

Introducing the special edition on occupational culture and skills in probation practice

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Introduction

The English probation officer is no mere official bound by regulation and routine (Clarke Hall, 1933)

It seems staggering to us that up to three-quarters of probation officers' time is spent on work which does not involve direct engagement with offenders (House of Commons Justice Select Committee, 2011)

'Psycho-babes, care bears and control freaks' (Hanson, 2009)

We are delighted to introduce this special edition of the European Journal of Probation focusing on occupational culture and skills in probation practice. As the quotations above illustrate, that culture is subject to change and to a variety of widely contrasting characterisations both complimentary and critical. This edition explores the dynamics whereby probation culture is formed, maintained and altered whilst also highlighting some variations and continuities across Europe. It might be fair to say that, in many European jurisdictions, there is currently a struggle for the power to define probation culture and that this struggle concerns practitioners intimately. It is hoped that, in this context, this edition is timely and useful.

Probation practitioners work through direct engagement with people who have offended and who, in many cases, live at the margins of society. Such relationships are mediated through the worker's own personality, values, knowledge and skills. Engaging with moral complexity is thus part and parcel of probation work but it does not take place in a vacuum and is subject to a range of competing, and sometimes contradictory, influences (Garland 2001). Hofstede (1994) classified national occupational cultures according to four variables. These were the degree of inequality tolerated by the population; the degree to which individualism was promoted above collectivism; the degree to which masculine values like assertiveness, success and competition were emphasised; and finally, the degree to which people prefer rigid structured solutions to problems as oppose to flexible, unstructured ones. At the mezzo organisational level, Durnescu (2008) analysed the published aims of various probation services and found that probation systems in EU countries could be divided into four main types; 'probation services based on promoting community measures and sanctions; probation

services based on the model of assisting the judiciary; probation services based on the rehabilitation model/public protection; and probation services based on a punishment or enforcement model' (p. 273). Probation cultures are, therefore, constructed in different ways politically in different jurisdictions. However, in an overview of Probation in Europe (van Kalmthout and Durnescu, 2008), it was found that despite some key differences relating to the relative size and development of probation services there was a tendency towards a convergence of practice towards an 'Anglo-Saxon' model characterised by 'correctional services; prioritizing control, risk assessment and public protection over welfare and social assistance' (Robinson, 2010).

As in many other countries, contemporary probation practice in England and Wales operates within a heightened and volatile political environment in terms of society's response to crime that has often been dominated by anti-liberal, anti-humanitarian rhetoric fuelled by negative media representations. To use Hofstede's classification it has been marked by increased inequality, individualism, a managerially driven culture of masculinity (Davies 2009) and a preference for technical, structured approaches focused primarily on risk management. By contrast, occupational responses to political change are evident in terms of the power of professional cultures to assert rehabilitation as a moral enterprise in which the offender remains in real ways the subject of work as opposed to the object of action designed to deliver an outcome for the wider public. Often characterised as interfering, well-intentioned (if somewhat naive) 'do gooders', probation staff have never had, nor sought, the symbolic status of other criminal justice professionals (Mair and Burke, 2011). As a result the occupational culture within probation has been a largely neglected and under-researched area of academic enquiry. As Deering (2011) notes 'the emphasis in the literature has been more of a theoretical debate, rather than a range of empirical explorations of actual practitioner opinion' (p. 50). There has been a plethora of practice guidelines and occupational standards outlining what probation officers should do but there is, however, very little on how these translate (or not as the case may be) into practice (Ellis and Boden, 2004).

Yet emerging research (see McNeill, Raynor and Trotter (2010) for an overview) appears to re-affirm the significant impact that the attitudes, skills and values held by practitioners can have in determining successful outcomes in the supervision process. Recent policy directives in England and Wales have once again stressed the importance of professional judgement and offender engagement in facilitating effective practice (House of Commons Justice Select Committee, 2011). Who, then, creates occupational culture and how?; how does occupational culture shape notions of what personal values, characteristics and skills are required to be an effective probation officer? how are these qualities and skills developed and sustained? how far does occupational culture shape the relationships and power relations between probation officers and their colleagues, offenders and staff of other agencies with whom they work?; Are there cultural traits in probation that endure amidst political and organisational change? In this introduction to the special edition we briefly consider some of these issues drawing upon the existing literature regarding other criminal justice agencies and the key findings from the contributions to this edition. In doing so, we acknowledge Janet Foster's (2003) assertion that 'cultures are not singular and monolithic, they do vary across time and space' (p. 223). Whilst our analysis is on the whole confined to England and Wales (within which division occupation cultures also vary to an extent), we hope to engender consideration and reflection as to how these features and trends are evident in other countries.

Occupational culture

For prison officers, the occupational culture - and the social interactions which inevitably result - is a significant component of the job itself. In the prison, how things are done can be as important as what is done, and occupational (that is informal) rules and norms underpin how officers relate to their inmates, to each other, to their superiors on the wing and to their managers (Crawley and Crawley, 2007: 135).

The above quote highlighting the importance of culture in shaping the daily interactions of prison officers could be equally applied to probation staff. Before examining the implications of this though, it is perhaps necessary to establish what we understand as the notion of occupational culture. In doing so there are a number of cautionary elements to be considered. Firstly, as Deering points out 'there are a multiplicity of definitions of culture and, in particular workplace culture' (2011: 25) and there may not only be significant differences between official accounts and how they are interpreted and acted out within the workplace but also between 'expressed beliefs and action' in terms of what individuals say and what they do' (Liebling, Price and Shefer, 2010: 157). Moreover Ott (1989) acknowledges that organisations can also have subcultures that may sometimes coincide and sometimes conflict with the dominant occupational culture.

Despite these conceptual difficulties, occupational culture is a useful conceptual tool for analysing the values and beliefs held by workers and how this binds them together. As Herbert (1998) observes 'it provides labels (a language) and categories, accounts of how things are done, accounts of how they should be done, in certain situations, and a set of assumptions about why this is the case' (cited in Arnold, Liebling and Tait: 483). Crawley (2004) describes occupational culture as, 'the commonly shared beliefs, values and characteristic patterns of behaviour that exist within an organisation.' (2004: 8). Reiner (2000: 85) likewise defines professional cultures as a 'complex ensemble of values, attitudes, symbols, rules and practices, emerging as people react to the exigencies and situations they confront, interpreted through the cognitive frames and orientations they carry with them from prior experience. Drawing on the insights provided by Schien (1985) and others, Deering (2011), on the other hand identifies workplace culture as operating on three different levels 'on the broadest macro level are overt behaviours, written rules and policy; second, is a sense of what ought to be (values); third those things that are taken for granted as 'correct' ways of behaving within the organisation' (p. 25). The first and most visible level, centring on 'behaviour and artefacts,' may tell us what an occupational group is doing but not necessarily why. The next level of 'values' may determine behaviour but they are less observable and there may be a difference between stated and operating values. Hofstede, (1984) acknowledges that an individual's values may play a part in their attraction to working in an occupation but warns against overstating the influence of organisational cultures upon the individual's values which may already been developed in other social contexts such as the family and school. The third level, where underlying assumptions develop out of values until they become taken for granted, is perhaps the deepest level of occupational culture (National Defense University, undated).

Culture shapes organisations through the transmission of values and shared practice wisdoms and thus socialises individuals to different degrees. In this respect 'organizational culture and occupational culture can also influence each other through the processes of selection and socialisation' (Johnson, Chye Koh & Killnough, 2009). Numerous studies of organisational culture have highlighted the influence of personal interactions within subgroups. As VanMaanan and Barley (1984) note:

During initial interactions with newcomers, the established occupational community transmits to new members those shared occupational practices (including norms and roles), values, vocabularies and identities - all examples of the explicit social products that are indicative of culture in organisation (cited in National Defense University, undated).

Over time, past experiences are used as a basis for determining action which in turn becomes shared practice norms and values (Johnson, Chye Koh & Killnough, 2009). This can be a unifying influence within an organisation but it can also be characterised by entrenched behaviour and attitudes, exclusionary practices and become an obstacle to change. In this respect workplace cultures can be deep seated and difficult to change. This has been particularly marked within the police where there has been a strong sense of a 'cop culture' which 'Reiner (2000) describes as a 'subtle and complex intermingling' of police officers' sense of mission, action-orientated behaviour and cynicism where the emphasis is on danger, suspicion, isolation, solidarity, pragmatism and authority' (cited in Foster, 2003: 200). Likewise, in relation to prison officers, Arnold, Liebling and Tate state that 'We know that there is, or often has been, a widely shared prison officer culture, or 'working personality', characterised roughly by insularity, group solidarity among officers, pragmatism, suspiciousness, cynicism, conservatism, machismo and distance from senior management' (Arnold, Liebling and Tait, 2007: 484).

On the other hand, there have been attempts to define the attributes of a 'good' (or perhaps ideal) prison officer

The best officers were good at decision-making, using their discretion, and communicating known and consistent boundaries to prisoners. They had 'moral fibre' (confidence, integrity, honesty, good judgement and flexibility), a 'professional orientation', an optimistic outlook, understood the pain of imprisonment and the effects of their own power' (Arnold, Liebling and Tait, 2007: 477).

Likewise a study by McNeill (2001) identified the key personal and professional attributes required to deliver effective probation as being a

willingness to learn; maturity and life experience; listening and confronting skills; being a sensible and realistic carer; an encourager; able to engage the probationer; believing in the possibility of change; being non-judgemental; being empathetic; inspiring trust, displaying honesty and confidence; and having a sense of humour' (p. 677).

It would be unrealistic and somewhat stereotypical to suggest that workers in these organisations display all of these attributes all of the time. As Arnold, Liebling and Tait note, in their discussion of prison officer culture, they represent

a "tool bag" of skills that a good officer carries with him or her. The key ability common to the good officers lies in selecting the right "tool" for the "job"; knowing when it was appropriate to use which skill, and to what degree, when dealing with different situations and people. Achieving the right balance of skills is also important:

too much or too little of some of the identified qualities could be detrimental and hinder effective performance (2007: 477).

In attempting to understand the occupational culture within probation, in the next section we briefly discuss how such cultures developed in the early part of the services history in England and Wales

The changing occupational culture of probation in England and Wales

As Maurice Vanstone has noted, the roots of probation practice were ‘shaped more by individual creativity than by organisational norms and expectation’ (2010: 19). This was endorsed in the Departmental Committee formed to enquire into the workings of The Probation of Offenders Act 1907 which had established the statutory framework for the establishment of the Probation Service:

It is a system in which rules are comparatively unimportant and personality is everything. The probation officer must be a picked man or woman, endowed not only with intelligence and zeal, but, in a high degree, with sympathy and tact and firmness. On his or her individuality the success, or failure of the system depends. Probation is what the officer makes it? (Home Office 1910: 5)

It is possible to identify a range of factors influencing probation culture and practices in its formative years, ranging from the religious and philanthropic to more practical concerns over rising crime rates and unruly behaviour, and a level of disenchantment with the prison (Mair and Burke, 2011). Over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, these influences were profoundly affected by secularisation, and the introduction of new working practices based on an expanded knowledge base. The promotion of social casework for example, became undoubtedly important for the Probation Service on two levels during this period. Firstly, it provided a theoretical framework for working with individual offenders and secondly, a mechanism for the building of a 'professional' image. However, it is debatable how far these practices, though influential, were reflected in the everyday workings of probation staff. Nellis further contends that it was a ‘humanistic sensibility’ (albeit one based on a predominantly white, British, imperial worldview) what mostly unified the outlook of probation officers from the 1960s onwards rather than a fully shared knowledge base.

A variety of theories, perspectives and ‘practice wisdom’ fed into it (via training arrangements) but officers retained considerable leeway in what they believed and much more discretion in the way they acted towards offenders (Nellis, 2007: 49).

From the 1970s, the Probation Service began to enter a different ideological phase as the ‘rehabilitative ideal’ became increasingly challenged across the political spectrum as a consequence of empirical findings and academic developments. The much-quoted article by Robert Martinson, ‘What Works? Questions and Answers about Prison Reform’ (1974) has been widely seen as the death-knell for rehabilitation, although a close reading of the article suggests that the picture presented by Martinson was rather more complex than is commonly perceived (Mair, 1997) and its impact would seem to have been more significant on a policy level rather than the working practices of probation officers. Indeed as Raynor (2002) has reflected ‘practitioners had to find their own sources of optimism and belief in what they were doing, and the ‘nothing works’ era actually became a period of creativity and enthusiasm in the development of new methods and approaches (p. 1182).

In the final part of his seminal quartet of essays, McWilliams (1987) argued that the conceptual vacuum that left by the demise of the diagnostic-treatment ideal was filled by three different schools of thought (Personalist, Radical, Managerial) within the Probation Service in England and Wales. Whitehead and Thompson (2004) summarise these as:

The Personalist understands probation work in moral terms as the process of helping people as an end in itself, thus detaching probation practice from the rationale of instrumentality. Next is the Radical school that seeks to pursue a policy of social change within a Marxist framework. Finally the Managerial school emphasises accountability, economy, efficiency, effectiveness, the offender within a framework of policy, objectives and targets' (p. 19).

It could be argued that the latter school of thought has dominated contemporary probation practice and culture since the latter part of the twentieth century, and in practical terms has moved the organisation from 'being an organic or adaptable organisation (characterised by personal involvement, achievement orientation, continual adjustment, shared group tasks, lateral and vertical communication, and consultation) to a mechanistic or bureaucratic one (characterised by 'impersonality', ascribed roles and rules, rational efficiency, rigid hierarchical structure, mainly vertical communications, specialisms of tasks and expectations and expectations' (cited in Vanstone, 2010: 29).

The rise of managerialism is of course not confined to England and Wales and has been evident in most western societies. It has redefined the relationship between the state and public service organisations such as the probation service and the penal-welfare values (Garland, 2001) that underpinned it. Central to what has come to be defined as New Public Management (NPM) is the promotion of a market-led approach based on the notion that it is more responsive to the needs of 'consumers' than what is perceived to be an overly bureaucratic public sector provision, dominated by the self-interest and elitism of professional groupings. As Deering notes:

NPM is also seen as having attempted to reduce the role and influence of professional groups and to subordinate them to a management that asserts that 'it knows best and must have the right to manage' (Clarke et al) . This is the vehicle by which managerialist concerns with targets, clear aims, efficient systems and reduced costs can be enacted' (2010: 22).

It is arguably the case that alternative probation paradigms developed over recent years have sought in part to resist the influence of NPM over probation culture (The 'Good Lives Model', (Ward and Maruna 2007), 'Desistance-Focussed Practice (McNeill and Whyte 2007) Community Justice models (Nellis 2002, Harding 2003) etc.).

Key findings from the articles in this edition

The impact of these changes is explored in the first article in this edition 'Targets, audit and risk assessment cultures' in the probation Service by Jake Phillips. The author traces the tensions inherent in these developments, particularly in respect of the introduction of targets, audits and risk assessment tools, and the impact on the occupational culture of the probation service. Based on fieldwork observations of 31 probation staff, the author found that many staff had internalised managerialist approaches and although targets were seen as a mechanism for legitimising decisions taken, concerns were also expressed regarding the

negative impact this was having on the contact time they spent with those they supervised. The author thus suggests that although the introduction of targets had increased accountability they can also be counterproductive and contributed to a culture of 'fear' as presented by some of the respondents in this study. This is particularly pertinent to the management of high risk cases where it could be argued political duplicity and a wider blame culture has not only undermined the probation service's work with such cases but also highlights the individual personal costs borne by those in positions of authority when things go wrong (Burke, 2011). Ultimately, in Jake Phillips' study, the stance adopted by staff towards targets, audits and risk assessment tools tended to be one of either pragmatic acceptance or ambivalence. This would seem to give some credence to the view expressed by Causer and Exworthy (1999) that to present NPM as a conflictual mechanism to assert the power of the manager over the worker is somewhat conceptually limited as many professionals have embraced these changes in order to safeguard or facilitate their own career aspirations and progression and ignores the fact that many staff undertake both managerial and professional tasks in their roles (cited in Deering, 2011). An alternative analysis is provided by Robinson and Burnett in that:

Probation staff - and certainly those who have been in the service for several years - are accustomed to working within an organisation that is undergoing reform. Indeterminate change is the norm: it is a defining characteristic of their professional existence (Robinson and Burnett, 2007: 332).

A recurring theme within the articles in the special edition is that of occupational resistance. As Deering notes

However it is recognised that whilst there is a top down influence upon organisation members, this is neither hegemonic nor unchanging, as it is not universally or uncritically accepted by all actors who themselves have an influence upon the overall culture' (2011: 26).

In 'Practical wisdom and the ethic of care in probation practice', Marilyn Gregory interviewed 15 experienced probation officers in England and Wales and found that practitioners were resisting the worst excesses of punitive managerialism and continued to practice in ways that balanced the demands of justice and care. Using the notion of 'phronesis' (wisdom in determining ends and the means of attaining them) the author found that many of those interviewed continued to display the attributes of reflective practitioners drawing upon their professional experience and training skilled in care. As such she contends that attempting to impose a narrow conception of probation practice based upon punishment and retribution, is not only a waste of these attributes but is also likely to prove unsuccessful. Instead the author draws upon the lessons emerging from desistance literature and restorative justice to argue for a more constructive practice.

In order to work constructively in an innovative way staff need to be aware of emerging practice developments that are informed by appropriate and robust research. Learning is a process of continual development. Post qualifying training can be an important mechanism for challenging accepted practices and introducing new methods into the organisation although in recent years many Probation trusts have seen their budgets reduced for this area of staff support. In 'Thinking in practice: Redefining the relationship', Kathryn Farrow, Gill Kelly and Brian Stout draw on their experiences of developing a seminar series to consider the links between practice and research and promote debate about the professional task of

offender supervision and management The authors highlight the considerable variations across Europe in the level of post-qualification training provided with probation and observe that retaining a link with social work was a key factor in maintaining a strong and vibrant post-qualifying training structure.

Resistance can also be framed within the use of discretion. In a study of pre-sentence reports written by Swedish probation officers', Anders Persson and Kerstin Svensson found that there was a significant level of dissonance evident between policy and practice, or between what they term 'organisational' and 'professional' logic. This was most apparent in relation to risk assessment practices where there appeared to be a resistance to the use of prescribed risk assessment tools amongst workers, even though they were promoted by management, although their adoption was not compulsory. The authors speculate as to whether this is because probation officers in Sweden identify themselves with social services who appear to have more local autonomy than the centrally governed Prison and Probation Service. The authors consider whether this form of individual action - through the assertion of professional discretion - is indicative of a wider occupational resistance and has its roots in that social work tradition in which most Swedish probation officers are trained. This has been a significant and occupationally symbolic issue in England and Wales. The separating of probation training from social work in the mid-1990s was seen as one of the precursors of modernisation and means of presenting the service as a more effective and thus credible agency of criminal justice/enforcement.

Resistance can of course be driven by ideology or self-interest. The stronger the adherence to established values and practice, it is likely the stronger the level of resistance will be. Attempts to move practice from a humanitarian base (often framed within social work values and ethics) have certainly been deeply felt amongst probation professionals in many countries. Anders Persson and Kerstin Svensson identified a strong ethical code expressed by the staff interviewed for their study, albeit one that was not always well defined or articulated. Resistance amongst staff took divergent forms and although there was a strong occupational culture and peer support evident, there was little debate about the nature of their collective professional identity. As such the authors contend that the resistance displayed by Swedish probation officers was often the result of a misunderstanding of policy intention rather than informed position of ideological opposition. This may well support the position taken by Gelsthorpe and Nellis (203: 227) that current probation culture now seems ambiguous with no clear overarching moral principle.

The theme of change in probation culture and tension, even contradiction, in values and methodology is developed by Aline Bauwens in her study of practitioner responses in Belgium to increased managerialism. Tracing the foundations of work with offenders in Belgium in social work values and client-centred approaches, the author examines the effects for Justice Assistants and occupational culture of managerial practices such as the introduction of national standards, performance management frameworks and a shift of emphasis from 'social', relational work with offenders to more screen-based, 'informational' work. In a study of twenty-two Justice Assistants, Aline Bauwens examines their responses to managerial changes and, echoing and developing other contributions to the edition, she explores the place of values in occupational culture, the role of practitioner discretion, the meaning of the term 'professional' and the sites and nature of resistance to cultural change.

What then are the implications for probation staff in terms of their professional culture? In The impact of experienced professionalism on professional culture in probation, Rene Butter

and Jo Hermanns explore how notions of professionalism influence the daily practices of probation staff. Using the concept of 'engagement' (in the sense of the level of professional fulfillment that individuals gain and the level of dedication shown to their work). The authors found that the levels of positive work engagement correlated with the personal values held by individual practitioners and that professional ethos is the main determinant of engagement with organisational objectives.

This would seem to support the stance taken by Arnold, Liebling and Tait that 'a positive work culture is about good relationships and clear roles' (2007: 487). A more supportive environment was likely to result in higher levels of engagement with the organisation's objectives. However, Rene Butter and Jo Hermanns found that those probation staff interviewed found their work challenging but were to some extent neutral in terms of the values held, and perceived themselves to be largely unsupported in their work. Interestingly, the authors found that the length of experience had little correlation with the levels of engagement expressed by those interviewed. This would seem to be in contrast to Robinson and Burnett's study in England and Wales that found that

whilst practitioners are utilising a range of coping strategies, and many clearly remain motivated in the context of their work with offenders, some staff (most notably longer serving staff) are experiencing a degree of alienation within their roles, in the sense that NOMS - not least with its terminology of 'offender management' - is distancing them from some of the values which underpin their continuing commitment to the work' (Robinson and Burnett, 2007, 333).

And Deering's study, which concluded

Perhaps the overriding impression from the data when set against the wider changes in the criminal justice system and the service is one of a group of practitioners with a clear idea of how they would wish to practice working in a structure that has made the ideal increasingly difficult to maintain. Whilst not in anyway openly resistant to government policies, practitioners has a qualitatively different habitus to the intended field' (2011: 179).

In recent years probation, criminal justice agencies, including probation, have been encouraged to put aside their cultural differences under the aim of public protection and improving the efficiency of the system. Maguire et al (2001) found that in terms on cooperation between police and probation officers on public protection panels, although working relationships were generally very good, cultural and organisational differences had an impact upon the plans made and the actions taken' (cited in Ellis and Boden, 2004). In They were very threatening about 'do-gooding bastards': Probation's changing relationship with the police and prison services in England and Wales, Rob Mawby and Anne Worrall highlight how a lack of sensitivity to the cultural traditions of an organisation can lead to tensions that may well impede collaborative working and shared partnerships. Respectively tracing the changing relationship between probation and the police and prison services, the authors found strong continuities within the occupational cultures and values of each of these agencies which staff held on to. The authors found that professional relationships were generally more positive between probation and the police than with the prison service, which is somewhat ironic given the 'merger' between the probation and prison services under the National Offender Management Service (NOMS). Their analysis supports the observation by Burke and Collett (2010) that 'Rather than being obsessed about integration and common ways of doing and thinking which reflects the current tensions with NOMS about how to

bring Prisons and Probation together, the best partnerships between Police and Probation have delivered precisely because the two agencies are culturally and operationally different and therefore have different skills, approaches and capabilities to bring to joint venture' (p. 244). In this respect, Rob Mawby and Anne Worrall conclude that the organisational efficacy of NOMS has been undermined by a failure to appreciate and address the cultural differences between the organisations, which for many within probation has in reality been viewed as a 'hostile takeover' (Napo, 2010).

Conclusion

Although it could be argued that there is some homogeneity of values expressed by probation officers, this does not mean that the way in which they translate them into their working practices can be taken for granted. There is inevitably a diverse range of orientations among staff in terms of their reasons for joining probation, their attachment to the organisation, their job satisfaction, their attitudes to promotion, their working relationships with their colleagues and workers in other agencies, and how they perceive their role, and those they supervise. All of these factors may be influential in shaping their encounters and approaches to their work. Taken together the articles in this edition provide an insight into the nature of organisational change, which to a greater or lesser extent has impacted on probation throughout Europe, from the perspective of some of those tasked with implementing and operationalizing them. The overall impression is one of a desire on the part of those interviewed in the various studies to utilise their professional skills and hold onto their humanitarian values, based on a belief in peoples' ability to change. The articles also highlight the nature of occupational resistance, which though taking different forms, has resulted from a fundamental resistance to anti-humanitarian values and an unwillingness to act as technicians, merely processing individuals, despite the all consuming influence of managerialism and actuarial based practices upon their work. Risk assessment and report writing were seen as particularly important sites of engagement and resistance. It will be fascinating to see how far the turmoil and struggle in England and Wales for the heart and soul of the probation services is reflected and acted out across Europe in the coming years.

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