

‘A nice idea but.....’: Implementing a reflective supervision model in the National Probation Service in England and Wales.

AINSLIE, Samantha <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2908-9910>>, FOWLER, Andrew <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0164-9915>>, PHILLIPS, Jake <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7606-6423>> and WESTABY, Chalen <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6459-4675>>

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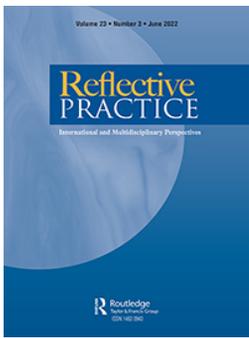
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Sam Ainslie, Andrew Fowler, Jake Phillips & Chalen Westaby

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'A nice idea but....': Implementing a reflective supervision model in the National Probation Service in England and Wales

Sam Ainslie , Andrew Fowler , Jake Phillips  and Chalen Westaby 

Department of Law and Criminology, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK

ABSTRACT

Despite significant research and literature relating to the role of critically reflective practice and staff supervision in 'helping professions', there has been less attention given to probation practice. This article addresses this gap by presenting the findings from a study that explores the implementation of a reflective model of staff supervision in the National Probation Service. Utilising a mixed-methods research design including a survey and semi-structured interviews with managers and front-line practitioners, the study sheds light on probation staff's experience of reflective supervision and manager perspectives of implementing the model. Overall, we find that probation staff are supportive of the ethos and underpinning principles of the reflective supervision model. However, our participants raised important barriers to implementation, most notably a lack of time and perceived tension between the managerial and developmental aspects of the supervisor role. We conclude by arguing that the Probation Service needs to address these barriers to enable reflective supervision to realise its potential to protect practitioner emotional well-being, support positive outcomes for individuals subject to probation intervention and develop practitioner professionalism, empowerment, and autonomy.

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Introduction

The Probation Service in England and Wales aims to reduce reoffending, protect the public from harm and deliver rehabilitation to individuals sentenced to custodial and community sentences (230, 578 individuals were subject to probation intervention as of 30 June 2021 (Ministry of Justice (MOJ), 2021)). Probation practitioners are predominantly based in community settings, however there are a significant number who work in specialist roles within courts and prisons or as part of specialist multi-agency teams. The history of the organisation is complex and beyond the scope of this article, but it is pertinent to note its roots within social work practice and the lengthy commitment of the profession to reflective practice (Worrall & Mawby, 2013). In 2014 probation was subject to monumental organisational change because of part-privatisation that drew significant criticism for its adverse impact on service-users and staff (Anison, 2019; National Audit

CONTACT Sam Ainslie  sam.ainslie@shu.ac.uk  Department of Law and Criminology, Sheffield Hallam University, Heart of the Campus, Sheffield S10 2BQ, UK

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Office (NAO), 2019; Phillips et al., 2016; Tidmarsh, 2020a). The research underpinning this article was undertaken across 2020–2021 in the National Probation Service (NPS) which, primarily, held responsibility for the management of people assessed as posing a high risk of harm. Since June 2021, probation services have commenced a period of unification following this failed attempt at privatization and staff are now experiencing a further period of upheaval that sees practitioners from the privately owned Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) rejoining the public sector. Debates continue about high workloads (HM Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP), 2020a), practitioner wellbeing (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2021) and plans to introduce a professional register for probation practitioners (Centre for Justice Innovation (CJI), 2020) all pertinent issues in the context of reflective practice.

In contrast to this tumult, a consistent feature of probation practice is the contact probation staff have with stigmatized groups and the support they offer to people who have caused harm. As a result, probation work has previously been described by Worrall and Mawby (2013, p. 115) as ‘dirty work’ because ‘it is regarded by the media and the public more generally as a socially tainted occupation’. Elsewhere Phillips et al. (2021a) have argued probation could be understood as ‘emotional dirty work’; that is work done by people ‘who manage the burdensome and disruptive emotions of others’ (McMurray & Ward, 2014, p. 1140). Such work is outsourced by society and can result in practitioners feeling emotionally tainted by the work they do (Phillips et al., 2021a). It is within this context of probation work that we consider the importance of staff supervision, critical reflection, and managing the emotional burden of practice.

The role of staff supervision in the helping professions

Despite a history of change and reorganisation that favours targets and enforcement processes, probation remains at its core a ‘helping profession’ (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012) where the practice landscape is characterised by emotionally complex and challenging interactions (Tidmarsh, 2020b). Accordingly, staff supervision (provided by Senior Probation Officers (SPOs) as part of their role as operational managers) is a critical component of professional probation practice but one with contestable purpose and processes. Within the literature relating to staff supervision in helping professions (dominated by social work, nursing and teaching) debates concentrate on the functions of staff supervision. Literature emphasises the role of supervision in practitioner development (Proctor, 1991; Ruch, 2009), and highlights the mediation function within supervision (Morrison, 2007) and the ways in which the process can contribute to the development of strong professional identity (Saltiel, 2017) by virtue of supervisors conveying the mission and values of the organisation (Tsui, 2005).

Conceptualisations of the purpose of staff supervision centre on two main foci; accountability and risk management imperatives or practitioner well-being and recognition of the emotional demands of practice which will vary across professional contexts. In considering the former, Peach et al. (2007) argue the public will not tolerate mistakes from public services and therefore the sole purpose of staff supervision becomes risk elimination through micro-management and surveillance of practitioners. Likewise, Beddoe (2010) posits that the development of supervision in social work is attributable to the rise of the ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1992) which promotes surveillance of professional practice.

Supervision within this context is synonymous with ‘professional practice’ due to the explicit linking of supervision with quality and accountability. The perceived ability of staff supervision to assure quality practice has been further strengthened by inclusion within high profile reviews following serious incidents such as the death of Victoria Climbié or the further serious offending of Joseph McCann where a lack of staff supervision was argued to have resulted in inadequate practice. Subsequently, staff supervision is identified as having an important role in promoting safe and positive social work and probation practice (Ferguson, 2005; HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2020b; Ruch, 2007).

Despite this, research shows ‘helping’ professionals reject and resist the surveillance role for supervision, instead insisting that supervision needs to support the maintenance of a reflective space as crucial for effective practice (Beddoe, 2010). Within nursing, concentrating on risk is argued to stifle professional growth and has been equated with a pervasive exercise of organisational power (Gilbert, 2001). By contrast, good supervision can assist in managing emotions and uncertainty by providing a ‘quiet reflective space’ which protects against the ‘specter of disaster’ (Beddoe, 2010, p. 1283) that looms heavy in the ‘swampy lowlands’ (Schon, 1983, p. 55) of the helping professions landscape. In this context, supervision can be viewed as replenishing (Tsang, 2006) and a potential site for rekindling hopefulness within practitioners (Stanford, 2008), where the emotional toll of practice can be ‘survived, reflected and learned from’ (Hawkins and Shohet, 2012, p. 3). The provision of a safe reflective space to explore the emotional burden of practice situations protects against unconscious emotional drivers impacting on decision-making (Ingram, 2015) and resultant potentially adverse outcomes for service-users. In probation work this could be enforcement action resulting in a return to prison or increased restrictions on liberty in the community in the form of exclusion zones, prohibited contact with named individuals or curfews.

Staff supervision and reflective practice in probation

Given the diverse purpose and functions of supervision within helping professions, it is unsurprising that tensions become apparent with respect to the supervisor role (Hawkins and Shohet, 2012; Ingram, 2015). Whilst probation-specific literature relating to the managerial role is limited, Williamson (1978, as cited in Coley, 2020) noted that probation officers held multiple expectations of their managers including the provision of advice and support alongside sharing of insight, oversight of practice, and facilitator of ongoing development. Likewise, Boswell (1986) previously commented on this role-conflict and the need for clarity to support SPOs navigate the inherent tensions in the complex task of supervising practitioners.

A snapshot of supervision history in probation (see, Coley, 2020) provides the context for our research and highlights the relative lack of attention within probation literature from the 1980s onwards until Rex and Hosking (2013) promoted the implementation of a new framework; Skills for Effective Engagement, Development, and Supervision (SEEDS). Primarily a practice skills framework aimed at improving engagement with probation service-users, the model emphasised the importance of reflective staff supervision, observations of practice and provision of developmental feedback. Embedding the SEEDS model was however disrupted by the part-privatisation of probation services in 2014 but research suggested that staff feedback was favourable (Sorsby et al., 2013).

More recently, research into probation staff supervision has focused on specific probation contexts including private providers (Coley, 2020) and the Offender Personality Disorder Pathway (Webster et al., 2020). These studies show space for reflection is valued by practitioners and seen as a tool for professional development and relieving the pressures and emotional demands of probation work. Critical reflection is recognised as an integral component of probation occupational culture (Worrall & Mawby, 2013) that is embedded firmly within professional education and training (Gregory, 2007) in recognition of its centrality to effective practice (Goldhill, 2010). Despite significant changes to probation training, developing critically reflective practitioners remains a priority for educators (Ainslie, 2020) but there is a concomitant responsibility for The Probation Service to ensure the necessary 'personalised structures' exist to 'sustain a critical emphasis' post-qualification (Goldhill, 2010, p. 37).

Increased recognition of the 'relentless' nature of probation practice (Phillips et al., 2016), the emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) performed and the potential impact on staff wellbeing resulting from the high levels of surface acting (hiding true feelings about situations and people encountered at work) undertaken by practitioners (Westaby et al., 2020) has contributed to the development of a revised supervision framework within the NPS. In other criminal justice professions, such as prisons and policing, surface acting is shown to contribute to higher levels of burnout among workers (Black & Lumsden, 2020; Nylander et al., 2011) and lends further weight to the argument that supervision that provides adequate space for reflection can help to ameliorate the emotional burdens of probation practice and subsequently improve practitioner wellbeing and thereby positive outcomes for the service-users they support.

Building on the learning from the original SEEDS framework and considering the developing evidence base related to the emotional demands of practice, the NPS developed the Reflective Practice Supervision Standards (RPSS) and a revised package of training for SPOs. These sit within the SEEDS2 framework which, commencing in 2018, sought to reintroduce the centrality of service-user engagement and support practitioner development. The RPSS explicitly aims to support practitioners with the emotional toll of probation practice by providing structured supervision, which is reflective and developmental in nature. The standards require supervisors to provide six reflective practice sessions per year (focused on case discussions that are reflective as opposed to managerial in perspective), two performance and development review sessions and practice observations followed by reflective discussion and provision of developmental feedback. Supervisors were trained over 3 days (with around 3 weeks between each day) focusing on the RPSS and a series of techniques for supporting staff. Given this significant investment in supervisors and attempt to shift supervisory practice within a large organisation, the NPS approached the research team to conduct an independent piece of research to explore how the RPSS had been implemented and received by practitioners and their supervisors (see Westaby et al., 2021).

Methods

In light of the above review of the literature and policy context, the aims of our research were to understand:

- SPO experiences of implementing the new model of supervision;
- How practitioners had experienced the new model of supervision;
- Whether the new supervision standards had an impact on staff well-being and the ability to work with people serving probation sentences effectively and safely.

A mixed-methods approach was used to obtain a breadth of views and experiences. We began the study in March 2020 with a survey (comprised of quantitative and qualitative questions) administered via Qualtrics which asked SPOs and practitioners (probation officers, probation service officers and trainees) about their experiences of supervision, the new framework and, for SPOs, the training they had undertaken. Survey respondents were asked if they would be willing to be interviewed and volunteers were then invited at random to participate in a semi-structured interview designed to explore their experiences in greater depth. Due to COVID restrictions, the interviews were conducted remotely using telephone or video conferencing technology and took place in early 2021. The interviews (lasting between 45 and 90 minutes) focused on people's experiences of supervision prior to and after the implementation of the RPSS as well as broader questions about emotional labour and professional curiosity. In this article we have deliberately chosen to focus on the interview data and incorporate a substantial number of quotes to give our participants a clear voice.

Ethical approval was provided by the research team's institution and participant access approved by Her Majesty's Prisons and Probation Service (HMPPS). Participants provided informed consent in writing and were made aware of confidentiality and anonymity as well as the option to withdraw from the research up until a specified date.

We interviewed 61 people: 33 front-line practitioners and 28 SPOs or managers. Participants were from a diverse range of NPS geographical divisions and operations including community case management, courts, victim liaison units, prisons, and approved premises. Forty-three interviewees were female and 18 were male, broadly reflecting the gender makeup of the wider service. Interview data were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using four sensitising concepts: perceptions and experiences of supervision; experiences of the SPO training; experiences of implementing the RPSS and perceptions of SEEDS2 and RPSS. The authors each took responsibility for coding in accordance with one of these concepts with later review by the team to ensure consistency. The inclusion of researchers with 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. This article draws upon the qualitative data relating to practitioner and manager perceptions and experiences of reflective supervision and implementation of the RPSS.

Before proceeding to the findings, it is worth briefly noting the implications of the coronavirus pandemic on this study. Data collection was paused due to the lockdown in March 2020 resulting in a delay between the completion of the survey and the follow-up interviews. The pandemic had a severe impact on the rollout of the RPSS as it interrupted training that was already underway, meaning new SPOs could not access the training. It also delayed the implementation of the next phase of training targeting front-line practitioners and altered the way staff supervision (and probation practice) were delivered with a move to largely remote and online working for most probation staff (Phillips et al., 2021a).

Findings and discussion

Overall, our participants were largely positive about the introduction of a reflective supervision model, recognising the benefits for managing the complex emotional demands of practice. Despite this, significant barriers to implementation were highlighted, resulting in a sense that the RPSS are 'a nice idea' but failing to reach their full potential to support practitioners and benefit people under supervision. We now move on to present the themes generated by our analysis.

The potential of reflective supervision

Supervisors *and* supervisees talked to us about the importance of reflection within the new approach to supervision. Reflection was viewed as a positive tool to collaboratively work through challenging cases whilst providing support and building professional autonomy:

I think the sense that one takes or that I certainly had from it was about that sort of supporting aspect to it and enabling staff to work through their knotty cases and to feel supported in doing that. (Eugene, supervisor¹)

I think it was trying to allow us to step back a little bit and become more - or allow our staff to become more reflective of their own practice and we were becoming enablers rather than managers. (Sutton, supervisor)

Participants recognised the need for technical and practical reflective discussions (Ruch, 2009) that supported exploration of 'what' had occurred in practice (and what could be changed) alongside contemplation of the 'why' to develop self-awareness. Supervisors frequently described the 'push-pull' model they had encountered during the RPSS training as helpful for developing reflection and empowerment in staff.

So I guess the first thing was to try and be more reflective with people, so what we get a lot of, is people wanting an answer very quickly and so all of the thinking is done by me or my colleague or whoever ... so what I thought I would try and do is those people who are a bigger demand on me as a resource, to try and get them to do more thinking for themselves by not doing it for them. (Amber, supervisor)

Pragmatically, encouraging practitioners to reflect may reduce the workload of SPOs in the longer-term by increasing staff autonomy, something we recommend the organisation promotes more visibly to support implementation given the ongoing context of high workload demands. More fundamentally, supervisors do perceive this model of reflection favourably and appreciate how it can improve staff skills and confidence around decision-making. As such, reflective supervision can be seen as an enabler for decision-making that is defensible as opposed to defensive and inhibited in nature (Eadie et al., 2013).

The emotional content of supervision

Our discussions with participants highlighted the importance of reflective supervision in addressing the emotional demands that probation practice places upon staff and the resultant impact on their own wellbeing:

... if I hadn't had those structured supervisions, I wouldn't have realised how hard it is what we do and that she was feeling a bit overwhelmed when managing self-harmers and people that tried to commit suicide so that helped me understanding

that it is important to check with them quite often to understand the challenges they're facing as well on a personal basis when managing the cases. (Yasmine, supervisor)

Because the one thing that I do like [about RPSS] is that it acknowledges my emotions. (Charmaine, practitioner)

A separate strand of our research study has shown that, despite being a key competency for practitioners, emotional awareness in others is a significant contributory factor in probation practitioner burnout (Phillips, 2021b). Practitioners and supervisors perform high levels of emotional labour, and this takes its toll emotionally. However, our research also shows emotional self-awareness can act as a protective factor for burnout and therefore reflective ability and emotional literacy (Knight, 2014) are significant competencies to enhance via a model of reflective supervision.

Probation practitioners have substantial power that, when deployed, can impact on the human rights of the individuals they supervise (Canton & Dominey, 2018). Therefore, they need to be able to identify the potential for unconscious bias and negative emotions to impact on their decision making. Alongside this, practitioners need to empathise and hold hope in the face of substantial structural barriers impacting the desistance prospects of their service-users (McNeill, 2009). Ultimately, 'without reflective practice the essence of probation work with offenders is lost' (Goldhill, 2010, p. 70) as, to use the professional relationship as a vehicle for change, practitioners require the capacity to handle their own emotions as well as the emotions of others (Ingram, 2013a). Reflective supervision provides a means to expose emotional drivers with the potential to influence decision making and limit the opportunity for avoiding feelings 'too deep and dangerous to confront' (Morrison, 2007, p. 257). Collaborative and emotionally intelligent supervision (Ingram, 2015) as per the RPSS can become a site to develop the 'emotional-cognitive muscle' that is 'reflective capacity' (Hawkins and Shohet, 2012, p18) whilst simultaneously supporting practitioner development of the reflective language required for introspection (Coulson & Harvey, 2013). However, to realise their reflective potential, practitioners need managers who embrace the importance of emotionally literate practitioners and organisations open to learning (Ruch, 2009).

Debating the purpose of supervision

A key finding in our analysis is the ongoing dilemma faced by probation supervisors in respect of the purpose of staff supervision. The contested nature of supervision could be both a barrier (due to a lack of clarity for staff) or an enabler if it promotes a reflexive approach. Responses illustrated however, the perceived tensions of delivering developmental supervision alongside the pressure to scrutinise practice with a view to minimising the risks of critical incidents with the potential to be construed as the organisation failing to keep the public safe from serious offending behaviour. Such tensions align to the ongoing debate about the nature of modern probation practice and its position on the care-control continuum:

It's balancing the staff development against the accountability which is a real challenge that because as senior probation officers you are expected to ensure that certain pieces of work are completed unfortunately I guess the probation service has a culture of responsibility

and accountability so if somebody commits a serious further offence, that's looked in to and people feel responsible for that individual's behaviour when they're not but they do carry a sense of responsibility. (Harvey, supervisor)

This tension, and ultimately the prioritisation of risk management imperatives, led some supervisors to feel that space for reflective supervision was squeezed out due to a lack of time and space within routine practice.

Then obviously in terms of the framework you've got to think as well about other issues that you deal with as an SPO. You're looking at performance issues. You're looking at - you may be dealing with absence management, you may be working with people through performance management, there may be action plans in place that have resulted from things like serious further offences so there's lots of different elements that you're trying to manage, and you can't quite fit that all into reflective supervision. (Zara, supervisor)

Supervisors seemingly struggle to balance these competing supervisory demands and feel torn between the underpinning ethos of the RPSS to develop staff and the accountability agenda that promotes process driven managerial oversight of practice:

There's a real tension there and I think the difficulty as an SPO is you get both those messages. So we have to put management oversights on our offender managers and their cases when we've had those discussions, but the idea of SEEDS is that you don't micromanage and actually staff get that feeling of empowerment to make their own decisions but then we're held to account if we haven't put that oversight on. That creates pressure for us, so we're promoting one thing but we're being told another. (Brianna, supervisor)

As such, our research in the public-sector NPS echoes Coley's (2020) research in private probation providers where supervision is a disputed and congested space. The tension between the managerialist and developmental functions of supervision risk compromising the provision of a safe space within which practitioners can reflect on practice and discuss emotions (Ingram, 2015). This lack of clarity in how the Probation Service views supervision therefore threatens the successful implementation of its RPSS. One aim of critical reflection is to transform practice (Thompson & Thompson, 2018). If Probation continues to commit to a reflective model of supervision whilst simultaneously conceptualising supervision in surveillance terms, there is the risk that this transformation fails to transpire.

The RPSS and related training for SPOs represent an organisational commitment to provide reflective supervision to support practitioner development. Despite this, our supervisor participants clearly felt under pressure to deliver the new form of supervision whilst simultaneously continuing to provide high levels of practice oversight. As such, Probation is falling into a trap recognised by Mann and Walsh (2013), of purporting to facilitate the development of reflective practice whilst restricting the opportunities for authentic reflection and learning due to institutionally imposed constraints.

Barriers to implementation

Most of our participants were supportive of the ethos and underpinning principles of the reflective supervision model but they also raised important barriers to implementation. Many felt the RPSS was an ideal beyond their ability to achieve in the reality of everyday practice due to a lack of adequate time.

I like that it's a lot more reflective. I think there's meant to be more time given to supervision including observation and that sort of thing. I think it is a bit of an idea, SEEDs, and I think that everyone's on board with it, everyone likes it and it's very popular, but I think the reality of it is that it hasn't really been adopted into our working practice. (Nikki, practitioner)

Previous research recognised a lack of time and dedicated space as a barrier to reflective practice (Goldhill, 2010) and the dangers of policy makers falling into the trap of 'rationality mistakes' that fail to take sufficient account of constraints faced by practitioners (Eadie et al., 2013). Pivotal factors determining the quality of supervision in helping professions include the pressure of time, the nature of supervision paperwork and skills of the supervisor resulting in variability in the interpretation and execution of supervision (Ingram, 2015). All these issues were raised by our participants:

So there is a massive culture not to reflect, and there is a massive culture not to go under when you're under pressure, and this massive culture of I'm going to let my colleagues down if I go off sick, and so they work shocking hours with ridiculous caseloads and are worn to a thread and within that they make errors. Nobody cannot make errors. (Dionne, practitioner)

Given the ongoing risk management imperatives espoused by Probation, the organisation needs to be mindful that a failure to provide space to discuss emotions can have serious implications for practice (Eadie et al., 2013). Practitioners need time, space and – importantly – permission, to acknowledge when their emotional reactions promote psychological self-protection at the expense of effective risk management activity (Ferguson, 2005).

The interpersonal dynamic between supervisors and supervisees was also key to the permissions about the content and focus of supervision and therefore, 'who' was delivering supervision, was for many, more important than the process itself. This led to difficulties for practitioners in identifying whether the RPSS had resulted in a tangible change to their supervisory experience:

I think my experience of being supervised in probation has been hit and miss because some managers are better than others at doing supervision (Jemima, supervisor)

I trusted in the relationship so I trusted that whatever he told me was the case, so even when I was doubting myself I trusted that when he told me something was good or something was, you know, that's fine, you're doing well, I trusted that and I needed that but then also if he told me something that I needed to work on, I trusted in that as well. I think it all comes back to that doesn't it, in that you respect and value what he was - I respected and valued what he was telling me (Rebecca, practitioner)

The 'ecology of reflection' (Harvey et al., 2016) is therefore significant, particularly the time to build the relationships needed for supervision as well as the predisposition and capacity for reflection in both supervisor and supervisee. The capacity of supervisors to model critical reflection is significant but relatedly, occupational culture and values can impact on experiential learning capacity and our supervisors commented on the lack of a whole-organizational approach. They discussed the fact that senior leaders were neither modelling the approach nor supporting the implementation of the framework following the training:

The culture. It needs an enormous shift. Without that then nothing is going to change, and it's got to come from the top. It isn't there. (Dionne, practitioner)

Understandably the pandemic will have had an impact here, but it would be remiss to overlook the fact that similar issues were raised following the original roll-out of SEEDS (Sorsby et al., 2013). The last time Probation attempted a wholesale roll-out of a reflective model of supervision, progress was halted by part-privatisation of the service and resultant upheaval. The newly unified Probation Service will need to work hard to ensure a similar derailment does not occur in the aftermath of COVID and further reorganisation of service delivery. Ultimately, it is not sufficient to simply direct managers to implement a new supervisory framework. Both managers and practitioners need the skills, relationships, and most importantly the time to build the foundations for reflective supervision. Without this, practice can become 'habituated in certain patterns' (Hawkins and Shohet, 2012, pg.16), lending itself to reactive practice rather than thoughtful responses, connected and aligned with the deep-rooted commitment to anti-discriminatory and humane practice that characterizes the probation profession.

Conclusion

There are some limitations to this study that have been acknowledged during analysis of data. The sample was self-selecting and so may be skewed towards people who had something to say about the RPSS, emotional labour, or staff well-being. Given the unavoidable delay between survey completion and interviews, participants who had originally volunteered were not all able to participate in the interviews due to the significant changes brought about by the pandemic.

Nevertheless, the study produced rich data relating to experiences of implementing a model of reflective supervision within Probation in England and Wales and makes an important contribution to reflective practice and helping professions supervision literature.

A reflective model of supervision can support the development of the reflective language in practitioners that is a requisite for high levels of introspection, self-regulation and agency (Coulson & Harvey, 2013). Without this language, practitioners may struggle to articulate feelings resorting instead to discussing their work in technical ways due to a perceived lack of legitimacy in discussing practice in terms of feelings (Holland, 1999). The provision of a safe space within which to explore emotions can subsequently contribute to positive outcomes for individuals subject to probation intervention given the opportunity for practitioners to explore decision-making and expose bias or emotionally driven reactions. Supervision then becomes an important component of 'holistic containment' (Ruch, 2007, p. 676) that facilitates by virtue of engagement with the morally and intellectually complex issues that characterise probation work (Millar & Burke, 2012).

Greater autonomy and empowerment for practitioners is a laudable aim of the RPSS but is unlikely to be realised if there is a continued dominance of bureaucratic processes (aimed at minimising the risk of practitioners missing something) and a lack of action around improving clarity of the SPO role and reducing staff workloads. If we accept that 'internal organisational processes can transform work cultures' (Beddoe, 2010, p. 1282), a reflective model of staff supervision has the potential to transform the Probation Service into an organisation that supports practitioners in empowering individuals subject to probation intervention, and a culture where the role of emotions in practice is 'recognised, embraced and incorporated into the profile of the profession' (Ingram, 2013b, p. 1002). In the context of an ongoing global pandemic that has dramatically impacted

the delivery of probation services, and in light of recent service unification and plans for professional registration for probation officers, now is the time to stress the importance of reflective practice within probation (Ainslie, 2020). The Probation Service should reflect on the implementation of the RPSS by listening to the voices of the staff who participated in our study; a failure to do so could mean that a model of reflective supervision remains little more than just a 'nice idea'.

Note

1. Participant names have been anonymised.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Sam Ainslie is a Senior Lecturer in Criminal Justice at Sheffield Hallam University having previously worked as a probation practitioner and manager for 17 years. Sam's research interests relate to desistance from crime, reflective practice and probation training. She is currently involved in research relating to emotional labour and burnout within probation practice.

Andrew Fowler is a Senior Lecturer in Criminal Justice at Sheffield Hallam University. His research interests include emotional labour in probation practice, the role of academics in higher education and teaching probation practice. Andrew is currently conducting research into learner's experiences of the Professional Qualification in Probation and a co-produced piece of research about men's experiences following the completion of the Horizon sexual offending programme.

Jake Phillips is a Reader in Criminology at Sheffield Hallam University. His research interests primarily lie at the intersection of policy and practice in the field of probation. He has recently conducted research: people who die whilst under probation supervision, the emotional labour of probation practice and the use of community hubs to deliver probation services.

Chalen Westaby is a Senior Lecturer in Law at Sheffield Hallam University. Her research interests focus on emotional labour and emotions in the legal professions, criminal justice and criminology. Chalen is currently conducting research in emotional labour in probation practice and judges.

ORCID

Sam Ainslie  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2908-9910>

Andrew Fowler  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0164-9915>

Jake Phillips  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7606-6423>

Chalen Westaby  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6459-4675>

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