The use of method triangulation in probation research

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Abstract

Qualitative research in probation is predominantly interview-based. This article explores the use of method triangulation in Belgian probation research. At first, a methodological question remains: is the use of a wider range of methods better? Or is it simply more?
Drawing from the author's experience in researching Belgian probation officers' daily work, the article concludes that using method triangulation (file analyses, interviews and observations) is a valuable approach that does not merely duplicate data, but also offers complementary insights and understandings, and can reveal some important discrepancies that might have remained uncovered through reliance on interviews alone.

Keywords: Probation work – Research methods - Qualitative research - Method triangulation - Observations

Introduction

Qualitative research in probation is predominantly interview-based. Only a few studies have employed observational methodologies to understand probation work (examples include e.g. Willis, 1983; Davies, 1986; Halliday et al., 2008; McNeill et al., 2009) or were carried out as evaluation research of cognitive-behavioural offender programmes. Well-documented examples are the STOP-programme study in Mid-Glamorgan (see Raynor and Vanstone, 1996, 1997) and the observational study of the pre-release group in the England and Wales resettlement studies, described in Clancy et al. (2006). Another observational study, currently under way, is -for instance- the video-based interview study in Jersey, of which some preliminary findings will be published by Raynor et al. (forthcoming).

Observational studies on *how* probation officers work with offenders are yet more difficult to find. Perhaps this is due to the fact that probation supervision mainly was (in many Anglophone countries) and still is (for instance in Belgium) conducted as a one-to-one process, whereby probation officers protect the confidentiality of all information acquired from the offender. As Howe notes *"for a long time it was presumed what did take place was essentially a private, professional matter between the worker and her/his client. What was achieved and experienced was simply a product of that worker's way of doing things"* (1991: 202). This lack of observational research on how probation officers *actually* work with offenders stands, therefore, in

marked contrast to the growing body of probation literature obtained through interviews and/or documentary analyses, thereby referring to Cohen's (1985) distinction between the practice and the *story*. The aim of this article is to explore the extent to which method triangulation, and specifically the combination of file analyses, interviews and observations of front-line probation staff, can be used successfully in probation research[1].

The article begins by describing triangulation, with specific attention to method triangulation. I explain the context of the PhD study, outline the methodology of the study and provide a short overview of defining characteristics of Belgian probation service interventions. The article then discusses the findings of this study. In the discussion, I point out that the triangulated findings were both convergent and complementary. However, some important discrepancies were found between the 'story' of some probation officers and their practice. I will try to explain why, and to what extent, these discrepancies are important. Finally, I argue why method triangulation is best to study Belgian probation practice.

Triangulation and method triangulation

The term *triangulation* originates from the sciences of land surveying and navigation, and refers to determining the position of a point using observations from two additional points (Sharp, 1943). In social science research, the concept of triangulation refers to a process by which a researcher wants to verify a finding by showing that independent measures of it agree with or, at least, do not contradict it (Miles & Huberman, 1994). However, in practice, qualitative studies in the field of social sciences often involve picking triangulation sources that have different strengths and foci so that they can complement each other, enhancing the validity of the research findings (Brewer & Hunter, 1989; Denzin, 1978, 1989). Especially in studies about complex phenomena – such as perspectives on adult offender rehabilitation and the translation of probation policies into practice, which was the focus of the PhD study – the combination of various methods is a crucial aspect (Creswell, 2003; Flick, 1992, 1998).

The use of 'triangulation' can be traced back to Campbell and Fiske (1959) and Webb et al. (1966), who argued that the use of more than one method is necessary to confirm that the variance reflected is that of the phenomenon being tested and not that of the method being used. Denzin (1978, 1989) and Miles and Huberman (1994) have taken the work of Campbell and Fiske and Webb and colleagues as his starting point and have shared their concern with bias and validity. They distinguish four kinds of triangulation in qualitative research: 1) triangulation by data source (data collected from different persons or at different times, or from different places); 2) triangulation by method[2] (interviews, survey, case study, observations); 3) triangulation by researcher (the involvement of two or more researchers in the analysis) and 4) triangulation by theory, which implies that hypotheses are informed by more than one theoretical perspective or that different theories are used to interpret the researcher's data. Miles and Huberman (1994) also add to their list triangulation by data type,

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[1] This article draws on some of the qualitative findings of the author's doctoral dissertation (Bauwens, A., forthcoming), under the supervision of Professor Dr. Sonja Snacken.

[2] Triangulation by method is also known as methodological or multi-method triangulation.

meaning combining quantitative and qualitative data; this is also referred to as 'mixed-methods approach' (Creswell, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie 2003). Janesick (1994) elaborated on the work of Denzin and Miles and Huberman and adds interdisciplinary triangulation to the list, where the research process is informed not only by a single academic discipline but by one or more other disciplines.

The emphasis of this paper falls within the category 'triangulation by method'. In this study the combination of file analyses, interviews and observations provides a relatively potent means of assessing the degree of convergence and complementary findings as well as elaborating on divergences between results obtained (see Becker & Geer, 1957, 1970; Trow, 1957; Atkinson & Coffey, 2002; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). For example, on the one hand, interviews may improve our understanding of probation work and elicit probation officers' ideas about various aspects of the job. On the other hand, observations may add to a more holistic and richer contextual understanding of the interview results and help to explain apparent anomalies or distortions emerging from the latter. Brewer and Hunter (1989) and Wolcott (1995) explicitly argue that the use of method triangulation or different fieldwork techniques cannot be distilled or described independently from the questions guiding the research.

The context of the study

My research agenda is twofold. In the PhD, entitled 'The transformation of offender rehabilitation', I'm aiming (1) to find out the current perspectives on adult offender rehabilitation in Belgium by studying the available literature and by analysing basic policy documents which reflect fundamental debates on adult offender rehabilitation, and (2) in my empirical research I then tried to find out how these stated rehabilitation principles are adopted and integrated in existing penal practices. To narrow the PhD research down, the study deals only with probation and conditional release orders, and not with electronic surveillance and community service (or 'unpaid work').

The methodology of this study was tailored to gain as much detailed and multi-layered information as possible about the penal practice taking place in the Belgian probation service, using method triangulation. I followed Kopinak's definition of method triangulation as entailing

> *"gathering information pertaining to the same phenomenon through more than one method, primarily in order to determine if there is a convergence and hence, increased validity in research findings"* (Kopinak, 1999:171).

In general, data were collected from the following three information sources: (1) file analyses; (2) semi-structured interviews with probation officers as well as informal talks; and (3) observations of probation officer / offender supervision meetings as well as observations in the field, including sitting with them while they worked on cases, sitting in on meetings with other professionals and relevant Committees, listening to them as they talked about cases with their colleagues, reading there case files and reports and being present whilst they carried out home visits. All data were recorded in extensive field notes and personal notes.

The triangulation enabled us to find out the similarities and discrepancies between what probation officers said in the interviews or informal talks about their daily work and what was done in practice (through observations). Subsequently, I was also

interested to investigate how you best can study what actually takes place in (Belgian) probation practice.

Methodology

Sample
This study was conducted in two Houses of Justice[3]: the House of Justice in Brussels (Dutch Department), a small Probation Service Area serving the Flemish part of Brussels; and the House of Justice in Mons, a medium Probation Service Area serving the South-West of the French part of Belgium. The research was carried out between May 2008 and April 2009. Twelve probation officers[4] (two males, ten females) were approached by the researcher with the help of two primary gatekeepers[5], and were invited to take part in the research. It was explained to staff that participation was voluntary and confidential in that the names of participants will not be disclosed in the research. All twelve probation officers, who were interviewed as well as observed, have fieldwork roles, have at least three year of work experience, and mainly work with offenders who are given probation orders or conditional release orders. Whilst I do not claim a representative sample I believe my sample is typical of Belgian probation officers. However, it should be noted that my 'gatekeepers' did help me in deciding whom to approach, which might indicate that the participants were more thoughtful and open to criticism of their own practice than the average member of staff.

Data analysis
The data consist of transcripts of semi-structured interviews, field notes and personal notes taken after the file analyses, informal talks, interviews and observations. Kellehear (1993) summarises three broad forms of analysis in qualitative research: 1) content analysis, 2) thematic analysis, narrative analysis and 3) semiotic, discourse, reflective analysis.
The analysis of the data in this study is done both deductively and inductively (Kellehear, 1993; Fook et al., 2000). The deductive analysis comprises a *content analysis*, in which patterns in the data are compared to a pre-existing framework, in this case developed by Mair (2004) in his Chief Probation Officers' study. The framework was slightly adopted for my study, in which certain questions were left out in the study with the Belgian probation officers (for instance questions that were not applicable to the Belgian context - see below 'Defining characteristics of Belgian probation service interventions' - e.g. How significant is What Works for the probation service?, Who have been the key players in pushing What Works?) and in which I examined the material to see whether and how often similar features were demonstrated by the participants. The inductive aspect of the analysis comprises a

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[3] The Belgian probation service is organized nationally into 28 Houses of Justice: one in each judicial district. Flanders and Wallonia each have 13 Houses of Justice and Brussels has two, one French-speaking and one Dutch-speaking, each serving different boroughs. The Houses of Justice are administered by the federal Ministry of Justice.

[4] Although the PhD study was conducted in four Houses of Justice (the House of Justice in Brussels (Dutch Department), the House of Justice in Brussels (French Department), the House of Justice in Mechelen, and the House of Justice in Mons), whereby in total 30 probation officers took part in the research, for the purposes of this article, we will only take into consideration the twelve probation officers, of whom the researcher had access to their entire work process (from file analysis and informal talks to interviews, observations and / or home visits).

[5] Gatekeepers, being two key research participants who eased access to the group of probation officers

thematic analysis, which involves analysing the data for recurrent patterns that emerge, and focusing on themes and issues raised by the probation officers and noted by the researcher, seeking to build up a picture of probation practice as conceptualised and utilised by practitioners themselves.

It should be noted that in this study the deductive analysis was useful in linking my work with pre-existing research on probation officers in a comparative perspective, which gave a form of academic legitimacy. However, whilst analysing all data there were many themes which did not completely fit the coded categories of the Chief Probation Officers' study of Mair and his framework. In the end, I used therefore the deductive analysis as one part of the broader inductive analysis in order to develop a more complete and complex picture of probation practices as demonstrated by the participants.

The iterative process of collecting, coding and analysing the triangulated data, generated by the file analyses, informal talks, interviews and observations, yielded five major findings. These findings revolved around: the changing structural and organisational context of the probation service; the vision of contemporary probation; the work methods and the use of offender rehabilitation models; the values of the probation service; and the legitimacy of the probation service. Although the PhD study will cover these five subject areas in detail, the findings reported here will *above all* use content related to the methodological issues associated with method triangulation in Belgian probation research. In order to interpret the findings correctly a short overview of the defining characteristics of Belgian probation service interventions will first be provided.

Defining characteristics of Belgian probation service interventions
Offender rehabilitation in Belgium remains consistent with a social welfare philosophy, aimed not only at public protection but also at the social inclusion of offenders (Bauwens, forthcoming). Hence, reducing re-offending and reintegrating the offender are linked together as primary objectives. The focus is put on a clearly defined practice, using explicit skills and techniques from systemic therapy (Lauwers, 2008). The systemic therapy emphasizes *"the acknowledgement of the complex interaction of multiple contexts on people's intimate individual and relationship experiences"* (Flaskas, 2007: 137). Influenced by this way of thinking the relationship between the probation officer and offender is a defining characteristic for probation service interventions in Belgium; variously labelled as 'casework relationship', 'one-to-one work', and 'offender guidance'. This means that for probation officers accountability lies in the relationship of trust established between them and their client, as starting points of their work (therapy, guidance and rehabilitation) and as a prerequisite to influence change. Practitioners spend a great deal of time thinking about the nature of the workers–client relationship and working at developing them. For this reason prevailing themes remain the need to 'start where the client is', and to 'move at the client's pace'. Probation officers try to encourage offenders to take responsibility for their own behaviour and reintegrate them back in the community through both capitalising on 'social capital' (essentially in the form of employment, structured activities and/or supportive (family) relationships) and 'human capital' (by means of therapeutic and/or cognitive-behavioural interventions).

Although recent changes in the probation service (for instance, the introduction of national standards, performance indicators, computer-based reporting systems, fixed-choice classification schemes, and standardized forms and letters, as well as the

standardized methods of data collection) have led towards a more technicist and prescribed approach than in the past, practitioners still feel they can exercise a certain amount of autonomy and control in relation to their work processes, maintaining a client-centred practice (Bauwens, 2009).

Findings

I will first discuss why the fieldwork started with file analyses and how method triangulation enabled us to find out the similarities and discrepancies between what probation officers said in the interviews or informal talks and what was done in practice, followed by how you best can study what actually takes place in (Belgian) probation practice.

File analyses
Having agreed access to the Houses of Justice, the first data collection stage to the research was familiarisation with the working of the probation service. The starting point for the fieldwork was a three-month period of file analyses that took place on the spot in the House of Justice in Brussels (Dutch department). Patton argued that *"learning to use, study and understand documents and files is part of the repertoire of skills needed for qualitative inquiry"* (2002: 295). He continues to say that document and files prove not only valuable because of what can be learned directly from them, but also as stimulus for *"paths of inquiry that can be pursued only through direct observation and interviewing"* (Patton, 2002: 294). Indeed, the file analysis was used as a basis for getting to know the research context, becoming familiar with probation and probation work and helping to work out what issues to explore in the informal talks, the interviews and eventually to carry out more precise observations, as supervision plans and reports do not tell the whole story about what work actually goes on with offenders. In fact, and as indicated by several authors, probation officers usually have a wealth of additional information about a particular individual, based on conversations held with the offender, hearsay or half-formed intuitions which seldom appear in print, but which, nonetheless, are vital for a proper understanding of the complex interaction between probationer and probation officer (Bauwens, 2009). Furthermore, the file analysis on the spot gave me the opportunity to build trust and to establish rapport with the probation workers, and to observe the functioning of the probation service, the relationships between the different actors, as well as their attitudes towards offenders and other relevant actors. In other words, the file analyses were also used to do some ethnographic work on the organisational and interaction context.

Interviews and observations
Similarly to the findings of Holstein and Gubrium (1995:28), in this study the probation officers, who did not receive the interview questions prior to the interview, improvised their answers in combining *"aspects of experience, emotion, opinion, and expectation, connecting disparate parts into a coherent, meaningful whole"*. But when the semi-structured interviews were thoroughly analysed it became clear that some probation officers had given responses fully in line with the law, the national standards, their in-house training materials and the probation policies. Put differently, it appeared that some probation officers were attempting to give 'right answers' instead of honest ones, or perhaps they considered those answers important. It might also be that I, as a researcher, should have asked explicitly if there were discrepancies

what policies and guidelines instruct staff to do and what staff in fact do, rather than relying on observations alone to find out myself certain discrepancies between what policy instructs staff to do and what staff in fact do *and* between what staff say they do and what in fact they do. Moreover, a discrepancy appeared between some probation officers' own perceptions about how they dealt with probation practice (as they explained in the interviews) and how they actually behaved in the supervision meetings. For example, a junior probation officer claimed in the interviews to be 'a real social worker' putting a lot of time and energy in guidance, but when observing the probation officer I met, on several occasions and in one-to-one probation officer/offender meetings, five to six offenders in less than an hour. These discrepancies are important as they might affect the quality of probation work as well as the impact they might have upon how offenders are dealt with. One explanation could be that a gap in the values enactment was found in the observations with mainly some junior probation officers, whereby 'values enactment' is defined as *"employee and managerial behaviours that are aligned with the explicitly defined core values of the organisation (such as those found in mission and values statements)"* (Gruys et al., 2008: 810). Rather than working from the desired and formal 'core' Belgian probation values embedded in social work, the actual values of those probation officers were more result-oriented (checking the imposed conditions by asking the offender for certificates or proofs to have evidence that the conditions are fulfilled) than process-oriented (providing assistance and guidance), possibly indicating a new attitude and a different adaptation of the cultural organisational values of the probation service. Another explanation might be that these young probation officers lack self-confidence, practice wisdom[6] (Sheppard, 1995) and experience in working with offenders, focussing more easily on receiving tangible evidence for the fulfilment of the imposed conditions (e.g. work certificates, therapy certificates, evidence of job applications, etc.) than on the often intangible aspects of assisting and guiding offenders. It is worth noting that the discrepancies *might* have had an impact, as currently these junior probation officers receive supervision trainings where they are told (by senior probation officers and the management of the probation service) the importance of keeping a balance between guidance/care and the social work process and supervision/control.

Goodstein (1983) points out that each organisational culture has values and beliefs that help members of the organisation to understand what the organisation holds as important and how these values should influence their personal work decision making and behaviour. Consequently, we might expect staff to refer to these values and beliefs when then explain their work. However, their 'construction of reality' may be through the prism of the organisation's values and priorities, but may also come from their personal values and beliefs. I therefore viewed the interviewees' answers, behaviour, individual values and social constructions of their self-images (and at times idealised self-images) as central to, and inseparable from, their opinions and the examples they gave us. This evidence was taken into account and used to better understand the culture of the probation service and how probation officers see their

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[6] Practice wisdom is defined by Sheppard (1995: 279) as: "…the accumulated knowledge social workers are able to bring to the consideration of individual cases and their practice in general. This would appear to have three main and distinct potential sources: knowledge gained from 'everyday life', derived from the process of living in society and interacting with others; knowledge gained from social science, specifically research and ideas; and knowledge gained from the conduct of social work practice".

work through the socially constructed prism of professional identities and to understand how they construct everyday reality.

The data gathered through observations and shadowing shed light on new aspects of probation officers and their daily work. Contrary to the interviews, where in my case more socially desirable answers were given, the probation officer/offender supervision observations provided insight into probation officers' decision making processes and revealed routine actions as well as routine communications. Examples are, for instance, the apparently irrelevant warm-up stages at the start of the meeting as well as the way of checking the conditions imposed on the offender. Without observation, these routine details would most likely have gone unnoticed. In addition, the observations elicited different patterns of care and control. Two probation officers, for example, claimed in the interviews to keep a very good balance between care and control (and held that self-image), as would be outlined working in the Good Lives Model of Ward (2002) and Ward and colleagues (2003, 2004, 2007), but in the observations it became clear that they put more emphasis on the risk element, working actually more in the Risk-Needs-Responsivity Model (Andrews & Bonta, 2006) than in the Good Lives Model. Observations also highlighted probation officers' attitudes and interactions with offenders and showed differences in criminal justice work expertise. Variation was found mainly with regard to pro-social modelling (e.g. difference in reflective listening or motivational interviewing) and there were differing views on the extent to which professional discretion should be used in balancing the need to 'stick with' and successfully engage the offender, as opposed to the need to adhere strictly to the letter of national standards and policies. These findings fit nicely in the 'model of skill acquisition' of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986), and further developed by Fook et al. (2000) on social work expertise. In short, Dreyfus and Dreyfus and Fook et al. identified learning stages whereby the learner progresses from detached, abstract and consciously analytic behaviour to involved skilled behaviour that is based on unconscious and intuitive recognition of similarities with past experiences. In my research I saw that the more experienced probation officers appeared more confident about their work, and seemed more able to prioritise the daily work that needed to be done, without having to check the guidelines and instructions.

Furthermore, after the meeting with the offender had taken place, the observations triggered some probation officers to ventilate their suppressed emotions and unresolved or complex issues in the case, which did not happen after the more formal semi-structured interviews. That said, emotions were also expressed in the informal talks. Two examples out of the field notes of the researcher:

> (1) After a very difficult face-to-face meeting with a sex offender, sentenced to a five-year probation order, the probation officer turned to the researcher, looking for understanding and support. "I'm glad you can see now how difficult our work can be at times. Have you heard that he keeps on minimising his actions and that he is always rambling on about 'the injustice' that is done to him? …He is very difficult to work with….I'm always exhausted after meeting him. He wears you out… It's time for a good cup of coffee". (Respondent 2)

> (2) A young female probation officer had a young offender coming in, who had been charged with torturing a young female, her age. During the face-to-

face meeting, the researcher witnessed the probation officer's handling in a very professional, prescribed manner. After the man left the meeting room, the probation officer fulminated to the researcher that "It is always the same with these rich kids; now they don't say a thing, sit shyly and bring their daddy along"; she continued to say that "daddy doesn't have a conditional release order, so daddy has to wait in the waiting room", making very clear that "HE is the offender!", followed by "Do you think he was that shy and ashamed when he tortured her [referring to his victim] and pulled her eye out?". A few minutes later sitting back in her office, a colleague drops in to say hello and the researcher saw the probation officer taking a little doll, which was standing on her desk. She answered her colleague-friend, having the doll in one hand, with a high pitched tone of voice, whilst the other probation officer answered back in a similar way and this for about three minutes. This event happened in front of the researcher, but that didn't seem to bother them at all. In fact, similar events between the two abovementioned probation officers occurred now and then whilst performing the research. (Respondent 7)

In my study I regularly witnessed probation officers ventilating their emotions, but always after the one-to-one meeting had taken place, when the offender had left the probation office and when the researcher was alone with the probation officer. It is fair to say that in both examples the probation officers' feelings didn't affect the one-to-one work with the offender. In fact, they were both very successful in hiding their personal feelings in front of the offender, so that the client wasn't aware of these feelings. Most commonly found to ventilate emotions were taking a break, socialising with others, anger, humour, and physical activity. This is in line with the research findings of Rosario and colleagues (1988) who defined this behaviour as emotion-focused coping strategies, aimed at reducing or managing the emotional distress associated with the situation (Lazarus, 1998).

Study of Belgian probation practice
The interview method of data collection has been advocated as being particularly well suited to the collection of data of sensitive topics as well as an effective means of gaining insight (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). Others have argued, however, that despite the increasing use of (semi-structured) interviews in research and the richness of interview data, *"there is an inherent faith that the [interview] results are trustworthy and accurate…"* (Fontana & Frey, 2000: 646). Atkinson (1997) and Silverman (2000) have argued that the interview is overused in qualitative research and its uncritical use has given researchers a false sense of authenticity. Buckingham (2000: 63) even concluded that interview data cannot be taken at face value because interviews have proven to be *an exceptionally slippery medium"*. In my research I found that there is no straightforward relationship between the 'story' and the practice. Although socially desirable responses were given in the interviews, through the use of method triangulation and the research process I was able to refine my analysis. Moreover, in a third House of Justice, namely the House of Justice in Brussels (French department), a large probation area serving the French part of Brussels where observations were not possible due to organisational reasons within their probation service, the interviews in combination with file analyses alone revealed what I had discovered with the method triangulation in the other Houses of Justice. The 'gatekeepers', the grapevine communication about the research and the credibility I had build over months with their colleagues made it possible that those

probation officers were immediately at ease to talk about their experiences, both positive and negative. In addition, I noticed that in interviews practitioners often echoed the probation policy aims for a balance between public protection and social inclusion, we saw in the observations that an equal balance was found for probation orders, but not for conditional release orders where the risk anxiety is higher I noticed a more risk-based approach, indicating that elements of the Good Lives Model and the Risk-Needs-Responsivity Model are simultaneously present in Belgian probation practice.

Discussion and conclusion

Notwithstanding some discrepancies found between what was told and what was done in practice, these findings did – at present - not evidence an 'implementation barrier' to good probation practice.

Contrary to the position in many Anglophone countries where researchers very often were (or still are) practitioners themselves, in Belgium this is rarely the case. However, it should be noted that the position as researcher or practitioner researcher both hold different advantages as well as disadvantages (This is well documented elsewhere, see for example McIvor, 1995; Shaw, 2005). Furthermore, probation research remains very scarce. Therefore probation officers are not used to being interviewed and observed and their cautious and apprehensive answers in the interviews have to be interpreted in this context.

In addition, being an academic and only familiar with the theoretical frameworks of probation, I had not only to acquire legitimacy in probation practice; I also had to maintain this acquired legitimacy on a daily base throughout the fieldwork. Following Patenaude's arguments (2001, 2004) that qualitative researchers face instant tests of credibility and personal integrity prior to and on entering the field, I experienced these tests not only at the beginning of the research, but also during the entire period of fieldwork. One capital error from my side would have been sufficient to stop the cooperation and would have meant the end of the fieldwork. It was crucial to establish research legitimacy by allaying all (natural) suspicions about the motives of the study and to be open and transparent about the research. Critical elements to conduct this research successfully included, as in many qualitative social researches, negotiations of access, the important role of gatekeepers, as well as building rapport and developing trust with the probation officers. But most importantly my fieldwork success depended heavily on devoting sufficient time and energy necessary to give feedback, to discuss the findings and to engage in open dialogues and communication, creating an atmosphere of confidence and trust between us and the practitioners.

In conclusion, similar as Gray and McDonald noted about social work, a face-to-face probation officer / offender meeting is

> "*an incredibly complex series of activities undertaken in diverse, unstable, constantly changing social 'spaces'. Empirically derived attempts to understand those spaces will always be partial and incomplete, and will only be able to attend to those processes amenable to the lens applied*" (Gray & McDonald, 2006: 15).

I'm very much aware that the empirically derived attempts to understand those interactions will always be partial and incomplete, and will only be able to attend to

those processes amenable to the lens I applied and the PhD questions I try to answer. Some discrepancies were found between the 'story' and the practice. In the way that observations went beyond official or 'right' responses and as Diefenbach (2009:882) notes *"What people say or don't say is only part of the picture. There is a definite need for further checking and additional information"*. The observations did give us added value, enriching the obtained data. In fact, the research activities contributed to the production of a more complete and complex version of events. Gaining access to probation officers' 'display of multiple, refracted realities simultaneously' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000: 6) allowed us to build a richer, more inclusive version of reality. And although we can discuss if this interpretation of method triangulation is a 'genuine' triangulation, due to the fact that the issue is perhaps less one of methods and more one of trust with relation to my position as an academic 'outsider' rather than a practitioner researcher, clearly, with regard to Belgian probation service interventions method triangulation was found a useful tool for understanding convergent, complementary and divergent ways in which probation realities are constructed, which might otherwise have remained uncovered.

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