RESEARCH NOTE:
DEVELOPING ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH ON PROBATION

Michael Teague, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, University of Teesside

Abstract
Huge cultural changes are underway in probation. At the heart of those changes lie the frontline practitioners who have the daily task of working with offenders. Yet, amidst the plethora of research on probation practice, much of it officially sponsored, the life experiences and motivations of practitioners seem on occasion to be virtually invisible. Some research has been carried out on practitioners’ experience of specific areas (for example, OASys), but very little broad ethnographic research has been undertaken on UK probation practitioners. While much of our academic and criminological knowledge about probation is filtered through officially funded research on particular types of intervention, little is known of probation’s occupational culture. It is argued that ethnographic research with practitioners would substantially enhance our understanding of that occupational culture and help develop our understanding of probation.

Key Words: Ethnography, research, access, frontline practitioners, probation, occupational culture

Introduction
‘Earlier this year, I was expected to spend eighty percent of my day entering data into the computer. After 22 years in the Service, that became an enormous problem for me, because I wasn’t being allowed to spend time with clients, which is my strength, to work with people and to do all the things I’ve been doing for the best part of my career. Suddenly I was told that there were now other priorities - data entry using the OASys programme. That requires and demands a massive amount of data on each individual client to be entered into the computer. For a while it made me ill, and I had to have some time off work. It was enormously frustrating. I couldn’t do the job I’d been trained to do.’

Maingrade probation officer with 22 years practice experience (Interview with author, 2006):

‘Top-heavy with middle management, lots of people with important titles, putting nice suits on, going to meetings with coffee and biscuits, setting these ludicrous targets - but because they’ve cut back so much, not enough infantry to do the frontline work...’

(Retired maingrade probation officer with 30 years practice experience (Spence 2002)).
The probation service is overstretched because the volume of community penalties has increased, and its morale is low following two major changes in structure since the millennium (Coulshfield Inquiry, Esme Fairbairn Foundation 2004: 4).

‘This is a very exciting time to be joining the National Probation Service. The changes that are taking place are making our work more effective and will have a growing impact on the people we are supervising’ (National Probation Directorate, 2005: 2).

These contrasting perceptions offer a flavour of how the realities of probation work may appear from different perspectives. They demonstrate that practitioner perspectives may not resonate with managerial standpoints. One reason for this dissonance may be the rarely acknowledged truth that detailed and comprehensive ethnographic research on frontline probation practitioners is not widely undertaken. Those practitioners have borne - and continue to bear - the brunt of substantial organisational, structural and cultural shifts which define the parameters for their practice. Yet despite their key role in the daily delivery of frontline intervention, their experiences may on occasion remain unexplored. The advent of managerialism in probation, as in other parts of the public sector, has exerted a significant impact on probation staff. Given that ethnographers stress explanations rooted in knowledge of how practitioners interpret and socially construct their world, a greater emphasis on ethnographic research within probation would enhance the depth of our understanding of the experiences of practitioners. This article aims to explore some of the issues that arise for the ethnographic researcher in probation.

A key objective for my ethnographic research currently in progress is to gain a comprehensive picture of probation’s occupational culture. I aim to explore probation work as it is understood and experienced by frontline staff, to consider their life histories and their motivation for embarking on the work, and to discuss how they sustain their commitment to that work. I do not aspire to quantify in percentage terms probation’s effectiveness, nor to ponder the efficacy of enforcement. While those aims may be of interest, they are not my major concern. Rather, I am interested in exploring the depth of our understanding of the experiences of practitioners. This article aims to explore some of the issues that arise for the ethnographic researcher in probation.

Why Probation Matters

One might reasonably expect the National Probation Service (NPS) for England and Wales to enjoy the highest visibility as a key criminal justice agency. The NPS’s crucial role in terms of public protection encompasses daily intervention with thousands of offenders, a significant proportion of whom are high risk. They do so not just by containing and monitoring them (difficult enough in itself), but also by directly engaging with them in a bid to lessen the risk that they might reoffend. This can achieve substantial social benefits:

‘When we are successful communities benefit and victims are prevented. Offenders are motivated to change, or they are managed and offending is prevented in that way. This is important work, of significant social value and it is our core business. Reducing re-offending is our core business, it always has been and we are good at it’ (Hill 2005).

When the sheer scale and commitment implied by this degree of concerted intervention is considered, frontline probation staff might be expected to attract substantial public support for the service they render to the whole community. Probation staff work with almost three times as many people in the community as we send to prison each year. Even if we consider only the fiscal realities, which preoccupy governments and (some) taxpayers, the service manages a very substantial caseload of offenders, at a cost which, offender for offender, represents a huge saving on the cost of imprisonment. The scale of the contribution made by probation renders it all the more surprising that we do not know more about probation’s occupational culture.

What Shapes The Experiences Of Frontline Staff?

The history of probation in England and Wales reflects its status as an agency of reform, with welfare taking precedence above punishment (Whitehead and Statham 2006). The service has a long-standing tradition of recruiting staff who believe in the human capacity for transformation. When the National Probation Service (NPS) Director stated that ‘some of the people we work with can change, and... we can make that happen’ (Hill, 2005), he was articulating sentiments which anecdotal evidence suggests are shared by many frontline practitioners. Though the skill of those practitioners appears to rarely impinge on the public consciousness (Teague, 2002), the breadth and scale of the task they face should not be underestimated. The NPS work with many who have been failed by mainstream services throughout their lives (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002). The stresses and challenges of supporting people let down by many other agencies do not make for...
comfortable work. Perhaps surprisingly, we know relatively little about how why staff do the work, their life histories, their underpinning motivation(s) and how they feel about it.

The contemporary probation service is a very different institution to the model fashioned by the early pioneers of community rehabilitation (Whitehead and Statham 2006). Probation has repurposed itself away from the rehabilitative ideal which was its primary driver for almost all of the twentieth century. This radical transformation in ethos reflects a realignment towards practice founded primarily in law enforcement, with a greater focus on risk. This has been paralleled by a further shift in values, with the planned transfer of at least part of probation provision out of the public sector and into private provision. We are, then, on the cusp of radical developments in community justice. Probation’s individual occupational culture has become subsumed under the broader correctional aegis of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS). Where do frontline practitioners stand in this period of transition? What has their experience been? Why did they go into probation work, and what kind of identities have they negotiated for themselves? Has the work met their expectations? Definitive answers to these questions are currently unclear; we remain singularly uninformed about probation’s organisational culture.

The lack of ethnographic research on probation staff contrasts with the plethora of research on the occupational cultures of other key criminal justice agencies. Major textbooks on undertaking criminological research devote whole chapters to research on prisons (for example, Martin, 2000) or police (Reiner, 2000). ‘C op culture’ has been explored (for example, in Graef 1990), but one looks in vain for contemporary ethnographic research with probation staff. Research on probation tends to focus on effective practice. As Oldfield (2002: 19) has cogently argued:

‘the field of probation work has been narrowed down and constrained within centrally defined parameters of what counts as correctional knowledge’.

We know a great deal about those centrally defined parameters, but rather less about how practitioners respond to them. Practitioners are tasked with the key role of delivering the ‘What Works’ agenda (Merrington and Stanley, 2004; Harper and Chitty, 2005), and their perceptions and experiences are crucial to the success of that agenda.

**The Invisibility of the Life Experience of Frontline Practitioners**

Interestingly, it took an academic criminologist to first point to the near invisibility of the experiences of frontline probation practitioners in academic research. HM Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) provide independent scrutiny of the NPS, and Professor Rod Morgan was the first Chief Inspector of Probation to emerge from an academic rather than a probation background. In 2002, he pinpointed the:

‘relative dearth of studies of a more ethnographic nature on the daily work of probation staff... The Chief Inspector will seek to encourage funders, and those who influence them, to give a higher priority to work in this area’ (HMIP, 2002: 22-3).

Despite this unequivocal support from the exalted heights of the Inspectorate, very little has changed in terms of support for ethnographic studies. An influx of funding and support for ethnographic probation research has been conspicuous only by its absence. Morgan’s encouragement does not appear to have initiated major change, and he has in any case moved on (to the Youth Justice Board, and beyond). Despite the clout that he undoubtedly brought to bear as Chief Inspector of Probation, his was a lone voice.

**Probation Research: Who Pays The Piper?**

Ethnography’s contribution to criminology has been defined as exhibiting:

‘an appreciative and humanistic dimension, opening up explanations based on empathy and subjective understanding and in making visible the ‘underside’ of the social world in a way that would not be made possible by more formal methods of social surveys and experimentation’ (McLaughlin & Muncie, 2001: 111).

This is precisely why in-depth ethnographic research is essential for our understanding of the practitioner perspective. While such research in probation is rare, there are exceptions to this. For example, Mair et al (2006) explore practitioners’ responses to using the Offender Assessment System (OASYS). Mair (2004) also explored the views, attitudes and backgrounds of chief officers at a time of fundamental change. Despite the plethora of resources available to government, it was the Economic and Social Research Council rather than the Home Office which supported Mair’s study. Part of the reason for the invisibility of ethnographic research with practitioners may lie with the way in which criminological research is organised. The Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate (HORSD) is not just the largest single employer of criminologists, but also benefits from the UK’s largest criminological research budget, totalling over £39 million in 2005/06 (Home Office 2005d). HORSD views itself as an integral part of the Home Office, supplying:

‘information to help ministers and policy-makers to take evidence-based decisions, and... front-line staff... to carry out their jobs as effectively as possible’ (Home Office 2005d: 31).

Changes in probation have been driven by number of factors, not least governmental political priorities and official policy agendas. This research, while of undoubted value to practitioners, does not aim to directly engage with their experiences and perspectives.
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Quantitative methods are... associated with positivist forms of enquiry which are concerned with the search for facts (Woods 1999: 82).

Much probation research has been concerned with 'the search for facts'. What is also required is an enhanced focus on the perceptions and experiences of frontline practitioners. These experiences need to be contextualised, not least because 'whatever the sphere in which data are being collected, we can understand events only when they are situated in the wider social and historical context' (Bryman 1995: 65).

What would be of interest in the probation context would be to discover the meanings practitioners attach to their behaviour, and to explore how they understand their role within the system of criminal and community justice. One practitioner/researcher commented that probation staff may consider:

'... their tradition of practice has been hijacked by a method that, whilst not without merit, is being marketed (and that is not too strong a word) as a panacea to supersede all rival methods of dealing with offenders' (Atkinson 2004: 248).

Mair (2004b: 255) has argued with regard to the focus on What Works that staff view on the effective practice agenda 'have not been examined in any detail, yet the significance of such views may be vital to the success of the initiative' (Mair 2004b: 255). In addition, the focus on the evidence base, endlessly stated and restated in official research, can be selective and arbitrary. We should not underestimate the costs of this focus, which may be substantial. A probation research officer who left in 2006 after many years of service frankly articulated his reasons for leaving:

'I had a moment of revelation which was basically that I didn’t actually have to stay in an organisation which seemed to be going mad. When there were four senior managers debating a percentage for enforcement of orders which was based on 3 cases I realised the end was nigh' (Anonymous Email to the author, 2006).

This is an example of just where the "search for facts" can lead. That search may not always reflect the seeking of objective truth. The research officer quoted a "senior colleague' who was unembarrassed to inform him:

'I don’t need a f***ing theory, just give me some figures' (Ibid, 2006).
Ethnographic research has one overriding goal: ‘to collect the richest possible data’ (Lofland and Lofland, 1995, p.16). Access to practitioners, enabling a free and frank account of their experiences, is essential to achieve this. In the acutely politically sensitive arena of probation, attaining chief officers, as ‘gatekeepers’, will understandably have a view on how they wish researchers to judge their organisation:

‘gatekeepers will... understandably be concerned as to the picture of the organization... that the ethnographer will paint, and they will have practical interests in seeing themselves and their colleagues presented in a favourable light’


However, whether or not an organisation grants access to their staff is an important research finding in itself:

‘the discovery of obstacles to access... itself provides insights into the social organization of the setting’

(Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 54).

In Conclusion
Ex Home Secretary Charles Clarke has acknowledged the invaluable role played by probation practitioners. Commending them as ‘deeply committed and effective’ (Clarke, 2005: 8), he recognised that they:
'have to take some of the toughest decisions of any public servant, in some of the toughest of circumstances... Any successful programme of change has to have at its heart those who work within it.

(Clarke, 2005: 8-9).

If we are serious about valuing practitioners, then we need to listen to them, and learn much more about their experiences, ethos and ideals. We can help achieve this through ethnography. However, probation research's political context with its unrelenting pressure to fulfil targets means that HORDS may not prioritise such research, which may fall outside what Oldfield (2002: 19) terms the 'centrally defined parameters of what counts as correctional knowledge.' There is, therefore, real value in the academic independence of universities, and their ability, desire and energy to support independent research. Without that support, ethnographic research into probation is unlikely to fully develop and prosper, and practitioners will lose a vital source of evidence to reinforce and substantiate the immense value of their work. Given the possibility that ten years from now, probation may not exist in its present form, such research will be of at least historical interest.

References


