

## Pro-social modelling\*

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### Abstract

*Pro-social modelling is increasingly becoming recognised as a key skill in the supervision of offenders. This paper defines pro-social modelling, discusses the research support for its use and describes the way it can be implemented in a criminal justice setting. It goes on to discuss the relevance of worker empathy and the perceived legitimacy of the worker. The strengths and weaknesses of pro-social modelling are identified and some of the criticisms of the model are discussed. Finally the extent to which pro-social modelling can be taught is considered.*

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### Introduction

What is pro-social modelling? The term pro-social modelling in its most limited sense refers to the way in which probation officers, or others who work with involuntary clients, model pro-social values and behaviours in their interactions with clients. The term is however often interpreted more broadly to include a group of skills which include supervisors modelling pro-social values, reinforcing client's pro-social expressions and actions and negatively reinforcing or confronting pro-criminal actions and expressions of those clients. The term pro-social practice or pro-social model is also often used by practitioners to describe a still broader approach to the supervision of offenders which includes collaborative problem solving and role clarification (see Trotter 1999, 2004).

In this article I am using a definition of pro-social modelling which includes modelling, positive and negative reinforcement and confrontation.

### Research on the pro-social model

The importance of pro-social modelling in the supervision of offenders has been shown in studies as early as 1964. Robert Martinson and his colleagues (1975) in their now famous (or infamous) study on what works in corrections refers to a study by Schwitygebel

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published in 1964 which found reduced numbers of arrests and incarcerations, compared to a matched control, among young offenders who were given positive reinforcement for successful accomplishments. For example they were rewarded with cash for attending sessions and talking in detail about their experiences. Subsequent studies using pro-social modelling and reinforcement found similar outcomes (e.g. Sarason and Ganger 1973, Fo and O'Donnell 1974, 1975).

Don Andrews and his colleagues (1979) examined tape recordings of interviews between Canadian probation officers and their clients and found that probation officers who modelled and reinforced pro-social values and who also made use of reflective listening practices had clients with lower recidivism rates in comparison to other probation officers. Probation officers who scored above the mean on a Socialisation scale (a measure of pro-social orientation) and an empathy scale (a measure of workers' understanding of other's point of view) also had clients with lower recidivism.

I found in a study undertaken in Australia (Trotter 1990) that volunteer probation officers had clients with lower recidivism if they scored above the median on the socialisation scale regardless of the levels of empathy of the clients. In other words pro-social officers did better. A later study (Trotter 1996) which again replicated aspects of the Andrews et al (1979) study found that professional probation officers also did better when they had high levels of socialisation and when their file notes indicated that they reinforced pro-social expressions and actions of in their clients. This again was regardless of empathy levels.

A similar study (Trotter 2004) found that child protection workers, who in many cases work with young people and families who are involved in the criminal justice system, did better on a range of outcome measures, including client and worker satisfaction with outcome and earlier case closure, if they used the skills of pro-social modelling and reinforcement and appropriate confrontation.

The value of pro-social modelling in the supervision of offenders has been further demonstrated in meta-analysis undertaken by Don Andrews and James Bonta (Andrews et al 1991, Andrews 2000, Andrews & Bonta 2003, Bonta 2004).

### **How do workers model pro-social values ?**

The Gough socialisation scale which was used in the Andrews et al study (1979) and my studies (Trotter 1991, 1996) places individuals on a continuum from pro-social to pro-criminal behaviours and forecasts the likelihood that they will transgress mores accepted by their particular culture (Megargee 1972). The scale was originally developed as a delinquency scale. It reflects a person's, 'social maturity, integrity and rectitude'. It reflects family cohesiveness, social sensitivity, empathy, optimism and self confidence (Megargee 1972).

How do people who score high on the scale behave in comparison to those who score low on the scale? In both the Canadian and Australian studies those who scored high on the scale were more likely to model and to express views which support the value of a law abiding lifestyle. Some examples of the practice of pro-social modelling are set out below. These are based on my studies in corrections and child protection (Trotter 1996, 2004) and on comments from participants in many seminars I have undertaken with professional workers examining the process of pro-social modelling.

Pro-social modeling involves the worker keeping appointments, being punctual, honest and reliable, following up on tasks, respecting other people's feelings, expressing views about the negative effects of criminal behaviour, expressing views about the value of social

pursuits such as non-criminal friends, good family relations and the value of work. It involves interpreting people's motives positively e.g. "most police are people trying to do a job and they have similar needs to most of us" rather than "all police are pigs". It involves being open about problems the worker may have had which are similar to the offenders e.g. "I spent a period of time unemployed at one time and I found it depressing". It also involves being optimistic about the rewards which can be obtained by living within the law.

One finding from the child protection study referred to earlier (Trotter 2004) which clearly illustrates the importance of simple modeling processes, was that when the clients reported that their workers were in the habit of responding to phone calls and keeping appointments, both the clients and the workers were almost twice as likely to be satisfied with the outcome of the intervention. The cases were also likely to be closed earlier. This was independent of client risk levels.

The following comments illustrate the differences between the kind of things more pro-social probation officers say in comparison to the things which less pro-social officers say. I have constructed these examples however they are consistent with the comments which have been made in the research studies and with the views expressed by practitioners in workshops. More detail is provided about the kind of conversations conducted by pro-social workers in Trotter (2004) albeit in a child protection setting.

The following comments are not pro-social:

*I know you are doing well and complying with the conditions but I need to see you more often anyway because you have still got problems."*

*The police seem to be having a go at a lot of my clients lately. They never leave you alone do they?*

*It is good that you went for the interview – but with the unemployment situation the way it is you can't expect too much can you.*

The first comment effectively punishes a pro-social action, the second is not supportive of a law abiding perspective and the third is pessimistic. The following comments are more pro-social.

*Because you have been keeping your appointments and doing your community work you will have to report monthly from now on.*

*It must be frustrating if you feel that the police are really out to get you. I think most police are really just doing their job. Is there some way that you can change what you are doing so that they are less interested in you?"*

*That is great that you went for the employment interview and that you have kept the appointment with me today. I can see that you are really making an effort."*

The first comment rewards pro-social behaviour, the second responds to the issue of police harassment with a more pro-social perspective and the third is more optimistic and acknowledges the pro-social actions of the client.

### **Pro-social reinforcement**

It was evident in both the Canadian study (Andrews et al 1979) and the Australian studies (Trotter 1996, 2004) that more pro-social workers were inclined to reinforce pro-social comments and actions by their clients. Some examples of pro-social actions and comments

include those related to compliance with the order such as keeping appointments, being punctual, completing community work, not offending and complying with special conditions such as attending for drug treatment. Other client pro-social actions include working through problem solving processes with the worker, accepting responsibility for offences, comments about the harm that crime can do to others and yourself, empathy for the victim and comments that crime is wrong. Pro-social workers are also inclined to reinforce comments and actions which value non criminal activities and associations including family, sport, non criminal friends, hobbies and attending school or work. Pro-social workers are likely to reinforce expressions which are fair, non sexist and non racist. They also reinforce optimistic attitudes, for example expressing a belief that life without crime is achievable, that goals can be achieved, that workers can help, and that clients can change.

How do the workers reinforce these things? The first and most obvious method of providing reinforcement is through body language (e.g. smiling, attentive listening, leaning forward) and the use of praise. Rewards can also be provided by the worker giving time to the client, attending court with the client and providing positive evidence, reducing the frequency of contact, helping the client find a job or accommodation, doing home visits or meeting a client outside the office, doing a positive report for a court or parole board, speaking to other agencies/professionals such as social security or the police about the client's needs and making positive comments in file notes.

The idea of pro-social reinforcement is that the rewards should be contingent on the behavior. The reinforcement should be offered clearly in response to the pro-social behavior. The client needs to clearly see the link. The clients should understand that the reduction in visits, the praise used by the supervisor or a visit to court is directly linked to their pro-social behavior, for example the fact they have kept appointments, been punctual, been attending job interviews, and not re-offended.

One of the most powerful rewards available to the PO in his/her day to day work is the capacity to reduce the frequency of contact. It is important in using this model to make the link between reduced frequency of contact and the pro-social activities of the client. It should not be seen simply as usual procedure, it should be seen as reward for good progress. In this way the client gains a sense that his or her goals can be achieved through pro-social behaviour.

The other aspect of pro-social modeling as I have defined it in this article is negative reinforcement. How do more effective workers use negative reinforcement? Lets look first at confrontation, the most common form of negative reinforcement? The issue of confrontation in work with involuntary clients is a complex one. There is little support in the research for aggressive or critical confrontation. A small qualitative study (Burns 1994) undertaken with probation officers in Australia found that the more effective probation officers (those with clients who had low recidivism rates) focused pretty much exclusively on the positive things that their clients said and did and made little if any use of confrontation.

My child protection study (Trotter 2004) found that confrontation which was most likely to be related to positive outcomes was confrontation which; (1) suggests more positive ways of dealing with the situation, (2) acknowledges that negative feelings may be justified and (3) explores the reasons why clients feel and act the way they do. On the other hand confrontation which (1) gives the client a sense of being criticised or confrontation which (2) points out the likely ill effects of the clients' views was related to poorer outcomes in the view of both the clients and the workers. (3) Ignoring pro-criminal or anti-social comments and actions was also related to poorer outcomes in the study.

Care needs to be taken therefore in the use of confrontation. The Canadian study referred to earlier suggests a "four to one" rule (Andrews 1982). For every negative comment give four positive ones. Evidence from my studies (Trotter 1996, 2004) certainly confirms that people are more likely to learn from positive reinforcement rather than negative reinforcement. Similarly care needs to be exercised in relation to more active forms of negative reinforcement such as increasing frequency of appointments or writing negative reports.

### **Empathy, pro-social modelling and legitimacy**

The concept of pro-social modelling and legitimacy has been raised by Sue Rex (1998) referring to the moral authority of the worker. It seems clear that the pro-social orientation of supervisors relates to the ongoing recidivism of those under supervision. Is this influence greater, however, if the client identifies with the worker, if the worker is young or old or if the worker understands the client's point of view. Are supervisors effective if they have a pro-social orientation but at the same time have little understanding or empathy for the client's perspective?

Some of the work which has been done on this issue is contradictory. I referred earlier to the Canadian study (Andrews et al 1979) which found that probation officers who had high levels of empathy and high levels of socialisation had clients with lower recidivism. On the other hand, probation officers with high levels of socialisation and low levels of empathy had clients with higher recidivism rates than other clients. It seems that a pro-social disposition accompanied by a lack of understanding of the clients' perspective was counter productive. Whilst both of my Australian studies in corrections found that high scores on the socialisation scale were related to lower recidivism, regardless of levels of empathy, it was also apparent that judgemental comments in file notes (e.g. no hope, lazy) were related to higher recidivism even after taking risk levels into account.

It does seem therefore that a pro-social disposition needs to be accompanied at least by a willingness to be reasonably non judgemental. Gill McIvor is planning further research on the notion of pro-social modelling and legitimacy and this might shed further light on the situations in which pro-social modelling is most effective.

### **Peer group association**

Modelling pro-social values by workers appears to influence the re-offence rates of their clients. There is also some evidence that modelling by other offenders also influences re-offence rates. I found in an Australian study (Trotter 1995) that clients placed on community work sites with other offenders had higher re-offence rates than clients placed on community worksites with community volunteers or by themselves. This was particularly so with young offenders (aged 17 to 21) and was evident after risk levels had been taken into account. This is certainly consistent with theories of differential association and a range of research studies pointing to the influence of peer group association (see Trotter 1995 for more detail on this issue).

### **Strengths and weaknesses of pro-social modelling**

The greatest strength of pro-social modelling is that the research evidence suggests that it works. It does seem to be related to client outcomes with offenders and with a range of involuntary clients. The evidence from my studies (Trotter 1996, 2004) found also that the use of the approach was significantly correlated with a number of client satisfaction measures. The success of this approach can also be explained theoretically by reference to learning theory.

The pro-social approach seems to work because it provides a method for discouraging and challenging anti social comments and behaviours within a positive framework. It puts into practice the idea that people learn best by encouragement rather than discouragement.

The approach also helps workers to take control of a reinforcement process which occurs anyway. Whether they are aware of it or not workers with involuntary clients do make judgments about the things they wish to encourage in their clients and they do in turn influence their clients' behaviour. By understanding the process and using this approach workers are able to take some control over this process.

### **Criticism of pro-social modelling**

The concept of pro-social modeling has nevertheless received some criticism. Outlined below are some of these criticisms and my responses to them. The issues are addressed in more detail in *Working with Involuntary Clients* (Trotter 1999).

One of the most common comments made in my workshops is 'I do it anyway'. Some workers feel that the pro-social approach merely describes a process which they use unconsciously. However there is evidence that those who work with involuntary clients do not routinely use these skills. Two Canadian studies (Andrews et al 1979, Bonta and Ruge 2004) and the Australian studies (Burns 1994, Trotter 1990, 1996, 2004) found that workers used the pro-social approach very erratically. Some workers use it and some don't. Some use it sometimes. The qualitative study referred to earlier found that many probation officers inadvertently reinforced the very behaviour they were hoping to change, often through use of smiling and body language as much as direct comment or actions (Burns 1994).

There seems little doubt that whilst pro-social skills might come naturally to some workers they do not come naturally to everyone. One of the strongest arguments in favor of this approach relates to the notion that the modelling process occurs anyway. It seems that whether they are conscious of it or not, to one degree or another, workers reinforce different behaviours in their clients. As I mentioned earlier it is preferable that they are explicit about this process both with themselves and their clients and that they take some control over it.

It might be argued that the approach is superficial and symptom focused and it is therefore unlikely to address the complex long term issues which have led offenders into the criminal justice system, for example peer group influence, unemployment, family breakdown, drug use, homelessness and school failure. It is certainly true that pro-social modeling will not address all the problems faced by clients of the criminal justice system. It is, however, one skill which will address some issues, it relates to client outcomes and it can be used along with a range of other skills.

It can be argued that the pro-social approach is manipulative - it attempts to change the behaviour of the client often without the client's knowledge, in directions set by the worker. On the other hand, as I have said the reinforcement and modeling process inevitably occurs in worker/client relationships and the process is less likely to be manipulative if it is explicit and if the worker understands and attempts to take some control of the process.

Pro-social modeling may also be criticized as being judgmental. It is based on value judgments. The term pro-social has connotations of social control, of there being a right way of doing things. It suggests that what is socially acceptable is best. Again probation officers and others who work with offenders inevitably make judgments about what are

acceptable and unacceptable standards in relation to such issues as drug use, reporting patterns or minor offending. As I have said a number of studies (Andrews et al 1979, Trotter 1990, 1996, 2004) suggest that workers reinforce different expressions and behaviours regardless of whether they have any awareness of doing so. Again it is better that they take some control over this process.

It is important nevertheless, that pro-social behaviour is defined in explicit and limited terms. It should not be interpreted as meaning having values consistent with the worker. As discussed earlier the Canadian study in corrections (Andrews et al 1979) found that supervisors who practiced the pro-social approach were only effective if they also practiced reflective listening and had high levels of empathy. It does seem that if this approach is in any way used as an excuse for moralizing on the part of the worker it is not going to work. Perhaps one of the strongest arguments for focusing on clients' pro-social actions and comments rather than their pro-criminal or anti-social actions and comments is that it is likely to avoid the possibility that the pro-social approach will come across as moralistic and disapproving.

Confrontation should be limited to factors which relate to the presenting problem (or the mandate for the worker's involvement with the client). For the most part this relates to illegal behaviour, for example offending, domestic violence, truancy or failure to comply with the court order. Other 'desirable' behaviours which the worker may wish to encourage such as seeking employment, mixing with pro-social peers or returning to study, should be encouraged if the worker believes they are pro-social. The clients' failure to do these things should not, however, result in confrontation by the worker.

It could be argued that pro-social modeling may be inappropriate with clients with particular cultural backgrounds. Definitions of pro-social are inevitably entrenched in social and cultural mores. Punctuality, work ethic, domestic violence, child neglect may mean different things in different cultures. Workers and clients are influenced by their racial, social, religious and economic milieu. It is important therefore that workers attempt to understand the views and actions of their clients in terms of their cultural context. In forming views about what is pro-social in any given situation the worker should take the client's cultural background into account. This involves talking to the client about cultural differences. Pro-social modeling aims to help make explicit the cultural issues in the supervision of offenders and in turn to contribute to culturally sensitive practice.

Pro-social modeling may also be criticized because of the difficulties involved in judging the genuineness of clients. Clients may make pro-social comments, however, their behaviour may not be consistent with those comments. This is certainly part of the challenge in using this approach. The aim of pro-social modeling is to reward pro-social behaviour and comments, that is comments and behaviour which are honest and genuine. A dishonest or frivolous array of comments about how a client may have changed for example should not be defined as pro-social and should not be rewarded.

At the same time it can be difficult to determine whether someone is genuine or not. The worker clearly needs to avoid being 'conned' and should avoid reinforcing behaviour which attempts to do this. Nonetheless, if in doubt, it seems that the most appropriate approach is to accept the client's word - at least until the worker has information that what the client is saying is incorrect.

One final criticism which is sometimes made about pro-social modelling is that it is very difficult to carry out because many clients do not say or do anything pro-social. How do you identify pro-social comments and actions when a client has a severe drug addiction, no work, no personal or family supports and is resistant to supervision? However, the

challenge in these situations is for the worker is to search for the pro-social actions and comments. There is no evidence that the client will be helped by a focus on things that he or she has done wrong. The worker should instead search for pro-social comments and actions as they occur (for example keeping an appointment and talking to the worker).

## **Training**

Can pro-social modeling be taught? Personality traits and beliefs such as optimism, fairness, punctuality, reliability and honesty are hard to develop or change. Is effective use of the skills of pro-social modeling limited to workers with these personality traits.

Some light on the extent to which training can influence the use of pro-social modeling and in turn client outcomes is provided in my Australian study (Trotter 1994). Workers with high levels of socialization (more pro-social workers) had clients who offended less often than other clients in the one and four year follow up periods. Workers who completed training in pro-social modeling also had clients with low re-offence rates at one and four years. Workers with high socialization were however more inclined to participate in pro-social modeling training and to complete the training. Which factor was influential – training or socialization? A regression analysis of the data found that socialization levels and training were independently related to client re-offence rates after taking risk factors into account. In other words some workers by virtue of their socialization levels did better with their clients, however, they did better still if they had undertaken training in pro-social modeling. Workers with low socialization although they tended to drop out of training and to have clients with high recidivism did better with their clients if they completed the training.

The particular training involved in this study included an initial five day seminar followed by monthly 2 hour seminars plus the availability of consultation with a coach if requested. The workers were however supervised by senior workers who had little knowledge of pro-social modeling. In most cases their colleagues also had limited knowledge. The impact of the training might have been greater if it had been supported more through supervision and collegiate support at the local office level. It seems likely that attempts to increase the use of pro-social modelling among direct practice staff will be most successful if they are part of a concerted effort involving training, supervision, collegiate support and modelling by senior staff.

## **Conclusion / Summary**

In this article I have acknowledged the difficulties of defining pro-social modeling. I have, nevertheless, defined it in this article as an approach to the supervision of offenders which involves workers modeling pro-social values, comments and actions, reinforcing pro-social values comments and actions of offenders and appropriately confronting pro-criminal values actions and expressions.

The research consistently points to the value of pro-social modeling in work with offenders and other involuntary clients. In fact research in Australia and elsewhere suggests that it can make considerable difference to the re-offence rates of those under supervision.

The article has outlined the specific ways in which pro-social modeling is undertaken and discusses and responds to some criticisms of pro-social modeling. It goes on to discuss the extent to which training can impact on the skills and practices of probation officers and others who work with offenders.

A meta-analysis suggests that more specialist corrections programs often do better in terms of reducing recidivism than routine probation supervision (Bonta 2004). Certainly in my research and more recent research by James Bonta and Tanya Ruge (2004) it was apparent that for every probation officer who used the skills of pro-social modeling another probation officer would not be using the skills. This may be changing with widespread training in the UK and elsewhere in pro-social modeling. Nevertheless the challenge today is how to help probation services implement these practices and how to encourage individual workers to participate in training and make use of the principles with their clients.

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