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Anchors Through Change: Exploring Identity Work in the Unified Probation Service for England & Wales

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The Probation Service for England & Wales offers an important case study for those who are interested in the impact(s) of organizational change on workers in criminal justice and, in particular, the identity work that they engage in as they move through frequent iterations of change. In this article, we draw on data from an ongoing longitudinal study of probation reform to explore identity work among a mixed sample of practitioner and management grade staff in one of 12 probation regions. Our analysis reveals the significance of both *occupational* and *organizational* sources of identification to workers of all grades, but also evidence of *dis-identification* with aspects of the current organization. It further reveals the importance of *anchors through change* in workers' identities as they navigate paths through successive reforms. These anchors include values, places and structures that are part of probation's legacy but which offer a sense of continuity and meaning to workers as they adapt within a turbulent field.

KEY WORDS: probation, social identity theory, occupational identity, organizational identity, identity work

INTRODUCTION

The systemization and creeping marketization of criminal justice that has occurred in many Western jurisdictions in the last 30 years has exposed workers to new challenges as the organizations in which they work have been subject to seemingly relentless 'reforms' in the name of enhancing efficiency and/or effectiveness. These reforms have included the colonization of services and their policies by central governments, experiments with outsourcing provision, the reconfiguration of local and regional boundaries and the merging of formerly separate

organizations. The probation service in England & Wales is perhaps unique in having experienced all of the above in the context of a sequence of reform programmes that have included four major organizational restructures between 2001 and 2021 (HMIP 2021). In this article, we deploy social identity theory and the related concept of identity work as a starting point for an exploration of how probation workers at all levels within the organization have navigated change and, in particular, their own occupational and organizational identities in a rapidly evolving context.

The article draws upon original empirical research undertaken in the two-year period since the implementation of the latest probation reforms (in June 2021), which have reunited a formerly bifurcated and partly outsourced service into a unified, public sector organization with new regional boundaries (Beard 2021). We begin by setting out our theoretical framework, which centres on social identity theory and the related concept of identity work, before moving on to discuss extant knowledge about the occupational identities of probation workers in England & Wales. Next, we set out our methodological approach and proceed to present a summary of the research study from which the data presented in this article is derived. Our findings are presented in five main sections: the first three consider aspects of organizational identification, with reference to the recently constituted Probation Service for England & Wales, its new regional structure, and the smaller units of organization (including Probation Delivery Units) that make up the regions. The fourth section considers occupational identification and, in particular, the enduring importance of values in the identity work of probation practitioners and managers. In the fifth section, we discuss our findings in relation to dis-identification: that is, the active questioning and/or rejection of potential sources of identification in the field. This centred on the macro-organizational structures of the Civil Service and (to a lesser extent) HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), within which the contemporary Probation Service for England & Wales is nested. The article concludes with a discussion of our findings and their implications, both for future probation reform and for the wider understanding of how criminal justice workers navigate change.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study of individual and organizational identities has attracted considerable research in the field of management and organizational studies (Corlett *et al.* 2017). Much of this research has been influenced by social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 1986), which suggests that the social groups to which we belong form a significant part of our self-concept. Research on the ways people draw on their membership of organizations in their constructions of self has generated the social-psychological concept of *organizational identification*, defined as 'the perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization' (Mael and Ashforth, 1992: 104). For employees, the organizations in which they work offer an important source for identification, and a body of research has demonstrated that high levels of organizational identification are correlated with high levels of job satisfaction, performance and decreased absenteeism and turnover (Hassan 2012).

Whilst much of the research in this field has concerned corporate environments and thus may have less purchase in other contexts, the allied concept of *occupational identification* has proven useful for consideration of workers in public service settings such as teaching, nursing and criminal justice (Hassan 2012). Mael and Ashforth (1992) define occupational identification as 'the extent to which an individual defines him or herself in terms of the work he or she does, and the prototypical characteristics ascribed to individuals who do that work' (106). Occupational identification is an important construct, not least because it potentially offers a more stable and enduring source of identity than an association with a particular employing

organization (Ashforth and Johnson 2001). However, it is important to recognize that criminal justice workers' identities may be influenced by both occupational *and* organizational contexts, and it follows that researchers should attend to both, with an awareness of the potential for both compatibilities and conflicts between these sources of identification (Hassan 2012).

The idea that individuals exercise agency and make choices in the construction of their workplace identities underlines the concept of *identity work*, which researchers allied to a range of theoretical perspectives have increasingly begun to deploy. Identity work denotes 'the many ways in which people create, adapt, signify, claim and reject identities from available resources' (Brown 2017: 298). For Brown, the increasing purchase of identity work, both in and beyond organizational studies, reflects a growing recognition that identities (of all varieties) are not one-off or static accomplishments, but rather 'actively and often self-consciously constructed' by individuals as they adapt to the vicissitudes of late modern organizational life (Gergen 1991; Giddens 1991). This is a useful concept in the criminal justice field, where workers may draw on resources from the organizations in which they work and/or their occupational alliances, as they navigate change.

The idea of identity work as an active and ongoing process also opens up the possibility of not just positive relationships between the self and aspects of the organizational context (*identification*), but also the possibility of more problematic relationships, as individuals negotiate their identities over time, especially in unstable or inconsistent conditions (Pratt 1998). Research has revealed a range of such (less positive) relationships between the self and the organization, including *dis-identification* (an active and negative connection between the self and the organization), *schizo-identification* (simultaneous identification and dis-identification with different aspects of an organization), *neutral identification* (a self-perception of impartiality with respect to the organization) and *split identification* (identification with 'normative' aspects and dis-identification with organizational failings) (Pratt 1998; Brown 2017).

THE PROBATION CONTEXT

The unstable/inconsistent conditions referred to by Pratt (1998) have been a salient feature of the probation field in England & Wales throughout the last 25 years, such that probation workers have experienced a sequence of organizational changes around them, over which they have had little say or control. In 2001, the first iteration of a National Probation Service (NPS) brought 54 formerly independent probation areas together in a new structure with 42 areas, each overseen by a Probation Board. Just three years later, the NPS was subsumed, alongside the prison service, into a new National Offender Management Service (NOMS) (Morgan 2007). The end of that decade (2009–10) brought further organizational change: Probation Boards were replaced by Probation Trusts and 42 area services were reduced to 35. These structural changes can be understood as part of a process of colonization on the part of successive governments, which can be traced back to the mid-1980s: a process which has also seen politicians pressing for probation to take a more punitive stance; the severing of probation officer training from social work education; and a new discourse centred on risk and 'offender management' (Robinson 2016a).

Despite this succession of organizational and other changes, a significant body of research conducted during this period established a strong and resilient sense of occupational identification among probation workers in England & Wales, reflecting its longstanding alliance with the discipline of social work and origins in philanthropy. Several studies, including an influential study of probation's occupational culture, revealed an enduring commitment to values centred on a 'belief in the capacity of the individual to change for the better' (Mawby and Worrall 2013: 36; see also; Deering 2011). In a similar vein, Robinson *et al.* (2014: 133) found a strong

self-perception among workers as people with 'the right values, virtues, qualities and experiences' for the job, rather than people with a particular set of technical skills (Robinson *et al.* 2014: 133). Reflecting on the findings of extant research with probation staff in England, Wales and Scotland, Grant (2016) argued that probation workers 'possess durable and deeply embedded dispositions that not only protect them from punitive field conditions, but also guide and underpin their everyday practice with offenders' (Grant 2016: 750).

These studies were, however, all conducted prior to the most significant organizational changes to affect probation in England & Wales: changes which saw the dissolution of the 35 Probation Trusts and their replacement with a new two-tier structure, which enabled the contracting out of a very significant portion of probation work. The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government's hotly contested *Transforming Rehabilitation* (TR) reforms led to the creation of 21 new Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs). The CRCs were contracted out to eight different parent companies to deliver supervision to low- and medium-risk people, whilst the supervision of high-risk people (and services to courts) fell to a new iteration of a NPS. With the new NPS situated in the public sector (and, for the first time, within the Civil Service[1]) and the CRCs run by a range of (mostly for-profit) providers, probation workers now found themselves and their colleagues split between a range of different (public and private) employing organizations (Robinson 2016b; Beard 2019).

The two-tier service remained in place for seven years until 2021, and during this period, a range of reports and research studies attested to the splitting of the service as a traumatic experience for workers on both sides of the split as they negotiated their ways through an 'unwanted divorce' (Deering and Feilzer 2015; Robinson *et al.* 2016: 167; Beard 2019). As novel, privately run entities, the new CRCs attracted the lion's share of academic research attention, raising key questions about the construction of legitimate identities at both organizational and individual levels (Robinson *et al.* 2016, 2017; Burke *et al.* 2017; Carr and Robinson 2021; Tidmarsh 2021). This body of research revealed a strong tendency toward strategies centred on establishing 'confluence' (Chreim 2002); that is, the maintenance of continuity and anchors to the past. These anchors included explicit commitments to traditional probation values; the conscious holding on to the generic label of 'probation' to describe the new organizations, their workers and their work; and specific instances of 'symbolic borrowing' from the extant probation 'brand'. One ethnographic study of the transition of workers from a Trust to a new CRC further suggested the importance of place and the locality as an important source of continuity—and identification—for probation workers (Robinson *et al.* 2016). In this study, researchers found that the common geographical footprint of the former Trust and the new CRC (an English county) enabled the preservation of a local, place-based identity—and a sense of pride in the reputation of 'probation' in that place—that was valued by many staff as they navigated through change. The researchers suggested that the geographical dimension of probation identities may have been overlooked and underestimated in previous studies (Robinson *et al.* 2016: 174).

June 2021 saw the (re-) unification of probation services when the Conservative government finally accepted fatal flaws in the two-tier model (Ministry of Justice 2019; Beard 2021; Robinson 2021). This iteration of probation reform once again dissolved the existing structures and created a new organizational entity: a Probation Service for England & Wales, comprising 12 regions, each with between five and 18 Probation Delivery Units (in general terms, corresponding to and named in accordance with counties and/or local authorities). The reconfigured service is situated in the public sector under the umbrella of HM Prison and Probation Service, which itself replaced NOMS in 2017. Its establishment involved the unification of over 7,000 staff from 54 separate organizations (Johal and Davies 2022) and rendered all the new service's employees civil

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1 https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/civil-service-staff-numbers (accessed 20/09/2024)

servants. At the end of December 2021, six months after unification, the total probation caseload was 238,500, comprising a mixture of people serving community sentences (including Suspended Sentence Orders) and prisoners subject to supervision pre- or post-release (Ministry of Justice 2022). It is against this backdrop that the research described below was conducted.

THE RESEARCH

This article draws upon empirical research conducted as part of a three-year longitudinal study of probation unification, which considers a range of perspectives (including those of external stakeholders, policy actors and service users, as well as those employed within the service) (e.g. see Millings *et al.* 2023; Robinson *et al.* 2023; Annison *et al.* 2024). The research received ethical approval from the employing institutions of the research team and from the HMPPS National Research Council in the latter part of 2021. This article draws upon data collected in the first two sweeps of interviews that took place in 2022 and 2023, i.e. the first two years after unification. Our sample, in each sweep, includes all 12 of the Regional Probation Directors (RPDs) and between 60 and 70 probation staff in a case study region (i.e. one of the 12 new probation regions created at unification). It also includes a number of staff working in teams within HMPPS, whose roles are directly related to the implementation of probation unification.

Our case study region is typical of the 12 probation regions in that it has a large geographical footprint and incorporates staff from both of the 'legacy' parts of the former structures: in this case, one of the seven former NPS divisions and more than one of the 21 CRCs.[2] It incorporates four English counties that correspond to the pre-2014 probation structures: that is, four discrete probation Trusts and (prior to those) probation areas. Within the case study area, participants were recruited via a range of strategies, which included presentations to senior leaders; the circulation of calls for participants and snowball sampling, with a view to hearing the voices and perspectives of staff (a) in a wide range of roles, (b) in all parts of the region, (c) with a balanced mix of individuals joining from both legacy organizations (NPS/CRCs) and (d) with a range of types and lengths of experience.[3]

In this article, we draw primarily upon data collected as part of a structured exercise that featured in our second sweep of interviews with frontline staff and managers in our case study area. This particular sample comprised 63 individuals[4] who fell into six groups: Senior Managers (SMs) with major operational roles within the region ($n = 9$); Heads of Probation Delivery Units (HPDUs), who lead the operational units in which the majority of probation teams are based ($n = 7$); Senior Probation Officers (SPOs) who line manage teams of frontline practitioners ($n = 17$); Probation Officers (POs) who deliver frontline services and hold a professional qualification ($n = 10$); Probation Service Officers (PSOs) who are frontline practitioners not required to hold a professional qualification ($n = 10$); and trainee Probation Officers (TPOs) who are employed as PSOs whilst undertaking professional training ($n = 10$). The frontline staff in our sample include those in 'offender management' roles centred on regular face-to-face supervision with a mix of people serving community and/or custodial sentences; and others in specialist teams (e.g. delivering services to courts; delivering accredited offending behaviour programmes or delivering unpaid work in the community).

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2   The NPS (2014–21) had seven divisions: North East, North West, Midlands, London, South East, South West and South Central and Wales. Only two of these (London and Wales) are coterminous with the former NPS divisions. Each region has taken on board staff from up to three CRCs from up to two parent companies.

3   Across all three sweeps of the research in our case study area we interviewed 98 individuals. Within this particular sample, during the course of the research, seven people retired and a further nine (SPOs, POs and PSOs) left the service to take up employment elsewhere.

4   Of these, and consistent with the study's longitudinal design, 52% had also taken part in an interview in the previous year (sweep 1).

The structured exercise we included in our interviews with this sample involved a prompt comprising a written list of potential sources of identification for contemporary probation workers, constructed by the research team, which we shared with them during the interview. This list included a mix of organizational and occupational items, as well as an open category ('something else') which participants could self-define. Items were listed as follows:

The Probation Service for England & Wales
The PDU I work in
My region
Being part of HMPPS
Being a civil servant
Probation values
My professional qualifications
The office or particular setting (e.g. court; Approved Premises; prison) in which I work
Something else (what?)

In 1:1 interviews, participants were asked to choose up to three items from the list that were most important to their identity as a worker. They were then asked to explain their choices and to elaborate, if they wished to, on their reasons for not choosing other options. Participants chose a mean average of 2.7 items, and a summary of their responses is presented below in Table 1.

Data analysis was conducted by the lead author and commenced by isolating relevant data excerpts that had been previously coded in NVivo by other members of the team and organized by role type. Text relating to the choices of items in the structured exercise outlined above was first converted into quantitative data and compiled to create Table 1. Text was then subject to further manual coding, centred on the identification of comments relating to each of the items in the structured exercise, grouped according to participants' roles.

In the following sections, research participants have been anonymized by means of codes that reveal their role and a number (e.g. SPO5; PO7). Where we draw on interviews with RPDs, we adopt a similar approach (RPD1, RPD2 etc).

FINDINGS

We begin by presenting a summary of the choices of the participants in our second round of interviews ($n = 63$) in respect of the structured exercise described above. These have been organized according to the roles of participants. The numbers in the final right-hand column show the total number of times the particular item was selected, and the items are listed in overall order of popularity. The numbers in the remaining columns show the popularity (by rank) of each item according to the role(s) of participants.

We will refer to Table 1 throughout the analysis which follows.

Organizational identification I: The Probation Service for England & Wales

The unification of probation services was a somewhat confusing affair. In May 2019 when the decision to unify probation services was announced, it was proposed that the staff and caseloads of the CRCs would be brought into the existing NPS (Ministry of Justice 2019). It was not until early 2021, just a few months prior to the date of unification, that problems with this plan were acknowledged in a report published by HM Inspectorate of Probation:

We found that often both CRC and NPS staff described the unification process as an NPS 'takeover' or 'acquisition', which we concluded was an unhelpful barrier to the cultural

Table 1. Sources of identification, by grade of staff ($n = 63$)

| Item | Choices by grade of staff | | | | | | |
| | Management grades | | | Practitioner grades | | | |
	SMs $n = 9$	HPDUs $n = 7$	SPOs $n = 17$	POs $n = 10$	PSOs $n = 10$	TPOs $n = 10$	Total no. of times chosen (% of interviewees choosing item)
The PDU I work in	Not chosen	1	1	2	=1	2	35 (55%)
Probation values	2	2	2	4	=3	3	33 (52%)
The office or particular setting (e.g. court, Approved Premises, prison) in which I work	3	5	3	1	=1	1	30 (48%)
My region	1	3	4	Not chosen	=7	8	18 (29%)
Something else (what?)	Not chosen	Not chosen	=5	3	=5	4	14 (22%)
My professional qualifications	=4	Not chosen	=5	=5	=7	=5	13 (21%)
The Probation Service for England & Wales	=4	4	=7	=5	=5	=5	13 (21%)
Being part of HMPPS	=4	Not chosen	=7	=5	=3	=5	13 (21%)
Being a civil servant	7	Not chosen	Not chosen	Not chosen	Not chosen	Not chosen	1 (2%)

> change which will be needed to create a genuinely unified service [...] Maintaining the existing name 'National Probation Service' for the unified service would be a barrier to creating the sense of a new organisation in which CRC and NPS staff consider themselves as equals (HMIP 2021).

Henceforth, plans were adjusted to minimize the psychological damage associated with the idea of a 'takeover' and a new vision—of a new and united *Probation Service for England & Wales* (henceforth, PSEW)—appeared (HMPPS 2021; Johal and Davies 2022). However, situated within the Civil Service and adopting IT systems used for the past 7 years by NPS staff,[5] the new organization was very clearly built on NPS foundations, and it was inevitable that many incoming CRC staff would feel like 'second class' workers' despite the new name (Millings *et al.* 2023).

5   The *Target Operating Model for Probation Services in England & Wales* includes the following statement: 'We acknowledge that this may feel like a bigger change for those staff currently working within CRCs, particularly in relation to IT and systems which will largely be those utilised currently by the NPS' (HMPPS 2021: 24).

Well aware of both psychological and practical barriers to integration, central HMPPS teams hastily established a *Welcome Hub* website that could be accessed by all staff at the point of unification, and a great deal of work went into the development of explanatory materials for the website, designed to help workers from different 'legacy' organizations to understand the transition and their place in the new PSEW. A new 'strapline' was also introduced for the PSEW—*Assess, Protect, Change*—intended to distil its statutory aims and the idea of a shared mission among all its workers (HMPPS 2021; Annison *et al.* 2024).

Our second round of interviews suggest that two years on from unification the new organization was not a dominant source of identification for staff in our case study region, regardless of which organization they had come from. Table 1 shows that although the PSEW was more likely to be selected as a source of identification by SMs than by other grades of staff, it did not enter the top three choices of any group. However, when it *was* selected, the comments of several participants suggested that their own particular construction of the service was of a stable point of reference, rather than a new organizational entity. For example:

> I've been in different PDUs, I've been in different roles, I've been in different teams, but I've been part of the Probation Service the whole of my working life. So probably that would be my number one (PSO8).

> The Probation Service, you know, I think that's been my career, you know [...] I identify as a probation officer [who works] for the Probation Service, whatever else it's been called in the past (PO10).

These examples chime with the findings of research conducted prior to unification (reviewed above), which found a strong tendency toward the maintenance of anchors to the past: anchors which included the active preservation of 'probation' to describe the new organizations, the workers and their work (Robinson *et al.* 2016). For the workers quoted above, 'the Probation Service' was clearly being constructed and understood as a point of continuity in their careers, and a stable source of identification, as they navigated ongoing change around them.

This finding is consistent with the enduring discourse of 'probation' which was found during the TR years (discussed above) and suggests that the id*ea* of a 'probation service' is today something of a mythical construct or discursive bridge that functions to anchor (at least some) workers as they navigate uncertainty and the discomforts of perennial change. In a similar vein, we found that the national strapline—Assess, Protect, Change—had not made an impact: the vast majority of participants in our case study area were unaware of it and were much more likely to refer in interviews to 'legacy' straplines, including 'advise, assist and befriend'; 'protecting the public and reducing reoffending' (Carr and Robinson 2021), and in their interviews with us, RPDs anticipated that this would be the case. These discursive legacies, like the idea of a probation service stretching back through the decades, were powerful elements of meaning-making for workers in the tumultuous conditions of the present.

Organizational identification II: The new regions

The PSEW meant new geographical 'footprints' for the majority of the 12 probation regions, which differed from those of the structures that preceded them. Only two retained the footprint of former CRCs and NPS divisions; the remaining 10 were newly shaped, with boundaries drawn to maximize alignment to police force and local authority areas (HMPPS 2021: 38). Our second sweep of interviews with RPDs revealed different approaches to the idea of building a regional identity. Whilst some told us that they had devoted much attention to this, others said they had only recently found the 'headspace' to start thinking about it. RPDs were concerned

both with their region's external-facing identity (with a view to building strong partnerships in the criminal justice field) as well as promoting a sense of belonging among their staff population. For those RPDs in regions with devolved governmental powers ($n = 3$), this was cited as an important element of identity building in their region. Others referred to attempts to adopt specific values; though only one RPD had sought to promulgate the existing values of the Civil Service in their identity-building work.[6] Our case study region was one in which the RPD had sought in the first year to develop a values-based identity and to translate this into a specific strapline for their region.

RPDs acknowledged a number of challenges in seeking to develop and embed a regional identity; challenges associated primarily with the size and internal diversity of the regions. For those RPDs who had previously occupied roles as Divisional Directors in the NPS, this was a familiar experience. For example, reflecting on their experience as a Divisional Director in the South West & South Central Division of the NPS, one RPD told us that 'trying to get anybody in Milton Keynes to feel like they were part of the same region as somebody from Penzance was a bit of a challenge'.[7] Thus, whilst we found among RPDs hope that staff would identify with 'their' region, they also anticipated that other, more proximate, sources of identification might displace its importance, particularly among frontline staff grades.

Indeed, Table 1 indicates a clear pattern in respect of the choice of 'my region' among our sample, such that the more senior the participant, the more inclined they were to select this among their top three choices. Among the SMs, 'my region' was first choice overall, and it was third choice among the PDU heads. This finding makes sense when we consider the particular roles and organizational purviews of the different staff groups: the roles and responsibilities of more senior managers tend to require a wider perspective, whereas middle managers and practitioner grade staff tend to be embedded in teams that reside in particular places, with particular resources and service users. As the following participants explained:

> [The region covers] such a big area [...] So to identify with the whole region where people have different interventions, different staff, different routines for prisoners, it's very hard to [identify] on a broader level than the office I'm in and the team I'm in (PO6).

> You still feel quite separated. I don't know whether it's because we're so distant…if there is a regional event, we have to travel so many miles to get there (SPO16).

Interestingly, SMs (and RPDs) were also more likely to mention the exercise of agency in respect of taking on their current roles, and this seemed to have a bearing on their identification. For example:

> [My first choice is] the region, so I do feel very aligned to that. *I made the decision* because at the point of unification I could have gone to [region A] or [region B] and I made the decision to go to [region B]. So, I suppose that's quite central (SM4, emphasis added).

The importance of agency also emerged for the minority of the RPDs who had previously occupied roles as Divisional Directors in the NPS—roles which involved becoming a senior civil servant for the first time. As one explained: 'There are only four of us [RPDs] left who actually made that choice. I had to think about it really carefully [at the time], and I decided I wanted to' (RPD3).

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6   The Civil Service operates in accordance with four core values: integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality. See: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-code/the-civil-service-code. Accessed 20/09/2024.

7   This quotation cannot be anonymised but it appears with the explicit permission of the participant.

Organizational identification III: Location connections and places of safety

This is my PDU and this is my office. I don't really tend to see the big picture (TPO9).

Table 1 shows that the most popular organizational units selected by staff in the case study region, across all grades, were *The PDU I work in* (chosen by 55 per cent) and *The office or particular setting in which I work* (chosen by 48 per cent). Many chose both. There are 108 Probation Delivery Units across the 12 regions and, like the regions in which they are situated, PDUs are new units of probation territory, the boundaries of which were drawn at the point of unification.[8] That PDUs, as new units of organization, were the most popular source of identification overall may appear to be inconsistent with our contention about the importance to workers of 'anchors to the past'. However, we found a common tendency among participants to derive meaning from PDUs precisely because of their histories and connections with what were familiar places and colleagues within them. For example:

> So, I have got a real sense of commitment to the PDU, and I don't know whether that's owing to the fact I worked here for 10 years as a probation officer, so I've got that previous history with the team and some of the staff members (HPDU4).

HPDU4, quoted above, was one of several PDU Heads who had a long history with the 'territory' of their PDU and who thus offered a point of continuity for longer-serving staff in those areas. That continuity of place and people was important for many was further reinforced by several participants' choices of 'something else' in our list of options, where the 'something else' was a prior iteration of probation territory (i.e. a probation Trust/area). For example:

> I would have to say, fundamentally - and maybe it's to do with my history: I still identify with [Trust/area A], primarily. I think that [it] has a particular identity. No disrespect to other areas, It is different. It is different to [Trust/area B] and it's different to [Trust/area C] (SPO1).

> I'm [Trust/area B] through and through. I'm a big champion of [Trust/area B] probation (SPO 9).

> I think I identify as working for local probation, so [Trust/area C] Probation, even though that's not what we're even called anymore (laughter) (PSO9).

Thus, sub-regional structures continued to be an important source of identification for some. Trust/area D was no exception: the RPD in our case study area and several other participants in our sample referred to Trust/area D as being 'like a family'; a place with a relatively stable workforce dominated by people local to that area.

Constructions of probation territories, then, were found to include both current PDUs and former iterations of place from probation's past: both were important sources of identification within our case study region. But smaller scale 'territories' were also important, especially among practitioner grade staff, for whom *The office or particular setting in which I work* was the most popular (or in the case of PSOs the equal first) choice. This finding makes sense given that practitioner grade staff tend to be embedded in teams that reside in particular places (e.g. a field team; a court team; a prison team; an Approved Premises team). It thus reflects to a large degree their positionality within the organizational hierarchy (see Robinson *et al.* 2023). However, we

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8   Prior to unification, the NPS and the Probation Trusts which preceded it, were made up of Local Delivery Units. Nationally, 63 per cent of practitioner grade staff and SPOs are based in PDUs, whilst the remaining 37 per cent are in teams that are not PDU-based (Ministry of Justice 2024),

can also understand the significance of these smaller and more proximate structures with reference to the relative powerlessness of those who chose them to influence the changes around them. This is likely to have generated a need for a sense of security and psychological safety in an otherwise uncertain and volatile environment. As one senior manager explained:

> What we found was very important to people at unification was: 'where am I going to hang my coat?' It became a bit of a euphemism for how we needed to…the level of detail that we needed to give people (SM6).

This participant's observation suggests Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, which posits that the human need for a sense of safety is one of the most basic, second only to physiological needs like oxygen, food and shelter. It is also consistent with theoretical approaches to recovery from trauma at both individual and organizational levels (see Robinson 2021). But there are other explanations too: consistent with some participants' choices of the mid-sized structures of PDUs and other 'legacy' units of organization, we observed strong emotional and/or biographical attachments to the smaller, particular places of office and/or setting:

> I do the job because I want to try and make a difference, and it's nice to work locally, and to try to support people with change, in my hometown. I'm proud of where I live. I love where I live. And I like the people that I work with, ultimately. That's what keeps me here, to be honest, through difficult times. I think the other [options] - like the PDU and my region - are really hard [to identify with] because [they] cover such a vast area (PSO2).

> [I chose the setting in which I work] Because it's the job that I do. I think where I'm based, how I'm able to work and…what would the council call it? My 'location connection' (TPO4).

Occupational identification and the enduring importance of values

Returning to Table 1, it is evident that across all the staff groups, three choices were most popular. Two of these are place-based organizational units of small to medium size and these have been discussed in the preceding section. With *Probation values* in overall second place and chosen by 53 per cent of our participants, our findings are consistent with those of earlier studies, which have revealed a very strong thread of continuity in occupational identification among probation workers amid significant organizational change. In the contemporary context of probation unification, we contend, the values workers associate with probation have played an important 'anchoring' role for many as they have navigated through change. For example:

> I think the professional values, in some senses, is all I've got. I mean, the staff around you changes at different times, but that has been the constant. I mean, you evolve it, but yes, I mean that gives you your sense of purpose (SPO3).

> I think you need to strip probation back to the reason why we're here. We need [structures] to organise us, but that's never going to replace the values of the people on the ground that keep the service running. That is your absolute key (SPO13).

> 'Probation values': yes, absolutely, the values the service have had right from when I first joined, and still have. Right up there, so I'll put that as number 1 (PO3).

> I joined the Probation Service when I was 18 years old and that values that I've kind of become aware of, and been told [about] over the years - 'This is what we aim to do' - I've bought into those, because I know it's the right thing to do, and I want to be that person (PSO4).

The enduring role of values in anchoring workers was also evident in the senior leadership team's focussed work, in the year after unification, on the development of a values-based strapline for the case study region.[9] This can be understood both as a means by which to build a regional identity (discussed above), and a lack of identification with the national strapline—Assess, Protect, Change—which was regarded by RPDs as a somewhat bland (albeit not objectionable) statement of functions rather than values. But holding on to traditional probation values amid this latest iteration of structural change was described by many as a challenge—as we shall see in the next section.

Meanwhile, Table 1 indicates that the other source of occupational identification in our structured exercise—*My professional qualifications*—was only moderately important. Those who selected it included two trainees (currently undertaking a qualification to become POs) and six management grade staff, but only two POs. Among those who chose this item, we observed a powerful sense of personal pride in their accomplishments. For example, one SPO explained with pride their journey from a working-class background through marriage and divorce and a return to education as a mature student. Others shared this sense of personal pride in having worked hard to gain a qualification, and/or equated their qualification with a notion of 'professionalism' that they were concerned was being diminished. For example:

> I am one of those very few people left with a social work qualification, and I'm not totally sure that the [current] probation qualification is worth its merit (SPO11).

> I'm very proud of my professional qualifications. What I hate is that I worked hard for those and then everyone's [now defined as a] 'probation practitioner', and I'm going: "I'm a proud probation officer. I worked hard to get that qualification" (PO6).

It is worth noting here that half of the choices of 'something else' in our structured exercise were connected to the specific roles that individuals held, such as 'being a Senior Probation Officer' (SPO12); 'my role as a probation practitioner' (PO2); 'my role as a PSO' (PSO5). These, we suggest, are responses that can be understood as instances of occupational identification.

Discomfort, conflict and 'dis-identification'

The theoretical framework we introduced earlier in this article suggests the possibility of not just positive relationships between the self and aspects of the context ('identification'), but also the possibility of *dis-identification* with features of that context, as individuals negotiate their identities over time, in unstable or inconsistent conditions (Pratt 1998). The interviews within our case study area revealed some powerful elements of *dis-id*entification among significant proportions of staff at all grades, and in this regard differences between managers and practitioners were less pronounced.

Table 1 shows that *Being part of HMPPS* was among the least popular sources of identification. Whilst one in five individuals said they were happy to see themselves as part of this organizational entity, many expressed a sense of disconnect between themselves and HMPPS. For example:

> I don't feel part of HMPPS (SM2)

> Being part of HMPPS. What does that mean? What does that mean for me? It's all…the waters are all muddy (PSO10).

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9 Interestingly, whilst some participants said that they appreciated this effort, the regional strapline did not gain much traction because staff in some PDUs decided to create their own 'grassroots' versions as a way to consolidate a 'PDU identity'. In the interest of preserving the anonymity of our case study region, we do not refer explicitly to the regional strapline. However, it is worth stating that this was very consistent with earlier iterations of probation straplines and statements of values that have been in circulation since 2001 (see Carr and Robinson 2021), such that we do not understand the creation of a regional strapline as an attempt to impose values that staff would not recognize or might be expected to resist.

Others expressed more active concerns about the place of probation alongside prisons in the context of HMPPS. For example:

> Being part of HMPPS to me feels very much like a prison takeover. We're being really closely aligned with the Prison Service now, which is helpful in one respect, but I don't think our values are the same and we should be two distinct organisations from my point of view (SPO9).

> I still think it's really important for prison and probation to have a separate identity, because they are different. They're massively different, worlds apart (PO7).

Comments such as these reflect longstanding discontent about the bringing together of prisons and probation services that can be traced back to the establishment of NOMS in 2004 (e.g. Hough *et al.* 2006; Robinson and Burnett 2007), so our participants were not expressing new concerns. This stands in contrast to the much more recent reality of probation being situated within the Civil Service. Table 1 shows that only one person in our case study region, a senior manager, identified with *Being a civil servant,* and in making this choice they commented: 'I assume I am a huge outlier' (SM3). Not only was that the case, but this option provoked the most negative reactions, such that it constituted, for many, a source of active dis-identification. For example:

> I feel alienated by the Civil Service (SM2)

> I'm a probation servant, not a civil servant (HPDU)

> I don't like it. I'm a probation practitioner. That's me. That's what I do (PO2).

> If someone says 'what do you do?' I don't like to say that I am a civil servant. I work in probation, and I align myself with my role, not the government organisation that I work under (TPO5).

Whilst to a large extent individuals' dis-identification with the Civil Service was quite generalized, several individuals offered an explanation that centred on the stifling of voice.[10] For example:

> I have to be careful on social media. There have been times when I've wanted to, sort of, challenge the direction of government. I found that challenging [...] the way we get silenced (PO8).

This perception of a conflict between aspects of the organization and the values shared by its members echoes some of the views about HMPPS, and in both instances, we see clear examples of conflict between occupational and organizational sources of identification (Hassan 2012). This suggests that for many in our sample, *identity work* involved a struggle and elements of discomfort. These feelings of conflict have been described by Bourdieu in terms of *hysteresis*, a term which denotes tension between a person's habitus and changes in the field in which they are operating, such that they no longer feel that they fit comfortably and must find ways to manage the associated discomfort, which can include leaving the organization (Graham 2020; see also McNeill *et al.* 2009). These feelings were found at all levels within the organization:

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10 For example, the Civil Service Code states that a civil servant must 'serve the government, whatever its political persuasion, to the best of your ability in a way which maintains political impartiality and is in line with the requirements of this code, no matter what your own political beliefs are'. See: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-code/the-civil-service-code (accessed 8/10/2024)

If [probation values] go, I go. It's not going to work for me. [In that respect] you're tested as a civil servant (RPD2).

I don't feel that my values sit comfortably with being a civil servant. Because I feel that the role we serve should be for our local communities, and we should be accountable locally. Not to a faceless, bureaucratic beast, if I'm honest. And as a result of that, things like HMPPS fit into that, and unfortunately so does the current framework of the Probation Service. But on the previous models, I might have been more inclined to [choose the Probation Service] as one of the areas of belonging. But I feel as if it has drifted so much from where it was (HPDU5).

The view of the Probation Service conveyed by HPDU5, above, differs markedly from the more common tendency among participants, noted earlier, to construct the PSEW as a point of continuity in their career. This individual saw the PSEW as part of a long-standing problem, whereby the community dimension of probation work has become less prominent (Bottoms 2008). They managed this by focussing on (self-described) 'old school' values, and continuing to 'instil [those values] in the staff that I work with' (HPDU5).

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The contemporary *Probation Service for England & Wales* offers an important case study for those who are interested in the impact(s) of organizational change on workers in criminal justice and the identity work that they engage in as they move through frequent iterations of change. Criminal justice workers are likely to experience powerlessness as the organizational field around them evolves, but social identity theory offers a useful lens through which to see that workers retain the capacity to exercise agency in respect of how and with what they choose to identify, from among the available resources. In this article, we have sought to understand how workers' identities may be influenced by both organizational and occupational factors, as well as the potential for both compatibilities and conflicts between—and dis-identification with—these discrete sources of identification. With the benefit of a mixed sample of staff in a range of management and practitioner roles, we have also been able to explore the similarities and differences between workers navigating change.

To begin with commonalities between staff groups, we found that (on aggregate) they all favoured a blend of both organizational and occupational sources of identification. In common with extant research on the occupational identities of probation workers, we found that *probation values* have maintained their importance across all grades of staff. However, a strong identification with values was often experienced as incompatible with macro-level organizational structures, such that these could be a source of dis-identification for those who prized their value base. The absorption of the Probation Service within the Civil Service and, to a lesser extent, the elision of probation and prisons in the content of HMPPS, are organizational manoeuvres that have generated varying degrees of unease which, whilst not universal, were found across all grades of staff (see also Tidmarsh 2024). Regardless of role/grade, few actively identified with these macro-organizational structures, with many perceiving them as posing threats to occupational identities grounded in 'traditional' values, including the exercise of voice and the community base of probation work—expressed by one participant as the conviction that 'probation should be embroidered into the localities' (RPD5).

With a small number of exceptions, then, the macro-organizational structures of the Civil Service and HMPPS were not central to the identities of our sample, and were a source of dis-identification for many. However, the *intra-organizational* structures of probation proved more important, albeit that some key differences in the precise sources of identification were

found between grades of staff. We have suggested that these differences can largely be explained with reference to the particular positionalities or organizational purviews of workers occupying different roles: in our case study region, senior managers were more inclined to identify with the region (as were the RPDs in our wider sample), whilst practitioner grade staff favoured the smaller units of organization: namely, the particular office or working location in which they are embedded. The middle-range organizational unit of the PDU was roundly popular across all grades, with the exception of senior managers, whose roles are neither limited to nor physically embedded within particular PDUs.

We noted earlier that research conducted in the context of the *TR* reform programme, which involved the outsourcing of much probation work to CRCs, suggested that the importance of place to workers—and the sense of confluence which derived from remaining in the same place whilst organizational structures changed around them—may have been underestimated in the literature to date (Robinson *et al.* 2016). The findings of the present study, we argue, provide further evidence that this is indeed the case. What small and mid-sized units of organization in probation share in common is their (differently sized) footprints in *places* that are imbued with meaning by virtue of their histories and particular cultures, both in and beyond 'probation'. Thus, we found longstanding allegiances to sub-regions within our case study area that derived from personal histories and biographies, past probation structures and/or features of the local community. Much like 'traditional' probation values, these places offer anchors through change for workers, which enable them to maintain their identities as workers, even in extreme conditions. We have suggested that 'the Probation Service' serves a similar anchoring function for many, as evidenced in several workers' constructions of the service as a static (and somewhat mythical) framework throughout their probation careers. In sum, our findings not only shed light on the importance of anchors through change for workers in conditions of ongoing turbulence, but they also point to the ways in which occupational values and places are constructed, often in mutually reinforcing ways, as primary anchors in the probation context.

The theoretical framework we have utilized in this article has been borrowed from the field of management and organizational studies and, as we noted at the outset, much of the research that has been published in this field has concerned corporate environments. Nevertheless, we have found this framework and its conceptual detail to be extremely relevant and productive in the particular part of the criminal justice field that we have explored. Firstly, the idea of identity work has proven very useful as a way to think about the choices that workers make in conditions of constrained agency (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011). Furthermore, echoing Hassan (2012), we strongly encourage other researchers in this field (and in the broader context of public services research) to consider the utility of concepts of occupational and organizational identification and, crucially, the ways in which these different sources of identification may align and/or conflict with one another. We also strongly endorse consideration of the possibility of both positive and more problematic relationships between workers' sense of self and aspects of their working environments. In our research, the concept of *dis-identification* has proven to be particularly pertinent, but the range of other possibilities set out by Pratt (1998) (see above) could be fruitful in other contexts.

Our findings suggest that those with responsibility for leading major reform programmes in the criminal justice field should caution against easy assumptions about how workers will adapt to top-down changes about which they have had little say. A similar conclusion was reached in a recent study of proposed policing reforms in Scotland. Atkinson and Murray (2021) used a survey to explore how members of the Scottish division of the British Transport Police felt about a proposed merger (later put on ice) with Scotland's national police force. They found that most officers felt a strong sense of identification with the 'railway policing family', which they saw as separate to other policing agencies. The authors concluded that this was an

important cautionary tale on mergers undertaken for political reasons, especially when coupled with untested assumptions that officers and staff would identify with a (wider and more general) 'Scottish policing family'. In the probation setting, the transition to the Civil Service—a values-based organization—might have been assumed to be acceptable to probation workers who are known to have a strong occupational identity grounded in values. But as we have demonstrated, any such assumptions have been ill-founded. Although 'probation values' have often been ill-defined and contested over the years (e.g. Nellis 1995; Gelsthorpe 2007), our research suggests that the contemporary configuration of probation services has served to emphasize dearly held values associated with voice and local accountability that do not sit well with the nesting of probation within larger structures which are experienced as obstructive.

The findings presented in this article appear to lend support to the comments of the outgoing Chief Inspector of Probation in September 2023, who took the opportunity to 'look back over what has been a tumultuous and difficult period for the Probation Service and to offer some reflections on the future as well' (Russell 2023: 6). He continued:

> [...] it's important that the voice and interests of the Probation Service continue to get the leadership attention they so desperately need. Many in the service hark back to the days (not that long ago), when probation was a genuinely local service – locally accountable rather than run from Whitehall, focused on local partnerships and able to act autonomously within them. Given our [inspection] results from the past year, and after speaking to probation leaders and managers around England and Wales, I have to say I have increasing sympathy with this view [...] While I recognise that another reorganisation of the service, and any shift in this direction would have to be with the explicit agreement of local managers and staff, I think the time has come for an independent review of whether probation should move back to a more local form of governance and control (Russell 2023: 8).

A 'strategic review of probation governance' also featured in the 2024 election manifesto of the Labour party.[11] Whether such a review will be prioritized by the new Labour government remains to be seen, but our contemporaneous findings in respect of the identity work of probation staff, and in particular the anchors through change that sustain them, would suggest that such a review would be welcomed.

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