REFLECTIVE PRACTICE: the cornerstone of what we all do

BY DAVID COLEY

SIR GRAHAM SMITH RESEARCH AWARDS

FOREWARD

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Helen Scofield
Acting Chief Executive Officer
Probation Institute

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Abstract

This research study explores the extent to which reflective practice is undertaken by probation officers working within the South-East and Eastern Division of the UK National Probation Service. It utilises semi-structured interview questioning to examine the reflective experiences of probation officers following the 2014 Transforming Rehabilitation organisational changes. Understandings of critically reflective practice are drawn upon and placed alongside an applied thematic analysis of findings. The study indicates that opportunities for reflection continue to be valued by probation officers, albeit its formal, structured operation presents as sporadic at best. Nevertheless, probation officers seek renewed, inventive opportunities to address this fundamental aspect of their professional identity.

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

CAFCASS   Children and Families Court Advisory and Support Service

CJS   Criminal Justice System

CPD   Continuous Professional Development

MoJ   Ministry of Justice

Napo   National Association of Probation Officers

NOMS   National Offender Management Service

NPS   National Probation Service

OEP   Offender Engagement Programme

SEE   South-East and Eastern

SEEDS   Skills for Effective Engagement, Development and Supervision

SPO   Senior Probation Officer

TR   Transforming Rehabilitation

Contents

Section 1 Introduction

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and its executive agency the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) value reflective practice as a key aspect of probation officer skills training. They place it within a context of Civil Service continuous professional development (CPD) and have in recent years expended extensive resources in enhancing its everyday application amongst frontline staff. Both agencies advocate use of the Gibbs model (1988) of reflective practice and encourage its on-going use amongst probation officers within a framework of reflective line management supervision, ultimately designed to enhance service user engagement (NOMS, 2012, 2014; Copsey, 2011; CSL, 2015).

Whilst the development of reflective practice is advocated by the MoJ and NOMS, its recent application has occurred within a context of seismic organisational transition. With the advent of the Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) programme, intended to introduce a mixed economy of service provision (MoJ, 2013), probation services in England and Wales have arguably undergone one of the most turbulent transitional phases within their history. Perhaps the dust has not yet settled on the extent to which any transformative effects have occurred and academic contestation in this area continues to flourish (Dominey, 2012; Burke, 2014; Kirton and Guillaume, 2015). The TR initiative has led to the reorganisation of the National Probation Service (NPS) and creation of 21 Community Rehabilitation Companies across six England based divisional areas. Wales forms its own division.

In the context of wholesale structural changes within probation services over the last two years, questions arise relating to the extent to which reflective practice actually occurs amongst frontline staff, especially for qualified probation officers in the NPS. This research project attempts to explore this issue and seeks to find some answers to such questions as, what meaning and value does reflective practice hold for NPS probation officers; how do probation officers understand reflective practice; if it is undertaken, how, where and when does it occur; what impact does the Skills for Effective Engagement, Development and Supervision (SEEDS) programme have in relation to reflection within a continuous professional development framework; and where do frontline probation officers see opportunities for future reflective practice?

The rise of desistance research and literature since the turn of the millennium, as utilised by the SEEDS programme, forms the evidence based backdrop to any contemporary research. Whilst the desistance research applies mainly to service users and their engagement with the criminal justice system, it does contain

elements relating to staff experiences. The SEEDS programme is available to NPS staff to utilise and remains situated within the desistance literature, although questions arise as to its current usage and the possibility of its re-emergence within a revised format in the future.

To enable the above questions to be addressed, NPS probation officers from the South-East and Eastern Division have aspects of their daily working lives captured here through semi-structured interviews that present a picture of their hopes, fears and aspirations. Most of the interviewees are experienced probation officers with some years of employment history under their belts. As such they place their stories within this context and utilise previous working biographies in other sectors as a benchmark for best practice within the NPS. Most work in the field of probation due to a sense of vocation and present as passionate about supporting socially marginalised service users into leading more productive, fulfilling lives. These probation officers' voices are captured and presented through this study.

When consideration is given to the practice of structured reflection within a work based context issues of professional identity can arise. Within notions of what it is to be a 'professional', the expectations of having sufficient time and appropriate spaces in which to reflect may come to the fore. These expectations held by employees and their employers might relate in turn to the organisational culture created within an agency, however large or small. They intersect with realities of organisational flux, in which frontline probation officers and managers practice their trade amidst constant workload pressures and demands. This research project cannot avoid or choose to ignore these issues as the way in which probation officers respond to such matters through any agential capacities is of significance. Critical thinking within reflective practice may also come into play here.

The remainder of this research project report is structured initially around outlining the methodology utilised in this study, including consideration of a conceptual framework to aid understanding and analysis. This includes a look at the literature pertaining specifically to the area of study, albeit this may be limited in extent due to scarcity of exploration and empirical findings relating reflective practice to probation work. We then look at the findings resulting from this study, in terms of the value and meaning that probation officers ascribe to reflective practice, as well as how it may be undertaken. Attention is paid here to organisational barriers to the practice of reflection and the specific role of the SEEDS programme. Lastly we consider some ideas about future reflective practice generated by research respondents before some discussion concludes the report.

Section 2 Research Methodology

This section describes the planning, implementation and outcome of the research methods undertaken for this study. We start by outlining the chosen research methods of semi-structured interviewing, documentary data collection and unavoidable participant observation. We then describe the analytical methods used to interpret data before looking at the everyday practical considerations involved in implementing the two month research project. Pre and early stage reading of relevant literature helped to shape the initial design and how this influenced the conceptual framework used is described.

Having personally worked within probation services for some seventeen years, the author is required to reflectively and reflexively consider and incorporate his experiences into the research process and findings. As such the positionality of the author needs to be outlined in some depth in this section. This reflective approach includes an awareness of the evolutionary nature of research and how initial planning was shaped and reshaped as the project progressed.

The original inductive project design primarily involved undertaking in-depth interviews with probation officers. The time frame for the research data gathering was planned to take place from July 2015 to September 2015, targeting respondents who had practiced as a qualified probation officer for some years. Interviews were initially planned to be face-to-face and semi-structured in nature, with a detailed research questions schedule having been designed to offer some degree of uniformity and enabling consistency of responses for analysis. Interviews were designed to last for approximately sixty minutes and they were to be recorded with agreement of the respondent. Whilst designed to draw upon biographical responses, whole work-life histories were not being sought, but rather episodically important periods relating to the research project focus.

The semi-structured interview method was initially selected as it provides improved focus within conversations upon the main areas of exploration whilst also allowing for a high degree of narrative response, providing flexibility for the interviewer and latitude for response from the interviewee (Bell, 2010). In relation to all aspects of professional reflective practice, it was the thoughts and feelings in relation to everyday reflective practice, professional identity, creativity and agency that were being sought, essentially "the understanding of someone else's world" (Gillham, 2008:45). This foundational position was adopted in order to access uniquely rich data, and dependent upon initial findings, possibly lead to further interviewing. Responses could be compared with previous empirical research findings in addition

to documentary data relating to reflective practice materials. Meaning-making and rational understandings by respondents are some of the key outcomes sought within this research approach. Bathmaker and Harnett certainly encourage us to embrace the benefits of capturing "the relation between the individual agency and social structure" (2010:1) as they explore life-long learning through life history and narrative approaches. Personal participant experiences and understandings of agency were certainly sought at the project design stage. Furthermore, human narrative is, according to Polkinghorne, a "primary form by which human experience is made meaningful" (1998, cited in Gillham, 2008:47). The potential usefulness of quantitative research data was initially considered so as to offer a more comprehensive view of the phenomena under study, primarily through questionnaires within a wider survey strategy designed to improve triangulation (Denscombe, 2010). Unfortunately time limitations precluded this and interview methods became the preferred methodology as being more advantageous in terms of capturing the subtleties, complexities and intricacies of human behaviour over and above those of quantitative research methods.

The eventual interview data was drawn from ten in-depth interviews in total. These were conducted in person, by Skype or by 'phone. The research schedule questions were oriented around the central issues contained within the research questions but with scope to explore the wider learning journeys of individuals. It transpired that interviewees responded flexibly and led discussion as they wished, with research questions being placed at relevant junctures within any given discussion. Some very limited yet valuable data from ad-hoc personal discussions with probation officers is also included, with this data being recorded in field notes. This study makes no claims for the research sample being representative of all UK probation officers, but rather to being a snap-shot of structured reflective practice and reflective experiences within the South-East and Eastern (SEE) Division of the NPS and within the given timescale.

The collection and collation of documentary data was also planned within this project. After the immediate challenge of gaining access to materials, it was not anticipated that the validity of documents should present any extensive difficulty. The initially identified data included extant policy papers and / or directives from previous Probation Trusts or the newly restructured NPS. Denscombe's (2010) essential concerns around authenticity, representativeness, meaning and credibility did not appear too questionable, with a significant level of validity being therefore maintained. Any available training materials relating to reflective practice were also identified as of value, as were CPD materials.

Participant observation can be valuable as a research method (Bryman, 2008), and whilst not accorded extensive weight, as an 'insider' this could not be avoided or ignored. Participant observation within a work setting offered the opportunity to collect documentary data and observe proceedings with minimal disruption, whilst allowing for an holistic viewing point into the subjects' understandings of reflective practice, essentially providing in-depth insights into the subtle complexities of this aspect of learning and professional development (Denscombe, 2010).

Additionally, in terms of positionality it is of reflexive significance that the author proceeds from a white, male, European, middle income, background and perspective, freighted as this is with in-built, probably latent, preconceptions and partialities. Rather than attempting to dismiss or ignore the personal impact of these experiences, the author has decided to include not only the influences derived, either consciously or unwittingly, from these life-wide experiences, but also to incorporate his formative impressions into this report. The author has been a member of Napo since 2000, the union and professional body for Probation and CAFCASS staff, and continues to be so. He is also a founding member of the Probation Institute and has worked in the field of probation for some seventeen years, being currently employed as a practice tutor-assessor.

Following the planning and subsequent use of semi-structured interviews, documentary data collection and a degree of reflective participatory observation as the primary research methods, the data captured was examined continually via the use of thematic analysis. This involved the use of immediate, open categories of patterned response (themes) being sub-divided, arriving at distinct participant experiences and notions that were positioned within the conceptual framework. Nvivo computer aided software was considered a useful tool to assist this purpose. Themes were identified from within all forms of data and analysed both descriptively and interpretively. Analysis was also planned to sit to some extent within a wider contextual setting of the intersection of individual agency and hegemonic influences within society, with a view to how individuals make meaning of wider socio-political events.

With Braun and Clarke "a theme captures something important in relation to the research question, and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning" (2006:10) that emerges. Of equal importance though is the understanding that "the 'keyness' of a theme is not necessarily dependent upon quantifiable measures, but in terms of whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question" (2006:10). The prevalence of a theme within the research project was partially measured by the number of participant voices that spoke on any given topic, albeit as Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest, unique narrative data was utilised

within the findings when providing significant, relevant, meaningful import, in the assessment of the author. Such analytical questioning as 'how does the participant make sense of the topic discussed' or 'what ideas or assumptions underpin the respondent's world view' are of importance here as it is the discovery of latent patterns of meaning that is of greatest value within this approach.

With regard to the planning and on-going evolution within the research, a focus group methodology was also anticipated. The planned use of a focus group sat within the strategic approach of individual interviews and documentary data collection. Of primary interest within this approach was the anticipated collective construction of the meaning of reflective practice and the process by which this is developed (Denscombe, 2010). Despite the advantages of this method, focus groups are not without their problems however as the dynamics of any group can lead to the suppression of member views or even an irrational attachment and association with certain topics or individuals (Bryman, 2008). In the event the practical organisational aspects of arranging such groups proved overly challenging in the time frame available as the resource implications were extensive. With on-going consideration upon what advantages would be gained from a focus group approach this research methodology did not come to fruition as on balance it was felt that sufficient useful data could be gained from interviews.

With reference to the proposed sampling to be undertaken for this research it was planned that an adequate sampling frame would be provided by the body of qualified probation officers within the NPS SEE Division. Participants were invited through on-line NPS SEE Division news bulletins. Ten individuals eventually self-selected to be interviewed in depth to discuss not only their reflective practice but also their learning journeys over the last few years. An amount of snowball sampling did occur from which participants were offered the opportunity to be interviewed. In line with project diversity and equality principles it was originally envisioned that the sampling would facilitate variety in terms of age, ethnicity, and gender, albeit respondent self-selection methods made this problematic.

Ethical issues, including the safe handling of all acquired materials in a secure and confidential manner, was addressed via use of the NOMS research Regulatory Ethics Framework for research applications (NOMS, 2015). The principles of the Economic and Social Research Council (2005) Research Ethics Framework were also employed. Distinct emphasis was placed upon all intervention with potentially vulnerable individuals. If individuals had experienced extremely negative consequences of work pressures or employment dynamics, then possible personal ethical and moral issues may have resulted from the participants' responses. Although academic research can be seen as being in some measures exempt from the duties and responsibilities

within the Data Protection Act (1998), as the confidentiality of data and anonymity of participants was to be respected at all times the principles enshrined within it were adhered to.

Data was managed securely through password protection and encryption when digitally stored. Paper documents were stored under lock and key. Names and addresses of participants were kept separate from transcriptions. Archived material was kept no longer than was necessary and any eventual disposal involved the complete destruction of data. Bell (2010) usefully reminds us that with all participants, not only must written and informed consent be acquired, but clarity about exactly what 'confidentiality' and 'anonymity' mean for each individual involved must be explored so as to avoid any subsequent misunderstandings. Bell extends this pragmatic and courteous practice with regard to clarity of understanding in relation to possible future publication of findings and both these approaches were practiced.

The overall timeframe for this project was from the end of July 2015 to September 2015. The continuous juggling of various elements of the planned research and study report production perhaps reflects the reality of undertaking such a brief project. Communication was by formal e-mail and 'phone, meetings and professional newsletter adverts. July to September 2015 also encompassed background reading and research of existing literature, including the provision of more recent publications such as, for example, Raho (2015) or Kirton and Guillaume (2015). The continued researching and examination of existing empirical data associated with the aims of the research project was also an on-going exercise throughout the months from July 2015 to March 2016. Through the process of constant plate spinning this research project was completed by Easter 2016.

This research project was fully funded via the Sir Graham Smith Awards, with support from the Probation Institute, London. Resources such as digital recording equipment, both video and audio, were available to the researcher. Internet use, including Skype, was also available. Of some difficulty was the arranging of suitable venues at which to undertake confidential interviews. On conclusion of the research phase some seven formal interviews (5 women, 2 men) were conducted by Skype or 'phone, with three others (men) being conducted face-to-face. All interviews were conducted in private, albeit the interview venues were on occasions somewhat ad-hoc in nature, as circumstances dictated. Pseudonyms were used in transcription and following.

In planning and conducting research we need to consider the notions that frame our thinking. We thus need to explore some ways of understanding reflective practice,

developmental journeys, individual agency, professional identity, and organisational cultures. Ideas around criticality also come into play here as working practices sit within ideologies and political environments that may present as problematic for probation officers.

In thinking about the term reflective practice this study shares Thompson and Thompson's (2008) principles surrounding the notion that it includes a sense of openness to challenging established knowledge, both individual and collective; it possesses an openness to learning and self-development; and it holds an openness to taking on board new ideas. As such it must be seen as a two-way street between knowledge and practice, not a cul-de-sac of established 'wisdom'. Thompson and Thompson also assist this study in structuring any exploration of reflective practice by categorising its primary dimensions into cognitive (considering thoughts and ideas), affective (considering feelings), and values (considering ethics, morals and foundational beliefs). They further assist by categorising the context in which it occurs into personal (undertaken individually), dyadic (undertaken in pairs) and group (undertaken as a peer exercise).

Reflective practice within this study can also be thought to have aspects of a transformative effect as understood by Mezirow (2000), with the key elements of this being an approach involving rational discourse, critical reflection and the importance of experience. This transformation encompasses an effect in which *objective reframing* "involves critical reflection on the assumptions of others encountered in a narrative or in task oriented problem solving"; whilst *subjective reframing* "involves critical self-reflection of one's own assumptions" (2000:23). In terms of wider personal development this understanding cannot be divorced from a praxis oriented approach. Novelli and Ferus-Comelo further remind us that "knowledge is never neutral, it is located in, and contextualised by, both time and space, and emerges to address historically produced and conditioned problems from the perspective and vantage points of particular actors and interests" (2010:50). This applies equally to learning from reflective practice within a probation service context.

Drawing on Brechin, Brown and Eby (2000), who themselves utilise Quinn (1998) and Schober (1993), we can understand reflective practice as,

> "The ability to think and consider 'experiences, perceptions, ideas [values and beliefs], etc, with a view to the discovery of new relations or the drawing of conclusions for the guidance of future action' (Quinn: 1998:122). In other words, reflection enables individuals to make sense of their lived experiences through examining such experiences in context…..It is the process of turning

thoughtful practice into a potential learning situation 'which may help to modify and change approaches to practice' (Schober,1993:324). Reflective practice entails the synthesis of self-awareness, reflection and critical thinking".

Here then is a working understanding of reflective practice, albeit this study primarily examines any structured, focussed aspects of its usage as opposed to informal, ad-hoc approaches. In the above understanding the word 'critical' has been introduced. The word critical is often associated with that of 'reflexive' and to help us consider their relevance to this study, Gardner (2014:22), drawing on Freshwater and Rolfe (2001), offers a useful understanding when indicating that,

> "from a *critical* standpoint, reflexivity involves researchers locating themselves within political and social positions, so that they remain mindful of the problematic nature of knowledge and power inherent in human relationships and organisations. Critical reflexivity draws particularly on the ….critical theory school …..which calls into question the socio-political structures in which we all find ourselves, and which reflects particularly on the effects of power, oppression and disempowerment".

Criticality is therefore required within the research analysis and sought within respondents' accounts of their work based reflections. Although serving within a politically and ideologically driven environment, this does not inevitably position probation officers as passive recipients of knowledge or neutral interpreters of events. Rather they may present as creative, innovative agents within their particular locations, possessing and presumably valuing some degree of professional autonomy.

This sense of autonomy requires that we explore personal agential activity by probation officers, assisted as we are in this study by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). Their research identifies agency as related to motivation, intentionality, will, initiative, and with a sense of purpose or choice, all allied to a belief that personal aims can be met. Within this understanding, aspects of past, present and future dominate as they interact in a creative dynamic, albeit the extent to which one or other aspect is dominant at any point in time or in what context, will vary. The iterational aspect of agency looks backwards and creates a foundational base upon which an individual can operate. Projective agency looks to the creating of a desired future, whilst the practical-evaluative aspect generates present day activity within individuals. As Emirbayer and Mische put it, a "chordal triad of agency within which all three dimensions resonate as separate but not always harmonious tones" (1998:972). The same authors place significant emphasis upon the importance that

context plays in influencing the balance between the chordal tones. It is this dynamic balancing act between past, present and future, found within the respondents' narratives that shall assist analysis within this study, particularly following the constant and significant organisational changes of the last three years.

Alongside experiences of individual or collective agency, Bathmaker and Harnett (2010), making use of Soja (1996), help us to appreciate the crucial interplay of historicality, spatiality and sociality. Personal histories (previous jobs, roles, or work experiences), environments (working spaces) and social interactions (team working or training events) all interconnect to shape individuals. Lived experiences, conceptions and perceptions are seen as perpetually and unwaveringly influenced by these three dimensions of human interaction, as probation officers move between past, present and future, as well as work, family, associates and friends, stepping from one space to another in their daily lives.

Lastly in this section we need to look briefly at organisational structures and cultures in relation to reflective practice. Gardner (2014) helpfully reminds us that organisational cultures provide a pivotal influence upon reflective practice within any agency, creating either constructive, challenging or disabling environments. Additionally, all cultures have assumptions and values embedded in them. Organisations, whilst being entities in themselves, also remain in constant flux and in a supportive organisation this should offer opportunities for all levels of staff to affect change for the better.

Gardner further outlines for us how change brings with it risk for all, resulting to varying degrees in uncertainty and anxiety. Individuals and teams can feel a loss of control as power dynamics within organisations shift. Professional identities become unclear and the emotional life of an organisation can falter as morale levels drop. Conflicts between an organisations expressed values and the daily application of values at the cutting edge of its business generally occur. In considering reflective practice within organisations in transition, Gardner identifies a further barrier to the promotion of reflection amongst staff in that it can imply a threat to the organisation, especially when the term 'critical' is applied to the reflective process. Equally, however, when critical reflection is encouraged from a 'bottom up' approach, greater morale and creativity tends to be generated.

In terms of disabling environments Thompson and Thompson (2008) see potential barriers to the implementation of reflective practice cultures as being such issues as an organisations overly managerialist approach, staff viewed as simply bureaucratic functionaries before that of creative, dynamic, decision makers, and lastly, these barriers and disabling cultures leaving staff feeling unconfident to engage in self-

critique. A more positive approach for Thompson and Thompson can be seen when employers promote analytical skills amongst staff, self-awareness skills, critical thinking, and strong, open communication. These skills, it can be argued, are traditional fare for probation officer engaging in self-development and from this greater self-confidence should arise.

When thinking about reflective practice in an inter-agency and multi-agency context, few would argue that grater 'joined-up' practice and collective development is required on an on-going basis. For Bradbury et al (2010) the central issues here relate to those of identity, team working and manging boundaries. In order to address these difficult areas reflective practice must include consideration of power dynamics between agencies, diversity and equality concerns, and an awareness of the wider socio-political landscape. Mutual respect must be evident and a collective communication culture developed in order to bridge the professional identity gaps. Much of this requires development through collective multi-agency training and staff learning.

Before shortly proceeding to look at the findings emerging from this study, we need to give some thought to probation officers' perceptions of professionalism and individual identities when in work. As probation officers move between different people, places and spaces we need also to consider how different identities are privileged depending on context. Although unearthing probation officer working identities can be somewhat difficult to achieve, for Robinson (2013) what sense of identity exists is built upon humanitarian, compassionate beliefs. A significant degree of agency exists as probation officers resist cultures involving managerialism, constant change, and punitive practices (Burke and Davies, 2011). Ethical and moral values, a high degree of autonomy, creativity and innovation, skills in working with risk and challenging individuals, and an expectation of employer provided CPD emerge from what little empirical findings exist in this area (Burke, 2014: Norton, 2013). Norton further identifies an expectation of being qualified alongside a belief in practice being founded upon research and theory (2013). Whilst Mawby and Worrell (2011) agree with others that probation officer identities hold a firm belief in the intrinsic ability of others to change, they usefully remind us that these broad categories of understanding probation officer identity are not founded on studies that significantly reflect ethnic minority views and the views of women within the context of a feminised workforce. This current research report has to acknowledge its limitations in this area, especially around diversity concerns within the research sample.

In reviewing the literature relating to reflective practice within the probation services we find a very limited pool of material to draw on. As such it is necessary to

adopt a trans-disciplinary approach and delve into the disciplines of social care, health and education in order to form a comprehensive picture of empirical findings or practice debate. Literature closer to the exact field of exploration within this study and report is comprised of reflective practice findings within probation officer training and a body of literature relating to the Offender Engagement (OEP) and SEEDS Programmes.

A plethora of literature exists in relation to reflective practice within health, teaching and social care (see for example Fook et al, 2006; or Mann et al, 2009; or Fry et al, 2010). This body of literature typically attempts to define the meanings of reflective practice, critical reflection and reflexivity and places models of practice implementation alongside understandings of its levels of complexity. It generally expounds the virtues of reflective practice, albeit some materials briefly explore the 'dark side' of the practice in terms of how its poor implementation can promote and reinforce discriminatory practices. Some materials, although lesser in extent, examine reflective practice from a managerial perspective within a therapeutic approach (see for example Ruch, 2012). Within the health and wellbeing literature evidence of reflective practice offering greater job satisfaction and resilience to stress can be found (see for example Knight, 2014; Pack 2012). Whilst this body of trans-disciplinary literature can be drawn upon for a general overview of reflective practice amongst professionals, it does not relate directly to probation practice and as such will not be expanded upon here.

A second body of available literature is that pertaining to reflective practice encompassed within probation officer qualification training. Again, not relating directly to this study area, but literature that indicates that reflective practice is essential to professional development within this arena. Additionally, it is practice that to a greater or lesser extent is promoted at the qualification stage of probation officer training. Skinner and Goldhill (2013) see reflective practice in training as essentially related to the ethical and moral positions that trainees adopt, whilst holding fears that it may become subsumed under a greater emphasis on rational, enforcement driven, utilitarian approaches to staff development. For Goldhill (2010) the value of reflective practice within the uncertain, emotionally demanding phase of professional training, not to mention post qualification practice, is extensive. This should occur within a supportive environment if deep reflection is to occur (Davies and Durrance, 2009), located in a broader context of personal development that enhances autonomy, confidence, and an understanding of the complexities of human nature (Miller and Burke, 2012). Some of the central outcomes of reflective practice for Campbell-Ryan (2014), presenting her work from an Ireland probation service perspective, are those of trainees learning to challenge individually held

prejudice, implement anti-oppressive practice and promote a client focussed approach to intervention work.

Sitting more adjacent to the aims of this current study is the small body of literature that has grown around the OEP and subsequent SEEDS programme. A core component from the outset for both these programmes was to affect a culture change within probation Trusts in part via more reflective supervision of staff (Copsey, 2011). This was to be achieved through high level organisational support designed to develop middle managers in their skills in offering a more reflective approach within probation officer supervision sessions. Aspects of the rationale for the OEP included the objective of capturing and enhancing the creativity and innovation of probation officers and utilising this to develop professional confidence and judgement skills.

Over one-hundred probation managers were trained by 2012 to practice a more reflective approach within supervision sessions with colleagues (Rex, 2012a). The research and evaluation base for this culture change towards a more reflective style of working was comprised of the full range of desistance literature (see for example McNeil, F and Weaver, B, 2007) as well as SEEDS and OEP pilot projects (Rex 2012a and b). Findings from the pilot projects indicated that frontline practitioners broadly welcomed a culture change away from target driven approaches and towards a more reflective, professional autonomy based position. Action learning sets, within a CPD context, were also welcomed within some pilot evaluations, as these were seen as safe spaces in which to build confidence and affirm practice skills, leading to a greater sense of empowerment amongst staff (Sorsby et al, 2013b; Rex and Hosking, 2013).

Lastly within this brief review of the paucity of literature and empirical data within the field of reflective practice, we are drawn to the work of Eadie, Wilkinson and Cherry (2013) as they attempt to link opportunities for finding reflective space in work to key issues surrounding professionalism within probation. In exploring and encouraging probation practice to simply stop for just brief periods in order to adopt some thinking in practice, they position reflective practice within an understanding of adult learning, errors of rationality, confidence building and professional judgement making. Finding probation officers that continue to maintain that "an effective practitioner is a reflective practitioner" (2013:19) these authors place their findings on reflective practice in a central position when working with diverse and complex human interactions and change. Basing their examinations and analysis on desistance and adult learning theories, coupled with four inter-related seminars made up of probation and youth offending service officers and managers, this compelling work offers an insight into the extent that reflective space is valued by

practitioners, when it can be found. This value results in part in more motivated and engaged interactions with service users and improved application to meeting their needs. This work continues to resonate with today's working context as it originates within the ongoing flux in service provision as witnessed from 2013, with any flux becoming arguably greater during the resultant three years. Eadie et al provide a telling insight into practitioner views relating to reflective time and space in work and one that this current study report can build upon.

Section 3 Research Findings

Understanding reflective practice

We are required to begin with exploration of the research respondents' individual understandings of what reflective practice means to them, as they locate their experiences in an everyday working context. This is the context in which they currently makes sense of their working lives and attempt to place reflective practice within this meaning-making journey.

Imagining Premiere League footballers may not be the most obvious place to begin an examination of reflective practice amongst probation officers, but for Nicholas it makes perfect sense as he utilises the analogy of a post match interview; "I liken it to when you think, footballers come off a pitch and they've had their game, they've done their thing, and there's a newspaper, um, a reporter there, saying 'What do you think about that?' or 'How did that go?'" A useful comparison for Nicholas that combines aspects of looking back at recent performance, under pressure, and posing straightforward question that demand answers. Whilst Nicholas utilises this analogy with a sense of humour in his voice, he is adopting a common sense approach that enables him to keep the idea alive in his working day.

Away from the 'media spotlight', Sally offers us somewhat of a more prosaic, everyday insight into how she understands reflective practice.

> *"Well for me reflective practice is considering each, um, case that I work with and each time I do a piece of work, going away and thinking about what I did, how I did it, what the responses were, what I could have done better, how it made me feel. Is there anything that I was doing that, um, was a response to an emotion, rather than thinking things through more clearly and, um, really just kind of thinking the whole thing through, very carefully, and then looking at what I could do better from that".*

Sally's comments represent a collection of concerns expressed by the majority of research respondents in that she positions her understanding of reflective practice in the context of casework, individual interventions with service users, and finding time and space to consider issues post interaction. Her focus on skills application and self-improvement for the future come into play as she looks to continually develop with every case under her management. The majority of respondents equated reflective practice with skills acquisition and development. Further to this she considers the service user's responses to her professional intervention as well as the interplay between her own thoughts and feelings. Whilst Sally's understanding of reflective

practice summarises the experiences of most other interviewees, additional aspects of what it can mean to frontline probation officers arose.

For Susan reflective practice "means about having colleagues, it means about having a Senior, about having supervision and I think I'm in quite a lucky position in that I have all of the above". Consideration is given here by Susan to a necessity within reflective practice for colleague interaction, be that with same grade colleagues or more senior colleagues. Susan emphasis the place of line management supervision within the idea of reflective practice and implies that others are not always so fortunate to be able to access this, at least not alongside that of time to reflect with colleagues. Susan's position suggests the significant role that staff supervision can play for some probation officers, in part to reflect her thoughts and feelings against a more experienced colleague. This idea underpins her understanding of reflective practice and assumes that a senior colleague should be available, indicating however that this resource is not always available for others. An understandable feeling of relief pervades her comments as she depicts a working environment where senior colleagues can appear in short supply.

Notions of what it means to be 'professional' and giving thought to this are important outcomes of reflective practice for Carl as one result of its application for him is to "hopefully strengthen and deepen my understanding and my professionalism is what it means", expressing as he does his emphasis in interview on knowledge acquisition and analysis. As with others above, the idea of professionalism comes to the fore as individuals view themselves working in a professional capacity and relate ideas of reflective practice to this belief. This implies that they expect to be treated as professionals and offered the opportunity for reflection as an aspect of their role. Arguably a natural and reasonably held belief for an individual who has attained a degree level qualification.

Ideas of self-awareness arose with Camilla and others as her understanding and practice of reflection involves aspects of personal introspection, "which is usually to do with me knowing myself well enough to think I need to spend a little more time on this case". Case management remains in view here for Camilla as she places an emphasis on being critically aware of her inner world. Camilla assumes in her comments that time for reflection is available as exploration in a journey of self-discovery forms a major aspect of her interpretation of what personal reflective practice really means. With Sally, above, Camilla's understanding can be seen to incorporate aspects of personal, ongoing transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000) as she places some emphasis on reframing her subjective experiences.

All respondents relate their understandings to ideas of 'time' and 'space' in which to think, with a requirement to find time and space for thoughtful contemplation and evaluation, be it either individually or collectively. They use phrases such as, to process, to digest, to absorb, to discuss in their everyday, common sense application of reflective practice. These are opposed to experiences of "just charging through" work related situations [Samuel], or simply "muddling through" [Carl] from day to day, from service user intervention to service user intervention. Whilst ideas of digesting, processing and absorbing appear regularly in respondents' accounts they relate primarily to inter-personal skills development, a degree of self-awareness and an identity common to that of a professional.

In a working environment that appears less than ideal, assumptions underpinning an expectation that reflective practice shall be undertaken, with all its implications for their employer, appear embedded in understandings of reflective practice as advocated here by experienced probation officers. Understandings resonate with notions of openness, self-challenge, and self-development as key principles of reflective practice (Thompson and Thompson, 2008), with a two-way, sense-making process being established between acquired knowledge within individuals and everyday practice realities. Although no respondents discussed collective approaches to reflective practice within their understandings, individual and dyadic aspects arise and these are infused with values of consideration for others, self-improvement and the provision of a high quality professional service.

The value of reflective practice.

Allied to experiences and understandings of what reflective practice means to individuals is that of the personal value it holds for each officer within a professional work based context. All interviewees expressed views that afforded reflective practice a significant amount of value. For Carl the value and necessity of reflective practice is immeasurable.

> *"I don't really think you could put a price on it …..I simply think that you wouldn't be able to do the job, or you would be doing it in such an automated fashion that you wouldn't be doing anything of any value. You'd just be delivering a programme or mechanically checking people in….[without it] you can't possible develop as a professional".*

Carl's intentional reference to mechanical interaction with service users is interesting in light of current developments in biometric reporting systems and other forms of service user monitoring that has flourished since the introduction of electronic 'tagging' in the late 1990's. The continued introduction of mechanical, electronic and

digital technological forms of service user monitoring has become so prevalent in recent times that professional bodies feel the necessity to examine its development with a view to considering at length aspects of its usage [Raho, 2015]. The strong emphasis on professionalism within Carl's interview narrative surfaces again here with a sense of the value of reflective practice within a CPD context, forming an essential element to any job satisfaction he gains from his role. Due to workload pressures and time limitations perhaps Carl spends a proportion of his working day simply 'checking people in', to the detriment of his personal job satisfaction and any thorough rehabilitative process with service users actually occurring. In light of the view that it is time for probation officers to revisit their views on mechanical and electronic supervision methods (Raho, 2015), Carl and others may have to review their positions to some extent.

In considering the value of reflection Martin expresses similar sentiments to Carl, as for him,

> "it's the cornerstone of all we do…… there's nuances and subtleties to everybody's personalities and the reasons for their offending, and you've got to see all those people as individuals and as soon as you start doing that you have to reflect on what you're doing with them and what they're saying to you. So yeah, for me it's the foundation of what we do really".

So for Martin the nature of the role makes the practice of reflection an imperative as the complexities of human nature and interaction demand a degree of examination of thoughts and actions. For Carl, and to some extent Martin, a formal approach to reflection is "a very powerful exercise because, um, you're doing it in a structured way, you're not sort of just free thinking and getting bogged down in impressionistic thinking". Experiences of 'free thinking' are redolent of unstructured, ad-hoc, informal approaches to reflection and as such Carl alludes here to the necessity of finding time and space to undertake a structured approach to reflective practice, issues that we explore further at a later stage in this report.

An emphasis on the deeply personal nature of reflection comes to the fore with several interviewees as for some, "it's so much part of me, and it's what makes me, and I don't think I actually label it…..so it's important for me that I'm true to myself…… that I'm working in a way that I feel comfortable" [Janet]. The idea of being reflective as part of an officer's identity again arose with Susan as she expressed how "I don't think I could do my job without it, that's how important it is, it's a key element of who I am and how I practice". Simply put, "it's about being honest with yourself" [Nicholas]. So the value of adhering to one's personal beliefs in how to engage with socially marginalised service users surfaces here and perhaps clashes with any mechanistic intervention methods outlined above. This can present

ongoing internal conflicts for some officers in a world where the opportunity for reflective practice and the value of its daily application can present as paramount.

Broad underlying themes relating to wellbeing sit embedded within experiences of valuing reflective practice, with Camilla offering an example of how,

> *"I don't think I could do my job without it, you'd drive yourself completely crazy...... to have a chance to decompress and deconstruct what they've done, why they've done it, where it's come from, how I'm going to choose to let it impact on me, then I would feel completely undermined and useless and start to see the world the way they do, and that would be completely destroying, that would be horrendous".*

Camilla's indications of personal agency are expressed in these comments as she values the power of reflective practice in supporting her choice to not let the unpleasant aspects of her role impinge upon her psychological wellbeing. This sense of reflective practice allows her to take some control over her complex and emotionally demanding working relationships. It sits adjacent to her anxieties around being overwhelmed by some of the distasteful and objectionable elements of her daily routine.

Further, in relation to placing reflective practice within a relational, supportive line management context, "if I'm feeling supported and valued and challenged, not saying my boss doesn't value me, that's not what I'm saying, but I am saying that reflective practice makes that (emotional resilience), for me, much more significant" [Sally]. Issues of staff wellbeing and emotional resilience have been examined recently by Thompson [2015] who identifies line management support as a crucial aspect of staff wellbeing. This appears to be an experience that Sally takes a step further by welcoming any professional challenge from others, in part as a motivational devise. The value therefore of a dyadic approach to reflective practice appears not only health inducing but additionally invigorating at an individual, personal level.

Others position the value of reflective practice within a learning and personal development context. "I do, definitely value it... like part of the learning process" [Shelagh], whilst for Samuel the self-development relates to contentment at work, presumably with added motivation to perform well; "I value it pretty highly,.... I know that I'm a better practitioner if I enjoy myself ..... 'cause the worst thing for me would be to be a probation officer and not be moving forward in the job". Both Shelagh and Samuel seem to place reflective practice within a CPD context as their voices speak of learning and self-development within their daily tasks and careers, placing it alongside experiences of job satisfaction. Additionally, they can but

compare it to their respective employment biographies that place current opportunities within a poor light. Sally values reflective practice to the extent that if she cannot access it in work, she chooses to access it outside of work, again in an effort to continually develop as a practitioner whilst also supporting her own wellbeing. Whilst aspects of personal agency come to the fore in her endeavours to seek support outside of her employment context, questions arise as to why Sally feels compelled to take such a financially demanding approach. Her commitment to seeking opportunities for structured reflection outside of work certainly suggest a lack of meaningful provision or access whilst in work.

Here then we see the utility of reflective practice lying in its being an essential and intrinsic aspect of human interaction when working with service users, helping to anchor practitioner values in an everyday, meaningful working context. This sits in contrast to technological modes of service user interventions as respondent experiences expressed here suggest a working context in which technological innovations continue to play an increasing role within service user management systems. Reflective practice is a deeply personal activity that not only dovetails with certain selected intervention methods as chosen by individual probation officers, but also supports emotional wellbeing within a demanding job role. As expressed in this study, reflective practice has a value for its advocates that is beyond comparison, placing as this does extensive and potentially expensive expectations upon the NPS.

Some barriers

If probation officers discover significant meaning within the practice of professional reflection, whilst affording it a high degree of value within their daily working lives, then everything would appear rosy in the probation garden. For front-line officers however, two underlying and inter-related factors act as barriers to practicing structured reflection. These barriers present as underpinning, all pervasive patterned responses within interview accounts. The two themes involve overwhelming caseload pressures and the corollary of a paucity of time to fully meet the requirements of the role. As we have glimpsed already, a further consequence of these factors can be a negative impact upon staff wellbeing, this again being an all-encompassing theme within personal stories. It is examined here in order to address it directly, before proceeding any further.

The workload and caseload issue is identified by Janet in straightforward terms when she says, "I'm really behind at the moment, we're working at hundred and fifty percent caseload and I'm so behind on everything". Tones of heightened anxiety come through in Janet's voice as she indicates that she is trying to cope with what

would appear to be one-and-a-half that of an expected officer's caseload. In Carl's interview narrative he picks-up on the time paucity issue;

> *"Well, there's never enough time. There is never enough time! I mean, I think it's probably true to say that, you know, you're looking at half the clients to work with, and double the time. The problem is they still say that there is never enough time…..we appear to be fire fighting at the moment….what we're doing is we're just falling back on what we know and on the few things available. We're not really taking the time for any real deep reflection or understanding".*

One outcome of high caseloads allied to other work role demands is, "the workloads are so high that the time for reflective practice is minimised" in Martin's experience. Continual fire fighting is seen as a common occurrence for both Carl and Martin with one consequence being that time to undertake reflective practice seems to fall by the wayside.

With very high caseloads and insufficient time to complete required role tasks, it appears inevitable that staff stress and anxiety levels are correspondingly high.

> *"I mean I've never had a day off in my career from stress from my job and I think a lot of that has something to do with the opportunities I have for reflective practice. And I see quite huge stress levels around the office, which I think might be reduced if there was really an opportunity for reflective practice".* Sally.

For Samuel staff morale is extremely low as a collective sense of helplessness ensues, amounting in effect to a culture of negative thinking amongst colleagues in his team; "I think in terms of the value of reflection, if I can keep my head off of the sea of negativity personally, and I think in terms of your other stress levels, that's got to be a factor as well in terms of protecting your own health which will be another plus for me". It is interesting how both Sally and Samuel relate reflective practice to enhanced wellbeing and associate it with experiences of sickness absence and health protection. Themes of stress, ill-health and job performance explicitly punctuate or implicitly underpin most interview findings, reflecting the disabling aspects of Gardner's (2014) understanding of organisational structures. Nicholas extends this theme to senior probation officer line managers; "I think they're strung out…. they're concerned from a middle manager point of view, 'have we got enough officers in the building with a pulse where I can allocate a case to?'…whether the work is of any quality or not becomes a sort of secondary consideration". Concerns around quality outputs are raised here by Nicholas as he expresses sympathy for his SPO colleagues who struggle to maintain any realistic workflow management.

With regard to staff wanting to practice structured reflection, perhaps with a view to enhanced wellbeing and job satisfaction, workload and time pressures can make structured reflection almost a laborious task, to be undertaken against their anxiety riven wishes. According with Janet's experiences,

> "If it's ten o'clock on a Tuesday, it took half-an-hour and that was taken out of your diary and you're made to do it then people would do it, but they would do it under sufferance. I know they would do it under sufferance because it would be, 'oh I've got this piece of work to do, I've got this telephone call to make, I've got to speak with this person, I've got to make this appointment'. It's always an extremely low priority….which is unfortunate because I think it may help some people, you know in terms of stress levels and stuff like that, if they had a little bit of time to offload. Particularly those who work full time I think… and you know working full time you only have two days to recover whereas if you work park time you have about four".

Concerns were raised by several interviewees that workload pressures and consequent experiences of anxiety can lead to physical and psychological isolation. Again, Janet's comment articulates this collective theme;

> "I think we all work in isolation, we work as a team but we actually work in our offices in isolation really, and you never really know what's going on….. with all just heads down…. 'I can't bother anybody, everyone is just as busy as me'. They don't have the time because they're busy and actually if I interrupt them it's going to impact on them and there's all those thoughts going through your head".

Martin continues the theme not so much from a team-colleague interaction perspective but from one of caseload management,

> "a really important part of that [casework] is discussing all that sort of stuff with your colleagues so you don't become isolated and think that what you're doing is right, you know, you've got to check it out with your colleagues and talk about things; those issues can be quite complex, and that's where a reflective practice comes in".

Not only risk management factors but the possible consequences of isolation are viewed from an ethical viewpoint by Sally who extends the idea to inadvertent yet harmful behaviours towards others;

> "If you're not reflecting on what you're doing drift can happen, you can be doing something that's damaging, you could do something that's unethical without really thinking it through. Without reflective practice you don't always catch all the risks".

Experiences of isolation self-evidently carry not only implications for staff wellbeing but also risk management. Additionally, unintended and perhaps unknown biased and discriminatory attitudes can also result from isolated, insular practices, rendering any workplace culture that promotes solitary workplace behaviour open to further organisational risks.

As with Gardner (2014) we can glimpse some key consequences of the disabling structural barriers of high caseload pressures leading to insufficient time to reflect. These being challenging and disabling environments in which probation officer anxiety and uncertainty leads to a sense of loss of control and subsequent stress. Overall morale levels drop as any tensions between individual or organisational values and their lack of application arise. Of equal concern is that this can lead to worker isolation that in-turn impacts negatively upon risk related decision making. In an organisation whose partial *raison d'etre* is one of risk assessment and management, this clearly sounds many alarm bells.

A transitional period

Although not necessarily an ongoing impediment to the application of reflective practice, we cannot proceed without taking into account the consequences of the TR privatisation agenda and its subsequent impact upon probation officers. This includes the impact not only on professional reflective practice but also on the organisational culture, policy implementation and frontline practice. The TR reorganisation programme can be seen as possibly the most pronounced transitional period in the history of probation services and one that according to some empirical evidence has had a significantly negative impact on employment and diversity matters within the NPS (Kirton and Guillaume, 2015). Is this mirrored to any extent in respondents' accounts of work on the frontline and their opportunities for structured reflection? The TR changes occurred shortly after the introduction of the extensive body of research based policy approach and implementation known as SEEDS, a programme designed to enhance the skills and knowledge base of probation staff in relation to their interactions with service users, including how to reflect upon this everyday working interface.

For some of the research respondents in this study "it's been horrendous for people who are actually working in probation,…… the whole process is horrible" (Shelagh), partly because "we had such a tranche of information pass over to us, ….and I just find it difficult to keep assimilating all this information that keeps being thrown at us" (Janet). For others,

> *"there's a current focus on 'you've just got to manage',……. In a time of change nobody's certain of what's going to happen and we've just got to get on with it basically, that's the kind of philosophy, but that's not helpful for me and that's not helpful for the offenders. The organisation needs people who aren't going to burn-out".*

Alongside issues of unmanageable change and information overload leading to exhaustion and possible absence from work, a culture shift also appears to have occurred for some.

> *"I think in some ways we've become a macho organisation and to sort of admit that you're struggling or that you having problems with somebody in a position of authority could be seen as a sign of weakness. My experience with my manager is that I'm reluctant to open up about some of the problems I might be having with individual offenders. When you look back over the history of probation going back 30, 50 even 100 years, you know, probation never worked with this group".* Carl.

This is what Samuel refers to as a police style 'canteen culture' in which personal inner examination through reflection is viewed as a weakness and a 'stiff upper lip' philosophy prevails.

Camilla introduces into this equation the issue of female probation officer experiences in relation to psychological wellbeing. She sees this issue as being largely ignored since the expansion of the NPS and the intensification of high risk management work when she states that,

> *"I don't think gender is really on the…agenda, 'gender on the agenda' if you like, as much as it should be; it's never really recognised……… one of the things that they haven't considered is the impact, emotional impact, and again on women, on women professionals………. I've spoken to more men who had raped people, who have raped women, that week, than men who hadn't, and you just think 'what is that actually doing to your world view'?………. I've spent the week dealing with fifteen guys who have all either raped or attempted to murder women, it's really difficult and I feel I need to be really aware of how skewed that is in case I say or do or perceive anything that could jeopardise my important relationships with men in my life".*

These comments from Camilla appear doubly concerning in light of recent research findings indicating a worsening of employment conditions for NPS staff and what is seen as a poor prognosis for working experiences for women in a feminised Service. Gender inequalities are expected to become exacerbated (Kirton and Guillaume, 2015). Retention of staff, particularly women, would therefore presents as a pressing issue if in the experience of female probation officers 'gender is not on the agenda'.

Experiences of ongoing transitional change extend to inter-agency working and this again forms an area of reflective practice resulting from the study as high-risk case management lends itself to greater multi-agency interaction. For Susan working in a prison environment the continued uncertainty about the future adds to her distress, "*because in the new offender management model they keep talking about, 'is it going to come in, isn't it going to come in, who knows'?....so that's been challenging as part of becoming the NPS over the last few months, definitely*".

Still considering inter-agency working in relation to prison interactions, Barry spends time in "reflection on the frustrations of it, it should be a lot easier!.......the prison is very difficult, even just getting hold of an offender's supervisor and stuff, and a lot of people now don't even have allocated supervisors, they'll be off on leave or allocated to a different wing". Barry's reflections on his frustrations extend to the difficulties of communication with other agencies as these frustrations can equally be related to other agencies such as the police or courts.

Despite the difficulties currently involved within multi-agency working Martin demarcates the necessity to spend reflective time considering issues in this aspect of NPS work,

> "*because we work in a multi-agency way you've got to understand how other agencies work and that's an area where you've got to reflect on; you've got to reflect upon how other agencies deal with things, you know, for better or worse, you've got to work within that system, you've got to have a knowledge of how those agencies operate*".

Having Martin's knowledge of the systems operated by other agencies echoes part of what Samuel understands as "Everyone's got their own agendas.........so we need to reflect on how our roles are blurring which is a real factor in agency working". Tensions therefore appear within reflections on multi and inter-agency working methods and cause some need for thinking how to manage what is at times a fraught relationship, what Bradbury (2010) would see as difficulties most pronounced at the boundaries of interaction.

To assist probation officers with not only inter-agency working but general intervention skills, approaches to supervision and an underpinning research base, the Skills for Effective Engagement, Development and Supervision (SEEDS) staff training programme was rolled-out to former Probation Trusts. This occurred largely in 2012, 2013 and early 2014. It was within the SEEDS programme that reflective practice was promoted through use of the Gibbs model (1988) of structured reflection. Peer group learning through collective sharing of experience was also promoted. When we ask what thoughts and recollections probation officers have

surrounding SEEDS and its advocacy of the Gibbs approach, a mixed bag of responses results.

Starting with officers who continue to utilise the SEEDS materials, Shelagh offers encouraging comments as she states that "Yeah, I thought it was good. I've still got my book upstairs and all the SEEDS stuff in it". She recalls "how you are working with this person? How did that make you feel? How can you work with them better? You know, that sort of thing".

Martin continues the positive theme when indicating that for him the opportunity to get away from e-mails, 'phones and fax machines was paramount, as,

> "The most valuable thing I found about the SEEDS training was all being together as a group of people, and having the space to discuss some of those issues, that's the thing I found really valuable from it……there was designated time to look at practice and to look at how we were dealing with things, with the SEEDS model as a foundation for it. The really useful thing for me was all being together without any other focus".

Dedicated space away from the office to come together as a group or team appears the key ingredient outlined here. Unfortunately for Carl the issue of workloads impinging on time arises as he took away reflective models from SEEDS, and "found it a powerful tool, but I haven't used it due to time limitations"!

Nicholas reminds us of the work pressured faced by SPOs and he says that in his experience, "I think they're strung out, um, and that's why I think there's not much difference between supervision that I've seen in months and years gone by……whether that work is done well or not is a secondary consideration when your primary concern is 'have you got enough bodies to do the work'"? This is unfortunate as a key aspect of the SEEDS model involved organisational application from the highest levels to create space for line managers to adopt a more reflective approach within staff supervision sessions. Nicholas states further that the focus of probation officer supervision remains that of compliance and enforcement of cases.

Less favourable comments within respondent narratives are typified by Janet who "felt that it was teaching grandma to suck eggs……and from what I saw I don't actually think that's going to add anything to my tool box". Perhaps for more experienced officers like Janet much of the SEEDS material was not new and herein lies a dilemma for SEEDS in that the target audience is broad and diverse in experience, skills, confidence, knowledge and understanding. An argument could be made that it tried to be too much for too many people.

The question of the timing of the inauguration and delivery of SEEDS also comes to the fore as "when that stuff started coming in all the changes were happening and it seems to be forgotten about" (Barry); with Camilla indicating that "to be honest we all knew that none of it was going to be implemented, that nothing was going to change with regards the way we're managed or the way our directors manage our SPO's, and nothing's happened about it since". Occurring just prior to the dismantling of previous Probation Trusts and the implementation of TR it was truly calamitous timing for all concerned within probation.

At the time of this research report significant question remain unanswered regarding SEEDS and its future possible re-implementation. How important is it seen in relation to competing resource allocation and what strategy is in place to re-introduce its usage? If re-implemented, what delivery options would be seen as most advantageous for highly pressured probation officers? Can it be rolled-out to approved premises, court and prison based staff; and what would be the consequences should it not be deemed worthwhile to re-instigate the programme? Despite the barriers that exist to stifle reflective practice, respondents' voices within this research study indicate that it continues to occur in some shape or form. This leads us to question exactly what work based subjects are important enough for officers to manufacture a degree of time and space to reflect in.

What to reflect on?

Having identified the main structural barriers and recent organisational impediments that hamper the application of reflection in work we are now in a position to explore the issues and subject matters that actually occupy probation officers' minds when finding time and space to engage in reflection. What areas of working life do officers choose to give purposeful thought to and why are these particular topics of importance?

From interview discussions the predominant thematic aspect to emerge is that of reflection in the area of personal and/or probation values. Within the broad category of values the key element to arise is that of fairness, of equity when dealing with service users. In addition to this, notions of respecting diversity and equality also surface. Shelagh sums-up the views of herself and her colleagues in saying that,

> "there are some types of offenders that I have to work with, or a couple of offences, that I find harder to work with than others, and that's because of my own, I guess, kind of values. So, for example, like I find home domestic violence perpetrators really difficult at times and also people that have committed offences against elderly people. I find that much harder to deal

with than people who have committed offences against children for example, um, so I'm always aware that I have that sort of, kind of bias almost. So I'm very careful when I'm working with those clients,....to make sure that I'm being fair, you know. And to check-in that I am still, you know, treating them equally and with the sort of respect and everything that they deserve and should get from the Service...... I think you have to keep checking-in on yourself when you're dealing with individuals as to whether you are actually being mindful of their diversity issues or not. ...it'd be quite easy when you're quite busy or, quite, you know, stressed, just to sort of ignore that factor I think".

So for Shelagh, being fair, unbiased and aware of individually diverse needs is a key area of reflection, being aware as she is to when workload pressures and stress can impinge upon her best endeavours. These universal themes expressed by Shelagh sat alongside others articulated by probation officer colleagues such as reflecting on their belief that individuals can change and rehabilitate themselves; the importance of protecting the public and victims from offending and harm; and sensitivity to and being honest in all dealings with others. Awareness is shown in narratives of the intersection of these factors across boundaries of gender, culture and impairment. Most narrative accounts placed personal values within a broader context of empowerment of individuals *vis-à-vis* the authority and control vested in probation staff, within a context of professional ethics, and within a broader context of differing social status. Reassuring then that officers place values of fairness for all at the centre of their reflective practices as this provides a basis for their work in both rehabilitating individual service users whilst simultaneously protecting potential victims within a system framed by ideals of justice.

Skills acquisition, maintenance and improvement is another subject upon which probation officers reflect, albeit mainly in a generalised, informal, unstructured manner. This is perhaps due to workload pressures and time limitations and the resource implications contained therein. Skills reflection relates primarily to service user interventions such as supervision sessions and follows a pattern of thinking around such issues as "did I not listen, did I cut across, was I aggressive, did I sit down and offer him an opportunity to talk"? [Martin]. Other skills involved active and patient questioning and listening, "not putting the words into peoples' mouths and also sitting there in silence, that's the real skill" [Janet]. Skills around professional boundary maintenance were articulated in a context of interacting as "friendly but not friends...that's in a way keeping a sort of boundary there, you know" [Nicholas]. Again, whilst reflection on skills was clearly implicit in most narratives, explicit comments were limited.

In considering knowledge acquisition and retention it can be said that a mixed pattern of narrative responses resulted from the research project. In discussion the topic was related primarily to new policy initiatives, procedures and working within legislation. Keeping-up with new policy implementation presents as an issue, articulated by Camilla who felt that,

> *"endless e-mails that get sent out about TR and about all the rest of it and I don't know anyone who reads them, good luck to anyone who does, because they get deleted almost immediately, because, do you know what, it's going to change in the next ten days anyway and I'm too busy".*

Camilla places the issue in the context of the Transforming Rehabilitation process and the constant policy and procedure changes that have resulted. She alludes to workload-time limitations and her deletion of e-mails is perhaps indicative of a self-protection mechanism in a world of competing pressures and demands, as presented by Kirton and Guillaume (2015).

Other colleagues spoke of gaining and maintaining their knowledge base through reading articles as a concise way to gain up to date knowledge, and for Samuel, "in an ideal world we would have time in our work schedule , um, to set aside time to read articles", whilst others found "toolkits" [Shelagh] as a useful source of information. The habit of reading books appears very limited from the findings, albeit some respondents who enjoyed exploring a more 'academic or 'theoretical' approach did find time outside of work to consult contemporary criminal justice literature, at times from other countries around the globe in an effort to learn from comparisons in practice (Svendsen, 2015; and Heard, 2015, provide current reference examples).

Martin draws on the wealth of knowledge derived from the experience of his colleagues, both recently qualified and more established colleagues, believing that without a continued knowledge update process,

> *"you can certainly get fixed ideas…., that's the dangerous thing. You've always got to reflect on how your knowledge and awareness fits into that individual offender, at that time, and your colleagues are very useful,…. it might just be a kind of nugget or small little tweak to what you're thinking or what you're doing, it's good to have that other idea really so you've got to be open to people telling you 'that's not how I see it', so yeah, you've got to be really careful not to allow yourself to become just on one track where you're just kind of thinking 'I know all this, I know all this'".*

Martin alludes here to the nuances of development through reflection, as the tweaks to which he refers reflect his efforts to prevent getting stuck in a dangerous rut of

trammelled thinking and behaviour. Finally, training was discussed by some respondents as one of their main sources of knowledge development, with the central most important aspect of this being for Nicholas, analytical thinking. "In terms of reflecting on my knowledge base, that might be when I'm doing training, I might think 'Well, 'how do I know that?', and, 'how did I learn that?", 'What experience has that been gained from?' So, in that sense I would say I reflect on it". Again, with knowledge acquisition and updating, time and space factors come into play, as does information overload via e-mails. Assumptions contained within patterned responses from participants indicate that underpinning knowledge is crucial for undertaking the probation officer role, albeit how such knowledge is delivered and absorbed needs a common-sense, pragmatic, achievable approach.

Yet another area of focus for reflective practice is that of emotional literacy, daily internal experiences and how to manage them.

> *"I reflect upon how I feel at the beginning of the day, so for me the start of the day is really important, and then how my day goes, on a personal level when I get to work, and then how I feel at work. I think you've got to be really, really careful about how you allow that to translate into your sessions with the offender, so you've got all your personal stuff which you've got to put to one side and not let it influence your work……. what kind of feelings are they projecting onto you, and I think that is quite a key skill really. You have to be aware of your own feelings and be aware of how they are trying to make you feel, as you can get quite a lot of projection where they're projecting their feelings onto you,…. I think it would be very dangerous on a personal level if you didn't reflect on things, if you allowed all those feelings etc, to bring into the session, to stay inside you without releasing them, that would be quite a detrimental thing"*. Martin.

In considering emotional needs Janet was, unlike some staff, not reluctant to ask in a reflective context for help from colleagues,

> *"because somebody might perceive it as a weakness, I actually perceive it as a strength you know. I think to be aware of yourself you need to think of it as a strength. Other people may think it shows vulnerability and they may not want to show those vulnerabilities, but you know each of us deals with it in a different way but, um yeah,….where I've talked about things on a regular basis it's relieving that pressure on a regular basis, which really, really helps"*.

Susan presents similar sentiments when she says, "I reflect on why certain things maybe press my buttons, I'm very conscious if I've had a very bad day at work, I think I don't want to be taking any of that anger or aggression taking that home with me". The issue of 'taking things home' and 'off-loading' on family or friends occurred intermittently within respondents' narratives, with a clear tension existing between

boundaries of confidentiality and the need to 'vent'. Officers were also cognisant of not placing their emotional pressures onto others outside of work. A common and not unexpected experience is thus for officers to give some purposeful thought to their daily emotional needs and the hazards of projecting these onto others or having service users project negative experiences onto them. Having a safe environment in which to discuss and express these issues therefore correspondingly appears as a necessity for all concerned.

The extent to which officers think and reflect upon what can be termed socio-political issues also provided a strongly patterned response. This is perhaps not surprising in the context of the greatest restructuring process ever encountered within probation services having just been experienced by staff. This study was conducted some fourteen months after the implementation of the Transforming Rehabilitation initiative imposed by the Conservative Government, in which approximately 70% of England and Wales probation services were assigned to private or voluntary sector agencies. The remaining 30% of services are maintained by the publicly managed NPS sitting within NOMS and deal with higher risk service users [MoJ, 2013]. If any form of critical thinking emerges, it is here that respondents express it most vividly.

Moral dilemmas arose within the research findings in relation to the TR agenda, especially when some respondents saw little change in approach;

> "I just find it morally wrong that this private company is making money from, you know, probation, and that really there's nothing, there's nothing different. They're not doing anything different. They're going on like they've reinvented the wheel and they haven't". Shelagh.

Similarly, for Susan, "It has felt like it's a sustained attack on us and our values". Any wholesale changes to the structural fabric of probation services, resulting in a perceived challenge to professional identities will of course carry consequences. For Carl these changes have resulted in staff that,

> "feel disempowered…. I do think the process, the socio-economic fact if you like, the political factors, they are working in the direction of dehumanising it and turning it into a machine…..that we're being driven by top down agenda into delivering, um, not just interventions but delivering probation in a very rigid way, and we're not being encouraged to reflect on what we're doing or think about what works or what might work or what has been tried in other places".

Rigid, inflexible, top-down approaches are clearly exercising Carl's critical   thinking, resulting in feelings not only of disempowerment but lack of creative opportunity,

perhaps resulting in part from his awareness of best practice in other areas of the UK, Europe or the world. Barry picks-up on this sense of frustration and develops it further.

> "I find it quite frustrating,…..and I don't feel I have any kind of say or input into that. I kind of have to accept what is given to me. I have tried to get involved, like there is a practice innovation group and things, which I have agreed to go on, but I find it very un-ambitious and boring, you sit there and talk about induction forms and stuff".

Barry's comments suggest some organisationally encouraged involvement in the implementation of new processes and procedures but not to the extent that he seeks, leaving him feeling de-motivated and involved at only a superficial, simplistic level. If any sense of being treated as less than an experienced, highly trained, qualified professional, able to operate and contribute to a higher degree is felt internally, then Samuel takes that sentiment into an external context when thinking about court work and other multi-agency interactions,

> "They kind of treat you with a little less respect I think… I get the sense that you really have to work hard now to kind of project a professional image,…. so you've got to gain that respect really… 'cause we have got, in certain courts, we have got a bad name".

The TR organisational separation and wider social context is brought down to a more immediate level by Martin who relates it directly to his engagement with service users and his having to work in an increasingly resource limited manner,

> "resources have diminished so that reflects the political will of the Government, so that reduces the resources available to us to work with and reduces the resources that the offender can access, so that's a fairly simple example. You have to reflect on how you're going to manage that in terms of managing a case and how you're going to present that to the offenders….. the broader canvass is with us every day".

Communicating to service users that the lack of resources, such as suitable alcohol counselling, limits what material support he can offer, appears to be a key area of reflection for Martin, being aware as he is of the wider socio-political context in which his work is located. Martin reflects on an important issue here for several respondents as his sense of vocation in supporting others draws him towards considering service user needs alongside his professional position.

Nicholas maintains the theme of 'austerity' and what he sees as a period of recession by reminding us that offending is not limited solely to one stratum of society as,

> *"there's time of economic depression, there's times of recession, … I think that domestic violence for example and sex offending cuts across pretty much equally, all classes, or socio-economic backgrounds, but it's easier to detect in a place where you're already looking for it………crime gets found when people look for it".*

Perhaps equally, a certain number of probation officers recognise issues in society before that of the political dynamics that drive matters of funding and resource allocation. Janet, as with Martin above, brings this down to a more personal, relational level when she reflects upon service users and some of their situations; "I have actually said to people 'I think if I had that upbringing I think I might be sitting in that chair too'. It always amazes me the resilience of some human beings to actually be alive and breathing and they have been through some of the most horrendous upbringings". Service user resilience would appear to be the key notion here as expressed by Janet, being placed as it is within a context of broader resource availability for individuals already marginalised within society and distanced from its opportunities for social mobility.

Probation officers are required to walk a daily tightrope between the rehabilitation of individuals and wider victim protection. It may therefore be reassuring to know that they reflect not only on the resource needs of their service users but also professional decision making and risk management issues, including those of inter-agency working. Nicholas leads the way here as he places defensible decision making within an inter-agency setting: "How did I justify my place at that table?" Were my decisions defensible?", "Would they withstand hindsight scrutiny?" Samuel picks-up the theme and again, reassuringly places it alongside experiences of having to prioritise workloads and risk; "I think particularly I need to reflect on prioritisation…not the person whose the most noisy asking me for something, but what's the most critical thing for risk now". Traditional risk management practices from Nicholas and Samuel, yet ones that are not without their difficulties, as Samuel continues with experiences requiring him "to reflect on how our roles are blurring which is a real factor in agency working …., is it a Venn diagram where things overlap"? For Shelagh risk management becomes more challenging due to constantly dealing with a caseload of higher risk individuals;

> *"I think in a way there's less space to do reflective practice because there's so much enforcement focus, so, there's quite a lot of pressure….there has to be quicker decisions about, you know, recall, or what you're going to do with this person, and I sometimes think it feels so rushed".*

If risk management is 'rushed', then according to Martin it is also fraught with inter-agency and multi-agency political dynamics, driven in part perhaps by conflicting agenda;

"because we work in a multi-agency way you've got to understand how other agencies work and that's an area where you've got to reflect on; you've got to reflect upon how other agencies deal with things, you know, for better or worse, you've got to work within that system, you've got to have a knowledge of how those agencies operate..... so what you've got there is pressure on you to conform to the values of all those agencies....... but sometimes you've got that tension between what you think is probably best for the offender and what other agencies want to do".

Constant, unrelenting, high risk management prioritisation and multi-agency pressures are new to the NPS and for some staff this demands reflective time and space in order to re-adjust their personal positions, to reflect on their careers and personal employment journeys within the criminal justice system. Carl tells us that, "now I found myself sort of, you know, working with this high risk group but I'm thinking, in a way, this isn't traditional Probation work. This is something else…so it's made me reflect on what this, what I intended to do in the first place and do I want to be doing it". As NPS Divisions may struggle to recruit qualified probation officers, who in a free-market ideologically driven climate can take their skills, knowledge and experience elsewhere, perhaps Carl's reflective experience is not his alone.

A final thought from Samuel in this risk management and inter-agency section in that he expresses the view that "in some respects an SFO forces the services as a whole to be reflective", an idea that he believes could be built upon for future learning, group reflection and training. If the 'fear factor' can be taken out of the SFO equation then for Samuel far greater reflective use could be made by the NPS from SFO enquiries.

For Samuel and others, making decision relating to risk forms part of their professional identity, as Carl explains,

> *"I mean that's what to me being a professional is, it's understanding that, you know, it's not up to you to take the moral high ground or to think that you know it all. Being a professional is to use your diagnostic tools if you like, to look at the person in front of you and think about, um, what their needs may be and what their risks may be and to, you know, make an assessment, a professional assessment, based on the person in front of you and the situation in front of you which will be different virtually every time".*

Notions of professionalism and professional identities sit however within a cultural milieu, one created in large part by the organisational approaches of employers. For Samuel the NPS needs to "create a culture whereby people aren't surprised when you come up to them and say 'Can I have a reflective discussion with you about what's happened'?….. So, it's just a culture thing isn't it? It's a culture issue'".

Expanding on his ideas of professionalism within a supportive organisational culture Samuel argues further that,

> "in an ideal world we would have time in our work schedule, um, to set aside time to read articles…., I do reflect on that quite a lot, 'cause you need to move forwards professionally don't you? You can't just stay still from the day you graduate……in other organisations you know, there's that classic thing about you wouldn't go to your doctor and expect them not to have done any training since they qualified".

Ideas about scheduling-in time for reflective practice within a professional context raised issues of whether or not a culture of compulsory or mandatory attendance within a reflective forum should be developed. For Carl the issue was clear cut, as "I think really a good manager should really be forcing their staff to do it I think". Nevertheless for Carl some cultural barriers exist in that he felt that "in some way's we've become a macho organisation and to sort of admit that you're struggling or that you having problems with somebody in a position of authority could be seen as a sign of weakness". Camilla picks-up on the idea of staff seeking spaces for reflection, especially around their psychological needs, as being perceived as a form of 'weakness' when she refers to attendance at counselling sessions;

> "This needs be something that's normal, it can't keep being perceived as something that weak people go to, or people who can't cope go to, because I like to think we are more emotionally sophisticated than that…… other people aren't prepared to speak about it like that, they'll cover it up…… I think it should be compulsory, yeah I do, it's beyond me that it's not. I mentioned it to my director when it first came out, I said 'why isn't this compulsory'? He just kind of shrugged and said 'well, you can't make people do things'; well you think 'yeah you do, you make me do stuff all the time'. You know, that's actually not good enough".

With the vast array of experience that staff bring to the probation officer role, perhaps comparisons with other organisations and their cultural expectations is inevitable. As Sally explains, previously coming from the arena of mental health nursing in which her professional journey began,

> "if you don't do reflect practice…. it's not monitored, so I take mine outside of work…..and it being, not just the individual value, it's actually being valued by the organisation. I mean 'cos in mental health, if you don't get your clinical supervision, if you don't go, then you get a bollocking. It's valued by the organisations as well as by the individuals".

Other colleagues developed this theme by indicating that the limited counselling sessions that are available to NPS staff are insufficient and if conducted by 'phone

become impersonal. Carl felt that trust issues with SPOs can also stifle staff personal disclosure and thus an outside, independent resource is needed. Here additionally, Sally cannot but relate her experiences today to those of her past in that she in part makes sense of her current predicament though reference to previous good practice. She thus places her understanding of her situation within Soja's (1996) intersection of personal biography, current working spaces and the need to seek reflective opportunities outside of work as her personal developmental journey continues within differing yet overlapping contexts.

In terms of what probation officers choose to reflect upon we see here that values, skills, knowledge and emotional literacy form the initial aspects of structured, purposeful contemplation as indicated by the research respondents in this study. The contemplative thinking does not however end here. It broadens out into socio-political dimensions in which a degree of criticality emerges as probation officers seek ways to challenge dominant, all-encompassing political dialogues that do not necessarily equate to their daily experiences on the front line. Further, perceptions of professional identity emerge yet again within this study, this time in relation to constant risk assessment, prioritisation, management and inter-agency working as respondents attempt to forge their identities around this essential everyday aspect of their working lives. These areas cannot escape critical evaluation of the organisational culture relating to staff support and supervision within a reflective context as some officers ground their practice within extensive work related histories.

How best to reflect?

Having gained some insight into what probation officers choose to reflect on we now need to consider how they undertake reflection. If reflective practice can be undertaken alone, with one other colleague in a dyadic fashion, or in groups, what proves the most popular method?

In considering firstly the art of lone reflection through the use of reflective models, diaries or written narrative methods, it is clear from the study that this approach receives little if any attention. In discussing the use of reflective models such as Gibbs' (1988) iterative design, Nicholas sums-up the responses of some when he says "No. I'm not knocking it, I'm not knocking it at all, uh, but I dunno what the Gibbs model is", with Shelagh making a valiant effort to recall other theorists; "Boud, is that another one?" Samuel struggles to remember his training days when stating that, "When I was a trainee officer I did that, but since then, um, I've never done it…It would be helpful to write things down. It would be helpful. Even if it's just in

bullet point or a mind map……I can see the benefits of that, 'cause then you can go back and reflect on what you've written". Nevertheless, he no longer engages in lone reflective practice.

When finding time to capture thoughts, experiences or feelings and capturing them in some form of written format, Carl openly admits that "when I've done that I've always found that a very powerful exercise because it's, um, you know, you're actually…yeah…doing it in a structured way…So yeah, I think it's something that because of the pressures of timing you don't do it". Using written methods, undertaken in an individual manner, does not therefore present itself here as occurring to any extent through the respondents in this study.

In contrast to lone reflection, when considering reflective practice in pairs, that is alongside one other probation officer colleague, this presents as a dominant theme to emerge. This dyadic approach is nevertheless largely ad-hoc and unstructured as probation officer colleagues turn to each other throughout their working day to discuss, share, and vent their feelings, leaving it difficult to quantify and evaluate. Whilst it clearly occurs in practice its unstructured approach places it largely outside the parameters of our working understanding of what professional reflective practice consists of. Although the value of informal, non-formal and incidental learning (Colley et al, 2002; Marsick and Watkins, 2001) is recognised as important, exploring this approach requires more time and resources than can be afforded here.

The other form of dyadic reflective practice occurs within the context of staff supervision sessions, primarily occurring when a senior probation officer line managers a probation officer colleague. When working well the space, time and reflective approach of an SPO is valued by probation officers. As Samuel points out,

> *"our most reflective tool is that of the relationship. It's about the one to one relationship …..it helps having a manager who you can talk to and you can bounce off, and know that you can expect enough to get a different view. Some managers you can get and you can just talk to them and you just go in there and you don't get anything back or it feels as if they're not bouncing things back to you which doesn't encourage you…..No, I don't have, really have regular supervision. When I do that it's very good but logistically at the moment it's a nightmare".*

Thus for Samuel and other respondents the opportunity in supervision to talk with a questioning, probing, reflective manager is valued and appreciated as a format for stimulating thinking, reflection and debate. When this doesn't happen it is,

unsurprisingly, discouraging. These views clearly carry import for the SEEDS programme and its reliance on SPO involvement.

Janet shares her wishful thinking around this subject as she hopes for the day when her employer offers her the opportunity to access her own chosen space to engage in reflection. Her hopes though are not wholly self-directed as she introduces the practical notion of protecting financial resources in the longer term.

> *"I always wished that they would have a pot of money……If they could say to us….. 'we will give you a hundred and fifty pounds and you have to evidence that you've gone to somebody, but you can go and choose whoever you want to choose to talk to, on a professional bases'. I would of found that really useful…. for me talking to someone in a more therapeutic environment…. the way the work affects me, how I feel about it would be really, really useful, because I just think that forty to fifty minutes, just to sit and listen, to offload and maybe get some reflection back about, 'well have you tried this? Have you tried that? Maybe you could do this'? ……or even me coming around with those answers would be so useful…. But they're never going to do it as they're never going to have the money. But to be honest if they did do that it may get it back in spades in terms of less sickness absence".*

Innovative thinking is shown here from Janet as her ideas to enhance her own psychological resilience through accessing reflective space outside of work could benefit not only herself but also she believes the NPS in the longer term.

Alongside the use of line management or independent supervision as a strongly patterned response from interviewees, the benefits of group reflective practice methods also comes through powerfully from the research findings. Shelagh sums up some of the key issues for us.

> *"Peer Learning….I thought they were really useful and not only when…….sort of going over cases but also when you were giving, trying to support your colleagues and give feedback. I thought they were really good…. there's nothing really like that here at the moment. There's been Personality Disorder Pathways [who] have a formulation meeting where you can bring a case and talk about a case and then you kind of get some reflective work done in that way, which have been really useful".*

Of note then here is the usefulness that Shelagh places upon peer group learning that encompasses a reflective approach. Nevertheless, also of note is that she speaks in the past tense and indicates a current lack of opportunity to get together with probation officer colleagues to reflect and learn in a collective manner. Equally however, Shelagh appears to grasp the only alternative viable option for reflection, namely that of accessing 'formulation' meetings through the opportunities afforded

by the Personality Disorder Pathways project currently provided in some offices. Again, an example perhaps of human innovation as individuals adapt and engineer existing circumstances to their advantage when faced with their professional needs not being met. One respondent expressed the common practice of seeking time with his Personality Disorder Pathways office based psychologist not primarily to discuss difficult cases but to find some reflective practice space for himself.

Martin, also looking backwards to previous opportunities for reflection, expresses fond memories of when he was engaged in Integrated Domestic Abuse Programmes in which he was observed via video link and offered feedback from senior colleagues relating to his practice, all within a safe team environment; "They were incredibly valuable, the whole sessions because the really skilful practitioners, professionals, would just feed-off the ideas. Then there was a group of professionals, the staff, just keeping the conversation going like a natural flow of conversation. That was excellent". So here again we glimpse not only the power of peer reflective spaces for probation officers but also the value they invest in them.

Although peer reflective practice presents as a strongly patterned finding, it is not without its difficulties as "I really don't think members of my team would be prepared to make the time for something like that…..I think another thing, a number of people would think it's a complete waste of time" (Janet). Here then the issue of a paucity of time to reflect, resulting from heavy caseloads, emerges yet again. It emerges alongside the belief that some probation officers hold reflective practice in little regard and do not wish to make time to undertake it. Broader cultural issues also resurface here as Camilla suggests that collective fear and reluctance prevail amongst colleagues as she takes time from her case management to seek individual reflective spaces; "I mean I quite happy to say 'actually, I'm off, I cant do that this afternoon, I'm off to see my counsellor', but other people aren't prepared to speak about it like that, they'll cover it up". Again, allowing for some conflation between structured reflective practice amongst colleagues in contrast to seeking specific, protected time within a counselling session, it remains of concern that a culture is identified in which any time away from one's desk is frowned upon.

For some, such as Camilla, an overly structured approach is of limited use, as she indicates with reference to peer group meetings and prescribed models or methods of reflection;

> "as someone who really values reflective practice I find those things really cheesy. I find it really, um, I don't know, I feel a little bit like you're being condescended to, you know, this idea that 'let's all meet at ten o-clock, bring a case that you want to reflect on',…… I don't think you can organise your feelings in that kind of way………and when there's trainees and other people

around you want to be very careful. I had a nasty experience recently where…[example given]…. there was no way I could have brought that to a group with a load of trainees in it or a newly qualified officer in it, because it would have scared the life out of them".

It would appear then that the reflective and learning methodology utilised within peer group approaches is of significance for some, as are the constituent members of the group, albeit this approach does not meet every individual reflective or learning need. Finally, with reference to peer group learning practice Nicholas reminds us that "when you're seconded you're well out of it, um, and so, so I wasn't any part of it, in that sort of stuff". As probation officers are rotated between prison, offender management units, court and other locations, issues of consistency and equality of opportunity arise here. With the implementation of current and future NOMS staffing policies and strategies this needs to be given careful consideration.

Returning briefly to practicing reflection outside of work, as suggested by Janet earlier, Sally tells us how she chooses to pay for a professional counsellor from her own funds and in her own time, as "I now pay for my own clinical supervision. …… obviously I don't share the details from cases, um, yuno, I talk about what's happening and helping". Nothing could perhaps articulate the value and necessity of finding reflective space more than Sally's comments.

Although probably in a minority group in terms of funding her own opportunity for reflection outside of work, Sally is not alone in commenting on how the only other time she has for reflection is when travelling. She indicates how she "would be really interested in how people who don't travel on public transport do their reflective thinking because I probably wouldn't have the time to do it at home". Several respondents, whilst emphasising their strict adherence to issues of confidentiality and anonymity of data, express how they have to bounce ideas of close family members at home, mainly in order to gain a 'reality check' and place their everyday work experiences in some kind of perspective, perhaps privileging their home based identities over their work based identities, although not to the extent of losing sight of professional boundaries of confidentiality. This perspective seeking often relates to gaining victim insights, albeit in an informal, unstructured manner. This position is taken to additionally relate to other professionals as, "it's important for your attitudes and beliefs to have a reality check outside of what you're doing at work…..in the 'real world'" and Martin seeks this through colleagues in various multi-agency risk management forums for example.

The 'how' of reflective practice can here be seen to extend primarily to a preference for dyadic, line management supervision opportunities for thinking and sharing ideas alongside those of peer group approaches. Officer to officer reflection occurs on a

daily basis but only within a largely unstructured, ad-hoc manner. Individual, lone reflective practice approaches that employ supportive models (see Gibbs 1988) find no resonance within this study. This has consequences for the SEEDS programme and its promotion of this method. As seen previously, the ability of probation officers to adapt their circumstances to meet the need for reflective opportunities is evident as they not only engineer work based opportunities but engage and invest in inter-agency and external openings, such is the extent to which those in this study value certain reflective spaces. An organisational culture that frequently moves staff between settings such as prison, court and office bases is surely required to take the above considerations into account.

The future?

So what does the future hold in terms of reflective practice for the research respondents featured in this study? This question is in part answered through the agency and ideas that they themselves hold in their personal and collective creativity and innovation. In this section we explore some of the solutions offered by those we have met who work on the frontline on a daily basis, some of whom speak of recapturing notions of professional empowerment and development.

Perhaps the most pressing issue for all NPS probation officers is that of workload reduction. With probation officers indicating that they cannot find time or space to undertake reflection on their practice as individuals, workload pressures need to be reduced [Martin] if the line between quality and quantity is to be re-drawn in favour of quality outputs [Susan]. A partial response to this issue is that of Divisional and Local Delivery Unit directors being compelled to take action to lessen caseloads when individuals or teams are under unbearable pressure [Camilla].

Views on workload management sit adjacent to experiences of organisational and cultural change. Amongst research respondents these involved not only the NPS creating time and space for reflection, but additionally creating an expectation that staff are supported and required to enter into such practice [Camilla]. This would need to occur within a safe environment [Nicholas] and be located within a broader CPD culture of meaningful training and staff development. This should be timetabled into staff working time [Sally]. If SPOs are to lead on this process then they too would require ongoing support to enable any cultural changes [Nicholas].

Whilst within research narratives some conflation can be seen across ideas of reflective practice, counselling and broader therapeutic interventions, the overriding theme is one of staff needing individual time and space to better manage the demanding emotional and psychological aspects of their roles. Expressed ideas found here are wide ranging. Access to free, unlimited, in-person counselling, beyond what is currently provided, is suggested by several interviewees [Shelagh, Camilla, Janet]. More reflective supervision could provide the necessary time and space to address emotional needs as well as consideration of ethical and value driven practice [Samuel]. Finally, clinical supervision, irrespective of who facilitates it, should be made mandatory for all staff [Carl, Camilla]. It has to be noted at this point that notions surrounding more reflective supervision within a CPD culture are promoted within the SEEDS programme and continue to find resonance here within individual respondent's accounts.

In terms of collective reflective practice, interviewees speak of some form of peer group learning as being most advantageous. Again, this needs to be on a regular basis [Shelagh] and timetabled into staff diaries [Martin]. Some form of group discussion presents as a strongly patterned response within the research study. This is in contrast to responses and ideas surrounding individually conducted reflective practice methods such as using reflective models, albeit it equated strongly with one-to-one opportunities for discussion through forms of supervision.

In further practical terms some respondents speak of using team meetings or similar as opportunities for brief promotional activities around reflective practice. This assumes that team meetings occur on a regular basis, something that in the author's experience does not always occur. A video of short duration could be shown at any such event, followed by team discussion [Samuel]. Here again we find echoes of the SEEDS initiative. One hour for team discussion of a reflective nature could be found on a Friday afternoon to conduct team discussion of events from the previous week, offering some time and space as a collective [Barry]. Ideas surface relating to SFOs. Improved learning from SFO enquiries could be achieved on a collective level if the personal 'fear factor' could be removed from the working environment and cases could be reflected upon in group settings. The SFO process is seen as containing strong reflective elements and as such these can be utilised more readily [Samuel].

Lastly in this section that examines ideas, agency and empowerment of individual probation officers, suggestions arose relating to the enhancement of professionalism and professional identities through the creation of a register of qualified practitioners [Sally, Carl]. Some respondents clearly situate previously discussed ideas of reflective practice, CPD, organisational cultural expectations, and ethical value based philosophies as needing recognition and affirmation through a professional registration process. This idea is closely aligned with improved usage of relevant agencies such as the Probation Institute [Carl].

Here then we find a collection of ideas for improved future practice in relation to structured reflection and learning, for both individuals and teams. These ideas can, if practitioners at all levels so wish, be utilised to form the basis of an organisational debate into how best to proceed with reflective practice within the NPS in the future.

Section 4 Conclusion

The key findings emanating from this study relate directly to the lived experiences, practices and ideas of those front-line NPS probation officers who offered their personal narratives in research interviews. Through their stories of everyday working challenges, encounters, frustrations and creative opportunities we find a picture of reflection managing to occur within a context of organisational turmoil, contending with a variety of barriers to its implementation. This ultimately requires innovation in professional practice in order to exist, alongside the self-application and tenacity of its advocates as they seek to create dyadic and peer group opportunities to engage in reflection. The experiences of probation officers captured within this study intersect with the experiences of the service users they support and glimpses of this relationship are also seen here. This study should hopefully reignite the debate into how reflective practice can improve this working relationship, with the ultimate aim of protecting victims of crime.

The voices of probation officers working within the NPS South-East and Eastern Division assist us in addressing our initial areas of exploration relating to the extent to which reflective practice actually occurs in this particular section of probation services. We glimpse insights into the meaning, value and purpose of its application in the experiences of qualified practitioners who specialise in heightened levels of risk management. The how, when and where of reflective practice amongst this group of staff is richly identified, including within some employment biographies. The application of the SEEDS programme is also addressed, including some suggestions from practitioners surrounding its possible future adapted usage.

Probation officer understandings of what it means to be a reflective practitioner encompass inter-personal skills application and an attitude supporting continual self-improvement. These are allied to ongoing consideration of differing degrees of self-awareness. Practitioners share their understanding of reflective practice as being associated with aspects of professional identity and how this can be an ongoing struggle against ideologically driven political forces that shape the policy framework in which they work. Despite this struggle reflective practice is seen as being highly valued for its usefulness in helping to understand and shape working relationships with service users, so much so that lack of opportunity in work has driven some in this study to seek support outside of their place of employment. Surely an indication of its value for practitioners if ever there was one.

Processes of human interaction, aided by reflection, present as a counterweight to alternative technologically driven, automated approaches. Reflective practice is thus

defined by research respondents as a deeply personal experience that accords with their chosen ways of working with disadvantaged, socially marginalised service users. In relation to risk identification and management, including inter-agency working, reflective practice can help to overcome the hazards of assessment bias and a drift into isolation in decision making.

The Transforming Rehabilitation process has exacerbated the barriers to undertaking structured reflective practice as those in this study perceive it as a direct challenge to their value systems, leading to a cultural shift towards directive styles of leadership. When time and space can be engineered in order to practice reflection, the oppressive and damaging experiences of workload pressures, organisational change and cultural employment practices can be alleviated. Additionally, within a challenging role it promotes emotional resilience and improved wellbeing, an organisational objective that all concerned can undoubtedly subscribe to.

Of greatest concern is that within a now feminised occupation, issues of gender appear marginalised if not forgotten altogether by NPS senior leaders. This issue is in need of urgent attention not only as an immediate equality and diversity issue but in relation to the retention and future recruitment of new staff. Should the SEEDS programme become re-instated through a policy driven, strategic approach, positioned within a quality assurance framework, then some opportunities to discuss and address difficult issues from a practitioner perspective could become apparent. The key question here concerns the extent to which any political will exists at a strategic level to re-instate the SEEDS programme?

Whilst the central focus of reflection emerging from this study includes professional values, skills, working knowledge and emotional literacy, the how of reflective practice is located firmly in line management and/or peer group reflective opportunities. Input from specialists such as psychologists or counsellors, who be their training have a tendency to utilise a reflective approach, are sought by probation officers. This is in addition to the value of SPO supervision, or more frequently due to lack of SPO supervision sessions being made available. Either way, probation officers choose to utilise every opportunity at their disposal, engineering supportive meetings if needs be.

Although the practice of when, where and how reflective practice occurs is highly individualistic and no one template meets all needs, reflection undertaken on an individual basis, was advocated by no respondents. Neither are supportive models of individual reflection utilised. This has implications for the SEEDS programme and the key question relating to employers matching the added value ascribed to reflective practice as presented by practitioners. An added value that may make it obligatory

for employers to initiate further collective efforts to overcome any barriers and practical difficulties to its regular application?

Within this study we find a picture of reflective practice enabling probation officers to make some sense and meaning from the chaotic context of their working environment. Although some of the central areas of reflection remain those of professional values, skills application and skills development, through considering cognitive and affective processes, reflective practice cannot be contained within the immediate confines of any role definition. It envelops wider matters as it considers issues of agency-structure dynamics, personal and professional identity, individual biographical employment journeys, and transformation through personal growth in work.

It would appear from this study that reflective practice cannot simply be enclosed within a purely utilitarian, apolitical, rational CPD context when applied to personal human interactions and the strongly held belief systems of its practitioners. As such, some complexities, tensions and contradictions involved within probation officer knowledge acquisition are suggested here as the problematic nature of knowledge inherent within any vocational profession begins to surface. In adhering to the principle of honest, open challenge within reflective practice, aspects of criticality emerge as respondents are continually forced to reframe not only their inner world but the external political forces that direct their work. They call into question the forces shaping their own professional identities and the culture they work within as they operationalise their personal agency to challenge systems and structures that constrain and frustrate. Further, they are at times forced to renegotiate their very *raison d'etre*, the potential opportunity to affect change in others, as resource limitations increasingly apply. This would appear to relate in part to inter-agency role boundary delineations.

This research project has attempted to capture and better understand the voices of frontline NPS probation officers in relation to the daily application of professional reflective practice in work. Probation officers speak of reflection when at its most productive as being associated with an enthused workforce that seeks job satisfaction through personal growth and feeling valued. Findings further suggest that the application of reflective practice is essential if an improved service user experience is to be attained. This improvement includes that of enhanced risk assessment and risk management designed to increase public safety. As such it appears incumbent upon NPS staff to engage in a collective discourse aimed at enabling structured reflection to further become the cornerstone of all professional practice.

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Contact:

david.coley@probation.gsi.gov.uk

LinkedIn