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Client Assisted Documentation

Obtaining self-reported written information from probationers and parolees during intake for pre-sentence reports and supervision.

The purpose of having clients document as much information about them as possible is to:

1. Save the Probation and Parole Officer time
2. Encourage the client to commit to what they are saying
3. Assess risk level
4. Assess literacy level
5. Reduce disputes over accuracy of documented information
6. Provide a training instrument for assessments

The attached questions have been devised to assist in the assessment of clients for sentencing and supervision. CAD is not intended to replace other forms of assessment such as live interviews and risk management inventories. CAD is a tool, which encourages clients to share responsibility for the articulation of their assessment.

The idea for CAD originated from Statement Analysis, an instrument used in investigations to detect deception. Since Probation and Parole Officers rely heavily on self-reported information by clients, Statement Analysis was seen as highly applicable instrument to determine deceptive discourse and encourage truthful disclosure. Principals of Statement Analysis were applied to the design of the questions to elicit responses, which were directive but not too specific in order to allow the clients the opportunity to share what was important to them, as well as edit out what is important and sensitive to them. The original focus was to determine rationalizations and attitudes around their offenses. However the instrument was quickly seen as having much broader application encompassing past, present and future self-perceptions. As well it became apparent that many clients could greatly assist in the articulation of their own assessments, saving professional time to focus on the distillation and confirmation of information instead of tedious and cost-ineffective documentation of chronological tombstone data.

It is both valuable if clients detail family histories and valuable if they avoid mentioning their families at all. What the client chooses to write provides insight, which can be quickly interpreted and explored in live interviews. For those clients who provide disappointing little information no time is lost to the interviewer, while knowledge of lack of literacy or pain about disclosure may be gained. For most clients however, very substantial information is gained. Frequently complex pre-sentence reports concerning high profile, high-risk clients (which can be stressful and time consuming for the report writer) are well articulated by the client, leaving little to do but confirm information with collateral sources. CAD's are often requested over the phone and presented at initial interviews, some typewritten, and even on computer disc.

CAD consists of seven questions focusing on life history, perceptions about their offense(s), self-awareness, and attitudes toward victims.

1. Tell me your life story from the day you were born till now.
2. You were convicted of _____ Tell me what happened from the beginning.
3. List the five most important contributing factors to the problem that brought you to court.
4. How has this affected the victim?
5. What plans, goals, desires do you have for the future?
6. Do you need help with any current problems?
7. Is there anything else that is important for me to know?

Questions are presented on plain paper with ample space for answers. The format is simple and open-ended, to illicit freedom of expression and choice about how to answer, what to say, and what to edit out. Any efforts to formalize this instrument, as bureaucracies tend to do, would hinder its purpose.

The client can be requested by phone to complete a CAD before the first interview. However they are usually instructed to complete the task upon arrival for the initial intake interview. Or they can be given the instrument to take home and return week(s) later. The client is provided a private space, given a pen and given instructions such as the following:

“Answer the following in as much detail as possible. I am interested in knowing about your family, school and work history, relationships and children. Tell me what you think is important for me to know about your childhood, teen years, work, and any previous conflict you may have had with the law.”

Did you plead guilty to this offense(s)? If you plead not guilty to this offense(s) do not answer question two regarding the incident. (To avoid client perjury).

If you make a mistake, bracket it and add your correction. Would you like a coffee? I will check in on you every 20 minutes to see if you need to use the washroom or go out for a cigarette so take your time.”

Completion of the CAD takes between 30 minutes and 2 and 1/2 hours. The interviewer does other tasks. One interviewer did three pre-sentence report intakes using CAD simultaneously!

PAGE #1 (At least two blank pages)

Complete the following with a pen in as much detail as possible. Do not scratch out mistakes, simply bracket the mistake and add the correction.

Question 1: Tell me your life story from the day you were born till now. Surprisingly few clients resist documenting their history.

Many choose to make substantial, and sometimes first time disclosures in writing. The reasons are simple. The client is not involved in the dynamics of manipulation inherent in a live interview or faced with shaming in a face-to-face interview. What about rapport? The interviewer then conducts a live interview often finding the CAD has helped the client and the interviewer focus on the salient points.

Probation Officers were initially apprehensive about using CAD; that many clients would be illiterate and provide little to no useful information. On occasion this is true, (approximate ratio of 1/20), but even sparse responses can give insight to what is important to the client. Most often the client will provide substantial information saving professional time, particularly where the chronology of blended families is complex.

CAD provides a foundation and reference point, helpful to the Probation Officer who is multi-tasking and often comes back to the report preparation weeks later.

If the clients are illiterate or English is not their first language they have been asked to have someone else do the writing or translation for them prior to an office interview with a great degree of cooperation.

Clients using CAD prepare many complex and detailed reports. The report-writer only verifies information through collateral sources and literally types what has been presented.

Page #2 (one blank page)

Question 2. You have been convicted of _____. Tell me what happened from the beginning.

This question elicits attitudes and rationalizations about the offense. Do clients see themselves as victims, (for example by detailing only what happened to them since being arrested), or find some way of avoiding describing their behaviors altogether? Do clients

take responsibility or blames others? This question gives important clues to possible remorse and risk.

Page #3 (one blank page)

Question 3. List the five most important contributing factors to the problem that brought you to court.

Clients will very often articulate their problems clearly and will also prioritize them. For example:

1. My drinking
2. I have a bad temper
3. Financial problems
4. I get depressed

This example gives the interviewer clues the client has some insight, takes some responsibility and may be amenable to recommended conditions to the court, (which can be gleaned from the listed problems).

If the client suggests:

1. She's a bitch
2. She spends money we don't have
3. She's always yelling at me
4. Her mother is wrecking our lives

We can see the client has little to no insight, does not take responsibility, will likely be resistant, and is higher risk.

These examples give the interviewer quick clues on how to approach and explore the problems with clients and assist in recommendations to the court.

Page #4 (one page for questions 4 &5)

Question 4. How has this affected the victim?

Again answers to this question will give clues to client insight, attitudes and risk level. Do they even care? Have they considered this question in the past? Often more problematic and high-risk clients will interpret this to mean them and will describe how they are the victims!

Question 5. What plans, goals, desires do you have for the future?

Encourages the client to share whether they have any plans for the future, if so how realistic, and whether they are taking any steps toward those goals. This question also reveals degrees of depression. Do they have no hope for the future?

Question 6. Is there anything you need help with now? It is important to ask questions 5 and 6 in this sequence. Question 5 gets them thinking about desired outcomes – then we can look at how to get there.

Question 6. Is there anything else that is important for me to know?

This question is design to give the client the opportunity to reflect on their documentation and offer another side to their stories. For example if they have been self-deprecating they will tell you some of their strengths, or if they have been deceptive they may choose to confess or take responsibility once they have dissipated anger.

After having numerous clients complete the CAD it was discovered their stories presented an excellent training instrument where PO's could explore together how to interpret client information not afforded by mostly undocumented live interviews.

KEEP IT SIMPLE. As with any instrument there is a tendency to formalize, create boxes for different areas of interest, or be more specific with your questions. This often occurs because the Probation Officer, anxious to have the client do most of the work, is disappointed when the client writes sparse answers and fails to detail family, work, school etc. I recommend, instead of writing a detailed question, simply state it to the client at the outset and see how they interpret the question.

“I am interested in knowing about your family, school and work history, relationships and children. Tell me what you think is important for me to know about your childhood, teen years, work, and any previous conflict you may have had with the law.”

If the information is inadequate I have told them it is insufficient and send them back to an office, or home to redo it. In four years I had only one challenge from a lawyer as to the legitimacy of the process and the judge directed the client to comply.

Once the client commits in writing to what they mean to communicate it is extremely unlikely they will deny they said it later, either with their lawyer, the court, or referring agencies.

CAD is useful for intake as well as assessment.

LEARN STATEMENT ANALYSIS. It is a very useful tool for those who rely on self-reported information.