

PROBATION RESEARCH
AN EARLY CAREER ACADEMIC'S MUSINGS

My aim with this writing is to explore research and, given the probation professional register's requirement for ongoing professional development, the place it currently holds within probation practice. Using professional curiosity and working with evidence and are fundamental to decision making within probation practice and research aligns neatly with both. Being curious about what research might be able to offer when faced with a difficult case is important. It is also important to be curious and question the reliability and applicability of that research when informing your evidence base. This approach will inevitably support defensible decision making. Whilst it has been a decade or more in coming, the professionalisation of probation officers in England and Wales has gathered speed in this past 12 months. As a former intensive care nurse and a registered social worker, I am very familiar with providing evidence of professional development in order to remain on a professional register. Engaging with research and reflecting on how it might inform future practice easily meets the threshold of continuous professional development, and it is my hope within these pieces to support practitioners' confidence with this.

This, the first of two pieces, aims to offer some context to research processes and the challenges that must be overcome to produce research. There is a huge joy in creating research and my doctoral studies were some of the happiest years of study for me, but research processes are not without challenges. The second, forthcoming piece will aim to support busy practitioners' engagement with research, for it really shouldn't be an entity which is inaccessible to the very people whose practice it aims to support.

I recently came across a Howard League for Penal Reform document in which Professor Shepherd (2016) called for a professionalisation of probation services.



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Drawing on medicine's use of evaluative research to inform processes through different systems within a large organisation such as the NHS, and robust research methods to establish effective treatment regimes, Shepherd suggested that this sort of approach was required to support effective rehabilitation and reduce crime. Shepherd (2016) cited a lack of probation specific academics which, with many eminent academic professors and senior researchers in the field now having probation officer foundations, I believe to be resolved. There is some great research out there to support probation practice, but things are not easy. It is my aim in this piece to offer an insight into research formation, from an early career academic perspective, and so I will explore some of the barriers to research, from its creation through to dissemination and integration into practice.

In teaching research informed practice to trainee probation officers on the Professional Qualification in Probation (PQiP), my learners are highlighting more gaps in understanding than in research evidence. Yes, every piece of research creates openings where we require further understanding, for one piece can never hear all perspectives or cover all areas of interest, but as a busy early career academic myself, it sometimes feels that there are more barriers than conduits to conducting and disseminating research. There are competing demands for academic researchers within higher education institutes (HEIs) and the teaching of new probation officers, rightly, takes precedent over research.

Conducting research on people on probation or in prison is, again, rightly so, bound by ethical hurdles; researchers do not have an automatic right to use people, who are at pivotal points in their lives, as obliging participants. Here, I am reminded of discussions at last summer's British Society of Criminology (BSC) Conference where there were conflicting accounts. On one side were academics eager to access participants in prison so that they can give voice to their lived experiences, only to be faced by gatekeepers declining access. Conversely there were people with lived experiences sharing accounts of how long evenings in prison were passed by completing research questionnaires. I was particularly struck here by tales of erudite people in prison completing surveys on behalf of people with limited reading and writing skills. This brings a whole new limitation to the validity of prison-based questionnaires: whose voice are we actually hearing here?

Of course, finances feature as a consideration within research and many HEIs are in severe financial hardship (LSE, 2026). Funding for research brings in big money and in some

cash-poor universities priority is given to research which offers a financial return to the institution. In such situations social science and criminology research are potentially vulnerable to being less appealing than medical research, to use Shepherd's positioning, for example. Thankfully there are still small research funding grants available through individual HEIs, and these are valuable researching in-house pedagogic approaches or for scoping and piloting larger research ideas. Larger research grants are available through national and international funding pots; these form a valuable income for HEIs and are part of how research academics' professional achievement is judged. Research grants enable academics to be 'bought out' of teaching responsibilities as the money creates another teaching post thereby relieving the academic of their teaching responsibilities, but they are few and far between. Funding applications are extremely time consuming to prepare and the highly competitive nature of them means that, unfortunately, a rejection is more common than acceptance. That said, someone has to 'win' and, although on a smaller scale, I will forever be grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council for funding my master's degree and doctoral studies. In the absence of buy-out grants, academics conduct research, often collaboratively with other colleagues 'in the field', amidst teaching responsibilities.

Another hurdle to navigate is gaining ethical approval. This is absolutely essential in any research, and the broad research principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice have been established since the Nuremberg Code of 1947 following Nazi experimentation on people during the holocaust (BMJ, 1996). Although gathering ethical approval for research can be a lengthy process it is rightly robust.

Ethics committees exist to support researchers to conduct ethically sound research and the process of gaining approval is excellent reflection-before-action to ensure that no harm is caused to participants. There are different levels of research which exist to protect people who are considered to be vulnerable to exploitation. My research which analysed an administrative dataset compiled by the NHS required a very lengthy Integrated Research Application System (IRAS) process which probably took more than six-months to complete. As a fully funded researcher whose role was entirely research-based this process was manageable. However, similar requirements to the IRAS process are extended to researchers seeking approval through the National Research Committee (NRC) for projects requiring HMPPS authorisation. This means that researchers undertaking work involving HMPPS data or access are subject to an equally lengthy and resource-intensive ethics process. Again, I am a strong believer that robust measures must be in place to ensure that research principles are upheld and no harm is caused, but such lengthy processes inevitably can create a barrier to conducting research.

Once ethical approval is granted, the researcher faces the challenge of recruitment. Qualitative research methods, which hear the experiences of participants, can never be expected to represent all voices but there is a desire to hear as many voices as is practicable. The concept of data saturation, where people's perspectives are being repeated and no new experiences are being offered, is now open to debate (Ahmed, 2025), but a sample size of around 12 participants has long been considered the goal to add validity to qualitative research findings (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). Researchers face a battle to achieve this number of participants, especially for a hard-to-reach population where there might be intersectional issues of trauma, marginalisation and shame connected with the

subject under exploration. After a 12-month recruitment process where I tried everything within my power, I had to content myself with the voices of five people with experience of detentions by police officers under the Mental Health Act; one of our current PhD student has yet to recruit a single participant for her study which seeks to hear the experiences of parents of adult children with personality disorders who are engaged with the CJS – do let me know if you can help there!

The data analysis part of any research is the fun bit. Working with data, cleaning, coding and watching results emerge makes it all worthwhile. Creating graphics to bring the research to life and presenting it in a way which tells the story for an audience in a way which it is accessible and can illicit change is highly satisfying. Gone are the days, certainly in the applied social sciences, where research was published in a way in which only other academics could read. Contemporary research ought to be accessible for the people it is intended for – this is why we now see different formats for many government reports.

Being able to disseminate the research findings comes with more challenges. The journals which are held in the highest academic regard have a peer review process where submitted manuscripts, which the editor considers to be worthy of the journal, are anonymised and sent to academics in the field of study. The reviewers check the submissions for ethical issues, robustness of research methodology, that the findings are appropriate to the data, the presentation, and so on. Manuscripts are either accepted with no amendments (very rare), returned to the author with recommendations for revise and resubmit (R&R) for further review, or they are rejected. The reviewers, by the way, are academics who are not paid for this process; rather this essential service that we provide becomes an additional workload.

Academics submitting work, who also do not receive payment for publication, can become stuck in the seemingly perpetual process of submission, rejection, R&R. This is a lengthy process; at the time of writing it is nine months since I submitted a manuscript of my own research to a peer-review journal – the last update tells me that they are still awaiting a second reviewer's comments, which is infinitely better than an update of two months ago when they had not found suitable reviewers to look at my manuscript.

An alternative to journal submission is presentation at conferences. A fortunate and unexpected outcome for a presentation I gave last year was that my research was picked up by the press officer resulting in an article of my work appearing in *The Guardian* newspaper – this was eminently a quicker way to get my research in the public eye than via a peer reviewed journal. I did not intend to bring in the point of payment so frequently, but the last conference I presented at cost me (or rather, my university) over £400 for the privilege. Although an essential element to research dissemination and future collaboration, the financial burden of hosting and attending conferences remains an ongoing discussion within academia

Conferences are becoming more accessible to practitioners in all fields, and later this year sees the BSC's second annual Probation and Community Justice Network Conference, to be held at De Montford University, which is free to attend. Conferences are a great opportunity for collaboration and exist as a chance for practitioners to engage meaningfully with academics and researchers, for it is only through collaboration and hearing one another's perspectives that meaningful research can be created and the findings be shared with those who can put it into practice to the benefit of probation and the people who use its service. We are committed to working towards creating spaces where HEIs and practitioners can work more collaboratively.

So, there we have it, research is absolutely essential so that probation practice keeps moving towards delivering an evidence-based service which effectively meets the needs of people on probation and in wider society, but it is not an easy process. Shepherd (2016) had a very valid point about there being a concerning dearth of randomised controlled trials to provide robust evidence for how to proceed with efficiency, and we remain in this position of being at a disadvantage in comparison to health care research – the reasons for such would be a whole different essay.

There is some great research out there; it can and does make positive impacts on people's experience of the service and supports practitioners' practice and their ability to make defensible decisions.

References

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