

# **Are Cognitive Problem-solving Skills Programmes Really Not Working? A Response to 'Evaluating Evidence for the Effectiveness of the Reasoning and Rehabilitation Programme'**

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*Abstract: Many believe that offenders are involved in criminal activities because they make poor decisions. Accordingly, problem-solving skills programmes have been delivered to literally thousands of offenders on both sides of the Atlantic. In 'Evaluating evidence for the effectiveness of the Reasoning and Rehabilitation Programme' (Wilkinson 2005), the authors cite outcome research suggesting that involvement in Reasoning and Rehabilitation does not significantly reduce reoffending in comparison to untreated control subjects. This article proposes that it may not be the underlying premise that is faulty. Rather, it is possible that a proliferation of cognitive-behavioural interventions, most of which include aspects of problem-solving skills development, has washed out any potential differences. Simply put, being managed in a cognitive-behavioural framework that adheres to the principles of effective correctional interventions (for example, Andrews and Bonta 2003) affords offenders an opportunity to develop better problem-solving skills.*

Recent evidence has surfaced on both sides of the Atlantic challenging the efficacy of programmes seeking to increase cognitive problem-solving skills (for example, Cognitive Living Skills, Reasoning and Rehabilitation (R&R)) in offender populations. For the most part, this evidence relies on comparisons of reoffence rates between offenders who completed programming versus those who did not. A failure to find a significant decrease in the recidivism rates of 'programmed' offenders has been interpreted as a failure, on the part of the programmes evaluated, to impact offender conduct post-release. However, these findings may not be an indication of failure on the part of an individual programme so much as they are the result of overall increases in the use of best practice models in managing offenders.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Martinson (1974) and his colleagues told us that 'nothing works' and, at the time, there appeared to be some compelling evidence to that effect. In response, correctional programmers sought to counter this argument by demonstrating that offender recidivism rates could be lowered, provided that certain principles of effective correctional interventions were employed. However, little comprehensive research had been conducted in this vein and, necessarily, the first step in the 'What Works?' revolution was to define those principles.

In Canada, the leaders of the charge in defining acceptable rehabilitative practices in criminal justice settings were Don Andrews and Jim Bonta. In their seminal contribution, *The Psychology of Criminal Conduct*, Andrews and Bonta (2003) present meta-analytic results which, ultimately, lead to certain prescriptions regarding formulation of effective community risk-management protocols. According to Andrews and Bonta, an effective risk-management plan is one that: (i) matches intensity of treatment with the assessed level of risk; (ii) specifically targets criminogenic needs identified during the assessment, and (iii) ensures that treatment is offered in a manner that is sensitive to the personal characteristics and abilities of the offender.

Early reviews of the Cognitive Living Skills programme in Canada (the precursor to R&R) suggested that the programme was, indeed, leading to lower rates of reconviction. So, why are recent reviews showing that cognitive problem-solving skills programmes fail to distinguish treated offenders from non-treated offenders. I believe the answer is a rather simple one, which I will call 'whitewashing'. Essentially, the 'nothing works' declaration was such a damning indictment of our efforts at rehabilitating offenders that we threw all of our efforts into proving Martinson and his supporters wrong. In doing so, we challenged researchers and practitioners to address these concerns at all levels. The result was a virtual wholesale adoption of cognitive-behavioural practices at all levels of correctional practice. I have labeled this 'whitewashing' to reflect the extent of the blanket coverage adopted in many Western correctional systems.

Cognitive-behavioural methodologies were applied to case-management practices, psychologically-oriented treatment programming (for example, relapse prevention), and psycho-educational programming, to the extent that no offender was untouched. And I believe that this is precisely why there is no longer any difference found between those who take problem-solving skills development programming and those who do not. Just being in 'the system' and being subject to any correctional intervention means that you will have reasonably extensive experience with cognitive-behavioural methods. General case management, domestic violence programming, sex offender programming, substance abuse programming, values and attitudes programming, or any other correctional programme has, as its base, a cognitive-behavioural framework. So, whether or not you complete Cognitive Living Skills or Reasoning and Rehabilitation, chances are excellent that you will learn the majority of the curriculum regardless.

## References

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