

Lifting the lid on Pandora's box: putting professional curiosity into practice

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Abstract

Professional curiosity has recently become a 'buzzword' in the field of probation and social work. However, little research has sought to understand what professional curiosity means definitionally, conceptually or operationally. In this article, we analyse interview data from 49 probation practitioners in England and Wales to explore what professional curiosity means in the context of probation and what the main barriers are to enacting professional curiosity. We argue that professional curiosity is primarily used to assess risk and that practitioners face multiple barriers to its enactment which are rarely acknowledged or dealt with in policy and practice guides. These barriers fall into three groups: structural, relational and emotional. We conclude the article by examining the findings through the lens of neo-liberalism and probation values. The article therefore extends knowledge of professional curiosity operationally while also seeking to explain its position in a neo-liberal policy context. This research has important implications for policy and practice. Rather than simply asking practitioners to ask questions and be on the lookout for disguised compliance, probation providers should recognise and acknowledge these barriers to practice.

Keywords

Criminal justice, neo-liberalism, probation, professional curiosity

Introduction

In recent years in England and Wales, practitioners in the context of probation and social work have been asked by organisations to use professional curiosity to assess risk and

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support change in the lives of the people with whom they work (Burton and Revell, 2018; Mantell and Jennings, 2016). Moreover, the term is often picked up in news articles about failures in social work and probation (see, e.g. Dearden, 2020; Lintern, 2020; Paterson, 2017) suggesting it has a certain appeal to the media and general public when it comes to explaining how and why agencies may fail to protect those in need. A lack of professional curiosity has been identified as a contributing factor in serious case reviews (which take place following the death of a child), serious further offence reviews and domestic homicide reviews (Health Notes, 2018; HMI Probation, 2020c; Home Office, 2016). A lack of professional curiosity has been identified as a factor in major failures of social policy such as the murder of Victoria Climbié in 2000 (Laming, 2003; Naqvi, 2013) and the serious further offences committed by Joseph McCann while under the supervision of the National Probation Service (Dearden, 2020; HMI Probation, 2020c; Ministry of Justice, 2020). However, there has been little academic research on professional curiosity and there is thus a lack of knowledge about how it is defined, conceptualised or operationalised. It is here where this article makes an intervention through analysis of interview data generated from interviews with 49 probation practitioners in England and Wales. In England and Wales, probation practitioners are responsible for managing people serving community sentences and supervising people after release from prison (on licence or parole). In spite of this focus, this research has implications for all areas of social policy where professional curiosity is an expectation of contemporary practice and where practitioners are expected to assess risk such as in the context of prisons and police work.

Professional curiosity is often defined in policy documentation as ‘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’ (Manchester Safeguarding Boards, n.d.). In the context of probation – the focus of this article – Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS, 2020) policy focuses on the need to be professionally curious ‘before making decisions to reduce risk, reporting levels and early revocation of orders’. Policy and practice guides ask practitioners to remain sceptical and critical, to seek evidence and corroborate information to fully understand a clients’ risks and vulnerabilities. In both probation and social work, the focus is on risk assessment and management (Phillips et al., 2021). We have previously shown that probation staff in England and Wales are more likely to provide a risk-based definition of professional curiosity when asked what the term means to them (Phillips et al., 2021). This, we argue, reflects a broader shift within probation towards risk-focused and technical approaches towards probation (Kemshall, 2019). These shifts have included a greater emphasis on instrumental rather than substantive compliance and the use of technology to automate probation work (Burke and Collett, 2010; Durnescu, 2013). Alongside this, probation services have witnessed a move towards limiting practitioner discretion – especially when it comes to enforcement decisions – with practitioners in England and Wales, the Netherlands and Sweden making decisions that serve to enhance the ‘credibility of the service’ rather than support and prioritise substantive compliance (Boone and Maguire, 2017: 110). It is perhaps, then, no surprise that a lack of professional curiosity is often cited in inspection reports and reviews which has the dual effect of limiting practitioner discretion (by dictating that risk assessment must take priority and that they should assess risk in this particular way) and holding them to account.

Within this risk-focused model of professional curiosity, emphasis is placed on identifying ‘disguised compliance’ and ‘thinking the unthinkable’. Disguised compliance is when clients (be they parents/carers or people under probation supervision) give the impression that they are complying when, in fact, they are not. Leigh et al. (2020) make the important point that while disguised compliance has become a popular term it does little more than work to blame practitioners if harm has occurred and should, in fact, be referred to as ‘undisguised nonsense’. Thinking the unthinkable, meanwhile, is a term used to encourage practitioners to think outside the box as a way of overcoming the ‘rule of optimism’ (Thacker et al., 2019) whereby staff focus solely on the positives in a client’s life rather than ‘identifying where things are not improving or risk is increasing’ (HMPPS, 2020). In social work, the rule of optimism can result in a ‘mistaken belief that the child/ren will not come to any harm’ (Revell and Burton, 2016: 1594) while in probation it results in a belief that a supervisee will not reoffend. In either case, it can be understood as a ‘psychological defensive mechanism to justify inaction or a lack of professional curiosity’ because the nature of the potential harm is either too painful to acknowledge, or because the practitioner does not want to think their client might not succeed. Professional curiosity, then, might be an ‘effective’ way of keeping people safe but it is also hard work and emotionally demanding. It might thus be expected that probation officers or social workers may have developed defences to protect themselves from the difficulties inherent to this particular technique.

Policy often acknowledges that challenges and barriers to professional curiosity exist, yet there has been little research done in this area. In their analysis of Serious Case Reviews and other relevant documentation, Thacker et al. (2019) identify three groupings of barriers: ‘case dynamics’, ‘professional issues’ and ‘organisational issues’. Case dynamics relate to the issues raised above – disguised compliance and the rule of optimism. Thus, staff need support in identifying when someone may be presenting as compliant but still posing a risk of harm and in accepting that clients may be making progress in one part of their life but still causing harm elsewhere. Professional issues relate to wanting to believe one’s client and being unable to identify when they may be being deceptive while organisational issues might be poor staff supervision and high workloads. There are also potential emotional barriers to professional curiosity. Being professionally curious while maintaining good working relations with clients is challenging because practitioners must ‘develop trust . . . while simultaneously exercising mistrust’ (Burton and Revell, 2018: 1518) and so an unwillingness to be professionally curious may be a defence mechanism against these feelings. More specifically, ‘thinking the unthinkable’ is hard work, potentially resulting in a ‘desire to disconnect from such revulsion and fear’, which becomes ‘a protective mechanism to repress “unbearable feelings”’ (Burton and Revell, 2018: 1516).

In drawing on the work of Cohen (2001), Ferguson (2005) argues that the Climbié case reveals an inability to take action in the face of an atrocity:

It is one thing to know about something, quite another to act on that knowledge. These professionals were caught in the midst of what Cohen calls ‘the dynamics of knowing and not knowing’. They were bystanders before an appalling atrocity. They knew but they didn’t know what was happening to Victoria and did nothing. (p. 785)

Professional curiosity can be understood as a tool to encourage practitioners to move from having information to taking action. Asking people to be professionally curious *may* spur action but it also fails to take sufficient account of why people may not act in the first place. Some of the barriers to action are discussed above yet there remains a dearth of empirical evidence about what factors may serve to prevent practitioners such as social workers or probation officers from acting, even when there is some evidence of risk of harm.

The way professional curiosity is being operationalised in terms of risk raises questions about how it intersects with those broader values of probation practitioners. Despite being an institution which has undergone considerable reform, research has suggested that probation practitioners' values have been particularly 'durable' (Grant, 2016). Thus, probation practitioners tend to adhere to the occupational value of believing in the ability of people to change and that is considered a key aim of their work (Annison et al., 2008). Public protection is central to what practitioners are trying to do, but they do this by helping people rather than simply managing risk through extrinsic controls (Deering, 2010). It is possible, therefore, that probation values may act as an inhibitor to being professionally curious because of the way it is focused on risk management in policy terms and this is explored further, below.

This increased emphasis on professional curiosity can be understood through the lens of neo-liberalism, a political ideology which favours a small state and prioritises the individual over collective responsibility. Many areas of social policy have experienced changes resulting from neo-liberalism and the 'austerity agenda' (Albertson et al., 2020; Fitzgibbon and Lea, 2020; Jones, 2019). In probation, this is most clearly seen in the context of the Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) reforms, a failed attempt to part privatise probation services which led to fewer staff through cuts to budgets and the reallocation of resources and services to the private sector through processes of privatisation and marketisation (see Albertson et al., 2020). As Burton and Revell (2018: 1510) argue, neo-liberalism acts as a barrier to professional curiosity because of the way it results in a blame rather than learning culture when things go wrong:

the neo-liberal rhetoric of free-market forces in which profit takes precedence and deep cuts to public spending have laid the foundations for privatisation . . . This does not create a climate conducive to encouraging curiosity, as embedding learning from Serious Case Reviews within such a hostile, reactive culture has become increasingly problematic . . . This has contributed to an organisational context which is stretched to breaking point as increasingly risk-averse, neo-liberal policies take hold.

Professional curiosity appears to thrive in institutions subjected to high levels of managerialism and privatisation (Burton and Revell, 2018). In this sense, it can be seen as the manifestation of a neo-liberal social policy arena in which risks are seen to be situated in the individual and where responsibility for managing that risk falls to individual practitioners and service users (Kemshall, 2002). Thus, we see concepts such as professional curiosity, disguised compliance and processes such as serious further offence reviews and serious case reviews being received by practitioners as finger pointing exercises rather than learning opportunities (Brandon et al., 2009; HMI Probation, 2020a; Reder

et al., 1993). Such an individualising approach within policy is problematic because a range of structural, relational and emotional barriers inhibit the ability or inclination for professionals to take action (Burton and Revell, 2018; Thacker et al., 2019).

As such, professional curiosity as risk assessment is part and parcel of a broader, and international, trend in probation which has seen a much greater emphasis on probation workers as technicians, the use of technology to manage and monitor compliance (with a concomitant emphasis on formal rather than substantive compliance) and public protection as the overarching aim of the Service. In this article, we explore this particular manifestation of neo-liberal penal policy by looking at how and to what end professional curiosity is implemented, and what barriers exist to its enactment.

Methods

The data presented in this article were generated as part of a larger study which sought to explore the emotional labour of probation practice in England and Wales. As part of the study, we were asked by the National Probation Service (NPS) to explore what professional curiosity means in the context of probation as it was being referenced increasingly in inspection reports and reviews. In March 2020, we carried out a survey which was sent by email to all probation practitioners and senior probation officers in the NPS in which we asked participants what professional curiosity meant to them. The findings of these survey data are published elsewhere (Phillips et al., 2021). As part of the survey, respondents were asked if they would be willing to partake in a follow up interview and we selected a random sample of people who expressed an interest in being interviewed and conducted interviews in early 2021. The interviews focused on emotional labour, staff well-being and staff supervision and professional curiosity. The aim of these interviews was to generate deeper and more nuanced data about what probation staff in England and Wales understand by the term, how they enact professional curiosity and what barriers exist to its enactment.

We interviewed 61 probation staff in total with our sample comprising front-line practitioners ($n=33$) and managers ($n=28$). Of these, 43 interviewees were female and 18 were male, roughly reflecting the gender makeup of the wider service. Of those 61 participants, 49 were asked specifically about professional curiosity (due to time pressures some participants did not have time to discuss this as part of the interview) and it is this corpus of data that we analyse below. Reflexive thematic analysis was carried out primarily by Phillips using the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). After this process, the remaining members of the research team read through the data to confirm and clarify the identification of themes. This process resulted in us identifying one theme around what professional curiosity is and what practitioners aim to achieve by being professionally curious and three themes concerning the main barriers to its enactment. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee at Sheffield Hallam University and received HMPPS National Research Committee approval. Although the research posed minimal risk of harm to participants, all interviewees were informed in advance about the content of the interview and given the option to withdraw at any point. All interviews were carried out online using MS Teams and recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Findings

In our survey analysis, we found that a risk-focused model rather than therapeutic or educational model of professional curiosity had been adopted in probation in England and Wales (Phillips et al., 2021). This is unsurprising considering the main aim of the Probation Service is the ‘supervision of offenders released into the community, while protecting the public’ (Gov.uk). In order to assess the extent to which our interview data confirmed our survey data, we initially sought to explore what probation staff understand to be the aims of professional curiosity before analysing the data to identify barriers to its enactment.

What is professional curiosity?

The majority of our participants (n=41) were able to provide a definition of professional curiosity which loosely matched definitions found in the literature. Of the eight participants who said they did not know what professional curiosity was, seven were either residential workers or probation services officers (PSOs). This group of staff do not have a professional or degree level qualification in probation (although PSOs do undertake a vocational qualification as part of their training) indicating a possible training need. It was also the case that most respondents understood that professional curiosity is an important policy development. Thus, Toby (SPO)¹ told us that it is ‘the new buzzword in probation’ and others stressed that it is a critical skill needed by probation staff:

It’s absolutely key to the job. It is one of the fundamental skills that you need to be a good probation officer. (Abby PO Generic)

. . . I don’t know how you do your job without professional curiosity. I really don’t know because for me that is one of the keys – I don’t know how to sum it up. (Nadia SPO)

This speaks to the argument that – as in social work – there has been a focus on asking practitioners to enact professional curiosity (Revell and Burton, 2016). In terms of what professional curiosity is, the most common response suggested it is a way of practitioners making sure that they do not take things at face value:

. . . healthy suspicion . . . It’s like a critical friend. (Andrew PO DSOU)

It’s not taking things at face value and it’s exploring things and looking at situations. (Brendan PO Prison)

But asking more in order to sort of unpick it and pad it out a bit, so that you haven’t just got a patch, you’ve got an entire patch blanket. (Charmaine PO Generic)

At its most basic level, professional curiosity for our practitioners was about asking questions and ‘being nosy. It’s dead simple. Nosy. Leave no stone unturned’ (Janice PO Generic). Other participants made a connection between professional curiosity and Socratic questioning:

Well basically with Socratic you don't take anything at face value, and you constructively use open and closed questions and so it is digging down through the layers. When an offender gives you an answer to something, okay, well let's get a little bit further down there, tell me a little bit more. How is it going at the moment? 'It's shit, isn't it' okay, tell me a little bit more about shit . . . (Henry PSO Court)

We asked people what they felt was the aim of professional curiosity. Although we received a mixture of answers to this question (some participants suggested that this approach – asking questions – can demonstrate an interest in service users and helps build the professional relationship) the majority of our participants framed their use of professional curiosity almost exclusively in terms of risk assessment:

Even if you think they're telling the truth, you never take their word for it and you always check and dig further and ask those questions, even if they're uncomfortable. Yeah, I think that's absolutely key to the investigative side of probation which is just as important as the therapeutic side. (Abby PO Generic)

Interviewer: So why do you need to know all that?

Participant: It's all related to risk isn't it. (Caitlyn PO Prison)

For me it's around risk management and public protection ultimately. (Nadia SPO)

Professional curiosity, then, is an important tool for probation officers and the way they assess risk. Importantly, it points to the way in which risk assessment might be understood as the service's *raison d'être* as well as the need for risk assessment to draw on a range of sources of evidence to protect the public (Kemshall, 1998; Kemshall and Maguire, 2001).

Structural barriers to professional curiosity

There remains scant evidence on what barriers exist in terms of being professionally curious. Our initial question about professional curiosity often led – without prompting – to a discussion about the barriers to being professionally curious. It was clear that our participants did not find professional curiosity easy, even though they considered it a key skill. Indeed, as we see below, being professional curiosity raised a range of emotions such as anxiety and fear which act as barriers to its enactment. However, by far the most common and immediate perceived barrier was a lack of time. This is perhaps unsurprising in a service which has long been under-staffed and under-resourced (HMI Probation, 2020b):

Yes, I think time gets in the way, issues around trust and paranoia get in the way. (Charmaine, PO Generic)

I think officers don't have that head space so they are given a bit of information which is accepted and they're almost on to their next interview in their head whilst they're in that one. (Harvey, Senior Manager)

This is not only about having time on a day-to-day basis. Our participants said they need time to get to know service users so that they would know what questions to ask, they need time to interpret the answers and synthesise the knowledge gained from asking questions and they need time to act on the answers:

Henry: we dig down through the sand and eventually we come to a lid marked 'Pandora's box' and we are reluctant to open the box.

Researcher: Why might we be reluctant to open the box?

Henry: When we open that box are we professionally or personally equipped to deal with what might come out of it, have we got the time, and more importantly I think because I think if you do this job, what I think you want to do is actually let the uglies out and have a look at them, but if I do that then this is going to impact significantly on my time resource. So for example, for me I might either consciously or subconsciously, not actually probe too much further because of the time constraints. (Henry PSO Court)

Participants said they also needed time to develop the skills and experience to be professionally curious (see also Burton and Revell, 2018), without which it is hard to know what questions to ask supervisees, nor how to ask them:

I think when you start as a practitioner you're very naïve and you want to believe everything that the prisoners tell you and it takes time for you to realise that they will give you what's best or what they really want to give you. (Yasmine SPO)

We haven't helped them to build that ability to understand professional curiosity and analysis and analysis isn't the key of everything that we do, you need to understand the situations and the triggers and all those things to understand how to best reduce risk and protect the public . . . You can't learn it in 15 months. It's insane to think. (Eugene SPO Generic)

One key piece of advice in policy and practice guides to professional curiosity is the need for inter-agency working and communication (see HMPPS, 2020; Manchester Safeguarding Boards, n.d.; Perth & Kinross Child Protection Committee, 2019). Good inter-agency communication is critical for practitioners to collect evidence and corroborate stories. Poor communication between agencies has long been identified as a factor in serious case reviews and serious further offence reviews. Our participants reported this as a barrier to being professionally curious:

I think sometimes agencies not wanting to share or not understanding why we want to share about risk, especially mental health services, it's very hard for them to share their risk assessments because it's medically confidential but sometimes it's about risk and protecting the public and it is sometimes difficult for others to understand that concept. (Yasmine SPO)

These issues around communication are relatively commonplace in the field of criminal justice policy (Moore and Hamilton, 2016) and were exacerbated by (now reversed) recent attempts to privatise probation creating even more agencies with whom information needs to be shared (Justice Committee, 2018).

A final structural barrier to professional curiosity relates to the need for good cultural knowledge and, in some cases, for staff to have similar experiences to service users to understand them, their situation and their risks:

This is it, or I have even had instances where I may have had a black service user in front of me and because I haven't had the same experience that he has had, or he thinks I should have had, as a black person, and 'I'm sorry, that's not been my experience', well the shutters come down straight away. They look at me as if I'm a total alien or something. That I have no idea what I'm talking about because I haven't lived. (Charmaine PO Generic)

These structural and cultural barriers to professional curiosity pose real issues for staff. They appear to put professional curiosity as a mode of practice in tension with what might be considered the 'values' of probation workers. These values are often understood as revolving around having a belief in the individual in their own right and working relationally to support them, rather than the more instrumental approach of rehabilitating people to protect the public (Henderson, 2013). Moreover, they are indicative of a service which is under-resourced and – to a degree – distanced from the rest of the social welfare system it is supposed to work with and the people it is supposed to be helping. This siloing of the social welfare system is a product of the 20th century need for institutions to specialise and carve out a space in which they can assert their own professional identity (Frost, 2017). In turn, such a silo approach to social welfare has been shown to result in less effective services and so this raises questions about how effective professional curiosity can be in the context of fragmented systems (Bunger, 2010; Frost, 2017; Moore and Hamilton, 2016). Finally, we would argue that our data here show that the now decades old focus on risk is resulting in a culture which makes relationship building particularly difficult, most clearly exemplified by people on probation describing probation as a form of policing (Mullen et al., 2022).

Relational barriers

In addition to the problem of time, our participants suggested that professional curiosity relies on good relationships being developed with service users. Again, this requires time (and skills) for relationships to be built and nurtured:

A part of professional curiosity I suppose is getting to know those relationships and connections. (Brendan PO Prison)

So I think for me it's about getting that relationship first and then in a way that becomes quite natural (Gabrielle PO Generic)

you need to make him feel able to open up to you. If the football was on last night there's nothing wrong in saying, oh, did you watch the football? What do you think about it? They would think, oh my god, but that's not anything to do with their offending. No, it's not, but it's about getting some information about them. So, yeah, for me it's about not just focussing on the obvious and the risk but knowing the person and their environment and who they're involved with. (Orla SPO)

According to these practitioners, a good working relationship allowed them to know what questions to ask and encouraged their clients to 'open up' so they could get the information they needed. Thus, a 'good' relationship underpins professional curiosity and without this cornerstone of good probation work (Burnett and McNeill, 2005) it becomes difficult to do. This is more so because professional curiosity also risks damaging relationships:

Also it can affect the relationship so it's about having the right level of professional curiosity and at what stage you do that. Ultimately if there's anything risk concerned, that takes precedence but if you're always digging and searching for something else it can really affect the trust and the relationship with the offender and that has happened, and I've made perhaps those mistakes. (Abby PO Generic)

. . . it's having the confidence, having a way of asking quite challenging questions of people in a way that may not be received as challenging if that makes sense. I suppose you've got to find quite a soft way of challenging somebody so that you're likely to get a realistic response and it's not going to damage the working relationship that you've got with them. (Harvey Senior Manager)

Reciprocal and mutual trust is a critical ingredient to building and maintaining the professional relationships considered key by probation officers (Phillips, 2013). Professional curiosity poses a direct challenge to this because it asks for that trust to be broken and an unwillingness to break that trust can act as a barrier to being professionally curious.

Moreover, participants expressed an unwillingness to be professionally curious because doing so can cause problems for the service user and, fundamentally, our participants wanted their clients to succeed. Academic literature on the values of probation workers suggests that probation officers do not want to set people up to fail (Robinson et al., 2013) yet professional curiosity requires them to ask questions in a way to glean as much information with which they can then potentially push for enforcement action or increased restrictions on liberty. While acknowledging a diversity in values and professional practice, professional curiosity risks going against core probation values which, in turn, risk being a barrier to this way of working:

So it might not just be what work it creates for you, it might actually open something difficult for the person sat in front of you and then how do you manage that responsibility of potentially opening a can of worms for that person when . . . resources or their ability to get support elsewhere might be difficult for whatever reason and that's a lot of pressure for, you know, you'd sit in a room with someone, potentially open a really complex – you know, these are really complex people, they've got complex histories, you know, digging deep may be really helpful to get you the information but actually then it might put someone in the situation where they've got to go out and deal with all that then. That could be . . . to make decisions that potentially put them in a difficult situation. (Heather SPO)

Here Heather is pointing not just to relational barriers but the way the potential damage to the working relationship can be further exacerbated by a lack of support services

highlighting the overlapping nature of barriers to professional curiosity. Not being professionally curious may, therefore, be an example of practitioners adhering to an ethic of not doing harm.

Staff can be prevented from being professionally curious due to the rule of optimism (Revell and Burton, 2016) and we saw evidence of this in our interview data:

There's a thing about thinking the unthinkable as well they say don't they? Do you know what I mean? Like having positive relationships with these service users but in the past they have done some really serious things haven't they so thinking about people are capable of doing that and not being marred, if that's the right word, by your positive relationship and losing sight of what our role is. (Maryam PO)

I think sometimes staff trusting an offender too much because they've worked with them a long time and that's the issue say with a lifer and the complacency around those on occasions. (Rhonda SPO)

We can see here that the 'rule of optimism' occurs because of the relationship which exists between an officer and their client as well as the values which underpin much probation practice: that of wanting people to succeed and believing that they can change. This speaks to the long-standing tension between care and control that has been debated in the field of probation (Harris, 1980; Todd-Kvam, 2020).

Emotional barriers

The final group of barriers we identified in our data relates to the emotional difficulties of being professionally curious (Burton and Revell, 2018). Participants argued that a high degree of emotional awareness is needed to be professionally curious:

Having that emotional presence and going in there and actually being actively listening to what the case is saying to you and then critically evaluating that in your head in real time is difficult to do when you've got five other things to do for the rest of that day. (Toby SPO Generic)

What we see here is an example of 'reflection-in-action' (Schön, 1983), a particularly difficult form of reflective practice. Essentially, Toby's comment suggests that professional curiosity requires the performance of emotional labour and critically reflective practice to be undertaken simultaneously. Importantly, this needs to take place in a context of insufficient time, high workloads, difficulties in training and issues around gaining information from other agencies.

Being professionally curious brings with it certain emotions which can act as barriers to action and so the need to be emotionally aware and have sufficient time to be so intersects. Participants talked about a 'fear' of being professionally curious. This fear may stem from uncertainty about what they might uncover should they ask questions:

Fearful of the response. Fearful of how I will cope, and fearful I won't even understand what they're telling me. (Charmaine, PO Generic)

It's understanding that situation, so you have to keep digging and digging and that becomes uncomfortable, especially if it's something you've gone through yourself, then you find it really difficult to pursue the question because you know it's hurting you to ask it because you know you don't want to discuss it or tell someone something that's happened to you and you find it difficult to then ask them that question. (Harsha PSO VLU)

Being professionally curious, then, requires practitioners to perform emotional labour – the management and display of emotions (Hochschild, 1983). Professional curiosity asks practitioners to undertake surface acting in that it requires practitioners to suppress their true emotions in order to achieve the goals of their organisation. This is important because surface acting is correlated with a higher risk of burnout among other criminal justice professions (Schaible and Six, 2016) and so asking people to be professionally curious potentially poses a risk to staff well-being. One reason for this fear and need to do surface acting stems from a concern among practitioners about how clients might react to questioning:

Sometimes it's the clients, they don't want to talk about something. You can ask all the questions you like, and they don't want to talk about it. They do sometimes ask well why do you need to know that? You say, well, it's part of my job to understand things but you can't give them exactly why you need to ask because you're – it's a jigsaw puzzle you're trying to put together and if you don't ask this, that and the other bits of information, questions, you won't get that information to build that picture. (Harsha PSO VLU)

This feeds into a larger discussion about the emotional dimension of practice in the social professions. As Burton and Revell (2018) argue, asking practitioners to enact professional curiosity means forcing them to experience cognitive dissonance:

On an individual level, workers are forced to confront the possibility of harm to children and, along with this, the myriad of personal feelings that they may experience, generating tension or a state of cognitive dissonance by managing or holding different, conflicting perspectives. (p. 1515)

Acknowledgement of this emotional dimension of probation practice has long been absent from probation policy (Fowler et al., 2020) suggesting a need for a greater recognition of the potential emotional difficulties that emanate from such work.

Discussion

This article has engaged with a recent policy development in the field of probation work in England and Wales: calls for practitioners to be professionally curious. Through analysis of interview data generated with 49 probation practitioners we have argued that professional curiosity is primarily used as a tool to assess risk and is an example of a policy which seeks to push people from inaction to action through encouraging them to ask questions, treat people with mistrust, be on the lookout for 'disguised compliance' and avoid falling into the trap of the 'rule of optimism'. We have also shown that professional curiosity is hard work and poses a risk to staff well-being and capacity to do their work

effectively. We have identified three groupings of barriers – structural, relational and emotional – all of which serve to prevent practitioners from being professionally curious yet there is little recognition of these issues in policy documents (Phillips et al., 2021). Not only do these barriers exist but we have also shown that they are interdependent with some barriers being exacerbated by others, demonstrating what Burton and Revell (2018) describe as ‘the interplay of such complicated relational dynamics [which] has the potential to distort professional judgement, including enacting curiosity’ (p. 1509).

Returning to our discussion of neo-liberalism, one significant implication of TR – which the Probation Service is still struggling with – was a reduced workforce resulting in high workloads which – according to analysis by HMI Probation (2021)) – diminish the quality of work. Here it is worth reiterating the point that professional curiosity requires a high degree of surface acting which is linked with burnout. Organisations should be mindful of the emotional toll that this type of work can take, especially when workloads are high because burnout tends to have its roots in poor work environments rather than individuals (Maslach et al., 2001). These reforms have created conditions in which people do not have the requisite time to be professionally curious. The second implication is around the impact of neo-liberalism on criminal justice policy which saw the responsabilisation of people with convictions becoming a key *modus operandi* in policy (Garland, 2001; O’Malley, 2018). We can thus see professional curiosity as an artefact of neo-liberalism because it serves to shift responsibility to practitioners (in that they take the blame if they are not sufficiently professionally curious) and service users (who are responsabilised to be open and honest about any risks they pose or face the consequences of breach or recall). As Rogowski (2011: 157) suggests, this ‘residual social policy’ is underpinned by two important and relevant assumptions:

that welfare is primarily the responsibility of the family and community, together with a belief that when the state intervenes, it should provide only the minimum because welfare provided by the state is oppressive, inefficient and debilitating.

The irony, of course, is that these macro-level policy shifts inhibit the potential of a professionally curious approach because they result in practitioners having less time and fewer resources at their disposal. Our data therefore suggest that asking staff to be professionally curious results in a double bind: practitioners are being responsabilised to do something while simultaneously being denied the resources with which to do it.

Professional curiosity appears – at times – to come into direct tension with those broader underlying values of probation practice such as the belief in the ability of people to change, a desire for people to succeed and to see the good in people. This tension may well cause people to not act. An implication of this is that these barriers constrain the potential gains from taking a professionally curious approach, partly because of the (almost) exclusive focus on risk. Elsewhere we have argued that professional curiosity can be used for therapeutic purposes by, for example, being used to develop relationships, gain a holistic understanding of someone’s situation and help clients and service users see things from a range of perspectives (Phillips et al., 2021). Although some of our participants saw professional curiosity in these terms it seems to us that, in the current neo-liberal, risk focused, managerial public protective system staff seem to be struggling

to do this even though, at the same time, they say that therapeutic work – building relationships and focusing on supporting change – is key to being professionally curious. Having a good relationship with a client is required to enact professional curiosity: one needs to know clients and their situations in order to ask the right questions and interpret the answers appropriately. This aspect of professional curiosity appears to be missing from the current policy framework and needs addressing. Rather than being seen as a tool to ‘dig deep’ and understand the root cause of people’s problems it would seem to us that professional curiosity is being used almost solely as a quick fix approach to risk assessment. The solution to this lies in a different way of understanding and operationalising professional curiosity. Rather than instructing staff to ask questions, staff first need to be given the time to develop the foundations upon which professional curiosity rests. Our findings raise some important questions about the future of the professional culture of probation. Currently probation staff values are – to a degree – resisting the wholesale implementation of professional curiosity as risk assessment. How long this remains the case will depend on staff turnover and whether the occupational cultural ‘memory’ of probation as therapeutic persists. One way in which this approach may survive is through training and the extent to which training providers (especially those institutions which deliver the probation officer qualification courses) incorporate a broad or narrow definition of professional curiosity into their curricula. That said, probation qualification involves both academic learning – delivered by universities – and vocational learning which is delivered by the Probation Service. This is also relevant to decisions around recruitment and the extent to which the Service incorporates professional curiosity as a key skill for new recruits.

Much depends on how the Service decides to define and operationalise the concept in the future. There is clearly a need for therapeutic practice in probation with a recent report from *Revolving Doors* (Mullen et al., 2022) showing that clients want more empathetic officers and officers capable of being compassionate, and disliked the intrusive nature of probation work. This appears to add some substance to the argument that the organisation should recognise the value of a therapeutic model of professional curiosity.

Conclusion

Probation practitioners see professional curiosity as a way of identifying the risks that people on probation pose. They say that it is about asking questions and not taking things at face value, corroborating information and generating and interpreting evidence about people’s risks. In this way, they understand professional curiosity to be what we (Phillips et al., 2021) have previously described as ‘risk-focused’. This is, perhaps, unsurprising. However, simply telling staff to ask questions in order to uncover the ‘real’ risks that people pose is insufficient. Rather, staff need to get to know people, understand when to ask questions, why to ask them, deal with the answers (both operationally and emotionally) and interpret them to see if they really do indicate an increased risk of harm. All of this requires time as well as a high degree of professionalism, training and skills and a safe space for reflection within supervision. It thus means that professional curiosity cannot simply be a risk management tool, as it is often portrayed in policy documents and in

media contexts. Rather, if organisations are going to continue using professional curiosity as a way of keeping people safe it must be part of a holistic approach to working with people on probation, social work clients and others who are subjected to social policy initiatives.

This is all highly relevant to fields where policy is increasingly focused on risk. The neo-liberal turn in social policy has led to a much greater emphasis on risk management, managerialism, privatisation and brokerage. Yet our data suggest that – even where practitioners are being asked to be professionally curious primarily to assess and manage risk (itself a product of a neo-liberal social context) – staff need the key fundamental skills and values around relationship building, honesty and a belief in the ability of people to change and viewing the individual as a whole person and not just an ‘offender’ to do so (Robinson et al., 2013). The move towards professional curiosity poses considerable challenges in this sense: staff must both gain trust and break trust and professional curiosity appears to be being used and framed as a tool with which to do this. Professional curiosity will not achieve its aim if staff are not given the time and space to build and nurture constructive relationships with their service users and so people responsible for writing policy need to take these contextual factors into account when developing policies if they are to be effective at what they seek to achieve.

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Note

1. All names used in this article are pseudonyms to protect participants’ identities. PO denotes Probation Officer, PSO is Probation Services Officer, SPO is Senior Probation Officer and PQIP is a trainee. The third word here refers to the participant’s main role or setting of work. Most of these are self-explanatory but ‘generic’ is someone who manages a caseload of people on probation in the community while VLO is a victim liaison officer, PD Pathway is someone who works primarily with people on the personality disordered offenders pathway and DSOU is a Divisional Sex Offender Unit.

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