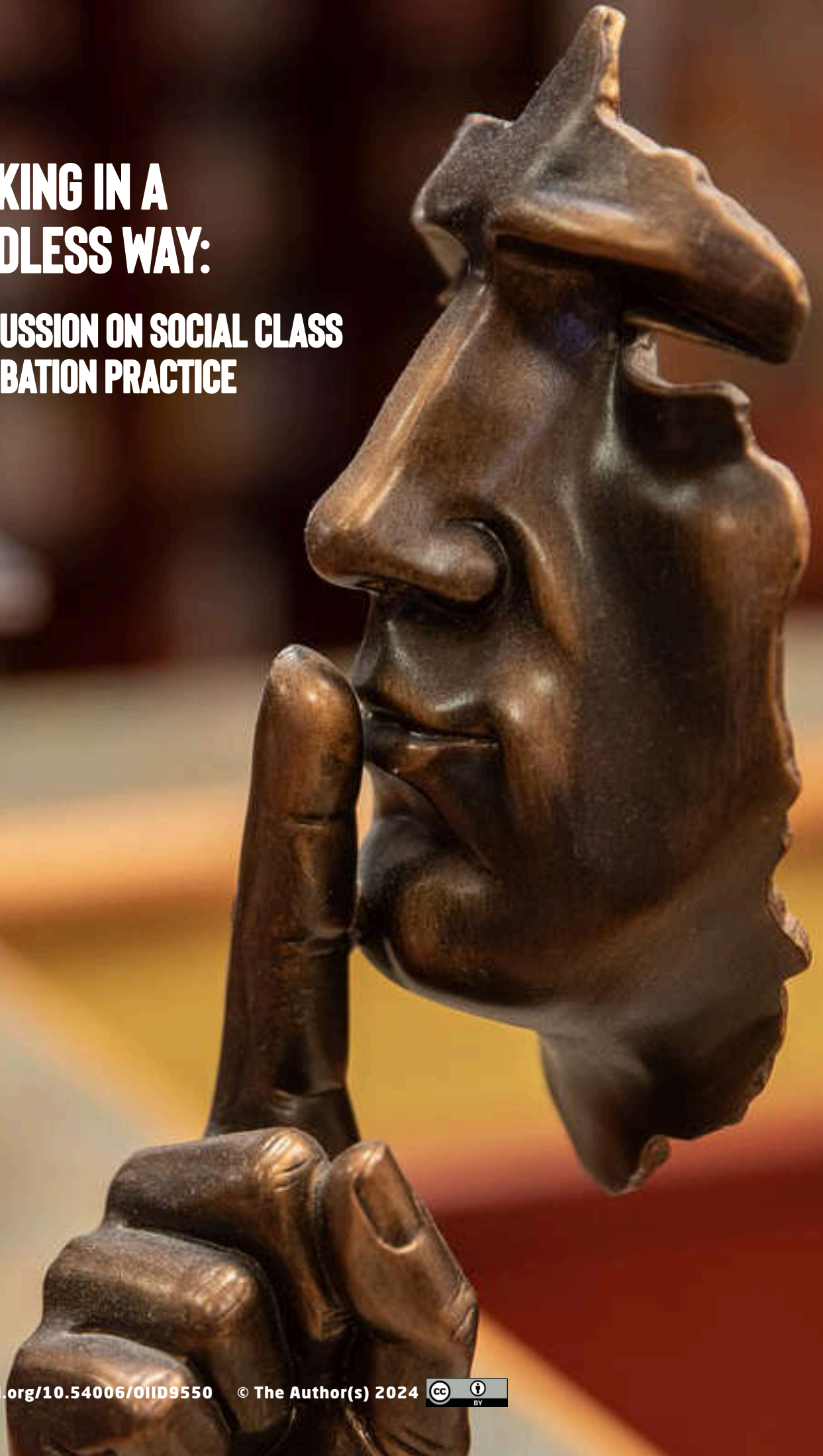


# WORKING IN A WORDLESS WAY:

A DISCUSSION ON SOCIAL CLASS  
IN PROBATION PRACTICE



## Introduction

Probation staff work within class-saturated environments, yet their experiences of doing so are largely unexplored. Where service user experiences of social class meet with theorising upon desistance from offending also requires examination (Graham and McNeill, 2019). Additionally, with class being considered as a protected characteristic under law (BPS, 2022; Sheehy-Skeffington, 2022) and HMPPS social mobility strategies being developed (Moj, 2019), further associated issues arise.

This article presents an individual encounter with class resulting from a discussion with an ex-Probation Officer who worked through the politically influential years bordering the millennium. It draws on a recent research study of previous probation staff who practiced during this period, exploring class dynamics through a semi-structured interview method. In particular we hear the voice of someone we can call Martin who shares his insights of daily practice within this difficult subject area. Martin identifies as white and middle class. He operated as a Probation Officer between 1991 to 2012, in a variety of criminal justice settings. Firstly, regarding client interactions he indicates that:

*in a sort of wordless way I tried to create more a level of acceptance, but I don't know what they thought of me... I didn't feel it helped to talk about something that is pretty obvious, I guess.*



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As he discusses class within a practice setting, ex-officer Martin's comments provide a raft of questions to reflect upon. How do staff work in a wordless way, what 'level of acceptance' is occupationally acceptable, does it matter what people on probation think in class terms of their supervisors, and is it more beneficial not to address certain subject dynamics, thus making class and its concomitant, social mobility, the elephant in the interview room?

## Class in Society

In discussing class in Britain during the period of Martin's time in practice he elucidates his views on what he saw as certain shifts in understanding traditional class categories. In his experience:

*there has been a growing elite at the top end of society who are doing particularly well...what used to be called the middle class have been gradually pushed down to join the class that used to be regarded as the working class...I've seen a lovely term for it called 'precariat'...which means that a lot of society now don't have security, they may have a reasonable amount of money but they don't necessarily have sick pay, they don't necessarily have proper holiday pay, and they don't necessarily have long term contracts,...which is a worrying state of affairs I think.*

Martin makes reference to the growing wealth inequality gap that has occurred over the last forty or so years in the UK (Savage, 2015). He suggests that some downward mobility has occurred, including "in the public sector, I'd say there's a merging of a whole group of lower-middle class", thus possibly encompassing some probation staff within his comments.

With regard to wealth inequality, mobility and work insecurity we can draw on findings from the Great British Class Survey (Savage, 2015). The GBCS echoes Martin's experience in that growing economic inequality in the UK over recent decades is identified, with greater degrees of inequality being experienced by citizens than

most other comparable wealthy nations. Amongst other concerns it additionally identifies a precarious class within its proposed new seven tier model. Those making-up the precariat sit at the base of this tiering structure and are seen as experiencing an insecure life in relation to employment, income and accommodation, leading to heightened levels of benefits dependency. Whilst the complexities of measuring social mobility are acknowledged within the GBCS findings, the gender pay gap and restricted access to highly remunerated professions are also apparent.

## Boundaries and barriers

What insights then does Martin offer in relation to front-line practice in terms of staff awareness, sensitivities, abilities and purposeful working methods to managing class concerns, primarily with a view to class differences possibly presenting barriers to individual engagement and constructive change?

*I think by doing a lot of listening as well,... by not dictating or telling, or being bossy, you're trying to be a better listener...I know we have a lot of authority in probation and I always tried not to misuse that, which you could easily, ... I found it increasingly uncomfortable as we were given increasing power, and they were encouraging us to use it more latterly, you know, like 'breach him, breach him'...using your authority in that way sort of reinforces in a way a class distinction*

When considering report writing we find sensitivities around power and privilege being considered in an effort to diminish class boundaries. Martin was clearly aware of class margins creating possible impediments to communication.

*don't know if that made a difference, but I think I was always aware of my privileged situation when I met people, so I hope I wasn't patronising or anything, or offering charity as such... I was conscious of that, and I think it probably does put up a bit of a barrier.*

As a working practice designed to reduce any class issues acting as an obstruction, Martin engaged as much as possible through home visits:

*rather than them coming into the office which is a very bureaucratic, faceless organisation... I think I tried to break down that difference by going into their own environment...I did feel different and I didn't feel I could break that difference down, but at least I could have stab at figuring out how people lived a bit better when one could visit people in homes.*

Martin's emphasis on home visits is interesting, not only through his attempts to break-down apparent social barriers but also in relation to the empirical evidence indicating the advantages of encouraging family members to enter more into the process of a loved one's rehabilitative, desistance journey (Coley and Ellis Devitt, 2020).

The significance of social difference is not however so critical for Martin as he further indicates that working with a diversity of backgrounds and lifestyles, including dealing with "white collar crime", can remain beneficial. As he says, 'you can't pretend to live, or having lived a similar lifestyle, but I'm not sure that is so essential' offering as this viewpoint does an encouraging approach to engaging others.

To end we come to a topic area within Martin's discourse in which no evasion of class issues was possible, either to be wholly avoided or even minimised: Court work. In his experience:

*crown court...that is very much a class setting,...you've got judges and barristers from the top echelons of society making judgements upon those often from the lowest notches of society in front of them, and we're somewhere in the middle, it's a peculiar scene to work in I guess.*

Interestingly, Martin places probation staff in court 'somewhere in the middle' of this class structure, a structure in which defendants can become excluded within a performative spectacle.

*it's always a bit of a circus...I should think that quite a lot of defendants must feel a little lost in the system when they're there because of the hugely articulate way they do talk, the judges and the barristers, who left them out of it, I would have said.*



A class-based circus is apparent here for Martin, with some performers demonstrating extensive educational opportunities reflected through their skills in verbal articulation, whilst others struggle to navigate the system. Perhaps an element of classed, systemic exclusion possibly resulting from miseducation (Reay, 2017) is alluded to as some experience partial exclusion from the process. Sadly, in terms of social mobility Martin also identifies exclusion from the opportunities offered by wider society for a significant degree of people on probation, with the anger that this creates being lived and felt by some through harsh experience (McGarvey, 2017). As Martin states,

*I think so many were stuck in deep, deep problems, whether it was financial or emotional, whatever it was, housing, it just seemed to be so problematic for them to rise out of the situation they were in, and of course if they come out of prison they come back to the same situation...I didn't see a lot of expectations for people to move-up...this is a fairly deprived area...so I didn't see amazing aspirations.*

It is within this context that Martin feared being seen as 'a soft policemen for the working class.... it's a tiny bit still like that'. A challenging notion indeed for future discussions.

## Conclusion

Here then we glimpse some subtle manifestations of class evident within probation practice, as personally experienced, negotiated and considered by a previous frontline practitioner, with our thanks going to Martin. It is of course only one experience though, through a white, male, middle class lens, with alternative diverse perspectives urgently needing to be documented. It does however begin to address the broader questions relating to the implications

for probation staff of class being considered as a protected characteristic in law and social mobility plans being implemented by employers. If these issues are to be taken further, then surely this is a discussion that needs to continue.

If you would like a copy of the research report please get in touch via:

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