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'Pushed from above and pushed from below': Emotional labour and dual identities amongst senior probation officers in England and Wales

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Abstract

Senior Probation Officer's (SPOs) in England and Wales work at the 'front and centre' of the organisation's hierarchy. They act as both manager and developer of frontline probation practitioners. Previous research has focused on the emotional labour undertaken by probation practitioners yet there is very little research on the emotional labour of SPOs, even though they must be skilful emotion managers of their own emotions and those they supervise. Using data gathered from interviews with 28 SPOs and managers across England and Wales, we analyse how SPOs' emotions are 'controlled' by senior management, and how SPOs 'control' the emotions of frontline workers they supervise. SPOs attempts at managing emotions are resisted by their supervisees, and SPOs resist the emotional displays they are expected to present in their work role. We conclude by considering the impact of emotional labour on SPOs and how best to support them in their role.

Keywords

emotional labour, identity, managerialism, middle managers, probation, staff well-being

Introduction

In England and Wales, Senior Probation Officers (SPO) are responsible for managing frontline probation practitioners such as Probation Officers (PO), Probation Service

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Officers (PSO) and Residential Workers (RW). As middle managers, they occupy a 'central position in organizational hierarchies, are responsible for implementing senior management strategies, and exercise control over junior staff' (Harding et al., 2014: 1214). However, despite this 'central position' SPOs are rarely the focus of research. This is a significant omission given their pivotal role in ensuring the delivery of the Probation Service (PS) which aims to 'assess, protect and change'.

The article begins with a brief overview of the history and role of the SPO, highlighting the shifting and broadening nature of their duties to include emotional support, professional development, education, financial management, accountability and disciplinary procedures. These responsibilities span recognised professional staff supervision dimensions of management, development, mediation and welfare (Bourn and Hafford-Letchfield, 2011), previously likened to 'walking a tightrope' (Bogo and Dill, 2008). We situate our discussion in the broader academic literature on the role of middle managers in large organisations and similar studies from across criminal justice, the NHS and social work. Across these institutions, middle managers are 'front and centre' because they implement organisational policy, and act as direct supervisors of frontline workers. In their study of middle managers in the NHS, Harding et al. (2014) consider how managers' identities are 'controlled' by the NHS and how they – in turn – in turn 'control' junior staff.[1] We consider how this may play out in the context of probation. The article continues with an overview of the concept of emotional labour before presenting our analysis of the complex and dynamic nature of SPO work. We finish by briefly considering its potential impact on their well-being.

The changing role of SPOs

Given the morally and intellectually complex issues that characterise probation work (Millar and Burke, 2012), it is unsurprising that 'Seniors' – introduced by the Probation Rules 1937 – were primarily tasked with providing advice and encouragement to less experienced colleagues (Boswell, 1986). Despite resistance of practitioners to supervisory intervention – perceived as scrutiny as opposed to support and development (Thornborough, 1970) – SPOs were positioned more explicitly as 'managers' from the late 1960s. They supervised small numbers of POs alongside administrative tasks and careful interpretation and reflection of communications from senior management to frontline staff (Brown, 1969). Alongside these managerial responsibilities, SPO also held a caseload of individuals deemed 'difficult' and requiring experienced practitioner oversight. Retention of the practitioner element of the role was contentious; viewed by some as a mechanism allowing the SPO to remain 'realistic' in their supervision of staff (Thornborough, 1970: 17) and by others as a ready-made excuse to avoid the managerial demands of the role (Brown, 1969).

Following the crisis of faith in traditional casework approaches to correctional rehabilitation in the late 1970s, probation practitioners were increasingly compelled to focus on targets, performance data and accountability to a system based on 'technicality' (Robinson, 2003), epitomised by the change from 'case worker' to 'case manager' (Burnett, 1996). Alongside the introduction of a large-scale managerial structure, this shift

inevitably impacted on the expectations placed on SPOs and positioned them explicitly as managers of teams of practitioners:

> In response to the changing phases of the Service, Seniors seem to have undergone a kind of metamorphosis from advisers, encouragers, organisers of work, to casework 'experts', team leaders and facilitators and finally into first-line managers, operating at the interface between main-grade and higher management. (Boswell, 1986: 136)

This metamorphosis did not resolve the conflict between SPOs as managers and developers. Instead, they became responsible for advising, developing and educating those they supervised, whilst also managing their performance. Staff supervision subsequently became a congested space that is characterised by the push and pull of staff and organisational demands (Davies, 1984) with SPOs ensnared in the middle. In the last 30 years, these push and pull factors have squeezed SPOs further, partly because of governmental objectives and increased influence of market principles of efficiency, cost effectiveness and economic competitiveness (Deering, 2011; Ranson and Stewart, 1994). Intertwined with a focus on risk management and public protection emanating from the influence of 'the risk society' (Giddens, 1999: 4) there is now an inescapable emphasis on accountability and sharper focus on staff supervision as a method of surveillance and ultimately control of those in social justice orientated occupations (see Beddoe, 2010 in relation to social work). SPOs are, then, left with a tangled web of a role that demands supporting learning and development of their staff, alongside performance accountability and risk management.

Implicitly recognising the tension in the SPO role between managing and developing, a new model for staff supervision, the Skills, Effective Engagement and Development in Supervision (SEEDS) model, was piloted in the early 2010s. Although primarily designed to aid probation staff with service user engagement, SEEDS acknowledged the role played by SPOs in supervising probation practitioners and thereby provided training and an accompanying practice framework for SPOs to draw upon (Rex and Hosking, 2013).

However, in 2014 Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) – which divided probation services into the public sector National Probation Service (NPS) and privately run Community Rehabilitation Centres (CRCs) – halted implementation. With reunification of public and private sector probation providers in 2021 the PS is in another period of upheaval, and the messy world of SPOs as middle managers becomes further magnified (Tidmarsh, 2022). Reunification has obliged SPOs to supervise frontline probation practitioners subjected to divergent working practices and must, along with frontline staff, begin 'adapting to working within a newly structured service, while the process of recovery from [COVID – 19] pandemic continues' (Carr, 2021: 308).

The launch of SEEDS2 in April 2019, and the accompanying Reflective Practice Supervision Standards (RPSS) could be viewed as one way of offering some clarity to the SPO role. SPOs are required to engage in reflective supervision and practice observations with their staff with the intention of developing frontline probation practice and supporting staff well-being. However, while the RPSS has generally been well received by SPOs, those interviewed in (Westaby et al., 2021) recent study describe several barriers to

its implementation, most notably the ongoing tension between the managerial aspects of their role and the developmental side built into the SEEDS2 model.

> I just remember thinking you're asking us to do an awful lot and you're not removing any sense of responsibility or any other tasks from us, but you are adding to it. (Eugene, quoted in Westaby et al., 2021: 25)

SPOs continue then to find themselves 'between a rock and a hard place' (Coley, 2020: 238) when trying to fulfil demands of this complex middle-manager role. SPOs face pressure from senior management above expecting organisational policies to be fulfilled with limited staff resource, as well as practitioner and risk management demands from below. Fundamentally, 'the SPO role presents as too broad in nature, with insufficient time to balance quality and workload issues' (Coley, 2020: 238).

SPOs as frontline managers

Occupying a central position in the PS, SPOs are generally described as middle managers (see for example Brown, 1969; HMI Probation, 2020; Robinson et al., 2016). Nevertheless, their position is consistent with that of frontline managers who are responsible for a work group reporting to a higher level of management hierarchy. They are a first level manager as the employees they supervise generally do not manage other workers or have any supervisory responsibility. Frontline managers tend to also be responsible for the day-to-day running of their work rather than strategic matters (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2003).

There has been little consideration of how the unique 'front *and* centre' position held by SPOs influences their work or impacts on their well-being. This is important considering the role SPOs play in fulfilment of organisational aims, and, conceivably, if SPOs are under pressure they are likely to be prevented from working effectively. Indeed, SPOs are expected to provide a:

> link between the organizations philosophical, political and policy perspectives and the street-level operations of 'doing supervision'. On a day-to-day basis, this position is important because middle managers translate policy provided by upper management and assist line staff with navigating competing expectations regarding job responsibilities. (Kras et al., 2017: 173)

Senior probation officers occupy a position in the middle of the organisational hierarchy with its inevitable push and pull from senior management above, and frontline staff below. Frontline managers are often charged with managing competing cultural identities such as 'street cop' and 'management cop' (Reuss-Ianni, 1983: 38). These two cultures often conflict because frontline workers expect their managers 'to be understanding, to protect them from management's unreasonable expectations…and to represent their interests', while senior managers 'expect supervisors to keep employees in line and to represent management's and the organization's interests'. Frontline managers, therefore, are 'vital and loyal lynchpins' linking senior and junior staff. They can facilitate

value creation or value destruction where they believe the service does not conform to values underpinning the organisation (Harding et al., 2014; Dudau and Brunetto, 2020 citing Osborne, 2018). This inherent tension in the role results in managers who 'both conform with and resist normative managerial identities' to become 'both controlled and controllers' (Harding et al., 2014: 1213).

This review of the literature on the role of middle managers in other contexts and their experience of identity conflict provides concepts useful in considering the role of SPOs. Given they are frontline managers situated between senior management and frontline workers they are perhaps inevitably subject to 'normative managerial identities' and thus have their identities 'controlled' and be expected to 'control' the identities of those they supervise. This enables us to understand how SPOs negotiate the longstanding tension between being developer and manager.

SPOs as emotion managers

As well as managing the relationship between junior and senior members of an organisation, middle and frontline managers manage 'the emotional states of their employees' (Harding et al., 2014: 1214, quoting Huy, 2001). Therefore, management is a form of emotional labour (Hearn, 1993), where workers are expected to exhibit certain emotions in exchange for a wage (Hochschild, 1983). The expectation to present certain emotions, or emotional displays are regulated through display rules which can be societal, occupational or organisational (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). While societal display rules are general in nature, they can impact upon occupational and organisational display rules (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Eckman and Friesan, 1975). For example, societal display rules are generally punitive in nature in relation to perceptions of probation and the Probation Service is mindful of this when making policy decisions (Westaby et al., 2021). Occupational and organisational rules are more specific, with the former established within the organisation through processes of recruitment, induction, policy, and staff supervision and the latter being inculcated within staff through informal professional expectations exhibited by other members of the occupation (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Adams and Mastracci, 2019; Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1989).

Workers adhere to display rules through either surface or deep acting. When surface acting, they produce emotional displays which are inconsistent with their inner feeling (Hochschild, 1983). With respect to SPOs this might be necessary, for example, where their feelings about a particular organisational directive do not align with organisational display rules. Surface acting though can be hard work and lead to, amongst other things, burnout and role overload (Tolich, 1993; Wharton, 1993; Wharton and Erickson, 1993). In contrast, when workers deep act, they try to align their feelings with emotional expectations through experiences or a trained imagination (Hochschild, 1983). So, an SPO might put themselves in the position of their frontline staff and align their emotional displays to authentically connect a frontline probation practitioner they supervise. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) also reference genuine emotional response to conform to display rules. While less emotionally challenging than surface and deep acting, workers are still required to control the genuine emotion they display, and so perform emotional

labour. Therefore, an SPO might display the genuine frustration they might feel about and aspect of their work role to those they supervise but they are still expected to control the amount of frustration they display.

Previous studies demonstrate frontline probation staff perform emotional labour in their everyday work (Phillips et al. 2016; Westaby et al., 2021) yet there have been few studies focussing on the work of SPOs. Research in other fields have however examined the emotional labour expectations particular to the manager role (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002) highlighting how they must tread an 'intrepid path between organizational objectives and their emotional costs on employees' (Dudau and Brunetto, 2020 citing Guy et al., 2008). Similarly, SPOs display a wide variety of emotions (Humphrey et al., 2008), both positive (e.g. empathy, friendliness) and negative (e.g. disappointment) and manage them appropriately through surface acting, deep acting or genuine emotional displays.

Methods

The data presented in this article were generated to explore emotional labour amongst probation practitioners in England and Wales. A mixed methods approach was used to integrate the benefits of qualitative and quantitative research and ensure both breadth and depth of practitioner experiences. In March 2020, we conducted a survey administered by Qualtrics and sent by email to all probation practitioners and SPOs in the NPS. The findings of these survey data are published elsewhere (Westaby et al., 2021). The survey asked practitioners if they would be willing to be interviewed. Those who volunteered were randomly selected for semi-structured interviews to further explore their experiences in relation to themes broadly covered in the survey. The research team used a random number generator to identify potential participants from those had expressed a willingness to be interviewed in their survey response. Potential participants were contacted through their work email which was provided by the participant when they expressed an interest in being interviewed. The email introduced the interview element of the study and included a participant information sheet. Where a participant was unable or unwilling to be interviewed (indicated by return email from the participant, an email informing the research team that the email was no longer in use or no email response after two follow up emails) they were removed from the randomly generated list and the next participant on the list was contacted. The research team contacted 47 SPOs in total and 17 emails were not acknowledged, and two participants initially agreed to be interviewed, but then withdrew before the interview took place. Following agreement to be interviewed, and before the interview took place, participants completed an electronic consent form (stored in a password protected folder on the University's secure server). Individual members of the research team liaised with participants who agreed to be interviewed to agree on a convenient time and date for the interview. The interviews took place between January and March 2021 and were conducted using MS Teams or the telephone due to COVID restrictions. The interviews focused on emotional labour, staff well-being, staff supervision and professional curiosity. It is these interviews that are the focus of this article.

We interviewed a total 28 managers of which 20 interviewees were female and eight were male, which roughly reflects the gender makeup of the wider service.[2] The participants interviewed were from a range of divisions, and a mix of settings (e.g. Generic, Approved Premises, Court, Prisons). The research team received approval from the Ethics Committee at Sheffield Hallam University and from HMPPS National Research Committee. While the research posed minimal risk of harm to participants who participated in a professional capacity, all interviewees were informed in advance about the content of the interview and given the option to withdraw at any point. The research team contains former probation practitioners who made sure that they did not interview former colleagues. Due to COVID restrictions all interviews took place using video conferencing technology (MS Teams) and recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2019) was carried out primarily by Westaby using the findings outlined by Harding et al. (2014) as sensitising concepts. Therefore, in terms of the themes analysed, coding of the interviews focused on descriptions by participants where emotional labour was performed in such a way that indicated emotional 'control of SPOs', emotional 'control' by SPOs, emotional resistance to SPOs and emotional resistance by SPOs. The remaining members of the research team subsequently analysed the data to confirm and clarify the identification of themes.

Findings

Our participants described the ways in which they, as frontline managers, performed emotional labour and explained why the emotion management they undertook was important. SPOs talked about how they managed their own emotions and the emotions of those they supervised. Their descriptions resonated with Harding et al.'s (2014) research on middle managers in the NHS and so we present our findings using the concepts of 'control' and resistance to illustrate the tensions and complexity of the SPO role. We use the word 'control' in a broad sense to reflect the way in which emotions are managed though display rules and the performance of emotional labour, and the consequent resistance to the management of those emotions both by supervised staff and SPOs themselves.

Emotional 'control' of SPOs

SPOs were keen to describe their feelings about organisational policy, and the attitudes and practices of senior management:

> [S]ome of the emotions that crop up the most I guess are things like just a sense of frustration with the system, the sense of frustration about the detachment of higher-level probation staff..... up there, from the actual practice of managing service users on the ground, you know, they are very disjointed and their expectations of what we can physically achieve are quite unrealistic to some degree. (Ursula)

The frustration described by Ursula and the difficulties she faces in terms of organisational policy and expectations of frontline workers is not dissimilar from Reuss-Ianni (1983) 'street cop' mentality. That is, the recognition that SPO identity is partly formed as a result of their experiences as a frontline practitioner, and the expectation that SPOs protect those they supervise from unreasonable organisational demands. Ursula is therefore acutely aware of all the pressures placed on frontline probation staff and consequently herself as an SPO. This serves to exacerbate her perception that senior managers lack an understanding of SPO and frontline practitioner roles and the resulting frustration she feels.

However, middle managers such as SPOs are required through organisational and occupational display rules to 'control' their emotions in their interactions with others in the PS (Boucher, 2016). Our data suggests that SPOs must 'control' certain unwanted emotions about policies or directions in front of frontline probation staff by repressing them:

> [I] think you get all of the direction from senior management about the things you need to implement and sometimes you don't agree with those things, but you have to implement them, and you have to do it in a way that gets the team on board. (Brianna)

Brianna explains the importance of ensuring frontline staff do not become aware of her true feelings about some of the policy directions because she understands that frontline staff must conform to them. However, this repression of emotion can be challenging:

> [I]n terms of my emotional management what I'm not always great at is hiding emotionally how annoyed I am because I get frustrated by stuff, like ridiculous things, you know, organisational ridiculousness really frustrates me because it gets in the way of us being able to discharge a job effectively…and there are times as an SPO where you're so burdened. (Eugene)

Eugene finds difficulty in controlling his frustration about 'organisational ridiculousness'. However – and importantly – simply repressing this emotion is not enough. Organisational and (managerial) occupational display rules dictate SPOs surface act by replacing unwanted emotions with a different and often integrative or positive emotional display. In their interactions with the staff they manage, these positive emotional displays are designed to create or maintain the bond between the SPO and the frontline staff they supervise (Wharton, 1993):

> I think when I'm in team meetings, when I'm in supervision sessions it's very calm, very measured, very supportive but I think on the inside at points it is frustrating, there are points I'm feeling at times quite angry. I can feel quite resentful at points as well. (Oliver)

> That was a really difficult experience because all the way through that she was extremely frustrating, unbelievably infuriating but, again, you actually had to maintain the professionalism. (Tianna)

Oliver and Tianna describe having to display neutrality whilst feeling emotions such as frustration, infuriation, resentment or anger towards the frontline workers they supervise. Letting these emotions be seen risks defying display rules prohibiting the outwards display of these emotions because of the need to 'maintain professionalism'. Professionalism therefore requires SPOs to act congenially (Lively 2000; Lewis 2005) and through neutral emotional displays they convey proficiency (Cahill 1999; Harris 2002). It is at times like this that we see how SPOs inhabit a role that simultaneously 'controls' the emotions of those they supervise whilst also having their emotions 'controlled'.

SPOs also find it necessary to engage in deep acting to 'control' their emotions and successfully perform emotional labour:

> [T]hey're coming to you and it might be that you think 'why the hell are you feeling this way? because that to me, you know, probably there's people in a different situation that might be ten times worse or have got more workload than you but for them they're living and breathing a difficult situation so I suppose it's, again, putting your personal views aside and trying to put yourself in someone else's shoes and think, okay, well why for you is this really difficult at the moment? (Heather)

Here, Heather recognises that if her feelings were displayed outwardly, they would not adhere to emotional display rules around displaying empathy. She therefore engages in 'empathic perspective-taking' (Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2019: 108) by putting herself in the shoes of the frontline worker to remember how it feels in that position. Here, then, Heather prioritises being 'street cop' over 'management cop' (Reuss-Ianni, 1983) and – through deep acting – displays emotions which align with those feelings (Hochschild, 1983).

Deep acting is also used by SPOs to align themselves emotionally with organisational policy:

> even if you don't agree with having to provide stats every week or so, or COVID reporting or whatever it is, and you've got to do it and you've got no choice….But it's about trying to think that there must be some reason why they want this all the time, these stats, these figures. Trying to have that conversation with the staff so that they understand we're not just asking you to do this because we want to waste your time, there must be a logic to it. (Ursula)

Ursula's description shows that as a result of her experience as a frontline practitioner, her previous experiences as an SPO, and her own initial misgivings as an SPO about its relevance, she understands that those she supervises will react negatively to, in this case, the mandatory provision of weekly stats or COVID reporting. However, Ursula, as an SPO has no choice but to find a way of compelling her staff to conform. However rather than surface act, deep acts, Ursula explains how she tries to align her management identity, like the 'management cop' identity as identified by Reuss-Ianni (1983) – the need to manage employees effectively and represent the organisation's interests – and her 'street cop' identity. Ursula deep acts to persuade herself that there must be a good reason for these organisational expectations and align her feelings with those she displays to staff

to generate the requisite legitimacy of administrative duties. The benefit to Ursula from deep acting is the authenticity she imbues which ensures Ursula works in the interests of the organisations by persuading those she supervises that organisational expectations are legitimate. This illustrates the tension which is inherent to the SPO role and the demands of being a frontline manager. SPOs must compel staff to conform to organisational policy – however unpalatable – but in doing so are obliged to perform emotional labour to display expected emotions about that policy in a way that is acceptable to those they supervise. As Ursula states, 'you know what middle management is like: you are pushed from above and pushed from below'.

Emotional 'control' by SPOs

Senior probation officers understand emotional labour is necessary to compel frontline staff to conform to organisational policy, but also that they should avoid or, at least temper, the increased pressure their staff may feel because of organisational directives. Therefore, SPOs not only describe how their emotions are 'controlled' by senior management, but also the necessity to perform emotional labour to 'control' the emotions of their frontline staff. SPOs often talked about 'controlling' emotions in terms of how they are responsible for supporting frontline staff:

> I had a manic day with appointments and everything, I had two officers crying because of different issues, one about an offender, the other about personal stuff. (Brianna)

> All the emotions I've been talking about. Some people will come to me in tears … Other people might be quite angry [asking] 'Why aren't there enough staff?', you know, they have the opinion that maybe other staff aren't doing as much as they are, so you have to manage that. (Ursula)

As Brianna and Ursula observe, SPOs often have to 'control' emotions such as anger or sadness. These emotions can be rooted in 'affective events' resulting from the workplace environment that produce 'hassles' (e.g. being unfairly reprimanded or asked to implement a directive that means unplanned additional work) or 'uplifts' (e.g. being rewarded for good work or getting support from a colleague) for workers (Basch and Fisher, 2000; Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). The cumulative effect of these affective events is productive or disruptive affective states in workers which then shape their attitudes and behaviours (Ashkanasy, 2002; Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). SPOs must perform emotional labour to influence perceptions of affective events of those they supervise to reduce or avoid undesirable emotional reactions (Ashkanasy, 2002; Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). Our participants often described the need to display empathy to help their frontline staff regulate unwanted emotions caused by an affective event:

> When I want them to see that I empathise with them I allow them to see that, that I have empathy for you, that I have empathy that you are struggling or that you're finding this particular report difficult or that you're about to miss this deadline and I want them to see empathy and I think they do see empathy. (Lillian)

> I was honest, I said 'You're going to make me cry!' We just kind of talked it through and reassured her that, one, she was safe and okay, two, she won't have to see that person again…and also reassured her that she was good at her job and doing what she was supposed to do. (Rhonda)

In the accounts from Lillian and Rhonda, we see the importance of displaying empathy towards the frontline probation staff they supervise (Humphrey, 2002). Being able to comprehend the challenging situations faced by frontline workers and demonstrate genuine understanding is clearly important. Having formerly been in the position of frontline probation practitioner is helpful here because it enables SPOs to build rapport and emotionally engage with frontline practitioners. As Goleman (2006: 277) maintains, 'The best bosses are people who are trustworthy, emphatic and connected, who make us feel calm, appreciated, and inspired.'

Senior probation officers also empathise with the challenging work of frontline workers and thus the need to couch organisational policy and directions so they will be accepted.

> Yeah, it's reacting to people as well and also trying to work out how you get a message over in a way that's acceptable because it's dead easy to say you can't do that, don't do that but all that does it puts it underground. So, it's about with a smile on my face saying let's explore why you've said that shall we? What do you think's going on? (Winston)

> Handing over any message that comes from above and trying to sanitise it and make it in such a way that it's not going to, you know, it's either understandable to your staff or not too kind of - some of the messages you get are quite hard hitting, you think my team at the minute are struggling, if I send this message out it's just not going to go well. (Toby)

Winston and Toby describe having to perform emotional labour to reduce the adverse impact of organisational expectations as affective events perceived as a 'hassle'. For Winston, 'controlling' the emotional responses of those he supervises is important so as not to exacerbate the undesirable emotional reactions he has already observed. Winston describes using surface acting to present a friendly and trustworthy demeanour (Hochschild, 1983; Wharton, 1993) whilst Toby understands the pressure his staff are under and the impact the 'hard hitting' messages he must deliver could have on their emotional well-being. Therefore, he describes the need to emotionally 'control' his frontline workers by sanitising difficult messages from senior management to protect them from potential emotional harm. Toby also comments later in the interview:

> It really is - the role of an SPO in the organisation is anything the organisation can kind of dictate. We are probably the meat in the middle of the sandwich, and we get squeezed from every direction and it's a difficult job. (Toby)

Therefore, while Toby recognises he must emotionally 'control' frontline workers, in doing so, the tension between his role as developer and manager becomes more evident.

The emotional labour he performs means that he must balance these two roles, something he acknowledges is difficult:

> One of them just left this week who's a really brilliant manager and she was my manager when I first joined, and she said I can't keep up. It is, it's quite a difficult job. You have to have a lot of resilience. (Toby)

Emotional resistance to SPOs

Thus far, we have shown that SPOs perform emotional labour to 'control' the emotions of those they supervise, to avoid adverse reactions to affective events. However, in some situations front line staff resist SPOs efforts to 'control' their emotions:

> I'll give you an example because this is real, and this happened yesterday. So my team are kicking back at the moment, well, one of my team is kicking back… So we had that discussion, it got very heated. They think they're being hard done to because they're keyworkers, we're front facing at the end of the day. (Jemima)

The emotional resistance to Jemima here is linked to her management role. Jemima found it necessary to recall several staff to the office during the COVID pandemic. In response, staff challenged how many of them should be onsite, despite risk assessments being undertaken by Jemima, Her Majesty's Courts & Tribunals (HMCTS) and the NPS. This emotional kickback can increase the emotional toll felt by SPOs, who are left to implement organisational policy resisted by frontline workers:

> So yesterday I came out of that meeting absolutely drained after nearly two hours feeling that I couldn't stay on site. My emotional bucket has been drained for probably the last eight weeks really and has just been getting worse and worse and worse. (Jemima)

> Give me 50 high risk offenders rather than two really difficult members of staff! It's like, oh my god. It's draining. It's draining. (Frank SPO)

However, there are times where SPOs recognise the emotional needs of frontline staff and accept resistance to emotional 'control' needs to take place:

> I think when people are angry, in general what I've allowed them to be is angry. You can't rob the genuineness of somebody's emotion…if somebody comes in that is really angry I saying, okay, calm down, have a glass of water is not really going to get you the result that you want to achieve and so you have to kind of understand and ask the right questions to understand why they're feeling the emotions that they're feeling without asking a question that's going to trigger or exacerbate and that is a really nuanced set of skills. (Eugene)

Senior probation officers are expected to possess the emotional skills to help frontline staff cope with difficult emotional situations. To react appropriately to emotional displays

such as anger, Eugene understands agility is required in his performance of emotional labour. Central to this is knowing and understanding the workers you manage and modifying the emotional labour performed to allow staff to display those emotions but still manage them successfully so that staff feel 'calm, appreciated and inspired' (Goleman, 2006: 277).

Emotional resistance by SPOs

Senior probation officers are expected to manage their emotions using surface and deep acting. However, there are times where SPOs described situations where they displayed their own unregulated genuine emotions. Described as 'emotional deviance', this can occur where a worker ignores organisational display rules and expresses unprescribed genuine emotions (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1989; Thoits, 1990). For example:

> I said to the deputy head the other day, I says look, all my staff have been in every single week and you're complaining because we want to close the office because it's snowing? So I mean sometimes I get annoyed about it, and I make it clear I'm annoyed. (Mia)

Mia recognises her annoyance should be suppressed, but she engages in emotional deviance and 'makes it clear' she is annoyed. The way Mia describes the exchange with the deputy head highlights the tension she feels as a frontline manager to protect and develop her staff but also to manage them. Admittedly, the emotional resistance Mia engages in is strategically presented as she displays annoyance at a less pivotal direction from the organisation, but the emotional deviance is present, nonetheless.

The emotional deviance described by Mia is directed towards senior management. However, there were times when SPOs talked about engaging in emotional deviance about organisational policy in front of frontline staff:

> I wouldn't let it go to the point where I was unprofessional or anything if that makes sense but if things are annoying me, I'm not afraid to say, yeah, I think these decisions are utterly ridiculous but how can we make it work best for us? Because there is a professional way of using your frustration to acknowledge where you're at but find a solution to how in practice you can make it work best for you. (Eugene)

Eugene's emotional deviance conveys to those he supervises genuine frustration at decisions made at a senior level. In our study of frontline practitioners, we (Westaby et al., 2021) show how frustration is displayed to demonstrate honesty and integrity to clients and we observe similar behaviour here with the display of authentic emotions reflecting a 'street cop' mentality (Reuss-Ianni, 1983) to show solidarity with frontline staff. Interestingly, the emotional resistance Eugene displays is inherently managerial in focus. He understands the importance of utilising the rapport he has developed with frontline staff – gained through emotional deviance – to 'control' their emotional responses to the demanding organisational policy. This demonstrates the tension faced by SPOs between their role as developer and manager, and the need to be 'emotionally nimble'.

> you're a little bit of everything; you're a manager, confidante, enforcer of process and performance management as well as trying to support and develop people as much as you can, and you have to be emotionally nimble to be able to do that I think. And with honesty and openness - the way that I was able to, manipulate is not really the right word, but the way in which I present and manage myself allows other people to have trust and honesty in return with me. (Eugene)

Eugene recognises the emotionally complex and dynamic position occupied by SPOs. A position that requires him to skilfully engage in emotional labour, alternating between different – and often competing - role expectations to fulfil the emotional expectations of both senior management and the frontline staff he supervises.

Discussion and conclusion

This article makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the challenges SPOs face in the probation service in England and Wales. The consideration of 'control' and resistance both by and of SPOs through the lens of emotional labour provides a rich understanding of the demanding emotional expectations place on them as frontline managers. SPOs find it necessary to skilfully fulfil their varied and ever-expanding responsibilities. It also highlights the tension between their role as developer and manager, in the context of increasingly managerial demands. Our analysis also sheds light on the nature of probation work and how emotions are appropriated for the ends of criminal justice. There are some limitations to this study, most notably that the sample was self-selecting, and so may be skewed towards those people were keen to discuss the emotional labour they performed as SPOs. As referenced in the methods section above, there were several people who initially indicated in the survey that they were willing to be interviewed. This may be a result of the delay between survey completion and interviews (due to the COVID pandemic), their circumstances changed, and they did not respond. Nonetheless, it means that our sample is not representative of the SPO population and so our findings need to be understood in that context.

Their position in the PS means SPOs are required to be 'emotionally nimble' (Eugene SPO Generic), skilful in the art of emotional labour knowing when and how to 'control' theirs and other's emotions. In doing so, it is clear that SPOs are:

> required to produce a more complex and varied species of emotional labour than is often required in the service industry… This reflects the greater variety of issues faced by leaders and the greater variety of leadership work required to deal with them. (Iszatt-White, 2009: 448)

Given the emotional skill required by frontline managers in the PS to fulfil their role, it is important to recognise the value in having experienced senior staff in the SPO role and to understand that the way in which these emotional skills are best learned is through experience. It also prompts questions around the suitability or otherwise of engaging SPO and senior managers from outside probation practice.

The need to engage in complex and varied emotional labour, with emotional display expectations that, at times, conflict with the underlying values and identity of SPOs can be traced back to the shift in focus of probation practice and its effect on how staff should be managed. SPOs were originally employed as senior practitioners whose role was to advise and encourage those less experienced than themselves. However, from the late 1970s onwards, the move from a predominantly welfarist to a neo-liberal ideology resulted in 'reduced social welfare, the intensification of punishment, and the increasing market-isation and re-regulation of criminal justice agencies to free market principles' (Walker et al., 2019: 118). In probation, this brought about an increased focus on targets and accountability, cost effectiveness and risk management which led to SPOs taking on an increasingly managerial role.

The congested space which SPOs occupy means they are caught in the middle of organisational demands and staff pressures (Coley, 2020). This requires SPOs to 'control' their own emotions and the emotions of those they supervise. In an illustration of what display rules are at play in probation, we have also shown that the suppression of un-desirable emotions is not enough. SPOs are expected to circulate directions from senior management in 'a way that gets the team on board' (Brianna SPO Generic). SPOs are an emotional buffer between senior management and frontline staff. Organisational policy – which is uncompromisingly direct – means SPOs are required to use various emotional labour techniques to sanitise directives and persuade frontline staff to accept them. The way in which the organisational hierarchy has developed, places increased pressure on SPOs to perform emotional labour in a way that creates conflict between their different job roles. Consequently, it is noteworthy to consider the emotional toll this has on SPOs and how this might be alleviated by thinking about how organisational policy is presented by senior management. The increasingly managerial nature of probation work – a sharper focus on enforcement, punishment and risk management and public protection – com-bined with the expectation to maintain the senior practitioner role results in tension for SPOs which can only be managed through surface acting. While surface acting ensures SPOs present requisite emotional displays there is a price to pay in the form of negative consequences such as burnout and role overload (Tolich, 1993; Wharton, 1993; Wharton and Erickson, 1993). We can see here glimpses of the emotional burden placed on SPOs raising questions about the scope of the SPO role and the demands it places on them.

Deep acting is one way of reducing the potentially negative consequences of being emotionally 'controlled' but SPOs must still invest themselves emotionally in the work they do. Being frontline managers means SPOs can understand the job role of frontline practitioners and the challenging situations they find themselves in. SPOs are therefore well-placed to provide the organisation with a human face of management and be pivotal in the provision of support for the well-being of practitioners. However, this aspect of the SPO role means tapping into their own experiences as frontline practitioners and pri-oritising an identity akin to Reuss-Ianni's (1983) 'street cop'. The resultant 'sanitisation' of organisational messages inevitably puts pressure on SPOs to manage these identities or risk negative consequences. It must also be borne in mind that in this context SPOs are positioned in the organisation as 'vital and loyal lynchpins' (Dudau and Brunetto, 2020) between senior management and frontline workers and can create or destroy value in the

public service provided by the PS where it does not conform to their own underpinning values. The benefits of value congruence underpinning professional leadership (Iszatt-White, 2009) leads to less emotional dissonance and the negative consequences highlighted above and this represents an area for future research focused on authentic leadership and emotional labour to shed much needed light on the role and identity of SPOs.

Our analysis sheds light not only on the role of the SPO in England and Wales but also on the PS itself. The probation service has become increasingly managerial in recent decades (along with myriad other public sector institutions) and the experiences of SPOs serves to underline how this is manifesting *on the ground.* That SPOs are responsible for performance management as well as developing practice and supporting staff, demonstrating the influence of 30 years of new public management and the challenges this brings to a staff group which is and remains value driven (Grant, 2016).

Ultimately, our analysis points to the demands of high workloads which are currently endemic across probation in England and Wales for both practitioners and SPOs. Whilst the impact of this on the quality of probation practice is recognised by HMI Probation (2020), it is clear from our research that high workloads present similar issues for frontline managers. There are – it would seem – significant risks to SPO well-being that have their roots in the tensions that exist in the SPO role and the emotional labour that is demanded from them. One solution here would be to introduce a clearer definition of the SPO role and reduce the amount of work they do. Another solution may be the introduction of a senior practitioner role which is often seen in the context of social work. This would have the effect of improving the amount and quality of support they can provide to frontline practitioners and, in turn, improve the quality of work done with people on probation.

SPOs find themselves stuck in the middle of an organisation which itself is dealing with high workloads, difficulties in recruitment and retention and questions over its legitimacy amongst the media and general public. However, SPOs play a crucial role in holding the two ends of the organisation together by being the link between what the organisation is trying to do, and the frontline workers who are responsible for putting policy into practice. Our research highlights the need for the probation service to do more to support SPOs as they navigate the 'intrepid path' between being held to account by senior managers, protecting the public, supporting staff and helping people on probation to desist from offending.

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Notes

1. Given the potential connotations in probation practice to the word 'control' – for example, coercive control – it is important to highlight that in this context the word is more appropriately likened to emotional management of SPOs as well as the staff they supervise. Therefore, while we use the word 'control' in the article, to distinguish it from other interpretations of control the term will be placed in speech marks.
2. Data on the gender breakdown of SPOs specifically are not available.

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