

Abstract

This article reflects upon the author's experience of undertaking the PQF (Probation Qualifying Framework) training scheme during the chaotic period of Transforming Rehabilitation (TR). The author asserts that the uncertainty and precarious nature of the changes were detrimental to an effective learning environment, which ultimately promoted a practice culture of punitiveness and control and did not allow learners the space to be skilful and confident practitioners, comfortable working autonomously. Furthermore the author contends there is an emerging culture within the NPS (National Probation Service) increasingly fostered on 'risk management' which is reflected in the vocational nature of PQF training and is contributing towards a widening cultural gap which is emerging between the CRC (Community Rehabilitation Companies) and NPS.

Introduction

I had been interested in becoming a probation officer since studying criminology at university. A lecturer who previously worked in the service often spoke about his experiences, enthusing on how varied and interesting the role was, how rewarding it could be, and how he viewed probation work as not just a 9-5 job, but a vocation. Since graduating, I have worked as an offender supervisor in a prison and as a keyworker for a substance misuse charity; however I wanted to work in a role that would allow me to make a positive contribution to someone's life, as well as provide further opportunities for career advancement. The ethos of the probation service and the nature of the work seemed to fit in with my own ideals, and so it was with this enthusiasm that I was taken on as a trainee under the PQF scheme in early 2013.

During my 18 months of training to become a qualified officer, the Transforming Rehabilitation agenda unfolded in front of my eyes. My cohort of trainees and I joined the PQF scheme working for a Probation Trust and graduated as qualified officers in the newly formed National Probation Service. Change has been an on-going feature of the Probation service throughout its history (Mair and Burke, 2012) however the TR reforms have been described as the greatest challenge in the history of the probation service, potentially resulting in the service being unrecognisable from its current form (Deering, 2014). The pace and scale of the changes had a significant impact on my ability to become a skilful and reflective practitioner, confident in working with a challenging cohort of service users. This short article reflects on my time as a trainee; the challenges of learning the role while the chaos and uncertainty of TR took place, whilst also reflecting on a possible culture emerging within the NPS, distinct from the CRC.

Training amid the uncertainty

Current research focusing on how the TR transition has affected probation staff identifies several key themes which include: liminality and insecurity, separation and loss, status anxiety, mistrust and powerlessness (Robinson et al 2016, Deering and Feilzer 2015). While I can certainly identify with these feelings, particularly the unsettling feelings of working and training in an increasingly uncertain and insecure environment; as a trainee working in the service for a matter of months when the split was enforced, perhaps the changes affected me in different ways to more experienced staff as I did not feel able to legitimately claim a right to feel separation and loss- at least not in the same respect as my colleagues. Not being able to claim the same shared sense of loss had an isolating effect from other officers.

The uncertainty of not knowing if I had a future in the service, where I would be placed once qualified and indeed what the service would look like once qualified was disconcerting and a constant distraction from learning the job. Regular training sessions with my fellow cohort of trainees became an opportunity to swap stories of anxiousness and uncertainty, particularly in relation to the difficulties experienced in holding two contradictory feelings: the optimism of undertaking a journey to become a qualified officer combined with the pessimism of not ultimately knowing where our futures were within the service.

I recall one colleague describing probation work during the transition like “being asked to clean up a house you know is being repossessed”. Although it’s often noted that the probation service is in a constant state of reorganisation (Robinson and Burnett, 2007) I have to wonder what long term effect TR will have on officers who undertook training during this period, particularly in regards to how they internalise the transition. It became increasingly difficult as a trainee to find ‘a place’ within the constant churn of the organisation and have the opportunity to learn the role in the absence of a suitable environment conducive to learning. I am concerned that officers who qualified during this period will be more readily inclined to internalise the occupational identity of what Mawby and Worrall (2013) categorize as the pragmatic and adaptable ‘offender managers’ rather than as vocationally minded ‘lifers’ (Ibid). I feel this is a particularly acute issue, as due to such high levels of staff turnover, newly qualified officers often see themselves as highly experienced officers often asked to dispense advice to the next cohort of PQF trainees.

Although liminality and anxiety have been identified as common emotional responses to TR, I feel other experiences have not yet been fully explored, including the pervasiveness of feelings such as guilt and resentment. I personally felt a large degree of guilt, as due to being a trainee I was automatically assigned to the NPS, but saw staff many of whom had been qualified for years, including colleagues who just weeks before were in the same team as me and advising me on cases and reports, were assigned to the CRC. Furthermore I began to detect a growing resentment between the NPS and CRC, with a widening gap materialising between the two, resulting in a 'it's not my job' attitude between the organisations, particularly in regards to appropriate risk-setting. I fear this could lead to the deterioration of a recognised 'probation habitus' (Robinson et al, 2014). Despite working in an excellent team, with knowledgeable and supportive colleagues, guilt and resentment are clearly not healthy feelings to have in such a complex job and are not conducive to a positive working and learning atmosphere.

Transforming Rehabilitation and professional development

The sudden organisational change from Probation Trusts to NPS meant having to transfer the majority of my caseload to officers now in the CRC, whilst simultaneously taking on an almost entirely new caseload of high risk service-users. While this was clearly against the ethos of engagement that probation had been encouraged to promote (Liebling, 2004), it was also counter-productive to the training process, as it snatched away the opportunity for trainees to see a service-user through to the end of an order, surely a crucial part of any trainees own journey. Although all practitioners have been affected by the sudden caseload re-organisations, trainee officers faced their own acute challenge of working with an entirely new cohort of service-users.

Effective work with high risk clients demands its own particular set of skills. It takes time and experience to ensure you can do this effectively and don't tip the balance between control and change (Weaver, 2014). However the experience of suddenly acquiring a full caseload of all high risk clients, without first possessing the adequate resources and capability was very challenging and I felt counter-productive to effective learning. Working with high risk cases, there was certainly the realisation that there is little margin for error- it almost became easier to be overly cautious, and there was certainly the concern of not wanting to be the individual to have the next serious further offence on your caseload (Knight and Ward, 2011). Clearly there is the need for the right training to balance these concerns out, but due to the constant organisational changes and caseload pressures, I felt that there wasn't the opportunity to reflect and build upon my own practice to become a skilful practitioner in this respect. Many experienced staff had left, or were on long-term sick leave, so the opportunity to gradually learn in increments wasn't a possibility. I felt forced to be a knowledgeable and competent practitioner, without the required experience or space to reflect on my practice. Furthermore, my initial idealistic notion that I had for the role, was slowly eroded by the reality of the job requirements and the limited time I was able to spend with service-users due to paperwork pressures (Knight and Stout, 2009).

Recent academic research has re-imagined TR as an opportunity to reconfigure 'edgework' in practice (Worrall, 2015). While a laudable aim that should be encouraged - and I was lucky enough to have an excellent, highly skilled practice training assessor who constantly challenged me to reflect on my practice - I felt that the PQF training did not lend itself to supporting trainees to display 'civil courage' (Ibid). Although both the vocational and academic training staff were all hugely knowledgeable, passionate and

helpful, the training element of the PQF often seemed prescriptive, geared towards learning and regurgitating various manuals, tools and processes, but offered limited opportunity to formulate a culture based on reflective practice and professional development (Clarke, 2013). There wasn't enough space given to allow trainees to develop crucial interpersonal skills needed to become an effective practitioner. Instead officers are taught to follow procedures, rather than think issues through (Skinner and Goldhill, 2013).

Due to organisational constraints caused by TR, I felt there was an added emphasis to get people finished and through the 'conveyer belt' of training which did not allow sufficient time to absorb new concepts and assimilate professional and academic knowledge (Goldhill, 2010). The vocational aspects of the programme were given precedent over exploring the academic elements, resulting in the academic portion of the training feeling like an 'add-on' disconnected to the practicalities of working in probation (Treadwell, 2006). The marginalisation of the importance of developing interpersonal skills within the PQF was further reinforced with the distance-learning element of the academic training (Treadwell and Mantle, 2007) which reinforced the 'McDonaldisation' (Ritzer, 2015) of probation training where the ultimate aims of the PQF seem aimed towards producing competent, yet enforcement driven officers, whose priorities are not measured on desistance-focused outputs, but on an ability to fill in forms and tick boxes correctly (Knight and Stout, 2009).

What is the culture of the NPS?

Mawby and Worrall (2013) argued that the probation service has no monolithic culture, but a set of common values. The challenge that probation has post TR is to ensure that these values remain in place across the sectors, despite the split into two separate organisations. My fear is that two distinct cultures are beginning to emerge and the NPS and CRC are beginning to pull away from each other, leading to a 'professional ontological insecurity' (Robinson, 2013). This has been exacerbated by the false notion that staff in the NPS are seen as 'the elite' (Rutter, 2015) as they work with the high risk cases, leaving skilled and experienced officers in the CRC feeling de-skilled and demoralised.

Since TR has been implemented, much of the academic research has understandably been focused upon the impact of staff allocated to CRC's (Robinson et al 2015, Deering and Feilzer 2015). While it is important to continue to keep CRC's under the academic spotlight, I also feel it is worth remembering that it's a misconception that the NPS is a continuation of the probation service, and will steadfastly carry the beacon for probation values. The NPS is also a new organisation and has its own emerging culture and set of values that need to be studied closer.

A common theme that has emerged from research on CRC practitioners is the demoralising and de-skilling impact the transition has had (Ibid). While I by no means wish to negate this in any form, I also feel it is important to also acknowledge the demoralising and de-skilling impact of work within the NPS; a centralised and bureaucratic organisation, increasingly reliant on technocratic and prescriptive measures, which in my experience allows limited opportunity to implement localised responses to acute issues.

Having a caseload containing purely high risk service-users can have its own negative impacts. The work can certainly lead to a greater deal of cynicism and even burnout (Kirton and Guillaume, 2016), but I also felt my work suddenly become far more limited in its scope; based primarily on managing risk and containing individuals. I felt I was not able to use the full set of skills you acquire when working with a variety of clients, and began to almost miss working with a mix of service-users who could challenge you in different ways, and who you might be able to readily support towards positive change. Merely containing risk and filling reports can take you away from the core meaning of probation work, and can be de-skilling in its own right. In this sense I feel that the NPS encourages one set of skills, but make other important attributes redundant.

My concern is that the NPS will become overburdened and consumed with a risk management ethos that is limited in its scope and capacity to facilitate real change, but instead be fostered upon public protection, punitiveness and short-term control. Raynor et al (2014) assert the importance of the fine balance between control and change; in this respect the NPS has a duty to ensure that its practitioners have both the space and the capacity to achieve both. Clare (2015) reflects that CRC's have the opportunity to become 'cultural architects' that can 'reinvigorate what works' with a desistance-based focus. If the rhetoric asserts that CRC's are centred on innovation and are taking on the mantle of change; where does that leave the NPS and what space is there for creative and innovative practice? It is within this context that we need to have a better understanding of what future training within probation will look like, and what do we want our probation officers of the future to be in order to suit the needs of the

NPS; reflective agents of change, or punitive and cynical practitioners, over reliant on risk management processes (Goodman, 2012).

Conclusion

From my experience, the implementation of TR reduced my capacity as a trainee to work with individuals in a person-centred way. Training often felt overly focused upon learning processes and prioritising public protection, which will ultimately serve to foster a culture of punitiveness that I feel is a distinct culture emerging within the NPS, which could exacerbate an emerging split with the CRC. In my opinion, it is not that trainees readily adopt a cautious and punitive approach from choice, but without giving officers learning their 'craft' the time, space and skills to work creatively this approach will be adopted out of necessity. If the NPS values become centred on risk, then the practice of new officers will reflect this in-turn.

Individuals undertaking probation officer training in the future will have to overcome their own obstacles, particularly the challenge of learning across the divide of the two distinct organisations that encompass modern day probation. It's imperative that both sectors are able to give trainees the time to reflect on their work and enable them to become the skilful practitioners who are able to practice a range of skills.

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