

Report: 'Circles of Support and Accountability' talk on Monday June 11th, 2018

A talk about the work of Circles of Support was given by Pauline Rousseau and Sarah Radford. Pauline is the Practice Manager of Circles Southwest which is an independent charity working with people who have been convicted of sexual offences; more recently the work has been extended to work with adults with intellectual disabilities and young people with harmful sexual behaviour. Sarah is the volunteer coordinator for Circles which operates in Bristol, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire.

The evening began with attendees being asked to discuss, in small groups, what sexual offending meant to them. Responses to this question allowed for a wide-ranging discussion during which Pauline and Sarah filled in gaps with key facts and statistics. Circles works with people who have offended against children, adults and with on-line paedophiles. Some offences involve contact and some non-contact. Circles mostly work with men but women can also be offenders. A definition of a paedophile was offered as being someone who had an enduring sexual attraction for pre-pubescent children. For approximately 1% of the population their primary sexual attraction is children. Pauline commented that very few people would want to have children as their permanent attraction given how taboo this behaviour is. Very few core Circles members are paedophiles, some are non-offending paedophiles. It is not necessarily helpful to think in terms of a 'cure' for this kind of behaviour as a sexual attraction for children is not an illness. It is a behaviour and how this behaviour can be changed is a key question for the organisation. Neuroscientists have been researching the ways in which the brain is wired and whether this can have an impact on people's behaviour. There are unanswered questions as to whether paedophilia is hard wired or whether perpetrators were abused as children. Neglect, sexual and emotional abuse can lead people to struggle to have an appropriate relationship with an adult. However, people can also be in an adult sexual relationship as well as craving relationships with children. Circles also deals with the sexual abuse of adults; Pauline and Sarah noted that rape is a form of sexual abuse which is about power and not sexual gratification.

Some Statistics:

18% of the sentenced prison population are serving sentences for sexual offences (MoJ 2018).

Last year saw the the highest number of offenders convicted of rape and other sexual offences. (CPS 2018)

5,000 people living in the S.W. of England are on the sex offenders' register (MoJ 2017).

Two thirds of perpetrators of sexual abuse have suffered sexual abuse within the family environment.

The Underpinnings of the work of Circles

The organisation of Circles of Support and Accountability sees itself as the eyes and ears of the community. It was established in 2008 and there are now 16 projects in England and Wales. It supports the work of mainstream agencies and has its origins in the principles underpinning Restorative Justice and Restorative Practice. Understanding and applying Desistance theory is key to supporting people in maintaining a non-offending life style, (Maruna 2001) and the organisation uses key theories from the 'Good Lives Model' (Ward and Stewart 2003).

The foundation of the work of Circles is to give ex-offenders the opportunity to have a stake in the community as to ignore, marginalise and exclude people will raise the risk that they will commit further harm. Taking part in a Circle gives them the opportunity for reparation. Ex-offenders are often moved to areas where they don't know anyone; if they become isolated that will give them an opportunity to re-offend. Ex-offenders sign up to take part in a Circle because they want to re-examine their behaviour and start again; this is what the term 'Accountability' refers to. Circles of Support does not have the resources to support people and prevent offending behaviour (Primary Prevention). The Lucy Faithful Foundation is the only organisation which offers support for potential abusers as well as support for their families and friends. Pauline and Sarah acknowledged the need for organisations to support victims but there are resourcing issues which make this remit beyond the scope of Circles. As part of their Youth Project work, Circles of Support also works with young people who are displaying harmful sexual behaviour in order to prevent future harm.

Circles has 9 staff members and 150 volunteers across the South West. A participating ex-offender is called a Core Member (CM). Circles works in close collaboration with prisons, police and the probation service who refer ex-offenders to the service. Those referred are the most needy and high risk offenders. The National Probation Service is responsible for sex offenders; the privatised sector does not deal with this kind of offender. The issue of funding for the organisation was mentioned in the context of cuts to probation service funding. At the time of the talk there was some uncertainty about aspects of funding allocated to Circles.

How Does a Circle of Accountability work?

A circle will comprise 4/5 community volunteers who have undertaken a 2-day training, DBS checks and have to submit references. The CM taking part will generally have served a prison sentence and undertake a sex offender programme in prison. The meetings take place monthly over a 12-month period of time giving volunteers time to get to know the CM. Volunteers will share information from the sessions with agencies involved with the CM. The term accountability is key as a CM can be recalled to prison if they share something with volunteers that may be related to future offending. CMs can become volunteers, which is important in terms of helping with issues of isolation and gaining employment – always problematic for those with a criminal record. Volunteers meet for half an hour before and debrief for half an hour after a session (Circle). This is important as sex offenders can be very

manipulative. Coordinators offer supervision for volunteers as well as on-going training. This work is not the same as Restorative Justice as it is the volunteers who are the community although most sex offenders who undertake a Circle have done the offender/victim programme.

Technology and Research

Pauline and Sarah described the difficulties that the Criminal Justice System (CJS) faces when dealing with this kind of criminal activity as technology has outstripped the current ability of the CJS to track and convict offenders. Some work is being done by a GCHQ task force.

Research and Efficacy of the approach

It was stated that in the last 10 years, figures concerning re-offending rates show that only one person who took part in a Circle has re-offended. It is beyond the scope of this report to state how that figure compares with the national average and those who have not taken part in a Circle of Support and Accountability

The evening ended with the screening of a film which acts as a platform for information giving and a tool for recruiting volunteers to the organisation. The whole evening was inspiring and thought provoking with good levels of discussion facilitated by Pauline and Sarah.

Bibliography

Maruna, S., (2001), *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild their Lives*, Washington DC: American Psychological Association.

Ward, T., and Stewart, C. A. (2003), 'The treatment of sex offenders: Risk management and good lives', *Professional Psychology, Research and Practice*, 34, pp. 353-60