

'If the cap fits'? Probation staff and the changing nature of supervision in a Community Rehabilitation Company

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journals.sagepub.com/home/prb**Matt Tidmarsh** 

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Abstract

This article explores the changing nature of supervision in a Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC) following the *Transforming Rehabilitation (TR)* reforms to probation services in England and Wales. Based on an ethnographic study of an office within a privately owned CRC, it argues that *TR* has entrenched long-term trends towards 'Taylorised' probation practice. This is to say that qualitative and quantitative changes to the complexion of practitioners' caseloads since *TR* reflect a decades-long devaluation of the probation service and its staff. The decision to allocate most qualified practitioners to the National Probation Service means that Case Managers (i.e. probation service officers) now supervise offenders who would historically have been supervised by Senior Case Managers (i.e. probation officers). This loss of expertise has been exacerbated by administrative staff redundancies at the office. The result is an increasingly standardised and fragmented mode of working within the CRC in which the majority of services are now delivered by the voluntary sector.

Keywords

probation, *Transforming Rehabilitation*, Taylorisation, managerialism

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Introduction

Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) fundamentally restructured the delivery of probation services in England and Wales. Following a sustained rise in the prison population, which was particularly marked under the preceding New Labour administrations, the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition government (2010–2015) challenged the effectiveness of the probation service (Ministry of Justice (MoJ), 2010). Refocusing the service through the lens of the market, they argued, would provide a cost-neutral way to reduce reoffending and arrest the spiralling costs of justice: ‘By competing [for] the majority of services, and achieving a more efficient public sector service, we can extend rehabilitation... within allocated budgets’ (MoJ, 2013a: 11). In June 2014, *TR* split probation into two organisations: the publicly owned National Probation Service (NPS) now works only with offenders who pose a high risk of harm, while 21 privately led Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) supervise low-to-medium risk offenders. Private providers are remunerated via a ‘Payment by Results’ (PbR) mechanism, which attempted to shift the focus from outputs onto outcomes (National Audit Office (NAO), 2016).

Just four years after *TR* was implemented, however, the incumbent Conservative government acknowledged that further restructuring would be necessary ‘to stabilise probation services’ (MoJ, 2018: 3). PbR has been abandoned (NAO, 2019) and CRCs’ contracts will be terminated early, with the day-to-day management of *all* offenders returning to the NPS (MoJ, 2019). The pressures imposed upon staff as a result of *TR* were frequently cited as a factor in CRCs’ underperformance (HMI Probation, 2017, 2019). This article, therefore, explores the changing nature of probation supervision in a CRC through the lens of ‘Taylorisation’ – that is, the process by which management assumes control of a labour process, ‘not only in a formal sense but [also] by the control and dictation of each step of the process, including its mode of performance’ (Braverman, 1974: 69). The first part surveys historical developments in probation supervision, with a particular focus on the managerial practices which have exposed the service to evermore central control in recent decades. The second part highlights changes to the complexion of practitioners’ caseloads following *TR*, in which unqualified practitioners now manage offenders previously supervised by qualified officers. This is not to devalue the work performed by those without formal qualifications; rather, to emphasise how *TR* presents a continuation of a decades-long period in which probation’s knowledge and modes of working have been diminished and degraded. The third part shows how probation practice has become increasingly fragmented, with services typically delivered elsewhere in the voluntary sector. Finally, the article demonstrates that an administrative mode of working is becoming normalised at the CRC through analysis of Samuel, a practitioner who joined the probation service in 2016.

Methodology

The research explored how staff working within a CRC had experienced the *TR* reforms, with a particular focus on probation culture and practice. Data were

generated via ethnographic study of 'Elizabeth Street', a pseudonym for a privately owned CRC office which serves *all* low-to-medium risk offenders in a large city in England, in which I observed day-to-day life for three to four days per week over a period of six months (April–October 2018). A CRC was selected for study because staff 'migrating' from the public sector to the private sector have experienced significant organisational change (Burke et al., 2017). Informal access was obtained following contact with a 'gatekeeper', a research officer employed by the parent company that leads Elizabeth Street. The research was then ratified by HM Prison and Probation Service's National Research Committee, aided by a letter of support from the parent company's board of directors.

Upon consultation with the gatekeeper, I had the chance to meet with potential informants and to explain the research prior to the fieldwork commencing, in March 2018. The opportunity to present my research, and thus manage impressions (Wincup, 2017), was beneficial for securing the consent of probation staff. Conversely, I sought offenders' consent to be observed on the day of the observation. Approaching offenders just before a prospective observation created an ethical issue due to the power dynamics inherent to a mandatory probation supervision between a criminal justice official and an involuntary client. The latter may feel that refusal to comply could violate the terms of their supervision and thereby coerce him or her into consent. Practically, though, it was difficult to approach offenders to distribute the information and consent form *before* the day of their supervision. Not only would this have required access to offenders' personal data, such as a home address, phone number, or an email account (which they might not have), but there was also no guarantee that the information would be read, understood, signed, and returned to the researcher. For this reason, my initial plan was to clearly instruct practitioners on the aims of my research and ask them to relay the information to offenders.

However, several instances early on in the fieldwork forced a re-evaluation of this approach. For example, after one offender refused to consent to an observation, his supervising practitioner, perhaps not wanting to disappoint me, attempted to persuade him to let me observe the interview. I thus had to explain that he was not obliged to consent and decided to remove myself from the situation. On two occasions, practitioners, perhaps lacking clarity about my research or looking to begin the meeting as soon as possible, informed the offender that I was a member of staff who was training. Again, I was compelled to intervene, clarifying for the offender that I was, in fact, a researcher looking to observe their supervision meeting. I politely alerted both practitioners as to why informed and open consent is critical after the interview. Thereafter, I decided that the best course of action would be to assume full responsibility for informing offenders about my research. I made clear to practitioners, individually and in a team meeting, that I would like a minute or so before the supervision meeting begins to explain that my presence was in no way connected to the supervisory process, and, crucially, how their refusal to consent to being observed would in no way impact the terms of their supervision. When accompanying practitioners on home visits, I asked them to check with offenders via the telephone that my presence was welcome. Only once did an

offender verbally withdraw consent after the form had been signed; hence, the observation did not take place.

All Case Managers and Senior Case Managers interviewed were, at some point in the research, observed in supervision meetings with offenders, although not all of those observed were selected for interview. Twenty staff from a range of job roles, whose experience in probation varied from six months to four decades, were selected for a one-hour semi-structured interview. The sample comprised 10 Case Managers, five Senior Case Managers, three Supervision Managers, and two Senior Managers. The presentation of the data reflects the decision by the parent company that owns the CRC to modify staff job titles: senior probation officers became Supervision Managers, probation officers became Senior Case Managers, and probation service officers became Case Managers (although some of titles have been adjusted to preserve the anonymity of the parent company). The sample broadly reflected the demography of the office, and of probation in general, in that 70% of interviewees were female (Kirton and Guillaume, 2015). All names presented below are pseudonyms.

The changing nature of probation supervision

The probation service has progressed through several 'phases' in its history (McWilliams, 1983, 1986, 1987), but the importance practitioners place upon relationships in the pursuit of offender reform unites different generations of staff (Mawby and Worrall, 2013). This relational approach originated from the Church of England Temperance Society (CETS), which began providing volunteers in the police courts to vouch for offenders convicted of drunkenness and disorderly behaviour in the 1870s (Vanstone, 2007). The work of these 'police court missionaries' offered a radical departure from the retributive inclinations of the prison; yet, their interventions were highly selective, 'saving the souls' (McWilliams, 1983: 130) only of those worthy of being saved. The Probation of Offenders Act 1907 formally established probation as a public service after several decades of such irregular provision (Vanstone, 2007). Inscribed within the Act were the words 'advise, assist and befriend' (Jarvis, 1972: 16), which gave clarity as to the service's rehabilitative mission and humanitarian ethos. However, the Home Office's reluctance to meet the full costs of the nascent service meant that it was reliant upon volunteers appointed by the Church to work with offenders (Jarvis, 1972). The dominance of CETS-sponsored police court missionaries over adult courts contributed to issues of 'dual control' (McWilliams, 1983: 130), as practitioners' loyalties were divided between the Home Office and the Church (Jarvis, 1972).

Recognising the flaws in the formative probation service, the Home Office began to adopt a more interventionist approach (Vanstone, 2007). Major organisational changes following the passage of the Criminal Justice Act 1925, including the compulsory recruitment of probation officers to courts, were accompanied by a sustained increase in the use of probation orders (Jarvis, 1972). There were also drives from within the service, led by the National Association of Probation Officers, to adopt a more scientific approach to offender rehabilitation (Jarvis, 1972).

Gradually, therefore, religious influences over practice were supplanted by a casework model which drew from social work knowledge (McWilliams, 1985). This 'phase of diagnosis' (McWilliams, 1986: 241) was underpinned by the introduction of Home Office-funded training in the 1930s, in which officers embarked upon social science courses while gaining practical experience (Vanstone, 2007). By 1941, probation was organised 'on a wholly public basis' (Jarvis, 1972: 53): it became a service 'for which people were trained to enter rather than called to follow' (McWilliams, 1985: 261).

Establishing a hierarchical structure proved crucial to the post-war development of the probation service (Morgan, 2007). The Criminal Justice Act 1948 legislated for probation areas to be overseen by a principal probation officer and the subsequent Probation Rules of 1949 defined the supervisory duties of the senior probation officer (Jarvis, 1972). Morgan (2007: 91) highlights how probation assumed new responsibilities for prisoners' pre-release 'throughcare' and post-release 'aftercare'; matrimonial conciliation to support magistrates' courts, culminating in practitioners 'acting as welfare officers in divorce proceedings' by 1957; and community sentences. The service expanded accordingly: full-time, qualified probation officers in England and Wales increased from just over 1000 to nearly 5500 between 1951 and 1981, while the total caseload grew from 55,000 to approximately 157,000 (McWilliams, 1987). Most new recruits were former servicemen searching for an alternative career (Knight, 2007). Applicants under the age of 30 were expected to have a social science diploma; those over 30 would undertake specific training in areas such as casework, law, and criminology (Vanstone, 2007). By 1971, an accredited social work qualification was required of *all* probation officers (Gregory, 2011). In this sense, probation practitioners were autonomous professionals supported by the state and the service's hierarchy to pursue offender rehabilitation through social enquiry (McWilliams, 1986).

However, confidence in the service's capacity to rehabilitate offenders was eroded by sustained post-war increases in crime (Garland, 2001). The politicisation of these concerns from the late 1970s onwards (Downes and Morgan, 2007) resulted in a period of marked transformation for the probation service, part of a wider reorganisation of the state along neoliberal lines (Garland, 2001). Political economic imperatives towards reducing fiscal expenditure in the 1980s meant that probation was dominated by a managerial emphasis on efficiency and accountability, which challenged the inconsistencies inherent to autonomous practice (Mair, 2016). While individual officers upheld the service's tradition of helping offenders by cultivating relationships, probation came to be an 'organisational machine... in which the individuals which it processed became units in a framework of policy' (McWilliams, 1987: 105). In the 1990s, however, a populist 'tough on crime' shift monopolised criminal justice policy (Raynor and Vanstone, 2007). For probation, attempts to reconcile competing aims of the 'efficient' provision of services with the rising caseloads produced by greater 'punitivism' resulted in successive governments taking an increasingly interventionist approach to the service's governance (Morgan, 2007). In this climate, probation practitioners were compelled to reassess their working practices (Phillips, 2011).

The consequences of increasingly centralised control over the probation service have been the focus of considerable academic enquiry in recent years (e.g. Gale, 2012; Gregory, 2011; Phillips, 2011). Some scholars have even drawn parallels between probation practice and the process of 'Taylorisation' (Fitzgibbon and Lea, 2014; Gale, 2012). Derived from the work of Frederick Winslow Taylor on the factories of late 19th-century America, Taylorisation refers to a theory of scientific management in which knowledge of a particular labour process is methodically collated by managers and repurposed as formulaic rules that direct action (Braverman, 1974). Taylorism, according to Braverman (1974), adheres to three principles. First, the labour process is rendered 'independent of the craft, tradition, and the workers' knowledge' (Braverman, 1974: 78) by displacing control onto managers. Second, the labour process is dehumanised via 'the separation of conception from execution' (Braverman, 1974: 79). This is to say that managers, rather than workers, plan how tasks should be performed. Third, management deploys '*this monopoly over knowledge*' (Braverman, 1974: 82, emphasis in original) to systematically plan the working day. The end goal, Braverman (1974: 83) argued, was to 'sink [the worker] to the level of general and undifferentiated labor power, adaptable to a large range of simple tasks'.

Taylorisation is an expedient, albeit imperfect, lens through which to explore the impact of managerialism on probation supervision (Gale, 2012). That face-to-face probation practice takes place behind the closed doors of interview rooms has enabled practitioners to retain a measure of discretion (Burke and Collett, 2015). However, managerialism has gradually devalued the knowledge and autonomy on which probation was predicated (Gale, 2012). The introduction of targets in the 1980s, for example, meant that performance could be assessed quantitatively (Phillips, 2011). Similarly, the imposition of National Standards in 1992 sought to control for discrepancies in service provision through prescriptive guidelines for practice, challenging the nature of the supervisor-offender relationship (Bailey et al., 2007). Social work training requirements were abolished in 1996, severing the links between practice and the subjectivities of social scientific knowledge, as probation was repurposed according to the logic of risk management (Hardy, 2014). While risk assessment technologies have been welcomed by practitioners as supplement to, rather than a surrogate for, traditional casework skills (e.g. Hardy, 2014; Robinson, 2003), their use does not depend on formal qualifications (Mair, 2016). Fitzgibbon and Lea (2014: 27), therefore, contend that such changes resemble 'Taylorisation': core tasks have been fragmented and standardised so that they could be performed by cheaper, lower skilled labour.

A significant effect of managerialism on probation has been to transform the profile of practitioners: where men comprised the majority of the service in the post-war period, women now account for approximately 70% of staff (Kirton and Guillaume, 2015). This demographic shift is in spite of the efforts to 'toughen' probation supervision (Knight, 2007). There has also been a sustained growth of (unqualified) probation service officers relative to (qualified) probation officers, with the former comprising approximately 50% of staff by 2012 (Mair, 2016). Introduced as 'ancillaries' in the 1970s to assist probation officers in their role,

managing generic cases and performing specialist functions like unpaid work, there was a marked increase in probation service officers to cover the shortfalls when training for probation officers was revoked in 1996 (Bailey et al., 2007). In contrast to aspirant probation officers, whose training is regulated by the state, probation service officer training is much shorter, has less academic rigour, and is subject to local fluctuations (Gale, 2012). Against the backdrop of rising caseloads, however, probation service officers' jurisdiction has gradually expanded to encompass tasks typically performed by probation officers (Fitzgibbon and Lea, 2014). Rhonda (Case Manager) outlined the changes to her role since she began as an ancillary in 1979:

In probation, *there's always been a culture of 'if the cap fits'* for [probation service officers]: one minute we could do things and the next minute we couldn't; one minute we could take on [domestic violence] cases, next minute we couldn't. That was all dependent upon . . . how many cases we had coming through. The only difference then was [probation officers] wrote reports for courts and managed sex offenders, stuff like that. But then they got us writing reports for court with no wage rise; we were just getting closer and closer to being a [probation officer]. (emphasis added)

Rhonda's comment shows that, far from being static, definitions of the roles and responsibilities of probation service officers are subject to political vagaries. Based on questionnaires and interviews with practitioners, Bailey et al. (2007) found that, although probation service officers felt some anxiety over increasing responsibilities, particularly with regard to higher risk offenders, many welcomed the changes. For the probation officers in Gale's (2012) study, however, probation service officer encroachment upon the supervision of low-to-medium risk offenders resulted in less face-to-face time with their clients and more paperwork – namely, report writing. This suggests that the boundaries between qualified and unqualified practitioners have been blurred. Indeed, Fitzgibbon and Lea (2014) argue that long-term trends towards Taylorisation laid the foundations for the decision to split the service on the basis of *risk of harm*.

TR: Who is supervising whom?

TR extended 'statutory rehabilitation' (MoJ, 2013a: 6) of 12 months to *all* offenders who serve more than one day in custody, which resulted in approximately 45,000 offenders being added to the total caseload (NAO, 2016). Initial proposals put to prospective providers estimated that CRCs would manage 80% of offenders (NAO, 2016); in actuality, however, this figure is closer to 59% (NAO, 2019). This is, in part, because fewer low-to-medium risk offenders are being processed through the criminal justice system, with the NPS absorbing the excess (NAO, 2016). But reduced business volumes also reflect a lack of sentencer confidence in the CRCs (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2019). Indeed, for George (Senior Case Manager):

... the court feels a long way away. I feel that's a matter to regret, because all our work comes from the court and our reputation depends to a large extent on what the people who make up the court think of the service we provide. What's true, or what we're led to believe, is that there's a lack of confidence in sentences from the CRC.

This comment is supported by recent research on CRCs' absence of a right to audience at court, which highlighted practitioner frustrations with 'their lack of insight into current court practice ... while court staff recognise their own limitations of understanding CRC practice' (Woolford and Salami, 2019: 315).

Where, previously, Senior Case Managers would have been expected to write and deliver presentence reports for the courts, the *TR* reforms excluded CRC staff from this sphere of probation practice (Woolford and Salami, 2019):

I was a court officer – that's how I saw myself ... I saw that part of the role, and the assessment for court, as being very significant. We don't do that anymore; a huge chunk of the work was taken away when we moved to the CRC. (Fizz, Senior Case Manager)

Gale (2012) highlighted probation officer frustrations with how report writing detracted from their opportunities to engage with offenders in a personal capacity, but Maddie (Senior Case Manager) argued that such work provided variety:

It was such an interesting role and it was so varied: we were doing court reports, we were going into prisons and doing parole reports, and the nature of our caseloads was so varied.

Since *TR*, however, potential gains in terms of opportunities to cultivate relationships with offenders have been lost within the intensification of her workload:

The job is challenging, but it sometimes feels like it's the same stuff from different people. I think that's probably because we don't have the time to get to know somebody, what makes them tick; it's a conveyor belt.

The increase in practitioner workloads is partially derived from CRC caseloads being lower than anticipated, for which the resultant financial pressures have meant that many have responded by cutting staff numbers (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2018). CRCs are not required to publish data on staffing levels; however, according to HMI Probation (2017: 11–12), 'staff numbers [in CRCs] have been pared down in repeated redundancy exercises, with those remaining carrying exceptional caseloads'. While there have been no cuts to front-line practitioner numbers at Elizabeth Street, there have been many administrative staff redundancies:

The impact of admin going is huge. I cannot stress how much we miss our admin and the impact that's had on our workload because we're doing all the admin. (Rhonda, Case Manager)

As such, although the CRC's share of the total caseload is down, extra administrative responsibilities have contributed to greater workload pressures (see Tidmarsh, 2019).

In addition to quantitative increases in practitioner workloads at Elizabeth Street, many have also experienced qualitative changes in the complexion of offenders under their supervision. When the probation service was split in 2014, most (qualified) probation officers were assigned to the NPS while the majority of (unqualified) probation service officers were shifted to the CRCs (Kirton and Guillaume, 2015). Accordingly, Elizabeth Street is predominantly staffed by Case Managers. The parent company's guidelines state that Case Managers should not supervise any cases involving serious domestic violence or child protection:

Even though we're supposed to be low- and medium-risk of harm, some of the cases managed by the Senior Case Managers are very risky cases that you wouldn't give to a Case Manager – things like child protection, high level domestic violence. (Kate, Supervision Manager)

This suggests that there should be clear differentiation between the responsibilities of Case Managers and Senior Case Managers; in practice, though, the loss of expertise has resulted in the former supervising cases that should be managed by the latter:

The number and type of cases we're expected to do, for example, as a [probation service officer], now Case Manager, I would never have held a domestic violence case, historically. I would say 70% of my cases have got some kind of domestic violence attached. (Will, Case Manager)

Concurrent with the first principle of Taylorism (Braverman, 1974), then, the knowledge of qualified practitioners has been located within the NPS. While this allocation was beyond the purview of the CRC, the result, mirrored nationally, is that unqualified staff are 'doing work formerly undertaken by probation officers' (HMI Probation, 2019: 74).

Echoing their Case Manager colleagues, Senior Case Managers also argued that there had been a blurring of the boundaries between job roles since TR:

At one point, they were talking about the [Senior Case Managers] having the high-end domestic violence cases and holding the child protection cases, but I know lots of Case Managers who've got child protection cases and I'm damn sure some of them will have domestic violence cases. That demarcation is not clear now. (George, Senior Case Manager)

This suggests that changes to roles and responsibilities have been greater for Case Managers, a point supported by Arthur (Senior Case Manager):

... the new Senior Case Manager role, not much changed. I'd say that more changed with ... the Case Manager role, and that caused a lot of issues, anxieties ... because we were told that everyone was going to do everything.

The instruction that 'everyone was going to do everything' points to an increasingly Taylorised mode of practice in which job roles have been standardised (Braverman, 1974). Where Senior Case Managers have been deskilled through the removal of their work for the courts, Case Managers are 'acting up' in their role:

We're jacks of all trades, masters of none. The gap between roles has closed. The only difference is wages. (Jo, Case Manager, emphasis added)

That Case Managers' terms and conditions have remained the same despite their additional responsibilities infers a shift towards cheaper labour. Indeed, Charlie, a Senior Manager, downplayed the significance of qualifications for probation supervision:

I have never been a fan of interpreting probation skills as linked to formalised qualifications. I personally believe that experiences are at the very least as valuable, probably more valuable in my own view, to be honest.

The probation service officer role has often been a prelude to becoming a qualified probation officer (Bailey et al., 2007). However, initial plans for the Professional Qualification in Probation (PQIP), the pathway to becoming a probation officer/Senior Case Manager, required practitioners to hold a university degree in one of four subjects deemed relevant to probation to be eligible (Kirton and Guillaume, 2015). For many staff, this inhibited progression:

I can't apply for the PQIP under the new rules ... It's not good to know that you're coming into the service at 25, 30, and there's no room for improvement if you haven't got a degree. (Vicky, Case Manager)

These rules have since been relaxed so that everyone, '[n]o matter your background or level of experience' (HM Prison and Probation Service, n.d.), can apply for the PQIP. For Trudy, a Case Manager enrolled on the PQIP during the research, differences between CRC and NPS caseloads impacted her experience of the training:

... our NPS colleagues [have] got, like, 5 cases: even though they'd be very high risk, they're sat at their desks doing essays and things like that, but we've got to do that at weekends or after work. They get to shadow probation officers while they learn; we don't get any of that because we've got a full caseload that still needs managing.

The shortage of Senior Case Managers relative to Case Managers at Elizabeth Street thereby reflects decisions made by the Coalition government as opposed to the CRC. For new Case Managers, occupational socialisation at Elizabeth Street is

no longer shaped by the acquisition of knowledge, but by an ability to adapt to a caseload with whom they would previously have been 'unqualified' to work:

There's loads of cases [Case Managers are] dealing with that should really be seen by Senior Case Managers; but unless you know that it should really be dealt with by a Senior Case Manager, then you just crack on with it. (Rhonda, Case Manager)

The manner in which staff were allocated under *TR* resonates with Braverman's (1974) claim that, as knowledge of a craft diminishes in importance, workers become an increasingly flexible, undifferentiated mass of labour. This is not to detract from the skills and experience of Case Managers at Elizabeth Street; rather, to emphasise that the findings reflect long-term trends towards the Taylorisation of probation and the flattening of the occupational hierarchy. The quantitative and qualitative intensification of Case Managers' individual workloads can thus be situated on a managerial continuum, part of the Coalition government's strategy to ensure that the *TR* reforms were cost-neutral (MoJ, 2013a).

Probation practice on the 'production line'

While decisions as to the allocation of staff were taken by the Coalition government, the new owners were free to decide upon the specifics of job descriptions, including job titles. Indeed, the parent company decided to remove 'probation' from staff job titles at Elizabeth Street:

[The parent company] wanted a fresh, new approach: it was all new, they wanted new titles [and] ownership of it. They didn't want to call people probation officers; they wanted Senior Case Managers and Case Managers. (Ashley, Senior Manager)

This semantic shift resembles the generic discourse of the 'offender manager' under New Labour – which, for Gale (2012), helped to obfuscate the boundaries between probation officers and probation service officers. The new job titles, therefore, communicate to staff changing expectations for their role:

I think the change of name from probation service officer to a Case Manager was done to sort of emphasise the fact that it is a different role. Essentially, what you're doing is the same, but it was to make it very clear to people, I feel, that it is a new role. (Will, Case Manager)

Increasing workloads have compelled practitioners to reassess their work and, by extension, the nature of their relationships with offenders. The Coalition government envisaged a prominent role for voluntary sector organisations in the provision of services, with CRCs having 'responsibility for the day to day management of the majority of offenders' (MoJ, 2013a: 10). This emphasis on *management* was supported by Matilda, a Senior Case Manager who joined the service after *TR* was implemented:

I thought I'd have, say, a caseload of 20 and I'd be in the community with them, out and about, making sure they got to their appointments, meet the family – you know, be really involved. But I'm not: I'm managing them from behind my computer. I want to be [involved], but we're just sat behind a computer. There's massive pressure. Basically, I'm a glorified admin officer and signposter.

This highlights how *TR* has fragmented probation practice at Elizabeth Street, offering a continuation of New Labour's 'offender management model': offenders are 'the object of action' (Burke and Davies, 2011: 2) as opposed to the subjects of practice, with work delivered elsewhere in the voluntary sector. Staff at Elizabeth Street are expected to signpost as a means through which to lighten the weight of caseloads:

Unless we look outside of the organisation for resources, then we're not going to be successful. Case Managers, on the caseloads they're on, we're not going to see any change. (Sarah, Supervision Manager)

And yet, many of the voluntary sector organisations to which CRCs signpost offenders are financially imperilled (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2018). According to a Clinks (2018: 24) survey of charities involved in the delivery of services on behalf of probation, 72% of those with CRC funding have had to subsidise their costs with other forms of income, including their own cash reserves. Just eight organisations had a 'payment by results' aspect worked into their contract, with the majority being funded through 'fee for services' (Clinks, 2018: 32).

The dominance of the output-based 'fee for service' over the outcome-based 'payment results' element of the PbR mechanism is also apparent among CRCs (NAO, 2019). Providers can be penalised for a failure to meet their 'fee for service' obligations (NAO, 2017):

We've always had a focus on performance, even in the Trust days; the difference is, now, if we don't meet those targets, then we lose money. (Kate, Supervision Manager)

The NAO (2019) attribute this enforced focus on performance to the hurried manner in which the *TR* reforms were implemented. The cancelling of PbR pilots when Chris Grayling became Justice Secretary, alongside the Coalition government's 'low risk appetite for failure' (NAO, 2019: 9) in managing offenders' risk, has resulted in the (further) entrenchment of targets. Here, there are similarities with the second principle of Taylorism: PbR has further separated 'conception' from the 'execution' of probation practice (Braverman, 1974: 79):

... we get bombarded with emails. [Managers will] say: 'you need to be doing things this way' or 'you need to be recording it this way'; it's remembering everything, remembering to hit targets. Then we're getting more emails, chasing up if you've not done something. (Maddie, Senior Case Manager)

Supervision Managers, too, are under pressure from the parent company to ensure that practitioners meet performance targets (see also Tidmarsh, 2019):

I think we are very much focused on performance targets; there's very much a message from the top about 'we must do this; it's critical'. (Sarah, Supervision Manager)

Efforts to decentralise probation services through *TR* have thus embedded the centralising tendencies associated with managerialism. Processes are necessarily dictated by management rather than the worker (Braverman, 1974). Accordingly, practitioners argued that practice has been reduced to 'box ticking':

It's all target-driven now; everything is a tick-box exercise. I don't feel like I know my service users, which I think is quite sad because that's not why I came into probation – to tick boxes, to get things done in a certain amount of time. (Trudy, Case Manager)

That staff lack the time to work *with* offenders and to establish relationships contributes to the sense that probation is focused on quantity over quality:

... we are being drip-fed the work that we do with our clients, and it's less about... - what fits in with them and us being told, 'right, you need to do this piece of work with the client', whether that's an induction or a risk assessment. *It's becoming more like a production line.* (Arthur, Senior Case Manager, emphasis added)

Unlike Taylorism, though, staff felt that this loss of autonomy is not absolute (see also Hardy, 2014; Robinson, 2003):

I feel like we do have some autonomy here... We can work from home if we want to work from home; we're in control of our own diaries. (Matilda, Senior Case Manager)

When set against a lack of control over *how* services are delivered, however, this reduced scope arguably represents 'the illusion of making decisions by choosing among fixed and limited alternatives' (Braverman, 1974: 27). This bears some resemblance to the third principle of Taylorism (Braverman, 1974) in that practitioners' working days are increasingly structured around the CRC's need to meet the targets for which it is paid. Elizabeth Street, for Trudy (Case Manager):

... feels like a reporting centre: you can just tick that you've seen people here and that's their compliance. To me, that's really sad because... I don't feel like I'm giving the best support to the client.

Accordingly, where 'members of the "old" probation service were probation officers first, administrators second' (McWilliams, 1987: 107), *TR* has entrenched a culture in which staff are administrators first and probation (service) officers second.

The changing profile of probation practitioners?

As argued above, probation supervision has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, manifest in the rise of probation service officers relative to probation officers. The shift towards an increasingly administrative mode of working raises questions about how new staff understand their role. Samuel, a Case Manager whose employment in probation began in 2016, after *TR* was implemented, joined the service because of a desire to work *with* offenders:

... it was that type of work: having a caseload, doing home visits, working with housing; you know, helping people, stuff like that.

His reasoning conforms to previous research which has shown that practitioners are motivated to enter the probation service because of the people-oriented nature of the work (Annison et al., 2008; Mawby and Worrall, 2013). However, the job has not fully met his expectations:

I'm enjoying it [but] I think, in an ideal world, I thought [the job] would be a bit more hands on, seeing people more frequently, doing more home visits... you'd be going to housing options and sorting stuff out, but there's literally not enough time to do that.

Caseload pressures mean that practice, in his view, is primarily concerned with risk management:

... ideally, you'd have a much smaller caseload so that you could pay much more attention to the guy and do more stuff with them. Sometimes, it does feel like we just do risk management with them and that's it... because you don't have the time.

This lack of opportunity to engage with offenders is in large part due to his administrative responsibilities:

... there's a lot of admin to do. We have to log every appointment, every time you see them; ideally, every time you speak to another agency you'd log in that. Every email you get, you should be logging that, but, again, I try, but it's difficult to find the time.

The Coalition government gave CRCs broad discretion over how new staff were trained, as long as it was 'appropriate' (MoJ, 2013b). However, this freedom has established yet more distance between the worker and a discernible knowledge base (Braverman, 1974):

[There was] not as much [training] as I would have hoped, to be honest. When I first started, you get, I think it's, like, a fortnight of training where you learn how to use the computer systems. (Samuel, Case Manager)

Given the stress on learning to use the information technologies that are crucial to managing risk and meeting performance targets, Samuel felt ill-prepared for dealing with people:

You're kind of chucked in, to be honest, at the deep end – like, my second or third day here, I had somebody showing up and that was, like, 'what do I do?'

The continued diminution of probation training hints at a business model at the CRC that is predicated on cheaper and lower qualified staff. Indeed, Samuel's concerns over training were echoed by experienced members of staff, who lamented the increasingly technicised nature of probation training since *TR*:

Years ago, you used to get training, and I don't mean the online crap we get here now. You're not absorbing the online training ... There's no learning style: tick, tick, tick – you got it wrong again. (Jo, Case Manager)

Samuel also delivers Building Better Relationships (BBR) – an accredited programme aimed at serious domestic violence, which is also delivered to offenders supervised by the NPS. Part of the 'What Works?' movement, accredited programmes emerged in the mid-1990s as a means to target specific offending behaviours; indeed, their successes contributed to the reassertion of rehabilitative legitimacy during a period in which political confidence in probation was low (Robinson, 2008). However, accredited programmes form part of a *fragmentary* (Braverman, 1974) approach to offender management, as services are delivered by several practitioners (Gale, 2012):

... the BBR group that I run, you get high risk guys showing up to that, and sometimes you can get embroiled in that; and you can find yourself alone, in a room chatting to a high risk guy and it's like, hang on a second, I'm not trained to do that. (Samuel, Case Manager)

That Samuel delivers services to high-risk offenders on behalf of the NPS shows how the boundaries between qualified and unqualified practitioners are blurred – not only within the CRC, but also *between* the public and the private sector. This demonstrates how the traditional value placed upon training and the supervisor–offender relationship has been further diminished.

Tellingly, Samuel's example of a successful supervision involved very little work that was personally delivered with an offender:

[The offender] was in a state, homeless, about 19, 20 years old. He'd taken a lot of drugs in his life, very paranoid, agoraphobic, just a real state ... I got him into ... a housing place; massive, a community place down the road where they put guys up and they do warehouse workshop work. They feed them, they house them, and give them about £40 a week. I referred for this guy and he's doing great; he's completed his order and he's been getting really good reviews from them. He said he's stopped drinking, taking drugs; he feels better in himself and in a space of, what, 6 or 7 months

I've been seeing this guy, he's gone from being in a really shitty place to a much better one . . . it's brilliant.

Probation is a job in which positive outcomes can be few and far between (Mawby and Worrall, 2013), and such success should not be trivialised through a romanticised lens of how probation practice used to be delivered – if it ever was. Samuel's experience, however, indicates that the nature of supervision at Elizabeth Street, if not the motivations of staff, is changing. No longer is work delivered *with* offenders; rather, practitioners are required to summarily assess needs and (further) outsource supervision. This points to a cheaper, 'Taylorised' mode of working in which practice depends not upon relationships, training, or qualifications, but upon an ability to sift offenders to relevant organisations in the voluntary sector and accurately record the information for which the CRC is paid.

Conclusions

Since the 1980s, the value of the social work trained, autonomous probation officer encouraged to pursue offender rehabilitation through relationships has been adjudged to be obsolete by successive governments. As such, the nature of probation supervision, along with the profile of practitioners, has undergone marked transformation. Practice was exposed to standardising mechanisms of target and National Standards and severed from its social work roots. These trends towards ever-greater control created the conditions in which the market logic of competition and profit could be proffered as an alternative delivery model. However, this article has demonstrated that *TR* has exacerbated a decades-long period in which probation supervision has been standardised and fragmented – such that, in the CRCs, it is predominantly delivered by cheaper, lesser qualified labour. This managerial continuity is a natural concomitant of the structural constraints in large part imposed upon CRCs, manifest in lower-than-anticipated business volumes and a PBR mechanism which prioritises outputs over outcomes. For practitioners at Elizabeth Street, the financial pressures under which the CRC operates have been intensified by administrative staff redundancies, which have detracted from their ability to establish and maintain relationships with offenders. The emphasis on offender management, extant in the removal of 'probation' from job titles, signifies that practitioners are expected to *coordinate*, rather than deliver, services. Accordingly, the shift to an administrative mode of working means practice increasingly resembles a 'production line' (Arthur, Senior Case Manager).

The process of Taylorisation (Braverman, 1974) is thus apposite for exploring changes to probation practice since *TR*. The loss of qualified staff to the NPS has blurred the boundaries between the Case Manager and the Senior Case Manager roles, as the former are responsible for managing offender profiles previously supervised by the latter. This is not to detract from the skills of Case Managers nor to devalue their work. Rather, *TR* can be situated along a managerial continuum in which the interventionist approaches of successive governments have sought to render probation practice more efficient by jeopardising, if not entirely eradicating,

'the craft, tradition, and the workers' knowledge' (Braverman, 1974: 78). The pressure to signpost to agencies in the voluntary sector both standardises conduct and fragments probation practice. Newer staff, like Samuel, continue to be motivated by a desire to work with offenders, although they have been socialised into a service wherein the time and space available for establishing relationships has been reduced. In this sense, the centralising tendencies of recent decades have, paradoxically, been intensified by decentralising market logic.

The Conservative government's decision, in May 2019, to disband CRCs and to return responsibility for the everyday management of *all* offenders to 12 NPS regions (MoJ, 2019) could have important implications for the Taylorising themes described in this article. Such reorganisation, the government hopes, will restore 'a shared identity and culture amongst all staff' (MoJ, 2019: 28). To this end, the (re)dispersal of the expertise could aid what Robinson (2018: 322) has called *enculturation* – that is, the 'process by which new members acquire the norms, values, behaviours and other tools of [a] particular culture' – as experienced, qualified staff are able to pass on the skills and knowledge required to practise. However, each realigned region will have an 'Innovation Partner' from whom unpaid work and accredited programmes must be procured (MoJ, 2019: 4). Accordingly, the potential remains for a 'two-tier' (HMI Probation, 2017: 6) and *fragmented service*, if to a lesser extent than under *TR*. As with *TR* (MoJ, 2013a), attempts to reinvigorate the 'professionalism' of probation staff are at the heart of the government's reforms (MoJ, 2019). Rather than an equivocal commitment to the market as the primary driver of professional standards (MoJ, 2013a), the government is proposing to establish 'an independent statutory register for probation professionals' (MoJ, 2019: 4) which commits staff to ongoing professional training and development. And yet, HMI Probation (2019: 74) are more cautious, concluding that the scale of redundancies and resignations as a result of *TR* mean 'we can expect a shortage of professional staff for some years yet'.


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