

## Title

Transforming Rehabilitation, emotional labour and contract delivery: A case study of a voluntary sector provider in an English resettlement prison.

## Key Words

Transforming Rehabilitation, emotional labour, resettlement, prison, voluntary sector, probation

## Abstract

In 2019, the UK government announced a scaling back of changes enacted under the Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) agenda introduced in 2013. In doing so, it seemingly reversed key criminal justice policies surrounding the management and supervision of those subject to penal and community sanctions, which had drawn fierce criticism due to its financial and systematic failings. This article speaks to a small but growing body of literature concerned with the professional damage induced by this failed 'rehabilitation revolution' for practitioners (see Robinson et al., 2016; Millings et al., 2019b; Tidmarsh, 2019), through a sharpened focus on a small group of actors brought into the sector through out-sourcing and sub-contracting. Our findings are primarily based on observational and semi-structured interviews conducted with 11 staff employed by a Voluntary Sector Provider (VSP) working in a Category B resettlement prison during this period of profound change. Through the lens of emotional labour theory (Hochschild, 1983) we identify three themes; *operational legitimacy*; *practice proficiency*; and *professional well-being* - to make sense of VSP worker's experience of policy reform under Transforming Rehabilitation. In doing so we contend that working in such fraught conditions, and the excesses of emotional labour involved, can potentially compromise both the integrity and efficiency of service delivery.

## Introduction

In 2019, the UK government announced a scaling back of changes enacted under the Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) agenda introduced in 2013. In doing so, it seemingly reversed key criminal justice policies surrounding the management and supervision of those subject to penal and community sanctions, which had drawn fierce criticism due to its financial and systematic failings. This paper speaks to a small but growing body of literature concerned with the professional damage induced by this failed 'rehabilitation revolution' for practitioners (see Robinson et al., 2016; Millings et al., 2019b; Tidmarsh, 2019), through a sharpened focus on actors brought into the sector through out-sourcing and sub-contracting. The increased involvement in service delivery by voluntary sector organisations (sub-contracted by larger private and voluntary sector providers) was a key strand of the original TR reform programme, particularly within the context of delivering resettlement services to those leaving prison. Our study explores the experience of a voluntary sector provider (VSP) in one case study prison during this period of profound change. Using emotional labour theory to help frame the prevailing and routine challenges faced by VSP workers, what we find is that the failure to establish settled working structures, to develop clear communication channels, and to harmonise working practices left participants feeling particularly vulnerable and their status as 'partners' threatened. Whilst ours is a modest case study, we feel it does align with the wider evidence of how challenging voluntary sector partners have found operating within a landscape shaped by TR (see HMIP 2018, National Audit Office 2016).

The article will firstly set the context and identify how TR posited a role for small, local enterprises, through to nationwide voluntary organisations like Shelter and St Giles Trust - experienced in working with marginalised populations – to engage individuals in new novel ways. VSP partners were encouraged to work with statutory partners to innovate practice delivery and where projects were deemed to 'work' – in the sense of evidencing reduced reoffending - they would be rewarded through 'payment by results'. Anxieties around the vulnerability of voluntary sector organisations operating alongside large multi-national organisations (like Interserve and Sodexo) were addressed by government commitments to develop protective mechanisms. In the language of emotional labour theory, VSP partners were being immersed within more formal partnership roles where they needed to 'boundary span' (Williams, 2007) in simultaneously building trust with service users, statutory criminal justice partners and commissioners. Not only that, but the efforts made by the VSP to secure individual and collective legitimacy had to be especially diplomatic and courteous given the conditions of uncertainty and volatility created by TR and needing to engage probation partner agencies coming to terms with profound change (Vargas, 2016; Robinson et al., 2017).

However, by the late summer of 2018, a succession of official reviews had identified the failure of the TR reforms to generate discernible impacts on offending behaviour and raised serious concerns about the amount of funding the reform agenda had consumed to date, and the future resource commitments required to make the arrangements sustainable. Chief amongst a series of concerns was the reduced involvement of the voluntary sector in offender management. Far from being a driving influence at the core of a mixed provider landscape, the evidence indicated that many voluntary sector organisations had found difficulty operating within, and adapting to, the TR landscape. Whether they had successfully aligned to larger probation providers or not, many organisations reported fairing worse since the introduction of reforms.

Having mapped out the methods we used – and identified this study as part of a wider project concerned with implementing and delivering rehabilitation reforms in criminal justice – we then use the analytical lens of emotional labour to help us scrutinize and narrate why the operational climate encountered by our VSP workers was so challenging. Conceptually, ‘emotional labour’ draws attention to the role of human emotions in organisational life, their centrality to workplace experiences, and their inferences for feelings of meaning and belonging (Elfenbein, 2007). It provides understanding of how workers employ and suppress emotions in pursuit of wider organisational goals and expectations (Hochschild, 1983), and it offers insight into feelings of value (Humphrey et al., 2015) and how the nature of work, the disposition of the worker, and relationships with co-workers, relate to this. Our case study analysis articulates how VSP practitioners constantly found it necessary to negotiate and (re)establish their credentials as partners in delivering resettlement services in ways they routinely found challenging to their professional and personal esteem and well-being. Our use of emotional labour theory helps inform three themes – operational legitimacy; practice proficiency; and professional well-being - to make sense of VSP worker’s experience of policy reform under TR.

Firstly, for the bulk of probation practitioners that the TR reforms impacted upon they needed to reconcile the splitting and re-aligning of their organisational working practice, creating feelings of loss (see Burke et al., 2017; Tidmarsh, 2019). The challenge faced by VSP organisations (and their employees) was to negotiate their operational legitimacy within a changing criminal justice practice landscape, often as a more formal partner in delivering resettlement services than before. Needham et al. (2017) identify how actors operating in a re-orientated role within a new/different professional setting requires the observing of new ‘display rules’, of exhibiting the skills and competencies capable of generating trust. In our case study, a VSP well versed in delivering accommodation services, had to *boundary span* and operate within a new organisational setting with new constituent populations to serve and engage. The need to be ‘sensitive to the social cues of different groups’ (Caldwell and

O'Reilly, 1982:126) was a challenge for our respondents who felt it was left to them to overcome cynicism and negotiate their legitimacy and place within the resettlement field.

Secondly, as the official reviews of TR identified, the routine partnership working that sat at the heart of the reform was in reality often not happening. Our VSP workers immersed within the prison environment were expected to engage service users on the prison wings, needed to engage with prison staff to secure access to the men and to facilitate communication, and needed also to work with probation colleagues based in the community to maintain resettlement support. The maintenance of these relationships and the trust building required to make them functional required constant attention. The challenge for VSP practitioners, as we illustrate, was not just about *boundary spanning* in a new practice setting, challenging though this was. But it was also about maintaining professional esteem and confidence in the face of apathy and of endeavouring to be able to engage in *deep acting*, to be 'more likely to strive to actually feel the emotions they are expected to express' (Humphrey et al., 2015:756) as established partners in delivering resettlement services.

Thirdly, the emotional labour literature helps understand how VSP workers responded to the challenges they encountered in negotiating their operational legitimacy and in terms of the complex needs of the service users they were engaging. Supporting service users with a series of complex needs in a challenging environment like a prison carries with it a high degree of emotional labour that can lead to workers becoming 'alienated from the aspects of self which is used to do the work' (Lumsden and Black, 2017:609). Coupled with the sense of not being recognised as a legitimate partner these are conditions that can induce stress, burnout and other psychological problems – outcomes often associated with the concept of *emotional dissonance* - defined as 'the separation of felt emotion from feigned emotion expressed to meet organizational expectations' (Mastracci et al., 2006:126). In other instances though, what we can also observe is that staff show great resilience and collectively created what Korczynski (2003) identifies as a 'community of coping' to help better manage and support one another's well-being and esteem.

By its conclusion, this paper will highlight the complex and unsettling terrain navigated by the VSP workers and its resulting impacts on their personal and vocational lives. Consequently, we emphasise the need for policy makers to give more consideration to the welfare and professional site of practitioners - to consider the dynamic impact on individual's emotional labour of recasting operational conditions - when designing reform. This should be driven by an ambition of supporting staff to effectively fulfil their duties, but more importantly, to ensure their protection and wellbeing. When policy makers are negligent to understand and pre-empt the challenging conditions for professionals working within the practice setting they threaten the professional esteem, status and

credibility of individual workers (and their organisation). At its worst the excesses of emotional labour of working in such fraught conditions can begin to compromise the integrity and efficiency of service delivery.

### **The Context of Voluntary Sector Involvement in TR**

In 2013, the government took the decision to replace the 35 Probation Trusts in England and Wales with a National Probation Service (NPS) dealing with high risk offenders and the creation of 21 Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) responsible for the supervision of medium to low risk offenders. As part of the reforms, CRCs were contracted from May 2015 to provide *Through the Gate* (TTG) prisons in England and Wales were re-designated as *resettlement prisons* tasked with establishing an integrated approach to service delivery<sup>1</sup>. For the first time, supervision was extended to those serving sentences of less than 12 months, who would serve all or most of their sentence within their local resettlement prison. It was envisaged that the additional cost of extending supervision would be met by efficiencies achieved by the new providers and longer term savings would be delivered through projected reductions in re-offending<sup>2</sup>. The contracted outsourcing of probation delivery allowed the CRCs to subcontract the bulk of their Through the Gate obligations to third-party organisations who were classed as Tier 2 providers – where our VSP found itself operating. Despite the innovative nature of these service delivery arrangements there has been scant academic attention given to the impact on those Tier 2 organisations tasked with delivering services as part of these supply chains or the impact of the staff within them as they navigated this changed service delivery landscape.

The ambitions set out in the TR agenda in 2013 represented a radical shift in formalising the voluntary sector as core to managing offenders in the community. The then Justice Secretary, Chris Grayling, claimed the sector had ‘enormous skills’ which could be brought to bear on probation (Justice Select Committee 2013 HC (2013-14) 94, Q179). The reforms posited the voluntary sector ability to not only support but own and manage probation services through the newly formed CRCs, delivering medium to low risk offender management, programmes, unpaid work and a range of corporate services. In the face of stubbornly high reoffending rates among those released from prison and demands to reduce public expenditure, the government argued that a mixed provider landscape which integrated private

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<sup>1</sup> As part of this new regime, prisoners would start working with the new providers during the last three months of their sentence to ensure continuity through the gate and in the community after release.

<sup>2</sup> As such CRCs were to be incentivised to drive down reoffending rates through the mechanism of Payment by Results (PbR). CRCs were contractually required to help prisoners maintain or find accommodation; provide assistance with finance, benefits and debt; and to support them to enter education, training and employment.

companies and a diverse range of local sub-providers from voluntary sector organisations would lead to innovation, reinvigorating efforts to rehabilitate offenders (MoJ, 2013; HMIP, 2018). Prior to the CRC contracts being awarded, Chris Grayling claimed that the sector would be well represented at CRC parent company levels as bids had been received from ‘a very good mix of private and voluntary sector organisations, often in partnership’ (Justice Select Committee, 2018:35). In December 2013, he stated that the government’s power to withdraw contracts would safeguard the ambition to engage the voluntary sector ‘if the big guy duffs up the little guy, we can duff up the big guy...if you make a material change to your structure and supply chain, you will have to tell us first’ (ibid.).

In April 2018, the Chief of HM Inspectorate of Probation, Dame Glenys Stacey, stated that the key voluntary sector role in probation services had not been realised, and indeed that they were less involved than ever before. This was followed, in May 2018, by the publication of research findings by Clinks (2018:61) – a national organisation representing voluntary sector organisations working in criminal justice – documenting concerns that 132 voluntary organisations delivering TR probation services were consistently under-funded. Half of those funded by CRCs declared ‘unsustainable’ and ‘one in three think[ing] their funding agreement is at risk of failure before the end of the contract’ (ibid.). By June 2018, the Justice Select Committee (2018:37-38) confirmed that voluntary sector involvement in probation, particularly local and specialist organisations, had decreased, reducing ‘the quality and array of services available to individuals on probation’. The evidence cumulatively demonstrates how challenging TR reforms have made the terrain for small, locally based voluntary sector organisations. Rather than being a climate where they can flourish, it has created conditions that threaten their operation and, indeed, their existence.

The succession of official reviews challenged the robustness and sustainability of TR, exposing fissures between the vision of rehabilitation revolution and the reality of its practice. The gravity of the concerns was a catalyst for change, leading David Gauke, Home Secretary in July 2018, to announce that the government would end the CRC contracts two years earlier than planned (MoJ, 2018a). In the concerns around the involvement of voluntary sector organisations in offender management services, three themes routinely emerged.

Firstly, it was evident that voluntary sector organisations found it difficult to engage with the bidding processes and the level of voluntary sector representation was much lower than anticipated. From an initial list of 700 expressions of interest from public, private and voluntary sector organisations, only 19 consortium bids were submitted and only one of the 21 contract area packages, Durham Tees Valley, was won by a contractor outside of the private sector (NAO, 2016:18). In oral evidence to the Justice Select Committee the CEO of a voluntary sector organisation explained that to secure sub-

contracts they had spent tens of thousands of pounds on legal and professional fees 'just to read the contracts and negotiate them' (Justice Select Committee, 2018:39). The picture emerging from both the National Audit Office (2016) and Clinks (2018) was that smaller, less prepared organisations felt overwhelmed by the processes and demands of the contracting process. The transference of risk from the Ministry for voluntary sector organisations (and indeed many others of the 700 parties initially interested) was deemed too much to bear. The Justice Select Committee concluded that these prohibitive conditions meant that TR had 'failed to open up the probation market' (Justice Select Committee, 2018:37). The government contested that the voluntary sector was less engaged in probation services – pointing out approximately 90 voluntary organisations were working within CRC supply chains - but acknowledged that larger voluntary sector organisations tended to be involved and that 'it is certainly true that some of the smaller voluntary sector organisations feel less involved' (ibid.).

Secondly, the official reviews describe an uneasy and uncertain practice climate, compromising the operation and delivery of partnership arrangements. The most profound change instituted by TR was the splitting of probation trusts and reallocation of staff into the NPS and CRC. Robinson et al. (2016) capture how traumatic an experience the involuntary reallocation of labour was for probation practitioners. Clinks (2018:37) identified the ripple effect of the split as voluntary sector partners reported challenges in how they understood and navigated new partnership arrangements, and of unease amongst service users in trying to make sense of their new supervisory arrangements as TR took hold. The concerns of Burke and Collett (2016:121), that 'ideological, organisational and commercial frictions and fault lines will sustain a battleground of antagonistic actions for the foreseeable future' have, for some in the voluntary sector, been realised. The Inspectorate of probation also reported the 'cultural challenges' of probation staff undertaking a procurement role, with the publication of listed prices for services leading staff to question the 'costs and the value for money offered by some interventions' (HMIPP, 2018:39). In their report the Inspectorate quoted a probation manager who expressed their concern;

we are selecting the purchase of service user interventions in the same way as we order the stationary, instead of taking a sensible commissioning approach (HMIP, 2018:39)

The re-appropriation of relationships along (uneasy) purchaser and provider lines reframed voluntary sector relationships with probation practitioners. The Clinks report (2018:24) captured voluntary sector partners concerns that there was less attention on face-to-face work, with the emphasis shifting to programme-orientated group work. The broader uncertainty surrounding what services CRC and NPS should be funding persisted, so reductions in investment strained professional relationships

between partners. Concerns around the fragmentation of relationships and tendency towards 'silo' working encouraged the sense that organisations were 'competing instead of co-operating and [that] commercial interest is core concern rather than the welfare of ex-offenders' (Clinks, 2018:28). The Inspectorate recognised that CRCs – 'uncertain about future income and at risk of hefty financial penalties for failure to meet contractual targets' (HMIP, 2018:5) – had to make difficult choices between one expense or another and that this impacted on the operation and composition of local criminal justice practice arrangements.

Thirdly, all reviews recognised that CRC finance arrangements had not worked out as intended. With much less income to invest, the sector was straining and funding to voluntary sector organisations was acutely affected. In 2017 the National Audit Office reported that the volumes of activity CRCs are paid for are well below the levels expected at the point of procurement, while the number of offenders supervised has increased. CRCs are paid on the basis of weighted volumes for different types of contracted rehabilitation services and in the first quarter of 2017-18 the volumes of activity were between 16% and 48% less than originally anticipated (NAO, 2017:7). Figures for March 2018 identified that overall CRCs supervise 59.3% of those managed on probation, much lower than the expected 70% of probationers outlined at the introduction of the TR reforms (MoJ, 2018b). The fall in expected income for CRCs is significant. The reduced income has impacted upon the ability of CRCs to innovate and transform their businesses. The financial instability for owners has forced the Ministry to take action to ensure continuity of probation services in England and Wales by amending its contracts with CRCs (NAO 2017). The Inspectorate Report (2018:31) reflects that whilst voluntary sector partners were used to dealing with uncertain finances and the instability of contract cycles, CRCs had invested little in services beyond minimum contractual expectations, leading to significant challenges.

We have deliberately emphasised the policy context within which our research took place as it highlights the complex and challenging terrain in which workers involved had to navigate and which subsequently impacted on their emotional well-being. The impact of changes enacted by Transforming Rehabilitation upon probation staff has been well documented (see for example – Robinson et al., 2016; Phillips et al., 2016; Burke et al., 2017; Kirton and Guillaume, 2019; Millings et al., 2019a; Walker et al., 2019). The findings of these studies identify feelings of anxiety, conflict and fatalism within a beleaguered work force (Taylor et al., 2017; Millings et al., 2019b). In doing so, they seemingly resonate with the negative aspects of emotional labour that Hochschild (1983) identifies, which can lead to workers becoming 'alienated from the aspects of self which is used to do the work'



(Lumsden and Black, 2017:609). Emotional labour provides contextualised understanding of the experiences of workers within a particular organisation, at one time, representing a purposeful tool for those seeking to frame and understand how structural change affects workers feelings of security and legitimacy. We utilise the analytical lens of emotional labour here to articulate meaning from the experiences of a different staff group involved in the TR reform programme, namely staff within a voluntary sector provider contracted to deliver resettlement services prison during the rollout of TR. At an individual level, VSP practitioners had to develop a wide range of skills to engage and support prison residents on their rehabilitation journey and needed to negotiate (collaborative) working relationships with established professionals working within prison and probation services. At an organisation level the VSP – a subcontracted organisation introduced into the sector to administer resettlement services – was one of the most manifest outcomes of the TR reforms and therefore needed to establish its position in the local criminal justice landscape whilst navigating the unease (and occasional hostility) of partner organisations still reconciling structural change.

## **Methods**

The paper draws primarily on observational and interview based research conducted with 11 staff employed by our VSP and working in our case study Category B prison, which had a population of around 1,100 men. Though much of the data presented here draws on the series of semi-structured interviews conducted with VSP staff the paper also draws on our wider insights from the broader range of research activities that research with VSP staff formed part of. The larger longitudinal study, stretching from January 2016 to July 2017, sought to capture the experiences of those involved with the implementation of the Through the Gate arrangements within the prison (Taylor et al., 2017; Millings et al., 2019b). Within our case study prison, TTG arrangements are delivered by a national charity who are a partner of the CRC owners and provide their services on a sub-contractual basis as part of the supply chain. The charity has a long-standing presence within the prison but their work was previously limited to providing support and advice with accommodation rather than the broader contractual responsibilities of the CRCs. In essence, the contracted provider has responsibility for delivering resettlement services ‘to the gate’ with follow-up support and supervision provided by the responsible officer in the community who is employed directly by the CRC owners/NPS.

We conducted a total of 113 semi-structured interviews across three phases of activity to examine the logistical capacity of the prison to facilitate resettlement pathways for prisoners and to identify and

explore the role played by change agents – individuals, their families, prison staff, and partner agencies – in developing resettlement processes (see Burke et al., 2017; Millings et al., 2019b). As a research team, and having negotiated the necessary ethical clearances, we were able to capitalise on the access granted to us by senior managers to directly engage prisoners and rehabilitation/resettlement professionals working. The period during which the fieldwork took place was one of the most challenging in the prison's recent history. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons conducted a number of unannounced inspections throughout 2016 and 2017, including one at our case study prison, that were routinely critical of the conditions and palpable threats of violence they encountered (Millings et al., 2019b). Within our sample, we engaged prison based offender management staff whilst outside of the jail we engaged community based probation practitioners from both the NPS and CRC. Whilst all groups had found the implementation and routine operation of resettlement services under the TR reforms disjointed, our research identified that the VSP staff were especially vulnerable and found working with partner agencies (and even their prime provider who sub-contracted them to deliver services) challenging. To help frame the nature of the challenges they faced and to draw out learning for future efforts at policy reform we utilise emotional labour theory to help us explore three key themes - operational legitimacy; practice proficiency; and professional well-being - that characterised the complex working conditions VSP staff had to endure.

### **Wrestling to secure *Operational Legitimacy***

As indicated above, the environment within the prison during the research period was characterised by poor levels of cleanliness, high levels of drug taking, and cultures of violence. The climate in and of itself meant the climate of the jail was even more fraught for the residents and for the prison service staff and partner agencies working in the jail. However, many of our VSP staff had extensive experience of working in such settings and this was a prison that VSP had a history of delivering services within. Moreover, consistent with Tomczak (2017), many staff embarked on their new role within a reconfigured landscape with confidence that their non-statutory status was a source of strength and meant that they were viewed differently to probation and believed they could conceptualise themselves as 'the friendly face of resettlement' (Jenny).

You're dealing with the anger, the hostility as well. The only thing that is the saving grace is the [name of organisation] badge because they still see the badge as a lifeboat. They see you coming on. They'll engage. If you go along with a probation badge on, a totally different story (Paul)

You're not statutory, are you? You can't recall them, you can't breach them, a lot of them just have that automatic probation, police, prison, but we're not like that, are we? They don't see that probation are there to help them because of the other side of probation. Whereas they just see us as being there to help and support them (Annie)

As Tomczak and Albertson (2016:64) observed, voluntary sector practitioners 'considered that their quality interactions with prisoners could never be replicated by officers who did not have the same practical and conceptual distance from punishment and the more coercive and risk-orientated aspects of prison work'. Their distinctiveness, they believed, had an agentic effect in enabling them to develop more trusting relationships with prisoners in ways that prison and probation officers could not and enabled them to focus more on the individual's needs rather than their offence or offending behaviour. Conceptually there was a confidence from VSP workers that their organisation's background and experience could renew the intent to help deliver rehabilitation to add a new perspective in a reconfigured practice field.

However, the VSP workers were now being asked to play a different role – having been subcontracted through the TR reform process – as a resettlement partner delivering services in partnership with resident prison workers and community based probation partners. They were meant to be a part of supply chain of services that would deliver end-to-end Through the Gate service provision to men as they entered prison right through to their release back into the community. Routinely within our study we found VSP workers to be cynical about how successfully the model had been established and how damaging implementation failures were to their sense of professional confidence in practice;

There is no Through the Gate. It's a fallacy. If you're not going to meet someone at the gate when they need it, then what is the point of calling it Through the Gate? It's just exactly the same as it always was before, and it just means that all the work that we've done in here just falls apart, because they don't get to the first appointment. It becomes so frustrating. They've put pressure on everyone to do these plans, and have this monitoring, and ask this person what they want. And then there's nothing to pick it up at the gate (Katy)

Katy's sense of bewilderment with implementation failures of the model to effectively support service users was common throughout the group as they had to contend with a constant battle to negotiate their operational credibility and legitimacy. On a mundane level this played out in the daily working relationships, as the following reflection on an interaction with prison officers illustrates;

Some of them [prison officers] are great, it's so helpful and you can really do your job and you actually get a sense of achievement. But many of them don't want civvies in the jail and they

let it be quite obvious. All it takes is for one – you walk into a room and there will be six officers and you'll say, "Morning, can I have someone unlocked?" and they'll just talk to you as though you're nothing and you're left standing there with a bright red face and thinking, "This is awful, so embarrassing." Most of them are okay, but they will also just ignore you if you say hello to them and completely blank you. Yes, you have that as well. When that happens, it has a massive impact on the way you feel. (Katy)

Other VSP workers in our study would relay similar stories of impactful moments that captured the sense of challenge faced routinely by the organisation in establishing its sense of place. What was consistent throughout was the power dynamics at work and the sense of vulnerability that staff felt that compelled them to be patient in the face of hostility and to be diplomatic in shaping their interactions with partners. Individually as workers and collectively as a subcontracted organisation the VSP was thrust into a practice setting that they needed to navigate sensitively and on a routine basis needed to negotiate their legitimacy as partners. Whether this be in overcoming the cynicism of prison officers unsure of what role an accommodation provider could play in assessing individual's wider needs, or often explicit challenges made by probation professionals about the ability of VSP practitioner's professional credibility to conduct supervision the challenges to their authority and integrity were routine and impactful.

Needham et al. (2017) identify how actors operating in a re-orientated role within a new/different professional setting requires the observing of new 'display rules', of exhibiting the skills and competencies capable of generating trust. What we observed with our VSP workers – who were well versed in delivering accommodation services – was that they were now having to make sense of new relationships and new working practices. Having made judgements about how to manage relationships they were having to *boundary span* to secure the support of prison officers to facilitate their daily working practices, to negotiate with probation service partners to ensure the men they access could be supported, and also establish the worth of their intervention with the men on the prison wings. In the face of what could often be judged as hostility they need to be 'sensitive to the social cues of different groups' (Caldwell and O'Reilly, 1982:126) in their interactions to help them overcome cynicism and negotiate their legitimacy and place within the resettlement field. However, what made this a particularly challenging set of experiences for the VSP workers is that the uncertainty about where they and their work fitted, or what they could achieve was not confined to one partner, but actually across the range of organisations they were contracted to work with:

We have only got read only access on OASys. We have got no access to any pre-cons. We have got no access to previous risk assessments. We can't see what was put on there before. It is

just a blind system basically. They are looking at our input thinking 'well why are they asking us that because it is already on there?' But we haven't got access to it and we are annoying them but unknowingly (Jenny)

Individually and collectively, the VSP had to routinely work hard to establish their credibility within the prison and to create mechanisms to improve communication, information sharing, and, initially, securing access to the men on the wings. During the 18 months of fieldwork concerns about the high turnover of staff owing to the intense tensions and frustrations they experienced was a constant feature. For some it was not just the relationships with the prison that were problematic but of more significance was the sense that the sub-contracting organisation could be similarly apathetic to the challenges being experienced;

We'd been asked to attend [a meeting], with the CRC, to explain what we're doing, bearing in mind we're two years in. The turnover of staff in the CRC in the community, and with us as well, is so high that by the time you explain what we're doing, and then the people who have listened to that and understood it then leave, and they have a new batch in, it needs to be done again and again and again. So it's only filtering down to very few (Katy)

Knight et al. (2016) contend that the capacity of practitioners to work with emotions in a manner congruent with the needs of both practitioners and service users need to be developed in a supportive working environment if it is to be effective and if the mental and emotional health of staff is to be sustained and enhanced. In the absence of formal support, the respondents in our research found a range of ways to seek this support in an environment that did not generally welcome emotional expression.

### **Negotiating *Practice Proficiency***

For the staff working for the contracted resettlement provider, who were at the epicentre of service delivery within the prison, the challenges of their routine working environment invoked a range of emotional responses as they struggled to work effectively. Their role had changed dramatically yet they had little strategic support or guidance. In practice they struggled to forge a new identity often finding themselves playing conduit between the prison, prisoners and CRC. They perceived themselves to be the proverbial 'jam in the middle' (Paul) caught between meeting the demands of the prison, the expectations of prisoners and their contractual requirements to the CRC. Like many of those involved in the delivery of public services, the workers in our study had to operate across organisational and professional boundaries both within and beyond the prison. The onus was on VSP

workers to 'boundary span' (Williams, 2007; Needham et al., 2017) to engineer collaboration based on a shared purpose - successful resettlement outcomes in terms of the case study. Successful boundary spanning, for Williams (2007), involves building and nurturing interpersonal relationships between a diverse set of stakeholders, fostering trust, managing power relationships and negotiating consensus. Within the context of the uncertain working climate shaped by the speed and scale of the TR reforms this was a constant negotiation for VSP workers in how they managed relationships with partners. We observed within our sample what Humphrey et al. (2015) argue is a third form of emotional labour whereby an individual's investment in their professional identity is natural and genuine. Despite the demands of the contract to ensure that performance targets were met, underpinning the workers' behaviour was an explicit desire to provide a good service;

I think everyone who is here wants to be here...that is a big thing. You have got to want to be working with the clients we are working with...you have got to see that we do make an impact on people and change (Jenny)

We care about our jobs. Everyone is in that room because they want to be and they want to make a difference, which is why it can be soul destroying sometimes when it backfires. We don't want anyone going out NFA [no fixed abode]. We go beyond the call of duty to help them...we certainly aren't there for the money, put it that way (Kathy)

Knight et al. (2016) contend that if positive professional relationships are to be successfully established and maintained then it is essential that the worker's response is authentic, and underpinned by values based on a respect for the individual and their capacity to change. It is within the routine activities of everyday working that we can see the dynamics of partnership working enact the capacity of VSP workers to engage in 'deep' and 'surface' acting. Deep acting is possible when there is a closer alignment between inner feelings and emotional displays in a climate where partners felt valued, surface acting in contrast finds practitioners rather more resigned to stimulate emotions in order to achieve the aims of the organisation (Phillips, 2019). Morris and Feldman (1996:990) contend that 'because emotional intensity often is difficult to fake... work roles requiring display of intense emotions entail more deep acting and thus greater effort on the part of the role occupants'.

Hochschild (1983) suggests that deep acting can lead to emotional exhaustion because it requires the worker to put more of themselves into performing the task (although it can also bring about a sense of personal accomplishment if the outcome is successful). However, a reoccurring theme throughout our interviews with VSP practitioners within the prison was the feeling of being an 'outsider'. Whilst some uniformed staff were supportive, others viewed the presence of civilian workers on the wing as an intrusion and treated them with suspicion and in some cases outright hostility. In terms of how

their work was appreciated and acknowledged by prison staff was captured by one respondent who thought that they were 'seen as a pain in the backside of the prison' (Rachel). Similarly, the quote used earlier of the resistance and hostility that can be experienced when dealing with prisoner officers illustrates what Crawley (2004:153) calls the 'routine, bureaucratic denial of humanity in prisons'. These attitudes and behaviours impact not only on how VSP practitioners were able to perform their duties but go further to shape individual's self-worth and self-esteem.

The notion of 'deep acting' in emotional labour can require much effort (as) 'the less individuals identify with their role, the more likely they are to resort to surface acting – to simply feigning the expected emotions' (Humphrey et al. 2015:756). For some in our sample the negative behaviour of some prison staff was indicative of a deeper antipathy or 'lack of buy in to resettlement' (Rachel) and in particular a failure to recognise or appreciate the work of the contracted provider particularly in relation to their widened responsibilities to manage the resettlement process. Moreover, although the contracted resettlement provider in our study had entered into a formal partnership with the owners of the community based CRC, that they judged relationships so poorly added to the sense of bewilderment VSP workers felt. Jenny's reflection 'when I phone the CRC I am phoning probation and I am getting spoken to as if I am not a colleague' was representative of the views of others who found it difficult to assert themselves with this group of staff and as a result did not feel accepted by staff working in the parent company.

The joint inspection into TTG arrangements within prisons noted that CRC staff in the community who were responsible for the cases often felt they were having to compensate for, and amend intervention activity from earlier in the cycle. The Inspection Report identified that probation practitioners did not have confidence in the reliability of information from the prison-based contracted providers, they were unsure about the range of services provided in the prison, and so did not make requests for services to be delivered (CJI, 2016). Such tensions and practice breakdowns were evident in our case study and VSP practitioners identified how they felt levels of resentment among some community based CRC staff towards them. They judged that although these concerns centred on the quality of the work they were engaged in, this resentment was primarily rooted in a perception that the VSP was encroaching on work that had previously been the preserve of probation;

I think there is still an element of resentment in the probation service with regards to the splitting of the two parts. I think we are seen as an add-on charity, as opposed to a part of the CRC. I think, whether they think we're cardigan wearing do-gooders, I'm not certain. I don't know, is the answer, because we don't have that communication (Rachel)

I think there has been a lot of animosity and some comments that are passed around from people and the CRC and then gets fed back to us about us being rubbish. That leaves you feeling a little stressed (Kathy)

Critics of the Transforming Rehabilitation reform have argued that it is ultimately a cost-saving exercise and part of a wider neo-liberal project that seeks to transfer responsibility for delivering public services from the state to private and voluntary sector providers at a lower cost (Burke and Collett, 2015). Some VSP practitioners felt that they were being used as a cheap alternative to probation and that their work was not valued by community-based CRC staff as the following quote reflects;

Nine times out of ten, you'll find that the probation officer doesn't even read the report that we write, which is frustrating in itself. I think people don't realise that the work that the resettlement staff are doing - I've got a thing where you can shoot me down but it's a poor man's probation inside the prison. They basically want us to do the dirty work of probation outside. That's the way it is. That's the way it comes across (Paul)

Cumulatively the fraught state of relationships between partner agencies working within the prison served to have significant impacts on VSP worker's sense of professional esteem and confidence. As the most overt manifestation of the TR reform programme their role needed clearest articulation and explanation. When that did not happen, and the implementation of new working models is vague, then the place of the VSP is compromised. What the VSP workers reflections on the first 18-months of their involvement in the prison illustrates is how they needed to navigate a series of complex relationships. They needed to boundary span and engage in very demanding activity concerned with building their personal and professional credibility. The sense of powerlessness many felt in the face of systems that functioned poorly, in the face of cynicism (and occasional hostility) from partners, coupled with the routine challenges of working with the client group, made the environment stress inducing. The prison - and the dynamic workplace practices VSP workers were exposed to - were subject to a range of political, managerial, economic and social processes. As resettlement workers committed to the imperative to support service users there are aspects of the organisational and operational climate that stifled the realisation of their ambitions and by extension compromised their practice proficiency.



## **Maintaining *Professional well-being***

Burke and Collett (2020) argue that probation staff (and rehabilitation mechanisms more generally) need to model the values and virtues they want supervisees to adopt. If they do not, and if the wider system lacks legitimacy in the eyes of supervisees, then it loses the right to influence and persuade. Within our wider study (see Taylor et al., 2017) one of the most pervasive themes to emerge in interviews with prisoners was the sense that the prison environment induced extreme feelings of negativity and frustration. In their reflections on engaging with rehabilitation services prisoners were similarly generally negative in their assessment of the support available to them. They articulated resettlement as re-integration back into the community and entailing support around accommodation, employment, mental health, and drug and alcohol support but believed that these were not being adequately addressed (Millings et al., 2019b). What was evident in our interviews with VSP workers was how impactful the fraught climate of the prison was in shaping their relationships with prisoners and in how they reflected on how the prisoners viewed them and their motivations to deliver service. At its worst, some staff appeared to develop coping mechanisms to deal with what they perceived as a hopeless cycle of re-offending, adopting what Westaby et al. (2016:117) describe as a form of ‘emotional detachment’;

They have an agenda and they’re not honest with you, the prisoners. You can’t believe anything they say because they just lie through their back teeth all the time. All you can do is take it on face value and deal with each case as it is (Kathy)

Consistent with Grootegeed and Smith (2018:1942), what we observed was how emotional labour not only alters the way workers feel about those they work with, but that it also begins to shape their ‘moral judgements of deservingness’. As we have noted, the implementation of the new TTG arrangements significantly changed the relationship between the contracted resettlement provider, the prisoners and indeed other voluntary sector agencies in the prison. As previously mentioned, the contracted resettlement provider had an established presence within the prison as a provider of accommodation working alongside other voluntary sector agencies in the prison. Under the new arrangements, the contracted provider was tasked with coordinating resettlement services for those prisoners serving less than 12 months and its brief extended accordingly. In some cases this meant that there was overlap with the work undertaken by other established voluntary sector providers within the prison, especially around the areas of employment and drug services in what staff and prisoners increasingly saw as a marketplace of services. One respondent described it as ‘like a huge piece of cake and everyone’s fighting over a little slice’ (Paul) as others reflecting on how toxic the climate could become;

I think there are so many agencies and organisations who have got their own agendas on things. They've got their own targets; they've got their own funding issues. They've got their own bids and outcomes and everything else they want to secure (Katy)

Martin et al. (2016:26) identify how problematic the introduction of competition has been for a sector which has traditionally thrived on partnership and complementary working and where the outcome of 'practical and existential anxieties for organisations [has] the ultimate effect on their service users'. Tidmarsh (2019) has argued that rather than liberating practitioners, market mechanisms serve to further entrench the centralising tendencies associated with managerialism as the contractual logic of markets means that targets have accrued greater financial significance. The introduction of commissioning models based on Payment by Results (PbR) within TR where sufficient working capital and resources are needed to take on the risk of a contract in which payment is weighted towards the end of the contractual period acted to embed these imperatives further. CRCs are predominantly remunerated through 'fee for service', that is, output-based targets that comprise approximately 90% of their funding although under PbR a proportion of payments are withheld if they fail to meet such metrics (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2016). PbR functions, Tidmarsh (2019:12) argues, as a form of 'penal accountancy' in that missing targets is punishable via the withholding of (state) funding and hitting targets is rewarded, regardless of whether the service delivered is meaningful.

For VSP workers, who engage prisoners on their arrival at the prison and then are pivotal in the oversight and delivery of rehabilitation services, this has had a significant bearing on their personal and professional esteem, and in shaping the conditions in how they engage with prisoners. It is VSP workers who undertake assessments on all prisoners on their arrival within the prison as they were paid a fee for each BCST<sup>3</sup> completed. This initial assessment represents not just a core source of revenue but is the manifestation of an individual's engagement with the TR programme of reform. VSP workers found the pressure to complete as many assessments as possible within rigid time constraints challenging, but also found it hard to authentically promote a service that they had deep concerns about its robustness and capacity to deliver the support the men need;

We have audits all the time, you need to be saying, "Right, do you want to do the thinking skills course? Do you want to do an anger management course?" Why?...They might be in for shoplifting, and I can ask him to do anger management all he wants, but he's never going to

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<sup>3</sup> The prison is tasked, within 72 hours of the prisoner's reception into custody, with beginning the *Through the Gate* process by using part one of a new Basic Custody Screening Tool (BCST) to identify their individual resettlement needs. Following this, the CRC complete part two of the BCST, setting out how they will meet the resettlement needs identified in the initial BSCT and formulate an individual resettlement plan that must be completed within five working days of reception.

get to do it, is he? His offence isn't anger-related. Plus, we don't run that course in this prison, so why am I asking him? Even if we did, I'm never going to be the person that determines whether he goes on a course or he doesn't. (Katy)

The above insights were representative of concerns many VSP workers reported that their interactions with prisoners were often on a superficial level in a process that was more akin to an exercise in 'box ticking' and one that removed the scope to meaningfully engage service users. Consistent with the findings of the joint Inspection into the implementation of TTG services (CJJI, 2016) that found less than 40% of needs were being adequately captured at the initial assessment, our VSP workers were concerned that attention to quicker processing was compromising the capacity to focus on individual circumstances;

It just feels like covering your arse. Cover your arse - record everything. You want to be engaging with people on a one to one basis and actually having some kind of working relationship with them? It feels as though you're too busy doing things that I don't think we should be doing (Kathy)

As the provider responsible for coordinating resettlement provision within the prison, it was the VSP workers who often bore the brunt of prisoners' frustrations and they often felt inadequately prepared or trained to deal with the complexities of the challenges they faced. As Maguire (2016) notes, criminal justice goals tend to focus on narrower outcomes – such as reducing reoffending rather than empowering the disadvantaged or combating social exclusion which many in the voluntary sector view as the primary purpose of their work. In this respect, issues around risk management and the protection of the public are more prominent in this type of work than with most other kinds of service users. Staff in our study appeared extremely conscious of the public protection aspect of their work and the consequences of this in terms of potential re-offending;

If we're releasing people who've got mental health problems and they've got lots of drug and alcohol issues and stuff like that, are we going to be accountable if they go outside, reoffend and obviously hurt a member of the public? That is my main concern in all of this (Paul)

Although voluntary sector organisations have a long history of complementing the work of statutory criminal justice agencies, research has highlighted the challenges faced by the sector as it has become enmeshed in the day-to-day operation of the criminal justice system (Hucklesby and Corcoran, 2016). Concerns have been raised that increased involvement in delivering core criminal justice services will detrimentally impact on the what has traditionally been seen as a strength of the sector in terms of its independence and perceived greater responsiveness and innovation. In our study, cumulatively,

the routine challenges of daily work in the prison and a struggle to believe that the model could be delivered was impactful on the VSP workers. As seen in this section, it did impact upon the workers capacity to (consistently) espouse the values of rehabilitation that Burke and Collett (forthcoming) identify as important to successful resettlement outcomes and that the bulk of the workers did identify with. Within the context of the dynamic relationships with partners and prisoners in shaping the challenges to boundary span and of having to navigate between deep and surface acting the VSP workers found solace in their interactions with colleagues. As a small unit working in a larger structure they did not always feel accepted by, we see the group develop what Korczynski (2003) terms a 'community of coping'. This had the effect of creating tighter bonds between the workers, or providing emotional support in engaging with routine daily challenges, and in building a resilience even when their work was not appreciated or supported;

If it wasn't for the team, I think I would have drowned a while ago. We're very tightknit. We're very good and I think we're massively underrated as well. You get that feeling that, "Hang on, lads. You don't appreciate the work we're doing here" (Paul)

I think we are fabulous. I do. I think it is absolutely amazing that we are even seeing the amount of people that we have seen. I think it is amazing that we have been completing the job with the resources that we were provided that initially was nil (Andy)

According to Korczynski (2003) in challenging environments that involve direct contact with service recipients, such as the prison setting, workers are likely to turn to each other to cope with the challenges they face and this forms an important collective aspect of emotional labour. This is particularly the case where workers are motivated by a desire to help but are often confronted by abuse and resistance. Although communities of coping tend to be informal in nature, Brown and Duguid (1991) have identified 'communities of practice' that are characterised by 'associational solidarity'. At their best communities of coping can support management efforts in reducing staff stress and turnover. They may also – and important within the context of outsourcing models of operation that require great levels of inter-dependency - constitute strong informal work-placed groupings and be a form of resistance that management might find more difficult to control.

## **Conclusion**

Tomczak (2017) asserts that the policy of Transforming Rehabilitation was a top-down initiative that whilst operating at a macro-scale national policy network level cascaded down to organization at a smaller, local scale. To that end all members of the penal system (including voluntary organizations)

have to be actively involved in translating thought and action, giving rise to struggles, accommodations and alliances in the process. This was certainly the case for those staff working for the contracted resettlement provider in our case study as they endured the 'struggles, accommodations and alliances' referred to in the quote above. Their ability to provide good service was externally constrained by physical and resource limitations, inducing in our sample a range of emotions that generated stress and professional uncertainty. However, they also displayed a resilience and became a close-knit unit and this enabled them to cope with, and adapt to, the stressful working environment they found themselves in.

Our study demonstrates how important the professional context practitioners find themselves within is when we then attempt to interpret and understand the operational and emotional challenges of their position. In our case study the VSP practitioners were placed in the physical space of the prison and tasked with conducting initial assessments of prisoner's needs, of introducing prisoners to a range of resettlement interventions, and of working with prison and community based criminal justice rehabilitation partners to administer these. The need to engage a variety of audiences in the delivery of these tasks presents professional challenges, engaging individuals with complex needs and chaotic lifestyles on one hand induces challenge. Whilst then engaging with experienced criminal justice practitioners and providing them with clear information about an individual's needs and ensuring a continuum of service provision operates involves other pressures and expectations. These activities in and of themselves involve VSP workers regulating their emotions, to protect their professional and personal esteem, and to boundary span in ways that emotional labour theory has established as impactful.

But more than the practical challenges of operating in the site of the prison we have to recognise that the VSP workers and the (sub-contracted) organisation they worked for operated within a political context that had deep impacts on their personal and professional esteem. Under the reforms implemented by Transforming Rehabilitation in 2013 probation organisations were split and probation practitioners were dispersed within different probation organisations (to some extent they remained within the same sector, performing similar roles). But for our VSP workers here they were introduced into this sector, the role of their organisation in administering Through the Gate provision was new and the workers and the model by extension became the embodiment of TR for many. It meant that the worker's place and role became politicised and can help explain some of the antagonisms the workers reported here in their professional relationships with other groups. As we demonstrated, VSP workers in our study needed to constantly negotiate the legitimacy of their role with prisoners (who on occasion viewed their role with suspicion); probation staff (who at times felt the organisation had moved into their territory without justification) and prison staff (who remained unconvinced by the

value of allowing them to operate). It is within this challenging and charged climate that professionals shaped their identity and found themselves in continued and deep negotiation concerning their (employment-induced) emotional well-being.

The government has recently announced that probation services will be brought back under public-sector control following on-going criticisms from a range of stakeholders including the Chief Inspector of Probation who in her final report went as far as to describe the current arrangements as being 'irredeemably flawed' (HMI Probation, 2019:3). However, in the proposed model (MoJ, 2019) some 35 per cent of interventions will still be delivered on a contractual basis. Regional Directors will adopt a 'dynamic framework' (Ibid. :25) in order to commission resettlement services according to the needs of local areas and local service users. For the contracted resettlement provider in our study the uncertainty as to whether they will continue to provide these services after the contracts expire in 2020 creates further liminality and anxiety for those staff involved.

The findings from our study would suggest that commissioners need to be more aware of the emotions involved in such work than was evident in the period of transition that we observed. Fowler et al. (2018) contend that the use of emotion has been marginalised from policy over the past thirty years. This, we would argue, has led to the neglect of an important aspect of working with those subject to penal sanctions. Acknowledging the emotions involved in this type of work is not about being soft on crime or failing to recognise the harms caused by criminality. It is these 'soft skills' that enable practitioners to achieve the 'hard work' of managing and enabling change in those they work with (Knight, 2014). Solely focussing on processes and denying the emotional aspects of such work and ignoring the impact upon those tasked with delivering these services is ultimately likely to be detrimental to the effective implementation of new initiatives regardless of their relative merits as our case study of a contracted resettlement provider highlights.

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