

Tacit knowledge regarding re-offending: A repertory grid study of probation officers' judgements

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'Tacit concepts regarding re-offending: A repertory grid study of probation officers' judgements'

Background and purpose: This research considered professional decision making by probation officers in Northern Ireland. The objective was to creatively identify the complexity of factors involved in the judgement of re-offending by tapping in to the tacit knowledge base of probation officers. The research question was defined as 'How do Probation officers' judge the likelihood of re-offending?'. **Method:** The repertory grid technique, based on personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955), was utilised to elicit probation officers' personal constructs in order to illuminate the extent to which criminogenic factors and/or other underlying beliefs were influencing assessment and decision making with regard to the likelihood of re-offending. Fifteen practicing probation officers volunteered to take part in the study. The results were analysed using initial 'eye-balling' of the data, cluster analysis and principal components analysis. The results are qualitative and quantitative and are presented both statistically and creatively through visual plots. **Results:** The results indicate that the constructs fall in to five broad categories: Crime; external factors; substance misuse; personal characteristics of the offender; personal values. **Conclusions and implications:** Personal construct theory suggests that a person construes and develops a unique understanding of the world "through transparent patterns or templates which he creates and then attempts to fit over the realities of which the world is composed" (Kelly, 1955, pp.8-9). If we accept that these constructions are what we use to make sense of the world and predict future events, the relevance to decision making practice becomes apparent in both personal and professional contexts. The findings from this study illustrate the range and complexity of factors being considered by probation officers in the assessment of recidivism.

Key words: offending, judgements, repertory grid, probation officer/s.