

A Place for Motivational Interviewing in Probation?

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Summary: Motivational interviewing (MI) was developed by Miller in the early 1980s. From the beginning MI emphasised the counterproductive nature of the confrontational intervention models that were well established in the addiction field at that time. This article briefly outlines the key ideas that underpin the MI approach before looking at the possible place for this approach within the framework of the criminal justice system. Three questions are considered:

1. Is MI compatible with the philosophy, ethos and approach of the probation services in Ireland?
2. Does MI fit with the 'what works' movement in probation?
3. What is the position regarding the diffusion of MI within probation services?

Keywords: Motivational interviewing, behaviour change, addiction.

Motivational interviewing and the wheel of change

In 1983 two influential articles transformed the face of treatment in addiction. These articles were greeted with interest and support, perhaps benefiting from the experiences of the ground-breaking but poorly received work almost a decade earlier on alternatives to abstinence (Sobell and Sobell 1974).

Prochaska and DiClemente (1983) published their findings on a study of smoking cessation. Based on their research, they developed the notion of a wheel of change. They purported that participants in their research had experienced change not as a one-off event but rather as a cycle. They developed a six-stage model of change which highlights the need to

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move from a point where change is not even under consideration (pre-contemplation) to consideration of the possible need to change (contemplation), to consideration of the importance of the decision to change (preparation), to the change itself (action) to maintaining the change (maintenance). The model also expands on the concept of relapse and presents it as one of the stages of change. Perhaps one of the most useful notions derived from the wheel of change relates to recognition of the need to assess readiness to change. It is this concern with helping clients to move forward with positive change in their lives that provides a link to motivational interviewing (MI) strategies.

While Prochaska and DiClemente (1983) explored the readiness on the part of an individual in relation to the change process, Miller (1983) was concerned with the client's level of motivation to change. Miller's work proposes a model of working with problem drinkers by identifying and increasing their motivation for change; this controversial approach to working in addiction challenged the more confrontational techniques of the time. He emphasises the importance of empathising with problem drinkers, avoiding confrontation in order to engage clients in a change process. He considers that resistance and ambivalence towards change are normal. He further suggests that resistance is a result of the interaction between clients and workers and so can be reduced by the adoption of non-confrontational language and approach by the worker. The expanded ideas of change offered in the stages model (Prochaska and DiClemente 1983) supported the intervention strategies inherent in MI by providing a compatible theoretical understanding of change applicable in addiction that moved beyond privileging abstinence.

Miller and Rollnick's seminal work on the approach was first produced in 1991 and further refined in 2002. Miller and Rollnick define MI as 'a client-centred, directive method for enhancing intrinsic motivation to change by exploring and resolving ambivalence' (2002, p. 25). It is important to note that beyond the actual technique employed, there is now seen to be a 'spirit' to MI. Fundamental to the success of MI are core commitments to the need for collaboration, evocation and autonomy (2002, p. 35). Miller and Rollnick also describe four general principles of MI: express empathy, develop discrepancy, roll with resistance and support self-efficacy (2002, p. 36). In order to achieve this non-confrontational relationship with the client the MI approach employs a number of basic interviewing strategies, which are presented as phase one and phase two techniques:

- Phase one: Ask open questions, listen reflectively, affirm, summarise and elicit change talk (2002, pp. 65–84).
- Phase two: Recapitulate, ask key questions and give information and advice (at the client's request or with the client's permission). This phase also involves negotiating the change plan through goal setting, considering change options and eliciting commitment to change (2002, pp. 129–139).

These skills will be very familiar to probation officers in Ireland, thanks to the comprehensive training in interpersonal skills provided through social work professional training and/or in-service training. This familiarity generally means that probation officers are likely to embrace the MI approach, although, interestingly, it can also cause some problems.

Harper and Hardy (2000) report on a study in Middlesex Probation Area where a sample of probation officers were selected and trained in MI. Use of MI was self-assessed. The study reported that ‘the mean score for competency fluctuated as training progressed. From an initial mean of five, scores fell to 3.73 but increased after training to 6.60’ (p. 397). This trend seems to reflect a learning curve in developing proficiency in MI. At the outset officers were clearly very confident in their ability to deliver MI (presumably based on their experience with the basic skills as outlined above), however as they gained further awareness of the skills involved in increasing fidelity to the model, their confidence declined. With training, support and practice their confidence was later restored and enhanced. What is particularly interesting about this study is that the probation officers who were not trained in MI considered that it was ‘nothing new’ (p. 399).

Harper and Hardy conclude that MI may be ‘particularly suited to the probation setting’ and report that those trained in MI listed among the advantages of the approach that ‘it was easily integrated into current practice and it enhanced learning from previous college courses’ (p. 399). These factors imply that MI does have a place in probation services. The cautionary note is that, due to the familiarity of some of the basic skills employed, interventions may appear to be MI adherent when in fact they do not convey the spirit of MI. In order to ensure fidelity to MI the proponents of the approach recommend that MI interventions be evaluated not just for their effectiveness in motivating change talk in the clients but also for adherence to MI on the part of the worker.

Compatibility between Irish probation services and MI

Miller wrote in 1999:

More than a decade ago, applications of motivational interviewing broke out of the addiction field and have been spreading into new and interesting areas: cardiovascular rehabilitation, diabetes management, family preservation, pain management, public health interventions and the prevention of HIV infection. The most recent surge of interest, in North America at least, is coming from a field where I least expected it: the criminal justice system. We are receiving calls for training from jails and prisons, courts, probation and parole departments, community corrections, diversion and pre-release programs (p. 1).

In Ireland there has been an interest in MI in various social work agencies since the late 1980s. However the reluctant engagement of addiction services in the approach probably hindered the uptake by other services such as probation. Given the current interest in MI it is useful to consider whether there is indeed a fit between the MI spirit and the mission of probation.

Since some of the elements in the spirit of MI – collaboration, evocation and autonomy – may be seen to undermine the argument in favour of MI in probation, it is important to address these points first. There are clearly some challenges in developing a collaborative relationship with an offender. MI promotes the view that it is crucial for the worker to provide an atmosphere that is conducive rather than coercive to change (Clark 2000). The alternative is seen as the adoption of the confrontational approach, which is the antithesis of MI spirit. Evocation refers to the belief that the resources and motivation for change reside within the individual. This is consistent with the value position of both the Probation Service (PS) and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI). Intrinsic motivation for change is enhanced by drawing on the client's own perceptions, goals and values.

Of the three elements of MI spirit, autonomy is probably the one which offers the greatest challenge. In order to adopt the spirit of MI, the worker affirms the client's right and capacity for self-direction and facilitates informed choice (Miller and Rollnick 2002). The PBNI's vision statement purports as a value that 'everyone, including

offenders ought to accept personal responsibility for their behaviour' (www.pbni.org.uk). It is perhaps easier therefore to see how the autonomy issue is consistent with probation settings if one considers that alongside the right to make choices comes the responsibility for one's own behaviour resulting from those choices. This contemplation of one's situation reflects the way MI supports the importance of clients taking responsibility for themselves and their actions.

The mission statement of the PS is to challenge offending behaviour (www.probation.ie), however it is obvious that even with the full authority and power of the criminal justice system it is not possible to make an offender change. Readiness to change can be furthered through the implementation of negative consequences but even mandated clients can refuse to co-operate and/or change. The best chance to optimise the likelihood of change in MI is seen to be collaboration, which is closely aligned to evocation and recognition of the client's ultimate autonomy. Challenging offending behaviour in MI terms would be an acceptable goal as long as it was not adopted as the intervention in itself. As Miller and Rollnick clarify, MI considers 'confrontation to be the goal, not the counsellor style' (1991, p. 13). The PBNI's mission statement is more in tune with the ideals of the spirit of MI when it states that 'Our best contribution to public protection and to community wellbeing is to help offenders change their behaviour and reduce their offending'. The spirit of MI is reflected in the PBNI's core ideals, for example:

- We respect the rights of every citizen.
- Offenders must take responsibility for their behaviour and its consequences.
- Everyone can change.

This belief in treating people with respect, accepting the individual's capacity for change and desiring to 'bring out the best in people' is also evident in the guiding principles of the PS.

While MI does not address directly the sometimes complex nature of the control versus care roles of probation, Miller and Rollnick (2002, pp. 173–174) do offer some ethical guidance. They suggest that it is consistent with MI spirit to deal with this dual role with openness and honesty, clarifying and negotiating possible conflicts in the interests of promoting positive change. Another concern that may emerge from the care/control debate relates to the notion of MI as a client-centred approach. While MI is fundamentally centred on the client, it is also directive; this means that while adhering to the spirit of listening to

clients, MI also elicits and reinforces statements of concern and change talk (Ginsburg *et al.* 2002, p. 344).

Probation, social work and MI

The two probation services in Ireland have a tradition of alignment with social work services. Wahab (2005) makes the case for MI as an intervention appropriate for social work practice concerned with behaviour change and adds that 'motivational interviewing is an exciting intervention model for numerous social work settings due to its consistency with core social work values, ethics, resources and evidence-based practice' (p. 45). The belief in the ability of clients to change, the importance of building a respectful relationship and the need to adopt the most effective approaches in helping clients to deal with their offending behaviour mark a consistency between MI and probation spirit and outcome aspirations.

Probation officers must deal with a wide range of offending behaviours and so need a range of responses. MI is only one such response. Motivation for change is an undeniable aspect of success in engaging and retaining drug users in treatment. Probation officers are often in the front line of assessing and recommending interventions for clients with drug-use problems and it is reasonable that they would look to progressive movements in the addiction field for direction on how to deal with their drug-using clients. In fact McNally (2001), commenting on the strong relationship between specialised drug treatment services and probation in the US, remarked that although details were not then available 'in Ireland experience would suggest that a significant proportion of referrals [to drug treatment] do come through the Court, Prison and Probation Services routes' (p. 8). Hence the close links between drug-use problems and the probation population is the first and perhaps strongest case for developing MI within probation.

One of the strengths of MI is that it is applicable in many situations since its primary focus is on engaging clients in the intervention process in order to maximise the possibilities of change. Any approach which will assist in getting clients to avail of the services within probation is to be welcomed. MI is an option when trying to make an early intervention in order to keep someone out of the penal system. It can also be used when enhancing motivation to stay with the treatment system and to engage

positively with the help on offer. Hence employing MI to engage and also retain clients may be sufficient in itself or may be the basis of recruiting clients into more intensive interventions. It is important to consider the success of MI in promoting adherence to treatment, which has made the approach attractive to many in the broader medical field as well as in the addiction area. MI therefore has applicability in working with clients to try to support them in their adherence to specific rehabilitative or treatment programmes.

In general the examples that are available support MI's usefulness. They remind us that MI is not just about final outcomes but is also concerned with change and motivation for change as a continuing process. McMurran and Ward (2004) comment that 'motivating offenders to change in therapy is an important aspect of effective offender treatment, yet despite this, offenders' motivation to change has received little close attention in the academic and professional literature' (p. 295). Although Garland and Dougher examined the application of MI in the treatment of sex offenders in 1991, the diffusion of MI throughout the criminal justice system is clearly taking time. Even today, over 20 years after the MI model was first introduced, there is little evidence of its direct application across the range of probation work.

MI and 'what works'

Two aspects of the relationship between MI and 'what works' will be considered here. The premise behind the 'what works' movement is that interventions should be based on research evidence of success. This premise is fraught with difficulties: What sort of evidence is acceptable? Whose evidence is most influential? What intervention is being assessed? What outcomes are measured? In spite of these difficulties, the case for MI as a researched intervention will be outlined. The second aspect of the argument relates to the connections between the alternative established interventions in the 'what works' literature and MI.

MI and probation share an investment in ongoing evaluation of interventions to establish best practice based on evidence. The 'what works' movement, while laudable, cannot be accepted uncritically. When it comes to the question of what works, Ginsburg *et al.* (2002) warn that it is not enough to ask simply 'what works?' but rather we must ask 'what can be done to help offenders engage and remain in programs that focus

on changing criminal behavior?' (p. 334). Clark (2005), in discussing MI and probation, raises the concern that probation in the US may have become too focused on the process – not the relationship process between offenders and probation officers but rather the bureaucratic process – and suggests that the criminal justice system in the US 'has come to believe that it is in the *probation business* rather than the *behaviour change business*' (p. 2). In a review of practice skills in probation, McNeill *et al.* (2005) identify the following common elements in successful interventions that lead to behaviour change: 'development of accurate empathy, respect or warmth and therapeutic genuineness, establishment of a therapeutic relationship or working alliance and an approach that is person centred or collaborative' (p. 5). They suggest that these are features of probation work in practice, where 'early attempts to apply "what works" perhaps underestimated the importance of interpersonal engagement' (p. 7). Given these provisos, how does MI fare in relation to 'what works'?

Saunders *et al.* (1995) recount that MI at the outset, as with many other new ideas, was criticised for its lack of supportive scientific evidence. Over twenty years later those involved in the development and promotion of the approach have certainly tackled the issue of providing evidence on MI effectiveness. The outcome of research has not always been as positive as MI supporters might have anticipated. For example in Project MATCH (1997), the researcher sought to establish difference in terms of success in matching substance users with three different interventions: motivational enhancement, cognitive-behavioural and twelve-step-based approaches. Little difference was found. Ginsburg *et al.* (2002) do report that:

... secondary analysis of findings from Project MATCH (1997) have begun to suggest that the authoritarian approach to promoting behavioural change is less effective than those that target internal motivation. One of the few matching variables that emerged from Project MATCH suggests that relative to other interventions used in the study, motivational enhancement therapy (NIAAA 1995) is well suited for use with clients who are initially angry (p. 339).

Following the disappointment with Project MATCH results, Burke *et al.* (2002) suggest that it is important to note if an approach is strictly MI or if it is an adaptation of MI; in the case of an adaptation, discrepancies

with the MI model have to be considered in judging the implications for effectiveness of MI. They present a comprehensive review of MI and adapted MI interventions and overall they find support for the efficacy of MI. This question of fidelity to MI is significant both in the evaluation of MI as an intervention strategy and, as mentioned earlier, in terms of successfully training workers to employ MI in practice.

Andrews and Bonta (2003) state that 'in our own field of criminal justice, evidence-based practice as outlined by criminologists has recommended that justice staff be responsive to motivational issues with offenders' (quoted in Clark 2005, p. 1). McMurran (2002) and Chui and Nellis (2003) also offer arguments for the importance of addressing client motivation. In their analysis of the importance of motivation in treatment, Longshore and Teruya (2006) explore the relationship between motivation and retention in drug treatment and conclude that 'readiness and resistance should both be assessed among clients entering treatment, especially when the referral is coercive' (p. 179). This supports earlier research which found that motivational enhancement and other brief interventions 'result in decreases in substance-related negative consequences and problems, decrements in substance use and increased treatment engagement' (O'Leary *et al.* 2004, p. 63).

Harper and Hardy (2000) reported on research with probation officers employing MI in their supervision of substance-using clients. They found that 'there were more statistically significant improvements in the attitudinal scales amongst offenders whose officers were trained in the technique compared to officers who were not trained in motivational interviewing' (p. 393). They also found that MI was 'more effective than non-MI work in bringing about change in offenders who had drug and alcohol problems' (p. 399).

It is fair to say that the jury is still out on MI. The research base is expanding but may be complicated by adaptations of MI and by the application of MI to such a variety of client settings. More setting-based research is required to substantiate the role of MI in probation. There have been some contributions considering MI within probation: McNeill *et al.* (2005) briefly note in their review of practice skills in probation that MI does have a place and they see it as being consistent with the role of probation. It is certainly worth serious consideration, not just because of promising outcomes in terms of changing behaviour but also because of its effectiveness in engaging and retaining clients, even mandated clients, in treatment programmes that may offer alternative interventions as well.

While MI itself has not been identified within the ‘what works’ literature, there is evidence supporting ‘programmes focused on changing behaviour’ (Utting and Vennard 2000, p. 28), which is the focus of MI. Utting and Vennard also cite the effectiveness of ‘multiple service programmes combining a number of different approaches’ (p. 28), which, again, is very consistent with MI and its role in engaging and retaining clients in treatment interventions. Cognitive-behavioural interventions appear to dominate in terms of the ‘what works’ literature presented by McGuire (1995). Although MI does not claim to be a cognitive-behavioural intervention, it definitely claims to focus on changing behaviour and views the most effective method of bringing about this change as working with the motivational levels of clients (Miller and Rollnick 2002). Increasing motivation for change involves working with the complex attitudes of clients towards their own behaviour, the consequences of that behaviour and their own goals. Helping clients to face the inconsistencies between these elements is central to MI. It also involves exploring ambivalence (Miller and Rollnick 2002) and cognitive dissonance (Miller 1983). Hence MI works at both a cognitive and a behavioural level. This does not automatically warrant elevating MI to the ‘what works’ cognitive-behavioural realm, but it certainly supports MI as a serious contender for a place.

What next for MI and probation?

In 1991 Miller and Rollnick ‘considered what would happen if motivational interviewing became a routine response for work with criminal offenders’ (p. 6). In 2005 the PS has achieved this goal: the internal staff training and development unit of the PS has trained personnel who are equipped to deliver MI training and routinely run MI training for probation officers. This important step forward marks the organisation’s recognition of the usefulness of MI and offers the possibility of ongoing support for those who wish to practice and enhance their MI skills.

Leckie (1990) suggests three issues that should be considered when exploring new ideas in social work practice: role legitimacy, role adequacy and role support. Using this as a framework for progressing MI in probation, it seems clear that probation officers do have a legitimate role in employing MI as part of their repertoire of interventions. It is up

to the probation organisation as a whole to provide the necessary training and ongoing supervision to enable officers to implement MI in an effective manner and to ensure a sense of competence/adequacy in its staff. Finally, in addressing the issue of role support, it is important to realise that this involves more than training. As Clark (2005) points out, MI can work most effectively when the organisation as a whole – in this case the criminal justice system – adopts a philosophy which is compatible with the spirit of MI. Referring to the care and control debate within criminal justice, he suggests that it is best not to opt for an either/or position but to embrace a both/and stance, thus facilitating probation officers to ‘examine how to impose sanctions *and* build helpful relationships’ in targeting the goal of behaviour change (p. 6). This is a much bigger challenge than simply training staff in effective techniques. It is about the ethos and spirit of probation itself.

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