



DEPARTMENT OF CRIMINOLOGY

Probation workers and their occupational cultures

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Introduction

This report presents key findings from a study of probation cultures funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC grant reference: RES-000-22-3979) and facilitated by the Probation Chiefs Association (PCA)¹. The study began in April 2010 and its main aims were to identify some of the characteristics of contemporary probation cultures and to examine how probation workers construct their occupational identities. During the course of the fieldwork we interviewed sixty former and current probation workers across England and Wales and we gratefully acknowledge their contribution to this work. We have anonymised the participants in the text that follows, using four acronyms: (1) 'PWs' are current probation service officers, probation officers and senior probation officers (n = 26); (2) 'TPOs' are trainee probation officers (n = 10); (3) 'COs' are chief officer grades, namely assistant chief officers and chief executive officers (n = 16); and (4) 'FPWs' are former and retired probation workers (n = 8).

An earlier version of this report was prepared for a conference on 20th September 2011 when the key findings were presented to an invited audience of probation workers, criminal justice professionals and academics. We considered the conference to be an important developmental part of the project as it was an opportunity not only to disseminate our preliminary findings, but also to seek feedback on them. In preparing this report, we have, as far as space and balance allow, taken account of the feedback received. The project ended on 30 November 2011; further publications are in preparation and will be announced on the project website at http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/criminology/research/current-projects/rim3_culture_probation.

Methodology and participants

While other researchers have used observational methods to explore the occupational cultures of criminal justice practitioners², we used an interview-based design for this study as we wished to examine how probation workers construct, and tell the stories of, their occupational identities, values and cultures. To do this, we talked to sixty probation workers about their working lives. They talked about their original motivations and aspirations on joining the probation service, their knowledge of the

¹ While the PCA facilitated access, the analyses and conclusions in this report are the authors' alone and should not be taken to represent the views of the PCA.

² A recent example is Loftus, B. (2009) *Police culture in a changing world*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

service at the time of joining, their training experiences and career development, their views on public and media perceptions of probation work, their daily routines and relations with probationers, courts and other criminal justice practitioners; we asked them to describe crises and typical working days.

In terms of gender and ethnic origins, 33 (55%) of our 60 interviewees were female and 8 (13%) identified themselves as being Indian, Black African, Black Caribbean, Irish or mixed other. Regarding age, 26 (47%) were under 50 years and 34 (53%) were over 50 years. Our age profile was distorted by the unexpectedly high number of COs who volunteered to be interviewed (enabling us to increase our overall sample from an original 50 interviews to 60). COs represent 27% of our sample. We analysed their responses separately from other grades, but found no major differences to support the existence of distinct 'management' and 'operational' cultures. Indeed the similarities were marked, possibly because all the interviewed COs were career probation workers with a wealth of experience in different grades. The sample's demographic profile is not greatly out of line with that of the service, which is approximately 68% female (45% of COs), 14% BME (26% of support staff), and 34% over 50 years (90% of COs)³. Geographically, we interviewed COs from across England, with other samples taken from the south-east of England (including London) and two areas in the north of England. The length of time interviewees had worked for the probation service ranged from two years to over forty. We found that many experienced workers had been employed in a range of rural and urban settings during their careers. All interviewees were recruited through general emails (approved by COs and, in the case of TPOs, by their university lecturer) seeking volunteers in the sample categories. Interviews were divided between Rob Mawby (28) and Anne Worrall (32) and, with two exceptions⁴, all interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Culture and criminal justice agencies

At its broadest, the culture of an occupation or an organisation can be described as the values shared by individuals that manifest themselves in the practices of members of that occupation or organisation. In the management and organisational behaviour literature, culture has been defined in different ways and studied rigorously with technical distinctions made between organisational, occupational and

³ Response to FOI request from MoJ.

⁴ Due to prison rules.

professional cultures. However, in this report we consider the following a useful working definition of culture that helps us to explain and interpret probation cultures:

The deeper level of basic *assumptions and beliefs* that are shared by members of an organisation, that operate unconsciously and define in a basic taken-for-granted fashion an organisation's view of itself and its environment.⁵

It is widely accepted that all organisations have cultures and that these can be resistant to change and an obstacle to progress or alternatively a source of stability and a force for good. In the criminal justice arena, only police culture has been subjected to in-depth study. Robert Reiner has summarised these studies and categorised the core characteristics of 'cop culture' as: mission-action-cynicism-pessimism; suspicion; isolation/solidarity; conservatism; machismo; racial prejudice and pragmatism⁶. As these headings suggest, 'cop culture' has been more often regarded as a problem than an asset, although Janet Foster has commented on positive police culture characteristics, namely 'the sense of mission, the desire to rid the streets of "the bad guys", the dedication and long hours, the willingness, on one level, to do society's dirty work'⁷.

Although the literature on prison officer culture is not so large, studies suggest that there are multiple cultures but within these, there are consistent characteristics that include: discretion, cynicism, suspicion, nostalgia, physical and emotional strength, male-domination, authority and solidarity⁸.

The literature on probation cultures is more limited though valuable work has been done and is ongoing⁹. It is in this area that our research seeks to make a contribution and in the remainder of this report we first set out *Key Points* that emerge from the research. We then provide further detail in the *Main Findings* section, before presenting our conclusions.

⁵ Schein, E. (1985) *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

⁶ See chapter 4 of Reiner, R. (2010) *The Politics of the Police* (4th edition), Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁷ Foster, J. (2003) 'Police Cultures' in T. Newburn (ed.) *Handbook of Policing*, Cullompton: Willan.

⁸ See, for example, Crawley, E. (2005) *Doing Prison Work*, Cullompton: Willan, and Liebling, A. et al. (2011) *The Prison Officer* (2nd edition), Cullompton: Willan.

⁹ The September 2011 special issue of the *European Journal of Probation* (volume 3, number 3) edited by Lol Burke and Keith Davies on occupational culture and skills in probation practice draws together some important recent work on probation cultures.

A note on the language of probation

Embarking upon this research we used 'offender management' as a generic term to describe the policy and processes that have driven the supervision of offenders since the establishment of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) in 2004. It is in this sense that the term is generally used in this report. However, written and spoken language comprise elements of occupational cultures and during the course of the research it became clear that the term was contentious and could not be used as a neutral descriptor. As we detail below, some probation workers were uneasy about using the title 'offender manager' and preferred 'probation officer', while others, particularly post-2004 recruits were more at ease with the term. 'Offender management' was not the only contentious term we encountered. Some probation workers talked about the most appropriate terminology for the people they worked with. One probation worker refused to use the term 'offender' because 'it's a label you are trying to get them to drop' (PW24) and preferred 'service user' or 'client'. The latter term was rejected by several interviewees as 'client' implies choice, which offenders clearly do not have in their relationships with the probation service. Taking the middle road, another interviewee, PW17, commented that 'offenders are still clients, sometimes service users; a lot of the time they're "my guys". I'm an offender managing probation officer'.

Like all organisations, the probation service has its own acronyms and jargon which form part of the cultural context and which distinguish the organisation from others working in the criminal justice arena. For example, probation workers located in prisons historically and currently talked about the different language used by prison and probation officers towards prisoners, which could cause tensions in probation-prison relations.

The evident sensitivity over these terms emphasises that despite the changes in the probation service in recent decades the relationship between probation workers and their offenders/clients remains central to the self-identity of probation workers. This runs implicitly through the sections that follow.

Key Points

- Probation workers come from a variety of backgrounds, although there are three identifiable broad groupings: 'lifers', 'second careerists' and 'offender managers'. They share certain core values such as recognising the human worth of offenders and believing in the ability of people to change but differ in their views on the source and operationalisation of those values within the contemporary political and organisational context of risk management and public protection.
- Much probation work now resembles other public sector office work, consisting of computer work in 'faceless' open plan offices and office appointments with offenders. However, probation workers have the opportunities to build a varied career, resulting in a widely experienced, multi-specialist workforce. The chances to move around help to satisfy their creative instincts and intellectual curiosity.
- Probation has become a 'feminised' occupation over the past two decades and this has important and possibly unexpected consequences for the cultures of the organisation.
- Doing probation work is stressful and workers have both individual and group coping mechanisms. Individual responses include seeking creativity and intensity in engaging with offenders and group responses include developing a sense of team solidarity.
- Probation work increasingly involves working with other agencies. Probation workers' relations with the courts are characterised by an immediacy that can be both testing and exciting at times. The probation-prison relationship remains complex and has become more problematic since the creation of NOMS. The improved relationship between the police and probation services is marked, but cultural differences remain.
- Probation workers feel that their work is not well understood by the general public and is ignored or distorted by the media. The self-effacing character of the probation service is not conducive to the proactive promotion of the organisation. The influence of NAPO on the cultures of probation work has declined but, paradoxically, it remains the most publicly recognisable voice of the service.
- Probation cultures vary across settings and over time but core features include: long office hours and group solidarity; high levels of organisation and computer literacy; multi-specialism;

weariness and cynicism about the probation service and NOMS; a yearning for autonomy and opportunities to be responsibly creative; valuing thinking and reflecting; managing emotional responses (their own and those of offenders); belief in change and their own ability to effect (and affect) it; probation work as 'more than just a job'; feminisation; liminality (a willingness to work 'on the edge' and in the 'gaps').

- Probation cultures are complex but, if properly understood, enhance rather than undermine the supervision of offenders and 'offender management', however interpreted. Attempts to dismantle or dilute probation cultures, however, could be counter-productive by loosening the 'ties that bind' probation workers to an 'honourable profession'.

Main Findings

Probation workers' backgrounds

Most of our interviewees came from professional middle class backgrounds (such as education or medicine) or aspiring working class backgrounds with encouraging parents. Some grew up in areas where crime was a significant problem. 'Lifers', who considered themselves to have had advantaged upbringings, often discovered an interest in probation work at a young age, one interviewee deciding she wanted to be a probation officer after reading Brendan Behan's book *Borstal Boy* at the age of thirteen. This group often undertook voluntary work while at school and university and joined the service shortly after graduating. For them probation was often regarded as being a vocation, a life-long commitment.

'Second careerists' came later to the work, having developed transferable skills in occupations such as the police, the armed forces or social work. Former social workers were looking for a more structured and focused outlet for their skills, while those with experience of 'command and control' occupations were looking for more autonomy and humanity. Some 'second careerists' felt that they had stumbled into probation, one interviewee reflecting that 'the pieces of the jigsaw were already there, but I didn't have the picture on the box' (PW7). Discovering 'the picture on the box' meant that this group in particular had the expectation of being able to 'make a difference' through building relationships with offenders and some had become disillusioned as the job became increasingly desk-bound.

More recent recruits shared much of the motivation of 'lifers' and 'second careerists' but they had more varied backgrounds and we found an additional dimension among the 'offender managers'. On the surface, we saw a pragmatism – a sense that working for a public sector organisation offered job status and security, though one interviewee commented that her parents would have preferred her to go into medicine or business. Beneath the surface, however, was a principled rehabilitative approach to working with offenders and a readiness to move on to other jobs if they were not allowed to work in the way that they wanted. This group contained people who felt they had been 'mis-sold' the job. As one interviewee said, 'I should have really looked at the application form when it kept talking about compliance and enforcement' (TPO9).

Training

The recent history of qualifying training for probation officers has been one of a steady move away from social work. Most of our interviewees could be divided into three groups in term of their training. Many qualified as social workers under the CQSW regime, from 1970 to 1990, though even within this framework, they saw themselves as 'different' – as a small group specialising in work that was always on the periphery of social work. Attitudes towards training within this group ranged from 'transformative' to 'useless' depending, it seemed, on the extent to which courses were either inspirational or recognised the different skills required to work in probation. The probation specialism became more marked under the regime of the Diploma in Social Work in the early 1990s and the final break from social work came in 1997 with the Diploma in Probation Studies which lasted until 2010.

Probation workers who trained under this last regime retained much of the critical thinking and reflection that had characterised earlier training but saw their daily job differently in at least three ways: it was dominated by computer-based risk assessment; it did not involve any significant time visiting offenders at home or in the community; and inter-agency collaboration was regarded as essential and uncontentious (at least in principle). The Diploma in Probation Studies was regarded by those who experienced it as being extremely demanding and as generating a high level of anxiety, both in terms of the requirements of the work and the availability of jobs at the end of training. Several spoke of experiencing financial hardship in order to train. According to one TPO, it has been 'like an emotional roller-coaster [but]... parts have been joyful... and exciting' (TPO5). Others talked about splitting up with partners and friends, partly as a consequence of the pressure of training but partly as a result of being personally challenged to think about new ideas and reflect on their own lives. It was clear that both those delivering and those receiving the training viewed the job as requiring a high level of intelligence, skill and reflection. As one former probation officer put it, 'it *is* rocket science' (FPW3).

A number of our interviewees had been probation service officers (PSOs) prior to training as probation officers. The boundaries between the two roles are increasingly blurred and, while the impact of the new qualifying framework cannot be predicted from our research, we would anticipate a very different culture emerging, where the 'transformative' nature of training is less marked than it has been to date.

Motivation, values and beliefs

Regardless of age or experience, our interviewees shared a belief in the worthwhileness of working with offenders in the community. This central tenet was expressed in a variety of ways but always included a belief in the capacity of the individual to change for the better under the right guidance, supervision and monitoring. For some this belief stemmed from a past or present religious conviction; for others it was rooted in personal experiences and humanitarian or political concerns. CO1 summed up the view of several 'lifers' when he said that he had been 'a young, left-leaning person, that was absolutely committed to helping people...who were oppressed and were suffering all the consequences of poverty'. A sense of duty and a structural analysis of society were common in this group. At the other end of the spectrum was a worker who had experienced extreme poverty as a child, a period in foster care, her mother on probation and her father at one point in custody for domestic violence. She claimed to have been 'rescued by education' (PW3).

For those at the experiential rather than intellectual end of the spectrum, personal influence through relationship-building was key (in criminological terms, interactionist and differential association theories implicitly underpinned their view of the work). A former probation worker reflected on 'the broad church that was probation':

I could work quite happily on an individual basis with quite a number of the team who I knew philosophically were miles away from me, who I would disagree with... but in terms of day-to-day, face-to-face work, it didn't seem that we were doing a lot different. (FPW6)

Everyone we interviewed recognised the importance of public protection, risk assessment and risk management and many expressed a 'left realist' position, recognising the rights of victims and the law-abiding community. However, there was a widespread reluctance, even at the highest level, to accept unquestioningly official prescriptions of how work with offenders should be carried out. Despite (or because of) all the constraints and circumscription now encountered in the role, we found both a recognition of improvements in practice (e.g., concerning equality, fairness and risk assessment) and also a yearning, at all levels, for a freedom to exercise judgement and be creative. Although this was expressed by many in terms of nostalgia (e.g., a *return* to a mythical golden age of probation with all its benefits and acknowledged faults) it was clear that the recent past can never be airbrushed from the collective psyche. Instead (we would argue), in turbulent political times, the organisation is implicitly

dependent on *responsible creativity* and should perhaps more explicitly enable probation workers to express their desire for autonomy and fulfilment by nurturing this new ethos.

Careers

Probation workers historically and currently join the service with life experience, gained, for example, through volunteering or through previous careers in a variety of settings. Generally they value the opportunities to move between posts and to develop different skills and specialisms during their careers. Typically, more experienced interviewees had worked in a number of probation roles in different locations. At one extreme, one (PW23) had trained as a probation officer in England before moving to Australia to work as a probation then prison officer, before returning to work as a probation officer in a different area of England. More often, probation workers told us about careers that had started as assistants or volunteers working in hostels before qualifying and working as generic case officers before taking on more specialist roles in prisons or with specific groups (e.g. sex offenders, prolific and priority offenders)¹⁰ or on secondments to, or initiatives involving, other agencies. While some interviewees were content to remain as main grade officers, others moved into management roles.

The movement between roles and posts did not always suit our interviewees and a number resented being moved from positions in which they felt they were performing well and had more to offer. Others took the chance to move roles because of difficulties they were experiencing. However, many of our interviewees relished the rich experiences and the diverse opportunities that a probation career makes possible. It allows them to develop their skills and a career that may involve promotion. It also satisfies a need to find creativity and fulfilment in their work. For example one chief officer recalled the excitement of moving from a prison position to a new day centre team in the 1980s:

We did one-to-one work [...] me and this other guy developed some work around working with men and masculinity and offending, and everything, which was really interesting. So it was a great three years, a really exciting, creative period, you had a blank sheet of paper and you could almost do what you wanted. (CO5)

¹⁰ Many experienced workers also worked with Family Court Welfare cases before the separation of this work and the creation of CAFCASS.

Another chief officer captured the fulfilment of doing probation work when talking about recently visiting a prison to interview a prisoner:

I really enjoyed it. It was an investigation, he was complaining, but I just thought, oh this is what.... it takes me back, this is what it's all about. Yeah, it's much more rewarding than managing staff [laugh]. It's easier as well. Um and I did, I kind of had that nostalgia for it, thinking oh God, I used to love this job. And I did, I loved it; loved being a probation officer, more so than I've loved any other job that I've done. (CO16)

Among the younger and/or less experienced interviewees, some made no secret of their ambitions to move upwards into management positions. Some eschewed management but couldn't imagine another career, 'I can't see anything comparing to what I get from this job' (PW17). Others recognised and anticipated that their careers would need variation if they were to last the course, for example:

Do I wanna be a probation officer to the day I die? Bearing in mind I'm 27, started at 24, that's 40 years plus of being a PO in the trenches. I don't wanna be a PO for 40 years. I don't think it's healthy to be a probation officer for 40 years straight, I really don't. [...] Move around, I'd like to do a bit of groups one day, I'd like to move into different areas. Certainly as well, I think that's important, I think you need to move around a bit, keep your practice up-to-date, keep your mind fresh. (PW15)

Yet others were more ambivalent, acknowledging that their skills could be deployed outside the probation service, for example: 'I'd love to get a job in the court....I'm put off being a senior ...I don't think they're paid enough and they are run ragged...[but] my ultimate goal is to manage a women's refuge' (PW14).

Across our sample, interviewees had enjoyed, and were enjoying, the variety of a career in probation and contributed to a widely-experienced and multi-specialised workforce. However, whether this can be sustained in the current turbulent context is far from certain.

Feminisation

In our interviews, we did not systematically ask direct questions about the experience of being either a man or a woman doing probation work. We adopted what we hoped was a more sophisticated approach by trying to analyse whether male or female respondents talked differently about their work. By and large, we found that they did not. We heard stories of overt sexism and sexual harassment from

women who joined the service in the 1970s as 'bright young things' and worked alongside older ex-armed forces and ex-police men. For women working in prisons at that time, things were even worse (for example, women not allowed on the landings or to carry keys; women deliberately summonsed to the censor's office to give 'advice' on letters containing graphic sexual descriptions). More commonly, and more recently, women experienced difficulty returning to work after taking maternity leave, so that their career development was delayed, though some expressed the view that this was inevitable and had to be accepted.

But, while the probation service was male-dominated until the early 1990s it is now female-dominated with 70 per cent of the workforce being women. For almost a decade, the proportion of chief officers who are female has been almost 50 per cent. For most interviewees, and certainly for most recent recruits, the service is seen as a 'feminised' organisation. CO13 felt this was not necessarily a good thing:

The culture has been changed by the current training regime – less people on second careers and not enough men. Most of our entrants are young women in their early/middle 20s with no life experience.

But most women shared the view of one recent recruit who said, 'the majority of us are women...I feel we're all treated with respect' (PW14). This has not, as one might perhaps expect stereotypically, meant a return to traditional social work roots (although the service has maintained certain core values such as recognising the human worth of offenders and believing in the ability of people to change) but rather the emergence of a new breed of female offender manager who is highly organised, computer-literate and focused on public protection. These women have a keen sense of the rights of victims and the need to hold male offenders to account. Few expressed any particular interest in working with women offenders. Some male interviewees expressed bewilderment at the feminised cultures. One young man explained how difficult he had found it to fit into his office of 'quieter people' because he was 'cocky...not as reflective as I'd like to be sometimes' (PW15). An older and more experienced man explained how he worked with his ipod in his ears because he couldn't cope with the level of female chatter in an open plan office. The feminisation of probation cultures is arguably one of the most significant changes that has occurred in the organisation, with far-reaching, but often subtle consequences, especially in terms of the relationship between the probation service and other, male-dominated, criminal justice agencies.

Coping

Probation work is stressful. The TPOs we talked to who were on the cusp of completing their training spoke with some trepidation about beginning work as fully-fledged probation officers. During their training they had worked long hours to balance the academic and practical components and there were clear anxieties about the workloads they would soon take on. More experienced workers told us about the stresses associated with balancing contact time with probationers, doing effective work with them, with the demands of satisfying the paperwork trail and keeping computer systems updated. Some probation workers were apprehensive about taking annual leave due to the amount of work that would accumulate while they were away.

It is not only the amount of work that can cause stress, but the type of work undertaken and the type of people that probation workers work with. They engage with an 'undeserving' group and the work can be emotionally taxing:

We are probably the only group that will work with people [in the community] who are doing evil and don't deserve help, aren't we? And there's something special about us doing that, you know. I mean it's a mark of civilisation, isn't it, that we will do it. But we do need the support and approval of society to do that, and that often needs cultivating. (FPW7)

In addition, probation workers currently operate in a criminal justice context in which budgets are tight and the future is uncertain. How do they cope with doing difficult work in turbulent times? We identified a number of responses. At the individual level, these included inner responses such as praying, silent meditation or intellectualising being a probation worker, and more expressive responses, for example talking problems through with colleagues, families and friends, or 'speaking up' at work through involvement with NAPO or UNISON. More physical responses included taking sick days, experiencing stress-related illnesses or, in extremis, leaving the probation service. Probation workers also cope by seeking to bring meaning and creativity into their work and by testing their professional skills in difficult cases. We believe that responses such as these can be theorised using the concepts of 'edgework', 'organisational cynicism' and Hirshman's 'exit, voice and loyalty' model¹¹ and we will

¹¹ See: Lyng, S. (1990) 'Edgework: A Social Psychological Analysis of Voluntary Risk Taking', *The American Journal of Sociology*, 95 (4): 851-886; Naus, F., van Iterson, A., and Roe, R. (2007) 'Organizational cynicism: Extending the exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect model of employees' responses to adverse conditions in the workplace', *Human Relations*, 60(5): 683-718; and Hirschman, A. O. (1970) *Exit, voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations and States*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

develop these ideas in future publications¹². At the group level, probation workers cope by developing strong group solidarity involving the use of humour and at times an 'us and them' mentality. This was particularly helpful in situations where bullying by management or a blame culture was felt to exist. One interviewee likened his team's group of desks in an open plan office to 'a raft in the middle of the sea and you're hanging onto it for dear life, because if you spin away.... if you sit in another OMU or stuff like that, it feels so alone, you know, so you rely on your colleagues around you' (PW20).

Working with other agencies

Relationships between the probation service and other agencies have changed considerably in recent decades. Our sample of interviewees enables us to chart probation workers' perceptions of these relationships from the 1960s to the present and it is evident that the ever closer formal relationships between agencies have not always been comfortable. They raise issues of information sharing, conflicting objectives, different ways of working, contrasting attitudes towards offenders and, not least, cultural tensions. Although the probation service has important relationships with a range of public and voluntary sector agencies, the richest data from the interviews concerns relationships with the courts, the police and the prison service.

The most common finding concerning relationships with the courts is that interviewees remarked on the inconsistency of their relationships, suggesting that much depends on the individual personalities of magistrates and the micro-cultures of different benches¹³. Probation workers recognise court as a proving ground across the decades, a place where respect must be earned. While some older probation workers feel that probation officers have lost the authority they once had in court to the point of being regarded as unimportant, the younger generation, including some of our TPOs, find court work and playing a significant role in sentencing exciting.

Our longest-serving interviewees with experiences of working in prisons going back to the 1970s and 1980s confirmed that prisons were unpleasant places in which to work in this era. A menacing atmosphere was often pervasive and we heard stories about sexism and racism (for example, the black gate officer openly known as 'Black Bob' and the wearing of National Front badges on prison uniforms).

¹² For example in *Doing Probation Work: Identity in a Criminal Justice Occupation*, Routledge (2013).

¹³ See Mawby, R. & Worrall, A. 'Probation officers: still the "servants of the court"?' *Magistrate*, December/January 2011/12.

The introduction of models of resettlement in the 1990s created the context in which probation workers found that working in prisons could be both progressive and rewarding. Nevertheless, this did not create sufficient groundwork for a smooth transition to NOMS in 2004. We have found that the impact of NOMS has been greatest at (a) senior management level and (b) at the level of probation officers and prison officers working together inside prison. The impact on probation officers working in the community has been either minimal (with experienced officers often refusing to use the term 'offender manager' in preference to 'probation officer'), taken-for-granted (among those staff who have been recruited and trained since 2004 – 'I'm a child of NOMS' (PW4)) or resistant:

[NOMS] was such a catastrophe...we're just poles apart...and all the fears are realised inasmuch as NOMS is run by prison staff, it's not run by probation staff...we've got people who know nothing about our job ...making huge decisions about us as a service. (PW19)

The relationship between the probation and police services has largely transformed during the period of our interviewees' working lives from one of mutual suspicion and hostility, to one of easy co-operation. Probation workers recalled that in earlier decades the police were seen as 'the enemy', with whom co-operation was rare and even discouraged. However, as a result of legislation compelling criminal justice agencies to work more closely together, and police and probation objectives converging around public protection, both organisations have found benefits in bringing their different competencies and skills to focus on the effective management of offenders:

We've transformed our relationships with the police now in ways that were unimaginable when I came into the job. [...] the reason why we work well with the police is because we're different to them, and from them. (CO2)

Just as the probation-prison relationship is complex, the probation-police relationship, though improved, is not without friction and tensions. As the interview extract above illustrates, there exists within the general spirit of operational co-operation cultural continuities in both agencies that remind us that these are two different agencies with separate missions; at times they will coincide and coalesce but at other times they will reinforce traditional suspicions¹⁴.

¹⁴ Mawby, R.C. & Worrall, A. (2011) "They were very threatening about do-gooding bastards": Probation's changing relationships with the police and prison services in England and Wales' *European Journal of Probation*, 3(3): 78-94.

Public and media perceptions

There was almost universal agreement among interviewees that the public know and understand very little about the probation service and what probation workers do. Many interviewees commented that their families and friends were unclear about their work; for example, one commented:

My husband thought I had a cushy life but he was very supportive. My family is very proud even though they don't really know what I do. People don't know what probation is. When I say what I do they say 'But you're so small – how do you manage?' (PW2)

This kind of comment was quite typical and several interviewees admitted that they did not disclose their occupations in social gatherings to avoid the debates that were sometimes provoked. Memorably one probation worker (PW12) recounted a situation where he told someone he was a plumber and couldn't sustain the conversation that developed.

Similarly there was agreement that the media are not interested in probation and only tend to provide news or documentary coverage when problems or issues occur that are not representative of routine probation work. In terms of dramatic media representations, probation workers are relatively rare; as one interviewee noted, 'there is no equivalent of *Casualty* or *The Bill* for probation work' (TPO9).

The low public profile is indicative of the resources and skills that are available to the probation service for external communications. In comparison with police forces who employ teams of professional journalists and public relations professionals and develop communications strategies, 'probation tends to keep its head down' (CO4). Culturally, this links to a passivity and a willingness to apologise that some felt characterised the probation service. One chief officer, (CO3), for example, commented that:

I think probation culture is far too *mea culpa*; absolutely too *mea culpa*. And I think that being like that has allowed the Ministry of Justice, Home Office before, others, to lend blame on probation inappropriately. [...] it's like 'I'm Spartacus' and no one else owns up, is the analogy I use.

Despite this negative or at least ambivalent attitude toward the proactive promotion of probation work, our research found some excellent examples of probation workers cultivating local media contacts and succeeding in getting out good news and promoting probation workers as 'hidden heroes' (CO5). In the same vein the PCA has become more active in communicating the profile of the probation service, although not yet to the extent of displacing Harry Fletcher as the most recognisable probation 'voice'.

The influence of NAPO

Interviewees who were probation workers in the 1970s and 1980s remember NAPO as being a powerful influence on probation cultures, providing an alternative and critical vision of the service. Branch meetings and national conferences were significant networking sites and allowed for debate that was at times both intellectual and stimulating – an opportunity to get away from the demands of the daily routine. As CO14 put it, ‘the people I wanted to respect me were other NAPO members, not my managers necessarily – you got your cred from NAPO.’ But that influence has faded and some cited the over-zealous promotion of anti-discriminatory practice in the late 1980s as one (possibly minor) catalyst, causing workers to feel intimidated and anxious about expressing their views. The covering of statues of bare-breasted angels in a conference hall was recounted by a few interviewees as being a ‘final straw’ moment.

Most experienced workers that we interviewed are members of NAPO, even if they are no longer active and feel that it has lost sight of the ‘bigger picture’ (for example, domination by the prison service) in favour of fighting domestic battles over relatively minor matters. Few recent recruits that we interviewed are active in NAPO. Several did not belong at all and those who did saw membership largely in terms of personal protection (and obtaining *Probation Journal*) rather than collective solidarity. TPO7’s view was that ‘they are just opposing everything for opposing’s sake... hang on a second, grow up, you know, we’re professionals, do a job.’ Nevertheless, when discussing probation’s media presence, almost all interviewees cited the NAPO Assistant General Secretary, Harry Fletcher, as the most consistent and publicly recognisable voice of probation. While some complained that he naively damages probation by saying how bad things are, most admired his willingness to speak up and contrasted this with the absence of any other probation voice in the media. ‘I’d say 95 times out of 100 he’s bloody good...he’s done what chief officers should have done 10 years ago and we didn’t do it’ (CO2).

Probation routines

All our interviewees (and the recent Justice Committee Report¹⁵) confirm that most qualified probation officers (as opposed to workers delivering programmes or working in specialisms) spend the majority of their time in their offices with their computers [see appendix, 'A day in the life of a PW', provided by PW13¹⁶]. One recent recruit anticipated the Justice Committee by guessing that 70% of her time was spent at her computer. Many offices are now open plan and anonymous - 'like typing pools' (PW24) - often located on industrial estates away from where offenders live (though it was pointed out to us that many are on bus routes into city centres):

The whole service has withdrawn behind its barricades, [...] the majority of what we do is in some big faceless modern office block, and the offender comes in. (CO 11)

Interview rooms sometimes had to be booked and this created problems when too many offenders arrived at the same time or if an offender was late for an appointment. Reception areas were bleak with few movable objects and high levels of security:

Waiting rooms in probation are horrid [now]. Everything's nailed down and minimal. Oh no, we can't offer them a cup of tea, can't give them a biscuit in case they throw a hot drink over us.

(FPW 1)

One office we visited ameliorated the atmosphere by playing local radio, which also helped to give a degree of confidentiality to conversations at the reception desk. By contrast, we saw several very pleasant and well-equipped kitchens and staff areas which were well-used and appeared to enhance staff morale. Given that some officers told us they worked until midnight on (too many) occasions, such facilities were clearly important. In addition to very late nights, officers also frequently worked at weekends and, since they were not allowed to work from home, this meant spending a great deal of their lives at the office. This proved particularly difficult for women (and some men) with families. One of the most significant changes to the probation routine over the past two decades has been the near

¹⁵ House of Commons Justice Committee (2011) *The role of the Probation Service*, London: The Stationery Office.

¹⁶ The typicality of this example has been questioned due to the long hours, but we would emphasise that it was not an isolated or unusual case among our sample. Observational research might challenge our findings but *this* is how probation workers perceive themselves.

abolition of the home visit. Workers remember spending up to half their time 'on their patch' in the 1970s and 1980s, with many offices also located on or near housing estates, with little or no security:

Quite a rickety old building, staircases and nooks and crannies, and no concept of risk management, health and safety, any of that stuff. You'd take your offender off with you – very little security. (CO 12)

Probation workers recall being very much a part of the local community. Those who remember such practices universally regretted their demise and some wondered how newer workers gain their knowledge of the realities of offenders' lives. However, those who do not have that experience did not see it as a priority and were concerned about both health and safety issues and the time involved.

What we did not find

Although 10 per cent (6) of our interviewees identified themselves as black or Asian, five of these were TPOs and all six were based in the south-east of England. While one former PW talked enthusiastically about the early days of working specifically with black and Asian offenders, none of the TPOs appeared to regard themselves as specialists in working with minority ethnic offenders. As with female interviewees, we did not ask what appeared to us to be a rather clumsy question about experiences of being a probation worker from a minority ethnic background and we did not find any evidence that these workers regarded the job in ways that were fundamentally different from white interviewees. Given the very small and geographically specific sample, however, we can't take this analysis any further in this present research.

Conclusion

The characteristics of probation cultures

The foregoing sections setting out the main findings from the interviews provide insight into who probation workers are and how they perceive themselves and their role. This data, augmented by data that we don't have the space here to present, enables us to posit the characteristics of probation cultures.

Before we identify these characteristics, it is important to clarify that our research has confirmed the presence of cultures; there is not a monolithic probation culture that pervades the organisation¹⁷. Indeed it is clear from the interview data that different cultures exist in rural and urban locations (CO5, CO8, CO12); for example, generally rural probation workers tend to be more autonomous but less embedded in particular communities. Further, there are culture differences between neighbouring probation areas and between different offices within the same probation area. For example, we were told of differences between offices within London and also between London as a whole and other areas of the country (CO14, FPW4). Second, cultures can reflect the type of work being undertaken and therefore it is not unexpected that probation workers in prisons, approved premises and unpaid work settings will develop a different culture to those working in community offices (PW3, PW9). Third, cultures are not static; they change over time and as our sample includes interviewees from the 1960s to the present, generational differences in cultures emerge. For example one interviewee (FPW5) in his seventies described himself as a 'culture carrier' who retained ways of thinking and working that were challenged during his later years of probation employment.

In identifying some of the characteristics of probation cultures, the components that we anticipated might emerge included stated and unstated values, explicit and implicit expectations of behaviour and attitudes, symbols, rituals and myths, the physical work environment and use of language. Aspects of these dimensions of culture are evident, implicitly and explicitly, in the previous sections and these are elaborated upon below. However, one aspect worthy of mention is the lack of visual cultural symbols compared to other criminal justice agencies. The police, courts and prison services have clear visual symbols. The police, for example, have a distinctive helmet for officers and a blue lamp for their buildings; prison officers have a uniform and notably carry keys; courts have architecture and wigs.

¹⁷ Similar observations have been raised in the literature on police occupational cultures. See Foster, *op. cit.*

Probation has nothing similar, other than a dated caricatured image of a sandal-wearer that was imposed externally rather than generated and accepted from within. Our interviewees often found it difficult to identify distinctive components of their culture. This lack of cultural symbols is interesting in itself for what it connotes about probation cultures, and it points to the finding that probation cultures are characterised by the implicit rather than the explicit.

While probation cultures differ and change over time, this does not mean that it is a fruitless or pointless exercise to investigate this area. Indeed, despite the differences and the difficulties of pinning down explicit components, there are family resemblances and common threads that run through and act as cultural locators or indicators against which probation cultures can be identified and analysed. To this end, as a means of drawing out what we argue are the key characteristics of probation cultures, we have posed five questions of our data, namely:

Question 1: Why do the job?

Probation workers are drawn to the job through common values which include: a belief in the possibility of change and their own ability to effect it (to 'make a difference'); a faith in both offenders and colleagues which may be, but more often is not, a religious faith; and an ethos of service or vocationalism (that the work is a 'calling').

Question 2: What are the 'artefacts' of the job?

According to Schein¹⁸ *artefacts* are the most visible elements of organisational cultures and include such things as physical space, the layout of offices, the outputs of work, written and spoken language and the overt behaviour of group members. Probation work typically involves some or all of the following:

- Open plan office on industrial estate
- Security-conscious dealings with offenders
- Separate, bookable interview rooms
- Female-dominated environment
- Computer-dominated risk assessment, reports, records
- Long hours in office
- Video links to prisons
- Little time spent outside the office except for arranged events, e.g., multi-agency meetings, court attendance
- Mutual support, chatter, humour, pleasant communal staff areas

¹⁸ Schein (2010) *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (4th edition), San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Question 3: How is the job made sense of?

The job remains a vocation to some and even cynics and world-weary workers regard probation as more than just a job; they need to make sense of why they do probation work. They need to do meaningful work and the cultural locators or filters for this include: an intellectualism that values thinking and reflection; a commitment to social equality and a respect for social diversity; a political positioning that historically has been overtly left-leaning (though is less so currently); and a protective stance on the threatened 'domain' of probation work.

Question 4: How do PWs gain job satisfaction and fulfillment?

Probation workers are 'socially tainted'¹⁹ because they work with groups of people who can be difficult and are regarded by society in general as undeserving of their efforts. Successes are limited and hard-won. Nevertheless probation workers seek and achieve job satisfaction through what has been termed 'emotional labour'²⁰ or managing the emotions that the work evokes in them. They do this in at least four ways:

1. By constructing themselves as professionals with a legitimate desire to be autonomous (though that desire is often perceived to be thwarted by the organisation).
2. By drawing on an institutional memory that values a golden age of probation when workers *were* autonomous, (while at the same time acknowledging that not all autonomous practice was best practice).
3. By constructing for themselves moments of action when they are called upon to test out their professional skills in situations that are potentially chaotic or dangerous.
4. By introducing into their work a creativity (or departure from the script) that they believe the organisation prohibits (but which the organisation is implicitly dependent on).

¹⁹ Kreiner, G.E. *et al.* (2006) 'Identity dynamics in occupational dirty work: integrating social identity and system justification perspectives', *Organization Science*, 17(5): 619-636.

²⁰ Hochschild, A. (1983) *The managed heart: commercialization of human feelings*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Question 5: How do PWs cope with the external environment and turbulent conditions?

Cultures develop as a means of integrating new group members into ways of working and are a resource for adapting to the external environment. The following characteristics are evident in probation work and enable probation workers to deal in uncertainty:

1. A self-effacing/ apologetic/ non-aggressive/ unthreatening position in relation to public and media criticism.
2. A long-sufferance that redefines success and lives with or rationalises failure.
3. A sense of solidarity and isolation (nobody understands us) ameliorated by humour (often dark), blame, arrogance and moaning masochism.
4. Liminality or 'bridging' – a willingness to work on the threshold, to span the worlds of law enforcement and law breakers ('we sit with judges and we shake hands with offenders' (FPW7)), and gaining satisfaction from being 'tricky to pin down'.

Figure 1. Characteristics of probation cultures



Implications for offender management

Our research has aimed to hold up a mirror to ways in which probation workers make sense of their work and sustain themselves in working conditions that are politically turbulent and socially tainted. It has been a small study that has produced disproportionately rich data, only a fraction of which we have been able to include in this report. Our primary goal has been to suggest the characteristics of a group of criminal justice workers who have been overlooked in the literature on occupational cultures.

This task is important in its own right but we should not evade the obligation to speculate about the implications of our research for offender management. We believe we have shown that probation workers are highly educated, skilled and deeply motivated people. They are committed to the worthwhileness of working with offenders in the community but we found no evidence of the caricatured ‘sandal-wearing, tree-hugging’ welfare-oriented probation officer. It is disingenuous of the government and the media to perpetuate this stereotype. None of our interviewees questioned the importance of risk assessment and public protection. What they did question were the methods by which these honourable goals should be achieved.

We believe that our most important finding has been the need to recognise, encourage and support the desire of workers for ‘action’ – or what might be more usefully termed ‘responsible creativity’. Like all other occupations, probation workers find ways of ‘easing’²¹ or coping with the pressures and tedium of routine work, but one of these ways is being innovative or working ‘on the edge’. This is emphatically not about behaving recklessly or disregarding the organisation’s objectives. Nor is it about a nostalgic return to a mythical golden age of probation (such as that portrayed in the film *I believe in you* or even in the TV series *Hard Cases*). Rather, it is about putting their skills to the test for the good of the offender, victims, the public and the organisation. Acknowledging this resourcefulness in its workforce is perhaps one way in which the organisation could model ‘responsible creativity’.

Our second important finding has been the feminisation of the organisation. The implications of this for offender management are far-reaching and by no means obvious. Certainly, we found no evidence of probation work reverting to a stereotypical social work or ‘caring’ profession as a result of it being female-dominated. Instead, we found that being highly organised, computer literate, team-playing and

²¹ Cain, M. (1973) *Society and the policeman’s role*, London: Routledge.

victim-focused were valued attributes. Being the 'symbolic mother' to offenders²² was seen as inappropriate. We might argue that some women saw their role as being the 'symbolic victim' in confronting and holding offenders to account for their actions. The implications of feminisation for male workers and for relationships between probation and other male-dominated criminal justice organisations are pursued in a forthcoming publication (Worrall and Mawby). We have evidence that some male colleagues have difficulty navigating this cultural turn. We have no direct evidence, but might speculate, that the absence of probation voices at the top of NOMS could be an indirect consequence of those voices being disproportionately female²³.

Our third major finding is that probation workers are multi-specialists who recognise the importance of inter-agency work and relish working alongside the courts, the police and the prison service (as well as other community organisations). We have evidence that this co-operation, co-ordination or even federation²⁴ is stimulating and rewarding. What has demoralised many probation workers, however, is being *merged* with the prison service and losing their identity and respect for their *domain* within a 'command and control' culture. Although the term 'contestability' featured little in most of our interviews, it was also apparent that probation cultures value co-operation above competition when it comes to making provision for work with offenders in the community.

We conclude that probation cultures are complex but, if properly understood, do not undermine the objectives of offender management nor need they be feared by management, the government or the media. However, attempts to dismantle or dilute these cultures may be counter-productive by loosening the 'ties that bind' probation workers to what was described to us as an 'honourable profession' and thus devaluing their commitment to their core universal value of reducing crime by working with offenders who are conditionally at liberty. It would be courageous for both NOMS and the government to respect that this work inevitably involves a willingness to work optimistically (not naively) with uncertainty, ambivalence and (to a degree) failure. Someone has to do it.

²² Worrall, A. (2008) 'Gender and probation in the Second World War: Reflections on a changing occupational culture'. *Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice* 8(3): 317-333

²³ Simpson, R. & Lewis, P. (2007) *Voice, visibility and the gendering of organizations*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

²⁴ Mawby & Worrall *op. cit.*

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Appendix: A day in the life of a Probation Worker (PW13)

- 05.45 Get up, dress, have breakfast
- 07.00 Leave for work
- 07.30 Arrive at work
- 07.40 Unlock – get files for day – log on – coffee
- 07.50 Start – reports/ records
- 09.00 First appointment – either PSR (90 minutes) or supervision (30/40 minutes)
- 10.00 Appointment – supervision
- 11.00 Appointment for absent colleague – record contact and next appointment
- 12.00 Write up video link with prison from previous day – phone and email to prison
- 12.30 Appointment for absent colleague – record contact and next appointment
- 13.00 Second call to prison – liaison with hostel staff – deal with emails – case discussion with SPO
- 13.20 Telephone call from prisoner wanting information
- 13.30 Telephone call from neighbouring area – unhappy about OM response
- 14.00 Appointment – domestic violence work
- 15.00 Appointment – victim empathy work
- 15.40 Bowl of cereal/ coffee – start PSR on OASyS
- 16.00 Appointment – drug client attends (hooray!)
- 16.30 PSR on OASyS
- 17.00 Appointment – poor response, difficult interview
- 17.40 Late for appointment due to overrun
- 18.00 Last appointment finishes – coffee/biscuit – PSR until 20.00
- 20.00 Leave for home
- 20.30 Arrive home – tea, soup, talk
- 22.00 Bed

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