposure to each other, it seemed that meaningful and responsive relationships within these multidisciplinary workgroups could and did emerge, despite these differences.

In essence, the majority of participants in this study located quality within the operation of working relationships between all parties with direct and indirect involvement with those under supervision. While this finding is not particularly surprising, it did raise two concerns: firstly, existing literature has possibly neglected the role of worker-worker relationships in the supervision process. Secondly, this data provides some evidence of further inter-departmental marginalisation of criminal justice social work within local authorities (a theme covered elsewhere – see Halliday *et al.*, 2009; McNeill, 2013).

## **Key Theme 2: Resources**

The resourcing of criminal justice social work also emerged as a recurring theme in this research. Participants made frequent reference to the perceived

association of quality supervision with having access to appropriate resources; and more specifically, having adequate time to work with clients. As one participant succinctly put it, *"I would like a reduction in caseload so that I can spend more quality time with my clients"* (FG1: Practitioner 2). Indeed, when probed about what might occur during the extension of contact time with clients, several participants referred to the use of this space to develop *better* relationships, and to facilitate structured intervention using techniques such as motivational interviewing. As one participant commented, *"sometimes it takes ages to get to know someone, and that's important if you're expected to have an impact"* (FG3: Practitioner 4). Other participants offered practical references to deficits in resourcing such as a dearth of appropriate accommodation; inaccessible mental health services; fractured employment support; a cluttered landscape of addiction services; a lack of women-only projects; and a general need for more constructive leisure activities. Despite the apparent shortfall in resources, a general consensus emerged that although scarcity of services might hinder the progress of a case, quality supervision in most circumstances required more *time* to operate successfully.

Another related aspect to the perceived relationship between the provision of resources and the delivery of quality supervision was reflected in some recognition of knowledge as a particular source of capital. This emerged in comments made about a link between quality supervision and having proficiency in the criminal justice field as a result of appropriate training. One participant suggested: *"We need protected learning, self-development, time and space for workers to do research and develop their skills"* (FG2: Practitioner 4). Not only did participants identify that more training was required, but several suggested that better quality training was necessary to enable the delivery of quality supervision. As one participant put it, *"We hear about all this desistance stuff, but all we get is training on computer systems and how to record KPI's [key performance indicators]"* (FG3: Practitioner 2). This point emerged strongly when discussing the skills required for the administration of quality practice (see also Key Theme 4).

In short, participants aligned the idea of quality with having sufficient time to *do* work with clients whilst having adequate opportunities for continuous professional development to develop *themselves* as valuable human resources. Having access to a more robust suite of external services emerged as an important theme. These concerns however, are not limited to this study. Issues relating to the resourcing of social work departments have emerged more strongly elsewhere (see Asquith *et al.*, 2005).

### **Key Theme 3: Practice Grounded in Social Work Values**

Focus group data revealed a firm consensus that the development and achievement of quality is also underpinned by social work values of promoting rights, respecting the individual, promoting social inclusion and demonstrating anti-discriminatory practice. In one example, a participant referred to her work

with sex offenders, suggesting that this particular client group are: *“ostracised to such an extent that they feel worthless as people... That they don't deserve the things in life that other people have - things that allow them to maintain a functional and healthy lifestyle”* (FG3: Practitioner 2). More revealing is the fact that other participants viewed their approach to the supervision process as being *solely* underpinned by social work values, such that internal pressures to conform to departmental guidelines and external debates relating to the penal system had little impact on the character of their work. As one participant put it, *“of course, there's risk assessments and then there's the Government going on about protection and payback, we do some of it, but we know it's rubbish, just moral panics! We kinda zone-out and do what's important for the individual”* (FG2: Practitioner 1).

Furthermore, having an approach to supervision anchored in social work values would appear to be consistent with responses from the ranking exercise used in this research (see Table 2). The items *'making the individual's life better'* and *'making a difference'* were marked by 88% of participants as being associated with quality supervision.

#### **Key Theme 4: Skills & Knowledge**

Throughout focus group discussions, participants frequently referred to the application of skills and knowledge – both understood as important elements within the delivery of quality supervision; however, the majority of practitioners appeared to struggle with identifying, locating and expressing tangible skills used in the process of routine practice. Participants referred more to their perceived *approach* to offender supervision, rather than specific skills used. For example, the majority of participants referred to the importance of good communication skills for developing good working relationships; however, when probed about what communication techniques might be used, the majority of participants were unable to identify specific methods such as conversational models or controlled use of body language. As one participant put it, *“just talking to the person is enough I think... there's enough skill in basic communication”* (FG6: Practitioner 2).

The failure of social work staff to locate exact skills used in practice, however, is not a novel finding. Other research in this area reveals similar difficulties in relation to the expression and description of both knowledge and skills underpinning practice (McNeill, 2000; Raynor *et al.*, 2013). One explanation might be that social workers actually receive very little training in particular techniques, such that practitioners must rely more on their own existing methods of communication.

In three focus groups (FG1, FG2 and FG6), having some knowledge about practice theory and legal issues was thought to be important to quality practice; however, concerns about knowledge – despite further probing - did not develop into significant discussion in *any* focus group. Again, participants focussed more on their general approach to routine supervision, rather than detailing the

application of specific knowledge in practice. As one participant put it when meeting a client for the first time, *"I mean, well, you can't just barge in without knowing a bit about why somebody's in the state they're in, you know, their social context, their position in society, the impact of stuff like poverty and economics"* (FG2: Practitioner 3). And when asked about how quality might be enhanced by knowledge, one participant stated: *"Yeah, like, theories of desistance and the 'what works' stuff... I think you need a bit of this as a kind of foundation"* (FG6: Practitioner 2). In short, participants recognized that knowledge was associated with quality in some way; however, this connection was largely discussed in loose terms.

In essence, participants were comfortable in discussing their general approach to routine supervision, and many felt that they possessed the requisite skills (albeit discussed in a very general way) to enable quality practice to occur. Indeed, for them, simply *being* a social worker seemed to imply some guarantee of quality in the process of supervision.

### **Key Theme 5: Going Beyond National Standards**

The majority of practitioners stated that they often go beyond minimal national standards (Scottish Government, 2010) in the supervision process. Many suggested that their work was informed by social work values in the first instance, with national standards offering very basic guidance thereafter. As one participant put it, *"you know the standards are good, but at the end of the day we also need the human touch as well because it's about people"* (FG4: Practitioner 1). Another participant suggested that national standards are possibly redundant: *"They don't mean anything to me. I think it's about social work values, about having more concern for people"* (FG1: Practitioner 2). These responses suggest that despite the existence of national policy documents underlining the expected outcomes of criminal justice social work, the majority of practitioners felt more committed to social work values as a set of principles that possibly shape conceptions of quality in routine supervision. It could be said that national standards offer little more than an instrumental steer in most cases – with insufficient scope as a manual for the delivery of quality in complex environments with equally complex clients. Again, this might explain why participants preferred to discuss their *approach* to supervision – highlighting general attributes, skills and knowledge – instead of detailing methods and techniques that could evidence more specific dimensions of quality as it is exercised.

### **Key Theme 6: Support from Colleagues**

There was overwhelming consensus from those participants based in local criminal justice teams that support from social work management was perceived as poor. Participants spoke of management staff without adequate experience, knowledge and skills to provide meaningful support and guidance. As one participant put it, *"I've worked with a few, and you don't really get a sense of them being a specialist or even having any advanced knowledge that you can*

rely on" (FG2: Practitioner 3). Another participant echoed this view: *"They are kind of disconnected from practice"* (FG4: Practitioner 1). To remedy this position, participants referred to other avenues of support such as reliance on informal peer-supervision and advice from more experienced colleagues to help guide their work with offenders: *"In some respects, colleagues have almost replaced team leaders for advice; you go to a team leader if there is something serious"* (FG2: Practitioner 2). Some participants felt they received little recognition for what they regarded as good practice or exceptional examples of quality work. As one participant stated, *"It's few and far between in my career when a manager has come up and said 'by the way, that was an excellent bit of work'"* (FG1: Practitioner 4).

In contrast, practitioners from a specialist criminal justice service (managing sex offenders) spoke of receiving thorough, meaningful and robust supervision from a supportive, experienced and knowledgeable manager. As one participant put it, *"She gives you time to reflect on what you're doing, and we always discuss stuff in loads of detail. She trusts your judgement, and that's important because I want to be respected as a professional"* (FG3: Practitioner 1). These staff referred to having a consistent and genuinely professional relationship with their manager. These staff felt they were able to practice in a creative manner – exploring each case in detail whilst applying flexibility and discretion, albeit with clear guidance. More revealing in this particular focus group, however, was the perceived association between having a good relationship with a manager and the delivery of quality supervision. As one participant suggested, *"I feel like I can give more time to someone if the case needed it, because I can justify it, and I know my manager would support me"* (FG3: Practitioner 2). It might be that the nature of work done by this specialist team (managing sex offenders) is such that a good relationship between frontline staff and management is almost *required* to ensure that all parties are adequately supported to practice in a challenging environment.

Whilst there was general recognition that support from managers or colleagues can and should enhance quality supervision (by offering good advice, informal supervision, imparting practice wisdom), there was broad consensus that the pursuit of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) by local authorities, and the culture of managerialism more generally, had a negative impact on the delivery of quality supervision. As one participant put it, *"You don't tick the boxes with KPIs doing the kind of work that the client appreciates, work that really is quality"* (FG2: Practitioner 3). Again, this links to *Key Theme 5* where participants suggested that in large part their work exceeds the minimum national standards, thus leaving a potential catalogue of quality practice largely unrecognised or undervalued. Again, perceived tensions between frontline staff and social work management, and the overall impact of KPI culture, are not novel findings in this study. These issues are explored elsewhere - particularly in literature covering topics such as managerialism and personalisation (see Ferguson, 2007; Ferguson and Lavalette, 2013). That said, our data indicates that practitioners appear to practice with degrees of resistance to, and resilience from, what they perceive as technocratic management styles within criminal justice social work.



## Key Theme 7: Outcome-Oriented Practice

Resistance to managerialism, however, did not reflect a lack of concern amongst practitioners with the outcomes of their work. Indeed, a preference for measuring case outcomes, *as opposed to* meeting key performance indicators (KPIs), emerged as an interesting theme in this research. As indicated in *Key Theme 6*, several practitioners felt that KPIs ignored many aspects of quality practice by focussing solely on process outputs. As one participant succinctly put it, *"In supervision you're told you haven't done X, Y and Z on the computer – 'can you tell me why not?' And you say, 'I want to talk about clients', 'well we can't do that. Let's deal with the KPI's'. This is just incredible"*. (FG2: Practitioner 2).

A wide consensus emerged amongst participants that determining and evaluating outcomes would be more useful in the measurement of progress in most cases. Several participants referred to the complexity and variance between cases, and the need for more flexible methods to appraise progress. As one participant suggested, *"The more chaotic your client is, you've got to be really realistic about what they can achieve; even just actually coming to an appointment is an achievement"* (FG3: Practitioner 1).

The association between quality and outcomes seems to be located in the elasticity required to set realistic goals for clients – especially for those who occupy unstable environments. There is also recognition that intermediate progress is undervalued by current audit processes, but seen as crucially important by practitioners as potential indicators of movement towards desistance. In one example, a participant discussed the incremental progress made by a client with notable substance misuse problems: *"She's still coming to my appointments, so I think that's a big achievement, because you know that she's not totally cut me off"* (FG2: Practitioner 4). This example indicates that basic engagement was viewed by the practitioner as evidence of transitional growth in this particular case.

In short, outcome-oriented measurement that captures incremental degrees of progress made in supervision was seen as important to practitioners who associated quality less with quantifiable aspects of practice (outputs) and more with the value of general relational processes and outcomes (with both objective and subjective components). Practitioners appear to recognise substantive merit in small-scale change – with quality practice associated with the application of social work values in pursuit of these outcomes. The methodological and practical challenge, it would seem, relates to how we might capture these more subjective elements of the supervision process for the purpose of measurement and evaluation. Again, this is not an original finding (see Whitehead, 2007). The move towards outcome-oriented practice in criminal justice however, is gathering pace in terms of policy with broad national outcomes now prescribed by the current political administration in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2010). What matters in practice will undoubtedly require



more sophisticated methods of measurement designed to capture more incremental stages of progress in each case (Miller, 2012).

## Discussion

A striking feature of this study is the apparent disconnect of bureaucratic process outputs (key performance indicators) and national guidance from the accounts we gathered of what appears to matter to practitioners with respect to quality supervision. Participants made little attempt to formulate conceptions of quality around adherence to national standards or simply getting people through community sanctions without breach proceedings; rather, their constructions of quality appear to be situated in the operation of relational processes; in access to and use of adequate resources, especially time; in the support and advice of colleagues and experienced staff; in the application of social work values; and in the recognition of intermediate and incremental progress.

Indeed, whilst performance indicators continue to feature significantly in the operational delivery of supervision within local authority settings, practitioners seem to be more invested in responding to the fluidity of cases with creative solutions, methods and approaches. Practitioners acknowledge that quality as they understand it is indisposed to established methods of measurement; however, they are convinced that quality supervision somehow locates itself in the attributes aligned to social work values; and that the delivery of quality lies primarily, if not exclusively, in the value attached to human relational interaction. A crucial observation of this research is that practitioners tended to avoid descriptions of their practice as mere processes, actions or tasks; rather, practitioners discussed quality in relational, emergent and subjective terms. Moreover, the consistency of shared understandings between each focus group is reflected in other studies that explore the occupational cultures of those involved in the supervision of people who offend (Deering, 2011; Mawby and Worrall, 2013; Robinson *et al.*, 2013).

However, our study also demonstrates that conceptions of quality are not yet well understood within the criminal justice field. Articulations of what quality might mean within other fields of social work practice have been examined elsewhere (see Seed and Lloyd, 1997). However, the absence in *this* field of any common meter of 'quality practice' would appear to reflect the complexity in capturing subjective elements of quality within criminal justice supervision. Participants in our study struggled to articulate a shared understanding of common parameters that might give shape or form to quality practice; however, this might itself be a reflection of the intensely individualised nature of routine supervision. This observation is congruent with a recent suggestion by Durnescu (2012) that the absence of discussion in relation to the character of practice would appear to reflect the limits of current mainstream research methodologies in their attempts to capture what routinely occurs in the (usually) private social space between supervisor and supervisee. Nevertheless, the methodological approach used in this research (*Appreciative Inquiry*) enabled practitioners to make some attempt to frame their thoughts by reflecting

upon their understandings of quality supervision to some extent. In essence, the term 'quality' emerged as a socially constructed value – one that is perhaps shaped by the personal, political, cultural, historical, and often individualised context of its use by each practitioner.

Yet without some agreement about what quality might be, Durnescu (2008) - in discussing jurisdictional variations - suggests that a cluttered landscape of meanings will have implications for the delivery of divergent outcomes; therefore undermining the design of adequate measurement tools. The application of what we might regard as quality practice in one domain might not capture quality in other contexts and locations (Raleigh and Foot, 2010). The key point here is that conceptions of quality (and hence of 'best practice' or 'quality practice') cannot be divorced from their contexts. But we would argue that understanding quality in supervision also requires richer articulations of the nature of supervision itself – both as a lived experience and as a contextualised and constructed practice (see McNeill and Beyens, 2013). These sorts of understandings of supervision require the application of research methods that move beyond traditional accounts of practice (and its 'quality') and extend into observational ethnographies of practice (Bauwens, 2010). That is, if we accept that quality supervision must somehow lie *in doing*.

Despite its limitations as a study that relies on practitioners' accounts - and therefore neglecting the other half of the supervisory dyad – our research nonetheless reveals the resilience of practitioners in the face of internal and external pressures, and would appear to suggest that practitioner *accounts* of what matters most in the routine supervision of offenders can survive significant periods of social, political, cultural and even economic fluctuation – indicating that agency and discretion survive within contemporary practice (Gregory, 2011; Fenton, 2012). This perhaps suggests that relationships between social and cultural pressures, the changing shape of 'the penal state' and the lived realities of particular penal practices require further exploration (see McNeill *et al.*, 2009; Page, 2013).

In essence, our study highlights the persistence of certain values and dispositions at the frontline of criminal justice social work in Scotland. For them, quality supervision implies and requires an approach capable of enduring penal flux; an approach that understands the importance of relational processes; an approach that situates itself outwith managerial agendas; and finally, an approach that sustains commitments to social justice, inclusion, empowerment and human rights. Or at least, that's what they *say* matters to them. *Hearing* from supervisees and *seeing* what practitioners actually do must be the next steps in analysing both what 'quality' means, and whether it really represents resistance to managerialism and punitiveness.

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