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## **Transforming Rehabilitation:**

### **The impact of austerity and privatisation on day-to-day cultures and working practices in 'probation'**

Samantha Walker, Jill Annison, and Sharon Beckett

#### **Abstract**

Viewed as a culmination of broader neoliberal governance within the UK, this paper examines the impact of the government's Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) agenda on day-to-day working cultures at the frontline of probation work. TR has brought with it extensive structural and cultural changes to probation work in England and Wales. Once a single public-sector service with a social welfare ethos of 'advise, assist and befriend', probation has been dismantled, partially privatised and culturally transformed into a collection of fragmented, target-driven organisations, divided according to risk and with an official rhetoric emphasising public protection.

The implications of TR are now starting to surface. While much of this attention has focused on the impact of TR on both the supervision of offenders and in terms of public protection, less research has been conducted on how these organisational changes have impacted upon staff. Drawing upon findings from qualitative research, this article suggests that deepening cuts, precarious working environments, and increasingly unmanageable caseloads inflict upon staff what we consider to be a pervasive form of systemic workplace harm, resulting in mental health issues, stress, and professional dissatisfaction.

#### **Keywords**

Workplace Harm, Neoliberalism, Privatisation, Transforming Rehabilitation (TR), National Probation Service (NPS), Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs)

## Introduction

Despite widespread opposition, the Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) agenda, which was introduced by the government in 2012, was operationalised at great speed, severing probation from its public-service and humanitarian foundations (Deering and Feilzer, 2015).<sup>i</sup> In the place of existing probation trusts emerged a ‘new’ and much smaller National Probation Service (NPS) and, following a complex bidding process, 21 new Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) took over responsibility for managing medium and low risk offenders. In 2014, following a review of all staff caseloads conducted on a randomly chosen date in 2013, all probation staff were reallocated either to the NPS or to CRC (Robinson et al., 2016), and what followed was a swift array of changes typical of broader patterns in the field of work and employment within the context of neoliberalism. Well-documented downsizing through redundancies, staff cuts and role changes<sup>ii</sup> has injected a sense of job insecurity amongst many probation workers – particularly those working within CRCs. Such feelings have been deepened by the CRCs’ over-estimation of revenues and a shift toward more automated services such as the introduction of offender management ‘kiosks’ and over-the-phone supervision (National Audit Office, 2017). The result has been at times unmanageable caseloads, giving rise to extreme stress and anxiety among probation staff and a general experience of deskilling and deprofessionalisation which has thrown many probation workers’ professional identities into a state of existential crisis.

Although the probation service has undergone numerous structural and cultural changes since its creation (Mawby and Worrall, 2013), the extent of these changes in the last few years cannot be overstated. Described as “the most radical change it [probation] has ever seen” (Newburn, 2013), TR has intensified the existing significant challenges that decades of neoliberal policies have posed to the ‘probation ideal’ (Deering and Feilzer, 2015) and its established working practices (Robinson et al., 2016: 165). Therefore, while this article builds upon existing critiques of contemporary probation, it focuses more specifically toward a consideration of the harmful impact that these structural changes have upon *workers*. Indeed, it is our belief that TR and the changes this has brought about offer a unique opportunity to conceptually expand and advance research in the broad field of workplace violence.

Numerous studies have emerged detailing the systematic failings of TR, failings which have been confirmed in the government’s early termination of the CRC contracts (MoJ, 2018). However, government ministers have failed to concede that TR’s failings are a result of its neoliberal underpinnings and the problems inherent within the privatisation of public services. On the contrary, in

discussing the termination of TR, Justice Secretary David Gauke defended the continued role of the private sector in the delivery of such public services, suggesting that “clear lessons needed to be learned in improving the system”, but that he “doesn’t favour excluding the private sector from this at all” (Grierson, 2018).

Given the government’s clear ideological attachment to policies of privatisation, it is therefore important to stress from the outset that the purpose of this paper is *not limited* to a focus on analysing or critiquing specifically the effectiveness of the government’s TR agenda. In view of the early termination of CRC contracts and the clear intention of the government to continue private sector involvement within probation, we deem it necessary to situate TR as a symptom of a deeper neoliberal agenda and examine the impact that these changes have had on the organisational cultures and day-to-day working practices within probation more broadly. In other words, we focus on TR, austerity and privatisation as the mechanism through which systemic work-based harms emerge from their underpinnings in neoliberal ideology. By drawing upon qualitative interviews with former probation staff, in this article we explore some of the challenges faced by probation staff in the wake of neoliberal capitalism. We demonstrate how neoliberal ideology has modified professional roles and responsibilities, how it has affected day-to-day working practices, and how it has had a significant impact the occupational identities of those working in the probation sector today. Ultimately, in this paper we argue that, when viewed as part of the broader neoliberal agenda, TR and the changes that have occurred within probation constitute a more pervasive and equally damaging form of *systemic* work-based harm.

### **Workplace Violence and Normalised Harm**

Throughout Europe the study of workplace violence (WPV) has attracted a growing body of attention from academics, governments, legal bodies, unions and management (Scott, 2017; Gill et al., 2002; Leather et al., 1999). Until relatively recently, such discussions have primarily focused on tangible harms such as physical violence and bullying. For example, during the 1960s, the focus was primarily upon violence against staff in the context of robbery and assault. In the 1970s, this attention shifted, in that the experience of healthcare workers, particularly nurses, was explored in relation to violence and abuse perpetrated by external actors and forms of prejudicial abuse along the lines of gender, race and sexuality. The focus of this attention was primarily patients and their relatives (Bowie, 2010). The 1990s then gave rise to psychological research into bullying in the workplace (see Leyman, 1990, 1996),

culminating in 2011 when Einarsen et al. (2011) declared workplace bullying a public issue (Fevre et al., 2012).

This focus on individual and tangible harms resulted in a lack of recognition of the effects that organisational culture and management has on the wellbeing of staff (Bowie, 2010). However, more recent discussions have shifted towards a focus on the role of the organisation and workplace harms, with research incorporating factors of wider occupational culture and organisational change (Salin and Hoel, 2011). Suggesting this was particularly true in the context of economic rationalism, D’Cruz and Norannah (2013:3) similarly argue organisational antecedents in relation to workplace bullying have, in the past, been ignored, highlighting once more a lack of understanding that surrounds WPV more generally. D’Cruz and Norannah (2013) describe this oversight as “surprising” given workplace change is “ubiquitous and inevitable in the current global economic environment” citing change as one of the most significant antecedents to direct forms of physical, verbal and psychological violence and bullying. To date, Berlingieri (2015:29) concludes that organisations might be typified as environments known to facilitate conflict. Workers’ experiences of these various forms of violence and bullying, she continues, need to be embedded within a broader organisational and societal context, and the examination of organisations and their practices ought to be situated within “their wider economic and socio-political context, such as those shaped by global capitalism” (2015:29).

We agree with Berlingieri (2015) regarding the need to situate issues of workplace harm and organisational practices within the wider political-economic context of global neoliberal capitalism. The organisational culture of probation that has been engendered by TR and that has generated the harms experienced by probation staff in this article does not work in isolation, and cannot be separated from, the underlying political-economic demands of neoliberalism and privatisation. Rather, the organisational culture of probation under TR is symptomatic and reflective of a deeper underlying cause: namely, the profit motive that underpins the privatisation of public service work. While useful, we argue that there is a need to move beyond a focus on organisational cultures and interpersonal forms of physical, verbal and psychological bullying within the workplace. These existing forms of workplace harm not only situate the problem with the individual or organisation but in doing so, misconstrue the causal roots of the pressures and harms experienced in work today. Indeed, “without connecting the macro with the mezzo and micro” Lloyd (2017:269) argues that we miss an “opportunity to reflect on the nature of capitalism in contemporary society and the potential harm it inflicts on the workplace”. As issues of

'wellbeing', mental health, and 'work-life balance' become increasingly central watchwords and common phrases within the field of contemporary work (Davies, 2011), we suggest there is a need to interrogate the more subtle, mundane and normalised forms of harm that are systemically produced by and are a seemingly inherent feature of work under late-capitalism (see also Scott, 2016; Tombs, 2007). It is for this very reason that we have decided to adopt the term workplace harm instead of the more commonly used WPV. Ultimately, by adopting a social harm perspective we aim to take discussions of workplace harm in probation beyond the individualised, the extreme, and the extraordinary in order to "problematise what might otherwise be deemed a normal part of everyday employment" (Scott, 2017:96).

## **Methodology**

As the implications of the delivery of TR began to surface the effects on frontline staff in the probation sector became very apparent. Speaking to various media sources, 'whistle-blowers' from within the probation sector documented job-cuts, increased caseloads, and organisational pressures affecting the wellbeing of staff.<sup>iii</sup> While studies have documented the shifting attitudes, identities and working practices of probation staff following the deployment of TR (see for example, Burke et al., 2016; Deering and Feilzer, 2015; Robinson et al., 2016), we identified an absence of research which examines the harms that TR and the broader neoliberal agenda is having on the welfare of frontline workers. For us, it was clearly necessary to explore and document how the *systemic* neoliberal employment culture of this revamped probation sector was having an acute impact upon *individual workers'* mental and physical health, their professional identities and their personal lives.

Having gained full ethical approval from the University of Plymouth, and using qualitative semi-structured interviews ranging in length from one to two and a half hours, the researchers spoke in total with eight men and women who had supervised offenders within the probation sector. To protect the identity of these participants, when quoting directly in this article, all names have been changed. While the authors were keen to speak to those at the frontline of probation, it became apparent early on that, due to the precarious position of those working in probation, this would not be feasible or ethical. Our decision to exclude this population was twofold. Firstly, in recognition of the stressful working environments identified by whistle-blowers in media sources, we wanted to avoid causing any further distress or harm to individuals still working in the probation sector. In addition, despite being theoretically protected from repercussions under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, whistle-

blowers, if identified, can find themselves subjected to punitive treatment from their employer (Scott, 2017). In 'rocking the boat' and challenging the authority of their organisation, Scott observes that employers may choose to make an example of that individual thus preventing further dissidence amongst other disgruntled employees; a process he refers to as 'disciplining by proxy'. Again, we wished to avoid causing further harm to participants in this way.

In recognition of this, we focused our discussions with former probation staff from different areas of England who had left following the publication of the government's strategy document '*Transforming Rehabilitation: A strategy for reform*' (MoJ, 2013). Following calls for participation made through the social media platform Twitter, participants were recruited utilising a mixture of purposive and snowball sampling. While the recruitment of participants in this way could generate criticism amongst some in that it may attract the attention of disgruntled former employees and is therefore ungeneralizable to the wider population, the tone of discussions within online forums such as the 'On Probation Blog'<sup>iv</sup> and recent media exposés suggest that the issues identified here follow more generalised trends within the probation sector. Once all interviews were complete, transcripts were analysed thematically to understand participants' experiences of TR and the broader changes within probation and to identify common themes and views.

Five of the individuals interviewed had been employed by probation trusts (within the previously unified probation service) before plans for TR were announced. Following the implementation of TR, of these five individuals, three were re-allocated to the CRC, a fourth left before they could be re-allocated, and one stayed in the newly reformed NPS. Of those three who joined after TR was implemented, one was employed within the NPS while the other two were employed within one of the 21 CRCs (however, one later left and sought employment in the NPS). Drawing upon Mawby and Worrall's (2013) typology of probation workers, of these eight individuals, one (Nigel) would be categorised as a 'lifer', two (Susan and Roger) as 'second careerists' and the remaining five (Tracey, Hannah, Harvey, David and Mary) as 'Offender Managers' (OMs). Unlike the newer OM recruits, lifers and second careerists are typified by those "whose probation careers pre-date computers, National Standards and offender assessment instruments" (Robinson et al., 2016: 172). As demonstrated in this article, these differences in demographics are important in shaping an individual's view not only about TR but about changes to the probation sector more generally; and it is to this wider context that we now turn.



## **Neoliberalism, the changing face of probation, and ‘Probation Underground’**

Through a process of privatisation, the introduction of market incentives, and the implementation of ‘New Public Management’ (NPM) policies, neoliberal ideology entails a reinvent(ion) of “public sector agencies along private sector managerial lines” and encourages non-market institutions such as probation to function in market or business-like ways (Davies, 2017:120). In other words, those who ascribe to neoliberal ideology assume that by privatising public services, loosening restrictions on capital and markets and introducing competition, quality will be improved, and costs reduced (Harvey, 2005). The emphasis is therefore on encouraging individual entrepreneurial freedoms while simultaneously outsourcing state responsibility from many areas of social provision. While much has been written about neoliberal ideology as a withdrawal from state intervention, as Davies (2017) has observed, neoliberalism has always been a state-driven process dependent upon strong and authoritarian state actors to enforce policies of austerity and privatisation. In this sense, “neoliberalism is not just a political and economic philosophy, but also an entrenched ideological framework” (Teague, 2016: 133) and the logic of neoliberal ideology has, since the 1970s, permeated and become firmly embedded within the UK criminal justice system through policy and practice (Reiner, 2007; Teague, 2016; Whitehead and Crawshaw, 2012). Indeed, typified by reduced social welfare, the intensification of punishment, and the increasing marketization and re-regulation of criminal justice agencies to free market principles (Corcoran, 2014), what has followed is a substantial punitive turn within England and Wales (Bell, 2011).

In the contemporary context, the stated goals of the criminal justice system’s institutions to reduce re-offending, deliver rehabilitation and protect the public have, in practice, been largely subordinated to economic interests and the preservation of the last 40 years of neoliberal political-economic orthodoxy (Whitehead, 2010). This has intensified significantly since the 2007-2008 Global Financial Crash, in which to reduce the government ‘deficit’, austerity measures have been pursued in an attempt to reduce public spending through staff cuts, tightening of budgetary belts and, of course, privatising public services. Until recently, probation had managed to manoeuvre its way around marketization and privatisation (Teague 2016), remaining a resourceful workforce that had adapted to changing political and punitive demands (Senior et al., 2007). Today, however, probation stands as a clear example of the impact that neoliberal ideology has had on the criminal justice system. Once a humanitarian organisation (Deering and Feilzer, 2015) with an ethos of ‘advise, assist and befriend’, probation has been culturally transformed into a target driven organisation primarily concerned with risk, public protection, and evidence-based practice (Whitehead, 2010). In other words, the pursuit of neoliberal

ideology has altered probation from “a people-orientated service into one of commodities and products that can be competed for in the market-place” (Whitehead, 2010:89). Despite the discursive emphasis upon ‘progressive’ ideals of rehabilitation, more emphasis has been placed upon embracing market principles of ‘enhancing efficiency’, ‘maximising value’ and working within budgetary limits (National Audit Office, 2012). As one of our participants, David, explained:

The one thing that I think they really kind of got wrong with this is the whole ‘Payment by Results’ thing. You know, ultimately probation was set up to reduce reoffending and for the protection of the public. [...] I could be wrong but for me that’s what probation is all about, you know, reduce reoffending and manage risk. [...] So, you’ve set up a model and you’ve set up a system [based on] all these targets [...] and I think that’s fundamentally what’s wrong with it. The government have pushed this and said, ‘We’ll pay you if you deliver on x, y, and z’ and by doing that we’re now spending less time with the offenders, which is essentially what’s going to help people to stop reoffending.

Situated as part of this broader move towards a competitive criminal justice arena driven by economics (Teague, 2013), the government’s TR agenda is arguably the latest development of the “market logic of neoliberalism” (Bell, 2011:5). As a top-down initiative imposed upon probation by the Ministry of Justice and driven by political and ideological imperatives for change (Annison et al., 2014), the rhetoric of TR incorporated many of the key tenets of neoliberalism. However, many of the participants interviewed did not associate their frustrations and grievances exclusively with TR. Rather, as opposed to being the central problem, TR was experienced by many of our participants simply as the ‘final straw’; the by-product of the consistent procession of neoliberal policies which, over several years, had paved the way for its introduction. Indeed, the general consensus amongst participants was, as Harvey explained, that TR and the partial privatisation of probation had “amplified existing issues”. This was particularly true for those ‘lifers’ and ‘second careerists’ who had been working within the probation sector for some time. Frequent references were made to the increasingly managerialist style of probation work, the creation of probation trusts, and the introduction of risk assessment tools such as OASys which many felt moved probation away too far from its rehabilitative roots. As one participant, Susan, explained:

I can’t even say TR was the point when I decided to leave. [...] It was before that when they started going into trusts, which for me, is a semi privatised state anyway. That’s when it all went

wrong. That's when their ethics, values and priorities changed. I think [that] sounded the death knell of probation to be honest.

Under the punitive characteristics of neoliberalism (Bell, 2011), probation has increasingly moved away from being a service underpinned by its "occupational desire to help clients" (May 1991:169), to one in which rehabilitation has simply become "part of a 'toolkit' of measures oriented toward the protection of the public and the management of risk" (Robinson et al., 2013:330). Reflecting this change, the role of the probation practitioner has also changed significantly. No longer a 'rehabilitative agent' tasked with prioritising therapeutic intervention (Teague, 2013: 17), the modern-day probation worker is one who must 'manage offenders' and demonstrate 'effectiveness' through the meeting of targets (Robinson, 2013). Both Annison et al. (2008) and Deering and Feilzer (2017) discuss how increased bureaucracy has impacted on time spent on face-to-face rehabilitative work with offenders.

This was a recurring frustration amongst the participants interviewed within this study. Indeed, irrespective of when they began their career in probation, all participants discussed being motivated by their desire to do 'meaningful work' and 'make a difference'. Mirroring findings by Mawby and Worrall (2013) in their study of probation culture and its impact on staff identity, many expressed their frustrations either at what they felt was the changing nature of their role, or at the stark contrast as to what they had expected probation work to entail. This point was summarised in the following extract from, David, one of the newer recruits:

I joined the job as a probation officer to help people kind of move and change their lives and, you know, to support them in reducing reoffending. That's what I joined it for. But in reality I felt like a ... essentially like a database handler.

At its deepest level Colley (2012:332) has shown how, in the fact of neoliberal ideology and subsequent austerity measures, 'chasms' can form "between practitioners' ethical values on the one hand, and economic value on the other" which can thrust practitioners into a state of professional existential crisis (see also Jones, 2005). Due to what they perceived to be a conflict between the changing values of probation and their own personal attitudes, a number of participants alluded to such a crisis. Despite her strong feelings about probation's 'noble history', Susan, for example, explained how, after moving towards an offender management style of working, she started to feel as though probation had 'lost its

way'. These feelings were exacerbated by the introduction of TR and what she felt was the commodification of probation work:

I had a real ethical problem with the possibility of working for a privatised company that was commodifying both clients and staff to make a profit for their shareholders. I knew I had to go.

Drawing upon the work of Charles Derber, Robinson et al. (2017) suggest that this kind of existential crisis is an expression of 'ideological proletarianization' in which workers feel they have lost control over the ultimate goals and purpose of their work. While probation practitioners have previously found meaning through their professionalism (Mawby and Worrall, 2013), under neoliberal market mechanisms which are designed to improve efficiency, the professional autonomy of probation workers has been reduced and become secondary to achieving targets (Burke and Collett, 2016). Interestingly, this kind of existential crisis was felt even by the newer recruits within our sample. For instance, despite entering the probation sector after the introduction of TR, Harvey found himself questioning his motivation and professional identity, with a mismatch between his anticipated role and his actual experience.

In a later section, we will return to this sense of alienation and disillusionment that participants experienced with the new goals and purpose of their work. However, for now, it is worth exploring how this experience prompted many workers to try and 'resist' the impact of neoliberal ideology on probation by both delaying their exits and attempting to preserve what they felt were the underlying ethical values of probation work. This is far from an isolated trend within contemporary public sector work. In a study of the impact of austerity measures on youth support workers, Colley (2012:322) argues that in the face of significant organisational changes such as this, in which the values and ethos of an organisation shift dramatically, workers must decide "whether to pursue conscientious objection, compliance, or adopt a stance of 'principled infidelity'". In other words, whether to voice their grievances, re-align themselves with the new values of their organisation, or attempt to continue working in a way that sustains their own values. More common amongst our participants, however, was a blurring of these options, as they attempted to adhere to targets and organisational pressures while still working in a way in which they felt held true to their personal values and what they felt to be the 'traditional' values underpinning probation work. Mary, for example, spoke about how she felt she

needed to “protect” the clients she worked with from what she believed to be the negative impacts of TR by “working against the grain”.

With increasing workloads and administrative pressures placed upon staff, Mary, like others – particularly those working within the CRCs – felt frustrated by the lack of one-to-one time she could spend with clients. Similarly, Roger regularly worked late, justifying this as part of his ‘duty’ towards the client:

I had just constructed this kind of professional world into which I kind of weaved a home life because the work I was doing was meaningful, you know. [...] The people I worked with *needed* support.

Going above and beyond contracted hours was, for many, the only way to continue to work with clients and to make their job ‘meaningful’. This kind of ‘principled infidelity’ would appear to support the optimistic notion of a ‘probation underground’ (Vanstone and Priestley, 2018) in which, in the face of neoliberal pressures, those working in the probation sector hold onto the traditional values which have underpinned probation work. However, as Lloyd (2017) has observed, despite going against the new organisational values, such forms of ‘principled infidelity’ and dissent is silently tolerated by neoliberal capitalism. As described above, such behaviours occurred largely out of formal working hours, allowing further value to be extracted from the worker at no cost to the employing organisation (see below on unpaid overtime). Furthermore, by continuing to adhere to formal targets and aims, such forms of ‘resistance’ actually provided workers a form of cathartic release and the existential fuel to simply *carry on* (Lloyd, 2017).

While, at the time of interview, all the participants in this study had indeed exited their organisation, this point is evidenced by the fact that many of our participants had delayed and drawn-out exits from probation characterised by significant inner turmoil. Hirschman’s seminal essay argues that individuals have three possible actions in response to the decline of an organisation: loyalty (remain), voice (protest), or exit (leave). However, Cederström and Fleming (2012) suggest that in the current socio-political and economic climate none of these options are particularly tenable. Protesting, they argue, often “puts us on the radar for the next wave of downsizing” (2012:64); while in the current job market, if one were to exit, where else is there to go? Finally, at what cost does loyalty come?

These were questions and concerns raised by all of our participants. Significantly, direct protest was not mentioned as an option among our participants. Instead, their turmoil appeared to manifest from two main, often interrelated issues: firstly, from a lack of alternative opportunities open to them. As Harvey explained:

I think I wanted to leave for a very long while [...] [But] It's very difficult to try and find another job sometimes and to just make a change like that, so I just stayed on.

Secondly, however, was the issue of loyalty. It is important to stress that the loyalty shown by participants in this study was not necessarily one to the organisation itself, but rather to the ideology and values they felt underpinned probation work more generally which were, quite painfully, misaligned with what they saw to be the realities of their organisation's new values. Amongst all participants, but amongst 'lifers' and 'second careerists' in particular, there was a sense that probation work was more than just a job. Despite no longer working in the probation sector, Mary still identified herself as a probation officer; an identity that she continued to feel "proud" of:

I was really proud of my profession. [...] [S]omeone said to me the other day 'do you still think of yourself as a probation officer?' and I said 'I *am* a probation officer! I'm a qualified and experienced probation officer, I will just probably never work as one again'.

Given that probation occupied such a central feature of participants' identities, it is perhaps unsurprising that many felt an overwhelming sense of sadness, anger and frustration at the realisation that they needed to leave. While admitting 'sense of relief' at being away from the pressures of the job, both Roger and Mary explained the discomfort of abandoning a career that was associated with security, belonging, and a sense of meaningful contribution to society:

The day that I left, I was heartbroken for my career. [...] I loved every day I went to work. I miss the work that I did. [...] A career, which I thought was a career for life was destroyed. (Roger)

I felt relieved [when I left] but I also felt really sad because [...] I expected to stay in that job until I retired because I loved it [...] and I believed in it. (Mary)

Ultimately, however, staying in the job would have proved to be far more destructive. In the following section, we will discuss how the nature of much work in contemporary society has undergone a qualitative change in which work has seeped into all areas of life, commandeering our personalities and becoming aligned with personal, political and ethical identities. We will see how, when living in such a society in which work becomes inextricably entangled with our lives and identities, the changes to probation engendered by TR cut ever deeper into the existential security of our participants, destroying morale and generating more insidious forms of harm such as stress, overwork, depression, domestic conflict, feelings of pointlessness and even suicidal thoughts.

### **Workload pressures amongst probation staff**

In their sociological polemic *'Dead Man Working'*, Cederström and Fleming (2012) suggest that much of modern work, rather than characterised by physical harms, is more explicitly concerned with that of the dying spirit of the worker; a death, they suggest which "can be equally slow and painful" (2012:33). Work today has colonised almost all areas of social life, occupying our thoughts even in our sleep (Crary, 2013). Much of contemporary work, including probation, draws upon forms of 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983) such as affability, communication skills and sociability. We can see this in the command to 'do something you love', to incorporate work as part of our personal identities and to inject authenticity, meaning and life-affirming moments into our work; a trend quite clearly reflected in our participants' desire to do 'meaningful work' within a profession they felt was 'more than just a job'.

Supporting such an assertion, Scott (2017) demonstrates through his research how, whether in the form of insecure employment, excessive hours generated by unmanageable workloads, or a sense of occupational devotion, a common reality for the modern-day worker is the blurring between work life and home life. This blurred reality was one also shared by many of the participants in this study. The need to work above and beyond contracted hours was a recurring theme during interviews. Having worked in probation since the mid-1970s, one of our participants, Nigel, was quick to point out that this was not a new feature of probation work. Originally, Nigel argued, this was because of dedication to the job; *wanting* to work long hours due to a sense of love and devotion to the work which was closely tied up with his biography. However, as time has moved on and the probation service has undergone the forms of depersonalisation and deprofessionalisation characteristic of neoliberal trends in criminal justice, he explained that the reasoning and motivation behind this 'overtime' shifted:

I can remember working long hours, but it was different. It was longer hours because I was putting in the time working with *people* [...] [doing] things which I felt was important. [...] Now people are coming in at the weekend to do all their OASys and all their assessments and paperwork to defend themselves and the agency.

This sense of occupational devotion and a divergence of harmony between personal and organisational values was a common theme expressed by all of our participants. Moreover, it was the justification consistently given for working beyond contracted hours (with or without pay). Both Susan and Roger both talked about feeling a sense of *duty* towards their job—particularly their clients—and both spoke about how they would routinely go above and beyond their normal expected hours of work. While some objected to this expectation of staying late, others felt that it was an ‘investment of their time’. As Susan reasoned:

[It] was okay [that I worked more hours than I should] because that was my choice. [...] That used to make me feel completely in control, up to date and stress free.

This sense of occupational devotion and an alignment between the self and one’s job can certainly be viewed as a positive, even an integral aspect of being an effective probation worker in the sense of the service’s traditional ethos of ‘advise, assist, and befriend’. However, given such devotion, TR and the wider changes to probation appear to cut deeper into the sense of disenchantment, alienation, and ontological insecurity experienced by those we interviewed. The changes to probation caused by decades of neoliberal policies that culminated in TR were experienced by all of our participants as a profound *loss*. What was lost was not just an appropriate way of working, but the end of an entire relationship between one’s profession and identity:

I joined [probation] to get involved and to help people. But the more and more the targets were piled on the less and less that became [possible]. (David)

I was applying for jobs and trying to get out of probation and I couldn’t. I was getting frustrated. But [...] I thought this is no longer the job for me! Its values, its ethics do not meet mine, I cannot work for an organisation that would treat another human being like this. So



that's when I decided to leave. It took me a considerable while longer to effect that leave.  
(Susan)

What such quotes appear to demonstrate is a sudden realisation amongst many – particularly those working within the CRCs – of the '*pointlessness*' (Cederström and Fleming, 2012) of their work that stemmed as a result of the deprofessionalisation and dehumanisation of probation work under the aim of maximising profit. The pain associated with this '*pointlessness*' was intensified by the way in which participants incorporated their occupation into their personal identity. This trauma was most potently experienced by Mary, who admitted to being suicidal at one point in her career:

I wouldn't be there [at work], I'd be off sick with everything that's gone on. I can't... I don't want to work, it doesn't match my values anymore, I wouldn't be able to manage the workloads anymore and the expectations. I'm very much a one-to-one therapeutic type of worker and that's gone, you can't do that anymore, so it didn't... you know, my values and the values of the organisation have just gone completely [gestures for separation]. I just think I worked against the grain and I just kept doing what I always did. But it was becoming more and more obvious that I wouldn't be able to continue, and I think a lot of people were the same, they kept doing what they always did and what they felt matched [their personal values and ethics].

It is important to acknowledge that irrespective of the speed at which TR was introduced, the impact that these changes had upon workers and their workloads took longer to take effect. This is significant for the emotional and physical welfare of many of those working in the probation sector today. Indeed, just like the frog in the metaphor of the '*boiling frog syndrome*', the increased pressure of probation work appears to have gradually taken their toll on the wellbeing of frontline staff.

Yet, as the values and ethics of probation were perceived to have changed, the 'heat' of heightened caseloads and an increased burden to meet targets also became more difficult to endure in the absence of a sense of meaningful rationale. Interestingly, in many cases this would not prompt refusal to work beyond contracted hours. To the contrary, work would simply seep into all pockets of

life, often spiralling as staff would sign-off with stress or illness thereby increasing an already unmanageable workload. As David explained:

It was quite 'funny' because me and one of my colleagues were like 'oh it can't get any worse than this' and gradually it did. [...] Someone would go off sick with whatever, for whatever reason and we'd have to take over all their caseloads. Then someone else would go off sick and we'd have to look after *their* caseloads. And, you know, we kept on saying 'oh it will get better, it will get better' and it just progressively got worse and worse [...] to the point where I had 80 plus cases. [...] I was constantly coming home everyday just moody and depressed, you know, just really down [...] She [my partner] could see that [...] and her response was 'well you need to get out of there, you need to get out of there!' and I knew that, and I got that, but until you're ready to do that, it won't happen. [...] [So] for us both, yeah, it was... it was difficult.

Indeed, David spoke about how he had previously been a 'happy and bubbly character', but that this had slowly been stripped away to the point where he experienced a loss of self and had to seek counselling for stress and anxiety, something he saw mirrored in other colleagues' experiences. However, what is most interesting about David's narrative in this case is that, at the time, he failed to view his stress and increasing anxieties as a product of the pressures placed upon him through work. Instead, he internalised much of this and blamed himself for his inability to cope (see also Eadie and Sein, 2006). For Cederström and Fleming (2012:8) this is significant. Indeed, while most of us still have a 'boss' working above us, they argue that we have also internalised the 'boss function' within ourselves, becoming our own managers. In this way "self-exploitation has become a defining motif of working today".

Unlike physical illness, emotional problems often elicit less sympathy within the workplace (Cederström and Fleming, 2012). Rather than viewed as the product of the nature of work and workplace cultures, blame is often placed upon the individual worker insofar as it is not the targets that have caused the stress but rather the worker who has failed to manage their time effectively. This was expressed explicitly by Tracey:

It's very much a culture of... it's all top down and if you have a problem it's because *you* aren't managing your time, and *you* aren't managing your offenders, and *you* aren't managing your morale.

However, being signed off from work under these circumstances offers little respite to the worker. If anything, it can exacerbate the problem and make the situation worse. As highlighted in the work of Fevre et al. (2012), the absent worker worries not only about the work they have waiting for them, but also the impact that their absence will have on their colleagues. Subsequently when they return, the work will not only remain, but is likely to have increased in their absence; and so the cycle begins again. This was a common reason for individuals not reclaiming their overtime. As Harvey explained:

I can say that I myself, have very rarely taken TOIL [time off in lieu] because the other issue that you're faced with as well is where do you find the time? You know, where do you find the time to take that back? [...] I'm probably owed a lot of hours, I can tell you that quite confidently.

From the narratives provided by our participants, it appears that despite any initial optimism for innovation under TR, this has been replaced by a pessimistic atmosphere of depression, defeatism and jaded cynicism. The analogy that was consistently referred to during our interviews was that of the Titanic. Any attempts at piecemeal reformism were seen as, to quote one participant, "rearranging deckchairs while the ship is going down" (Nigel):

We got to the point [...] of feeling that, 'well whatever we're going to do, it's not going to work!' It's the moment in Titanic in the film where he takes the plans out and says 'look, whatever you're going to do this ship will sink'. (Nigel).

Ultimately, whether they jumped ship, 'drowned' (Hannah) under their increasingly unmanageable caseloads, or clung on for survival, it is evident that many are left grieving for a probation service they knew; a 'bereavement process' which began for many with the announced plans for TR. In the wake of the recent announcements that CRC contracts are to be terminated two years earlier than expected (MoJ, 2018), probation is once again to be sent into turmoil; a move which is likely only to prolong the issues and harms raised by the workers interviewed for this article.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we have built upon a growing body of literature that explores how TR, when situated within a broader neoliberal agenda, has impacted upon frontline staff within the probation sector. In drawing upon the lived experiences of eight former probation workers we have attempted to demonstrate how such changes constitute a pervasive and harmful form of work-based harm. From the experiences of our participants we can see how TR and its neoliberal ideological base have not only destroyed morale, but also how it has engendered more insidious forms of harm for probation staff such as stress, overwork, depression, domestic conflict, feelings of pointlessness and even suicidal thoughts. Such existential insecurity is indicative of labour under neoliberal capitalism today.

It is important to recognise that the problems experienced by the probation staff in this article were not just a case of ruthlessly demanding managers bullying and creating *extraordinary* working conditions to have their demands met. To the contrary, under the contemporary context of late-capitalism, these problems are quite *ordinary* (though nonetheless harmful). Qualitative changes to the nature of work under neoliberal capitalism has demanded reduced public spending, maximised value extracted from workers and, ultimately, enhanced profits. Indeed, while such harms and conditions are an established feature of work within the private and commercial sectors, in the context of austerity and privatisation, they are no longer simply the preserve of the corporate sector. Indeed, while this research has focused on examining the impact decades of neoliberal policies has had on day-to-day culture and working practices of probation staff, we believe our findings are likely to be transferable to a wide range of criminal and public sector institutions.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Details of criticisms can be found in the range of articles published in Vol 11, Number 2/3 of the British Journal of Community Justice (2013). See link for access:  
[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Wendy\\_Fitzgibbon/publication/298628007\\_Risk\\_and\\_privatisation/links/5766d14b08ae1658e2f7176d/Risk-and-privatisation.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Wendy_Fitzgibbon/publication/298628007_Risk_and_privatisation/links/5766d14b08ae1658e2f7176d/Risk-and-privatisation.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> See for example, the HMI Probation 2017 Annual Report:  
<https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2017/12/HMI-Probation-Annual-Report-2017-2.pdf>



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<sup>iii</sup> Media sources include the 2017 Panorama documentary, *'Out of Jail: Free to Offend Again?'*.

<sup>iv</sup> The OPB is a blog and online forum run by probation officer, 'Jim Brown' (CQSW), which encourages debate and discussion amongst those working and/or interested in the probation sector. For link, see [probationmatters.blogspot.com/](http://probationmatters.blogspot.com/)