EVALUATION OF THE
COGNITIVE SELF-
CHANGE PROGRAMME

Rationale and design for evaluation of a widely-used cognitive skills programme for offenders

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Cognitive Self-Change

• Cognitive Self-Change (CSC) is a cognitive skills program for offenders.
• It was developed in the 1990s by Jack Bush in the Vermont (USA) correctional system.
• It was targeted at violent offenders in prison.
• CSC has been adopted and adapted around the world:
  – in 2001 it was reported as being “delivered in more than 20 jurisdictions throughout the United States, as well as Canada and Europe”
• In 2013 it is known to be being delivered:
  – in Australia in the Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) corrections systems, and the New South Wales juvenile justice system.
  – In Northern Ireland
  – In England
CSC in the ACT

- CSC has been delivered in the ACT since the mid-2000s
- It was preceded by Bush’s earlier program *Thinking for a Change* (T4C):
  - T4C was a highly structured and scripted, 22-session cognitive skills program (CSP);
  - in the ACT it was delivered in the community only (there was no prison at the time)
  - Reviewed in 2003, it was found to have very low completion rates, and was replaced with CSC
CSC in the ACT continued

• CSC comprises 4 steps:
  – Step 1 - participants learn to objectively monitor and report on their thinking, and document it in a “Thinking Report”
  – Step 2 - participants identify which aspects of their thinking are “risky”, e.g. might lead them to commit an offence.
  – Step 3 - they identify alternative ways of thinking which might eliminate or reduce the risk
  – Step 4 - they practice the skills they have developed.

• Groups comprise up to eight participants, with two facilitators
• is provided to generalist offenders, but primarily to family violence offenders
• It is offered in prison, periodic detention (weekend prison) and community corrections;
CSC - what’s different about it?

- CSC, unlike other offending behaviour programs (including CSPs)
  - uses open, rolling groups, which
  - allow participants to progress at their own pace, helping address responsivity issues (language, literacy, motivation...)
  - absences simply extend the length of time they need to attend the program to complete it
  - diligent workers can get through the program more quickly
  - participants join a group comprising others at different Steps, who model, motivate and coach the newbies
  - open/rolling groups allows prisoners to commence in prison and complete in the community (on parole/post-release supervision);
  - completion rates should be better than for closed groups
CSC – outcome evaluations 1

Only four directly relevant:

• Golden (2003): doctoral thesis; T4C; recidivism; male & female community sample; 38% did not complete; compared completers with comparison group; (reported results for non-completers, allowing post hoc Intention To Treat\(^1\) analysis); found T4C reduced: recidivism (about one quarter; Not Sig) and “technical violations” (Sig)

• Henning and Frueh (1996): CSC; recidivism; male prisoners; one-third did not complete; used ITT analysis; some concerns about comparability of comparison group; CSC reduced recidivism over 24 months (Sig) and in survival analysis (Sig), about 20 percentage points in each case

Note 1 – Intention To Treat analysis is used to refer to studies which include in the “treatment” group all those who commenced treatment; this maintains the integrity of comparison/control groups; such studies are more powerful in detecting whether treatment has a statistically significant effect, but are likely to underestimate the size of the effect of treatment.
CSC – outcome evaluations 2

- Baro (1999): CSC; male prisoners; outcome measure: in-prison behaviour; very high non-completion rate (75+%); comparison group not very comparable; found CSC reduced prison disciplinary offences;

- Sadler and Powell (1998): conference paper; CSC; male prisoners; recidivism; no comparison group – analysed based on “dosage”; therefore “completion rate” unclear – approximately 1/3 received only a low dosage (<65 hours); recidivism lowest for high-dose group (25%; cf 40% for low-dose); linear relationship between dose and recidivism (significance unclear)

Rather than examining offenders who completed or did not complete, these researchers looked at the number of hours of the programme each offender completed.
CSC – process evaluations

• Stoke, Dixon and Beech (2009): CSC in English male prisons
  – found 50% drop-out
  – One-fifth of these later returned to the program
    (completion rate of this 10% not reported)

• Cussen and Lynehan (2012): in ACT, Family Violence CSC, i.e. male offenders in the community
  – found high levels of attrition from referral to completion
  – 35% completion rate among those commencing programme
CSC – why evaluate?

• Limited outcome information, in limited settings – such research as has been conducted is encouraging
• Completion rates are low – program cannot be expected to reduce recidivism if offenders are not completing
• BUT, some research suggests a “dosage effect”
• Cost-effectiveness:
  – Baro (1999) found just 25 out of 500 selected for the program completed it (5%);
  – low completion rates may mean high cost per successful completion
• Reasons for drop-out unclear; it may be possible to reduce drop-out by better understanding it or better selection (matching participants to programs)
CSC – the proposed evaluation

Stage 1:
• review of administrative records to establish attrition from referral to completion
• Gather information to try to identify appropriate comparison and/or control group(s) (e.g. Waiting List Control)
• Limited retrospective outcome evaluation, e.g. technical breaches and recidivism

Stage 2:
• Prospective process, clinical and outcome evaluation, by following offenders (treatment and comparison) from referral through to completion (or drop-out) and beyond
• Use of appropriate questionnaires such as PICTS, Barratt Impulsivity Scale, treatment readiness
CSC evaluation: contact and collaboration

• We are interested in collaborating with researchers and practitioners in other jurisdictions – ask for details!
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