

Book review

Mawby, R.C., Worrall, A. (2013) *Doing Probation Work: Identity in a Criminal Justice Occupation*. Abingdon. Routledge.

This rewarding book is unusual in its focus on the culture of probation and the motivations, strategies and personal narratives of probation practitioners. Reporting on and analyzing in exciting ways the data arising from sixty in-depth interviews, it gives voice to the experience of probation staff, often heard first-hand through quotation, whilst simultaneously using a range of theoretical concepts to explore and understanding that experience. (The author of this review was one of the participants). A sense of time and change is powerfully present as the authors consider how radically probation culture has altered in recent years and how probation officers have responded to those alterations. In this connection, the book is timely as, in England and Wales, probation work with ‘low risk offenders’ (the numerical majority those supervised) is tendered out to private and voluntary agencies (and to those Probation Trusts which are successful bidders), leaving the traditional state service with assessment and high risk tasks only. At what seems another watershed moment for the culture of probation in England and Wales, it is valuable to be offered a vocabulary for evaluating the meaning of this transformation for probation culture and for probation staff. In a less direct sense, the book is also timely in a European context as, in exploring occupational culture in one jurisdiction, it supports similar studies across the continent and, as a result, contributes to the very rich potential for comparative studies.

The catalyst for their work was the experience of the authors as they studied multi-agency responses to prolific and priority offenders. They observed that, whilst more is known about the culture of courts, the police and the prison service, little is understood of the rather self-effacing probation service. Arguing that a knowledge of probation culture is essential to policy and practice in criminal justice they also seek to oppose the widely held view that probation culture is in (potentially terminal) decline in England and Wales. Indeed, a view put forward in the book, is that in ‘turbulent times’ culture emerges as a key resource for survival.

Interested in personal stories, experiences and meanings, the authors chose to conduct sixty detailed semi-structured interviews with current and retired probation staff as their means of gathering data. The participants ranged widely in role (from trainees to chief officers), in length of service and in styles of qualifying training. 68% were female and 14% identified as Black Minority Ethnic, proportions broadly reflected in the workforce more widely. A thematic analysis resulted in the areas for discussion reflected by the chapters of the book itself, namely: motivations to become a

probation officer and occupational identities; the working environment and its meanings; relationships with other criminal justice agencies; wider cultural perceptions and representations of probation; the 'crafting' of their professional identities and careers by staff; the diversity of 'voices' constituting probation culture and finally, indications for the future of probation culture.

Before commenting briefly on the chapters themselves it is important to note the theoretical richness of the book which renders it so thought-provoking experience and considerably more than a valuable description. For example, culture is understood in nuanced ways as constituted by shared values, practices and symbols but also as locally variable, interpreted differently by diverse staff and constantly shifting and reconfiguring over time. Nevertheless, it is held to be sufficiently real and influential as to give a deep sense of the assumptions underlying practice and a good guide to the behaviour, day-by-day, of the informal organisation as distinct from its more formal policies and public face. Getting to grips with probation culture, the authors make interesting use of the concept of 'dirty' or 'tainted' work and the implications for social identity of association with stigmatised groups (and perhaps also, in Neo-liberal times, with welfare-related groups). Identity formation in reaction to stigmatisation is discussed and the work of creating professional self-esteem and pride in opposition to and even because of social disapproval is helpfully explored. Using the sweep of time reflected by the careers of their participants, the authors trace the path of probation officer / offender manager identity in recent decades from high-status local figure to something much more tenuous and conflicted.

To take another final example from the range of useful theoretical tools brought to bear by the authors, the use of Hirschman's (1970) typology of responses to organisational stress is especially helpful. They illustrate his three original strategies on 'exit', 'voice', 'loyalty' from amongst their participants' narratives alongside the further categories of 'neglect', 'organisational cynicism' and 'organisational expedience.' In addition and very interestingly, they add a category themselves of 'edgework' and illustrate how some contemporary offender managers in 'risk-saturated', desk-bound and heavily regulated environments (where the stakes are rendered extremely high by the fear of a 'serious further offence' on the part of one of their service users), nevertheless create a sense of autonomy and meaningful action by practicing at the edge of what is tolerated by their organisation. This takes us nearer to the heart of what it means to work now in probation in England and Wales today than is achieved by much of the literature. It would be of the greatest interest to explore how far this experience is reflected in the working lives of other European probation staff.

Making use of data generated by the interviews and theoretical tools such as those described, the emerging themes are explored in depth in the subsequent chapters. Whilst keeping in mind the complexity of profiles and histories amongst probation staff, the authors introduce three ideal types of probation officer for analytic purposes in the second chapter these being, 'The Lifer' (ideologically driven and most often joining in the welfare era), 'The Second Careerist' (with a previous occupational culture perhaps in the forces health or teaching) and the 'Offender Manager' joining more recently and potentially with a more pragmatic motivation and an exit strategy should the work fail to provide a vehicle for the expression of personal values. This typology is developed in the final chapter with the proviso that the categories are not reflected by any individuals in a simple way. In the third chapter the shift in the environment of probation practice from patch, community and a tradition of home visiting to security conscious, open-plan screen-based offices is explored alongside the attitudes this reflects and the effects on staff. In the subsequent chapter, the transition from closeness to the court and alienation from the police towards more distance from the

former and partnership with the latter is examined alongside the failed attempt in England and Wales to merge probation with the prison service. Here Davidson's (1976) model of relations between organisations on a continuum including 'communication, co-operation, co-ordination, federation and merger' is well used and the maintenance of integrity of distinct cultures in effective partnership working is championed. This analysis might well structure comparative studies of the positioning of probation within European criminal justice systems more widely. In the fifth chapter, the low profile of probation in cultural artifacts and outputs and its comparative invisibility socially is discussed. The subsequent chapter offers a fascinating insight into day to day probation work in turbulent times with the use of the concept of 'edgework' being a feature as discussed. It is typical of the challenging commentary recorded by the authors that the experience of staff in a demanding organisation led by risk and performance is discussed in terms of 'emotional tyranny' and likened to the experience of being in an abusive relationship. This is followed by a survey of 'voices' constituting probation culture including the muted one of religion, the voice of the trade union, BME voices and, given detailed discussion, the female voice. This latter is set against a background of an increase in the proportion of women amongst practitioners and managers occurring at the same time as the work of the service arguably becoming 'masculinised' through its focus on punishment, protection and compliance.

Throughout, this book is written in a scholarly and eloquent but accessible style and is enlivened by the inclusion of extensive quotations from participants in the study. It will be of considerable interest to students of the sociology of organisations whilst, at the same time, being an essential source and stimulus to students of criminal justice and probation both in England and Wales and more widely. Interestingly, the authors note the resilience of probation as a culture and a concept in the face of sustained attack and, at the same time, the ability of contemporary practitioners to manage organisational pressures whilst finding ways of practicing meaningfully and with satisfaction. They argue for the continued contribution of a culture of probation to a well-functioning criminal justice system and are optimistic about the ability of probation to survive especially when it affords workers opportunities for 'responsible creativity' (P153) and when it is recognised that probation staff are enthusiastic 'multi-specialists who recognize the importance of inter-agency work' (P154).

References

Davidson, S. (1976) Planning and Co-ordination of Social Services in Multi-Organisational Contexts. *Social Services Review*, 50: 117-137,

Hirschman, A.O. (1970) *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Declines in Firms, Organizations and States*. Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press.

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