

PROBATION WORK — THE POLITICS OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

EARLY FINDINGS FROM A SMALL-SCALE
RESEARCH PROJECT



Introduction

In September 2020, I embarked on a part time PhD with De Montfort University, with the aim of exploring professional identity in probation practitioners - how such identities are constructed, what enhances or diminishes professional identity, and what professional identity means to the practitioners themselves. The project arose from my experience of working in probation during Transforming Rehabilitation which proved to be a painful and disturbing period for many probation practitioners, characterised by now well-evidenced factors including the fragmentation of professional identity, and an enhanced sense of dissonance, which is effectively explored and discussed in Kirton and Guillame's early study of the impact of TR (Kirton and Guillame, 2019)

It was these concerns which resulted in the decision to study seriously what the impact of TR might mean for probation practice, for probation practitioners and for the people whom they supervise. Inevitably, in the decade since TR, the world of probation itself has moved on, as the reunified Probation Service evolves and as One HMPPS shapes its future.

The Probation Service has been subject to considerable scrutiny over recent years, and rightly so - it is demanding and challenging work, operating in circumstances where, if things go wrong, the consequences can, and have been, damaging in the extreme (See, for instance, the



Anne Burrell

PhD student and Practice Teacher Assessor

HMI Probation (2023a; 2023b) reports into the Serious Further Offences of Damien Bendall and Jordan McSweeney). In such circumstances, it's possible to view probation work as irredeemably problematic, and fundamentally flawed. Yet the practitioners who have taken part in this study thus far remain remarkably resolute, determined. They are focused on the positives of their role, and the constructive influences which they can exert, in managing risk, and safeguarding vulnerable people. This article is a tribute to them, and to their practice.

The research utilises a qualitative approach, predicated on the concept that identity is a social construction that is developed over time within a particular social context. This means that I focused on the internal meanings which shape the actions of participants, and which provide a rationale for what they do. In this context, Becker has argued that identity is formulated as a consequence of the interplay between experience, and the ways in which individuals define those experiences - implicitly, therefore, identity is rooted in the social world, and the relationships between individuals and their social groups and audiences. (Becker, 2007.)

As such, I used semi structured interviews, and focus groups and over the past few months, (from May to December 2023) I have been able to complete interviews with 23 former and current probation workers, from a range of grades, backgrounds and contexts, and differing job roles as well as 13 additional 'expert' interviews. This article seeks to consider some of the early themes which I have identified.¹

Tribe, belonging and core values. Participants described a mixed range of routes into probation practice, with varying levels of pre-existing knowledge and understanding of the service and of its work. However, having started in probation - in whatever capacity - participants described a strong sense of belonging, that they had found their 'tribe.' Elucidating on this led to considerations of the accord between the role, and the participants' core values, of fairness and justice, and of enabling rehabilitation and reintegration. This sense of belonging to a tribe of like-minded people is well rehearsed in previous studies of probation work, notably Mair and Burke (2011), and, more recently, Annison et al (2023.) One participant observed that: 'we are

here to reduce risk and, you know, reduce reoffending, but I think we do that by building up the positives for people and working with them to put the things in place to make sure that they're focused on a different route, and to move them forward, and all the rehabilitative stuff that, you know, I think should be the centre of our practice.' (Key informant #8, Prison Probation Officer.)

In this context, it is interesting how frequently the quasi-religious terms associated with the original Police Court Missionaries, the predecessors to today's practitioners, was referenced, with a number of participants making use of vocabulary such as seeing the job as a *vocation*, and finding satisfaction in the *redemption* of people they had supervised. Many participants reported on subsequent contact with former supervisees who had successfully moved on from their previous offending, and who recounted their journey to rehabilitation with pride.

Significant others: Many participants referred to key people who were critical in enabling their survival in the early stages of their career, and who greatly assisted in supporting their development, and resilience in the work. This encompassed a range of roles, including the perhaps obvious ones of Practice Tutor Assessors, Senior Probation Officers and academics; but also included experienced main grade staff, both in casework, and in specific locations, such as Approved Premises or the Victims Units. The inherently relational aspects of probation work, most explicitly with people subject to supervision, but also with colleagues in the organisation, and partner organisations, is a consistent theme.

¹ The sample was self-selecting, and so it is not possible to make generalisations from the initial findings; nor is it an aim of the project to do so.

Professional identity and locus of control: All the participants identified having a sense of identity as a professional, largely based on their specialist knowledge and expertise, and the specific skills demanded of probation practitioners. Attitudes to formal professional registration were more ambivalent, with some participants seeing external monitoring as a positive step, notably with regard to safeguarding people on probation. The majority, though, were more dubious, seeing the recently established internal professional register, in particular, as yet another process to be undertaken, but which has little real meaning for them and for their status. Thus far, professional identity appears to be a largely *internal* construct; and it is worth considering that, for probation workers, the opportunities for sharing experiences are *solely* confined to the workplace, given the constraints of confidentiality, and of data protection.

Perhaps a more recent factor which enhances this internal sense of professionalism, and which was referred to by many participants, was the perception that it is probation which is 'managing the risk,' particularly in multi-agency settings. One participant referred to attending multi-agency meetings, and observed that: 'it is our values of..... transparency and integrity and *being* that professional, and I think we are the experts in our risk assessment, and we do bring that to the table, which is why I think that other professionals will go, oh, they can deal with it because they seem to know what they're talking about.'

Equally, and in contrast, a sense of *diminution* of professional locus of control - a prioritisation of processes over practice - was referred to by several participants. Whilst relieved to be a single service in the public sector, there is a theme of dissonance regarding current probation organisational culture, expressed by one participant as: 'it feels like we're kind of a little cupboard in a vast mansion, that people kind of every so often remember is there and has a function....but...'

This perception appears to present a challenge to the sense of belonging which was described so consistently as part of the initial appeal of probation work. Loyalties seem to be primarily focused on relationships within The Probation Service, and specifically within the localised practice teams, with a much weaker sense of identity relating to the Civil Service in general, and to the Probation Service in particular. One participant, who worked for a Probation Trust, then a Community Rehabilitation Company during TR, and is now working for The Probation Service, noted that her loyalty to the actual organisation by which she was employed had never been significant, arising not least from the pace of change; and contrasted this with her commitment to her colleagues and to her team.

Conclusion

My research is at an early stage, and data collection is ongoing. It is intriguing, and reassuring, to identify the common themes over time which have characterised probation work, particularly in relation to shared values, and core characteristics of optimism and resilience - alongside a healthy scepticism, itself a core approach of probation.

Mostly, though, it has been energising, rewarding, and moving, to hear practitioners talk with pride and belief in their role and in what they do, notwithstanding the recent fortunes in probation practice. It has been fascinating to start to identify key themes of the project at this early stage; but this article also seeks to pay tribute to the people whom I have had the privilege to talk to, in considerable depth, about their motivations to do probation work; their commitment to their roles; and the values and beliefs which shape their practice and approaches; and for which I wholeheartedly commend them.

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