

Understanding Probation Supervision in Ireland: What Can We Learn From An Historical Approach?

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Since the foundation of the Irish state, the Probation Service has evolved from a small and largely voluntary service into a professional organisation with a distinct social work ethos. While the organisational cultures of other Irish criminal justice institutions are relatively well-researched (e.g., Rogan, 2011; Hamilton, 2014), the culture, philosophies, policies and practices of the Probation Service have received little empirical scrutiny. The *Histories of Probation* project addresses this gap by producing a history of probation from the perspective of core stakeholders, namely administrators, probation officers, rehabilitation workers and probationers, as well as archival records. Oral history approaches can add new dimensions to knowledge, shedding light on the lived experiences of hidden or non-elite groups, animating official histories and adding nuance to existing scholarly accounts on the evolution of probation practice. This article reports on findings from oral history interviews conducted with 25 men under supervision from the 1980s to present. To contextualise their experiences, we draw on a revised version of McNeill's (2009) framework for understanding supervision experiences. Like McNeill's (2009) research, our findings revealed a diversity of experiences, with supervision variously experienced as helpful, hurtful, holding, or hands-off.

What did the research find?

Helping relates to the classic probation philosophy of 'advising, assisting and befriending' (McNeill, 2009). In the Irish context, probation supervision was perceived as helpful when officers focused on relationship building and providing practical rehabilitation supports. For probationers, strong professional relationships were characterised by empathy, trust and understanding. Importantly, officers were perceived as helpful when they showed a willingness to listen as well as genuine concern for their clients.



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Several spoke about times when officers advocated on their behalf (for example, with judges or rehabilitation providers), which was interpreted by probationers as evidence of faith in their ability to change. When asked about the most helpful aspect of probation, one participant explained:

She [PO] advocates on your behalf so she talks for you, do you know, and she puts a good word and sometimes she puts the feelers out for things before you ask for them so she's saving you the hassle of going in and getting told no. [PC5 2000s]

Rapport often took time to develop due to an ingrained distrust of authority figures among probationers. This sentiment is illustrated by the following quote from a participant who characterised his early experiences of probation as unhelpful because of prior negative experiences with a range of institutions including police, prisons and the Catholic Church. These experiences tainted his attitude towards all authority figures, including probation officers. As he recalled:

Up to that point my experience of, for the want of a better term, institutions wasn't healthy [...] so to me the probation was just another cog in that wheel. [PC16, 1980s cohort]

Aside from relationships, participants also highlighted the value of practical support, describing supervision as helpful when officers provided advice on life choices, engaged in clear supervision planning, and sought out rehabilitation opportunities. One interviewee recalled how probation had provided the scaffolding to support his desistance journey, elaborating:

[Probation is] a foundation and then when it's time to move on you know there'll be a plan put in place for it, continue doing what you're doing you know. They're not going to save you but they're going to lead you in the right direction. [PC2, 2010s cohort]

Hurtful experiences by contrast can ensue from an over-emphasis on surveillance and enforcement, according to McNeill (2009). This view was also endorsed by a number of our participants. For them, supervision was harmful when it was intrusive, rigid, and more concerned with surveillance than support. Hurtful experiences also emerged from relational difficulties, and we heard several stories of encounters with probation officers that were characterised by disrespect, lack of trust and personality clashes. One interviewee had a challenging relationship with his first probation officer and felt that he had been prejudged by her as a 'bold person.' By the time of our interview, he had lost contact with his family and attributed this in part to the negative label imposed by his supervisor and shared with his mother during probation meetings. When asked about the least helpful aspects of supervision, he explained:

Just really the old woman [PO], that's it. She was negative, you know what I mean. She was labelling me. Like my ma was with me and all so she was making my ma fight with me and all. Where me ma wouldn't really be like that. So she was making people act different around her. So that was negative. She changed. She changed me ma's perspective to who her son is. [PC24, 2010s]

Home visits were originally designed to provide officers with a deeper understanding of supervisees' lives to facilitate rehabilitation (Ahlin et al., 2013). Though valued by some of our participants, this example shows that home visits are not always perceived as beneficial by people under supervision.

Holding experiences are also common among probationers and tend to elicit diverse responses (McNeill, 2009). For instance, holding experiences are perceived positively when the supervision process creates a safe space to contain the tumult of a difficult existence and negatively when they merely restrict a person's freedoms for a period of time (McNeill, 2009). Both kinds of holding experiences were evident in our study. The following quote illustrates one of the more positive examples. Here, the interviewee discusses how the probation order provided structure and order to his day. Notably, he valued the gradual introduction to a 'normal' routine which allowed time to adjust to a new way of being, elaborating:

The most helpful for me personally was just keeping out of trouble, having a structure, having a plan so Monday-Friday between 2-4 I'd have to be here so that was definitely most helpful because it was good structure, it was a good opportunity to see how, I hate to say normal, but how normal working people was living and how much more calmer and better it was than the life that I was living previous to that. [PC17, 2010s cohort]

Hands-off experiences do not appear in McNeill's (2009) typology but have been added here to capture another important dimension of supervision. Some of our participants explained that supervision had a limited impact on their lives, typically because meetings were short or infrequent, officers seemed aloof or indifferent or they themselves were disengaged from the process. Some participants liked the hands-off style of engagement, while others were left feeling angry and frustrated. The following quote from an interviewee who needed, but did not receive, support from his probation officer highlights the sense of hopelessness generated by such experiences.

So what's the difference if I'm clean or not cause I was going to her for weeks and weeks and weeks clean and she didn't really do anything for me...[...] and then I go in dirty and she doesn't really do anything for me so...[...] It's just a formality. [PC10, 2010s]

Conclusion

Our findings highlight the value of exploring probationers' supervision experiences from a historical perspective and contribute to the understanding of supervision practice in several ways.

First, what probationers perceived as helpful or otherwise remained remarkably consistent across the time period in question. Practical support and high-quality relationships with supervisors were valued by all cohorts while surveillance-oriented experiences were routinely perceived as painful.

Second, supervision experiences were highly subjective. For instance, ostensibly helpful activities like home visits were regarded positively by some but seen as unnecessarily intrusive by others. This is consistent with Hayes' (2018) views on the ambiguous nature of supervision processes, which can contain both positive and negative elements.

Third, supervision experiences were diverse. Participants variously characterised supervision as life-changing, harmful or inconsequential. Most of our participants had been under supervision more than once and recounted disparate experiences at different points in their lives. In mapping these experiences, our findings reinforce McNeill's (2009) framework, highlighting its utility for understanding supervision experiences in Ireland, past and present.

To return to our opening question, our experience shows that oral history studies can make important contributions to knowledge. Non-elite stakeholders such as probationers rarely leave paper records, leaving us with an incomplete picture of probation history. Oral histories address this gap, adding depth to existing narratives and acting as an antidote to the penal nostalgia that often colours criminological accounts of the past.

References

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