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Robinson, G., Priede, C., Farrall, S. et al. (2 more authors) (2014) Understanding “quality” in probation practice: frontline perspectives in England & Wales. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 14 (2). pp. 123-142. ISSN 1748-8958

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895813483763>

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**Understanding 'Quality' in Probation Practice:
Frontline perspectives in England & Wales**

Abstract

In the context of 'ordinary' probation practice, quality is a contested concept, as well as an under-researched one. In this article we present the findings of a study which sought to capture, via interviews inspired by Appreciative Inquiry, the views of probation staff about the meaning(s) of 'quality' in probation practice. The interviews revealed a 'frontline' perspective on quality which has not previously been exposed or articulated as such. Drawing upon theoretical concepts developed by Bourdieu, it is argued that despite significant recent changes in the penal and probation fields in England & Wales, and some signs of adaptation in normative conceptions of probation work, there exists a culture or 'probation habitus' among frontline staff that is relatively cohesive and resilient.

Keywords: quality, probation, practice, habitus, Bourdieu.

Word count: 9551

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Introduction

Despite a strong tradition of research on probation in England & Wales, particularly around notions of effectiveness, ideas about what might constitute 'quality' in the context of probation practice have, to date, largely evaded research agendas. Indeed, a recent review of the literature, both in and beyond the UK, concluded that there is very little work which has explicitly or directly addressed this issue (Shapland et al. 2012). To the extent that academic researchers have examined quality explicitly, this has tended to be in relation to discrete aspects or products of practice, such as the quality of

programme delivery (e.g. Goggin & Gendreau 2006) or of pre-sentence reports (e.g. Raynor et al. 1995) rather than 'ordinary' probation supervision. In these specific contexts, quality has been constructed and operationalised by researchers, who have then proceeded to evaluate practice against those measures. 'Top-down' constructions of quality and processes of quality assurance have also been associated (in and beyond the UK) with the development of national standards and/or performance indicators for probation work. In England & Wales, such measures have a relatively long history, dating back to the early 1990s, and we have also witnessed the parallel development of the roles of both the national Inspectorate and managers within the probation service as 'auditors' of performance against those centrally defined measures (e.g. Audit Commission 1989; Merrington & Stanley 2007).

'Official' constructions of quality such as these have, however, met with criticism from academic commentators, both as managerially-driven initiatives that may be perceived as attempts to control rather than enhance the quality of practice (e.g. Oldfield 1994; Worrall 1997) and by virtue of their tendency to privilege quantitative 'inputs' over qualitative (and less auditable) aspects of practice that might connect more intuitively with notions of quality among frontline staff (e.g. Humphrey & Pease 1992; National Audit Office 2008; Davies & Gregory 2010). But rarely, if ever, it seems, have practitioners or other probation staff been asked to reflect directly upon their *own* conceptions of quality, despite the fact that these ideas are likely to have a significant bearing on the ways in which they conduct themselves – or strive to do so – in the largely private and hidden sphere of probation supervision.

In this article we present the findings of a recent study of constructions of quality among probation staff in England & Wales. The data presented here constitute a 'snapshot' of how quality is constructed by probation staff in a single jurisdiction, and at a particular point in time: as such it provides a baseline for future research in this jurisdiction, and a potential starting point for comparative research. The study also represents the first use of Appreciative Inquiry in the probation context, a methodology which proved very effective and which would be replicable in future research of this nature. Before going on to outline the study's methodology and findings, however, we provide some important contextual information about the jurisdiction and explain why we think England & Wales constitutes a particularly interesting context for a study of constructions of quality among probation staff.

The context

The English & Welsh probation service is among the longest established in Europe (Vanstone 2004), but its recent history is one characterised by significant and rapid change. Not only has the probation service been exposed to the influences of the kinds of broad social and political developments which have affected the punishment field more generally (such as a 'punitive turn' in penal policies; the growth of managerialism and the rise of risk as a key concept in criminal justice and other public services), but it has also been subject to a number of specific strategies designed to change the way probation is organised and delivered (Robinson et al. 2013). In the last twenty years in particular, there have been major changes affecting the organisation and governance of the service; the profile and training of its practitioners; the size and nature of practitioners' caseloads; and the official purposes of probation supervision (e.g. see Canton 2011; Burke & Collett 2010; Raynor & Vanstone 2007).

A particularly controversial development, in the late 1990s, was the severing of probation officer training from its traditional grounding in social work education. This development was instigated by a Conservative government keen to 'toughen up' probation's image, and it prompted concerns about the creation of a 'two tier' workforce of differently qualified staff with potentially very different orientations to their work (Deering 2010). In terms of direct influences on practice, the English & Welsh probation service has been heavily associated with the development and spread of the Risk-Need-Responsivity model which originated in North America, and more recently it has begun to be exposed to ideas about how the findings of desistance research might inform probation practice (e.g. see McNeill et al. 2010; Shapland et al. 2012). Meanwhile, probation work has become increasingly 'technical' and computer-based, in that staff have (for a combination of reasons) seen the proportion of their time spent completing assessments, contact logs and other paperwork increase dramatically, impacting on available time to spend in direct, face to face contact with those under their supervision (House of Commons Justice Committee 2011; Deering 2011).

It seems therefore that this particular corner of the 'penal field' concerned with the administration of community sanctions in England & Wales has been and continues to be in a state of flux (see also Robinson, et al. 2013; Deering 2011; McNeill et al., 2009). Although much has been written about how and why the social changes associated with late-modernity have shaped the reconfiguration of crime control, Joshua Page has recently argued, convincingly, that less has been said about how these changes play out in practice, and how they affect the subjective orientation of penal actors to their practice. Page (2013) suggests that Bourdieu's social theory provides useful conceptual

resources with which to analyse these internal dynamics of reconfiguration within penal fields and subfields.

Bourdieu famously developed and deployed the concepts of *field*, *habitus* and *capital* to explain how social practices are constructed in and through the relations within particular areas of social life. The three concepts are complex and interconnected but essentially a *field* is a 'site of struggle' in which various social actors compete over, contest and construct influence and power. *Habitus* refers to the 'durable dispositions' that social actors form as a result of their histories within and across social fields; in other words, the habitus is constructed through the influence on the actor over time of the wider conditions of the social fields in and through which they exist and operate. *Capital* refers to the resources and assets within particular fields which actors struggle to acquire and through which they 'play the game' within each field. Bourdieu distinguishes between economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital, although he stresses the interactions between them.

With respect to probation, changes in the wider social and political contexts of probation work are likely to have altered the dynamics *within* this particular sub-field, leading to conflicts and struggles (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992) and the possibility that probation staff may feel ill-at-ease or even (in Bourdieu's term) 'tormented' in their professional habitus, particularly where the objective conditions that generated that habitus have changed. Because the habitus is rooted in a particular history in the field, external changes that alter it can call into question an actor's 'feel for the game' and competence or mastery in playing it. Put more simply, if others seem to be in command and seem to be changing the 'rules of the game', then we might expect to find probation

staff struggling with a tension between the priorities and concerns that (historically) have shaped their professional habitus, and this new 'game-changing' regime. The literature review on quality in probation supervision (Shapland et al., 2012), prepared in advance of the fieldwork, noted precisely this type of disjunction; what seemed to count (in official discourses on quality) was not what seemed to matter (to both practitioners and offenders). Thus, as we embarked upon the present study, we expected to find that constructions of quality would be highly contested, as well as potentially being critically important in shaping the nature of practice.

The study

The probation service in England & Wales is currently made up of 35 Probation Trusts, overseen by a National Offender Management Service (NOMS) which is an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice. Commissioned by NOMS in 2010, the study coincided with a review of performance targets and national standards for the probation service in England & Wales and a growing interest in 'offender engagement' in the probation context (Rex 2012). The research focused explicitly on meanings of quality in the context of the 'ordinary', one-to-one supervision of offenders subject to statutory supervision in the communityⁱ, and it involved 116 participants employed in three Probation Trustsⁱⁱ. Participants were sought on a voluntary basis in each of the three Trusts, with a view to including staff working in a range of teams, with different types and lengths of experience, and being broadly representative of the demographic characteristics of staff within each Trust. Participants took part in either an individual interview or a focus group interview. Forty-seven individual interviews of around one hour in length were conducted with participants who were either current or former practitioners (probation officers [POs], probation service officers [PSOs] and senior

probation officers [SPOs])ⁱⁱⁱ, and focus group interviews (of which there were three in each Trust) included both practitioners (probation officers and probation service officers) and some non-practitioner grade staff (case administrators and reception staff).

The interviews adopted an innovative approach, drawing heavily upon the methodology of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (for a more in-depth discussion of the study's methodology, see Robinson et al. 2012). Best known for its applications in organisational settings, AI has been described as 'a focus on best experiences [...] a way of looking at an organization, which concentrates on strengths, accomplishments, best practices, and peak moments' (Liebling 2004: 132, 133). Although it has not been used extensively in criminal justice settings, Liebling's pioneering 'appreciative' research on staff/prisoner relationships and the quality of prison life was a key influence on our choice of methodology (Liebling et al 1999; Liebling 2004), albeit that our interest in AI was confined to its so-called 'discovery' and 'dreaming' phases^{iv}. In the 'discovery phase' the aim is to explore and expose the best of past and/or present processes and practices. The 'dreaming' phase entails thinking beyond what currently 'is' and imagining possible alternative (and better) futures. To a large extent, consonant with an AI approach, we sought to elicit views about quality by asking participants to talk about actual examples of practice, both in their own experience and within their team or Trust. Thus for example, in individual interviews, we asked participants to begin by describing in detail a 'peak moment' in their career during which they felt particularly positive about their practice, and then to identify and describe a specific case or piece of work which they felt was illustrative of their best quality practice. The majority of data gathered were qualitative, the exception to this being the results of a 'card sorting' exercise in which

participants were given a list of 19 items (drawn up by the research team) to sort and rank in terms of relevance to their own conception(s) of quality. The aggregate results of this exercise can be found in Table 1. Qualitative data from individual interviews and focus groups (in the form of detailed written notes and partial transcriptions) were analysed separately, and the analyses were conducted in stages, as we completed each phase of the research, progressing from Trust 1 to Trust 2 and finally Trust 3^v.

Staff views about ‘quality’ in offender supervision: key findings

A key finding of the research was a striking degree of consensus about the main ingredients or aspects of ‘quality’ in probation practice. Despite the catalogue of change affecting the probation service and the ‘flux’ in the field that this has produced (summarised above), and despite a considerable degree of heterogeneity within the sample (e.g. in terms of types and amounts of formal training; length of experience; roles and caseloads; geographical locations), there were a handful of key themes which emerged consistently in participants’ accounts of ‘quality’ in probation practice, and this consistency was found in both our qualitative and quantitative data. Although some areas of controversy and/or ambivalence did emerge (as we shall see), these were relatively few: we found differences of emphasis rather than stark differences of opinion, and these tended to reflect the variety of roles of participants and associated differences in levels and types of contact with offenders. Thus for example, the factors or themes which emerged most clearly from the individual interviews with practitioners were not necessarily all emphasised to the same degree by reception staff and those in administrative roles, and vice versa. Similarly, there were some differences of emphasis between probation officers (POs) and probation service officers (PSOs) and between practitioners and managers. The different roles of staff could thus cast a

slightly different light on 'quality', but nonetheless six key themes emerged as being consistently related to 'quality' in the context of probation practice. These are presented below.

Theme 1: Good working relationships

Firstly, staff in all roles saw good working relationships as vital to good quality work. Of particular importance to those we interviewed were their relationships with offenders, which were emphasised as the backbone or foundation of good quality supervision. As one participant succinctly put it, 'A lot comes down to the relationship' (PO1, Trust 1). Another commented: 'The relationship is the fundamental thing. The better the relationship you have with a person, the more successful the outcome; it makes it easier for people to comply' (PO3, Trust 1). Reinforcing the perception of the one-to-one relationship as a crucial element of quality work, the results of the card sorting exercise (see Table 1) indicate that two items explicitly concerned with practitioner/offender relationships (Card A: 'Really engaging with the individual' and Card E: 'A relationship based on mutual trust/respect') were among the most popular choices of participants when they were asked to select items which, for them, were the most important to quality work.

In their descriptions of engaging and establishing good working relationships with offenders, participants emphasised a variety of factors that they considered important, such as: building rapport; treating the offender respectfully; listening; being open and honest; following up on promised actions; taking time to get to know the person; being consistent; involving the offender in setting goals; establishing boundaries; and building trust. To a large degree, participants understood good relationships in very similar ways

- albeit that some explicitly acknowledged that their own 'good' relationships with offenders were not necessarily all identical. As one practitioner put it, 'It's difficult to [define] what a good relationship is because that will vary from case to case. In some cases you will take a different stance to another' (P046, Trust 3). So the 'particulars' of 'good' relationships could vary, according to characteristics of the particular offender (who might be higher or lower risk; male or female; more or less motivated etc.). Thus, many of our participants described to us good working relationships which clearly featured commitment to and care for the offender in question, whilst others (a minority) described good working relationships that involved working with people who had committed very serious violent or sexual offences which rendered them hard to empathise with.

It was not however only in their direct work with offenders that participants saw the value of relationships to quality work. Also of significance were relationships with other agencies involved in supporting offenders on their caseload or with which probation staff might otherwise need to liaise in the broader context of their work. As one participant succinctly put it, 'You need to network as a probation officer' (P027, Trust 2). Several of our interviews included examples of very positive work alongside other professionals, and several emphasised the importance of inter-professional relationship building skills. Good relationships and communication with other agencies were also frequently cited by participants as examples of 'best practices' in the Trusts in which they worked.

Participants, then, consistently valued the 'relational' foundations of their work. They were, however, less sure about the role of 'significant others' (such as partners or

parents) in the offender's life in the process of quality supervision, as indicated by responses to Card Q (see Table 1). Some participants expressed ambivalence about this item because they felt that although involving others could potentially be useful sometimes, or in some cases, it could also divert or in some way compromise the agenda agreed between offender and supervisor. Nonetheless, we noted that several participants' reflections on their own best practice included direct references to the value of engaging with the offender's partner, family or social network in the context of the supervision process.

Theme 2: Resources

Resources, like relationships, were mentioned very frequently indeed as key to the production of good quality practice. Chief among participants' priorities was 'time', and in particular having enough time for the following activities: getting to know and working with the offender face to face; preparing for and planning supervision meetings; and reflecting on and discussing casework with colleagues and supervisors. In our card sort exercise, 'Having enough time to work with individuals' (Card C) was among the three most important items for our participants, and comments such as the following were common: 'I think I could make more of a difference if I had more time' (P012, Trust 1); 'We can't change people's offending in the space of 15 minute slots' (P02, Trust 1). Although some participants questioned the need for 'more' time (as opposed to the more productive use of the available time) to do 'quality work', when describing examples of their best practice, interviewees often talked about 'making time' or 'going the extra mile' for an individual, which meant going well beyond the minimum contact required by National Standards in force at that time (Ministry of Justice 2007), and sometimes having to work extra hours to get other things done.

The question of *where* time could be most productively spent with the offender proved a little more controversial. For some, seeing the offender in their social context (i.e. outside the probation office, including home visiting) was important; for others it was less so; and for still others this was regarded as a luxury that they could rarely afford because of other ('bureaucratic') demands on their time (see Table 1, Card P). Indeed, some participants' comments revealed a clear link between a reduction in home visiting and other 'out of office' contacts with offenders and resource constraints. For example:

I used to see it as important that I did lots of home visits – we don't have the time now. I don't think it's as important, [though] I do regret that we don't do as many home visits. You could gain a great deal of information by doing the home visit. Personally I do think it's important; professionally and practically I've accepted that it's not essential (P05, Trust 1).

Several participants agreed that whilst an understanding of the person's social context was important to quality supervision, conducting supervision outside the probation office was not something they regarded as crucial. Some qualified this, however, with reference to the type of case in questions. For example:

Depends on the type of case. I think it's really important if you're working with somebody who's perhaps more vulnerable or if it's domestic violence or a sex offence. For the majority of my caseload it's not that important at all (Area 2, PS018).

Time was not the only resource considered important to the production of quality work: participants also mentioned the need for resources for staff training, and many talked about the importance of access to the resources of specialist colleagues and other agencies relevant to the needs of the offenders on their caseload. When we asked participants (in the context of both individual and focus group interviews) to provide examples of what they considered to be 'best practices' in their Trust, training provision and local resources (provided in-house or by partnership agencies) were frequently cited. These included resources relevant to accommodation, employment and female offenders in particular. In our card sort exercise, 'Being able to access the right resources for the individual' (Card F) and 'Being able to direct the individual to the right people to help them' (Card J) were popular choices (see Table 1). Comments from those who selected one of these items among their top three included the following: 'We don't work in an isolated fashion and quite rightly so. I tap into whatever's available that's pertinent to this person' (P05, Trust 1). However, it was acknowledged that resources were not always available and, for some, this was mentioned as a key barrier to delivering quality work. As one PSO put it, 'Sometimes, if the resources aren't there, your hands are tied, especially in terms of things like housing and programmes for people' (PSO14, Trust 2).

Theme 3: Individualisation and flexibility

Ideas about individualisation and flexibility came up frequently during the research. For those participants whose work involved most direct contact with offenders (reception staff as well as practitioners) these notions meant expecting the unexpected and being able to respond calmly and effectively to people presenting a variety of emotional states, practical problems and sometimes crises. For practitioners it also meant knowing what

was appropriate and realistic in relation to the individual offender, and his or her risks, needs and circumstances – all of which were prone to change over time. In our card sorting exercise, Card D ('Responding to the individual's changing needs/situation') was ranked fourth in importance by participants (see Table 1). Quality work was also seen to require, for participants of all grades, having access to relevant and up-to-date knowledge and information, both about the individual (risks, needs, strengths, social circumstances, families etc) and about local resources available to deal with those needs.

Notions of individualisation and flexibility also involved some discussion of the use of professional discretion and, as a corollary of that, issues around prescription in the context of probation practice. Thus, several of the cases chosen by practitioners to illustrate their best quality work included their use of discretion in deciding how to work with an individual; and, conversely, participants consistently told us that compliance with what they regarded as inflexible practice standards (in force at that time)^{vi} was not, for them, linked with quality (see Table 1: 'Complying with National Standards' (Card S) was the item which was most often regarded as irrelevant to quality in probation practice). To quote one practitioner:

[Complying with National Standards] is not so important to me, particularly with really chaotic [people]: trying to get them in once a week at any time is a challenge, never mind at a set time and a set date; I think you have to be really flexible (PO2, Trust 1).

Theme 4: Goals and outcomes

One of the issues we sought to explore in the course of the research was the extent to which probation staff associated quality work with 'processes' and/or 'outcomes'. Although we did not ask interviewees about this directly, we ensured, in designing our interviews, that there were ample opportunities for them to express views about the importance of both, and it was an issue which we probed in the context of case discussions. We found that both processes and outcomes were important for most practitioner grade staff, and that they were seen as very much connected parts of quality supervision: there was broad agreement that good quality outcomes were not often achieved in the absence of good quality processes, and the foundation of a good working relationship. As one practitioner explained: 'Quality starts at the beginning and goes all the way through to the end, it isn't just "this week we did this and it was really good", so it's promoting positive outcomes and very much focused on working with the person' (P03, Trust 1).

Probably the clearest indication that participants associated quality 1-1 work with outcomes came from the card sort exercise, which included a deliberate mix of process- and outcome-oriented items. Among the relevant items were Cards A ('reducing risk'), G ('seeing progress') and K ('producing a good outcome'). Card A was ranked second by our participants (see Table 1) and routinely considered to be key to quality practice. For example, 'If you're not reducing risk, you're not doing your job properly' (P042, Trust 3); 'That's very important, whether it's the risk of reoffending or the risk of harm' (P06, Trust 1). The outcome of 'reducing risk' did, however, prove slightly controversial for some of the practitioners whose work was focussed on the highest risk offenders, some of whom commented that risk reduction was not always as realistic as risk management, or harm minimisation. In a similar vein, comments were also made, not

infrequently, about how 'seeing progress' or 'producing a good outcome' could sometimes mean very small steps toward change which were nonetheless significant in the context of working with a particular individual:

[Seeing progress] is obviously linked to quality, but progress is different for different people. Some people's progress could be just actually getting out of bed and being able to make the appointment (PSO3, Trust 1)

The role of goals and outcomes in quality work was then closely linked with Theme 3 (see above), in that participants tended to emphasise their *appropriateness* for the individual; so goals and outcomes could sometimes be relatively small (e.g. small reductions in alcohol consumption), and sometimes more ambitious (e.g. gaining employment; achieving desistance from offending). In respect of goal setting, practitioners often stressed the importance of collaborative goal-setting and emphasised the importance of the offender's role/agency in formulating goals and sentence plans. Indeed, a number of participants questioned the validity of items in the card sorting exercise which did not explicitly refer to the offender's active participation in goal setting or achieving positive outcomes (e.g. Cards G, I, K).

Theme 5: Attributes, skills and values which staff bring to their work

In our individual interviews, participants were asked to talk about what they felt they brought or contributed to their own 'best quality' work. A particularly interesting finding was that although participants quite often mentioned training and/or skills which they felt had a bearing on their best practice, they tended to place a great deal *more* emphasis on the values, personal qualities and experiences which they brought to

their work and which often also accounted for their desire to join the probation service. So for example participants talked about the role of life experience and maturity; aspects of their own backgrounds and biographies which they felt enabled them to relate to offenders; personal qualities (e.g. having energy and enthusiasm; having a positive outlook; commitment) and values (e.g. believing in people's ability to change; seeing the individual as a whole person and not just an offender). As one practitioner explained:

[M]any of the probation staff I know are working in probation but they are not working for the pay. They might get better pay in a different setting. It's because they really are passionate about working with people. And I can say that about many of my colleagues [who] really care about the public and offenders. They really care about the work they do (P045, Trust 3).

Another commented:

The sort of people that do this work are, the majority are positive people, and if you didn't believe that people had the ability to change and for things to be better you wouldn't be able to do this job (PO, Focus Group, Trust 3).

In short then, participants tended to describe themselves as 'the right kind of people' for the job, and quality work was seen by staff as something delivered by people with the right values, virtues, qualities and experiences, rather than something delivered by a highly trained and technically proficient workforce with specific techniques at their disposal. Indeed, when discussing quality work, very little emphasis was given to

specific techniques, interventions or ways of working (see Card O, Table 1); although some participants mentioned things like 'doing motivational work' and 'acting pro-socially', and a very small minority referred to specific approaches that they had been trained to deliver and tried to use as much as possible (e.g. neuro-linguistic programming; transactional analysis). Whether this consensus was an indication of a deficit of appropriate training for one-to-one work and, perhaps, feelings around 'deskilling' among staff, was unclear, although some of our participants hinted that this might be the case. For example, one manager told us:

There's a lot of training in probation, about what I call 'Thou shalt', [which is] about procedures and processes. There's less about different ways of [doing] face to face work with offenders (SP03, Trust 1).

We were also given one or two examples, from probation service officers, of having to learn to do their job without any formal training and very inadequate mentoring or supervision. Examples such as these left us wondering whether the lack of emphasis on knowledge and techniques in participants' accounts of quality work might not be evidence of a more general problem with staff feeling (or being) deskilled or unskilled.

Theme 6: Support

Finally, participants consistently noted that quality work did not happen without support of various kinds. In the words of one participant, 'You can't operate in isolation as a probation officer' (P09, Trust 1). Sources of support that were valued varied, and included colleagues in formal and informal support roles. For example, among practitioners, other practitioner colleagues were valued for their knowledge and advice;

for cover during holidays and absences; but also for friendship and 'camaraderie'. Knowledgeable and efficient case administrators were also routinely mentioned by practitioners as key to their best quality work. Good support from managers tended to mean having a manager who was approachable, knowledgeable and made time for 'traditional' supervision, which meant enabling practitioners to discuss their cases, their progress and any difficulties encountered. However, such support was perceived to be in short supply, and managers were often described as spending too much time focusing on 'things that had gone wrong', or targets that had not been met, at the expense of potentially useful discussions about casework.

The other main source of support which participants mentioned was agencies outside probation, which included both statutory and non-statutory organisations, both within and beyond the criminal justice sector. The support of other agencies was most commonly mentioned in teams where more complex or high risk cases were the norm. In many instances practitioners chose 'best cases' which involved close liaison with the police, social services, drug and alcohol or other services. Overall there was quite significant enthusiasm for the idea of co-located services, or 'one-stop shops' for offenders.

Frontline versus 'corporate' constructions of quality

As previously noted, one of the key – and surprising – findings of this study was a considerable degree of consensus about the ingredients of quality probation practice among frontline practitioners, middle managers and administrative and reception staff. For our interviewees, quality probation practice had a number of key dimensions (presented above as six analytical themes) which were seen as relevant to work with a

variable population of offenders and in the context of periods of supervision of different types and lengths. Although this does not imply that all examples of 'quality work' will look the same, the same dimensions of quality do appear to be consistently relevant to probation work with a diverse range of individuals. In the jurisdiction of England & Wales, then, there does appear to be a perspective on quality that is largely shared among frontline and other staff, albeit that this has rarely been articulated or exposed as such.

Participants were not, of course, conscious of the high degree of consensus we as researchers would ultimately reveal. Indeed, many of the participants in the study were conscious of quality as a construct that could potentially look rather different, depending upon one's perspective. It was not uncommon, at the end of focus group and individual interviews, for participants to voice their curiosity about whether colleagues in their own Trust, or staff in other Trusts, were saying the same sorts of things to us about quality. Some participants also raised questions about what quality might look like from the offender's perspective, or commented that we know little about what offenders would consider quality work^{vii}. In a number of interviews, then, participants wondered aloud whether offenders would be likely to identify the same, or different, factors as important in their own evaluations of quality probation practice. For example:

I think, when somebody talks to me about quality of service I often think, is that taken from the recipient's point of view or from the deliverer's point of view? [...]
From the recipient's point of view is it actually making a difference to your life, or is it something that's worthwhile? (Area 1, P08).

Related to this, in discussions of 'quality outcomes', a number of staff commented that whilst instigating a recall to prison or a breach prosecution (in the event of serious non-compliance or heightened risk) might, for them, be a constructive and positive outcome, this was unlikely to be a view shared by the offender in question.

Much more common, however, were comments around divergences between their own views about quality, and those of senior managers in the service and within NOMS.

Indeed, a number of participants made some reference – either directly or obliquely - to what one described as a 'corporate' view of quality, and the ways in which this differed from their own view. Several pointed out that, within the service, 'quality' and its measurement was most often associated with written work, such as pre-sentence reports, OASys assessments and reviews, contact logs and (especially) the timeliness of their completion. Many of our participants (managers included) were keen to draw a distinction between their own notions of quality and the sorts of process targets prioritised in National Standards (in force at that time) around frequency of reporting and timeliness of procedures (see Card S, Table 1). The following quotations illustrate some of these perceptions of divergent perspectives on quality:

Whenever we get emails or anything that mentions the word quality it is always about assessments and things like that. I know all our targets are linked to funding and we've got to hit them, but it is to the detriment of face to face work (PSO3, Trust 1).

I picked [a case to discuss] that I thought, well that was an interesting piece of work that doesn't actually meet the criteria of what the organisation may think of

as quality [...] so it was about the quality [from my point of view] rather than, right, you've ticked the boxes (PO3, Trust 1).

Closely linked with the above observation about divergences between staff and 'corporate' perspectives on quality was the observation that what 'counted' as quality for staff was largely invisible, or hidden from view. This was expressed both in the practical sense that processes like engaging and developing good working relationships with offenders tend to be conducted in private settings (interview rooms; offenders' homes), in the absence of observers; but also in the sense that much of what staff regarded as quality was rarely subject to audit or measurement by managers or NOMS:

A lot of the things that we do are not recognised. A lot of the things that we do are not really observed, because they're kind of hidden things, because we have no, apart from recording it on [computerised systems] we don't have any other way of saying 'this is how much effort we put into this'. [...] The amount of time that we physically spend with somebody is not recorded. What's recorded is that we saw the person [...] They lose sight of what you're doing (PO4, Trust 1).

Our [approach to] quality is a result of the culture we've had – a lot of our quality's become quite hidden (SP05, Trust 2).

Our findings, then, confirmed the presence of a gap between 'official' and 'frontline' constructions of quality which commentators have long suspected, and which are likely to generate conflicting priorities for practitioners as they strive to satisfy both their own and the organisation's conceptions of quality work.

Making sense of 'quality' in probation practice: a discussion

When we look at our findings, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, despite a context for probation practice in England & Wales that can hardly be described as stable, there nonetheless appears to be a remarkable degree of consensus about 'quality' among frontline staff in the service. This finding is all the more surprising given the 'hidden' nature of quality work and its lack of exposure, coupled with the contrast between staff and 'corporate' constructions of quality. It is however consistent with the findings of at least two other studies that have, broadly speaking, sought to understand practice culture from the perspective(s) of probation staff in England & Wales (Deering 2011; Mawby & Worrall 2011). Both studies reported a considerable, and unexpected, degree of homogeneity among their interviewee samples in respect of their attitudes and orientations to probation work, despite varying degrees of practice experience and exposure to different training arrangements. On the evidence of our own and other recent studies, then, it would appear that significant changes in the field have not created starkly different breeds or generations of staff with very different orientations to their work, and thus it would seem that there is, in England & Wales, a culture among frontline staff – a probation habitus perhaps – that is stubbornly cohesive and/or resistant to change.

That is not, however, to claim that constructions of quality among probation staff (and more generally, the professional habitus of probation staff) have been entirely immune to the many changes in the field we summarised earlier in this article. Our data would appear to indicate that whilst practice culture has, in some ways, changed and adapted, in other respects it has proven to be remarkably resilient^{viii}. Thus, we can see evidence

of some distinctly 'late modern' elements alongside some more traditional ones in our participants' discourse. For example, our data confirm that 'risk' is now very firmly embedded in the discourse and culture of probation in England & Wales: that, is risk is a taken for granted way of thinking about, classifying and responding to offenders subject to probation supervision. However, contrary to some theorising about the impact of risk thinking on penal practices (e.g. Feeley & Simon 1992, 1994), it is very clear that the dominance of risk has not detracted entirely from a view of the offender as an *individual* requiring a tailored and responsive approach (Theme 3 above)^{ix}. Nor has a rationality of risk obliterated the quest for transformative or positive outcomes for supervision, albeit that there is now a clear awareness that realistic goals and outcomes for individual offenders may sometimes be small, and that change is unlikely unless the offender is actively involved in its pursuit (Theme 4).

Risk thinking has also failed, as we have seen, to diminish the perceived primacy of the offender/worker relationship as the worker's main tool (Theme 1). Our data (Theme 5 in particular) also convey a strong belief in the importance of practitioners' personal qualities, professional and personal experience, values and 'soft' skills. These findings are indicative of an enduring 'core' of ideas about probation work (as relational and founded on particular values etc.), and a significant degree of continuity in the culture of probation practice that arguably originates in its traditional alliance with social work (e.g. see Vanstone 2004). It might be argued that it is the combination of essentially humanistic motivations for entering the field *and* the inescapably relational context in which the work is necessarily located that produces both the essence and the durability of the probation habitus.

However, there are at the same time indications that probation may be pulling away from its social work roots. This was particularly evident in participants' comments about the social context for probation work, particularly with reference to home visiting and conducting supervision beyond the confines of the probation office (see Theme 2), and in comments about the inclusion of people other than the individual offenders ('significant others') in the supervision process (Theme 1). Overall, we found among our sample a degree of ambivalence in relation to issues around the relevance of the offender's social context, and a narrowing of probation work to one-to-one office-based interviews. We strongly suspect that this narrowing conception of probation supervision is an adaptation borne of a combination of real resource constraints coupled with a dramatic increase in managerially-driven processes and procedures that have seriously diminished the proportion of time practitioners have available for face-to-face work with offenders. It is, in our view, a matter of concern if the notion of probation as an exclusively office-based, private encounter becomes culturally embedded, given the recognition that the community dimension of probation work remains critically important, even if increasingly neglected (see also Bottoms 2008). Such neglect ignores the strong hints in the desistance literature that desistance can only be achieved by offenders working actively in and finding support from key others in their social environment (Bottoms & Shapland 2011).

A further observation concerns the strong emphasis we found in our research on the probation officer as 'case manager' or 'broker' of services, largely dependent upon the resources and expertise of both colleagues within the service, and external agencies beyond it. This was particularly evident in Themes 1, 2 and 6, which all include reference to the value of external agencies and resources to quality probation work with

a range of offenders. Whilst these are not entirely new ideas in the probation context, the degree of emphasis our participants placed on working cooperatively (or striving to do so) was striking, and has to be understood in the context of a number of recent developments in England & Wales, which include the expansion of formalised multi-agency working arrangements, particularly in relation to sex offenders, drug misusing offenders and prolific offenders (e.g. see Kemshall & Maguire 2001; Pycroft & Gough 2010; Ministry of Justice 2010). These and other related initiatives have brought offenders subject to probation supervision into increasing contact with a variety of professionals, and have seen probation staff increasingly working alongside (and in some cases co-located with) staff from other agencies – most notably, police officers. That several of our interviewees offered examples of very positive work alongside other professionals, and many stressed the importance of inter-professional relationship building skills to quality work, suggests that collaborative working – in common with ‘risk thinking’ - is becoming part of the normal cultural fabric of probation practice in England & Wales.

How probation staff understand and construct quality in their everyday practice is, thus, of theoretical interest, in that it tells us a great deal about the contemporary culture of probation in a given jurisdiction: in other words, quality discourse can serve as a sort of ‘cultural barometer’. In other words, it offers a means of revealing significant shifts in the nature of the reconfiguring field and the reforming habitus of those that occupy it; that is, quality speaks to both shifts in the ‘rules of the game’ and the ‘feel for the game’. There is no sense here that the ‘traditional’ habitus has been wholly displaced; rather, we see evidence of a struggle to retain what continues to matter to probation practitioners. But we contend that ‘quality discourse’ it is also important for practical

reasons. This contention centres on the value of exposing ideas about and examples of quality practice in the interests of improving it. As we saw in our study, participants appeared to have no forum for talking about quality in their own terms and were largely unaware of the extent of consensus among themselves and their colleagues. If we accept the validity of probation staff views about quality and wish to nurture and develop that vision, then it is important to begin by exposing it, not least to staff themselves. It is also important to expose and consider the ways in which the achievement of that vision of quality may be constrained in the real world, with a view to closing or reducing the gap(s) between the normative vision of quality practice and the ability of workers to achieve that in their everyday work. In our study, participants generally believed that there were real constraints that put a cap on their ability to realise quality work all of the time. So, many of the examples of quality practice offered by our interviewees were historical (i.e. relating to earlier stages in their careers), and some of the dimensions of quality which participants emphasised were considered to be in very short supply. The clearest examples of this were discussed under Themes 2 and 6: *resources* (especially time for face to face work with offenders) and *support* (particularly from managers, who were generally seen as preoccupied with auditing and less able/available to offer time and space for casework discussions). As we have seen, our participants also experienced important 'clashes' between their own and the organisation's conceptions of quality practice, and several commented that this high degree of dissonance between conceptions of quality meant that what they themselves perceived to be their best work tended to go unnoticed and/or failed to attract positive reinforcement from managers (see further Robinson et al. 2012).

Knowledge of how probation staff construct quality is of course also very important for those who wish to *influence* practice. As we have already suggested, constructions of quality are normative in the sense that they are likely to represent, to individuals, ideas about what practice ought to look like. Attempts to change practice, then, are likely to fail unless they engage with existing conceptions of quality, and succeed in either challenging those perceptions, or persuading practitioners that new ideas are consistent with their current understanding of what constitutes quality work. Thus, for example, if the findings and lessons of research on desistance are to have a real impact on everyday probation practice, then practitioners (and others within the probation service who control resources) will need to be persuaded of two things: first, that seeing offenders in their own social context and developing their positive social capital is not a 'luxury' that can rarely be afforded; and, second, that it is an aspect of practice which is very much consistent with their emphasis on building constructive working relationships with those they supervise.

Table 1: Results of the card sorting exercise*

| Card/item | Number of times mentioned in the top 3 | Number of times excluded as not quality/problematic |
|---|--|---|
| A. Really engaging with the individual | 52 | 0 |
| B. Reducing risk | 51 | 4 |
| C. Having enough time to work with individuals | 50 | 2 |
| D. Responding to the individual's changing needs/situation | 36 | 0 |
| E. A relationship based on mutual trust/respect | 32 | 3 |
| F. Being able to access the right resources for the individual | 27 | 3 |
| G. Seeing progress | 21 | 13 |
| H. Making the individual's life better | 13 | 16 |
| I. Having a clear sentence plan | 13 | 12 |
| J. Being able to direct the individual to the right people to help them | 13 | 1 |
| K. Producing a good outcome | 11 | 17 |
| L. Being able to exercise discretion | 11 | 6 |
| M. Making a difference | 9 | 5 |
| N. Making a good OASys assessment | 8 | 30 |
| O. Using particular interventions / techniques | 6 | 17 |
| P. Meeting the individual in their own social context | 2 | 22 |
| Q. Including people important to the individual in supervision | 0 | 25 |
| R. Getting the person through the order without breach | 0 | 71 |
| S. Complying with National Standards | 0 | 75 |

** Explanatory note*

Participants were given a set of cards which each had one of the items above printed on it. Each participant was asked, initially, to sort the cards/items into those that they considered to be relevant to 'quality' probation practice, and those that were not. They were then asked to select, from the 'quality' items, the three which, for them, were considered to be the most important to 'quality' practice. The first column of figures shows the number of times each card was selected among a participant's 'top 3' choices. The second column of figures shows the number of times each card was excluded from a participant's selection of cards/items which they regarded as related to or important to quality work. It should be noted that cards/items were sometimes 'excluded' because they were not fully understood, or regarded as ambiguous, by the participant. There was no limit to the number of items that a respondent could exclude.

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ⁱ Offenders subject to statutory supervision in the community include those subject to Community Orders, Suspended Sentence Orders and various forms of post-custodial supervision on licence. For further information about the Community Order and Suspended Sentence Order, see Mair (2011).

ⁱⁱ The three Trusts were deliberately chosen to reflect different loci for offender supervision, in terms of urban-rural mix and ethnic composition of the offender and staff populations. We would therefore not necessarily expect similar responses in each Trust.

ⁱⁱⁱ Currently the probation service employs about the same number of POs and PSOs (approximately 5000 of each) (Ministry of Justice 2012). Probation Officers hold a professional qualification (such as a Diploma in Social Work or a Diploma in Probation Studies) and tend to work with higher risk offenders. Probation Service Officers are not required to hold the same professional qualifications as POs but may have other relevant qualifications and/or be engaged in training leading to qualification as a Probation Officer. Senior Probation Officers are usually line managers of POs and PSOs and are usually former POs. The PO and SPO interviewees in our study included both those (qualified in the mid-1990s or earlier) with a social work qualification, and those (qualified since the late 1990s) whose professional training was not grounded in social work.

^{iv} AI, when utilised to its fullest extent (as a mode of organisational transformation), consists of an 'appreciative 4-D cycle' with four stages or phases, labelled 'discovery', 'dreaming', 'design' and 'destiny' (e.g. Elliot 1999). The third ('design') stage centres on outlining more concretely the 'ideal', whilst the final stage ('destiny') focuses on sustaining that ideal in the real world.

^v The analysis of individual interviews began by identifying themes within the responses to particular questions/sections of the interview. Some of the focus group data (collected on individual worksheets completed by participants) was transcribed and analysed using a software package for qualitative data analysis (MaxQDA). Ultimately the separate analyses were combined and the key analytical themes described in this paper were identified as dominant across the whole data set. During the final phase of the research (in Trust 3) we experienced 'data saturation' such that no new themes emerged.

^{vi} It is worth noting that, in April 2011, during the fieldwork for the study, a national policy decision was made to cease using existing (and relatively rigid and prescriptive) National Standards for probation practice and Probation Trusts were informed that they would be able to develop their own policies in the coming year.

^{vii} This is not an issue we were commissioned to consider. It is however an issue which we have addressed in our review of the literature, which includes a review of research on offenders' views about what they have found useful or valuable about being subject to probation supervision. On the basis of that extant knowledge, we do not see any significant discrepancies between what our participants said about quality, and what offenders themselves describe when they talk about positive experiences of probation supervision (see Shapland et al. 2012).

^{viii} Given that we have no reliable 'baseline' against which to compare current constructions of quality in probation practice, we must proceed with caution when thinking about potential continuities and changes in how probation staff construct quality.

^{ix} Interestingly, the emphasis we found on *individualisation and flexibility* (Theme 3) is also consistent with the 'responsivity principle' which is one of the key principles of the 'RNR' model of probation practice (e.g. see Bonta & Andrews 2010).