

## The Probation Board for Northern Ireland's Cognitive Self-Change Programme: An Overview of the Pilot Programme in the Community

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**Summary:** With probation agencies increasingly charged with supervising offenders in the community who are assessed as posing a high risk of reoffending and a high risk of harm if a further offence was to occur, the need for an effective offending-behaviour programme for violent offenders is both timely and essential. One such intervention is the Cognitive Self-Change Programme developed by Jack Bush and researched extensively within secure facilities in North America. More recently, this programme has been adapted within a number of prisons in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, with the relapse prevention component of the programme being available to offenders upon their release to probation supervision in the community provided they have successfully completed the core elements of the programme in prison.

This article provides an overview of the ethos, principles and components of the Cognitive Self-Change Programme, and offers some preliminary reflections on the process of piloting this programme in its entirety with high-risk violent offenders subject to supervision in the community by the Probation Board for Northern Ireland. The roles and responsibilities of the programme and treatment managers are also outlined and a brief consideration of some of the difficulties encountered along the way, and the lessons learned, is included.

**Keywords:** Cognitive-behavioural programmes, risk management, cognitive self-change programmes, high-risk offenders, instrumental violence, community-based interventions.

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## **Cognitive self-change: A brief background**

Before describing the principles of cognitive self-change (CSC) and the process by which the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) has come to pilot this programme in the community, it is first worth outlining briefly CSC's origins and development in North America, where it has been extensively researched by the Department of Corrections in Vermont.

The process of CSC evolved primarily through the work of Jack Bush (see, for example, Bush 1995) and has been adopted as the offending programme of choice in a significant number of North American secure facilities, and more recently in certain prisons<sup>1</sup> in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The fundamental principle underlying CSC is that each of us is able to direct our lives by consciously choosing the way we think. By changing how we think, we can influence how we feel and how we construe and interact with the world around us. Significantly, in terms of what we perceive to be valuable and rewarding, we can gain positive reinforcement through creating new and different meanings for what we do and what we do not do. In other words, we can train ourselves to gain a sense of satisfaction and pleasure from behaviours simply by attaching a different meaning to them.

Through his experience of working with violent and high-risk prisoners, Bush asserts that 'Criminal violence is not associated with any single disease or behaviour' (1995, p. 139), it is not a distinct form of criminal behaviour, but represents a learned and functional response to what may be perceived by the perpetrator as threatening or stressful situations. Such a propensity to violence is underpinned by pro-violent attitudes and beliefs and often functions as the primary means through which the perpetrator may experience a sense of power and control. In this sense, violence is a learned response from which the perpetrator derives positive reinforcement, for example a sense of efficacy, an increase in self-esteem or a reduction of negative feelings.

Bush proposes that through the process of learning to identify particular thoughts and feelings experienced by the perpetrator during the commission of violent acts, it is possible to identify the underlying pro-offending attitudes and beliefs. In so doing this process can provide a starting point for perpetrators to identify new ways of

<sup>1</sup> HMP Full Sutton, HMP Wakefield, HMP Parkhurst, HMP Kingston, HMP Channings Wood, HMP Dartmoor, HMP Swaleside, HMP Gartree, HMP Ranby and HMP Maghaberry.

thinking that will make it less likely that they will respond in a violent manner, but will nonetheless enable them to maintain a sense of self-worth, or, as Bush puts it, enable the people to still feel good about themselves.

### **Cognitive self-change: Simple but effective**

The Cognitive Self-Change Programme (CSCP) is similar to other programmes that attempt to address offending and offending-related behaviour through the application of cognitive-behavioural principles. Cognitive-behavioural approaches have been demonstrated to be the most effective in reducing the risk of reoffending (see, for example, McGuire and Priestly 1995).

The CSCP is a long and intensive programme and to complete it successfully takes anywhere between eight and eighteen months and requires each participant to attend between approximately 130 and 260 group sessions. Furthermore, each participant is required to attend individual sessions with a programme facilitator, the purpose of which is to support the participant's completion of individually tailored journal assignments and to address, as necessary, issues of non-compliance, resistance or other identified impediments to progress. The CSCP is designed as a rolling programme, whereby participants are able to leave and join as necessary. Participants who are experienced in the programme are encouraged to support and facilitate the progress of new, less experienced group members.

Importantly, where the CSCP differs from other cognitive-behavioural programmes is that it does not assume that participants start with any motivation to change. Creating conscious choice is viewed as being at the heart of motivating antisocial offenders to change. This is achieved through the acquisition of four discrete but related skills, which clients are then required to both implement and practice in their interactions with others. The four skills, or steps to self-change, can be summarised as follows:

1. Learning how to pay attention to thoughts, feelings and attitudes.
2. Learning how to see when thoughts, feelings and attitudes are leading towards doing something potentially hurtful, violent and/or criminal.

3. Being able to generate new thinking that will lead away from the old, offending-related thinking, yet allow participants to feel good about themselves.
4. Practice using this new thinking in real life situations.

Each step of CSC is a cognitive skill – a behaviour that through practice can be learned and mastered. Importantly, the programme ethos dictates that nobody can be forced to change the way they think, feel and behave. The cognitive-emotional aspects of human behaviour are rooted in habitual and unique patterns of experience that are not amenable to direct influence from others. However, just as these are learned and, in many cases, adaptive responses to experiences, so too can they be modified or unlearned through conscious effort. The programme adopts an authoritative approach to working with offenders and the basic requirement from the outset is that participants attend each session and engage in an open and straightforward manner. Participants are required to undertake work as directed by programme facilitators in order to learn the skills necessary to change their behaviour.

Ultimately, however, the programme is delivered in a spirit of co-operation that respects each participant's right to choose to change his or her thinking and behaviour. It is important to underline the point that the CSCP does not seek to educate participants with regard to 'right' and 'wrong' ways of thinking, but rather its purpose is to assist participants to identify the relationship between thinking, feeling and behaving, thus enabling them to consciously adopt alternative, less 'risky' attitudes and beliefs that lead away from offending, but without undermining their self-identity and self-worth. As Bush (1995, p. 40) puts it, 'The programme does not demand that offenders comply their thinking to any specified norm. (This is both impossible and undesirable: impossible, because we have no access to how offenders think other than what they tell us, undesirable because coerced compliance is not real or lasting change)'.

In keeping with this ethos of non-coercion, the requirements for participation in the programme are underpinned by what is known as the 'strategy of choices', which dictates that (see, for example, PBNI Cognitive Self-Change Manual, p. 26):

You can be part of the group and accept its rules or you can choose not to be part of the group. But you cannot be part of the group and

choose to disobey its rules. That would subvert the function and purpose of the group. It is [the facilitator's, treatment manager's, programme manager's etc.] responsibility not to let that happen. So you [the would-be participant] must decide what you want to do.

Presenting the strategy of choices to would-be participants is intended to address the basic paradox inherent within criminal justice whereby the main toll for controlling criminal behaviour – punishment and the threat of punishment – triggers resistance and resentment of authority which reinforce the very behaviour that is the focus of the intervention.

The four skills of CSC identified above are learned and reinforced, and each participant's competency and progress is assessed through the practice of simple techniques: cognitive check-ins, thinking reports, group presentations and journal assignments. In addition, individual competency development plans are devised for each participant and are designed to address identified deficits, areas of concern or other identified impediments to progress. When a participant has satisfactorily completed all the tasks for a given stage of the programme, they have completed that stage and can be credited accordingly. This task-based criterion does not eliminate the facilitator's or treatment manager's judgement as to an individual participant's overall level of engagement and progress, but it does operationalise and make transparent the criteria for progress and ultimately for completion of the programme.

### **Cognitive self-change: From prisons to the community**

The PBNI has for some time recognised the need for a cognitive-behavioural programme to address violent offending. Probation officers were increasingly preparing pre-sentence reports (PSRs) on individuals convicted of serious violent crimes. For example, in 2004 a PBNI audit of PSRs over a six-month period indicated that 30% were written for offenders where the index offence was one of violence. Significantly, over half of those PSRs written on violent offenders were for an offence of assault occasioning actual bodily harm or for a more serious violent offence. In addition, 42% of these offenders had three or more previous convictions for a violent offence, indicating a pattern of violent offending as opposed to a one-off, isolated incident. Furthermore, sentencer

satisfaction surveys carried out by the Northern Ireland Office identified the absence of a programme aimed at specifically addressing violent behaviour as a significant concern for a high number of sentencers in various courts in Northern Ireland, and, in particular, amongst Crown Court judges. As such, the need for a programme such as the CSCP in working with this offender population to manage and reduce risk had been clearly identified.

The PBNI became aware of the CSCP being delivered within the Vermont Department of Corrections by Jack Bush and his associates, and of its application within other correctional facilities predominantly in North America, in 2004. It was perceived that the CSCP would meet the needs of sentencers and the offending population in addressing issues related to public protection. Bush visited Northern Ireland in January 2005 and trained a number of PBNI and Northern Ireland Prison Service staff in the delivery of the CSCP. In close consultation with Bush, elements of the programme have since been modified and adapted to suit the offending population it is aimed at within Northern Ireland, as well as its delivery, for the first time, within a community-based context. Modifications made to Bush's original CSCP manual include the development and implementation of a suitable model for evaluating programme effectiveness and treatment outcomes. Notwithstanding the difficulties of identifying an appropriate psychometric tool to measure thinking styles and attitudinal change, in consultation with Shadd Maruna<sup>2</sup> a psychometric test battery that is administered to participants pre- and post-programme has been implemented. This comprises:

- Psychopathy checklist – screening version.
- Psychological inventory of criminal thinking styles.
- Personality assessment inventory.
- Stages of change questionnaire.
- Locus of control questionnaire.

Participation in the CSCP became available as an additional requirement to probation orders made in courts in Northern Ireland from May 2005, and the programme was piloted by the PBNI in January

<sup>2</sup> Shadd Maruna, Lecturer in Criminology at Queen's University Belfast, has researched extensively the area of offender reform and desistance from crime.

2006. The programme became available in HMP Maghaberry in 2005, and it is intended that participants will be able to commence the programme in prison and complete it under supervision in the community.

Offenders who are assessed at the pre-sentence stage as suitable for participation in the programme, and who subsequently have the programme included as a condition of an order, are required to attend two group sessions and one individual session per week for between eight months and two years.<sup>3</sup>

### **Assessment and selection criteria for programme participants**

The CSCP is designed for adult offenders. Participants on the PBNP programme must be at least 21 years old as a level of maturity is required to engage with the programme content, which assumes that violent offending is underpinned by ingrained patterns of thinking that may not be fully discernible in younger offenders – the programme specifically targets established patterns of thinking and behaviour and how an individual's belief system has developed over time.

As indicated, a participant on the programme will have an index offence of violence, usually an offence of assault occasioning actual bodily harm (AOABH) or a more serious offence. Furthermore, it is expected that a participant's criminal record will reflect a pattern of instrumentally violent offending, and where this is the case, consideration may be given to an offender's suitability for participation in the programme where the index offence is less serious than AOABH. What is crucial, however, is that the index offence and/or a participant's criminal record reflect a propensity for the use of instrumental violence. In other words, using violence as a means to an end, to achieve an identified objective (for example the use of a gun in robbery) as opposed to violence indicative of an inability on the offender's part to manage anger effectively (reactive violence). It is important that this distinction is applied in the assessment process, since an anger management or more

<sup>3</sup> Offenders sentenced to custody probation orders with an additional requirement of the CSCP are able to commence the programme in prison and complete it in the community. Where a straight probation order is imposed by the court, the PBNP has indicated to sentencers that a minimum of two years' supervision will be required in order to provide sufficient time to complete the programme.

general psycho-educational programme may be a more appropriate intervention for offenders not predisposed to adopting instrumental violence.

A potential participant on the PBNI's CSCP is assessed at the pre-sentence stage as posing an increased likelihood of reoffending (evidenced by a score of 30 or more on the ACE<sup>4</sup> document) and as likely to cause significant harm if a further offence was to occur (established according to the criteria laid out in the RAI<sup>5</sup> assessment form).

Where addiction, literacy or other issues are identified that would likely impact on an offender's ability to participate on the programme, these should be addressed accordingly before he can be included. This may mean an additional requirement to a probation order or custody probation order to attend for counselling or tutoring in one or more of these areas.

Importantly, the offender will require a level of cognitive functioning commensurate with the demands and expectations of the programme. If there are concerns during the assessment stage regarding a potential participant's intellectual ability, he or she will be referred to the PBNI's Psychology Department where an assessment will be carried out. In general, a cut-off score of 80, as measured by the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (third version), is considered sufficient to enable a participant to engage adequately with the programme and to understand and implement the concepts central to the process of CSC. It is not possible to include on the programme those individuals who evidence persistent or severe mental health problems.

Participants will also be screened using a short version of the psychopathy checklist (see, for example, Hare 1980) prior to their participation on the programme. This process will be administered by a psychologist and any offender evidencing personality traits indicative of psychopathy will not be assessed as suitable for inclusion on the programme.

Prior to the making of a court order that includes the CSCP as a requirement, a potential participant will be interviewed by a programme

<sup>4</sup> The ACE (Assessment, Case Management and Evaluation) System is a standardised risk-assessment tool (Probation Studies Unit, University of Oxford/Warwickshire Probation).

<sup>5</sup> The RAI form is a standardised tool used to assess the potential risk of harm posed by a client on probation if a further offence was to be committed.

facilitator, who will explain in detail the purpose and content of the programme and the expected levels of participants' engagement and participation. The offender and facilitator will sign a contract detailing the conditions necessary for inclusion in the programme. A signed copy of this contract will be given to the offender and a copy retained by the facilitator. Each would-be participant is also required to read and sign an agreement on disclosure and confidentiality.

Given the programme's philosophy with regard to the strategy of choices, it is essential that prospective participants give their fully informed consent to participate on the programme: informed choice is at the core of each stage of the programme and is viewed as central to motivating significant and lasting change away from offending and violence.

### **Programme delivery: Roles and responsibilities**

An assistant chief officer (ACO) within the PBNI has operational responsibility for the delivery of the programme. The ACO is required to have a sound working knowledge of the demands of the CSCP for both staff referring participants to the programme and those involved in its delivery. The ACO is also responsible for taking the strategic decisions necessary to ensure the successful implementation of the programme.

The programme manager supervises those staff who deliver the CSCP. He or she ensures the proper allocation of staff and other resources as required, including making all practical and logistical arrangements for group sessions. It is also the responsibility of the programme manager to facilitate the staff appraisal process and, in particular, to identify training needs relating to the delivery of the programme. It is intended that the programme manager will liaise closely with the treatment manager with respect to the competency and performance of the programme facilitators.

It is essential that the treatment manager has a detailed knowledge of CSC principles and programme content and is fully trained in its delivery. The treatment manager's primary responsibilities include providing immediate support and guidance to programme facilitators in achieving best practice, and assisting in session preparation, debriefing and delivery, as necessary, for ongoing programme sessions and in the development of the participants' individual competency development

plans. It is also the responsibility of the treatment manager to ensure that programme integrity is maintained throughout all aspects of delivery. Furthermore, the treatment manager is tasked with convening regular meetings with facilitators and the probation officers who have overall responsibility for supervising participants' orders. The purpose of this is to provide ongoing support and training and to assist in the assessment of participant engagement and progress in relation to the allocation of programme credits. Finally, the treatment manager will assist and support facilitators to make decisions, in consultation with the programme manager, with regard to the day-to-day running of the programme, particularly where difficult practice issues arise.

It goes without saying that the programme facilitators will have been fully trained in the philosophy and methods of the CSCP. Three facilitators will be assigned to each programme, with two running the group sessions and the third acting in a back-up capacity to assist with the delivery of sessions as required. Facilitators trained to deliver the programme will have previous experience of working with high-risk offenders and delivering cognitive-behavioural programmes. Facilitators are required to meet regularly with the treatment manager to discuss programme issues and their experiences of and performances in delivering the programme. Trained facilitators, including those not directly involved in delivering ongoing group sessions, will be required to carry out pre-sentence assessments for prospective participants. As mentioned previously, participants are also required to participate in individual sessions, and these too are delivered by facilitators trained in the process of CSC.

### **Piloting cognitive self-change in the community: Some preliminary reflections**

Since the PBNI's CSCP in the community is at the pilot stage, the accompanying evaluation process is intended to provide information relevant to treatment outcomes and effectiveness. The evaluation will also consider in detail how effectively the existing programme has been adapted for delivery in the community. Without wishing to pre-empt the outcome of this evaluation, it has become apparent that while the overall philosophy, process and content of the CSCP are amenable for use

within a community context, there have been a number of challenges from a programme management perspective.

The CSCP is a programme designed for offenders who are assessed as posing an increased likelihood of reoffending in a violent manner that will likely result in serious injury to a victim were this to occur. As such, in terms of the responsivity principle, which tells us that treatment resources should be targeted at the highest risk offenders, the CSCP is intensive and completion can only be achieved through regular attendance over an extended period of time. On more than one occasion an offender has been assessed as suitable for participation in the CSCP and has agreed to attend as an additional requirement of the order, only to choose to withdraw from the programme (when the reality of the commitment required becomes apparent during initial attendance) and return to prison to serve the remainder of the sentence, rather than proceed on the programme in the community.

Furthermore, a number of participants have commenced the programme and have progressed through the first few blocks, including being able to identify their 'risk thinking' and outline new attitudes and beliefs that will lead them away from further violence and offending. However, what has proved challenging for them is being able to implement this new thinking and associated behavioural change against a backdrop of family, friends and acquaintances who may themselves be involved in offending behaviour or who expect the participant to remain the same. In this respect, it is important not to underestimate the status and sense of identity and self-esteem that many offenders, particularly violent offenders, derive from their behaviour and reputation. Offenders participating in prison-based CSCPs face a similar dilemma, with the difference being that they are able to rehearse and practice the skills and new thinking within an environment that arguably offers fewer opportunities to falter, than is the case for participants in the community. Accordingly, a level of support for participants not usually required by those in offending-behaviour programmes is a must within the CSCP.

The overall management structure that the PBNi put in place for the pilot programme has been adequate in many respects, although, again, running the CSCP in the community has brought with it unique challenges. It is essential that operational systems are in place that support the resourcing of the programme at every level. These must include not only providing ongoing training and support for facilitators and programme and treatment managers, but also making information

about the programme available to staff and managers who may not be directly involved in either the assessment, delivery or evaluation stages.

Finally, given the nature of the programme in terms of intensity and the potential risk posed by clients assessed as suitable for inclusion, a model for participant supervision and programme delivery akin to that of the PBNI's Community Sexual Offending Group Programme is being considered as the ideal. Most significantly, this would include having a dedicated CSCP delivery team, as opposed to the existing arrangement whereby facilitators are drawn from teams where it is expected that they will continue to discharge other responsibilities not related to the CSCP.

To conclude, the PBNI's pilot of the CSCP in the community has been running for just over one year and represents an ambitious project that has thrown up some unexpected challenges along the way. However, there is an ever-increasing need to supervise high-risk offenders in the community and the CSCP represents as appropriate and effective an evidence-based treatment method as is currently available (see, for example, Henning and Frueh 1996). It is envisaged that the lessons learned from the pilot will prove invaluable within the broader context of supervising violent offenders in the community and of public protection in Northern Ireland.

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