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Good practice in eliciting disclosures from sex offenders

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Abstract  Eliciting useful and reliable disclosures from sex offenders is imperative for effective risk management. Responsiveness to accurate self-report by sexual offenders of their risky thinking and problematic behaviours ensures that offenders are dealt with at the correct risk level. This requires practitioners to use a range of constructive strategies and techniques for eliciting disclosures. Drawing on a recent study that investigated the nature and usefulness of disclosures, this paper explores the inherent challenges and identifies best practice in this important area of work.

Keywords  Sex offenders; disclosure; risk; probation; police

Introduction

The risk assessment and supervision of sexual offenders is central to their effective management in the community and protection of the public. Both researchers and practitioners have recognised that accurate self-report by sexual offenders of their risky thinking, grooming and problematic behaviours is essential to making accurate risk assessments and in developing well-matched risk management plans (Gannon, Beech, & Ward, 2007). Practitioners therefore have a key role in eliciting self-report disclosures from offenders. This paper uses a recent investigation of sex offender disclosures prior to the introduction of mandatory polygraph pilots in two English regions, to explore good practice techniques in eliciting accurate and useful disclosures. The study was a preliminary baseline investigation in a programme of research to evaluate the mandatory polygraph testing of sex offenders and was designed to provide in-depth understanding of the nature of disclosures, and the conditions under which disclosures are made and used under normal (pre-polygraph) supervision arrangements. A total of 56 criminal justice practitioners participated in the study, including probation officers, police officers, treatment providers and approved-premises key workers from two regions in England. In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to explore practitioner definitions and examples of disclosure, the usefulness of types of disclosure and how disclosures can impact upon supervision arrangements. A summary of the study was published in September 2010 (Wood, Kemshall, Westwood, Narey, & Logue, 2010). The study is limited in terms of its relatively small sample, and the findings reviewed herein are not representative of the views of all criminal justice practitioners. However, this paper provides interesting perspectives on disclosure by exploring

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the most challenging practice issues for practitioners, and presents best-practice guidance for eliciting self-disclosures from sex offenders.

What is a disclosure?

In the context of managing sex offenders, practitioners were asked to provide a definition of disclosure and to explore what types of information are disclosed to them. Offender managers described disclosures as revealing new information about an offender's risk or offending profile. Disclosures may provide information about "something you don’t know" (police officer) and generally occur in two different ways, as follows.

- **Deliberate self-reports** are those made by offenders where they knowingly volunteer information that is previously not known. Disclosures of this nature may concern "revelations" about risky behaviour, thoughts, feelings and fantasies or other information that has been offered voluntarily by the offender. They may be triggered by the questions that an offender manager asks, or they may be reported in the general course of a supervision relationship at the instigation of the offender; and

- **Unintended self-reports** are those that occur without the offender being fully aware that they have made a disclosure of significance. These tend to be characterised as a "slip-up" made by an offender where he/she reveals information about activities, behaviour or contact that he/she may not have deliberately and consciously wanted criminal justice practitioners to know about. An example of this form was illustrated by a man who had a curfew condition that prevented him from leaving the house before 9 a.m. In passing conversation, he mentioned the length of a queue at the local newsagent at 8 a.m.

Types of disclosure

The range of examples of disclosure identified by practitioners were grouped and four “types” of disclosure emerged. In brief, these concerned:

- **risky behaviours and situations**—for example, about their compliance and adherence to licence conditions; risky and offence-related behaviours; generally risky situations; gaining access to victims; and issues around community re-integration;

- **historical information**—including historical information about past attitudes, motivations and behaviours; family and social factors; past offending and behaviour patterns;

- **thoughts, feelings and fantasies**—including risky fantasies, thoughts, feelings, rehearsals and plans. This can include triggers for offending, and feelings (such as stress) that can take offenders into offending; and

- **sexual behaviour**—including current and historical “sexual behaviours”.

The majority of specific case examples offered during interviews concerned a disclosure relating to risky behaviour or situations, suggesting that they were the most easily identified and perhaps most common disclosures. Disclosures were rarely "bombshells" (probation officer), and usually provided small but significant details. It is also important to recognise that disclosure types are interconnected; for example, disclosures about thoughts, feelings and fantasies are linked to disclosures about risky situations. Disclosures about historical circumstances can often aid practitioners in understanding “trigger feelings” or in how offenders rehearse and plan offending.
This study found that the types of disclosures that practitioners identified as the most useful were those that enabled them to assess risk more accurately in order to manage offenders more effectively. Specifically, those that:

- enabled practitioners to gain important information about offence-related concerns, e.g. grooming behaviours, thinking patterns and information on how victims are sought, found and targeted (Grubin, 2002);
- assisted practitioners in helping offenders to develop self risk management strategies, including avoidance behaviours, and in identifying escalating risk and changes in dynamic risk factors (Council of Sex Offender Treatment, n.d.; Grubin, 2003, 2009); and
- helped to strengthen the monitoring function of supervision by better understanding past offending, triggers for offending and victim targeting strategies.

**Strategies to elicit disclosures**

The study enabled the authors to identify a range of best-practice strategies and techniques from evidence gathered during interviews with practitioners and sex offenders. Essentially, these include:

- the skills to build positive and effective relationships within a safe and permissive environment for disclosure;
- expertise in appropriate interviewing and questioning techniques;
- having specialist knowledge of risk assessment and management of sex offenders, and to be well-informed about the offender and victim issues;
- knowing how to assess the significance of disclosures made (and linking to/matching to risk assessment/management); and
- the capability to enable offenders to recognise the benefits of disclosing.

These will be explored in more detail below.

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**The skills to build a positive and effective relationship within a safe and permissive environment for disclosure**

A recurring theme in the study was the importance of the relationship between supervisor and offender. This is in keeping with previous research that has highlighted the importance of effective relationships as key to increasing compliance in offenders (Prochaska & Levesque, 2002; Wood & Kemshall, 2007). Marshall, for example, asserts:

> A critical assumption underlying this whole process is that people are most likely to take risks to admit to acts they believe others view as repugnant, if they know they are not going to be rejected and if they are assured that support and help will continue. The more clients are treated with respect, the more self-confidence they will feel and the more self-confident they are, the more likely they are to have the courage to admit to heinous crimes. (1994, p. 561)

Key themes such as “trust”, “honesty” and “confidence” were cited by practitioners as important elements in developing an effective working relationship with an offender. This is reinforced by the work of Marshall (2005), who found that four features of a practitioner’s style accounted for between 30% and 60% of the variance in beneficial effects with treatment. The four features that facilitated changes were: empathy, warmth, directiveness and rewardingness.
Given the magnitude of variance accounted for, this suggests that these attributes are arguably more important than any specific intervention. This is supported by more recent work by Marshall and Burton (2010), which again emphasised the importance of warmth, support and the quality of the relationship.

The creation of a safe and permissive environment for disclosure was also seen as important. This could include the physical environment, with police offender managers eliciting disclosures during home visits, for example, because of the feelings of safety and comfort experienced by the offender. Process and relational issues were also important, including setting clear expectations of supervision including the limitations of confidentiality, fairness, positive and appropriate supervisory relationships with offenders, and a generally “pro-social” model of supervision and the modelling of pro-social values (see Trotter, 1999, 2004). Indeed, adherents of the Good Lives (GL) approach have made reference to the importance of the process and context of such work, specifying the importance of the style, attitudes and relational approach of practitioners toward their clients (Ward & Maruna, 2007). Positive interventions with offenders, including attention to key legitimate needs such as housing and employment, were characterised by a solution-focused approach (Berg & de Shazer, 1993). Practitioners were also able to describe and model “active and reflective listening” (Cherry, 2005) and were seen as important in developing an environment in which disclosures could be made. Such a stance also discouraged “roadblocks” to disclosure, including any signal that the practitioner is not listening, is disinterested or is unlikely to take the offender seriously (Gordon, quoted in Miller & Rollnick, 2002). Indeed, Trotter (2004) found that practitioners who had received training in listening and counselling skills achieved better outcomes, especially when clients believed that practitioners had tried to understand their point of view. Developing and maintaining an effective relationship within a safe and permissive environment is more likely to increase the likelihood of obtaining more significant disclosures. Practitioners reported that disclosures within this environment enabled them to work with offenders around particular issues or concerns. This resulted in more effective offence-focused discussion through the normal course of supervision without, as one practitioner put it, “automatically sticking them on a programme”.

Within the study there was a commonly shared view held by practitioners that a constructive relationship is something that develops over time. Particularly where information about sexual behaviour was sought, time and sensitive questions were needed to enable offenders to feel comfortable to disclose information. For example, one practitioner commented:

You can’t go straight into it, you have to progress it very slowly over a few sessions. It’s a delicate situation to ask a man [about sexual behaviour]... it is still a very emotive subject. (probation officer)

The importance of establishing rapport with sex offenders in order to encourage them to talk openly about their thoughts and activities was certainly in evidence as an element of good practice. Indeed, it is now generally recognised in the literature that direct, confrontational approaches to the treatment of sexual offenders will be likely to lead to increased resistance as opposed to change (Kear-Colwell & Pollack, 1997). In contrast, elements that constitute a positive, helping relationship, such as respect, support, emotional responsivity, positive reinforcement and the use of humour are seen as key (Marshall et al., 2003), and have been linked to improved coping skills, taking responsibility and accepting future risk (Fernandez, 1999). Without this rapport and the ability to build an effective relationship over time, the likelihood of eliciting meaningful disclosures was felt to be greatly diminished. However, there
was evidence from the study that not all practitioners were able to work in such a way; for example, one practitioner divulged:

I wonder if some probation officers are possibly not very comfortable with this work. So they may be antagonistic, not necessarily consciously, they are not openly doing that but they are giving off a message that clearly says I don’t like you. Well men are not going to disclose in those situations.

One of the issues cited was the levels of embarrassment and/or shock experienced by some practitioners upon hearing offence-related information. One probation officer talked about having observed interviews with colleagues who had “look shocked or sound shocked... some of the language [the offenders] used” which they felt indicated that “you’ve got a real value judgement and they’ll probably never tell you anything again”.

Although this was a challenge for some practitioners, the importance of having the confidence to talk about issues that others might find difficult was acknowledged, especially as these conversations could lead to relevant disclosures.

Practitioners’ reflections on positive engagement indicate the following may be useful:

- having specialist practitioners who actively choose to do this work, and gain a level of expertise (Lane Council of Government, 2003);
- undertaking regular training that addresses such issues;
- using peers/supervisors to discuss and work to resolve any issues. One probation officer described the immense support he received from talking through disclosures with colleagues and treatment programme tutors in order to help him make sense of the information disclosed; and
- promoting feelings of camaraderie and support among practitioners who maintain these caseloads (Lane Council of Government, 2003).

**Expertise in appropriate interviewing and questioning techniques**

Practitioners broadly characterised offenders as two types: those who were open and motivated to work on their offending behaviour, and those less motivated or manipulative. The view was that each “type” necessitated different strategies for the work to be most effective.

Direct questions were not considered appropriate for all offenders. Practitioners suggested that offenders who responded better to direct questions were those who had higher levels of motivation to change or had acknowledged the seriousness of their offence. Effective strategies that practitioners use to encourage disclosures for this type of offender included:

- stating to the offender that no disclosure would come as a shock, “you can tell me anything I’ve heard it all before”;
- asking straightforward questions: ‘which schools have you been past this week’;
- finding language with which both the offender and the supervisor felt comfortable; and
- helping offenders to identify motivations behind their offending in order for them to be vigilant of such factors again.

There were a number of examples offered about internet offenders who cited curiosity as a reason for looking at child pornography. Offenders were encouraged to explore their motivation further, and over time there was evidence that some would eventually disclose an attraction to children. Practitioners reported that they used more tactical
questioning/strategies where offenders provided evidence of denial or had responded negatively to direct questions. These included:

- looking for ways to elicit important information within a general conversation, because such information they felt was often hidden within everyday stories about an offender's life: “I'll ask them seemingly irrelevant questions about other stuff and then maybe they'll... tell you something in passing that makes you suspicious but if you jump on it straightaway they'll know and you'll back off... I'm more inclined to let it go for a few minutes and then come back in a roundabout sort of way” (probation officer);
- using a series of questions to probe for perceptions around sexual needs and sexual wants in order to encourage the offender to critically examine their own feelings and thoughts prior to offending. This can enable the offender to examine their current behaviours, especially around risky sexual activity in order to understand more clearly the trigger factors likely to lead to re-offending. Positive reinforcement for such constructive engagement, including positive reinforcement for disclosures is important, as is the overall reaction and response of the practitioner: “I never show that I'm angry... and I know I've had offenders who I've taken from other colleagues and they've said, oh I can tell you things because you don't get angry with me” (probation officer); and
- using particular tools; for example, personal diaries to encourage offenders to record feelings, their mood and general day-to-day activities. These diaries were then used as a prompt for discussion, and often generated more detailed information leading to possible disclosures teased out of seemingly innocuous conversations about everyday occurrences. Similarly, the use of risk assessment tools in one area had enabled practitioners to frame questions more effectively around dynamic risk factors and these were used regularly during supervision to examine an offender’s personal and social circumstances. Practitioners viewed these techniques as effective strategies in helping to prevent further offending.

However, it was also recognised that offenders can disclose selectively in order to demonstrate compliance, for example. Indeed, over-compliance was treated with a degree of cynicism:

We get phone calls almost daily to [let us know] I've changed my car, I've changed my phone number and you need it otherwise you won't be able to get in touch with me... We get concerned because some people like to be over-compliant... At some stage, they can say well you know it wasn't me because I used to tell you everything. (police offender manager)

Relationships could also be disclosed selectively. For example, a probation officer indicated that new relationships would be reported, but when asked about whether an offender had disclosed his/her previous history to the new partner, “they'll say ‘yes, it’s fine, I’ll bring you the contact details next week’, and then when next week comes they’ll say ‘oh it’s finished’”. Offenders were described variously as attempting to send practitioners on a “merry dance” (police officer), who “play the game well and know what they need to say... so they don’t get any more hassle” (probation officer). Disclosures about sexual behaviour and fantasies were rare, but when they did occur it was even more rare for offenders to admit that they engaged in illegal activities. A probation officer suggested they “draw a line and say ok, I know everything beyond that line is illegal but I’ll admit to anything up to it”. The prerequisite for self-reporting was seen as the offender’s own motivation and acceptance of an
offending identity. Offenders needed to be ready to “address problematic behaviour and beliefs” (probation officer), and those who exhibited high levels of denial or deceit tended to be less open about even their day-to-day activities.

The importance of specialist knowledge of risk assessment and management of sex offenders, and to be well informed about the offender and victim issues

Specialist knowledge on sexual offending and risk factors enabled practitioners to interpret the significance of disclosures. For example, practitioners using risk assessment tools were able to identify changes in dynamic risk factors from disclosures and respond accordingly. Specialist knowledge also enabled practitioners to identify grooming behaviours (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2007), and trigger factors for offending such as increased fantasies or changes in mood. Practitioners felt an acute responsibility to be alert to such disclosures, signs and triggers:

... so although things can appear to be quite insignificant obviously they’re not. Basically in terms of risk management, every piece of disclosure really is quite important and can build on a picture and obviously we have to use that to develop risk assessments as well. (probation officer)

This indicates that specialist practitioners are the most likely to both elicit useful disclosures and also be better placed to interpret and use them. An evaluation by the Lane Council of Government (2003) in the United States found that specialist officers needed to play a different role to their non-specialist colleagues. Specialist staff must pay greater attention to the offender’s daily life and habits and gain familiarity with the offender’s current attitudes and behaviours, thereby increasing the likelihood of eliciting frequent and reliable disclosures. In this evaluation and in our study, the following practices enhanced practitioners’ ability to monitor an offender’s behaviour and state of mind:

- the ability to talk openly about sexuality and sexual deviancy;
- detailed discussions of any contact the offender may have had with past or potential victims followed by verification of that information with the offender’s family or others in his/her support network; and
- open discussions with the offender regarding his/her progress in identifying and avoiding pre-offence planning and behaviours and his/her understanding and use of relapse prevention strategies.

Historical information about an offender, including previous and current offences, was seen as vital contextual detail for effectively assessing and managing risk. Police officers stated that they actively sought out an offender’s account of the offence when visiting sex offenders for the first time, in order to assess how they might engage with monitoring. Practitioners reported that even where offenders gave a purified historical account, this enabled them to assess what offenders were “prepared to tell (me) about other behaviours” (probation officer).

Practitioners stated that historical disclosures helped them to establish “patterns of behaviour that (sexual offenders) display prior to offending that in turn may be classed as a contributory factor towards their re-offending” (police officer). Historical information therefore enabled practitioners to understand the motivations and triggers of previous offending in order to better conceptualise current and future risk. Some examples included retrospective analysis of substance misuse, previous grooming strategies or the escalation of sexual acts that preceded the offence. Disclosures about historical relationships were seen as
important, not merely in terms of understanding what relationships have existed in the past but also in the offender’s assessment of the quality and content of them.

**Knowing how to assess the significance of disclosures made (and linking to/matching to risk assessment/management)**

Practitioners recognised that some disclosures indicated higher or more imminent risk, and some disclosures had to be shared promptly with other agencies. If disclosures indicated an escalation in risk, for example grooming behaviours, contact with actual or potential victims or changes in dynamic risk factors, then practitioners were prepared to share such disclosures:

> The key is to share that information with everybody involved who can then monitor any changes or concerns as far as escalation in risk. (probation officer)

As stated by one police officer:

> Self-disclosure is an integral part of risk assessment, alongside other information like witness statements and information from other partner agencies... it all builds basically a picture of an offender and his risk and how we best manage that risk.

Disclosures resulted in changes to risk assessment, even if the formal risk assessment levels, such as classifications used by the Multi-Agency Public Protection arrangements (MAPPA) (see Wood & Kemshall, 2007) did not alter. Risk assessment was seen as “fluid” and dynamic, and practitioners described looking for “something out of the norm... out of character” (police officer) that would result in further investigation. Disclosures altered risk assessment where information suggested an offender was behaving in ways similar to their offending behaviour or provided insight into changing dynamic risk factors. Changes in access to victims or the move from “general” fantasies to “specific” types or named individuals also altered risk assessments.

While formal risk levels rarely changed directly as a result of a disclosure, they could be revised once the disclosure had been investigated. Indeed, any disclosures made, especially if they were suggestive of any possible risk factors, would be subjected to verification checks. In some cases, such verification procedures confirm offender reports. One such example was where an offender reported increasingly depressive thoughts but stated he was taking action to resolve this through his general practitioner (GP). Contact was made with the GP, which provided confirmation. In other cases verification strategies contradict offender disclosures. An example was given where, following a limited disclosure about a new relationship, verification checks were made via Social Services that elicited that the offender had not disclosed information about increased access to children.

> I confronted him about it... I think he realises we aren’t stupid, we do check things... he doesn’t just tell me one thing and I just believe it. (probation officer)

Disclosures acted as triggers for actions that could result in changes to the risk assessment and management plan. In one case, an offender disclosed that he had become involved in an internet dating site. The police investigated and determined that the woman he was dating had children and he was reclassified from low to medium risk. Further investigation revealed that he was staying over with the woman and she was leaving him alone with children. This resulted in a reclassification to high risk. It was the investigation that led to reclassification, not the offender’s disclosure. Practitioners indicated that disclosures would inevitably affect the interventions they used with offenders and to changes in the risk management plans. The
most notable changes to supervision and risk management plans arising from disclosures were:

- developing investigative and critical questions to explore disclosed information in greater depth;
- increasing engagement with offenders, including an increase in police home visits;
- considering enforcement of licence conditions, and in high-risk cases, recall;
- seeking additional conditions to a licence or a Sex Offending Prevention Order (SOPO);
- referrals to treatment programmes and feedback to treatment facilitators; and
- use of MAPPA, for example to gain access to relevant mental health services, to alert social service child protection departments, increased police surveillance or access to housing.

Enabling offenders to recognise the benefits of disclosure

This paper has identified the numerous challenges that practitioners encounter when eliciting disclosures and aspects of good practice that help to counteract the difficulties. However, there is a more fundamental tension that underpins the relationship between supervisor and offender, and invariably impacts upon whether offenders will or will not disclose. Essentially, there is a role conflict for practitioners between fostering a relationship in which the offender feels comfortable to disclose relevant information, and their duty to act on this in a way that has the potential to be punitive to the offender. This dilemma is captured neatly by one of the probation officers interviewed in the study:

They can never trust us utterly because they know, and we have offenders say to us, look ... I know that you’re trying to make things better for me, I know you’re trying to get the electronic tag lifted, I know that you’re trying to work in my favour, but I know you’re a probation officer as well.

Practitioners recognised the dilemma for offenders. On one hand, disclosures were expected and signalled compliance and to some extent insight and a capacity for self risk management. On the other hand, they could signal escalating risk and result in increased monitoring, enforcement and sanctions:

It’s quite difficult for people disclosing their offences. It’s quite difficult to say I’m really glad you’ve said that and now I’m going to ring the police. (probation officer)

It is also evident that practitioners identified that the consequences of a disclosure were likely to influence future disclosures. Where an offender experiences a poor outcome as a result of something they said it is unlikely that they will choose to disclose in the future. Cases were cited where offenders had ultimately been recalled as a result of disclosures they had made, while others had experienced problems with employment, relationship breakdown or difficulties with education or training. In essence, many offenders experience disclosure punitively. The crucial issue for practitioners is to what extent can they enable offenders to see the benefits of making disclosures? As Marshall et al. argue:

Very few people, sex offenders included, voluntarily change their behaviour, attitudes and beliefs, unless they see it is to their advantage, and probably no one enters treatment without hope that the resultant changes will benefit them. (Marshall, Eccles, & Barbaree, 1993, p. 442)
However, there are a number of mitigating factors, as follows:

- Not all disclosures lead to punitive action and where positive outcomes occurred following a disclosure, the number and quality of disclosures were found to have increased—in essence where practitioners elicited disclosures within a positive working relationship and worked in a solution-focused way with offenders to minimise risk, then the disclosure was experienced ultimately as positive. This is captured by one probation officer who stated: “Once the working relationship is established they are more likely as time goes on to tell you more ... That's based on the consequences of telling and then seeing what happens once they’ve done that, where that information goes, how it makes them feel, how I respond. If that’s ok, then they’re inclined to do it again.”

- Practitioners suggested that in some instances offenders were frightened by their own actions or intentions, or recognised that they needed help to stop offending. Disclosing information was seen to provide an outlet through which offenders sought help and intervention. Where offenders sought change, then disclosure and its subsequent actions were framed positively. This is reinforced further in the Good Lives literature, which advocates a strengths-based process of self and mutual help, encouraging an active and responsible approach to enhance a sense of self efficacy (Ward & Maruna 2007).

A common view expressed by practitioners was that disclosures and the willingness to discuss issues also assisted in supporting offenders to develop their own risk management strategies, to understand the reasons for their offending behaviour and to identify how their behaviour may be a precursor to further offending (this is supported by the work of Mann, Webster, Schofield, & Marshall, 2004 on relapse prevention; Mann, 2004). For example, one practitioner described how conversations concerning sexual needs and desires encouraged the offender to examine critically his/her own feelings and thoughts prior to offending. This enabled the offender to examine his/her current behaviours, especially around risky sexual activity, in order to understand more clearly the trigger factors likely to lead to re-offending.

A prerequisite for deliberate self-reporting was the offender’s own motivation to change. Where an offender has accepted the identity of being a sex offender and is ready and willing to work on his/her offending behaviour, further disclosures are likely; as practitioners reported, offenders needed to be ready to address problematic behaviour and beliefs in order to choose to disclose new information. However, practitioners found that many sex offenders they supervised were at the “precontemplation” stage of change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1986). In these cases, techniques such as motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 1991) can move clients to the “contemplation” stage of change and to engage subsequently in active work on their offending behaviour. Such a technique is consistent with the elements that underpin effective and positive supervisory relationships, being an approach that emphasises collaboration between the practitioner and sex offender. Miller and Rollnick (2002) identify two aspects: evocation, i.e. eliciting intrinsic motivation from the offender; and autonomy, i.e. requiring the offenders to be responsible for change by guiding them gently in self-directed changes, all important aspects in the process of effective work with sex offenders.

In addition, the study highlighted that it is possible to incentivise offenders to disclose, and that rewards, no matter how minimal, can be significant in this process. As one practitioner stated, this means: “encouraging people to disclose and rewarding them, actually thanking them for being honest and making it a positive experience” (probation officer).

Trotter’s pro-social supervision (Trotter, 2004) encourages practitioners to reward behaviours that they want to promote, working on the premise that rewards often drive
behaviour change (Cherry, 2005). Many offenders, especially sex offenders, will be unused to hearing anything positive about themselves or their behaviour, so this can be a means of promoting positive change. Clearly, the rewards need to be legitimate and appropriate, but this need not be insurmountable. Henry, Holdsworth, and Harrison (2000) found that the rewards that had the most impact on their client group were simple informal rewards, e.g. saying “please” and “thank you”. This suggests that when working with sex offenders, informal and verbal rewards of affirmation, including thanks, telling significant others about positive work/achievements, acknowledging efforts and public praise, would suffice. Emphasising the benefits of why it is important for them to make disclosures and giving rewards when they do is an effective means of eliciting more disclosures. Further, it is important to ensure that offenders understand the link between disclosures and the opportunity to address any potential issues early and positively, especially given that “punishment only suppresses behaviour it does not extinguish it” (Huesmann, Moise, Podolski, & Eron, 2003).

Implications for practice

At a time when polygraph testing for sex offenders is increasingly frequent and mandatory, why might practitioners wish to improve their practice in eliciting self-disclosures from sex offenders? The constraints of time, cost and resource to polygraph all medium- to high-risk offenders regularly is one obvious answer, particularly at a time when both police and probation resources will be under pressure. In this climate, increasing the volume of self-disclosures and making techniques to elicit reliable and useful disclosures a routine part of supervision outside mandatory polygraph testing will be important. All practitioners supervising sex offenders in the community need to be able to elicit, work with and respond appropriately to disclosures, not just the specialist few working with the most risky. This paper has highlighted the most challenging tensions and dilemmas, but also illustrated that these do not have to be insurmountable. The key practice lesson is that disclosures are more likely, more reliable and useful when made within the context of a positive, open, honest and effective relationship, combined with practitioner skills that can broadly be designated as “pro-social” (Trotter, 2004). This indicates a significant training agenda for criminal justice practitioners comprising:

- offender engagement techniques;
- pro-social supervision skills;
- interviewing and questioning skills;
- positive and reflective listening skills;
- motivational interviewing skills;
- relapse prevention techniques; and
- detailed knowledge of dynamic risk factors, and those factors most indicative of escalating risk and deteriorating behaviour.

Conclusion

The key role of secrecy, cognitive distortion and blame-shifting surrounding the nature of sex offending means that there is a considerable emphasis on responsible self-disclosure (Frost, Ware, & Boer, 2009). Criminal justice practitioners need to recognise that sex offender disclosures are critical to good risk management, enabling responsiveness to changes in thoughts, feelings, fantasies and circumstances. This ensures that offenders are dealt with at
the correct risk level; that risk management plans are well matched to risk; and that multi-
agency responses are adapted to changes in risk. Numerous serious further offence inquiries
have shown that risk management failures are often rooted in worker ignorance of risk changes
and under-matching of risk management interventions to risk factors (see, for example,
Hanson & White: HMIP, 2006). Disclosures can help practitioners to combat these risk
assessment and management failures, increasing both effectiveness and defensibility.

Further, disclosures can be of benefit to sex offenders. Although, for some, disclosures
may lead to what they would perceive as punishment, e.g. recall, or increased risk level, for
many they serve as a precursor to addressing offending behaviour in a positive and effective
way. This research has found that offenders are more likely and willing to disclose within a
constructive, respectful and affirmative supervisory relationship, where they are supported in
developing self risk management strategies. These include sex offenders being able to identify
how their behaviours, thoughts, feelings and fantasies may be an antecedent to further
offending, to develop improved coping skills, and to take responsibility for their actions. In the
absence or breakdown of external controls, enhancing an offender’s own internal controls will
be critical to any successful risk management strategy. Disclosure, as we have seen, may
provide an important step towards this goal.

Note
1. “Offender manager” is a term used by police forces to describe those police officers who manage sex offenders under
the Sex Offender Register.

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