

Practitioner perspectives on working with young women in the criminal justice sphere: the importance of relationships

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Abstract

This research briefing paper outlines the accounts of practitioners experiences of working with young women in a variety of settings related to criminal justice in Scotland. It focuses upon their relationships with young women, highlighting the importance of these to their work, the emotional labour and skill involved, and the challenges to building and maintaining them within a context of structural constraints.

Key findings

- Inter-personal relationships are hugely influential in the pathways of young women in contact with the criminal justice system, particularly because of their age and gender.
- Leaving the care system can have a number of impacts upon young women which can lead to criminal justice system contact, suggesting a need for increased and prolonged support.
- Positive relationships with practitioners are key to working successfully with young women.
- The actions that go into building and maintaining professional relationships with young women often have multiple purposes, both functional and emotional.
- Professional relationships that can span the locked setting and the community are considered very important for working with young women.
- There can be a predominant focus upon young women being 'difficult', rather than also highlighting the external factors that make the work challenging.
- The lack of appropriate transitional support for young women leaving prison or secure care impacts upon practitioner decision-making, leading to more risk-averse decisions.
- The emotional labour of practitioners is a neglected area in research, policy and practice, but one that impacts upon their relationships with young women.
- The skills of practitioners in building and maintaining relationships with young women are not always acknowledged, meaning their work can be under-valued and under supported.
- Relationship-based practice between practitioners and young women needs to be viewed in a wider network of support and opportunities.



Background

Having been the ‘forgotten few’ for many years (Burman and Batchelor, 2009: 280), girls and young women who enter secure care or prison have begun to receive more attention, with a growing body of research highlighting their particular experiences and needs. Yet there is still limited research exploring what appropriate provision for young women should look like, and programmes and initiatives designed to specifically meet the gender- and age-specific needs of this group remain small in number. This population of young women is not easy to quantify, not only because it is difficult to define who is included in such a group, but also because available data is not always broken down by both gender and age¹. In Scotland, limited snapshot data tells us:

- In the prison system, as of 30 June 2013 there were 27 young women aged under 21, compared to 560 young men (Scottish Government, 2015)².
- In the secure accommodation sector, on 31 July 2018 45 residents (53 percent) were girls or young women (Children’s Social Work Statistics Scotland, 2017–18).

Whilst these may sound like small numbers, they obscure the fact that due to short periods of remand or time spent in secure care, this population of young women changes regularly. These figures also exclude far larger numbers of young women who are seen as ‘at risk’ of criminal justice contact, or who are being supported either to prevent them going into secure care or custody or after they have come out. As a result, these small documented numbers do not provide an accurate representation of the true figures. When this population of young women is viewed as a small group, it is easier for their specific needs to be overlooked or ignored in related policy and practice.

Many young women who come into contact with the criminal justice system have histories of extensive traumas of different kinds. They are likely to have experienced abusive, coercive or exploitative relationships, and have often had few positive interpersonal relationships (Batchelor and Burman, 2004; Batchelor, 2007; Schliehe, 2014; Sharpe, 2012). These young women are also more likely than young men to have a history of

spending time in the care system (Fitzpatrick et al, 2019), with more than half of those in prison or secure care having had some kind of previous referral to social services (Arnall and Eagle, 2009).

Previous research has shown that positive relationships with practitioners are key to enabling young women to engage in the complex work that is often needed to address their varied psychological and social needs (e.g. Bateman and Hazel, 2014; Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice, 2013; HMI Probation, 2014). Relationships with practitioners have the potential to serve as a model for positive interpersonal relationships, demonstrating ways of resolving conflicts to enable young women to sustain important sources of support. As well as helping to maintain and (re)build healthier relational bonds (Robinson and Ryder, 2014), relationships with practitioners also have the potential to address the current living situations of young women, and help them find and engage with solutions to difficulties they are experiencing.

¹ Scottish Prison Service weekly prison population figures give the number of women and men in prison, and separate to this, the number of people in prison by age group, meaning that it is not possible to ascertain on a regular basis how many young women are being held.

² These are the most recent official prison statistics published for Scotland.



Whilst arguments about the essential role of positive relationships with practitioners may be well rehearsed, the complexities of these relationships and their implications are not always given due attention in research, policy and practice. The following factors often go unsaid or understated:

- the detail of the steps involved in building such relationships
- the support that conducting such relationships requires
- the skills needed to conduct this work
- the necessary surrounding societal conditions (for example, organisational funding, job security and political will)

These factors all affect the quality and potential of relationships. There has been limited research exploring the experiences of the practitioners who conduct this work, and this research highlights their valuable insights, influence and support needs.

The research study

This briefing paper is drawn from doctoral research (conducted during 2015–2016) which explored practitioners' experiences of working with young women who were in contact with the criminal justice system or secure care estate, or who were considered 'at risk' of this. Fifty practitioners (42 women and eight men) from across Scotland took part in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. In this paper, the term 'practitioner' is used as a broad term to describe those working in positions that involve regular face-to-face contact with young women. These were people working within secure care and prison, or in social work and community-based projects to support young women upon leaving custody, or to try to prevent them from going (back) into custody. Their roles included key/case workers, psychologists, social workers and managers. The interviews explored their beliefs about young women's pathways into secure care or prison, their perceptions about the young women's needs, and their experiences of working with them. The girls and young women ranged in age from 12 to 21 years, which reflects the varying age brackets of secure care (12–18 years), prison (16–21 years) and the services that support young women either side of these.



Key findings

The significance of relationships to young women

Practitioners from across the different settings highlighted the way in which age and gender intersect to ascribe a particular importance to relationships for young women. They understood that young women's inter-personal relationships – both in their presence and their absence – are hugely influential in their pathways to criminal justice contact. Youth is a critical time for maturation, development and transition, and during this stage, relationships, identification and connection with family members and with peers are particularly influential (Salahu-Din and Bollman, 1994).

In accordance with existing studies (for example, Bateman and Hazel, 2014), the research suggested that young women place greater emphasis upon the significance of friendships than do young men, meaning that such friendships have more potential to be a source of conflict if problems arise. Several practitioners said acceptance by friends appeared to be more important than any consequences of what they did together. Brian, manager of a community support project, described how: *'they [young women] just think, well these are my pals and this is what we do...and if something happens when you get blasted, well that's just the way of it and who cares?'* Despite this increasing importance of relationships outside the family, many

practitioners felt that young women were more likely than young men to continue to rely upon family relationships: *'she disclosed stuff about what was going on in the family home and that resulted in her being ostracized from the family home, however she always ended up going back.'* (Margaret, social worker). Leaving the care system could mean returning to live, or reuniting, with birth families, and several interviewees emphasised the destabilising effect that this could have: *'she was really angry that mum just sort of appeared when she was 16 and expected her to just get on with life.'* (Laura, social worker). This reuniting with, or relying upon families was described as a potential contributor to criminal justice contact. This was for a variety of reasons, such as family conflict, financial strain, or the family itself having criminal justice system involvement.

Several practitioners drew attention to how young women living in care were often used to very supportive relationships. Leaving this support behind when moving on from care sometimes meant they struggled to live the independent life that seemed to be required of them: *'one minute you are a child in care who's getting more than is good for you on one level in the material sense, and the next minute you're just in a total mess.'* (Elaine, manager, community support project). Transitions, whether to or from the care system, secure care or prison, can mean the disruption of relationships, leading to loneliness and isolation. This was described as a push factor for some young women towards abusive or unhealthy partner or peer relationships. Isolation was also seen as contributing to potential institutionalisation, as the social support and company young women could access in secure care or prison was often absent from their everyday lives: *'they've always got somebody on shift that they can talk to, whereas when they leave, that is just vastly reduced. We have seen young girls do things in an attempt to return.'* (Gillian, psychologist, secure care).

Transitions within and between services also meant multiple experiences of receiving support from different professionals, institutions and agencies. Several practitioners viewed this as detrimental, recognising the role that this may play in understanding why young women may be wary of new practitioners: *'they've had many, many workers, they invest in a relationship, then either that worker moves on, or they don't fit into that service anymore, so they get moved on somewhere else, so they don't want to invest initially too much into a new relationship.'* (Nancy, key worker, community).

Many practitioners articulated that in the context of what was often both a historic and current lack of positive relationships for these young women, developing consistent and trusting relationships with them was key to the work. Practitioners said having these positive relationships was vital for enabling young women to engage with and utilise the support they were offering, in order to prevent or move away from criminal justice contact. Having such close relationships also allowed them to quickly identify when a young woman was struggling, or might experience a change in her circumstances that could leave her vulnerable.



Building and maintaining relationships

The approach described by practitioners, of placing the relationship at the heart of the work, is often described as 'relationship-based practice'. Whilst this is a concept with varying definitions, practice that works 'in and with the relationship' (Ruch, Turney and Ward, 2010:16) fits with the ethos that was described in most interviews in this research. Talking to practitioners about their day-to-day work revealed a complexity in how their relationship-based practice with young women is enacted. The processes that were involved were deliberate and calculated and required sufficient time. The research found that their relationships had a multi-layered nature to them. Practical actions, such as the provision of multiple cups of tea, making phone calls on behalf of the young women, and providing accompaniment to meetings, appointments and court dates, did all have obvious and useful functional purposes. However, these actions were also displays of emotional support, care and commitment, and furthermore, provided positive inter-personal relationships models. Hayley (team manager, social work) illustrated how a small, simple act was seen as crucial to demonstrate to young women that they are valued and respected: *'I say to my team, if a young person arrives at the door, get up off that chair, and go and take an interest in that young person, and learn their name firstly. That's our mantra, that the young person is valued.'*

Young women were often described as 'testing' practitioners especially during the early stages of relationships, and so practitioners needed to demonstrate reliability, consistency or 'stickability'. This was understood as arising from previous experiences of being let down by many people. Showing genuine interest in the young woman and her concerns, preferences and needs was an important sign of respect as well as having practical value. For example, June, a community-based mentor, described the painstaking work that she put into establishing

relationships with young women: *'I spend as much time as I can trying to work out how I can help them, what help they get from everyone else, and then, where I fit into that.'* Some practitioners described how making use of situations of crisis gave them opportunities to show that they 'were there' for the young woman. Being able to provide or offer long-term support, without arbitrary cut-off points (such as age limits), was seen as motivational in the engagement process.

Practitioners from all settings said that flexibility within the relationship was very important, although the nature of this obviously differed from locked settings to community-based practice. However, across the board this meant that young women were able to determine the terms of their engagement with a service to some extent, so that they had some autonomy and agency in the relationship – particularly important given the increasing independence that usually comes with age. In community-based settings, being able to engage, dis-engage and re-engage was seen as helpful - a process that has been described as 'negotiated connection' (Drake et al, 2014). As described in other research (Bateman and Hazel, 2014), to aid transitions, many practitioners also felt that professional relationships that span the locked setting and the community were optimal, rather than ones that were compartmentalised. Some practitioners, particularly those from social work or community settings, were able to do this by working with young women in prison or secure care, and then continuing those relationships once back in the community.

The complexities of relationship-based practice with young women are revealed by the research. The actions that go into building and maintaining relationships with young women often have multiple purposes, both functional and emotional. Qualities that are key to the success of these relationships include flexibility and potential for longevity.

Contextualising the difficulty of the work

By illustrating the different steps involved in building and maintaining relationships, the research shows that relationship-based practice is not simple. Indeed, working with this population of young women was described as challenging by many participants in this study. It would perhaps be easy to relate this directly to the gendered narrative of 'difficult young women' that previous research has shown, which finds them described as being 'attention seeking', 'too emotional', 'bearing grudges' and 'manipulative' (Baines and Alder, 1996; Gelsthorpe and Worral, 2009; Burman and Batchelor, 2009; Sharpe, 2012). In this research, however, the majority of practitioners objected to such labels, and instead contextualised the challenges of the work. Several voiced other explanations for 'difficult' behaviours, such as: *'You'll hear words like, "they're controlling, they're manipulative", and I'm like, no, they're care seeking, or this is how they've learnt to solve problems'* (Sarah, psychology specialist, secure care). Another common view was that involvement with many different workers may have encouraged so-called 'manipulative behaviour': *'they'll play off somebody off another person'* (Eva, manager, community support project).

Practitioners also gave explanations for finding the work with young women difficult that were related to external factors. These included issues that were connected to the individual practitioner, such as a lack of previous experience or appropriate training, having often worked previously only with men: *'we've had girls on campus for about three years, and we have still staff who've a fear of working with females.'* (Joanne, managerial, secure care). However, many of the factors that made the relationships more difficult were related to organisational constraints, such as case loads, resource and support issues. Some organisations lacked the right conditions for meaningful relationships to be built, such as time and working environment. Several practitioners also depicted insecure working conditions caused by funding issues, or changes to policy, linking the difficulty of the work to systemic or structural factors, for example: *'we used to have weekend workers who were an integral part of the team.... But again, as a cost saving, they went.'* (Donna, manager, community support project).

The difficulties experienced due to organisational and systemic or structural factors were exacerbated by the age and gender of the population of young women. For example, as described previously, many practitioners felt that transitional services from secure care or prison were inadequate. This meant they struggled with decisions over the young women's futures because they saw them as particularly vulnerable due to their age and gender: *'time in secure [care] can become quite elongated, because people are just anxious, and it's our anxiety that keeps a lot of girls locked up, I think, a lot of the time.'* (Alan, managerial, social work). This fear of a lack of onward support for young women can mean that practitioners suggest prolonged stays in secure care. Gendered ideas of difficulty, and of vulnerability and perceived neediness for care and protection, appeared to drive patterns of action – whether conscious or not – towards longer stays in state custody and towards risk-averse decisions. It appeared that this population of young women was viewed as more vulnerable than young men, impacting upon the ways in which they are treated.

Practitioners drew attention to organisational and systemic factors when describing why they found the work difficult which is an important finding because the influence of these external factors is often minimised when there is an emphasis on the young women themselves 'being difficult'. Making the working relationships easier requires organisations and state level actors to address these external constraints. Furthermore, exploring such perceptions challenges the label of one 'difficult' group and contributes to the recognition of young women and their experiences and needs as individuals.



Gendered emotional labour

As the previous sections have illustrated, building and maintaining these working relationships is a considered and skilled practice. The interviews revealed that practitioners deliberately managed their emotions in order to do their work. This has been termed 'emotional labour' (for example, see Hochschild, 2003). Emotional labour involves being able to intentionally utilise emotions for certain purposes, induce and use emotions that may not exist, and to suppress emotions that are not helpful to the aim of the work. For example, Nancy (key worker in a community support project) described how when things do not go to plan for young women, her empathy demonstrates that she cares for them, and also acts as self-motivation to continue helping them: *'sharing the disappointment with the girls sometimes is a good thing, because they can see that you genuinely do care for them as well. If I didn't get disappointed every time something went wrong for the girls, I think I would be in the wrong job to be honest.'*

A gendered element to the emotional labour of working with young women was apparent in the research. Whilst the need to 'nurture and care' was seen as an important approach regardless of gender, several practitioners viewed this as particularly relevant for young women, a belief that seemed to be based upon viewing them as more vulnerable and emotionally needy: *'they need a more intensive service, they need a more nurturing service [than young men]'* (Carrie, social worker). However, this expectation of care from practitioners also resonates with traditional gender stereotypes, where it is seen as 'natural' that women should have these 'mothering' skills (Acker, 1995). Most of the interviewees were women³ (though this was not intentional), which may fit with the finding that women are more likely to be involved in work that involves emotional labour (Stalker et al, 2007; James, 1989).

³ Of the 50 people interviewed, 42 were women. This was not by design; the sample was shaped by those who responded to requests for interviews. I do not claim that this is a representative sample of the work force, but discussions with various interviewees suggest that it may be indicative of the higher number of women working with young women, although this varied from setting to setting.



The skills of emotional labour that go into this work often seemed to be invisible, as they are often seen as 'natural' abilities which has also been found in other settings (for example, Steinberg and Figart, 1999). Many interviews revealed a belief that seemed to be associated with working with this population – that it was an innate 'natural ability', personality or even luck that resulted in successful working practices. Whilst a personal connection clearly is very important, reducing this to luck or chance does not do justice to the skills involved in the work. Processes often, misleadingly, were described in ways that sounded simple, hiding the detail and planning behind each stage of the relationship: *'we have a period of time where we're just relationship building and responding to appointments, we'll spend time, get a cup of tea, just spend time getting to know them.'* (Lorraine, manager, community support project). However, in conducting this research, the huge amount of effort that many practitioners put into their relationships with young women was apparent.

For example, many practitioners described how demonstrating care was a key part of their role, which they did intentionally and purposefully: *'our goal is to show these girls that we care and not to give up on them...'* (Helena, managerial, social work), through deliberate strategies such as using *'language that represents that you care.'* (Joanne, managerial, secure care). This ability to convincingly show care, whether authentic or not, requires and demonstrates practitioners' skills.

The invisibility, or lack of recognition, of some of the skills involved in emotional labour can mean that the work can be both under-valued and under-supported. Indeed, the performance of emotional labour has been found to have numerous negative effects on the wellbeing of employees, including vicarious traumatisation, burnout, fatigue and cynicism (for example, see Burman, Robinson and Crowley, 2018; Bonach and Heckert, 2012; Puthooppambal, 2015).

Impacts of the work upon practitioners

As discussed, the research showed that many practitioners experienced their work with young women as difficult, but not simply for the reasons that are typically associated with this group. The interviews illustrated that an emphasis is placed upon relationships as being pivotal to the work, and that practitioners are required to use emotional labour to build these. Yet having close personal connections increases the potential for the practitioner (and young woman) to feel distress in the event that anything negative happens within their relationship or more generally within the life of the young woman, or if the relationship is cut short for some reason.

Demonstrating care towards young women is a key part of the role of practitioners, but too much emotional attachment was described as compounding the difficulty of the work. Feeling accountable or responsible for certain outcomes could result in practitioners experiencing emotional discomfort: *'who wants to be the person that makes the decision to, you know, let a girl out, and then the next day she kills herself, something awful happens? It's very hard, you know, on the decision makers.'* (Alan, managerial, social work). With such personal investment through the provision of emotional labour, there were clear implications for practitioners of perceived success or failure.

Many practitioners felt that the work was made more difficult because their own support mechanisms at work were inadequate. The research found that across the range of settings, informal support was often considered more important and useful than formal support mechanisms: *'We're a small team, and we're a close team, and you ring up and "I need to rant", so we have a lot of support for each other.'* (Nancy, key worker, community). This often appeared to be in the context of limited availability of formal support mechanisms, sometimes a lack of organisational acknowledgement of the importance of these, and for some, a reluctance to engage. A barrier to some practitioners accessing formal support mechanisms was described as not wanting to be seen as needing support, for fear of being seen to lack control or as being useless: *'this is a bravado job – you can't be seen to be weak.'* (Andy, prison officer).

Whilst informal support can provide a crucial opportunity for reflection (Ingram and Smith, 2018), this can mean that the emotional labour of practitioners extends to their colleagues; meaning that staff who are already providing emotional support to young women are tasked, albeit unofficially, with supporting one another. One prison officer described how he felt they had little in the way of useful formal support, but

that they *'have each other'* (Jon, prison officer). This was not always the fault of the individual organisation, as often wider structures around it were not conducive to providing better support mechanisms.

In conducting relationship-based practice, reflection and reflexivity are critically important (Ingram and Smith, 2018), but these rely upon space being carved out during the working day, and dedicated supervision time. This research indicated that supervision is usually a space where both management issues and support issues are discussed, with the emphasis often being upon management of cases, because of time constraints. The support and reflection functions were often sidelined: *"As a service here, we've been very reluctant to engage in reflective practice...the staffing is so pressured that they don't have time to reflect."* (Dee, psychologist, secure care).

Negative emotional consequences were sometimes experienced, both by practitioners and young women, when the working environment constrained the potential for positive relationship building. It is crucial that relationship-based practice between practitioners and young women is viewed in a wider network of support and opportunities.

Conclusion

The research demonstrates the painstaking steps taken by practitioners working in the criminal justice sphere in Scotland to build and maintain relationships with young women who are involved in or seen to be at risk of offending. Careful consideration needs to be given to assumptions about the nature and needs of young women in criminal justice and related services – as these assumptions can shape policies and practices. Drawing upon the shared perceptions and experiences of practitioners from different organisations and roles, the research draws the following conclusions and raises questions that can feed into future efforts:

1. Relationship-based practice between practitioners and young women needs to be situated within a wider understanding of (i) the influence and impacts of young women's inter-personal relationships; (ii) their individual backgrounds and experiences (particularly the care system) and (iii) how it can connect young women to wider networks of support.

- As also described by others (for example, Batchelor and McNeill, 2002), relationships with practitioners can effect change for young women, but only alongside the provision of opportunities – personal, social and economic – and the means to partake in these.
- Young women need to have some agency and autonomy within their relationships with practitioners, as this is important in the developmental process and the transition from childhood to adulthood.
- Greater acknowledgement of the age and developmental stage of young women needs to be made within the criminal justice system when considering and responding to the actions of young women.

- How can we all, including researchers, services and policymakers, avoid labelling young women and narratives about them?
- What do/should appropriate supportive and/or transitional services for young women in the community look like?

- **2. A lack of recognition of the emotional labour of this type of work and inadequate support mechanisms in place for practitioners increases the difficulty of the work. The research reveals the delicate structures around the practitioner-young woman relationship, and the organisational and structural influences and constraints to these (for example, funding, caseloads and availability of supervision).**

- The interview accounts portrayed the impact of the relationships with young women upon practitioners. Negative impacts were sometimes experienced which related both to traumatic experiences that the young women have often faced, but also to the state and organisational demands placed upon practitioners. Varying levels of training, resources and support were all factors that affected whether a negative impact was experienced.
- Emphasising the importance of the relationship at the expense of ignoring any negative impacts it might have upon the practitioner means that in the long term, the relationship may be disrupted.
- These professional relationships are pivotal to working with young women. To ensure they are effective and successful requires consideration of how they are shaped, and where they sit in the wider web of institutional and structural relationships and connections.

- How can the wide-ranging factors that contribute to the difficulty of working with young women be properly acknowledged and addressed in the planning and funding of this work?
- What do practitioners see as appropriate and meaningful training, support and acknowledgement of their skills and commitment, and how can we ensure that this takes place?

As has been found to be common in the employment of emotional labour – and more so in this case because it is gendered – the skills used in the work with young women were sometimes invisible. By detailing the work of practitioners and making their abilities visible, the research acknowledges the skills required by the work, and encourages proper recognition and support.



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