

Rapport building with offenders in probation supervision: The views of English probation practitioners

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journals.sagepub.com/home/prb**Zacharia Nahouli** 

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Abstract

Rapport-based supervision in probation is linked to positive behavioural change and reduced reoffending for probation service users. However, the process of rapport building is not well documented in probation practice. This study conducted focus groups and interviews with London-based probation practitioners to understand their views of rapport when supervising service users. Thematic analysis generated five themes related to how practitioners facilitated rapport building and maintenance, as well as several barriers that exist towards building and maintaining rapport – these were conceptualised as a rapport-building process. We provide recommendations to help alleviate barriers and further facilitate the rapport-building process.

Keywords

probation, rapport building, motivational interviewing, service user, supervision

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Introduction

Rapport is typically described as a 'harmonious, empathetic, or sympathetic relation or connection to another self' (Newberry and Stubbs, 1990: 14). In therapeutic practice, developing this type of therapist-patient relationship can foster a comfortable environment encouraging cooperation and information sharing (Ardito and Rabellino, 2011; Bordin, 1979). Several tools have been developed to conceptualise and operationalise rapport, such as the Motivational Interview (MI) which emphasises building rapport with clients through accepting, empathic, or collaborative behaviours and activities (Miller and Rollnick, 1991). Extensive evidence suggests that rapport-based and client-centred approaches are effective in medical, therapeutic, counselling and social work contexts for motivating clients to engage in 'change talk' and address problematic behaviours (see Martin et al., 2000 and Moyers et al., 2009 for reviews).

There are, however, contexts where rapport is important despite the goal of the interaction being markedly different, such as interviews between convicted offenders (from here on referred to as service users) and their probation officer (Lustig et al., 2002). Service users may disclose information relating to their motivations for behavioural change and likelihood of recidivism (Clark et al., 2006; Shapland et al., 2012; Trotter, 2014), or relating to their mental well-being and self-harm/suicidal behaviours (Mackenzie et al., 2015; Trotter 2014). This information is crucial for protecting the public and service users from harm, and so creating a comfortable and supportive environment that helps guide service users towards communication and disclosure is vital (Clark et al., 2006; Ireland and Berg, 2008). Indeed, there is evidence that using MI techniques has positive psychological effects for service users, helps them curb problematic behaviours and may also be predictive of a reduction in recidivism (see McMurren, 2009 for a review).

Rapport-based tools appear beneficial for probation practice towards ensuring the safety of service users (and others), averting risk and reducing reoffending, and they are a key element of probation practice – for example, the Skills for Effective Engagement Development and Supervision (SEEDS) framework incorporates both MI and relationship-building skills and trains probation officers to use them (Robinson, 2014; Sorsby et al., 2013). There is also some evidence that probation officers consider positive relationships with service users to be integral to effective supervision (Robinson, 2014), and the term 'thick' supervision has recently come into usage to describe the network of relationships between services users and probation officers (as well as other relevant personnel/institutions) to ensure good probation outcomes (Dominey, 2019).

With this being said, evidence for the effectiveness of rapport and relationship building in probation supervision is limited. Research studies typically only measure service user outcomes when rapport-based interventions have been used compared to when they have not, but the quality of the rapport/relationship they develop with their probation officer and how this contributes to those outcomes has generally been overlooked (Chamberlain et al., 2018; Robinson, 2014; Shapland et al., 2012). Similarly, research that looks at probation officer and

service user views and practices on this topic is generally lacking (Robinson, 2014). Research exists highlighting that service users are less likely to offend if they have a positive perception of their probation officer (e.g., Blasko et al., 2015; Chamberlain et al., 2018; Vidal et al., 2013), but these studies do little to document the rapport-building process in supervision and do not adequately highlight which elements of these tools are effective for building rapport and leading to the aforementioned positive outcomes.

Furthermore, probation officers experience unique challenges because they have a dual role. Not only do they have to help meet service user needs, they are also charged with carrying out enforcement (i.e., punishments for transgressions; Alexander et al., 2008; Clark et al., 2006; Skeem et al., 2007; Trotter, 2014). Regarding the latter, this may truncate attempts to build rapport in the first instance and/or interfere with rapport maintenance during each interaction and longer term. Again, the existing research has done little to understand how probation officers effectively navigate this dual role and build rapport.

To summarise, there is scant research that explores probation officer views of rapport in service user supervision or how they attempt to build rapport in practice. It is also unclear what methods are effective for building and maintaining rapport with service users, or what barriers and facilitators currently exist towards this during dual role probation interactions. To our knowledge, only one study has investigated probation officer views specifically on rapport building. Here, a small sample of 12 American female parole officers reported believing rapport to be integral towards effective practice and that they built rapport by treating a service user fairly, and with a high degree of dignity and respect (Ireland and Berg, 2008). This small study is important but may not generalise to a wider UK probation context. Considering the reported benefits of rapport for guiding service users towards positive behavioural change and reducing reoffending, it is vital that we better understand rapport building in this context.

Study overview

The current study investigated the views of a cohort of London probation officers (PO), probation service officers (PSO) and managers (from hereon, all referred to as probation practitioners) from what used to be the National Probation Service (NPS) regarding rapport building when supervising primarily high-risk service users – although, over half of the participants had been in service prior to the introduction of the Transforming Rehabilitation reforms (when the supervision of most low/medium-risk cases were assigned to Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs); Ministry of Justice, 2013), and so are likely to have experience of mixed caseloads (see Table 1 for sample demographics).

A series of focus groups and one-to-one interviews were conducted with reference to four research questions: 1) What do probation practitioners understand by the term 'rapport'?; 2) How and when do probation practitioners build and maintain rapport?; 3) What facilitators/barriers exist in probation for building rapport?, and 4) What are the views and practices of probation practitioners regarding the current rapport-building literature?

Table 1. Participant demographics and indication of participants' focus group (FG)/interview (Int.) number and their pseudonyms.

	FG/Int. No.	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Role	Location	Experience	
FG	1	Anna	32	Female	PO	Community	8y	
	1	Bethany	38	Female	PSO	Community	8y	
	1	Carl	62	Male	PSO	Community	1y 6m	
	2	Danielle	41	Female	PSO	Court	19y	
	2	Ethan	53	Male	PSO	Court	8y	
	2	Fiona	32	Female	PO	Community	8y 5m	
	2	Gemma	39	Female	PO	Community	12y	
	3	Harry	33	Male	PO	Prison	5y	
	3	Isabel	30	Female	PO	Prison	7y 6m	
	3	Jasper	46	Male	PO	Prison	15y	
	3	Kevin	37	Male	PO	Prison	12y	
	4	Lydia	29	Female	PO	Community	4y 5m	
	4	Mark	27	Male	PSO	Community	6m	
	4	Nicole	27	Female	PSO	Community	1y 8m	
	4	Owen	55	Male	PSO	Community	6m	
	4	Peter	28	Male	PO	Community	4y 6m	
	4	Gianna	28	Female	PO	Community	5y 3m	
	Int.	1	Rita	39	Female	Manager	-	17y
		2	Simon	27	Male	PSO	Community	1y 4m
		3	Tina	41	Female	PSO	Court	13y
4		Ursula	29	Female	PSO	Community	1y	
5		Veronica	54	Female	Manager	-	14y	
Mean			37.59				7.38y	
SD			10.5				5.74y	

Method

Probation practitioners' views and experiences of rapport building were explored via a series of focus groups and one-to-one interviews which were carried out between June and November 2019 with practitioners working in London branches of what was then the NPS. This was a doctoral-level study undertaken as part of the first author's PhD research and adhered to the British Psychological Society's (BPS) code of conduct. The study received ethical approval from the London NPS Divisional Research Committee (a local division of the HMPPS National Research Committee), as well as from the University of Westminster Research Ethics Committee.

Participants

Probation practitioners were recruited via advertisements in NPS publications and newsletters, and by snowball sampling – participants were unknown to the researchers. Interested participants contacted the first author by email to take part in a focus group – one-to-one interviews were arranged with participants that were unable to attend a focus group due to time or location. Twenty-two probation practitioners participated overall (17 in a focus group and 5 in one-to-one interviews) – the sample size was sufficient for reaching data saturation. On arrival for the focus group/interview, participants completed an anonymous demographic questionnaire (e.g., age, job role, how long they had worked as a probation practitioner; see Table 1). All participants were provided a pseudonym during analysis.

Focus groups and interviews

Four focus group sessions, comprising between 3 and 6 participants were conducted at various NPS offices in London, lasting between 60–120 min. One-to-one interviews lasted between 30–60 min and were conducted via Skype or in person. Focus groups and interviews were semi-structured, containing set questions along with prompts for elaboration. All focus groups and interviews were carried out by the first author and were conducted following advice by the NPS research committee and best practice from the literature (e.g., Kitzinger, 1995).

All participants were sent an information sheet by email prior to participation in the study that briefed them on the nature of the research (i.e., aims and goals), their participation rights (i.e., anonymity, confidentiality and study withdrawal) and how the data would be used. They were reminded of this information at the start of the focus group/interview and were subsequently asked to provide written or verbally recorded consent to participate (the latter was for participants being interviewed online).

Data analysis

Focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author before being subjected to an inductive thematic analysis using NVivo.

Thematic analysis allows for a flexible approach that considers the descriptive accounts while also allowing for interpretation to understand participants' underlying motivations or feelings towards the topic. Hence, thematic analysis yields both semantic (descriptive) and latent (underlying) themes. Data were transcribed and then coded for meaningful and consistent patterns. Codes were arranged into representative themes and subthemes which were reviewed and refined (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The first author analysed all data, co-authors then blind double coded. Theme developments were discussed throughout to ensure consistency and prominence, and to limit the influence of the first author's biases or assumptions towards the data.

Findings

The rapport-building process

Five overarching themes emerged, which have been labelled: 1) What is rapport?, 2) Perceptual influences of rapport, 3) Techniques for initial rapport building, 4) Adapting to the service user, and 5) Maintenance and barriers to rapport. Most of the themes were also split into subthemes to highlight further nuance. Furthermore, these themes were conceptualised as a general rapport-building process that probation practitioners reported following when supervising their service users. See Figure 1 for an overview of the themes and the rapport-building process.

Within the rapport-building process lies the probation practitioners' knowledge and understanding of rapport, as well as their perceptions of themselves and their

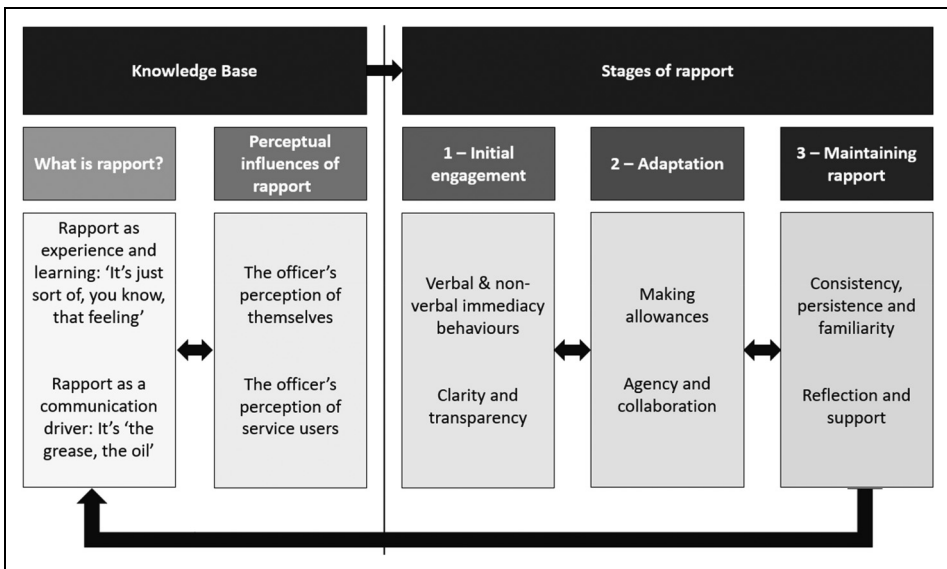


Figure 1. The rapport-building process.

service users – this was considered to be their rapport knowledge base and formed themes 1 and 2. This knowledge fed into the their practice of building and maintaining rapport with service users, and three distinct stages of rapport building were identified and considered to be the rapport-building process – this formed themes 3, 4 and 5.

In stage 1, probation practitioners first build rapport by engaging in immediacy behaviours – i.e., simple verbal and non-verbal behaviours used to communicate warmth or attention, such as handshaking, smiling or asking, ‘how are you?’ – and developing clear expectations with their service users. Then, practitioners develop a deeper relationship with service users by tailoring supervision to meet their needs and interests (stage 2). Finally, practitioners maintain rapport over an extended period through consistent and reflective practice (stage 3). These reflections feed back to their knowledge base which in turn refines the process for future use, meaning this is an iterative process. However, it must be noted that probation practitioners may also shift between stages where necessary and there are myriad barriers to following the process, meaning it is not a linear nor simple process.

Theme 1: what is rapport?

Participants reflected on their understanding of rapport and the role it plays in supervision. Generally, they defined rapport as ‘*a positive, collaborative working relationship*’ (Veronica) with their service users and ‘*an enabler to gaining as much information as you possibly can*’ (Qianna). To achieve this, participants reported having to establish ‘*some kind of connection*’ (Ursula) by ‘*finding common ground*’ (Fiona), developing ‘*mutual trust*’ (Mark) and creating a ‘*relaxed environment*’ (Simon), ultimately leading to the interacting parties feeling ‘*some level of trust, some level of personal comfort*’ (Jasper) with one another. As such, it was overwhelmingly agreed that establishing rapport was ‘*the bread and butter*’ (Veronica) of supervision and ‘*the grease, the oil*’ (Ursula) of communication, which motivated service users toward disclosing personal and sensitive information:

‘...they may not be telling you things I want to hear but the fact that they’re coming out and maybe disclosing to you the things they’ve done is rapport.’ (Danielle)

However, participants stressed that this communicative relationship was a ‘*two way street*’ (Carl), whereby probation practitioners also had to be open and genuine with their service users to develop that trust:

‘For you to actually be open enough to have these conversations, I need to also give something as well, a bit of genuineness and a bit of like, “alright this happened to me”...’ (Lydia)

Many participants felt this communicative relationship was ‘*the same technique you’d use with anybody*’ so as not ‘*to come across as contrived*’ (Mark), although

not all probation practitioners agreed, with some stressing that *'building rapport for my cases looks very different to building rapport with my friends'* (Isabel). Those who were more experienced or worked in prison settings were more likely to adopt the latter view, potentially due to the more structured setting.

Even so, all participants seemed to consider rapport building to be a largely mysterious process, or *'just sort of, you know, that feeling'* (Ursula), saying they developed the *'skills while doing the job'* (Isabel) and over time as they met various types of service users of different ages, cultures, and backgrounds. As such, participants generally felt that rapport was a skill that developed through a process of *'trial and error'* (Carl):

'...sometimes you'll do things and you'll think bloody hell that was a cock up, and other times you'll be like, you know what that was really good, I'm going to use that again...'
(Carl)

The mysterious nature of rapport was viewed positively by some participants because it forced them to learn, so that rapport skills developed naturally and experientially rather than by simply following a set of rules.

Theme 2: perceptual influences of rapport

Participants considered how theirs and the service users' characteristics, biases, and life *'can potentially change the rapport, the way you deal with people'* (Carl), and they recognised how these factors could influence both the probation practitioners' and service users' perception of one another – it was mentioned that sometimes these factors can act as *'straight barriers'* (Nicole) to building rapport. As such, participants highlighted needing to be aware of these factors to ensure they do not hinder rapport building and supervision:

'So I see it as two people entering the room with a backpack, I need to know what rocks are in my service users backpack and what rocks I'm carrying... a bad session is when both of you sit there throwing rocks at each other, a good session is when you take off your backpacks and you put them on the floor and you have an easy flowing conversation.' (Veronica)

Regarding practitioner perceptions, participants mentioned that a large barrier to rapport was that they sometimes developed negative biases based on service user case notes, which can cause them to pre-judge unfairly:

'...I went away and read his file and thought there is nothing positive about this guy... because he had that label and those negative sort of experiences and those negative hand overs, it was very much that's what he is...' (Bethany)

They also recognised that service users often hold negative biases too, such as being *'very racist... sexist... homophobic'* (Qianna), and practitioners had to be aware of how they could exacerbate those biases. For example, due to the high

prevalence of female probation practitioners and male service users, female participants reported sexist views towards women as a prevalent bias:

'...the sort of toxic masculinity they can hold over female practitioners can be very difficult to challenge when you are short and little, and you know wearing like maybe a dress or something.' (Qianna)

However, they also mentioned that successfully reflecting on and challenging those biases, and showing they are '*running that session*' (Qianna) was effective for gaining a service user's respect. Some characteristics (e.g., age) were also recognised as working in a practitioner's favour and effective for facilitating rapport building:

'...age works for me... my best place is auntie because your auntie is very rarely someone you hate so much that you're going to get into an attachment loop with, and it's someone you might take advice from...' (Veronica)

One of the most influential factors discussed by participants was attire, which was perceived by all to play a fundamental role in rapport building. Most participants felt that dressing too formally could damage the relationship between the probation practitioner and service user. They recognised that service users have often had '*people in authority telling them what to do*' (Harry) throughout their lives, and many '*have been victims to trauma*' (Anna). As such, formal wear could make the practitioner seem unrelatable and highlight a power imbalance, therefore disrupting rapport building. Formal wear was also considered by these participants to further exacerbate a service user's already existing distrust towards probation practitioners and the '*entity of criminal justice*' (Lydia):

'If I've got a service user who's street homeless, who's been back and forth on drugs whatever, and I'm sat there dressed in a suit, they're going to be like... "they don't know about my life, they've got no idea..." (Bethany)

For these participants, informal wear instead allowed practitioners to highlight that the service user was an equal in the supervision process and showed understanding towards them. However, a minority of participants promoted formal attire as it presented service users with a positive role model and inspired positive behavioural change, whereas informal wear gave the wrong impression to service users:

'...my view is how bloody difficult is it to wear a tie and shirt to work... you should be inspiring confidence... when I see officers in jeans, trainers and a t-shirt... sit in front of offenders and say, you know, "you really need to be like me"... really?!' (Carl)

Supporters of the latter view were primarily male and reported during the sessions coming from police backgrounds, whereas supporters of the former were primarily

female with years of experience in probation or other social work backgrounds. However, some participants instead reported that a probation practitioner's preferred dress code may not necessarily have the direct impact that participants discussed, but rather made them feel more comfortable, and '*when you feel comfortable you behave more comfortably, don't you?*' (Simon).

Theme 3: techniques for initial rapport building

Using their knowledge of rapport, participants considered how they built rapport, or attempted to, when first engaging with a service user. Participants recognised that at the beginning of the supervision process, '*some people can be really scared of what's happening... resistant and hostile*' (Bethany), and so probation practitioners have to '*get to know that one service user as quickly as possible to understand how to work with them*' (Lydia). As such, most participants reported simple non-verbal behaviours, such as handshaking, and verbal behaviours, such as greetings and personal conversation, as important for engaging with service users in the first instance and opening up deeper communication:

'...people underestimate how important it is just to say "hello, good morning, how are you?", because once I've done that they'll either smile or they'll grunt or they'll do something... and that allows me a way in.' (Tina)

Service users were reported to have spent large parts of their life incarcerated and outside of general society, therefore they '*haven't had a lot of experience with people showing an interest in them*' (Irene) or engaging with them positively. Thus, participants also considered it important to equip them with these transferable communication skills for future use:

'...I will ask my guys to stand up when I come into the room and sit down because I want them to be able to represent themselves well in the world... if he goes for job interviews I want him to stand up, be confident, hold his hand out...' (Veronica)

However, a minority of participants reported being wary of using certain behaviours with service users, as '*some of them obviously are very dangerous*' (Owen) and may use them to manipulate supervision:

'I find with, especially DV perps [domestic violence perpetrators], they'll shake your hand but they'll use it a little bit too hard or it's a way of them trying to establish power almost' (Bethany)

However, this may reflect biases these participants have towards service users rather than conscious attempts by service users to manipulate supervision. As expressed earlier, many service users do not '*have these little nuances that other people do*' (Veronica), and so may not understand the symbolic meaning behind particular verbal and non-verbal behaviours.

On top of immediacy behaviours, participants also discussed the importance of fully explaining the probation process to service users at the offset to set clear expectations, which establishes a mutual understanding between them and avoided later problems:

'I liken it to a game of chess... everyone's got moves to make but you do them in a particular set of rules... as long as you follow those rules and stick to the rules of that game, you start to build rapport.' (Carl)

Establishing clear boundaries and transparency was said to make it easier to challenge service users and carry out enforcement without damaging rapport, as the service user could predict the consequences of their actions:

'...I don't recall you; you recall you. You know what you're meant to be doing here, if you don't do that you know you're going to be recalled or breached, and that's on you.' (Bethany)

They also agreed that service users '*will respect the honesty and the openness*' (Qianna), and therefore it will help develop a trusting relationship. Without clarity, it was reported you could do irreversible damage to the relationship:

'I think in my history of [working with] offenders, they don't like being misled and if they feel that you've misled them either by admission or not being direct it will ruin every relationship that you've got with them from now on.' (Danielle)

As such, being clear and transparent from the offset of supervision was overwhelmingly regarded as a necessary element towards developing a strong relationship with a service user and limiting the disruption that other elements of supervision (e.g., enforcement) may have on the relationship, and may be key to allowing probation practitioners to navigate their dual role to the courts and their service users.

Theme 4: adapting to the service user

Participants discussed that after initial rapport building, they attempted to develop a deeper relationship with their service users by understanding and addressing their needs. They agreed that '*desistance is a journey*' (Mark), meaning it is unlikely service users will make rapid behavioural or life changes. As such, they stressed the importance of looking past maladaptive behaviours often presented by service users (e.g., swearing, substance misuse, time mismanagement) and identifying when gradual change is being made:

'...he's having a bit of a wibble, he's very unkempt, probably spilt half a can of Guinness down him just before he came in, but you know this is the best you'll ever get from him... this is him trying really hard...' (Owen)

Within this, they reported that these behaviours, while being disruptive to the supervision process and posing legitimate grounds for enforcement, were recognised by participants as often being *'the subconscious way that they [service users] have always lived their life'* (Qianna) and recognised that in these cases *'enforcement can actually set you back a bit'* (Mark). This may end up disrupting the rapport-building process, effective supervision, and positive behavioural change. As such, to make service users feel comfortable in supervision and ease them into a process of change, they mentioned making allowances for some mal-adaptive behaviours during supervision, but not condoning them:

'... for him to express himself, swearing was part of that. In here, I'm happy for you to express yourself that way, but outside you need to remember this will get you in trouble...' (Anna)

Allowances were also made for disabilities or mental health disorders some service users possessed:

'...if you're working with someone with ADHD, meet them outside, walk while you're talking so that their sensory motor issues are not undermining your capacity to build rapport... fresh air, gives a sense of being connected back to the world if that makes sense.' (Veronica)

However, participants specified that allowances should only be made when they could be achieved or maintained – breaking promises was said to be extremely detrimental for rapport:

'...you can really damage that relationship if you promise to bring them something... and then you turn around the next time and they're waiting for this big bit of help and you're like "oh yeh, maybe we'll do that next week".' (Owen).

Other participants also expressed apprehension towards making allowances as it could give service users the impression that the probation practitioner was a *'soft touch'*, which may lead them to abuse or manipulate those allowances and the relationship.

Additional to allowances, participants also discussed adapting to their service users by tailoring supervision to interests and needs and making them feel like an active agent in the probation process, as often they *'don't feel part of that decision making'* (Rita). As such, participants reported making an effort to include the service user's hobbies or interests into supervision tasks, giving them autonomy and making them a collaborative agent in the supervision process:

'... I always make sure that they have some personal things on there, such as get back into football as a hobby or get my driver's licence or something, and I always say to them, "this is your sentence... you can do it the way you want to do it..."' (Lydia)

Service users were said to have '*responsibility for their risk and their actions*' (Veronica) and were the only ones who could change their lives, but it was important for probation practitioners to guide them and keep them on the path towards change:

'Making them accountable to the things they told you, because they might have these big pipe dreams... but nobody has ever been interested enough to hear it and follow on with questions... Everyone likes to feel someone's interested...' (Danielle)

As such, participants discussed making supervision feel like a collaborative process for service users, and within that they reflected on several novel ways by which they included service users in supervision. For example, many participants reported getting service users to teach or explain to them something they are interested in and that has meaning to them, which '*boosts their self-esteem... they get a bit of power back in the situation*' (Ursula). Ethan recalled a particularly interesting example:

'...he was a member of the magic circle... he could do magic tricks... I said, "next time you come bring a pack of cards"... his eyes lit up and he actually seemed to be smiling and engaging whereas usually he would sit there looking like he wanted to kill himself... I tried to encourage him to go back to something he used to enjoy and used to make him feel good about himself...' (Ethan)

Theme 5: maintenance and barriers to rapport

As probation practitioners supervised service users for extended periods of time, participants also considered it important to maintain rapport, and they claimed that key to this was consistent supervision. Participants recognised the traumatic or unstructured lives many service users lived and that the practitioner may be one of the only constants in a service user's life. As such it was important that the practitioner could be depended on:

'...a lot of our clients, they've not had consistency throughout their lives, they've got a lot of attachment issues... if they're lucky to have an OM [Offender Manager] that can be there for more than two years then that is a positive for them...' (Gemma)

Reflection and support from colleagues/the organisation was also discussed as important for maintenance, as practitioners could gain insight into the effectiveness of their supervision which allowed them to persist in their demanding job role, especially with difficult service users:

'...if you're able to get out of that room, reflect and regroup with people who have an understanding, so you don't feel it's you, you know that it's just the complexities of that person, you're able to go back in and try again...' (Anna)

However, several participants stated reflection could lead to the realisation that they are not the right fit for a service user, perhaps due to their supervisory style

or characteristics. In some cases, they considered their continual presence as damaging towards their relationship with a service user, with negative feelings that developed also impacting other cases, and so moving these service users to a more suitable practitioner was considered beneficial:

'...you start thinking about that difficult client from the night before... and that can make you anxious and infect all your other caseloads as well... I've had three clients tell me, "naa me and you ain't going to work", then you know what that is completely fine... we will see if we can swap over.' (Danielle)

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that there is a plethora of organisational problems that hinder their ability to stay consistent in supervision. Most barriers revolved around staffing issues, as high workloads and a perceived lack of support led the organisation to '*haemorrhaging staff*' (Qianna), meaning service users were frequently being shifted between probation practitioners:

'I had one guy right and he had six different officers in two years, he didn't want to tell me nothing... he's been raw for somebody already, he's already exposed himself to somebody and that person has disappeared...' (Anna)

Shifting practitioners was also reported as common for service users who made positive behavioural change, but the shift could cause them to revert to more mal-adaptive modes of behaviour:

'I have taken over cases that... were on monthly reporting, so I can't say well I want you every week now, yeh, so I can get to know you, they're going to turn around say "well hang on a minute... I've done all this, I've earned my spurs now, you know I'm on monthly because I've been a good boy"...' (Carl)

Ultimately, participants felt the organisation made it difficult to engage in reflective practice and rapport building, as high workloads meant they are '*very short of... time*' (Carl) to do so. Probation was also often described as a '*dumping ground for... housing, mental health services*' (Carl), meaning that probation practitioners had to take on extra duties which left them with less time, energy, and resources to develop their relationship with service users. Some expressed that '*the training is crap!*' (Anna) and did not believe they were well-equipped to manage their myriad of responsibilities. As such, many participants felt under-supported by the probation service and claimed this was a large hinderance to building and maintaining rapport with service users, or engaging in effective supervision:

'...the organisation itself doesn't have a good rapport with its staff and in turn that affects the rapport we have with service users... It becomes this cycle of just ill feeling almost you know...' (Bethany)

Discussion

This study investigated the views of English probation practitioners from several London branches of the NPS regarding rapport building with service users, to understand what they believed rapport was, how they used it and whether these views aligned with the rapport-building literature. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate this topic using a cohort of probation practitioners based in England. Findings suggest that probation practitioners consider rapport to be essential for successful supervision and they use several methods to establish and maintain rapport with service users, which can be conceptualised as a rapport-building process.

It is evident from the findings that a one-size-fits-all approach to rapport building in this context does not exist (a sentiment shared by the literature, e.g., McNeill, 2009), as probation practitioners use their unique experiences and knowledge to follow the general stages of the process. This can partly be attributed to rapport-based supervision largely being neglected in probation research (Shapland et al., 2012), resulting in little guidance or training on how to consistently build rapport – this lack of guidance was reported by participants.

Participants also viewed rapport as being, by its very nature, a dynamic and mysterious interactional process. They know rapport when they experience it but cannot explain the nuanced way in which it develops, and this sentiment is often echoed by the literature (e.g., Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal, 1990). However, some participants reported that the mysterious nature of rapport allowed them to use their natural capacity to build rapport rather than it being a simple tick-box exercise, a robotic activity which has previously been criticised as accounting for a large proportion of probation work (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2011). Yet, participants reported that it was possible to learn rapport-building skills by reflecting on their experiences, as well as through support and discussion with colleagues that had similar or differing experiences. This indicates that probation practitioners could be trained to build rapport in some capacity, such as by teaching reflective skills and engaging in peer shadowing.

Probation practitioners work with diverse service users that differ in age, race and mental capacity, and many have had traumatic life experiences which have left them with poor mental health (Mackenzie et al., 2015) or difficulties socialising with others (Shapland et al., 2012). Accordingly, probation practitioners quickly gain experience of different types of service users, which they believed was fundamental for understanding and meeting the specific needs of both current and future service users. There is evidence that taking a needs-based, client-centred approach to supervision leaves service users feeling valued and that they are deriving something beneficial from supervision (Bottoms and Shapland, 2011; Farrall, 2002; Sturm et al., 2020), whereas they feel processed and unvalued when their needs are not considered (Leibrich, 1993). Here, participants mentioned that using this approach and being transparent in their methods allowed them to develop a strong and trusting relationship with service users, making them feel valued and comfortable to disclose information. Participants reported being able to use that information to guide their

service users towards positive behavioural change and they noticed significant (positive) differences in service users' behaviour when using this approach. Thus, a client-centred approach was considered integral to the rapport-building process, and this approach shares many similarities to the therapeutic, counselling and social work literature on rapport (Miller and Rollnick, 1991; Shapland et al., 2012).

However, some participants expressed discontent with this type of supervision, at least in its current format. Participants generally believed that due to the relative failure of other organisations (e.g., mental health or accommodation services), the burden to sort out service user problems usually fell to them, and oftentimes this fell outside of the remit of what they thought probation practitioners should be doing. Participants also expressed a lack of support, guidance, or training from the probation service towards meeting these service user needs, which is echoed by the literature (Robinson, 2014; Shapland et al., 2012). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that discussing certain issues, such as mental health or suicide, can develop secondary trauma for probation officers (Lewis et al., 2013), especially if they are untrained or unsupported in doing so (Mackenzie et al., 2015). Due to this, officers may miss opportunities to support their service users, be ineffective at addressing their needs, or cause harm to themselves or the service user, all of which can be damaging towards effectively developing a relationship with service users (Lewis et al., 2013). Considering the link between rapport building and service users discussing/making positive behavioural change and reducing reoffending (Chamberlain, 2018; McMurrin, 2009), the current barriers to rapport building in probation indicate that practitioners may not be able to effectively guide their service users towards positive behavioural change, and this may leave the service user, the practitioner and the wider public at risk of harm.

Participants discussed other barriers to building rapport with service users, such as a probation practitioner's and service user's biases. Here, it was explained that practitioners can have pre-conceived ideas about their service users which may cause them to unfairly judge them, but also that service users bring their own set of ideas and experiences into supervision that can cause them to be biased towards the practitioner; although, these were discussed as not necessarily being conscious. Unconscious bias is well documented and it has been shown that these biases can have a large impact, particularly negatively, on how we behave and make decisions (Greenwald and Banaji, 1995).

In the police literature, biases towards suspects (e.g., due to the crime committed) can influence whether police officers build rapport or engage in empathic behaviour (Collins and Carthy, 2019). For example, research has shown that people who have committed a sexual offence consider their interview to be confrontational and lacking in rapport (Holmberg and Christianson, 2002), and where rapport is absent information yield is lower (Collins and Carthy, 2019). Similarly, participants in our study expressed the fact that similar biases can creep into their supervision and so they stressed the importance of reflective practice to understand these biases. Furthermore, they reflected on how elements of their character, such as their gender or attire, could impact on how service users engaged with them – they attempted to limit elements of their character that exacerbated service user

biases (e.g., formal attire), but also attempted to capitalise on elements that facilitated rapport (e.g., their age). Reflection is described in the literature as a key element of rapport building and effective probation practice (Clark et al., 2006), and it is found in probation tools such as SEEDS (Robinson, 2014). Evidently, participants considered reflective practice to be important, but again a lack of support to engage in reflection was reported, which may hinder their ability to build rapport with service users.

To conclude, this study intended to investigate the views and uses of rapport by English probation practitioners when interviewing service users. The findings indicate that they follow a multi-faceted process towards rapport building, however, each individual practitioner has their own specific techniques for building rapport within that process. There were disagreements between participants regarding what clothes to wear during supervision, what allowances to make for service users, or whether a practitioner should share personal information or not, amongst others, but these data do not give indication regarding which of these techniques are appropriate or effective for building rapport in practice. Rather, these data show that every practitioner crafts a unique role in probation that works for them based on their characteristics and their previous interactions and experiences with both service users and other practitioners, and they attempt to reflect on practice where possible in order to refine that role. As such, this study provides a useful first step towards understanding the general process of rapport building in this context. Considering the reported benefits of rapport for guiding positive behavioural change in service users, and the potential this has for ensuring service user and public safety, we provide several recommendations for practitioners, the probation service and researchers to consider to facilitate the rapport-building process and help these outcomes come to fruition.

Recommendations

Firstly, due to the myriad organisational issues participants reported, probation practitioners generally believed that they were not adequately equipped or supported to meet the needs of their service users and build rapport effectively in practice. While relationship-building is recognised as an element of good probation practice by frameworks such as SEEDS, research has shown that probation practitioners often feel this is an element lacking within training (Robinson, 2014), which echoes the views of participants in this study. As such, the probation service should make a concerted effort to identify and understand these issues, and should ensure that they provide effective training and retraining to support practitioners to build rapport with service users. Due to the reported importance of experiential learning for rapport, training should also aim to draw on the views and experiences of other probation practitioners.

Concerning practitioners themselves, an important aspect to successful supervision that participants discussed was awareness of themselves and the service user and what they each brought into the interview room which influenced rapport, as well their ability to reflect on these experiences. While practitioners report barriers

to reflective practice, we recommend that they do attempt to engage in reflection and understand the ways in which they may be hindering, but also facilitating rapport, allowing them to limit negative influences and accentuate positives. Again, this is an element of probation training (Robinson, 2014), but the probation service also needs to alleviate current organisational barriers that hinder a practitioner's ability to reflect (e.g., high workloads).

The limitations of the current findings must also be considered. The qualitative nature of this study, while providing a useful and important indication of how probation practitioners conceptualise and use rapport, gives no indication of whether this process is followed in practice or whether it is effective. Future research should aim to conduct observational studies that assess how this process is used in practice, as well as experimental research that investigates the utility of the techniques and methods reported here. Studies to this effect have been conducted in other countries (e.g., see Raynor et al., 2014) and in the police interviewing literature (see Vallano and Compo, 2015 for a review) and can provide the basis for this research. Furthermore, this study did not take into account the views of service users. Given that rapport is considered to be a two-way process between interviewer and interviewee, it would be important for future research to understand how service users conceptualise and engage in rapport building, which can give a more in-depth picture of the rapport-building process in probation.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

Declaration of ethics

This research was approved by the University of Westminster ethics committee (ETH1819-0583) on 24th May 2019 and the National Probation Service ethics committee (2018–265) on 10th January 2019.

Declaration of interest statement

No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

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