Student experiences and impressions while on placement with the Probation and Welfare Service.

Patrick O’Dea, Department of Social Studies, Trinity College Dublin.

Summary
This paper is a review of the experience of students from Trinity College Dublin (TCD), undertaking professional placements within the Probation and Welfare Service, (PWS) as part of their social work training. A number of randomly selected placement reports have been used as a source in order to extract and convey a sense of student experiences and impressions while on placement with the PWS. The focus in the paper is not on the broad repertoire of skills and knowledge acquired there, but rather on the three themes that emerge consistently from the random sample of placement reports; a) social work theory, b) gender and c) attitudes to crime and offenders.

Keywords Students, Professional Training, Gender, Social Work Theory

Background
The Department of Social Studies, Trinity College, provides two social work training courses, both of which lead to the award of the National Qualification in Social Work (NQSW). One is a four-year undergraduate social work degree, the Bachelor in Social Studies (BSS), which is awarded jointly with the NQSW. The other is a postgraduate social work course, where the NQSW is jointly awarded with a Masters in Social Work (MSW). The BSS degree programme is a four-year fulltime course, with an intake of approximately 30 students per annum. The MSW postgraduate programme is a two-year fulltime programme with an annual intake of approximately 20 students. Students undertake a placement in social work in each year of the MSW course and in three of four years of the BSS course. (First year BSS placement by contrast is undertaken in a residential/social care setting). Placements are an integral part of social work training and are designed to complement learning in social work theory and skills undertaken in the academic setting.

Social workers are distributed across the settings of medical/hospital, mental health/addictions, disability/intellectual and physical/sensory, child protection /family support, local authority/housing welfare, occupational social work, community/voluntary sector and the disability/intellectual and physical/sensory, child protection /family support, local authority/housing welfare, occupational social work, community/voluntary sector and the

Emerging Themes
a) Social Work Theory
The link between social work theory and practice is central to social work education. Students learn to integrate theory and practice, particularly while on placement. They also learn the key techniques used in different practice approaches and agency settings, and develop the ability to choose the pertinent theory and practice approach to particular circumstances. Placement reports from students in the PWS can sometimes appear theoretically more confident that reports of students in other social work sectors, where there may not have been an established placement practice within the Probation and Welfare Service.

A perusal of the sample of placement reports shows consistency in that students employ the cognitive behavioural approach as their primary method in case work. Another common intervention used incorporates Trotter's guidelines (Trotter, 1999) for working with involuntary clients; incorporating role clarification, pro-social modelling and reinforcement, problem solving and focus on relationship. Other theory practice approaches evidenced in students’ reports included that of motivational interviewing.

Sample comments from placement reports analysed

“The Cognitive Behavioural Approach was one of the primary methods utilised in this intervention. I focused on the causal connection between pro-criminal thoughts or beliefs and criminal behaviour.”

placements for the academic year 2004-2005 shows a slightly higher first preference for PWS placements than actual PWS placements acquired. However, the assignment of placements is mediated through a process that addresses students' learning needs and involves consultations between student, social work tutor, previous practice teacher and Department of Social Studies teaching staff. Thus it may be that a student seeking a PWS placement may not obtain one for any of a number of reasons. PWS placements are highly valued by the students and the University, and this is reflected in the very positive relationship between the University and the Probation and Welfare Service.

Students have to complete a placement-related written assignment of approximately 8,000 words. The assignment topics can vary somewhat for students of the different years, but substantially address the core topics of 1) community and agency context, 2) overview of work undertaken, 3) case study of one piece of work, and 4) placement learning, including special features which either contributed to, or limited, learning on placement. The present author used these reports as a source in order to extract and convey a sense of student experiences and impressions while on placement with the PWS. As also stated, this author concentrated on the three themes of a) social work theory, b) gender, and c) attitudes to crime and offenders; which emerged consistently from a random sample of these placement reports, rather than on the broad repertoire of skills and knowledge acquired on placement.
One placement report drew out some implications and personal reflections evoked by clients’ gender:

Examples of student comments regarding working in a prison environment included:

"Working in a male dominated organisation was somewhat intimidating and
This placement provided me with a first opportunity to work with male clients."

One placement report drew out some implications and personal reflections evoked by clients’ gender:

“I was never aware of any negative impact on my work because of my gender; in fact
I experienced the opposite effect. Perhaps being a woman, the prisoners were more
open to talking to me about problems and issues that they had."

b) Gender.
The PWS students comment on the fact that their clients are predominantly men. That may
seem unremarkable to Probation and Welfare Officers, who are long immersed in Probation
practice. However, it forms part of the ‘first impressions’, or ‘culture shock’ of newly arrived
students to the PWS. Social work settings, child protection to name one for example, tend to
engage more frequently with females than males. The Probation setting is often a first setting
in which many students have had an opportunity to engage predominantly with male clients
and to participate in institutions of the criminal justice system, where the majority of staff are
also likely to be males. This point on gender is acknowledged in nearly all placement reports.
The acuteness of the observation may also be a factor of the gender composition of students in
Dept of Social Studies, where 85% are female.

Examples of student comments regarding working in a prison environment included:

“Trotters’ approach to working with involuntary clients also proved useful in terms of
collaborative problem solving and pro-social modelling.”

The challenge of choice between different and competing theory/practice approaches is some-
what removed from students in PWS setting. Probation practice in recent years has embraced
‘what works’ (e.g. Chui, 2003) evidence based practice and theory with cognitive behaviour
therapy as a core aspect of its direct practice with clients. The PWS thus has a theory and prac-
tice ‘house style’ with a corresponding support literature.

Students adopt and embrace this PWS house style. Placement reports overwhelmingly refer-
ence such authors as: Trotter C., Andrews D., Miller R and Rolnick S., Raynor P and Vanstone M.
Frequently referenced too are PWS own various published policies, procedures and reports,
and published articles by PWS staff such as, Connolly A., Geiran V., and McNally G, (e.g. Irish
Social Worker [2000] Vol. 18). However, a qualitative difference between the competent and
the excellent student report from a PWS placement is the latter’s evidence of independent crit-
ical thought. Such students cite the rationale for the cognitive behavioural approach or demon-
strate an awareness of the wider criminogenic issues in addition to the repertoire of PWS-relat-
ed theory and practice approaches.

c) Attitudes to Crime and Offenders

Students are members of the society at large and so carry forward into placement some of
the same emotional range and intensity attaching to ‘crime’, that is present in the general popu-
lation. The PWS, as such is not an ‘at ease’ setting for students. It can be highly evocative. That
tension is evidenced in some comments in students’ reports of placement:

“I found it difficult to imagine myself capable of holding a non-judgmental attitude to clients.”

“I was disgusted by the crime and my personal feelings about this crime took over my
ability to be non-judgemental.”

“That emotional range and intensity is not exclusively reserved for offence or offender,
but is as passionately felt in relation to the formal institutions of justice:

“I could not help but feel troubled by being part of such a system. Is it helping clients
or is it reinforcing institutional oppression?”

“The courtroom is a place where disrespect, judgemental and discriminatory thoughts
and actions prevail. Court staff could benefit from anti-oppressive training.”

The existence of such feelings demonstrates something of the evocative nature of this work con-
text for students. The context is that of the criminal justice system, not what might be anticip-
ated as a ‘client-centred care system.’ Students can clearly feel the system’s tensions when con-
fronted with the force-field that is the care/control, justice/welfare dilemmas. The implications
of this are many, not least in posing the question as to who is the client.

Conclusion.

Students acknowledge the PWS as a learning site that offers opportunities to progress across
a repertoire of social work skills and knowledge, both generic and PWS-specific. This article has
concentrated on the three themes of social work theory, gender and attitudes to crime, rather
than the totality of students’ learning on placement in the PWS. What emerges around themes of
gender and attitudes to crime suggest something of the evocative nature of the student expe-
rience of the PWS agency context. Students’ feelings, including indignation, can provide mate-
rial for supervision with practice teachers and thereby can deepen the student learning on PWS
placements. Supervision has a role too in addressing the theme of social work theory. Students
demonstrate a general willingness to embrace the PWS’s explicit evidence based theory and
practice. PWOs as practice teachers could take on a greater role in supervision of encouraging
independent critical thought by students, such as their awareness of wider criminogenic factors
in offending. In summary, supervision is crucial both in integration of theoretical constructs
with developing practice skills, together with facilitating students to reflect on their personal
frame of reference, which influence their responses in the PWS setting.

Mark Shevlin, Gary Adamson, Brendan Bunting
School of Psychology, University of Ulster at Magee Campus

Summary
The “Men Overcoming Domestic Violence” programme for male perpetrators of domestic violence was evaluated by exploring the changes in participant’s beliefs, attitudes and associated characteristics between the ‘pretreatment’ and ‘post-treatment’ stages. The results of a statistical analysis revealed that participants reported statistically significant changes on a number of psychological variables related to aggression and violent behaviour. The evidence reported was favourable in terms of demonstrating the efficacy of the Men Overcoming Domestic Violence programme.

Keywords: Domestic violence, efficacy, perpetrators, programmes, evaluation.

Background
Since 1997 the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) have delivered a “Men Overcoming Domestic Violence” programme for male perpetrators of domestic violence. The majority of these participants have been on Probation Orders or Custody Probation Orders with a condition of attendance at the programme but some have been referrals from Social Services who have not been convicted of domestic violence offences (non adjudicated offenders). Hague and Malos (1993) noted that any group work programme for male perpetrators must be evaluated. The Men Overcoming Domestic Violence Programme aims to increase the participants’ understanding of their actions and awareness of the consequences. As such, any changes in behaviour must be preceded by changes in the participants’ beliefs and attitudes. Therefore, it is essential that effectiveness of the programme in inducing such changes be demonstrated. Implicit in the design of the MODV programme is that behaviours are a function of the individual’s beliefs, attitudes and personality. Therefore a change in behaviour will be preceded by a change in an individual’s belief, attitudes and personality. A number of variables that have been empirically and theoretically demonstrated to be related to violent behaviour are measured before and after participation in the MODV programme. It is expected that any changes in these variables is attributable to the intervention. The analyses reported below are all carried out at the group level. If consistent changes are found to be statistically significant this implies that MODV programme is effective for a broad range of participants. A reduction in the mean level of those variables associated with violent behaviour, and an increase in positive psychological variables, would constitute evidence for the effectiveness of the MODV programme. In particular, the MODV would be considered to be effective if there were significant decreases in self-reported.

- Psychoticism
- Neuroticism
- Criminality

References

Patrick O’Dea is on secondment from the PWS to the Department of Social Studies, Trinity College, Dublin 2. He is a lecturer in social work and fieldwork organiser.
Email: paodea@tcd.ie.