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# PROBATION OCCUPATIONAL CULTURES FOR THE FUTURE? A FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

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This article is based on a discussion, between the four co-authors, that took place over two days during the 'Conversation with Paul Senior' in Kendal in January 2016. Conscious that we have each undertaken research into aspects of occupational cultures in probation and social work, we spent some time on the first day devising questions that we might ask ourselves in order to imagine what occupational cultures in Probation might be like in 2020. The following day, we decided that an innovative way to capture our musings might be to imagine ourselves as a focus group and to record our discussion. So this is what we did - using nothing more than a smartphone. Subsequently, the recording was transcribed and we set about editing it to form the core of this article. We have added an introduction and a conclusion but the core discussion is very much as it was - 'warts and all'. We are aware that the arguments are not always presented in a polished fashion but we have resisted tampering too much with the spontaneity of the discussion. Our aim is to provide a few insights and stimulate further debate and research.

## Introduction

The concept of culture embraces a diversity of notions, ideas and meanings which may be linked with roles, norms, and values. If culture is effectively a system of collectively held values, then as Schein (2010:21-22) noted, once 'a set of shared assumptions has come to be taken for granted, it determines much of the group's behaviour, and the rules and norms that are taught to newcomers that is a reflection of culture'.

Academics in the fields of social policy, sociology and economics have acknowledged that work is at the core of human social and cultural life (for example, Edgell, 2012; Vallas, 2012). As Vallas (2012:8) noted, 'how work is arranged… has massive institutional and cultural effects'. Trice (1993:xii) observed that 'occupations tend to be cultures in and of themselves'. Deering (2011:25), writing about the impact of penal policy upon probation practitioners, pointed to the plethora of definitions of culture in general, and more specifically the range of definitions of occupational culture.

Johnson et al. (2009:320) argued that occupational culture may exert such a significant impact that it 'shapes perceptions of reality'. It is clear that probation practitioners, like groups of workers in many occupations, develop their own specific occupational culture. Research on the police (for example, Graef, 1989; Loftus, 2012; Reiner, 1992) underlines the importance of studying occupational cultures. Within the criminal justice system, Sir William Macpherson made the following observation about the power exerted by police occupational culture in his report on the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence:

> 'We are all consumed by this occupational culture… we tend to conform to the norms of this occupational culture, which we say is all powerful in shaping our views and perceptions of a particular community.' (Macpherson, 1999:25)

Writing about probation in particular, Mawby and Worrall (2011:4) observed that occupational culture may be viewed as 'the values shared by individuals that manifest themselves in the practices of members of that occupation or organisation'. They cite an early definition of occupational culture by Schein as helpful for their discussion of probation cultures: 'The deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organisation, that operate unconsciously and define in a basic taken-for-granted fashion an organisation's view of itself and its environment' (Schein, 1985 cited in Mawby & Worrall, 2011:5). If we want to understand what Schein labels as the 'deeper level' assumptions of probation workers, a consideration of how future probation occupational cultures may develop is essential. Such attitudes and perceptions may exist and function beneath the official presentational umbrella of the agencies which now cover what formerly constituted the probation service. The study of probation's occupational cultures may provide access to understanding which may otherwise be relatively inaccessible, given that it is situated beyond the presentation level.

The deeply ingrained notions and ideas embedded in an occupational culture are effectively the substance of that culture; that is, they communicate to those who are part of the culture which particular activities they ought to be undertaking, and how they

should understand them. There is, of course, the possibility of discrepancies between the probation agencies' official mission and the everyday lived reality of practice as experienced by frontline practitioners. This underpins the importance of paying careful attention to probation occupational cultures as understood by a range of practitioners. How these cultures may develop in future is precisely what this focus group aims to discuss. It is also important to note that the process by which we view occupational culture did not develop independently, in a vacuum; it is inevitably shaped by wider political, social and economic forces. This discussion must also take account of that reality.

## What do we mean by 'occupational cultures'?

**Michael** It's very important to define what we're doing. You could say it's some kind of collective programming of what we do as a people, collective programming of the mind and shared values and ideas of how a particular job is undertaken. There are going to be as many different definitions of culture as there are sociologists and criminologists. If we're talking about organisational culture, I would tend to see that as a top-down phenomenon, driven from the top of the managerial hierarchy, and if we're talking about occupational culture that's a process that is driven from the ground up, by frontline practitioners. So if we're looking at occupational culture we're looking at ideas that people are bringing to their job, why people come into probation. That might be one of the key areas that's changing as the nature of probation changes and the CRCs develop. Linked with this are the ideas that practitioners embrace once they're in the job: ideas of what they're actually doing, how they understand what they're doing, and what the job actually means. And interlinked with that are practitioners' ideas of what punishment is, and what rehabilitation is. And those are all incredibly varied. If we're looking forward we've got all sorts of ideas to draw upon from probation from the past. The original one is still the belief that if there was a return to social work education and a social welfarist ethos, everything would be magically resolved - that idealistic view - and then you could move it right up to the present day to confrontation, control, compliance - all of those issues. That whole idea of risk assessment interlinked with ideas about technology and how we communicate. Patterns of work can be altered by technology, which can mean the deskilling of practitioners, and the degradation of their work. If we characterise early probation as 'advise, assist and befriend' and maybe mid-probation as 'confront, control and monitor', is there a pithy three pronged analysis of what probation might be in 2020?

**Anne** Going back to what you said earlier about organisational cultures and occupational cultures, if we look at where the boundaries are between those two, that might be the thing that has changed and is changing. But as you were saying that, I was writing down 'autonomy and accountability' because one of the key things in 'traditional' probation occupational cultures has been the autonomous professional worker being able to make their own judgements and that has been steadily eroded. The other phrase I've written down is the one about cultures being about 'how things are done around here'. It's the informal, the back story of how you're socialised into a particular occupation and what the process of that is. Between us we've got quite a clear idea of what the process

*has been* and I wonder if it's the process of socialising into the occupation that has changed so dramatically with Transforming Rehabilitation.

**Michael** And you're not talking about training specifically here?

**Anne** No, clearly training is one important element. That's the key to how you get a raw person off the streets and into the job but that's not the only thing about occupational cultures. It's what happens after the training or alongside the training, it's about the group dynamics and the way in which the group socialises its members into particular ways of doing things.

**Michael** That's important because how we organise work is going to have massive institutional effects, cultural effects, just the way in which it's structured for practitioners on a daily basis, and occupational norms and values. That's going to have a huge impact.

**Dave** And things that were being talked about earlier in relation to open plan offices and the way the work is physically arranged has an impact. I'm just saying that as a side issue, I don't know how that helps us.

**Anne** I don't think it's a side issue, it's absolutely crucial. We've done quite a lot of work between us on the physical environments. We've done the European project on photographing the physical environment of probation, for example, because we think it really is an important part of the culture, so I think you're quite right to raise that.

**Lol** Why I think it's really important is that one of the things that Transforming Rehabilitation has done is very quickly changed the demographic of the organisation, so you've now got lots of new staff who are coming in and have not worked within the old culture. So the environment and organisational memory that the new providers are trying to create, for some workers that will be what they've been socialised into. The providers think that by concentrating a lot of their efforts in terms of the physical layout of the working environment for example, they are making a strong statement of intention.

**Anne** Yes, why spend all that money on creating a particular kind of model of the physical environment if you don't think that it's going to impact on the way in which you're working and how people see their role within the organisation? Also, the issue of values has to come through all the time, how you sustain (if you want to sustain) the values of traditional probation cultures and how those have to be changed in the new environment.

**Dave** For me, connected to values is all that you were saying earlier about the impact on occupational culture of the changing demographic which is the gender changes in probation, of it becoming a woman majority occupation.

**Anne** In a way the voice of the occupational cultures of probation has now become much more a female voice than it was in the past. It's not necessarily that there are so many women in the organisation so you're going to see a particular kind of change. It's more that the whole voice has changed and you've got to take that into account in reactions to probation and it's just a completely different dimension. You'd like to think also that there had been a change in diversity in terms of ethnicity.

**Michael** Black and minority ethnic probation staff in terms of representation are over-represented compared to black and minority people in the general population. So in that sense, unlike prison and unlike policing, unlike sentencers, maybe not the

magistrates but the judges in particular, the probation workforce is representative in terms of race and ethnicity. It depends again what your barometer for diversity and representation is. If culture is a collectively held set of beliefs, then everyone in an organisation contributes to that culture. So inevitably you look at the fact that compared to the representation of women in the general population, the percentage of women in the probation workforce is greater than in the general population.

**Dave** That has an impact in terms of values in the sense of a demonstrable commitment to diversity and equality, but I was thinking more of the micro-practices which we were talking about, about women doing things in a different way to the way that men do things and how that may have changed working practices from a masculinist form to a feminist form of practice.

**Anne** One of the things I'm really interested in finding out, and at the moment I don't think we can, is how the demographics break down in NPS and CRC.

**Lol** If we look forward five or 10 years, will there be a different demographic in each of those organisations? You could argue, as Anne's research has suggested, that that demographic might not necessarily be what you'd expect it to be because it hasn't been so far. The official discourse of public protection or machismo style of management hasn't meant more male managers, in fact it's meant quite the opposite. It will be fascinating to see where, over time, the NPS and CRC start to develop their distinctive identities and whether it'll attract more males to the NPS, which you would expect, than the CRCs, but it may not.

**Dave** One of things that was going round my head when we were talking earlier about women managers collectively being very impressive, was that, at the same time, we talk about the macho-isation of management styles. So it seems to me there's something of a contradiction around. New Public Management has brought with it a style of management which is much more structured, target-focused, output-focused, much less 'soft and cuddly' than the old style management of probation *through supervision*; yet how does that fit with more and more women coming in with a different style and a different way of doing things?

**Anne** I'm not sure whether the majority of probation managers, whether they be male or female, have ever really taken on board the macho approach. There's always been an anxiety around probation management at a personal, individual level. Certainly the Chiefs that we spoke to were very exercised and very anxious about what they'd been required to do. So in a sense, there's always been a degree of concern within probation management about the macho style.

**Michael** There's also a fundamental difference, if you think of women operating in an environment which is a primarily male environment. When we talk about the proportions of men and women in the workforce in probation, they must bring a particular series of values, because as well as being inculcated and subsumed under the cultural norms of probation that you join, you're bringing with you to the job a particular understanding. If your workforce, the gender breakdown or breakdown in terms of ethnicity is structured in a particular way, that must have an impact. If you were operating in a primarily male environment, surely there would be different forces driving the cultural norms.

## In what ways are occupational cultures changing in Probation work?

**Lol** The question here is around how the occupational cultures that we talked about are changing and what have we observed from our various research projects?

**Michael** Interviewing people who trained in the social work era, there still seemed to be a value base you could define, not as social work values, but a value base reflecting what Garland was talking about in terms of penal welfarism. So prioritising rehabilitation very much above punishment and what we might call, but don't call, social welfarism, still felt very strongly rooted in probation and probation practitioners. There was also quite a strong critique of some of the technological influences, quite a strong critique of the utility of risk assessment.

**Anne** I would agree wholeheartedly and alongside that I think was the importance of 'the relationship', however you define 'the relationship' as a means of rehabilitation. But one thing that had already changed and is continuing to change, and wasn't completely incompatible with rehabilitation, is the notion of public protection. That had come into the culture a long time ago but certainly was a change from traditional probation values.

**Lol** In our research into the impact upon staff of the changes brought about by TR, which commenced just before the split took place and then immediately after the transfer into new ownership, it was clear that before the split that those kind of trends you just talked about were evident, in terms of staff trying to hold onto something even though they weren't quite sure what it was they were trying to hold onto. In the discussion we had yesterday about the *essence* of probation, we found it difficult to pin down what it was, often staff couldn't articulate it either but there was certainly something about probation that they wanted to hold onto and part of that was linked into notions of public service. I think that's why the privatisation agenda was so difficult for a lot of them. What TR did was to strengthen these feelings because it gave them something to unite against. Then the split comes along and all those emotional bonds and professional relationships very quickly appeared to dissipate and they seemed to organise themselves into camps (not everyone but a lot of them did) and rightly or wrongly the NPS were seen as the more elite group. Often this was communicated through office banter but it nevertheless seemed to have been felt sharply by some staff in the CRC which is perhaps understandable given that they were already feeling insecure (Robinson, Burke & Millings 2016). That surprised me because, if you think about all the research that's been done, there's always been that overarching set of values and homogeneity among probation workers that has endured regardless of all the changes. That felt much more tenuous after the split. In trying to make a bit more sense of that, I was thinking of the model of 'lifers' 'second careerists' and 'offender managers' deployed by Mawby and Worrall in relation to why staff exit an organisation. As a result of the split, particularly in CRCs, a lot of staff left to either join the NPS or left the organisation completely. And this notion around the 'lifers' - a lot of the so called 'lifers' who had probably been thinking about leaving the organisation for quite a while now had an opportunity to leave because they could take voluntary redundancy and they were at a stage in their life where they basically

could walk away, so they left. Some of the 'second careerists' left because in some cases they had joined probation to get away from another occupation and were increasingly feeling that this wasn't what they had signed up to. Some of the 'offender managers' were in a different position because they're the post-1997, the younger people. They've got 20 years or more ahead of them, so they either look at what they can do in the CRC, and for some it was an opportunity, or for others it was a case of, 'This is incompatible with what I trained for', so they joined the NPS. All those three categories left the CRC and in effect, you had a significant turnover of new staff who from my recollection, tended to be young women. So that feminisation, which Anne talked about earlier, was further strengthened and they also tended to have not worked in the organisation and often had come from the private sector so they didn't have the traditional notions of the public sector, so in effect a new culture was emerging very quickly.

**Anne** Would the voluntary sector fit in here? Were the majority of the women from the private sector or are they women that have worked in the voluntary sector who would bring yet another culture?

**Dave** Bring a culture of short term contracts, no job for life.

**Lol** Yes absolutely, many of them came from the voluntary sector and a bit like the 'offender managers', they didn't see this as necessarily a job they would be doing for more than the next five years because that was the environment they had been used to working in. Most of your traditional careerists had seen this as a job for life and a very secure occupation. It wasn't secure any more.

**Michael** In terms of outside influence, it's almost like neoliberal insecurity, deregulation, job insecurity, and precarity. So economic, political, ideological factors create a whole new culture on the ground in probation and those young women go into the CRC, it's all interlinked.

**Dave** Neoliberalism permeates and creates a kind of ideological hegemony which says that it's now a good thing not to expect to have a secure job. That is the norm, to expect to have a life of so called 'job churn' and, indeed, to be a good citizen you have to buy into that. And if you're like us - the dinosaurs who've had jobs for life - we're accused of being totally out of touch in suggesting that job security is a good thing and that it's wrong that young people don't have secure jobs. It's us who are ideologically deviant!

**Anne** But what does that then also say about your willingness to invest in working with particular offenders? We will all have known offenders that we worked with for years on and off and yet if you know that you'll only work with this offender for the next six months or whatever, and that's it, there's a distancing.

**Dave** And what kind of climate does this create for training because what's the point of training somebody expensively for three years if they don't expect to work over the long term? So it plays into all these ideas of short-term training for the job and, behind that, that higher education is simply about creating transferable skills which you then take off to whatever organisation you end up working in.

**Anne** And how does that all relate to what we know about desistance if the probation worker just becomes a kind of 'fly in, fly out' person in an offender's life. So it's all very random and happenstance, because we know that desistance can take years and is a very long-term thing, yet the people who are working with offenders are now in this very short-term culture.

**Lol** But the language hasn't changed which is interesting. If you ask many of these young workers, they would still sound like traditional probation officers in many ways. They still talk the same language, but what's also interesting is that the providers often talked in these terms also. They claim, 'our new model is a desistance-led model' and then they go through it and I think 'This doesn't look anything like desistance to me'. They've adopted the language but tried to put it in a neoliberal structure so inevitably you've got a conflict there. It might work itself out over time but something's got to give?

**Anne** So we have desistance but we have desistance *now*, we have desistance in the next couple of months, not the next 20 years.

**Dave** But this is this whole thing about having a language which carries values but which aren't implemented in practice and is just a smoke-screen to create something which seems to be good and worthy but, underneath, there isn't the practical action which is in any way connected with the values.

**Anne** Or even worse, it's the exact opposite, so that what you are saying is the exact opposite of what you're actually doing but you call it something else, it's very Orwellian.

**Dave** Well it's the neoliberal co-option of empowerment as a set of attributes which are disconnected from values and purposes grounded in a critique of the status quo and the need for social change.

**Anne** Yes, you're empowered to make the choices we want you to make.

## How can we intervene and influence these developments?

**Dave** I suppose I'm moving to arguing for something which is not about saying that neoliberalism *per se* is a negative force, but asking how can we engage with neoliberalism on its own terms and begin to undermine it and expose the inconsistencies in the neoliberal project. That's why I believe that what works best in achieving work objectives, is when teams work together. Teams that work together effectively have the same characteristics of what we would recognise as emancipatory empowered groups, seeking self-realisation, self-direction, achieving their own objectives on their own terms.

For me one of the inconsistencies in neoliberalism is that it needs people to work together effectively in order to achieve its economic and material outputs but, potentially, within that are the seeds of its own destruction, in that if it wants to do that efficiently it has to empower people. There are examples of companies which operate in that kind of way. In Scandinavia there's the Swedish model; there's the Silicon Valley groups with their open spaces for people to get together and become creative; there's the way the Japanese car firms work with groups of workers working together to find solutions to production problems.

On the one hand, we've got the CRCs coming in with their New Public Management styles which are very authoritarian, structured, almost Fordist in their division of labour, which are contrary to the values of the workers who are working in them. What we can argue for, it seems to me, is a style of teamwork which is consistent with those values which should be attractive to the

organisations - because groups become creative and come up with solutions. However, these may well be different to the ones which may be expected. This opens up the potential for moving towards creating the kind of organisations which will have embedded in them the essence of probation values that we've been talking about earlier.

So, what I'd like to argue for is something about needing to return to and reassess the value of *real* groupwork skills. These are the ones which are based on group dynamics and facilitating people rather than what has come to predominate in probation and permeate its occupational culture - group work which is a very authoritarian, a top-down approach. Reintroduce real groupwork into organisational practice - it should be attractive to the organisations because we're offering them something that will help them to operate more efficiently and more effectively to achieve the targets that are set for them. But, within that, we're actually offering a better work culture to key into, a work environment for the people who work within them which will be more conducive to what we see as traditional probation values.

**Lol** I wouldn't dispute any of that and I like your vision but I don't think we should underestimate the challenge in that. That's not a reason for not doing it, but we have to accept that attitudes, and the individualism embodied within them (for example, seeking personal advancement ahead of working in a good team), have been hardened by neoliberalism. I'm not dismissing what you're saying, I'm just making the point that this is the challenge.

**Dave** That's why I was exploring whether the kind of approaches that I'm talking about are ones which are very much grounded in second wave feminism and feminist practice. We've moved into third or fourth wave, which is what you were describing as the modern female voice, which is different to the female voice of the consciousness raising groups. It carries a different set of expectations, different set of challenges. Yet when we were talking about what underlies all of it, what it is that is different and special that women bring, there is that sense of humanity, if I can use the word. OK, we realise you want 'advancement', but how are you going to best achieve it? And that's when you go back and say, 'Is it either me or you or can we do it together?'

**Anne** I think there's an underlying thing we can do to influence things and it sounds very trite but it's being positive about what's happening. The stuff I was talking about in the McWilliams lecture (last summer at Cambridge) about applauding the courage of people that are trying to make this work and seeing there is still a lot of good work going on and applauding that rather than saying 'isn't it all dreadful and you must be so depressed'. And that fits in with the group work argument about how you support people in what they're doing and making them feel good about what they're doing.

**What will be the effects of working with other professions and organisations?**

**Lol** We've talked a bit around relationships in terms of intra-organisational relationships within the organisation. Perhaps we could think about the impact of some of the things we've encountered in terms of professional relationships external to the organisation. So we could think about the role of the voluntary

sector, relationships with other statutory agencies like the courts, police etc. How can we see that emerging over the next few years?

**Dave** I think the word is inter-professional, that's the thing that we have to recognise that it is all about. Probation needs to get out of its bubble. In other parts of the public sector this has been worked through and the problems are there in all of the human services: health, child protection, etc. This has been big for a long time and there are a lot of lessons being learned that we should be studying rather than reinventing the wheel. In my view, insularity is probation's Achilles Heel.

**Anne** And the irony is that when you begin to work with other professionals, your own role then becomes more clearly defined. So going back to Integrated Offender Management, it's when probation started working alongside the police and alongside the voluntary sector that they began to see where the boundaries of their own role were and where they don't need the boundaries. The fear is that when you're working with other professions you will lose your identity but in fact the opposite can happen, that you become much clearer about your own identity and it's about respecting the domain of different professions. I'm very much in favour of a model that says we work alongside the police, prison service, but we work *alongside* them, we don't become absorbed by them. The danger of NOMS has been that prison has absorbed probation rather than seen them as equal partners. You're right about probation needing to get out of its bubble, but, in a way, once it does it will actually have a clearer sense of its own identity.

**Lol** I take a slightly different reading of the situation in the sense that I think the probation bubble you talked about was certainly true up until about 10 years ago. Over the last 10 years a lot of work has been done to burst out of the bubble, both on a statutory level through IOM and related developments but also through working with the voluntary sector. So that bubble was starting to be broken but yes it was there, there's no doubt about that. I think what TR has done, in some ways, is put people back in a bubble in the short term because people aren't quite sure of each other and a lot of the outside stakeholders were not sure about who to talk to - is it NPS or CRC? Who is probation any more? And that's been difficult, but that will be overcome I'm sure in time. So I don't see that as being a longer term impact because one of the things TR could do well is that it should mean by definition that the bubble has to go because it's the nature of the whole enterprise that you've got to link with other organisations.

**Dave** Stepping entirely out of the world of probation and into a conservation group I'm involved with, probation with a small p is just so firmly embedded in the public's thinking and knowledge. It's taken for granted, but even the officers of the local authority who are buying into the CRC to do unpaid work (community payback) on recreational facilities in the area, say 'I go and talk to probation'. But in fact they're going to a CRC and the CRC doesn't want to be called probation. If they think they've got something that could make useful unpaid work, they still talk about going to the local probation office - but they aren't the people who are providing the unpaid work. Maybe, ironically, in order for the CRC to be able to maximise opportunities for unpaid work they have to be known as probation. I just find it really amusing that people think they're working with probation. I say

'probation doesn't exist anymore, this is a privatised CRC, Community Rehabilitation Company' - and people look at me as if I'm mad.

**Lol** That was a real issue for the staff in the early days in our research, because they were contacting the police and saying 'we're the CRC' and they were saying 'who are you?' so they all said 'we're probation' in the short term. Over time the language has changed as people get more used to the new landscape and I think on the statutory level at least they're more clued in now but 'probation' is still the term that's generally used. When we had the CRC managers together some of them were saying 'let's ditch probation, get it out of the language' because basically 'community rehabilitation' is a better term. It's about doing rehabilitation in the community, that's what we do.

**Anne** But the word is so tenacious and universally, globally recognised and we're never going to get away from that.

**Lol** Multi-national organisations spend millions trying to get 'brands' established so you associate a product with something and we've got it in probation and then what do we do! Whether it's an accurate brand is on one level irrelevant because it's about the image that draws in people's emotions or whatever.

**Dave** Maybe something we could be saying is that it's something that should be celebrated because it is such a renowned brand, like Apple!

## So what lessons can we learn from these changes?

**Dave** The brand is really important. All that we've been talking about, we could brand it as about *probation* occupational culture - let's not be ashamed of that.

**Anne** It's a bit like someone was saying yesterday, nursing is a profession and an occupation and wherever you work, whatever organisation you're in you have that basic profession of being probation.

**Dave** People know what a probation officer is better than they understand what a social worker is, yet social work is now a protected title, registered title and probation's in this nowhere-world but the brand is tenacious.

**Anne** So you can't call yourself a social worker unless you have certain things.

**Dave** No, unless you're registered.

**Anne** Does that raise the question of the Probation Institute's register of probation workers as being a way forward?

**Dave** That was one of the questions. I'm a registered social worker and I'm a Visitor with the Health and Care Professionals Council. A couple of years ago, there were some tentative explorations with the HCPC because they would have been very happy to consider being the host registering body for probation officers. But probation decided it wanted to go its own way - didn't want to be associated with these health and social worky type people.

**Anne** It's a minor point but I think there's a problem with the word 'officer'. I don't think that's going to survive, nor should it, because there's such a range of workers within probation doing different tasks. But a probation worker - I could have a vision of that being a protected title.

**Lol** Yesterday we asked the question if probation is meaningless as a term and there's a strong argument that it's not. I suppose what's going through my mind

is, when we talk about probation, are we talking about probation being the sum of the parts of the NPS and the CRCs or is it something more than that?

**Dave** Well that's why we're talking about culture isn't it? It's at a number of levels. Maybe in terms of the employees who you would call probation workers, they are the employees of the CRC and the NPS, but the professional values which probation represents are above that. If you formalise the title, you would have your probation values but then you have a connection with a code of ethics which registrants sign up to. The question would be whether everybody whom you would call a probation worker in the CRCs and the NPS would be able to sign up to a code of ethics which emerged out of the values that we've been talking about.

**Lol** And in some ways that would formalise what the existing research suggests has happened anyway. That despite all the changes there's been something that holds people together. And I suppose that's the danger and that's the caution, that we lose that, that it fragments, but the challenge is actually doing it, it's about thinking through the bigger picture in terms of what holds those two separate parts of the organisation together - what's their common bond? Not seeing themselves just in terms of the way it's framed in TR, between a purchaser/provider or a customer/ purchaser, but both being part of a system, but just doing different functions within it. The work is complementary but they're working to a bigger overarching set of principles and values.

**Dave** I would argue that those values are connected together, not just in relation to what people do as officers with the people who are their customers or clients or service users, but also they're embedded in the way the organisation works.

**Lol** And they're embedded in the way they treat each other. Which as we've seen has been one of the worrying recent developments. One would hope that over time they find a way through this.

**Dave** So it's not just about how basic grade officers treat each other but how managers and CEOs of the organisations they're working in work with them and what kind of culture they create. That's what's wonderful about social work or probation work that ideally there's not that disconnect between how you live as a member of an organisation with what you do with the people who you're responsible for, the core values bridge both.

**Anne** I sometimes wonder whether that is one of the things that is changing and that is one of the things we're in danger of losing - that sense that 'there but for the grace of God go I' and that you actually have something in common with the offenders you're working with.

**Dave** But I would say what we have in common is a belief in people's capacity for self-realisation and emancipation.

**Michael** Looking outwards, it's very interesting. If you accept the analysis of the UK as an example of a pretty classic neoliberal economy, then the other archetypal neoliberal economy in the world at the moment is the USA. If we're looking at what's going to happen in probation here, we can look at what's happened in probation over there, in terms of the cultural change. What neoliberalism prioritises culturally and ideologically is individualism, rampant individualism. If we look at the way that probation has operated in neoliberal economies, particularly in some of the southern states of America, it's been about prioritising

profit over rehabilitation, and charging people for supervision, making the organisation self-financing. Often the charging for supervision means early breach and privatised prison companies can pick up the slack by making money putting people in prison. This reflects their lack of concern for rehabilitation and change, which has always been a fundamental part of probation culture. It is saying, this is an organisation which is primarily driven by a profit motive. That's what counts, not people's capacity for self-realisation; what counts isn't people's capacity for change; what counts is how much money we can make.

I would take issue with the point you made that everybody recognises what a probation officer is. Many people may have heard the name but almost nobody knows what probation officers do. As part of my research, I was asking probation officers, how do you think the public recognises you, and what do they think you do? Everybody bar none said it was seen as being about making excuses and being soft. It was universally felt that probation wasn't understood. The practitioners themselves feel that there's not a clear understanding of what probation stands for. If you go back to the MORI poll in 2002 they asked 1000 people what every criminal justice agency did and amazingly, more people thought Neighbourhood Watch was more effective than probation. So, people thought that a voluntary community group, was much more effective than probation. People thought the police were thirty eight times more effective than probation at reducing crime. So we shouldn't go down the road of saying probation's understood. When I looked at some of the media representations of probation, almost everybody, including broadsheet papers, would represent community sentences as, 'it's a let off'. 'Walking free from prison' is a classic piece of tabloidese.

So the main issue for the future is, if we go down the neoliberal road, there are clear links between neoliberalism and punitive penal policies. The culture of individualism leaves all sorts of issues around how that culture can change and you can end up with an organisation that's fundamentally and primarily about punishment, not about rehabilitation.

**Lol** In that notion of individualism as well, we can recall the earlier discussion about office design, and staff not being encouraged to come into the office but to work in the community - what the new owners are calling 'agile working'. We would all see that as a good thing I guess, but what you lose there is exactly what we've been doing over the last couple of days where you're sitting together with your colleagues discussing things. When I started my training I already had a fairly developed understanding of probation, because I'd worked for a number of years in the organisation. My views may have changed over time as a result of training and experience but a lot of those values that I've always held were formed sitting in the tea room talking to probation officers. Where will that fit into this new kind of agile working which they talk about where people are out with their laptops in the community? Where will be the opportunities to create those dynamics which are really crucial to making this a success? I think that's a real danger as well if we move too far in that direction.

## Conclusion

The overall tone of our discussion reflects our collective concern that the '*essence*' of probation (as discussed by Paul Senior in this edition) could be endangered in the wake of the Transforming Rehabilitation reforms. There are undoubtedly considerable challenges ahead. Not least among these are the questions of what the working environment and composition of the future workforce will be; what training arrangements will be in place; and, what the influence and shape of new technological advances in service delivery will be (Burke & Collett, 2015; Robinson et al., 2016). Service users often bring the baggage that accrues from dysfunctional, disrupted, and chaotic life experiences to supervision. The centrality of building trust with them is fundamental to successful intervention. How will the changes in the structure of probation's occupational cultures impact on the experience of service users? Will the primacy of probation's reintegrative work be sustained?

At the time of writing we can only speculate what their outcomes will be but we are keen that our reading of the current situation is not seen as a counsel of despair. We accept that some aspects of 'traditional' probation may have been irrevocably changed by recent policy developments. Whether this proves to be a good or a bad thing remains to be seen and we suspect it will be a bit of both. Equally though, we are keen to ensure that the worst excesses of neoliberalism that dehumanise and commodify individuals, are averted (Teague, 2011). More positively, our discussion suggested the potential for further exploration of a) the influence of the 'female voice' in shaping the future of probation work (Mawby & Worrall, 2013) and b) the role of groupwork theory and practice in the maintenance and development of team identities and cultures (Ward, 2008; Pullen-Sansfacon & Ward, 2014). Probation work might be unglamorous but as Mawby and Worrall (2013) note, it is necessary work and someone has to do it. It is important therefore that those that do it in the future do so with the compassion and humanity that has been the hallmark of probation staff both past and present. In order to ensure this though, it is important that we continue to develop our understanding of the occupational cultures of probation and build on recent insights into what attracts individuals to this work and sustains them in their endeavours.

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