



Questioning the 'Evidence' of Risk that Underpins Evidence-led Youth Justice Interventions

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Abstract

In this article, I evaluate the Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm (RFPP) as employed in risk-focused research and risk assessment in the Youth Justice System in England and Wales and elsewhere. This paradigm has been criticized as theoretically and methodologically flawed, static, limited in scope and subject to political manipulation. Criticisms are explicated and evaluated, then counter-balanced with discussions of the methodological robustness and empirical successes of the paradigm. I conclude by recommending that quantitative risk-focused research is supplemented with routine qualitative consultation of neglected stakeholders (youth justice practitioners, young people) and that evidence of risk is interpreted, utilized and disseminated in a more valid, realistic manner.

Keywords: evidence, interventions, risk factors, stakeholders, Youth Justice System

According to Beck (1992), we live in a 'risk society'; one in which the possibility of positive, 'good' risks (taking a risk to achieve a positive outcome), is overwhelmed by risk perceived 'almost exclusively (as) a threat, hazard, harm or danger' (Lupton 1999: 8). Nowhere is the general public's perception of risk more acute than in relation to young people or 'youth' and the (typically criminal) risks they ostensibly pose to themselves and others (see Goldson, 2005; Roberts and Hough, 2005). The public's clamour for an effective, appropriate and accountable Government response to the 'problem of youth' (Muncie, 2004) through the policies and the practices of the Youth Justice System (YJS), is starkly reflected in the modern-day drive for 'evidence' of 'risk' to inform interventions with young people (Goldson and Muncie, 2006a, 2006b). As Bateman and Pitts (2005: 248) have noted:

... one of the defining features of contemporary youth justice is its emphasis upon 'evidence'. . . policy must be 'evidence-led' and practice, 'evidence-based'.

However, just how comprehensive, valid, reliable and appropriate is the ‘evidence’ of risk that underpins ‘evidence-based’ interventions in the YJS? In this article, I aim to evaluate the expanding critique of quantitative risk-focused research (RFR) conducted using the risk factor prevention paradigm (RFPP), and the ‘what works’ youth justice interventions informed by it. This critique claims that this form of RFR is theoretically and methodologically flawed, static rather than dynamic, limited in scope and frequently manipulated for short-term political advantage (Hughes et al., 2002; Bateman and Pitts, 2005). Criticisms of RFR will be explicated and evaluated, then counterbalanced with a discussion of the methodological robustness and empirical success of RFR, in addition to highlighting the pragmatic potential of a re-orientated approach to risk-focused research, policy and practice. In the conclusion, I make recommendations for supplementing the traditionally quantitative risk-focused practice in the YJS (‘risk assessment’) with routine qualitative consultation processes with relatively neglected stakeholders such as youth justice practitioners and young people (Case, 2006). A more realistic and grounded interpretation of the validity and utility of available evidence is also advocated (Bhasker, 1997; D. Smith, 2006).

The Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm

The Labour Government, through the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, introduced a managerialist and preventative ethos for the YJS to replace the previous preoccupation with welfare and justice concerns (Muncie et al., 2002). This ‘third way’ for youth justice prioritized the ‘actuarial’ assessment of statistically-evidenced risk over rehabilitative ideals (Annison, 2005; R. Smith, 2006). The jewel in the actuarialist crown is the ‘risk factor prevention paradigm’, a pragmatic crime prevention model that uses risk assessment and survey to identify factors in the key domains of a young person’s life (family, school, community, psycho-emotional) that statistically increase the likelihood of (official or self-reported) offending (‘risk’ factors) or decrease its likelihood (‘protective’ factors). Identified risk and protective factors are then used to inform ‘evidence-led’ interventions that aim to reduce risk and prevent offending. This risk-focused crime prevention offers an alternative to more traditional responses to youth offending (treatment, rehabilitation, opportunity reduction) by re-orientating youth justice and crime prevention towards a focus on evidence of risk and protection.

Comment [D1]: This is a very long sentence that is essentially a paraphrased quote! All I’m saying here is that the paradigm (model, method) is a practical way of identifying the influences on crime.

If you do what you’ve always done, you’ll get what you’ve always got

The RFPP in its current form is significantly underpinned by the findings of the longitudinal Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development (West and Farrington, 1973), which identified a group of psycho-social risk/protective factors for offending by an all-male, predominantly white sample in England. This hardcore of risk/protective factors has since been replicated, validated and added to by a multitude of international studies in the Western world, many (but not all) including females (see Farrington, 2007; see also Rutter et al.’s 1998 review of international RFR evidence). These risk/protective factors are the bedrock of risk assessment and early intervention in the YJS,¹ as well as much government-sponsored RFR (Armstrong et al., 2005; YJB, 2005). However, despite an ostensibly dynamic empirical base, the RFPP can be criticized for failing to develop to its full potential since the Cambridge Study. For example, allegedly little attempt has been made to broaden the traditional focus upon biological, individual, family, peer, school, neighbourhood and situational factors (see Farrington, 2007) with deeper consideration of macro, structural and political factors (see Pitts, 2003; Armstrong, 2004; Goldson, 2005). As Annison (2005: 119) cautions:

While risk assessment tools have provided a structured approach to risk assessment of young people who offend, the wider social, cultural and political context also needs to be considered.

I am not suggesting that this hardcore of replicated factors do not influence youth offending, as this would deny the utility of exploring key factors and using the results as evidence to inform interventions. Nor am I claiming that the RFPP should not seek to replicate and generalize from its findings, as to do so would misunderstand a central tenet and benefit of the positivist approach. However, I would argue that risk assessment and RFR have become self-fulfilling and reductionist exercises, measuring offending against an expert-prescribed menu of risk/protective factors derived from research with a narrow, psycho-social focus. Is it any wonder, therefore, that the RFPP continues to replicate itself at an exponential rate? Is it also any wonder that politicians, policy makers and practitioners, perpetually squeezed for time, money and resources, yet pressed for results, are swift to trumpet risk assessment and its quantifiable, restricted and manageable outputs; particularly as these outputs will not highlight any potential political factors associated with youth

offending? Could it be that the practical and political appeal of the RFPP lies as much in its predictability as in its predictive ability? Non-governmental RFR in academia *has* drawn attention to the influence of political and structural factors upon youth offending, including previous involvement in the YJS, police practice, unemployment and poverty (Webster et al., 2006). For example, the Edinburgh ‘Youth Transitions’ study uses its findings to argue for non-interventionist policy on these grounds (Smith and McAra, 2004). Nevertheless, despite broadening its scope, the RFPP is still profoundly individualistic, with:

... a thicket of single factor associations at the individual level obscuring the view of the larger landscape of environmental and structural forces.
(Homel, 2005a: 86)

Universal risk and protective factors: The Holy Grail

Some political and academic advocates of the RFPP demonstrate the need to identify ‘a unified explanatory edifice’ (D. Smith, 2006). This relentless quest for risk/ protective factors as ‘universal truths’ (Macintyre, 1985; cited in D. Smith, 2006) is fuelled by aggregation rather than individualization of risk profiles, over-generalization of the heterogeneous categories of ‘youth’ and ‘offending’, and a desire to identify globally-applicable risk/ protective factors through cross-national studies (Farrington, 2002). Consequently, exponents of the RFPP have been accused of identifying risk/ protective factors that have insufficient sensitivity to individual, social and temporal differences relating to age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, local area, country, type of offending (self-reported, officially-recorded, violent, property, serious), and cultural, political or historical context (see, for example, Robinson, 2003; Webster et al., 2006). For example, risk/ protective factors identified as associated with active (recent) self-reported offending amongst a ‘nationally-representative’ sample of 10–16 year-old secondary schoolchildren as part of the evaluation of the Government’s ‘On Track’ programme for ‘at risk’ young people (Armstrong et al., 2005) may *not* be associated with the *officially-recorded* offending of that group, with self-reported or official offending of *sub-groups* within the sample (females, Asians, 12 year-olds, young people from Cardiff), with offending of any kind *outside of the time period measured* (the last 12 months) or with offending by young people *not in school*.

The pervasive aggregation of risk data may mean that some individuals get ‘lost in the statistical shuffle’ (Bateman and Pitts, 2005) and are denied appropriate intervention because a factor that may have influenced their behaviour was not identified as a risk/ protective factor for the majority of the demographic group to which they belong. A young person may slip through the net as a ‘false negative’ (not considered to be at risk when they actually are) due to aggregation. In contrast, ‘false positive’ individuals may have invasive interventions thrust upon them due solely to their membership of a ‘high risk’ group rather than due to their individual risk profile or actual behaviour (see Kemshall, 2003; Goldson, 2005). Homel (2005b: 2) sees as problematic the ‘questionable jump from the identification of risk factors in longitudinal and population surveys to the identification and control of “risky individuals”’, which he describes as ‘a key element of the Youth Justice Board’s approach’. He questions whether targeted intervention (as promoted by ASSET) is appropriate for addressing aggregate problem behaviours (Homel, 2005b). This argument is reinforced by Farrington (2007), who highlights the contradiction between the preference in RFR for identifying risk/ protective factors based on difference between individuals (aggregate differences between groups), yet targeting interventions on the basis of within-individual change.

However, Homel (2005b) stresses the utility of RFR in indicating the precise characteristics of children, families, communities and institutions that are most likely to underpin youth offending. RFR, especially nationally- and locally-representative surveys, is capable of generating reliable profiles of large youth populations, including sub-groups (different age groups, genders and ethnicities) that can inform sensitive and context-specific policy and practice (see Case and Haines, 2004; Annison, 2005). This can be achieved through the systematic collection of data that is less prone to sorts of reporting, recording and interpretation biases that blight official data systems (see also Tarling, 1993). RFR can offer a reliable and versatile ‘indicator of the problem areas requiring intervention’ (Baker et al., 2004: 98). Therefore, the RFPP is not necessarily the static, inflexible paradigm that some accuse it of being. Contemporary RFR is, for example, focusing exponentially on identifying and exploring individual differences in risk profiles between young people committing different types of crime (Armstrong et al., 2005), different genders (Smith and McAra, 2004) and different age groups

Comment [D2]: This basically means an agreed way of explaining youth offending.

Comment [D3]: This is a follow-up point that merges together several arguments and complex concepts. The essential point is that risk factors have been identified for groups (aggregation) not for specific young people (individualization), the key concepts of youth and offending have been defined inconsistently and differently across studies (in a ‘heterogeneous’ way), and risk factors rarely explain offending by everyone everywhere (globally-applicable).

This sentence illustrates a common academic method - saying a lot very quickly. The trick to demystifying this approach is to identify and translate the key terms - those that I’ve just listed in brackets above - just as you would in the introduction to an essay.

(Case and Haines, 2004; Farrington, 2007), although comparisons between the risk compositions of different ethnic groups and samples from different localities remains scarce in academic research. Studies of individual differences in risk in the UK alone have themselves evolved from previously static and unambitious descriptions of statistical correlations between psycho-social risk/ protective factors and offending into detailed explorations of community-based risk/ protective factors (see, for example, the SCOPIC studies; www.scopic.ac.uk), transition points and 'critical moments' in young people's lives (Smith and McVie, 2003; Webster et al., 2006) and young people's pathways into and out of crime (see France and Homel, 2007).

ASSET as an asset

The use of the assessment instrument, ASSET, in the YJS has been applauded for providing detailed, structured, and reliable information to guide intervention and justify professional decision-making; facilitating a breadth and depth of analysis not previously possible using clinical assessment (Baker et al., 2004; Baker, 2005). Whilst acknowledged as imperfect even by its supporters, risk assessment in the YJS has also been commended as capable of improvement and progressive refinement (Baker, 2005). From a practical and moral standpoint, given the 69 per cent accuracy of ASSET in predicting reconviction, including the reconviction of specific sub-groups of offenders such as females, ethnic minorities and younger age groups, it could be argued that such an effective risk management and control system can be forgiven for the 'small' proportion (less than one-third) of prediction failures (false positives and negatives) it produces (R. Smith, 2006). Indeed, Whyte (2004: 11) lauds ASSET as an 'actuarially impressive' tool for 'making professional decision making more transparent' and 'a welcome progression from invisible, idiosyncratic practitioner judgement which is often difficult to challenge'. However, actuarial risk assessment tools are less capable of predicting re-offending and offence seriousness (Robinson, 2003); both of which may be more useful and valid targets if the RFPP is to fully inform policy and practice in the YJS. In addition, claims for ASSET's effectiveness would be strengthened if its predictive score could be set against data concerning the predictive accuracy of clinical assessment, which utilizes the diagnostic skills of individual practitioners to 'explain behaviour, assess motivation to change, and match intervention programmes (to risk factors)' (Kemshall and Pritchard, 1996: 9). However, there is a paucity of data relating to the accuracy of clinical risk assessment. As such, a major advantage of actuarial risk assessment is that it is grounded in empirical data, so its predictive utility can be subject to ongoing reflection and evaluation (Annison, 2005).

When is a risk factor not a risk factor?

It has been widely acknowledged by both proponents and critics of the RFPP that it remains extremely difficult (if not impossible) to operationalize what a risk factor actually is (Hill et al., 2004). For instance, risk/ protective factors can be vague terms (disaffection from school) that can apply to *all* young people at some point (R. Smith, 2006), depending on how they are defined by the researcher / practitioner. In this way, they serve as the much sought-after catchall concept, yet consequently lack in discriminatory power or temporal fixedness.

It is also difficult to scientifically (statistically) evidence the precise relationship between specific risk/ protective factors and problem behaviours such as offending (Prior and Paris, 2005). Advocates assert that a risk/ protective factor predicts an increased / decreased probability of later offending, including the onset, frequency, seriousness and duration of, and desistance from, offending (see, for example Farrington, 2002). However, the concept of a 'risk factor' is not employed consistently across criminological research. Risk/ protective factors can assume an *extreme* category of an explanatory variable (for example, poor parental supervision), a *dichotomous* variable (for example, poor parental supervision compared/ contrasted with average or good parental supervision) or a *continuous* explanatory variable (for example, scale of parental supervision). Consequently, more consistent terminology is needed to enable more effective linkage between operational definitions and underlying theoretical constructs (Farrington, 2002). Increasingly sophisticated multivariate statistical techniques (multi-level modelling, multiple regression) and multiple cohort longitudinal research designs are being employed to provide 'evidence' of the nature of risk/ protective factors and their relationship with offending, exploring the degree to which it is causal, predictive, correlational, symptomatic or merely coincidental (see also Thornberry and Krohn, 2003). Kraemer et al. (2001) draw a useful distinction between a 'risk factor' (a correlate preceding an outcome) and a 'causal risk factor' (a risk factor that, when

Comment [D4]: Here is another academic technique - using quotes to make arguments.

We assume prior knowledge from other academics but we shouldn't, so it is always important to explain what quotes mean. Here, I'm saying that Asset demonstrates a good level of predictive accuracy (it is 'actuarially impressive') that makes practitioner judgments clear and visible to outsiders ('transparent') and lowers the risk of judgments being distorted by subjective and personal bias ('invisible, idiosyncratic partition and judgment').

changed, is shown to change the outcome). However, the notion of a causal risk factor, popular in longitudinal research, seems to gloss over the inability of social research with human beings to fully control for extraneous variables and thus identify unequivocal causes for behaviour. The world's leading authority on the RFPP, David Farrington, acknowledges the difficulties in discerning whether a risk factor is indicative or causal (or neither), but I believe that he overstates the case for causality when claiming that RFR is (fully) able to control for extraneous variables and when talking up the ability of within-individual research to demonstrate risk factors as causes (Farrington, 2007). Farrington's assertions also appear to contradict his previous claim that 'the paradigm avoids difficult theoretical questions about which risk factors have causal effects' (Farrington, 2000: 7).

Factors identified in cross-sectional research cannot be accurately described as 'causal' because they are measured at the same point in time as the measure of offending is taken – thus it cannot be argued that A (predictor) leads to B (target variable – offending) (see also Kraemer et al., 2001). Accordingly, recent Government-sponsored reviews using cross-sectional designs have stopped short of asserting risk/ protective factors as causal, preferring to define factors as contributory to negative / positive outcomes (Armstrong et al., 2005; YJB, 2005). Even factors identified in prospective longitudinal RFR should not be claimed as unequivocally causal because this ignores the potential influence of a host of additional, extraneous factors on offending. In this form of RFR, it is arguably valid to describe a risk/ protective factor as 'predictive', in that it can be statistically-demonstrated to increase the likelihood of future (self-reported or officially-recorded) offending. However, the results of prospective prediction studies have typically been poor (Farrington, 2007) and too much remains unknown about the nature of the risk/ protective factor-offending relationship and the potential inter-relationships between different risk/ protective factors to permit over-confidence in the predictive utility of a particular factor in isolation. Conclusive evidence and precise, widely agreed technical terminology remains elusive; it is therefore more realistic to conceive of risk/ protective factors as correlates with offending, even in longitudinal RFR.

Risk factors for risk factors

Obviously, nothing can be a cause if it is in turn caused by something else.
(Wilson, 1974: 49)

Although the cumulative, interactive and sequential effects of different risk factors upon one another are attracting increasing research interest (Farrington, 2007), as are the potentially mediating /moderating effects of protective factors upon risk factors (Lynam et al., 2000), there has been little exploration of the aetiology of risk factors themselves. For instance, there could be a multi-stage process operating whereby certain factors function as risk factors for other factors (risk factors for risk factors), which themselves influence offending in some way. This would appear likely in the light of RFR highlighting a 'common aetiology' for problem outcomes, with many negative behaviours being highly correlated with each other and sharing the same risk/ protective factors (Catalano et al., 2002). Problem behaviours could also serve as risk factors for one another (the apparently reciprocal relationship between substance use and offending, truancy as a risk factor for offending, as examples). The notion of a common aetiology seems to over-simplify the complex interactions and psycho-social and structural mechanisms at work here, as well as further overstating the ability of much RFR and practice to distinguish the aetiology of offending (the causal influence of risk factors). However, it may be possible that advocates of the RFPP are under-selling the value of its methods. The adherence to positivist methodology within the RFPP dictates that factors not statistically linked to offending are dismissed (they drop out of regression analyses) as non-risk/ protective factors. However, relationships may exist between factors and offending that are statistically invisible because: the factor is not activated; it is activated but imperceptible to analyses; or it has been counter-acted by other mechanisms (see Bhaskar, 1997).

It is of concern that the unequivocal, partially-informed, over-generalized and possibly erroneous application of risk/ protective factors as the 'evidence' that underpins 'what works' interventions persists in the YJS and has been extrapolated to tackle other problem behaviours, such as social exclusion and educational failure (Prior and Paris, 2005). If the nature and dynamics of risk/ protective factors are inadequately understood in practice, policy or academia, then surely it must be premature and problematic to use the RFPP as a solid foundation for testing the very interventions that eventually coalesce as 'evidence-based' policy and practice? What this mess of multicollinearity² and blurring of aetiologies does indicate clearly is that the RFPP does not

Comment [D5]: There's a lot going on in this sentence. I do tend to over punctuate in order to say a lot very quickly. This sentence hinges on the phrase 'common aetiology'. I'm arguing that certain critics are very keen to identify, and, universal causes of crime and that in their enthusiasm to generalize and be definitive, they overlook how complex and difficult it is to pinpoint what actually causes crime. Consequently, they tend to settle for oversimplified explanations. That argument is pretty much the central thread of this article if you read through.

allow a complete understanding of *how* and *why* risk/ protective factors work and don't work.

They never ask how, they only ask who

... correlations between risk factors and offending tell us little about why young people behave as they do.
(Armstrong, 2006)

Risk assessment and government-sponsored RFR have traditionally privileged quantitative methods (typically questionnaires) and cross-sectional studies to provide 'scientific', statistical evidence of *what* is linked to offending at a specific point in time (Flood-Page et al., 2000; Armstrong et al., 2005; YJB, 2005). This limits politicians, policy makers and practitioners to extrapolating or hypothesizing the reasons for associations between certain factors and offending, rather than being informed by qualitative investigation of how risk/ protective factors work to increase the likelihood of offending, how they can be manipulated and improved, and why behavioural change may occur as a result. Akin to the grade on a student's essay or the football scores in a Sunday newspaper, the headlines from RFR can appear self-explanatory and stand-alone, telling the full story with no further investigation required. According to Bateman and Pitts (2005: 253), the RFPP 'relies on an account of the origins of offending based on a combination of correlation and speculations'. The blind faith of politicians and academics in this burgeoning body of technical evidence is fraught with danger. If the available evidence cannot tell us *how* risk/ protective factors work, *how* these factors may precipitate youth offending or *how* programmes underpinned by them can reduce offending, subsequent research conclusions and 'evidence-based' policies and practices are built on sand. An irony emerges that the ostensible empirical robustness of much government-sponsored RFR critically narrows its focus and limits its methodological and practical utility. Of course, staunchly quantitative risk-focused researchers may argue that the positivist RFPP is not in the business of exploring *hows* and *whys*, only *what* factors link to offending. I would also argue that this 'black box' approach only tells us 'what works' (to coin a popular phrase), but in so doing it lacks a theory of change (Tilley, 2001). To paraphrase Pawson and Tilley's (1998) argument for the realistic evaluation of interventions, the RFPP as it stands does not inform the YJS: 'what kinds of risk factors have what kind of impact upon what kinds of people under what kinds of circumstances and why?'. Continuing to test the RFPP and replicate its findings with different groups of young people (discussed earlier) is necessary, but not sufficient to produce a sensitive, reflective and accountable system of risk assessment and RFR in the YJS. What is needed is the depth and richness of data provided by qualitative research and engagement with user groups, particularly youth justice practitioners and young people. Accordingly, recent RFR commissioned by the Youth Justice Board (YJB, 2005 – commissioned from Communities that Care) and the Home Office (Budd et al., 2005) has introduced qualitative interviews and longitudinal elements into the design, albeit in a limited fashion (interviews with only 10 per cent of the total sample – YJB, 2005; surveying only known offenders – Budd et al., 2005).

The identification and interpretation of the risk/ protective factors that underpin the RFPP has always been an inherently subjective process (see, for example, Pitts, 2003; D. Smith, 2006). As discussed, risk assessment and RFR in the YJS has tended to privilege the quantitative identification of sets of prescribed risk/ protective factors (Pitts, 2003), which neglects a deeper, qualitative investigation of the opinions, meanings and motivations of key stakeholders in the process, such as youth justice practitioners and (particularly) young people. Not only could more frequent qualitative research with user groups (interviews, focus groups, case studies) test the scope and flexibility of the RFPP by validating, adding to and amending the established body of risk/ protective factors commonly drawn upon, but it may also illuminate how and why risk/ protective factors work, don't work and otherwise influence the behaviour of different groups of young people in different localities.

A growing body of RFR, both cross-sectional and longitudinal, employs mixed methods in the form of risk surveys and interviews with young people and key stakeholders to further illustrate and explore the origins and operations of identified risk/ protective factors (Smith and McAra, 2004; Budd et al., 2005; YJB, 2005). If the government pays heed to the qualitative findings from these studies, they could be used to actively inform and develop risk-focused work in the YJS, rather than employed merely to illustrate and validate the established quantitative risk factors that continue to drive the RFPP. However, if the RFPP were to be transformed in the ways suggested here it would arguably cease to operate as a positivist paradigm and instead become an appreciative criminology (cf. the work of David Matza in the 1960s), which would destroy its political and managerialist foundations. This indicates that the continuing centrality of the RFPP as currently conceived in the YJS may owe as much to the facilitative role it plays in this nexus as to its explanatory power. What is

suggested in this paper is that qualitative RFR would provide policy makers and practitioners with a deeper understanding of the breadth and scope of risk/ protective factors that influence different forms of offending amongst different demographic groups. These factors, which may sit outside the narrow focus of risk assessment, could then be integrated within ASSET and ONSET. Risk assessment in the YJS already has the ability to quantify 'soft' data, such as young people's emotions, attitudes and motivations. Augmenting risk assessment with a greater depth of qualitative information would provide comprehensive and manageable data sets to serve as authoritative bases for decision-making by youth justice policy makers and practitioners (see R. Smith, 2006), without throwing the (quantitative) baby out with the bathwater (Case, 2006) or transforming the RFPP into a fully-fledged appreciative criminology.

Towards a user-friendly and grounded RFPP – engaging users on the ground

In this article, I have argued that risk assessment and RFR in the YJS is underpinned by the RFPP, which has been developed predominantly in academia. Although youth justice practitioners have been asked for feedback relating to the practicalities of administering ASSET (Baker et al., 2004; Baker, 2005), they have yet to be consulted regarding the relevance and comprehensiveness of the risk/ protective factors addressed by ASSET or their support for RFR in general, despite the former Chairman of the Youth Justice Board protesting that 'practitioners need a lot of discretion to design local horses for local courses' (Morgan, 2006). Instead, youth justice practitioners are obliged to routinely implement the structured, prescribed ASSET instrument and use the aggregated scores for each 'domain' as evidence to inform interventions. Protestations that ASSET 'requires considerable professional skill and expertise', and creative and dynamic decision-making (Baker et al., 2004: 81) have been countered by claims that the 'technicization' and 'routinization' of youth justice practice deprofessionalizes and neuters practitioners, robbing them of their ability to use discretion and experience when assessing risk and targeting interventions (see Hughes et al., 2002; Robinson, 2003). Pitts (2003) labels this process 'korrectional karaoke'. The hegemony of the RFPP within the YJS is maintained by advocacy from politicians and policy makers (see also Armstrong, 2004), encouraged by the ability of risk assessment and RFR to generate 'evidence' to inform youth justice interventions. What is often overlooked is that political advocacy could be grounded in political expediency (e.g. risk assessment's provision of immediate, quantifiable data, its commonsense appeal to voters) and that practitioners may be unsupportive of risk assessment. Indeed, the qualitative element of the evaluation of ASSET (semi-structured interviews with practitioners) highlighted a degree of practitioner scepticism and resistance to actuarial instruments, which manifested itself in lack of engagement with the process (Baker et al., 2004; Annison, 2005). Such disengagement, reflected in low completion levels of certain ASSET sections (e.g. the practitioner-completed 'criminal history' section, lack of encouragement for young people to complete the 'What do you think?' section) could potentially undermine the reliability of assessments (Annison, 2005). However, practitioners were also encouraged by ASSET's potential to promote consistency, transparency in decision-making and improved resource allocation through increased diagnostic accuracy (Baker et al., 2004). Certain academics have recommended a re-orientated, holistic approach to risk-focused, evidence-led practice that fuses clinical, actuarial and academic priorities through a dialogue between professionals, practitioners, researchers and theorists (see Bateman and Pitts, 2005). Over ten years ago, Kemshall and Pritchard (1996) suggested that practitioners should review findings from risk assessment (actuarialism) in the light of their own skills and experience (professional discretion), yet there is little evidence that this has taken place:

... the 'clients' of the system, the populations prevention works 'on' as well as 'with', may have different and competing views about what they need . . .
(Hastings, 2006: 1)

Similar to the neglect of practitioner perspective, there is a paucity of qualitative research addressing the relevance and comprehensiveness of risk/ protective factors from the young person's perspective (Case, 2006). Even within the innovative, 'holistic' system proposed by Kemshall and Pritchard (1996), there is no explicit discussion of the role of young people. Are young people to remain passive recipients of adult-prescribed interventions or is there scope to integrate their perceptions, experiences and interpretations of risk/ protective factors in their capacity as key stakeholders in the YJS? For example, the ASSET tool is completed by an adult Youth Offending Team practitioner and is largely predicated on the subjective, technicized judgement of risk rather than young people's own judgements, which are limited to the small and poorly-completed 'What do you think?' section at the end of the instrument (see Annison, 2005). The completion and

Comment [D6]: Jar gon city here, but don't panic. Examine the long, complex-sounding terms in detail. Break them up into smaller parts and you'll find them much easier to understand, especially if you consider the context in which they're written and how they fit with what is around them. The argument is that practitioners have been robbed of their professional expertise/discussion (they have been 'deprofessionalized') and turned into machines and robots by excessive practice guidance - so their practice has become very technical ('technicization') and routine/repetitive ('routinization').

interpretation of risk assessments and surveys could also be influenced by the young person's offending history, their perception of the YJS, the practitioner–young person dynamic (previous and current relationship), interviewer effects (age, gender and ethnicity differences between practitioner and young person), time constraints on practitioners, practitioners' use of leading questions, local policy priorities and the national political climate (see, for example, France and Crow, 2005). Further exploration of the potentially confounding effects of inter-personal and socio-political factors on the validity of ASSET / ONSET and risk survey responses is warranted.

There has been relatively little investigation of young people's interpretations of how and why risk/ protective factors inter-relate and influence their behaviour, particularly in Government-sponsored evaluations of their own interventions (ASSET – Baker et al., 2004; On Track – Armstrong et al., 2005), although the recent YJB study *Role of Risk and Protective Factors* moved this agenda forward by incorporating interviews with young people to explore risk/ protective factors identified using questionnaires (YJB, 2005). Indeed, at a recent youth justice conference, the former Chairman of the YJB implored:

I believe that it's desperately important that we continue to devote as much of our limited (funding) resources as possible to measuring young people's experiences, perceptions, motivations

...

(Morgan, 2006)

It is, of course, entirely possible that young people's perceptions of risk/ protective factors will be compatible with the adult-espoused, YJB-prescribed menu of risks integral to contemporary risk assessment, thus validating the RFPP (ESRC, 1999). However, without asking more young people more often, we will never know. There is a pressing need for a more holistic approach to risk assessment with young people; one which tempers the broad-brush garnering of evidence from stereotypes and generalizations by adult 'experts' with the addition of an inclusive, consultative approach to and *with* young people in the YJS (Case, 2006).

Conclusion: Re-orientating and Revamping, not Rejecting

The methodological, epistemological and rights-based criticisms of the RFPP, particularly in relation to its use in risk assessment in the YJS, could lead the more proselytizing politician or sceptical academic to call for its abolition. However, I suggest that tearing down the entire risk assessment system and starting from scratch would simultaneously overstate the validity and veracity of the anti-RFPP thesis and glaringly underestimate the efficacy of the RFPP and risk assessment in the YJS. For instance, those who seek to criticize or problematize the RFPP as a risk-obsessed deficit model that contributes to the labelling and stigmatizing of young people as 'at risk' and 'dangerous', tread dangerous ground if they naïvely equate political rhetoric with the realities of how the RFPP is applied in practice (see D. Smith, 2006). Depending on the policy and practice context in which it is used, risk assessment can support positive means and ends such as rehabilitation and redistributive social policy. Increasing emphasis within the RFPP is being placed on the identification of 'protective factors' that mediate and moderate risk, whilst protecting against the onset, acceleration and exacerbation of youth offending. There is also a thriving 'positive youth development' movement, imported from the USA (see Catalano et al., 2002), that is extending the traditional RFPP by prioritizing protective factors that increase the likelihood of positive, pro-social behaviours. This inverts the risk-focus of the RFPP and moves it forward from a narrow, risk-focused, socially-exclusive model towards an holistic approach with the potential to inform socially-inclusive, empowering interventions that transcend the YJS.

What I advocate here is a deeper, more open-minded exploration of the potential influence of risk/ protective factors upon different forms of youth offending by different groups of young people in local areas, as well as an investigation of the influence of risk/ protective factors upon each other. This would produce a broader, more holistic, yet simultaneously more sensitive RFPP. Accordingly, risk/ protective factors would be investigated and interpreted in a more specific, practical and realistic manner as:

- *correlates* of particular forms of offending (official, self-reported, violent, property) for specific sub-groups of the youth population;
- factors identified from an historically-static list of *adult-prescribed risks*, emanating from a predominantly quantitative literature, which could be re-evaluated, validated and built-upon through closer engagement with

youth justice practitioners and young people;

- factors whose reporting may be influenced by *subjectivity and individual differences* (age, gender, ethnicity, class; including individual differences between practitioner and young person), *inter-personal dynamics* (practitioner–young person relationship) and *socio-political influences* (local policy priorities);
- factors whose *precise relationship with offending* and *inter-relationships* with one another requires further exploration if we are to properly understand how and why they influence a young person's life.

The positivistic foundation of the RFPP would be augmented by encouraging researchers and key stakeholders to strive to improve the concepts they use ('risk', 'protection', 'causality', 'offending', 'young people') in order to better understand how factors affect each other and impact upon offending. A broader and more reflexive RFPP would account for the agency (free will, choice), identity, culture and context that influences young people's exposure to risk and how they negotiate it (see also Sharland, 2006). There is no necessity for an either / or choice between actuarial risk assessment on the one hand and the qualitative, appreciative investigation of young people's experiences, aspirations and needs on the other. There is potential for a symbiotic relationship that draws upon the strengths of both in a similar fashion to the growing body of RFR that employs complementary mixed methods. An holistic approach is advocated here in preference to the continued privileging of one approach over another, such as using qualitative methods simply to illustrate (rather than explore) quantitative risk factors. The symbiosis of quantitative risk assessment / survey and qualitative exploration of risk/ protective factors could produce a RFPP that is more sensitive to different demographic groups and local concerns, and is more responsive and flexible in the face of new forms of crime, emerging social problems, changing demographics in the population, rapidly fluctuating political agendas, altered organizational arrangements, and changing youth cultures. In this way, the re-orientated RFPP could explore the influence of 'historical and social context and . . . the importance of diversity and local knowledge rather than only searching for universal relationships' (Homel, 2005a: 86).

A re-orientated RFPP is recommended for use by the YJS in risk assessment processes; one which seeks to evaluate the validity, scope and application of the RFPP (ASSET/ ONSET, the subjective judgements of youth justice practitioners or academics conducting interviews) through systematic, embedded consultation processes with youth justice practitioners and young people who come into contact with the YJS. The results of these consultations could be integrated within extant risk assessment, thus producing a more valid and realistic 'evidence-base' of risk/ protective factors to inform the reflexive use of the RFPP in the YJS and beyond.

Notes

1 The ASSET structured assessment tool is 'designed to identify the risk factors associated with offending behaviour and to inform effective intervention programmes' (YJB, 2004: 27). Its sister tool, ONSET, is used at the pre-offending stage with 'at risk' 8–13 year-olds referred to Youth Inclusion and Support Panels.

2 The statistical phenomenon of two or more 'predictor variables' in a regression model being so closely correlated with one another that they may be, in effect, representing the same thing (see Field, 2005). For example, if truancy and disaffection for school were both identified as risk factors for offending, but were also highly correlated with each other, an argument could be made that truancy was, in fact, an integral component of the variable of disaffection for school. In such cases, it is superfluous and erroneous to explore the effects of each factor separately.

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