Call Yourself An Expert! The experience of two short-term experts working abroad

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ABSTRACT

The authors worked as 'short-term experts' (STEs) in Turkey during 2009-2010 on a European Union Twinning Project led by the UK Ministry of Justice. They worked alongside Turkish Probation Service experts to develop interventions and training manuals to support victims of crime. In this article they focus on the intervention and training for probation experts who support victims of sexual violence. They describe their work and explore the challenges of the role of 'expert' and how best to transfer knowledge and skills.

BACKGROUND TO THE TWINNING PROJECT

In 2005 a new Probation Service for Turkey was established, managed by the Department of Prisons and Detention Houses, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice. Alternative sanctions to custodial sentences were introduced, with offenders being given opportunities to serve their sentences in the community. Services to support victims of crime were introduced.

Between 2005 and 2007, following implementation of the legislation in Turkey, a first European Union Twinning Project took place, led by the UK Ministry of Justice. A range of activities were undertaken to ensure the effective establishment and implementation of probation services in Turkey. These included legal revisions, policy and infrastructure work.

Basic and specialist training courses for probation staff, and seminars for judges and prosecutors were carried out by experts from the UK and other Member States. A small Head Office team of judges, probation experts and managers was established in Turkey, as was a multi-agency National Advisory Group.

During 2009-2010 a second Twinning Project ran for 18 months. Short-term experts (STEs) from the UK and other Member States further developed the work with juvenile offenders and victims of crime. The authors – Jane Shackman and Beverley Radcliffe - worked as short-term experts on this project.

By March 2011 there were probation services in 134 locations in Turkey, with 369 probation experts (equivalent to UK probation officers) and 795 enforcement and protection staff (equivalent to UK probation service officers) working with juveniles under probation orders and with victims.

WHAT DID WE DO?

We undertook eleven missions in all, either together or separately, assisting Turkish probation experts to develop interventions and training in supporting victims of crime. The continuity of our work on the project and with our Turkish colleagues helped in building up relationships and trust, and gave us a better understanding of the Probation Service and how to approach the work. There were four levels of intervention and training:

1. Supporting victims of crime
2. Supporting victims of robbery and burglary
3. Supporting victims of domestic violence
4. Supporting victims of sexual violence.

Each mission lasted one or two weeks and built on the work of the previous mission. We worked on all interventions but in this article focus on intervention 4: Supporting victims of sexual violence.

Developing the intervention and the training manuals
The first stage was to develop an intervention manual, working with six Turkish probation experts. This laid down the standards of the service and how it would be delivered.

We introduced theories about the links between domestic and sexual violence, the short and long-term effects of sexual violence, emotional and practical support needs, and normal responses to trauma. We looked at the social and cultural context in Turkey affecting women's lives and prejudices that might affect victims' decision to report sexual violence. Other topics included working with diversity, client and worker self-care, resources for women experiencing sexual violence and interagency working.

Research and our own working experience gave us insight into the needs of victims and the impact such crimes have on them, their families, communities and society. Common feelings of self-blame, guilt, shame and worthlessness can all inadvertently be reinforced by responders, causing secondary 'victimisation'. These were key concepts we wanted to introduce. It was important that we, as STEs, had the same understanding of the impact of sexual violence and how to deliver effective support.

A local NGO provided relevant information, including ways to mitigate the often confusing process of reporting sexual crime, and an overview of available services to victims.

The second stage was to develop a training manual. We worked with six Turkish probation experts, two of whom had worked on the first stage. This was, for a 4½ day course and was based on the intervention manual. The probation experts would use this manual to train their colleagues to support victims of sexual violence.

We took materials, training activities and ideas from the UK to share with our Turkish colleagues. These were translated into Turkish and distributed in advance.

The third stage was to 'train the trainers', supporting the training of eight probation experts (some of whom had worked on stages one and/or two) who would work in pairs to deliver the training to their probation colleagues.

The fourth stage was to observe and support the probation experts as they delivered the training in pairs to their probation colleagues, to assist with assessing and revising the training manual, and to help assess the suitability of the course participants to carry out the work.

CHALLENGES OF OUR WORK

What does it mean to be an expert?'

We were conscious of being called 'experts' and we felt this was an assumed arrogance and superiority that took us some time to overcome. In our discussions before the mission, we had planned to share equal responsibility with our Turkish colleagues for the content and design of the manuals. However, we quickly learned that they had different expectations. We had hoped that they would

consider, adapt or reject the UK materials, activities, and session plans we introduced, but frequently they simply accepted them without discussion or dissent. We wanted our Turkish colleagues to have autonomy, whereas they tended to expect us to lead and direct. After all, that was why we had been invited there as experts. This presented a challenge for us: we did have expertise, but based in a different country with different values and culture, and we did not want to impose our ideas. These different expectations created tensions and misunderstandings at times. Working in a fully collaborative way proved difficult to achieve and we came to question whether a truly democratic form of participation could take place.

Both sides needed to take risks: for example our Turkish counterparts needed to accept a more interactive form of learning, and we had to be open to challenges. For this to happen, we first needed to create a safe and supportive environment. The first half-day of each mission was spent getting to know each other, outlining the objectives and seeking agreement on how to work together. This helped balance the power between ourselves and our Turkish colleagues and laid the foundations for our work. We acknowledged and discussed differences as they arose, and encouraged our Turkish colleagues to take the work forward in their own ways in the future.

Occasionally the group resisted doing an activity in the way we suggested, or indeed doing it at all. How much should we cajole, persuade or insist when we thought we knew best which ideas to include - ideas that worked in the UK but were untried in Turkey? What did our role as experts entitle us to do in this situation, and how should we judge when to push what we believed and when to compromise?

In time, we evolved a way of working that appeared to suit us all. We moved away from our hoped-for fully collaborative position, and took on a more directive role. Our Turkish colleagues brought their knowledge, skills, cultural understanding and case material, and we drew on these and integrated them into the materials we were introducing. Once our Turkish colleagues had understood and accepted the purpose of an activity, they would develop the necessary case studies.

As drivers of the activities, we needed to appear confident and assertive. Our Turkish colleagues then modelled this behaviour. As the work progressed, their behaviour and attitudes changed - they became more confident and assured, were more constructively critical of what we offered, and suggested ways to adapt sessions we presented.

The way we worked with our Turkish colleagues mirrored ways of working with victims of sexual violence: we acted as conduits or channels to help them in ways that did not take over or control them, but gave support and guidance. However, there were also many times when we needed to give firm direction - this is what we were there for and why we had been chosen as experts in our field.

What did the probation experts want from the STEs?

> *"One of the most important things for the Turkish staff was to get answers to their questions and to be guided by the STE. If an STE was well-prepared, it was possible for him/her to answer questions and guide the staff. When this wasn't the case, there was failure…STEs needed to understand the context and bring together the pieces of the puzzle."*

At first it was difficult to know what our colleagues really expected or assumed about working together. They were unclear of our exact role and did not want to offend us. However, over time we were able to get a clearer understanding of what they wanted from us. We were then in a position to discuss and agree what we could and could not do.

Later on they told us:

> *"Most important, STEs are able to direct/lead the participants on the subject being worked on: take our hand and put us on the right path and give us ideas."*

It was also helpful when the STEs were:

> *"really prepared, had done good planning in advance, had a good schedule and abided by it, did value our opinions and ideas and knew about the whole project, not just their own mission, because it's all connected.."*

Sound knowledge and experience were pre-requisites:

> *"We benefited from getting information about actual practices abroad; it was useful to have STEs with experience and knowledge of doing the actual work."*

Other helpful qualities included good leadership and communication skills, the ability to give guidance on the right timeframes for sessions, and to put the group back on track when necessary.

Unfortunately, the tight timescales meant there was insufficient time for fuller discussions of the new concepts and training activities we were introducing.

Occasionally STEs were regarded as preoccupied with their own personal or work-related problems and not as helpful as expected. One person commented:

> *"Some STEs had their own agenda and didn't seem to care what the Turkish Probation service needed. They did what they thought they had to and went back to their own countries."*

A genuine interest in the country, openness to learning, and willingness to engage socially were appreciated. When this was the case, the STEs gained too:

> *"Most of the STEs had both good manners and the required level of knowledge and experience. They were willing to share, help and learn which proved to be really useful for both themselves and the Turkish staff."*

Finding a common language

Language can be a barrier without an interpreter. Even working with excellently skilled language assistants, words did not always have the same meaning when interpreted or translated. There were also different legal definitions of the same terms. This meant that we often discovered that our Turkish colleagues and we were not discussing the same things.

> *"It took time for us to find a 'common language', both technical terms (criminal justice system) and non-technical."*

Legal terms such as 'sentence', 'measure' and 'order' have specific meanings in Turkey that are different from their UK meanings. Even job titles have different meanings. We found different meanings for non-legal words too; we could spend a whole afternoon discussing the merits of calling something an 'intervention' rather than a 'programme'; or 'supervision' as opposed to 'inspection'. There appeared to be no direct Turkish word for 'supervision'.

There was a heated debate early on over the term 'victim'. We assumed this term was straightforward with no scope for misunderstanding. How wrong we were! Some probation experts felt strongly that a person only becomes a victim once a judge had convicted someone of the crime against that person: if there is no offender, no crime has been committed and therefore there is no victim. Our view was that a person becomes a victim as soon as a crime has occurred against them. This is not dependent on whether someone is caught, charged or convicted of the offence.

The role of the Language Assistants

We worked throughout with two skilled and experienced Language Assistants who interpreted the discussions and translated the manuals into Turkish and English as we developed them. None of our work would have been possible without their skills, professionalism and patience. It was very important that we worked effectively with them:

> *"Most of the STEs had previous experience of working with interpreters which was really helpful. I was able to work easily with them, agreeing about things like when to stop and wait for interpretation. When I was trusted by the STE and had a good working relationship with him/her, I was able to contribute more."*

The Language Assistants' knowledge of the Probation Service and of Turkish culture meant that they were well placed to act as more than 'just interpreters':

> *"For me, not being considered as just an interpreter but as someone whose ideas and contributions were useful made me happy and valued."*

Different cultures

It is flattering and easy to believe that the knowledge we have as 'experts' is of vital importance to another country. Whilst we must be willing to share our expertise and knowledge, it is equally important to be willing to understand the culture and situation of the country we are working in, and how our western European culture and models may or may not fit.

We tried to gain sufficient understanding of the culture and norms of Turkey and its people prior to working there. However, this did not give us a true or full understanding and we learned more quickly once collaborative work started. We tried not to make assumptions, but sometimes this was more difficult than we anticipated: we all view the world through our own cultural lenses and working under pressure it was easy to slip back into familiar ways of seeing and doing things.

The knowledge we had acquired in the UK was not always helpful to our Turkish colleagues. Laws, social and cultural norms, the role of women and how victims of sexual violence are perceived and treated differ considerably between our cultures. The STEs' views on human rights sometimes clashed with the cultural rights of people with different belief systems. One example of this is the position of women and the concept of 'namus', signifying virginity, purity, integrity and honour. Women who are not virgins when they married are seen as impure in religious and cultural terms.

Leyla Welkin, a clinical psychologist working with sexually abused women in Turkey, suggests that the way people in Turkey think about sexual abuse is linked with the concept of namus:

> *'In Turkish society namus is a quality of honour or purity that is believed to be tied up with a woman's virginity and the protection of her sexuality from inappropriate relations. One of the tricky things about namus, however, is that it is not just a quality that affects a girl or woman, but it reflects upon her entire family, while she holds responsibility for it. In this way, a girl or a woman's sexuality becomes a family possession that must be protected to protect her family's honour from harm.'*
>
> (Today's Zaman, 15.06.10)

The concept of namus influenced the way we redesigned and adapted training sessions and case studies.

There were also similarities in how women victims of sexual violence were perceived. In both UK and Turkey there can be a tendency to 'blame the victim'. In the UK a victim of sexual violence might be blamed for dressing or behaving provocatively; in Turkey this was the same, but extended to blaming the victim for bringing shame to the whole family.

Beliefs and theories informing the work

The STEs working in Turkey came from different western European countries and diverse professional disciplines, with varying views and theories. Even people from the same country or cultural background do not always have shared beliefs and theoretical perspectives. If differences between STEs are not resolved prior to a mission, their public disagreements can create uncertainty, confusion and a lack of confidence in them amongst their Turkish counterparts.

One such difference arose when we were developing the intervention manual with two other STEs. It became clear that they had different fundamental beliefs about the impact and effects of sexual violence on victims, including the prevalence of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). We (Shackman and Radcliffe) regard PTSD as a relatively uncommon mental disorder following sexual violence. We believe that most victims' reactions are normal and that probation experts need to reassure victims of this and not pathologise these reactions or suggest victims automatically need specialist help. The two other STEs working with us believed that many victims are so severely affected that they inevitably need specialist psychological help. This fundamental difference in opinion created some tension and confusion for the Turkish probation experts.

A pre-requisite in establishing a twinning project is therefore to ensure that all the participating STEs share and agree a similar enough approach, as well as having the right skills, knowledge and expertise required for each mission. If not, the STEs can feel de-skilled and devalued, and their Turkish counterparts may lose confidence in them and in the project.

Victim-led approach to supporting victims of sexual violence

An early challenge we faced with Turkish colleagues was our differing beliefs in how sexual violence victims could best be helped. We believed the work should be victim-led, but our colleagues expected to work in a prescribed way, following a structured programme with set outcomes, similar to the way they work with offenders. They lacked the experience of work with victims and the confidence to follow the client's lead, and wanted the security of knowing what to say and when to say it. At first they felt uncomfortable not having an exact formula for conducting each session with a victim.

This problem was repeated when the probation experts delivered the training to colleagues. Some trainees expressed concern that if they did not know "exactly what to say, or when to say it, or if we say the wrong thing, then we could do harm to clients."

Attitudes towards supporting victims of sexual violence

In our discussions it was clear there are strongly held beliefs in Turkish society that victims of sexual violence should be dealt with by the family and community rather than through the criminal justice system. Sexual violence was generally not regarded as a suitable topic for public discussion or for the involvement of others outside the family. This is linked to the belief that if a woman has been raped she is classed as 'soiled goods' and brings shame on her whole family. Some probation experts also held some of these attitudes and values and reflected on this:

> *"I know that it is still much of a taboo to talk on any sex related issue culturally and there are some very deep routed misconceptions that maybe we also partly hold.".*

The perception of family shame also impacted on the work the probation experts were doing: they were trying to support victims of sexual violence who not only had no family support, but were sometimes actually estranged from their families as a result of the crime. Probation experts were therefore also often acting as mediators.

The probation experts we worked with were highly committed and, through participating in the missions, became more confident in supporting victims of sexual violence. Many of the other probation experts they subsequently trained showed similar motivation and commitment, but some expressed reluctance or resistance to taking on this work.

Several factors contributed to this: lack of confidence, extremely heavy caseloads, anxiety that Branch Managers would not be able to offer them sufficient guidance and support, and a lack of agreed inter-agency protocols. Some probation experts felt that they had chosen to work with offenders, that victim work was being imposed on them, and that doing victim work should be voluntary.

This illustrates that training alone is not sufficient to prepare and enable probation experts to undertake this work. Much additional preparatory work is

needed. The people undertaking this work must also be committed, dedicated and carefully selected.

It is also important to consider the gender of the trainers and trainees when dealing with this subject matter. Many Turkish trainers are male and tend to train in pairs. Consideration should be given to having male and female trainers working together. It is also important to have a mixed gender trainee group.

The language of sexual violence

We thought it important to include a training session on 'the language of sexual violence' - the colloquial, slang and explicit language used by victims, and to examine how the experts felt about hearing it, perhaps for the first time. We wanted this to be an interactive session, to promote reflection and empathy amongst the group, and to help them understand how difficult victims can find it to express themselves openly.

Our Turkish colleagues did not want this session included! It would be too embarrassing, it wasn't necessary, it was a taboo subject, and anyway victims would not talk about sexual violence except in indirect ways. Our heated discussion continued, until the group finally agreed to try out the exercise themselves; this was something we always suggested when they voiced uncertainty about the purpose of an activity or how to run it.

We distributed outline drawings of a person's body and asked them individually to write on the drawing all the words they knew, slang included, that describe different body parts. Despite their initial reluctance and discomfort, they worked silently and then discussed their drawings in pairs. This proved to be a powerful exercise. The probation experts discussed its usefulness and were then determined to include it in the training manual.

This led to further discussion about their role as trainers: if they saw the value of a particular exercise, and if their trainees had learnt to trust them, it was likely that the trainees would participate in the exercise, as they had done with us.

In contrast to the probation experts' beliefs that victims of sexual violence would prefer not to talk about their experiences, Welkin has introduced therapy groups for sexually abused women. She found that, given the right environment and support, many women do indeed wish to talk about their experiences. They found meeting and talking in a therapeutic group especially powerful:

> *'The women in our group have been remarkably ready to join together and support one another. The groups in Turkey have been particularly committed to the process and have offered one another excellent solidarity compared to many of the groups I have done in the United States.'* (Today's Zaman, 15.06.10)

Therefore it is essential that probation experts become comfortable with the varied language that victims use to describe their painful and often humiliating experiences.

Impact of the work

Perhaps we did not fully take into account the impact of this work on those who were completely new to it. The nature of sexual abuse was hard for some probation experts and language assistants to listen to:

> *"As a mother it was really depressing to hear some real life stories as part of the intervention development …especially those about abused children. Of course any act of sexual violence and its victim is a source of worry and sorrow but the ones on children were really difficult to take."*

Working with victims of crime was new for the majority of probation experts, and working with victims of sexual violence presented particular challenges:

> *"It has been the most difficult training for probation staff, because it is a new area they have never worked in, the victims are so sensitive and vulnerable. To be able*

> *to absorb this kind of material one needs to feel ready from tip to toe. If there are unresolved issues about one's responsibilities, supervisors, colleagues, resources available, and also about the sense of professional self-satisfaction, all these block learning. And in training like this…it is even more difficult for trainees to open up themselves for new information and skills."*

Even though the probation experts were endeavouring to highlight their services and support victims of sexual violence, they had had very little contact with victims. Those victims who did come forward for help and support were of such an extreme nature that the probation experts often felt overwhelmed and inadequate to offer any effective support. We felt that this combination of inexperience and the extreme nature of the sexual crimes contributed to some probation experts being reluctant to take on this work. Others raised concerns about this work, not through a lack of desire to help, but because of their anxiety they might do or say something to make the victim feel worse.

Nevertheless we spoke with individual probation experts who really did go beyond their role to try to get the best help possible for the victim. They seemed to have a sense of personal commitment to the victim as another concerned human being rather than doing it because it was their job.

Some probation experts found working on the missions quite painful, but felt they really grew and learned through the experience. For us, although we did include a session on self-care, we reflected that perhaps we could have spent more time on this.

Interactive or didactic learning styles?

We had different learning styles from our Turkish counterparts. We felt the most effective way to learn was through experiential and interactive participation, whilst our Turkish colleagues were familiar and comfortable with a more didactic style of teaching. This created tension at times.

When suggesting how to deliver any session, the Turkish members' default was to use a didactic style, most often a PowerPoint presentation.

> *"A more didactic approach is generally adopted in Turkey. People like writing tons of things on their slides - like 15 lines on one single PPT slide! - and just reading them. … Although some staff had difficulty in getting used to this new way of training, at the end of the day I can say that they really liked having practice such as role-plays and group work. Small competitive activities also worked well. It is apparent that they need interaction and practice rather than just sitting there and pretending to be listening!"*

We felt it important to include experiential exercises so the participants could actively learn how to empathise and become attuned to a victim's experiences, and to practice the support skills they would be using.

Therefore we varied the learning styles to meet the differing needs of participants. The experiential and skills-based activities had the greatest impact on many:

> *"Turkish participants on the training really appreciated the skills practice and exercises. Because of this the learning became more permanent for them; they could have forgotten it if taught by presentations and PowerPoint. This way they could internalise the lessons."*

Role plays

The Turkish experts agreed that role plays should be included in the training manual. On earlier missions, role plays had been conducted by two people in front of the whole group, with the rest of the group and the STEs giving feedback. We suggested doing role plays in groups of three, with a probation expert, a victim and an observer, to give everyone the chance to try out all the roles instead of merely observing.

The group was reluctant to do this, worried that small role-play groups would not benefit from being observed and receiving feedback from the STEs. We had a hard job convincing them that it was more valuable for everyone to do the role plays, to try out all the roles and interventions, being involved and getting peer feedback. After discussion they tried out the role plays in this way and experienced the advantages. When they subsequently delivered the training course, their trainees gave positive feedback after role play, articulating what they had learnt both as probation experts and as victims from playing both roles.

Piloting the training sessions

Our assumptions and approach to piloting the training sessions differed from our Turkish colleagues. Our concept of piloting is to learn what works well and what needs adapting and changing, 'learning from our mistakes.' In Turkey this was seen more as exposing mistakes, poor quality work, loss of face, and thus to be avoided.

When the Turkish probation experts themselves delivered the training, they preferred the STEs to give the feedback to the trainees. They felt uncomfortable commenting on the approach or attitudes of the trainees, who were their contemporaries and work colleagues. They also felt that even constructive feedback could be seen as 'de-motivating and critical'. A similar tension arose at the end of the course when they had to assess their trainees but were reluctant to comment or judge them because they were colleagues.

Developmental supervision

We had a responsibility to raise issues that concerned us. One of these was that developmental supervision should be provided for this challenging, sensitive and new area of work. The probation experts are managed by Branch Managers, who carry out supervision, primarily about accountability and audit. We recommended that supervision of a developmental, educational and supportive nature should also be provided. However, as Branch Managers were not trained or knowledgeable about working with victims of sexual violence, they did not have the requisite skills or experience. We therefore also recommended further training for Branch Managers in this aspect of the work.

TIPS FOR FUTURE MISSIONS

There were challenges, surprises and joys in our work in Turkey. Despite the differences, overall we felt that there was a good exchange of ideas, and that the knowledge, attitude and skills we offered in working with victims of sexual violence were to a large extent transferable, relevant and could be adapted to the Turkish context.

We suggest different factors can contribute to positive and productive outcomes in similar missions. One is the importance of having a clear yet flexible plan, with numerous ideas and activities already developed which can then be adapted or discarded.

Our Turkish colleagues said that they too could have been asked to prepare texts and ideas in advance. Some commented it would have been useful to have had background information and contact with the STEs before the missions:

> *"There was no communication at all between STEs and experts before missions; all communication was at a higher level. We didn't know who was coming or their backgrounds at all…we could have been provided with more information and details about the subject beforehand, so we knew what to prepare ourselves for."*

Good preparation was essential, but not all STEs got this right: one probation expert commented:

> *"STEs could have had more information (in advance) about sexual violence in Turkey so they could have adapted their material and ideas more to the situation here. It would have helped if they'd had more understanding beforehand of the cultural issues and contextualising of sexual violence here."*

We saw that when we were prepared to set the agenda and the pace, our Turkish colleagues were much more confident. They wanted to be consulted but often preferred us to be directive and take the lead whilst also remaining flexible and adaptive.

It was essential to factor in the additional time needed for interpretation, and to establish agreement as to how, when and if every discussion would be interpreted. Pre-written material needed to be translated and sent to colleagues in advance. Straightforward, clear and non-jargon language and concepts worked well in translation, while euphemisms did not!

When working with another STE it is very important that you agree and plan things beforehand to ensure that you both use the same concepts, models and theories. Otherwise chaos can rule! We planned for everything, and planned more when we were there. We had a very short time to develop the manuals, so we worked hard, sometimes well into the night.

Working effectively as an STE takes time, effort and diplomacy. It cannot be rushed or forced and is an evolving process. Certainly we would have appreciated more time to discuss with our Turkish colleagues our shared and different cultural beliefs and attitudes towards victims of sexual violence, but often projects are time constrained and there are not always opportunities to set the scene adequately. Balancing the demands of the project with the need to build effective and positive relationships can create tensions and conflict for the experts.

We hope we have given some insight into working as an STE abroad. Challenges will arise, but with good faith and willingness on both sides, they can be overcome. We found the experience extremely rewarding and enjoyable. The energy and enthusiasm everyone demonstrated was contagious and we readily embraced as much as we could. We would both return in a heartbeat, and feel very proud to have taken part in such a worthwhile and exciting opportunity.