A Reply to Colm Power

Sam Lewis, Peter Raynor and David Smith*

We are grateful to the Editors of the Irish Probation Journal for inviting us to respond to Colm Power’s critique of our research on the Irish on probation in England. In the following response we have tried to maintain a balanced and respectful tone as well as a concern with accuracy and veracity, as we have in all our work. Readers of the IPJ would quite rightly be bored by a detailed point-by-point response to Dr Power’s critique, so we will be brief, dealing with specific points only when they are directly relevant to his claims about the quality of our research and the validity of its findings. Dr Power’s central argument appears to be this: our findings did not coincide with his preferred beliefs, and the explanation for this must be that our findings were wrong. Our findings were wrong because our methodology was wrong: we failed to read the right things or talk to the right people. Indeed, we researched the wrong subject, and were the wrong people to be doing the research in the first place. We supposedly admitted the inadequacy of the research ourselves. What follows is our response to these claims.

On Dr Power’s central argument, we need say only that the failure of our findings to support his beliefs does not necessarily imply that our findings are wrong. It would be equally logical to conclude that it is Dr Power’s beliefs that are wrong.

Turning to our methodology, Dr Power first complains that our background reading was inadequate, and cites the work of Hillyard as an

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example of the kind of reading that we ought to have done. In fact our report mentions the importance of the Prevention of Terrorism Act as a source of possible discrimination against Irish people in Britain; and the concession one of us made that attitudes might take longer to change than political relationships was merely a statement of the obvious.

More seriously, Dr Power complains that we talked to the wrong people, or failed to talk to the right ones. The wrong people include the wrong kind of probation officers, whose views count for less than those of the ‘two highly experienced’ Manchester probation officers cited by Dr Power, who apparently have a privileged status of veracity and legitimacy. Since the study was concerned with Irish experiences of probation, the only possible approach was to seek interviewees through the probation service. Dr Power is oddly suspicious of the (mainly Irish) probation officers who enabled us to contact as many interviewees as we did, on the grounds that they may have selected interviewees with favourable views of probation. He also suggests that we should have held the interviews somewhere other than in probation offices (a tricky proposition on a wet day in Atherton, which incidentally is further from the centre of Manchester than Dr Power seems to think). In fact we say in the article that, in common with other ‘consumer’ surveys of probation, our sample is almost certainly skewed towards those with reasonably positive views of the service. Dr Power sympathises with probation officers who did not help with the research, as he seems to do with the former worker at Irish Community Care in Manchester who declined to help Dr Lewis. Dr Power accuses us of not contacting enough experts outside the probation service and then acknowledges that we were refused help by one such source of expertise.

Dr Power says that we ‘coyly conceded’ (Why ‘coyly’? Why ‘conceded’?) that we conducted only three interviews in Merseyside. For the record, we went to considerable lengths to secure interviews in both Greater Manchester and Merseyside, going outside formal probation channels, in Merseyside in particular, when it became clear that the information system in the probation service was having difficulty in identifying eligible interviewees (an embarrassingly recurrent topic of our meetings with the steering group that oversaw the research). Our efforts included sending letters and flyers for potential interviewees to all probation offices; requesting the chief officers of each area to email all their staff asking them to support the research; going through the local branches of NAPO (National Association of Probation Officers) to seek
members’ support for the research; broadening the base of the research to include offenders on licence as well as those on probation; contacting Irish Community Care in Manchester (see above for the outcome); contacting the Action Group for Irish Youth (whose response in contrast was very helpful); interviewing Harry Fletcher of NAPO, a longstanding advocate of the need to take discrimination against Irish people seriously; and interviewing Dr Power. Paradoxically, in view of his disparagement of our sources, Dr Power is more extensively cited than any other source in both the report and the *IPJ* article.

According to Dr Power, it was the poor quality of our methodology and of the resultant data that led to our finding (which he evidently believes cannot be true) that our interviewees had relatively positive experiences of the probation service, while reporting discrimination in other parts of the criminal justice system. But, as we made clear in the *IPJ* article, this finding is in line with those of other studies, both of predominantly white (and non-Irish) and of black and Asian probationers. Dr Power evidently thinks that in this, as in much else, the experience of Irish people must be different from, and worse than, anyone else’s. As we made clear at the start and conclusion of our paper, we reject this view of the Irish in Britain as uniquely victimised and disadvantaged. This is why the Census and other data we used from beyond the field of criminal justice are relevant to our argument.

Dr Power is especially agitated about our lack of attention to the particular situation of Irish Travellers. In fact we interviewed more Travellers than we expected to, and paid specific attention to their experiences in both the report and the *IPJ* article. We suggest that Travellers may be liable to receive community penalties for offences which would attract a lower level of intervention if committed by non-Travellers, and note the discriminatory effects on Travellers of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. Dr Power’s ‘two highly experienced probation officers’ might be surprised, but we found no evidence that pre-sentence reports on Travellers were worse than those on settled Irish people or that Travellers were disadvantaged in their access to community sentences; and Travellers’ accounts of their experiences of probation were at least as positive as those of non-Traveller interviewees. Of course our numbers were small, and we do not have Dr Power’s record of research with Travellers, but it is not reasonable that our evidence should simply be discounted against that of the two officers interviewed by Dr Power. The two officers are of course
entitled to their views, but the weight of evidence available to us pointed in a different direction.

Dr Power says that ‘Dr Lewis admitted that the research was inadequate and that the report itself would not be published’. This is misleading at best. Dr Lewis told Dr Power that the research would have been improved if the number of interviewees had been greater, again a statement of the obvious. Self-critical and reflective researchers are always liable to think, when a project comes to an end, that it could have been better. And in fact the report has been published, in the sense that it has been widely distributed by the Greater Manchester Probation Area and was included on a CD-ROM that formed part of the pack for delegates at the conference attended by Dr Power. The decision on if and how to publish it was not ours but the research funders’, and it was because we knew it was unlikely to be made generally available that we wrote a substantial summary of it for the *IPJ*. There is nothing in the report about which we feel coy or embarrassed, and it is untrue that much of it ‘reads like a series of excuses as to why [our] . . . methodology failed in practice’: only four of its 61 pages (excluding introductory material and references) deal with methodological problems.

We agree with Dr Power that it is a pity that there was no time at the conference for discussion of our presentation. As professional academics we welcome debate about and even criticism of our work when it is done in an evidence-based way and promotes the advancement of knowledge and understanding. Delegates would then have been able to judge our research in the light of Dr Power’s critique and his characterisation of his position as empirically based and ours as ideological. We would have welcomed the chance to defend our work and are confident that we could have done so convincingly.