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Abstract

This article analyses the implications of the greater use of technology and information in probation practice. Using data generated via an ethnography of probation, the article firstly argues that probation in England and Wales now exists in what scholars would identify as 'the information age' (i.e. that computers and other technologies work to define and create probation practice as we know it). The article goes on to use actor-network theory to analyse two 'heterogeneous networks' to explore the way in which probation practitioners and the technologies they use interact to create particular forms of practice. The article argues that unless we understand the technology that underpins practice we cannot fully understand practice. Finally, the article considers the implications of this analysis for probation post-Transforming Rehabilitation (TR).

Key words

Probation practice; information age; technology; Actor-Network Theory; ethnography.

Introduction

This article analyses the ways in which probation practice is shaped by practitioners' interactions with technology. Rather than focusing on the developments of specific new technologies, this article uses actor-network theory (ANT) to consider the ways in which human and non-human actants are critical to the way in which probation

practice is constituted. As an approach to understanding a social sphere, in this case probation practice, ANT sees objects as playing an important role in the construction of the sphere itself. ANT incorporates non-human actants into our understanding of why and how things happen as they do. Rather than seeing objects as neutral 'tools of the job', they are described as actants, which implies an active role in the development of a narrative or form of practice. Such an approach overcomes the neglect given to the role of technology, in particular information communication technologies, in constructing probation practice and highlights some important ramifications for the future of probation in the context of Transforming Rehabilitation (TR). Analyses prior to TR highlighted problems with the rationale and subsequent research has demonstrated that some of these problems have come to pass (Burke, 2015). Alongside this, we have seen concerns raised about the way in which the technology which the new probation providers are delivering is neither fit for purpose nor interoperable. This article draws on research, which was conducted prior to TR to consider the effect of technology on probation practice, before considering the ramifications of this for the new probation landscape. Following a discussion of prior research on technology in probation and the methods used, I examine two 'heterogeneous networks' to explore the way in which human and non-human actants work to constitute practice. In doing so, I explore the way in which knowledge is reified, information travels and technologies such as risk assessments are value-laden. Thus, we see that the constitution of practice is not simply a product of the interaction between policy and practitioners.

Literature Review

The subject of probation culture and practice has been reinvigorated in recent years. A body of literature has made the case that broad shifts in the political and policy sphere towards punitivism, managerialism, public protection and risk management have not neatly translated into practice and workers' values. Thus, probation workers remain

adherent to a 'welfarist ethos' (Fitzgibbon, 2007), value a more qualitative type of supervision to that defined by key performance indicators and outputs (Grant and McNeill, 2014; Robinson et al., 2013b) and find more value in the one-to-one work they conduct with people on probation than the risk management approach as espoused in policy and as described by Feeley and Simon (1992). Much of this work has made use of Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and *field* to explore the ways in which practitioners resist, succumb, eschew and internalise these broader changes in policy (Grant, 2015; Phillips, 2016). Moreover, this research has come to broadly similar conclusions; that the probation *habitus* has been relatively resilient to such changes and represents what Bourdieu would call a heterodox in probation practice: the *field* is structured in such a way for multiple forms of practice to coexist (Deering, 2011; Grant and McNeill, 2014; Robinson et al., 2013b).

This article does not refute these broad findings. However, it takes issue with the way in which the arguments put forward are focused on a tension between relatively narrow definitions of what makes up the probation *field* and *habitus*. In this body of research, *habitus* is, rightly, seen as being synonymous with the *people* involved in probation. However, the *field* is primarily associated with the policy that defines the rules of the game which practitioners have to play rather than, for example, politics (although see Burke and Collett, 2014) and the technology that practitioners use: the focus of this article. A Bourdieusian approach brings the way in which these two aspects of the *field* interact to create new forms of practice to the fore and this has been done to varying degrees, with Robinson et al (2013b) outlining the way in which there has been an adaptation within probation practice which stems from, *inter alia,* resource constraints in the *field* whilst evidencing a resilient *habitus* which values outcome based notions of quality over process and outputs (see also Grant and McNeill, 2014; McNeill et al., 2009). However, the role of non-human actants in the constitution of probation practice is missing from such analyses. Arguably, this stems from a hierarchy in criminology whereby policy and people are seen to interact, but

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the tools which aid that interaction are largely ignored (Brown, 2006). Thus, whilst many of these arguments are well evidenced, they risk neglecting a significant change in the way in which probation practice is 'done', which, as we see below, depends upon an increased reliance on information and the concomitant use of technology becoming increasingly critical.

Such analyses have been conducted in other *field*s to a much greater extent. For example, in their seminal work *Policing the Risk Society* Ericson and Haggerty's (1997) argue that the actions of the police are shaped by the need and demand for them to police danger by making use of information on risk. In a separate criminal justice institution, Aas (2005) discusses the way in which sentencing has been affected by facets of the information age. Here, she found greater standardisation and an increased reliance upon sentencing frameworks were key. As we see below, much of what Aas finds in sentencing can also be related to probation. Indeed, many institutions now rely on information technologies such as healthcare, insurance or marketing, all of which may be seen to have been affected in similar ways to those presented in this article. However, what makes such an analysis in the context of probation important is that probation has always been considered to be the humane face of the criminal justice system and so the increased use of technology which risks an informationalised and depersonalised service might be considered to pose a considerable risk to the culture of probation as illustrated through the probation practitioner as 'durable penal agent' (Grant, 2015). Moreover, practitioners have, and still do, place considerable emphasis on the importance of their ability to form a personal, one-to-one relationship with people on probation. However, the extent to which probation practice is contingent upon the use of information technology, and the impact thereof on practice, means that practitioners need to be aware of the risks of relying upon technology in doing their work. Thus, such an analysis also sheds light on the extent to which theses such as Feeley and Simon's (1992) 'new penology' has manifested in practice.

In short, whilst the rise of technology in probation has been described and documented in a range of places the focus has primarily been on risk assessment technologies. Moreover, there has been little attempt to theorise the ways in which this has impacted on the constitution and definition of what it means to be a probation practitioner. This article attempts to fill this lacuna in the literature.

Information plays an ever increasingly important role in the information age and, importantly for our understanding of probation, information might be conceptualised as being 'frozen and deliverable to any future point in time' (Rasmussen, 2000). As such, we can discern the way in which probation has become 'informationalised', a key facet of information, or post-industrial, societies (Bell, 1976). Arguably, probation work is now less about people and more about 'things' (Burke and Collett, 2010) and, crucially, information about those things. Risk assessment technologies are particularly relevant here. The increased use of risk assessment technologies, as illustrations of the information age, has been subject to the most analysis in terms of its impact and implications. For example, Aas (2004) has argued that risk assessment technologies do not provide a narrative of a person's situation but project a status onto them which is created through, and by, a database of risk factors and associated levels of importance.

Elsewhere, Robinson (2003) found that practitioners value risk assessment technologies' provision of information, which in turn can be used to make defensible decisions and defer responsibility in case something goes awry. On the other hand, she highlights concerns about risk assessment technologies leading to less indeterminacy and greater technicism in probation practice which, in turn, can impede the potential for the therapeutic alliance to act as a turning point in someone's life. Additionally, Hannah-Moffatt et al (2009: 393) found that practitioners value assessment technologies as a way of enhancing defensible decision but also use

discretion 'in an effort to mitigate the perceived discriminatory effects of the risk assessment'.

More recently, Hardy (2014) has analysed practitioner perspectives on risk using governmentality as an analytical framework. He argues that whilst risk was prevalent in much of his participants' work, its presence has not resulted in the 'wholesale jettisoning of rehabilitation as intent or practice' (Hardy, 2014: 315). Similarly, Bullock (2011) has argued that whilst actuarial risk technologies are key to the provision of certain interventions (in her case domestic violence programmes) any relevant risk assessment is far from being an objective process. Rather it is constrained by practitioner values, organisational contexts and the technology itself which is value-laden. As such, 'risk management practice continues to be moulded in terms of practitioner values and preferences' (Bullock, 2011: 133).

This is not to suggest that risk assessment technologies are a flawed means with which to rehabilitate people on probation, but that they do not 'act' in a vacuum. Rather, the results are the product of an interaction between the technology and a person. Thus, these studies have shed light on the way in which risk, broadly defined, has impacted on practice and practitioners' views of offenders and their levels of culpability and responsibility. However, little has been done to think about how the technologies themselves have the power to constitute practice where a degree of interaction and interpretation is required (i.e. assessments that are more than online static risk assessment tools). In many respects much of the work that has occurred in the context of the impact of risk has treated practice as a dependent variable, practitioners' values as an independent variable and the technology which they use is seen as a constant.

Up until the mid-1990s, the probation service's motto was 'advise, assist and befriend', a motto, which at a linguistic level at least, puts the human at the heart of probation

practice. Probation no longer has a unifying motto although the newly formed National Probation Service website states that its 'priority is to protect the public by the effective rehabilitation of high risk offenders, by tackling the causes of offending and enabling offenders to turn their lives around' (GOV.uk, n.d.). Whilst the offender is present here, it lacks the humanistic element that 'advise, assist and befriend' signifies. Moreover, recent years have seen the term probation officer phased out of use in policy documents with 'offender manager' becoming the preferred nomenclature for people who work with offenders. This is not a matter of semantics, but an indication of the way in which the work of probation practitioners has become increasingly technicised and informationalised.

An important element of informationalisation in work is that of standardization across the work that people do, and the different spaces in which they do it. Aas (2005) has reported on a similar development in the arena of sentencing, and French and Stillman (2014) have found that welfare work in Australia has been similarly informationalised. Moreover, French and Stillman (2014) make the important point that this shift does not necessarily represent an 'electronic turn' but an informational turn. Probation may also have experienced its own 'informational turn' – the aim of this article is to explore in greater depth.

Methodology

Throughout the article I draw on data that were collected via an ethnography of probation which involved spending 9 months in two probation teams in England. One research site was in an urban area and served one half of a very large city. The second office served a small town and the semi-rural rural area that surrounded the town. Whilst the research was small scale and therefore not fully generalisable the period of time spent in each site, in conjunction with the different nature of each, means that I was able to observe a wide range of practice with a broad sample of practitioners from

case administrators to senior probation officers. This period of observation allowed me to observe interactions with offenders, sit in on meetings and accompany practitioners on home visits and prison visits. I also spent a considerable amount of time in the office watching what happened and discussing probation practice with participants. I spent three or four days per week in the office, staying there for a full working day. This gave me a valuable insight into the back stage (Goffman, 1969) of probation work where most of the work with technology occurs (Phillips, 2014). Rather than relying on interviews, surveys and focus groups as most probation research has done recently (Robinson and Svensson, 2013), observation gave me the opportunity to see and discuss what actually happens in probation work rather than relying on stories about probation practice. For the purposes of this article the method allowed me to see how practitioners engaged with technology as part of their daily lives. The period of observation was followed up with 32 semi-structured interviews with participants from across the two teams. The interviews were used to probe deeper into the issues that had arisen during the period of observation.

The data have been analysed using an Actor-Network Theory approach. As argued in the introduction, most analyses of probation practice and culture have focused on the way in which the relationship between policy and practitioners constitutes practice to the neglect of the tools, which mediate this important relationship. Actor-Network Theory (ANT) can help overcome this gap in the literature. ANT is, despite the word theory in its name, not a method of explaining *why* something happens but more a way of understanding *how* things happen. Importantly, ANT allows us to understand the 'relationship between people and things' (Brown, 2006).

The theory sees 'Agents, texts, devices, architectures …[as]… essential to, the networks of the social' (Law, 1992: 379). Law (1992) suggests that ANT requires us to consider the 'social' as the product of a range of networks, all of which shape our understanding of the world. In employing ANT in this context it is key to point out

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that actants are neither objective nor value-free. Whilst a piece of software might be capable of doing the same task over again and producing the same result, the way in which it comes to the answer is value-laden. Laden by the values of the organisation which commissioned the piece of software in the first place; by the person who designed the software; as well as by the way in which the end user employs it. As Lessig (2006) has argued, code, which directs the way in which software functions 'codifies values' (Lessig, 2006). It is in this respect that we can begin to see how technology can contribute to the constitution of practice in ways which reflect the political and social contexts in which they exist.

ANT asks us to see non-human actants as equal to human actors when thinking about the practices that emanate from the interaction between actors and actants: 'an actant can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of action' (Latour 1996: 373). In essence ANT alerts us to the way in which non-human actants constitute understanding and, therefore, action. Moreover, ANT asks us to consider the networks, which feed into the creation of a particular form of action and I attempt to do this in the following section. Thus, in the findings section of this article I use two 'heterogenous networks' to explore the way in which probation practice is constituted by technology. A heterogeneous network is 'a way of suggesting that society, organisations, agents and machines are all effects generated in patterned networks of diverse (not simply human) materials' (Law 1992: 381). Analysing the social via heterogeneous networks means that we need to consider the 'bits and pieces' (Law, 1992: 381) that have combined to create the end product of that particular network. For the purposes of this article, I see the end product of heterogeneous networks as particular examples of probation practice, both of which were observed during the fieldwork of the research outlined above.

Probation Practice in the Information Age

Before proceeding to examine these two heterogeneous networks it is necessary to illustrate *why* I consider probation practice to be occurring in an 'information age'. The information age, as a concept, is difficult to define. However, there are certain characteristics of a *field,* which point to its existence. Webster (2006: 8) outlines five different definitions of information societies, each of which 'presents criteria for identifying the new'. These definitions cover the following broad changes in society: technological, economic, occupational, spatial and cultural. Whilst these changes are disparate, they share 'the conviction that quantitative changes in information are bringing into being a qualitatively new sort of social system, the 'information society' (Webster, 2006: 9). This article deals mainly with the technological, occupational and spatial changes in probation work. The prevalence of computers is a key attribute of the information age and ties in with Webster's lens of technological change:

> Almost every organization in the world has become dependent on
> networks of telephony and computers. (van Dijk, 2012: 2)

There can be no doubt that computers and information are critical to the way in which probation is now practised. For example, during the first day of the observational period of research I noted that:

> …one person was wearing headphones whilst working - it looked like he
> was listening to music or the radio although it wasn't clear. The office is
> large with about 11 banks of 6 desks. It is open plan with privacy screens
> between each desk. Each desk has a computer and a phone and are
> generally adorned with personal items … Most people are typing or are on
> the phone. There's a bit of general chat/banter as people come in but
> otherwise there isn't much interaction going on … (Fieldnotes)

The idea that probation officers spend up to 70% of their time in front of a computer has become commonplace when discussing probation (although the extent to which this is true remains debatable) and it was clear that the computer played an important role in the practice of probation (see also Mawby and Worrall (2013) for a discussion

of the prevalence of computers in probation). Van Dijk (2012: 2) argues that computer networks form a key role in the information age. What's more, 'when they [computer networks] break down, the organization simply stops working'. This was observed on multiple occasions throughout the period of fieldwork with work all but stopping when the computer network went down because practitioners were unable to access case records, contact details of their offenders and report templates.

Indeed, when the Probation Trusts were split into Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) and the National Probation Service (NPS), practitioners on Twitter and other social media complained vociferously about problems with the IT system and, in particular, n-Delius, the computer system used for maintaining case records (Brown, 2014), whilst participants in Deering and Feilzer's (2015) research expressed concerns around the ability of the new organisations to cope.

The *Independent* newspaper reported that the update to the computer system following the split left the service in 'crisis management' (Leftly, 2014). Moreover, I observed how the computer was seen as integral to the image of being a busy probation officer. When the computer network went down, staff had little to do beyond chat with colleagues. However, I observed on several occasions that even when the computer was not functioning, the computer was used as a prop in the creation of a visual definition of what it meant to be a busy probation worker (Phillips, 2014).

Network 1: Video-link technology and practitioners' values

ANT asks us to consider networks and it was clear during the research that those networks between practitioner and offender were becoming increasingly mediated not just by computers, biometric kiosks, and risk assessment technologies but myriad other developments. During the period of observation practitioners argued that they were increasingly having to work remotely, with the greater use of video-conferencing being one pertinent example of this. This change in practice, practitioners explained, was driven largely by budgetary pressures as they negate the

need to spend a full day in the car visiting a prison to see a client for a mere 45 minutes. Moreover, we have seen changes in the use of space with more open-plan offices and changes in the architecture of probation officers more broadly (Mawby and Worrall, 2013) which reflect policy reforms over recent years (Phillips, 2014). Elsewhere Bottoms (2008) has argued that probation, along with a range of other professions such as Mental Health and Drugs services, has distanced itself from the communities which it serves and this can undoubtedly be linked to the increasingly office based nature of probation practice.

Importantly, such developments were seen by participants to have had a deleterious impact on their ability to create positive professional relationships with their clients:

> Mary1 came back from her videolink - she said it was a disaster - [the offender's] English was not so good but because of the videolink it was even harder than normal - she thought she could've done with an interpreter but that wouldn't work on videolink. (Fieldnotes)

The increased use of video-conferencing calls between offices and prisons were seen to be a generally negative development despite the acknowledgement that it saved time and money in the short term at least, with practitioners complaining that the quality of the connection was poor and that the screen made it difficult to create rapport with offenders, something that was seen as critical to creating a constructive worker-client relationship.

There has been no research into the problems associated with conducting offender interviews via video-conferencing. However, in a review of research into online counselling, a field of work not all too dissimilar from probation work, Richards and Viganó (2013) argue that online counselling has similar levels of efficacy to face-to-

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1 Participants names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

face counselling with clients reporting levels of satisfaction similar to those undergoing face-to-face counselling. However, they conclude that although there are positive results, the evidence is limited at present (Richards and Viganó, 2013: 1000). Importantly, however, the research which emanates from this more traditional and, crucially, voluntary form of counselling, is the perceived benefit of anonymity afforded by online interaction, something which cannot be afforded people under the supervision of probation services. Moreover, they found that the online interaction appeared to result in the client engaging in identity and impression management - something which, arguably, needs to be avoided in probation work in which practitioners seek to identify offenders' genuine attitudes and behaviours in order to advise the court on the most appropriate form of sentence (notwithstanding the argument that this is, perhaps, a slightly naïve view of the extent to which this can be achieved). Finally, they argue, albeit on less reliable data, that online counselling is 'less appropriate for clients presenting with suicidal thoughts, domestic violence, substance abuse, child abuse, and sexual assault' (Richards and Viganó, 2013: 1006). Such issues are common amongst the probation caseload and suggest a need to be cautious of too great a reliance upon such a means of conducting interviews with offenders over the internet. Even just this brief consideration of the use of video-links to conduct interviews with people on probation highlights the need to pay more consideration to these technological advancements in practice. That said video-links should not be viewed wholly negatively. They do, as I suggest above, represent good value for money and can be a useful way of having a catch-up session where the alternative may be no contact at all.

However, we can analyse this network in more depth. There are clear benefits to conducting interviews via video-link and so it would be sensible for this technology to implemented in a way that is effective. There is an assumption that video-link technology is neutral – that it is simply a medium with which to enable communication at a distance. In the context of probation, this is clearly not the case

and practitioners raised considerable issues with it (beyond the fact that they believed the technology simply was not developed enough, or the infrastructure was not advanced). If we want to truly understand why this is, we need to be able to explore the way in which this technology was commissioned, developed and installed. It is clear that probation practitioners value a particular experience when it comes to interacting with people on probation and that this was not possible with the technology that was available to them. We have an understanding already of what practitioners bring to practice in terms of their values, but we are currently lacking in knowledge about the technology that is used in probation. Interestingly, however, practitioners accepted this means of working – they do not, in the words of Laws (1992) and his discussion of the way in which the overhead projector mediates his communication with his students, 'storm the podium and take control'. Actor-network theory analysis highlights the ways in which 'social relations may shape machines, or machines shape social relations' (Laws, 1992: 383). It would appear, in this case, that the product of the heterogeneous relationship is, partly, a result of machines shaping social relations.

Network 2: Computers, official histories, OASys, and face to face interviews

The second 'heterogeneous network' to be used in this article concerns the end product, and effect, of a network which comprises computers, official histories, risk assessment technologies and interviews. It is largely concerned with the way in which knowledge is reified and becomes 'information' through the process of being written down but focuses primarily on what information is written down, and what information is not. The argument is that only certain forms of knowledge have the privilege of being written down and, in that process, become information, which can be acted upon.

In addition to the changes in how probation workers interact with offenders (i.e. via video-conferencing or biometric kiosks), I also observed the objectification of knowledge, a key feature of theories of the information age. In making a distinction between knowledge and information Aas has argued that 'knowledge is personal, while information is social and usually collective' (Aas, 2004: 381). In essence knowledge becomes reified by being written down. As Aas (2005: 50) found in her work on sentencing in the information age, sentencing now depends on the storing and processing of information unlike in previous times where 'a substantial amount of knowledge was still undocumented and unexplicated, stored in people's heads'. We can see this development occur in probation, too. For example, one practitioner said that the key to her work is 'evidence, everything has to be evidenced' (Fieldnotes) whilst waving a folder in the air suggesting that if something was not written down in a file then it could not count as evidence.

An intuition or gut feeling about someone is clearly not sufficient in terms of making defensible decisions. Moreover, it is very difficult to act on knowledge that it not written down because such knowledge does not travel. Thus, the question is not whether knowledge gets informationalised through the process of being written down, but rather *which* knowledge gets reified by being written down. It was clear in my observations, that knowledge which was written down was primarily knowledge related to someone's official history. Whilst I am not suggesting that practitioners should not take a person's 'official' history into account when considering what sentence should be proposed, or what course of action should be taken in a potential breach situation, this written information should be treated as just that; official. There are very few opportunities for an offender to write their own side of the story down, thus limiting their ability to influence their progress on an order

In order to illustrate this, we can look to a parole report written by Daniel. Rather than concentrating on the content of the report itself, I focus on the way in which the report

came into being, the effect of its content and, crucially, the absence of the offender's voice:

> Daniel, a PO, talked to me about an offender for whom he had written a parole report which was based on concerns raised by a social worker and revolved around a historic risk of harm to children posed by the offender. The offender had appealed the outcome of the parole hearing - the appeal was upheld. Daniel expressed concern at the way in which he had taken the social worker's report 'as read' and not questioned the social worker's concerns. (Fieldnotes)

Daniel had treated the social worker's report as containing an element, at least, of verisimilitude and had proceeded to initiate the recall process. What is important to highlight is that the offender's story was absent: he had had no opportunity to put his side of the story forward until it was too late, until he had been recalled. On the one hand, this might be considered acceptable, and defensible, in the interests of risk management and public protection and, indeed, this is a strong argument. As Daniel himself said, the role of probation here was purely 'risk management - it had moved way beyond rehabilitation'. However, it is also an example of how information, which comes from certain sources is privileged over and above that of other sources, primarily offenders themselves. It is also important to note that this did not happen frequently, and Daniel was concerned at the outcome of his actions. However, it is also an example of how the way in which practitioners are reliant primarily on information which is written down means that the argument that 'what does not travel often simply tends to be reduced to the aspects that can travel' become ever more important (Aas 2004: 381). It was clear that it was only the information that had been written down in a format which travelled easily which was used to frame decisions about whether to initiate recall and Daniel himself, in the end, found this troubling.

We can take another example to illustrate this further. During the period of observational fieldwork an offender did not turn up to their unpaid work appointment and the Probation Service Office (PSO) received an automatic report informing her

that, in accordance with the National Standards that were in force at the time, she should initiate breach. However, she explained to me that she was not going to do so until she had had an opportunity to speak to the offender. She duly made contact with the offender who had an acceptable excuse with the PSO saying 'it's a good job I knew her so well or I mightn't have done that' (Fieldnotes). In this instance breach was avoided and the person on probation was able to continue with her order. What was clear was that this particular participant placed considerable emphasis on the fact that she knew her clients well and this was part of her own identity as a PSO. It is interesting to note that this PSO was experienced and was particularly confident in her own practice. The PSO had started working in probation in the 1980s and would regularly talk about practice, which appeared to be much more person focused than that which exists today. Here we can see the effect of two actants interacting. On the one hand, the values that had been inscribed into the Unpaid Work reporting system suggested that breach must be initiated at a particular point. But the human actor's own values, which had their roots in a form of practice that was, by her own admission, 'social worky', conflicted with this. What resulted, interestingly, was a form of practice in which the person on probation, another actant in the network, was given the opportunity to put their side of the story forward which ultimately worked to constitute the outcome.

However, things did not always pan out this way. I observed several instances in which the Unpaid Work attendance report was taken at face value and a warning letter automatically generated. In some cases, this was because the practitioner genuinely thought the person on probation was being non-compliant but it also occurred because the practitioner simply did not have time to chase attendance in person. Here, then we see networks (computer generated attendance reports, practitioner values as well as the time pressures which practitioners face) converging to create different forms of practice. Whilst the particular form of technology is not always the most significant factor when it comes to shaping practice, it is important to remember that it can, and

does, play a role. The role and use of technology, therefore, demands both attention and further scrutiny.

This objectification of knowledge seemed to make knowledge appear as more true and less subjective than information that was relayed verbally. Moreover, certain forms of information were seen as representative of a greater truth than other pieces of information. For example, practitioners explained that the purpose of a pre-sentence report interview was to corroborate the offenders' account of the offence with official accounts such as police reports or CPS packs. We can see these two accounts as two actants in a heterogeneous network which resulted in pre-sentence reports and sentencing proposals to the court. In the vast majority of cases it was clear that those official accounts were treated with greater respect than offender accounts. For example, those offenders who had been found guilty but who were denying their offence were treated with a certain element of disdain with one offender being derided in the 'backstage' of the office for saying he was 'maintaining his innocence' as opposed to being 'in denial', the phrase preferred by the offender manager. Furthermore, the reliance on such official accounts had the potential to start relationships off badly:

> I looked at the file and I thought 'oh, why have I got this?' I don't want this one. She was a lady in prison … she was pregnant and had 5 children in care…she didn't comply with anything. … I did *not* want this case. I looked at her pre-cons - forty odd counts of prostitution on it: nightmare … When it got to court, the judge gave her a deferred sentence for 6 month which was a bit of a surprise … She came out, lovely lady - I see her and I look at the paperwork and *I can't match the two*. She was a lovely lady…It was horrendous on paper and yet when I got her, in that 6 months, she did everything so … I'm quite proud of her. (PSO)

I observed considerable changes in the way in which these official accounts were constructed; changes which were implicitly tied to the values, which were laden in the technology which they used.

In a different way, I observed the way in which the use of certain technologies around pre-sentence report interviews worked to standardise not just the PSR itself, but also the structure of the interview. For example, pre-sentence reports and the system used to create them, another actant, are prepopulated with information from previous reports. This meant that many PSR interviews followed the same pattern and focused on the same things as had been present in previous reports. Of course, each practitioner goes about PSR interviews in slightly different ways and each has their own 'style' of working. However, the technology in use works to shape these interactions in subtle ways. The way in which information is 'carried through' by OASys means that a clean slate is difficult. Certain risk factors are correlated with higher rates of offending but the templates in use dictated these sessions and meant that the sessions were structured by the information/technology as well as what a previous practitioner had written down. Because of the need for defensible decision making in probation, there was a greater impetus for practitioners to note down negative rather than positive events in an offender's order and, as was noted above, once something was written down it became much more influential. As Kemshall (2001: 1) notes, 'risks are almost always framed by the precautionary principle of 'better safe than sorry". Tuddenham (2000) has made the case for a more reflexive style of decision making as a counter to the paradigm of 'defensible decision-making':

> Reflexive risk assessment is a dynamic, self-questioning process, which explicitly accepts that knowledge is subject to perpetual revision, and that the wider social and political context has an influence on the practice of risk assessment and management. (Tuddenham, 2000: 174)

However, the way in which information gets structured and processed in probation means that 'perpetual revision' is difficult. Tuddenham's (2000) argument here is strong, yet the data generated in this research suggest a need for reflexivity around the

impact of the assessment tool on the assessment as well as the assessor. In doing so we can start to acknowledge the way in which the existence of heterogeneous networks combine with the priority afforded information as opposed to knowledge obfuscates the potential for 'perpetual revision'. Thus, the networks are complicit in the construction of a static narrative of an offender's time under probation supervision. It should be acknowledged that police and court records work to create an initial, value-laden, view of the offender. OASys is then critical in reproducing an offender's story with little input from the service user themselves. These two actants thus combine to affect the assessor when it comes to making a professional, and allegedly 'objective', in sofar as OASys is 'evidence-based', assessment based on their knowledge of the offender.

Whilst face-to-face contact is still a key facet of probation practice, almost all aspects of probationer-practitioner interactions are mediated by some form of technological innovation which threatens the potential for creating relationships based on trust and respect, and risks creating a static picture of an offender and their circumstances. Probation practitioners must enlist and mobilise a host of heterogeneous actants (e.g. case files, computers, interviews with people etc.) to render a decision about someone on probation. It thus becomes as important to understand the technology and the way it functions as much as it is to understand the policies and the practitioners.

Conclusion

It looks likely that probation work will involve ever more technology. Fitzgibbon and Lea (2014) argue that technologies such as biometric kiosks are valued highly by the security industry and the private nature of CRCs is likely to signal the introduction of yet more technologies of this kind by organisations who are already struggling to make a profit (National Audit Office 2016; Plimmer 2016). Now that CRCs and NPS offices are increasingly located in separate locations, communication channels

between the two organisations become more important, yet it is likely that such communication is going to be mediated increasingly by communication technologies, particularly email. There has already been concern raised about communication between the two involved parties in terms of, for example, confidentiality but this analysis suggests we should also be concerned about the way in which communication will become even more mediated. Indeed, there is already evidence to suggest that the 'structural impediments to communication' between the two organisations have led to a greater sense of loss amongst CRC employees (Robinson et al., 2015: 7). TR makes it more likely that decisions will be made on the basis of written reports, case records, and compliance histories all of which serve to prioritise 'official' histories. Moreover, CRCs are now described as 'paperless' which means that yet more information will be able to travel because it will all be recorded electronically. Add into this the fact that the naturally risk averse private sector is likely to be unwilling to take risks with potentially dangerous offenders and the structure of the new landscape means that all responsibility and accountability for a failure in risk management will fall to the NPS and could lead to greater levels of defensiveness than we have seen thus far. This raises important questions about how practitioners will be able to create constructive relationships with people on probation, record and convey a holistic understanding of the person as well as conduct full and proper assessments. This is particularly important when we remember that they might never have met the person on probation and that communication is increasingly in written form and information is increasingly reified and mediated by computer systems.

This article has demonstrated some of the problems associated with the way in which knowledge in probation has been reified as information at the expense of offenders' own accounts of their situations and actions. In turn, this presents issues that are directly related to the Transforming Rehabilitation agenda and need to be considered and evaluated as the reforms progress. The article raises important questions about the

ability, and capacity, of practitioners in the NPS to conduct quality risk assessments, make informed decisions about breach and recall and work in a way which is still underpinned by a constructive professional relationship (Burnett and McNeill, 2005; Robinson et al., 2013) when the structures in place serve to sever those relationships before they can be created. The article also demonstrates the potential for more ethnographic research in probation as this, almost inherently, allows us to overcome the problems associated with interview based research which prioritises what people say rather than what they do. After all, it is what practitioners *do* that has the most immediate impact upon people on probation and only by highlighting the inconsistencies of the TR agenda, and the way in which it has impacted on practice, will probation services continue to work for the benefit of the offender and their communities.

Moreover, this article has illustrated the value in taking an ANT approach to probation research demonstrating the importance of analysing probation practice as being constituted by both people and things. However, this research was only able to examine the end product of the network which had created the situation described above – the point at which practitioners interacted with technology to create a particular form of practice. ANT asks us not to simply look at the product of a network, but to begin at the start. Indeed, many ANT studies entail 'micro-level analyses of the places where science and technology come into being: labs, institutes, government departments, boardrooms and funding agencies' (Cressman, 2009: 2). This is undoubtedly a difficult task in the new probation landscape where CRCs are protective over their tools and methods for the purposes of confidentiality and the chances of being afforded access to conduct research on such strategic decisions are slim. More and more research is examining probation post-TR and more is needed. This article highlights the importance of not only looking at practitioners' views, their identities and the practical issues encountered during and after the reforms (as

valuable as they are), but also to investigate the tools they use in the new world of probation and analyse the ways in which they work to constitute practice.

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