

DOING PROBATION WORK: IDENTITY IN A CRIMINAL JUSTICE OCCUPATION (2013)

Rob C. Mawby and Anne Worrall

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Reviewed by John Deering, University of South Wales

In this fascinating book, Mawby and Worrall succeed in their aim of filling a gap in the literature on occupational cultures by looking at probation practitioners, managers and trainees, arguing that whilst there has been a recent increase in research looking at probation practices and governance, none of this has focused on culture specifically. The book is based on an empirical study in which some 60 respondents ranging from TPO's to Chief Officers (Executives) with a wide range of length of service and experience were interviewed in depth.

The result is a very readable, multi-layered book, in which the authors maintain a very good balance between description (and the use of direct quotes from respondents) and theoretical analysis. The latter sets out to challenge what the authors see as a general theory of decline and the demise of probation within the literature and concludes that many practitioners, particularly those more recently recruited remain optimistic about probation work and have adapted to the considerable challenges presented in what are described as turbulent political times, in which the New Labour government via the creation of NOMS started the process of 'eradicating' probation from the national psyche, as it regarded it as tolerant of crime and offenders (p. 76). This process has of course now been extended by current coalition plans for the privatisation of some 70% of the service's functions. Despite this, Mawby and Worrall see a service continuing to be based in its traditions and humanitarianism, whilst taking on risk assessment and public protection in a skilful manner that goes way beyond a crude law enforcement approach.

In analysing probation cultures (and the conclusion is that these are numerous), the authors use Schien's definition of 'pattern(s) of shared assumption' (2010:18) and come up with what they call three 'ideal types' drawn from their data. Whilst these do not necessarily represent any individual respondents, they do form a framework for analysis. All three are discussed in some detail, but briefly can be characterised as: 'Lifers' – baby-boomers who went to university from school and joined the service soon afterwards, idealist, left-leaning and see the job as a vocation; 'Second Careerists' – had previous occupations, including social work and the armed forces, not always graduates, politically more pragmatic, wanting to 'make a difference'; 'Offender Managers' – more recent entrants to the service, often previous graduates trained via the Diploma in Probation Studies, overwhelmingly female, politically pragmatic, IT savvy; public protection orientation.

Although identifying these types, the authors stress that they also share a range of values such as: an emphasis on the importance of the professional relationship and a belief in the ability

of individuals to change their behaviour; the worth of working with offenders in the community; the importance of the social and personal reasons for crime, all within a context of public protection and the victim perspective.

In subsequent chapters, the book deals systematically with a range of issues, all in a thought-provoking and thoughtful manner. The change in the pattern of daily work is noted, from a more autonomous past practice which often included work in people's homes and the local community, to one largely defined by office-based work in front of a computer. The change in relations with other agencies is covered in chapter four and the irony of the government's attempts to force closer relations with the prison service (via proposed merger in the 1990's to NOMS after 2004) within a period where the probation service was seemingly much more easily moving to work more closely and effectively with the police, initially via multi-agency public protection arrangements and later due to later developments such as Integrated Offender Management. Chapter five looks at the service's continued low public profile and the ignorance of its work amongst the general population, something not helped by the reluctance or inability of the service to be proactive in these matters, something that is contrasted with the police.

If I have favourite chapters, they are those dealing with 'job crafting' (taken from Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001) and the examination of diversity and 'different voices'. The notion of job crafting is used to describe how individuals develop (or 'craft') their practice within the context of (at least recently) almost constantly changing legislation and policy initiatives, particularly within turbulent political times. Mawby and Worrall argue that this is done to enable individuals to maintain job satisfaction and to practice in tune with their core beliefs. They state that the majority feel able to manage the welfare/punishment tensions inherent in the job and that the key is balancing 'rhetoric and reality' by knowing the rules and using them to 'achieve meaning' (p. 104). This is achieved despite sometimes poor management and oppressive managerialism, alongside high workloads, all of which combine to produce an environment of lower autonomy but higher accountability. Although most respondents had stayed or were intending to stay within the service, some had/did not and the authors identify six strategies for dealing with this work environment (from Hirschman 1970): exiting/leaving; having a 'voice' to protest; remaining loyal to the service despite difficulties; cynicism involving doing enough to get by and using expedience; neglect, although few examples of this were found. To this they add the notion of 'edgework' (Lyng 1990) which they describe as going to the 'professional edge' by bending the rules in a 'fast and exciting' way that was potentially risky (pp. 109-110).

When considering diversity and 'different voices', discussion and analysis is undertaken around the waning but continuing influence of religion (mainly Christianity), that of Napo, also seen to be not as powerful as it was and of the experiences of black and minority ethnic staff, charting the emergence of the Association of Black Probation Officers and National Association of Asian Probation Staff. However, most space is given over to the feminisation of probation and the apparent paradox of the influx of women to the point where they are the majority of practitioner and trainee staff, at a time when the service has been moved to one concerned not with social work values that might be seen as more traditionally 'feminine', but rather to a focus on 'masculine' law enforcement and public protection. They consider the role of female staff in the 1960's and 1970's as 'symbolic mothers' being overtaken by women as to some degree 'symbolic victims' working with and confronting male perpetrators of domestic and sexual offences against women. The fact that many undergraduate psychology and criminology courses are female dominated also leads to consideration of

whether some women are ‘fascinated’ by male offending and offenders and also the move to more of a managing and administrative approach to the work might attract some women. They conclude that feminisation will have a lasting, significant effect in the future, but that this is unknown at present.

In the final chapter, Mawby and Worrall review the multiple cultures that they feel exist; within and between Trusts, between rural and urban Trusts etc. arguing that probation culture lacks visual symbols such as the police and that it is mainly about the ‘implicit rather than the explicit’ (p. 142). They revisit their three ideal types, considering each to make a useful contribution to the ‘perfect’ probation worker, although of course with the passage of time, the ‘lifers’ will disappear. They conclude by considering the implications of existing cultures for offender management and also coalition proposals for the breakup of the service. The latter is seen as potentially destructive as it risks fragmenting a workforce of educated, skilled and committed people who, in their view are not likely to frustrate government aims for offender management, arguing that they do not reject the risk and public protection agendas per se, but rather contest how these might be most fruitfully pursued, for example by emphasising the importance of the relationship and preferring co-operation with other agencies rather than enforced mergers and competition. They consider that workers need to be able to have a level of autonomy and creativity within the rules that has been reduced and that the government and NOMS needs to be ‘courageous’ (p. 154) and recognise the need for probation work to be holistic, optimistic but not naïve and prepared to accommodate a certain degree of failure in its work.

This book does a considerable service to all those interested in the work of probation, its culture and practices by its examination of these phenomena in a time of perhaps unprecedented change. It deserves to be widely read.

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