

**‘What does professional curiosity mean to you?’: an exploration of professional curiosity in probation**

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**Published version**

PHILLIPS, Jake, AINSLIE, Samantha, FOWLER, Andrew and WESTABY, Chalen (2021). ‘What does professional curiosity mean to you?’: an exploration of professional curiosity in probation. *The British Journal of Social Work*.

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‘What does professional curiosity mean to you?’: an exploration of professional curiosity in probation

## **Abstract**

This article explores the concept of professional curiosity in relation to probation practice. We synthesise existing relevant literature to develop a theoretical framework of how professional curiosity is understood, arguing that professional curiosity can be used to manage risk, develop the therapeutic alliance, and facilitate knowledge building. We then present analysis of how the concept has been used in probation policy and analyse data generated in the first study of professional curiosity amongst probation workers in England and Wales. We conduct a content analysis of the meanings that probation staff (n=445) attribute to the term professional curiosity by analysing responses to an open-ended question which asked participants ‘What does professional curiosity mean to you?’. Our analysis is exploratory in nature and sheds some light on how probation workers in England and Wales understand professional curiosity. Respondents were more likely to associate the term with managing risk, although there is considerable heterogeneity between the way it is understood. We draw on existing research about probation training, culture, and values to explore the reasons for these findings. We conclude by considering the limitation of the research and highlighting policy implications.

## **Introduction**

Originally developed in the context of social work, the term ‘professional curiosity’ has recently been introduced to the field of probation. However, little work has been done to understand what it should or could mean in this context although there is active discussion amongst policymakers about how to operationalise it. The aim of this paper is to inform this discussion, by providing an empirically grounded account of the meaning that probation practitioners attribute to the term. Professional curiosity holds the potential to improve the effectiveness of probation through ‘better’ risk management. But it can also be used to improve relationships between service users and

practitioners, provide practitioners with space to reflect upon and interrogate their own practice, and enable people to stay on top of best practice. This article considers the difference conceptualisations of the concept and seeks to understand how probation staff understand it and what impact it could have in the context of probation.

### **What is professional curiosity?**

In social work research, professional curiosity normally relates to practice seeking to uncover all relevant information about risk of harm through asking questions, corroborating information, and not taking a service user's account at face value. Thus, a lack professional curiosity is often cited in Serious Case Reviews (Thacker *et al.*, 2019) and seen as a key skill in the identification and reduction of risk. The Brighton & Hove Local Safeguarding Children Board provide the following definition of the term:

The capacity and communication skill to explore and understand what is happening within a family, rather than making assumptions or accepting things at face value. (2017: 1)

Another common definition found in practitioner guides adds 'checking and reflecting information received' to ensure practitioners do not accept information at face value (Perth and Kinross and Child Protection Committee, 2019; Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Board, 2017). Professional curiosity is thus about 'asking questions that give and solicit information without being intrusive or making the [service user] feel threatened.' (Health Notes, 2018). Such policy definitions focus on using open ended questions, not accepting information at face value and probing techniques to identify and generate evidence from a range of sources which are then used to inform an assessment about potential risk of harm.

For Burton and Revell (2018: 1513) professional curiosity is about 'understanding gaps in knowledge and identifying discrepancy in parental stories about harm to children'. It is often used to identify potential 'disguised compliance'. This recurring theme in the literature reinforces 'a perspective that a lack of sufficient curiosity had contributed to abuse going undetected, implying that, if

professionals had been 'more curious', this may have unearthed information that would have prevented harm' (Burton and Revell, 2018: 1509). In this sense, professional curiosity becomes a tool to hold practitioners to account or blame them for failings, rather than improve practice. Indeed, as argued by Leigh *et al* (2020: 271) the concept of 'disguised compliance' has become a popular colloquialism which is 'only successful in doing one thing: concealing the wider issues involved when professionals work with risk'.

Such an uncritical approach to 'professional curiosity' in probation risks resulting in similar issues especially considering Burton and Revell (2018) link the conceptualisation and operationalisation of professional curiosity in child protection with broader institutional and public contexts, focussing on how the neo-liberal agenda has permeated social work practice, developments reflected in the field of probation. Interestingly, for Burton and Revell such a climate creates the risk of 'a disconnect from front line practice ... [and] ... this creates distance between social workers and service users, exaggerating existing power imbalance whilst simultaneously shifting the goalpost towards a more bureaucratic, prescriptive approach less likely to engender curiosity in practice' (2018: 1514). The aim of professional curiosity then is to uncover the risks posed by the service user (be that someone on probation, the parent of a child or vulnerable adult). Practitioners must be prepared to 'think the unthinkable' to do this type of work. In turn, this means they must have the 'right' skills to avoid becoming too trusting and children becoming 'invisible' behind the smokescreen of deception and manipulation' (Naqvi, 2013). Therefore, being professionally curious while maintaining good working relations with clients is challenging because practitioners must 'develop trust... whilst simultaneously exercising mistrust' (Burton and Revell, 2018: 1518). Professional curiosity is often invoked to encourage practitioners to spot potential 'disguised compliance', and Leigh *et al's* (2020: 281) analysis goes on to show that disguised compliance is itself 'vague and potentially interprets parental behaviour in a suspicious and negative manner'. In turn this leads to clients struggling 'to attain the professional's desired position, leaving them in a no-win situation' (Leigh *et al* 2020: 282).

Knott and Scrag (2016: 91) argue that professional curiosity is about 'listening to your gut reaction, the physical feeling that there is something not quite right or some level of incongruity. It requires that we listen actively to make sense of what we are told'. While a gut reaction should not be a guiding principle of practice, people should not be afraid to explore areas which do not seem correct. This approach requires a shift in practice because of the uncertainty it entails, requiring the practitioner to be comfortable with a certain degree of doubt (Mason, 1993). This is bound to be difficult in the risk-saturated contexts of 21<sup>st</sup> century social work and probation practice (Fitzgibbon, 2012).

The academic research could be understood as evidence of the neo-liberalisation of social work through the focus on professional curiosity as informing actuarial and clinical risk assessments. However, the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) includes professional curiosity in its Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) to signal the importance of reflection and the 'need to develop professional knowledge and sustain curiosity' (BASW, 2018: 9).

Here, professional curiosity is a strengths-based and goal-focused approach to engaging with individuals. Curiosity is seen as 'a position of openness to each person's point of view, and to multiple ideas about the family's situation' (Guthrie, 2020: 8). Systemic theory makes use of a distinction between first- and second-order positions developed by Hoffman (1985). First order positions situate the worker outside the person's life which, in turn, can lead to reinforcing assumptions about the client and results in 'linear bureaucratic processes, which promote simple interventions as opposed to developing a deeper understanding' (Guthrie, 2020: 10) of a person's life. First order positions are less likely to lead to meaningful change in a client's life because the focus becomes more about the verification of a 'truth'. Second order positions, meanwhile, take a more holistic view of the client's life and see the practitioner as part of the change that may need to occur. The aim of professional curiosity here is more about changing someone's life than managing

risk. Moreover, this approach acknowledges there is no one truth in a situation, but that the practitioner needs to understand the client in a more holistic sense.

Lang *et al*'s (1990) domains of production and explanation are useful here. When working within the domain of production the practitioner is seeking to obtain the 'truth'. Examples of questions in the context of family therapy and social work might therefore include: 'Do we need a strategy meeting?', 'What's the legal position?', 'Has the threshold been met?' (Guthrie, 2020: 12). In the field of probation, questions may be: 'Has the risk posed changed or increased?' 'Do they need recalling?' Whilst exercising professional curiosity to answer these questions is useful and helps practitioners assess risk, it does not identify what needs to change.

Alternatively, in the domain of explanation 'there are at least as many possible 'truths' as there are people involved in the interaction, and therefore no single truth can be discovered. Within this domain, the professional uses curiosity to explore a range of possible ideas and perspectives' (Guthrie, 2020: 12). Thus, questions may include 'What is this family's set of beliefs about receiving help from social workers?', 'What are the differences between what the mother believes is best for her daughter, and what the professional team believe is best for her daughter?' (Guthrie, 2020: 12). In the context of probation, questions may be, 'What does the person under supervision want from probation?' 'How can we reconcile what they want with what I think they need?'. Professional curiosity relating to risk assessment is thus aligned with the domain of production whilst approaches encapsulated by the domain of explanation aim to generate a more holistic understanding of, and co-produced solutions to the problems that people face. Using professional curiosity to develop the therapeutic alliance relies on reflective supervision allowing the practitioner to cope with the uncertainty that results from such an approach but also discourages exploitative practice because it encourages the sharing of experiences (confidentially) between practitioners as a form of accountability (Bond, 2015). This is particularly relevant in probation where supervision has, in recent years, become increasingly managerial in focus (Coley, 2020).

Professional curiosity is also understood as a tool for enabling staff to take advantage of learning opportunities to stay abreast of recent developments in terms of good practice and evidence.

Professional curiosity is considered a driver in acquiring knowledge and updating skills (Eason, 2010).

This field of practice is structured to actively encourage professional curiosity where nurses are required to evidence continuous professional development (CPD) to maintain their registration. Such curiosity has been shown that increased competence arising from these continuous learning opportunities results in improved self-esteem, self-respect, professional status and meaningful work (Desilets *et al.*, 2010).

INSERT TABLE 1 AROUND HERE

This review of the literature has demonstrated that professional curiosity is deployed in different ways according to the disciplinary context of the setting. Moreover, we can understand professional curiosity as being conceptualised in different ways, with distinct aims, concepts, and methods which we summarise in Table 1.

### **Barriers to professional curiosity**

Thacker *et al* (2019) argue that barriers to professional curiosity fall into three themes: 'case dynamics', 'professional issues' and 'organisational issues'. Case dynamics involve potential disguised compliance and the rule of optimism, 'a well-known dynamic in which professionals tend to rationalise away new or escalating risks despite clear evidence to the contrary' (Thacker *et al.*, 2019).

We should be cautious here, because the concept was originally conceived to 'describe how the complex, structural constraints within organisations affected the way in which social care institutions responded to practice situations [but has since been transformed into]... a tool to blame social workers for situations where a child had been seriously harmed or had died' (Leigh *et al.*, 2020: 270).

'Professional issues' denote the perceptions of practitioners and a tendency to believe a client's story because it conforms to preconceived ideas. This relates closely to the field of lie deception which suggests that, on the whole, humans are poor at identifying when someone is or is not telling

the truth (Masip, 2017). Thacker *et al.*'s (2019) final theme of organisational issues relates to 'inadequate supervision and lack of management oversight and security'. In addition to this we could add high workloads, a lack of time, and a high turnover of staff. All issues which are endemic to public services in England and Wales.

There are also emotional barriers to being professionally curious because practitioners are unwilling to 'think the unthinkable' because there is a 'desire to disconnect from such revulsion and fear' which becomes 'a protective mechanism to repress 'unbearable feelings' (Burton and Revell, 2018). The wider context of a profession which is easily castigated by the media and public when things go wrong may prevent a social worker from asking those difficult questions about harm they are experiencing. Managing the emotional demands of work in social work and probation is critical to good practice although also brings a risks of burnout (Phillips *et al.*, 2020). This line of argument presents challenges for organisations who want to encourage their staff to be more professionally curious and needs to be borne in mind when considering how people use the term in their work.

### **Organisational context**

Although the literature reviewed above came from other disciplines, echoes of professional curiosity in the field of probation already exist. Professional curiosity for risk assessment is reflected in the need for practitioners to obtain information from other agencies and the myriad ways in which probation staff work with other agencies through, for example, Multi-agency Public Protection Arrangement. In relation to professional curiosity for therapeutic ends, the introduction of the Offender Personality Disorder Pathway (NHS England, 2015) makes use of psychologically informed hypotheses about the 'causes, precipitants and maintaining factors of an individual's (offending) behaviour' (Brown and Völlm, 2016) whilst a strengths-based approach is inherent to the Good Lives Model of probation practice (Ward and Brown, 2004). In relation to professional curiosity for knowledge building, there is no requirement for professional registration and continuous



professional development, although plans are underway to create a professional register (HMPPS, 2020a).

Despite some clear similarities between probation and social work (Smith, 2005) the gap between the two professions has widened in recent years. Most significantly, in 2014 around sixty per cent of the work of probation trusts was outsourced to privately run Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs), which supervise low- and medium-risk clients and the newly created National Probation Service (NPS) took over responsibility for managing high-risk clients.

These reforms were intended to improve the rehabilitation of offenders. In reality, they entrenched an already well-established move towards centrally administered targets and encouraged a long standing trend away from working with 'people' and towards working with 'things' (Burke and Collett, 2010; Tidmarsh, 2020a, 2020b). Following these reforms, there have been reports of high workloads in both private and public providers leading to poor quality supervision, court work and risk assessment which relates directly to some of the organisational barriers to professional curiosity discussed above (HMI Probation, 2019b).

## **Methodology**

The data in this article were collected through a survey conducted with practitioners in the NPS in early 2020. The survey was designed to understand the emotional labour of probation work and the links with stress and burnout. During the development of the survey we were asked to include a question on professional curiosity. A search of the literature uncovered little research examining professional curiosity in probation, so we deliberately asked participants the following open question: 'What does professional curiosity mean to you?' Thus, the data reflects the views of staff working with high-risk people subject to probation supervision in England and Wales. The research received ethical approval from the ethics committee at XXXX University and all participants gave written informed consent.

The survey was sent to 12,430 probation officers (PO), probation services officers (PSO) and trainees through the online survey software Qualtrics. 1,508 people responded, leading to a response rate of 12 per cent. We intended to leave the survey open for one month, with reminders sent at two weeks and three days prior to the survey closing. However, the Covid-19 pandemic meant the NPS moved to an 'exceptional delivery model' during week 3 and the final reminder was not sent because of concern about asking staff to complete a survey during the transition to remote working.

30 per cent (n=445) of respondents answered the question, 'What does professional curiosity mean to you?' meaning that 3.6% of the total probation workforce provided their definition of professional curiosity. We cannot, therefore, see these data as generalisable to all those working in probation. That said, as an exploratory study which represents the first attempt to see how probation staff understand professional curiosity this sample represents a useful place to start. There is a need to follow this initial study with further research which generates a larger sample of quantitative data and elicits qualitative data to add depth.

INSERT TABLE 2 AROUND HERE

Table 2 shows that the sample broadly reflects the demographic makeup of the NPS in terms of gender and ethnicity for both overall respondents (n=1508) as well as those who answered the question on professional curiosity (n=445). Our sample includes an over-representation of students on the Professional Qualification in Probation (PQIP) course, and an under-representation of 'other' roles such as victim liaison officers. This will have had an impact on our findings and needs to be borne in mind when interpreting them.

We used the literature review to code responses to the open question about what professional curiosity meant to the participant, using the different conceptualisations of professional curiosity to make sense of the responses. One member of the research team conducted the first sweep through the data, coding people's responses accordingly before other members ensured the codes had been assigned consistently. We started by identifying the meanings most clearly related to the

conceptualisation of professional curiosity identified in our literature review. For example, where a response was about risk assessment, we coded this as 'risk-focused professional curiosity'. Where someone implied professional curiosity is about obtaining a holistic understanding of the client's life we coded this as 'therapeutic professional curiosity'. We then considered the remaining responses to attribute a code we felt was closest to the meaning provided. Where we disagreed, consensus came through discussion to ensure intercoder reliability.

During analysis it became clear additional meanings were being attributed to the term 'professional curiosity' which did not fit our existing themes. We thus created new codes to reflect this. The first set of responses in these newly identified groups were relatively generic responses from which we could discern neither the aim nor the underlying rationale/approach which we call 'neutral' professional curiosity. Another such group of respondents explicitly stated that they did not know what professional curiosity meant, whilst a final group offered definitions which could not be coded into any of the groups which we call 'other'. See Table 3 for examples of the different comments we received and how we coded them.

This process can most closely be described as a content analysis because it allows for 'quantification of data ... by measuring the frequency of different categories and themes, which cautiously may stand as a proxy for significance' (Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2013; see also Weber, 1990). Our interpretivist coding process was conducted to achieve both reliability and validity. Specifically, by involving the whole research team in the coding process we achieved reproducibility, one of the stronger measures of reliability (Weber, 1990). We sought to achieve external validity by focusing on semantic validity, where 'persons [the research team] familiar with the language and texts examine lists of words (or other units) placed in the same category and agree that these words have similar meanings or connotations' (Weber, 1990: 21).

Having coded the responses, we used SPSS to calculate the prevalence of different meanings attributed to professional curiosity and bivariate crosstabulations to explore the links between the

different conceptualisations of professional curiosity and the following participant demographics: gender, role and probation officer qualification. For each combination of variables, we conducted chi-square tests of independence with a p value of 0.05. Where variables are independent, we used Cramer's V to calculate the strength of any association.

The research team is made up of two experienced probation officers and two academics in criminology and law. The two former probation officers now deliver the academic component of PQiP and the two academics research policy and practice in the fields of community sanctions and the legal system. The combination of experience of probation work allowed the team to understand and interpret what participants may have meant in their responses, whilst maintaining critical awareness through members of the team who were less entrenched in probation cultures. As discussed above, we ensured intercoder reliability through an analytic process whereby each researcher was coding material in the same way as other members of the team (Cavanagh, 1997).

### **Professional curiosity in probation**

Before moving on to the findings from our survey data we now examine the way in which the concept has been used in probation policy. In an inspection of the management and supervision of men convicted of sexual offences, inspectors merely allude to the nature of professional curiosity:

Some staff lacked the appropriate degree of professional curiosity when dealing with these men. In one in three cases, safeguarding checks were not made as needed throughout the sentence. Responsible officers carried out home visits in too few of the cases inspected, and this meant that they missed a key opportunity to gather information to inform risk assessments and reviews. (HMI Probation, 2019a: 11)

More recently, HMI Probation suggested that a lack of professional curiosity was a feature in some serious further offences and referred to it in its independent review of the Joseph McCann case (HMI Probation, 2020a, 2020b). The use of the term here appears to denote a managerial approach to being professionally curious with the main concern being that procedures were not carried out. Even so, the focus is undoubtedly risk assessment and management. This is reflected in her Majesty's

Prison and Probation Service's (HMPPS) (2020b: 1) own definition of the term, published in a briefing after our survey closed:

Being professionally curious is a process of always questioning and seeking verification for the information you are given rather than making assumptions or accepting things at face value. By doing this you can avoid some common pitfalls in practice: being 'professionally optimistic' by focusing on positive and not identifying where things are not improving or risk is increasing; making a judgement about new information without verifying it with other agencies involved; accepting an offender's level of compliance and not exploring if this could be 'disguised compliance'; allowing crisis/chaotic behaviour to distract you from risk management work and accepting this as normal.

This definition of professional curiosity references the terms disguised compliance and professional optimism. As argued above, these concepts need to be treated critically because they can lead to practice which potentially damages a client's chances of progress or blames practitioners.

Nonetheless, risk has become central to probation practice in the last thirty years (Kemshall, 1998) and so it is perhaps unsurprising that the concept of professional curiosity has piqued the interest of those responsible for overseeing and delivering probation services.

### **What does professional curiosity mean to probation workers?**

Having explored the use of the term in policy, we now turn to our survey data to understand what professional curiosity means to probation practitioners. Table 3 provides some examples of how our respondents answered the question, 'What does professional curiosity mean to you?'

INSERT TABLE 3 AROUND HERE

Table 4 shows that 54.2% (n=239) of respondents gave a definition which we coded as risk-focused. 12.6% (n=55) and 5.6% (n=25) gave definitions which were therapeutic or about knowledge building, respectively. A further 22.5% (n=99) gave an answer which was coded neutrally and 5.2% (n=23) explicitly stated that either they did not know what professional curiosity was or attributed a meaning which did not fit any of the above definitions.

INSERT TABLE 4 AROUND HERE

We accept that probation staff will be interested in risk as the service has public protection – and thus the management of risk – at its heart. Even the way in which rehabilitation is operationalised in the contemporary probation service is risk oriented (Robinson, 2008). Our findings resonate with Burton and Revell's (2018) argument that risk-focused professional curiosity easily manifests in the context of neo-liberal public services.

### *Professional curiosity and gender*

Recent years have seen the 'feminisation' of probation (Mawby and Worrall, 2011). On a demographic level, the number of female practitioners now outnumber men at a rate of 3:1 whilst on a more cultural level, researchers have observed subtle cultural shifts underpinned by 'the emergence of a new breed of female offender manager who is highly organised, computer-literate and focused on public protection' (Mawby and Worrall, 2011: 14). We thus analysed the extent to which the attribution of meaning to professional curiosity can be understood through a gendered lens. Table 4 shows that men were more likely to provide a therapeutic definition of professional curiosity, whilst women were more likely to provide a risk-focused definition. This resonates with Worrall and Mawby's (2014) typology of probation workers which sees 'offender managers' as young, female graduates who are comfortable with risk management being the primary aim of their job. That said, the risk-focused definition prevails across both genders. In order to assess whether these variables are associated, chi-square tests were conducted. This resulted in the Pearson Chi-Squared statistic,  $\chi^2_8 = 8.712$ , corresponding to  $p = 3.67$ . From this, we can conclude that there is no association between gender and meaning attributed to the term professional curiosity.

### *Professional curiosity and role*

POs and PSOs carry out similar roles although PSOs – who are not qualified probation officers – tend to supervise lower risk clients and so one might expect POs to be more concerned with risk than PSOs. That said, POs are more likely – through their training – to have come across ideas associated with the therapeutic alliance and may feel the need to stay abreast of up to date evidence as part of

being a professional. PQIP students will also have come across some of these ideas as part of their training but will have had less time to become acculturated to the occupational norms and values of probation. It is reasonable to assume that the meaning one attributes to professional curiosity will be related to role. We therefore conducted analyses to understand this further. Table 5 presents a crosstabulation of the meanings attributed to the term professional curiosity with 'role' used as the independent variable.

INSERT TABLE 5 AROUND HERE

PSOs are more likely to define professional curiosity in terms of risk, whilst POs are more likely than others to define it therapeutically. This may be due to the breadth of training and exposure to ideas from other disciplines. Interestingly, PQIP students fall between these two groups. PQIP students are likely to be less experienced but also more engaged with current research and publications due to the requirement to undertake assessments and reading towards their qualification. They are also undergoing training in a service in which risk assessment and management predominates and so one may expect them to reflect this in their responses. Despite these differences, it is worth noting – again – that respondents were more likely to take a risk-focused approach to professional curiosity regardless of role. The chi-square test resulted in the Pearson Chi-Squared statistic,  $\chi^2_{12} = 26.491$ , corresponding to  $p = 0.009$ . From this we can conclude that there is an association between role and meaning attributed to the term professional curiosity. The strength of this association was assessed using Cramer's V, resulting in a Cramer's V value of .141 ( $p = 0.009$ ). Therefore, although the variables 'role' and meaning attributed to professional curiosity are associated, the strength of the association is weak.

We can consider the increased – albeit weak - proclivity towards a therapeutic form of professional curiosity amongst some probation officers through the lens of probation culture. A considerable body of work demonstrates a consistent value base underpinning probation officers' work (Grant, 2016; Robinson *et al.*, 2013). The therapeutic form of professional curiosity aligns closely with many

of these core values such as a belief in the ability of people to change. Despite the prevalence of risk in the NPS, 'risk thinking' has not served to fully diminish these underlying values although we may be seeing a further 'pulling away' from probation's social work roots (Robinson *et al.*, 2013).

#### *Professional curiosity, qualification and length of service*

The route to becoming a qualified probation officer in recent years has changed considerably. The requirement to be a qualified social worker (DipSW) was removed in 1995 and qualification was achieved through the Diploma in Probation Studies (DipPS) between 1997 and 2010. This was superseded by the Probation Qualification Framework (PQF) until the current regime was implemented in 2016.

These different training regimes may have resulted in different attitudes towards this element of probation practice because of the different political and penal cultures in which the training was designed and delivered. For example, recent training regimes may have placed more focus on the development of skills – such as how to gather and interpret information with a focus on managing risk – as opposed to historic training regimes which had a greater focus on characteristics such as good listening skills or being empathic.

These different qualification routes can also be seen as proxies for length of service and we may expect to see differences between those with more experience than those with less resulting from progression, the building of confidence and experience, the development of reflective practice capability or product of professional acculturation whereby practitioners internalise those underlying values discussed above. We thus analysed our respondents' understanding of the term professional curiosity by qualification.

INSERT TABLE 6 AROUND HERE

Table 6 shows that probation officers with a DipSW and DipPS are less likely to see professional curiosity as a risk management tool than those who qualified after 2016. It is also worth noting that



no PQIP qualified probation officers said that they did not know what professional curiosity. That said, the chi-square test resulted in the Pearson Chi-Squared statistic,  $\chi^2_{16} = 18.806$ , corresponding to  $p, 2.79$ . From this, we can conclude that the variables qualification and meaning attributed to the term professional curiosity are not associated.

## **Conclusion**

This article has provided an up to date review of the literature on professional curiosity, analysis of policy level definitions of the concept and a content analysis of how probation workers attribute meaning to the term; the first study of this kind. Our data suggest that probation policymakers and practitioners are much more likely to see professional curiosity as a tool for risk assessment and management than about developing therapeutic alliances and knowledge building. This was the case across gender, and qualification and there was no statistically significant association between these variables. PQIP students and PSOs are statistically significantly more likely to attribute a risk-focused meaning to the term professional curiosity than qualified POs although, again, the risk-focus predominates across all roles. We should also reiterate the potentially confounding impact of an over-representation of PQIP students in our sample.

Despite the overall tendency to see professional curiosity as being about risk, there is considerable heterogeneity in the way in which practitioners attribute meaning to the term professional curiosity. Moreover, there appears to be a certain level of dissonance between the institution's definition of professional curiosity and practitioners'; yet more evidence of a disconnect between the aims of probation organisations and the staff who work within them (Humphrey and Pease, 1992; Robinson and McNeill, 2004).

Professional curiosity can be understood in much broader terms than it has been used thus far in probation. Moreover, practitioners across the NPS attribute different meanings to the term professional curiosity, which encompass all these different conceptualisations. This does not reflect the complicated, nuanced and multi-faceted nature of professional curiosity as understood in other

fields of work. Focusing on risk factors through more safeguarding checks, for example, is unlikely to lead to better probation practice. Whilst the 'presence' of a risk factor may be important it does not tell the practitioner why – or even whether – a client will reoffend.

There are some limitations to this research. Our overall response rate was low, partly due to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. The sample represents 3.6% of the NPS workforce but broadly representative of the NPS workforce in terms of gender, ethnicity and role, although there was an over-representation of PQIP learners in the sample. This will have impacted on our findings in ways we cannot fully appreciate. We should also note that just because a respondent appeared to attribute to a particular meaning in their response, this does not mean that they do not also attribute other meanings to the term. As is often the case with research such as this, some comments were ambiguous or combined the different understandings of professional curiosity listed above. Our approach was interpretivist and despite taking steps to increase the reliability of our analysis through a process which allowed for reproducibility between coders as well as semantic validity this needs to be borne in mind. Surveys of this kind will always generate data which is lacking in depth and explanatory power and so this research should be followed up with interviews which seek greater depth on how people in probation understand and exercise professional curiosity.

Despite these limitations, some important implications arise. Firstly, organisations need to think about how they want their staff to be professionally curious. It may be that policymakers are content with a risk-oriented model of professional curiosity or they may decide a more holistic approach is desirable. In any case, there is a need to define it so that – at the very least – all practitioners are 'on the same page' when it comes to implementing it. Secondly, there is a need to undertake further analysis of practitioners' understanding of the term to fully identify how probation practitioners can be professionally curious and identify any barriers to this way of working. This should comprise both quantitative and qualitative methods. Thirdly, providers should consider the need to reconcile the

difference between a significant minority who attribute a therapeutic meaning to professional curiosity when the majority of the service takes a risk-focused approach.

We also urge caution around reifying the term, because doing so can result in the forms in which it is already present and expressed (albeit perhaps in different language) being overlooked. For example, probation workers do value the relationship between themselves and their service user and there has always been a thirst for knowledge around what works and evidence-based practice. We are concerned that if this becomes a real area of focus for policymakers any nuance will get lost amongst attempts to govern people on probation purely through risk (Fitzgibbon, 2012).

Professional curiosity holds the potential to be useful for improving the effectiveness of probation and social work through 'better' risk management. But it can also be used to improve relationships between service users and practitioners, provide practitioners with a space in which to reflect upon and interrogate their own practice, enabling people to engage with best practice and available evidence. However, it is currently understood in policy documents, inspection reports and - to a lesser extent - practitioners' understandings in narrow terms. At the very least, there is a clear need for probation providers to consider how they want to define professional curiosity and, if necessary, implement programmes to ensure that there is consistency of approach across the organisation.

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