Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation

Putting professional curiosity into practice

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HM Inspectorate of Probation

Academic Insights 2022/07

JULY 2022

Contents

Foreword 3
1. Introduction 4
2. Research findings 6
    2.1. What does professional curiosity mean to probation staff? 6
    2.2. Barriers to professional curiosity 7
3. Conclusion 10
References 11

Foreword

HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth offending services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth offending services.

This report was kindly produced by Jake Phillips, Sam Ainslie, Andrew Fowler and Chalen Westaby. The focus is upon the concept of professional curiosity, its application within probation, and the implications for good-quality practice. It is noted that there is some evidence – albeit limited – that professional curiosity can be a useful tool to assess and manage risk and support people to change. However, it is highlighted that there are structural, relational and emotional barriers to its enactment, and that more needs to be done to ensure that it can fulfil its potential. Notably practitioners need: (i) time and space to ask the right questions, analyse and act; (ii) time and space to develop relationships with people on probation; and (iii) emotional support, recognising the emotional labour linked to its employment. There is also a need for a clearer definition of what professional curiosity should look like in probation and the extent to which it applies not only to risk assessment/ management but also to more therapeutic/educative work. Within the inspectorate, we are developing an effective practice product to provide further guidance and support to practitioners.

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The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HM Inspectorate of Probation.

1. Introduction

A lack of professional curiosity has recently been cited in reports from HM Inspectorate of Probation in relation to specific cases (such as the Joseph McCann case) as well as in core inspection reports (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2020b; 2022). However, very little research has sought to understand what professional curiosity in probation looks like.

In this *Academic Insights* paper, we provide a brief overview of our research into the topic and consider the implications for good quality probation practice. The data we present were generated using a survey and interviews with staff. The survey was distributed to all probation practitioners in England and Wales in February 2020 and asked respondents to tell us, in their own words, what professional curiosity meant to them. We then conducted interviews with staff in early 2021 in which we discussed the concept in more depth, to understand how practitioners seek to be professionally curious and what barriers exist to its enactment.

What is professional curiosity?

The term professional curiosity has been used across several disciplines and means different things in different contexts. In the field of social work it has been explored most widely in relation to child protection work, where it tends to denote a form of practice which emphasises not taking service users' accounts for granted and corroborating information using a range of sources (Burton and Revell, 2018). In this context, the service user – often the parent or carer – is seen in terms of risks that must be managed and professional curiosity is a tool that practitioners can use to do this. Although there is no clear definition of professional curiosity, the Manchester safeguarding board defines it as:

> 'applying critical evaluation to any information they receive and maintaining an open mind. In safeguarding the term 'safe uncertainty' is used to describe an approach which is focused on safety but that takes into account changing information, different perspectives and acknowledges that certainty may not be achievable.' (Manchester Safeguarding Boards, n.d.)

As argued by Burton and Revell (2018, p.1512), this definition 'appears to be assumed and lacking in clarity'. Nonetheless, in this model, practitioners are asked to look out for disguised compliance which 'involves parents or carers giving the appearance of co-operating with agencies to avoid raising suspicions and allay concerns' (Manchester Safeguarding Boards, n.d.). Although this may be a useful way of directing practitioners, some have argued that a focus on disguised compliance has been 'successful in doing one thing: concealing the wider issues involved when professionals work with risk' because it is used to blame practitioners for failings rather than improve practice (Leigh et al., 2020). This approach to professional curiosity also asks practitioners to 'think the unthinkable' and to consider all issues that may be occurring in someone's life.

In the field of therapy, professional curiosity is used to denote a model of practice which seeks to understand a person's life in a holistic sense (Guthrie, 2020). The focus is on supporting people to define and decide where they want to be, and how to get there. This approach still depends on asking questions of clients and thinking 'outside the box' but the focus is on empowerment and change rather than risk assessment and management (Phillips et al., 2021). In essence, both social work and therapeutic work use professional

curiosity to ask questions in order to understand a client's situation more fully, although they do so for different ends.

In the field of nursing and midwifery, professional curiosity is used to encourage practitioners to stay abreast of developments in the field and to engage with academic research and professional development (Mantell and Jennings, 2016). This is partly related to the need for health professionals to register on an annual basis, so that they can provide the necessary evidence, but it is also linked to a broader, normative, appreciation of the value of engagement with knowledge.

Each of these models of professional curiosity are relevant to probation practice, yet we have argued there has been insufficient attention paid to defining what it looks like in the probation context. This is despite organisations such as the inspectorate and the Probation Service asking practitioners to be more professionally curious over recent years. That said, we can discern a particular model through analysis of the language used. In HM Inspectorate of Probation reports, it is often referred to in terms of risk:

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

The Probation Service has published a seven-minute briefing – after we conducted our initial research – which defined professional curiosity in the following way:

> 'Being professionally curious is a process of always questioning and seeking verification for the information you are given rather than making assumptions or accepting things at face value. By doing this you can avoid some common pitfalls in practice: being 'professionally optimistic' by focusing on positive and not identifying where things are not improving or risk is increasing; making a judgement about new information without verifying it with other agencies involved; accepting an offender's level of compliance and not exploring if this could be 'disguised compliance'; allowing crisis/chaotic behaviour to distract you from risk management work and accepting this as normal.' (HMPPS, 2020)

At an organisational level there appears to be a tendency towards seeing professional curiosity as a tool to assess and manage risk rather than having the emphasis on therapeutic or educational approaches we see elsewhere.

2. Research findings

The findings presented below come from a wider research study which sought to understand reflective practice, staff supervision, staff wellbeing and emotional labour in probation. The questions around professional curiosity were thus a small part of a longer survey and interview schedule and we should see the findings as relatively exploratory in nature. The survey was completed by probation practitioners (n=1,509), and we conducted interviews (n=49) with probation officers (POs), probation services officers (PSOs) and senior probation officers (SPOs).

2.1. What does professional curiosity mean to probation staff?

We started by examining and analysing the responses to our open-ended survey question on what professional curiosity meant to probation staff. We identified four key ways in which staff define professional curiosity:

- risk-focused
- educative
- therapeutic
- neutral.

Through a process of coding and content analysis, we found that the majority of participants provided a definition of professional curiosity which we coded as 'risk-focused'. That said, this varied across practitioners from different groups (see Table 1).

Table 1: Type of professional curiosity as defined by respondent, by role

Type of professional curiosity	All participants (*n* = 445)	Probation Officer (*n* = 202)	Probation Services Officer (*n* = 119)	PQIP[1] students (*n* = 67)	Other[2] (*n* = 55)
Risk-focused	54.2%	54.0%	62.2%	56.7%	32.7%
Therapeutic	12.6%	15.3%	8.4%	9%	16.4%
Knowledge building	5.6%	4.0%	2.5%	7.5%	16.4%
Neutral[3]	22.5%	21.8%	22.7%	20.9%	27.0%
Other/Don't know	5.2%	5.0%	4.2%	6.0%	21.7%

There was no statistically significant difference between the ways men and women defined professional curiosity, but there was a statistically significant difference between people with different job roles. In our data, PSOs were more likely to use a risk-focused definition while

[1] PQIP is the Professional Qualification in Probation.
[2] This category includes roles such as victim liaison worker, residential workers or programme facilitators.
[3] These responses were about asking questions but we were unable to identify the aim of the questioning.

POs were more likely to provide a therapeutic definition. We have suggested that this difference may be the result of different levels of training and professional cultures amongst people with different job roles (Phillips et al., 2021).

In our interviews, participants gave very similar definitions of professional curiosity to those provided in our survey data. Toby (SPO Generic)[4] told us that it is 'the new buzzword in probation' whilst others stressed that it is a critical skill needed by probation staff:

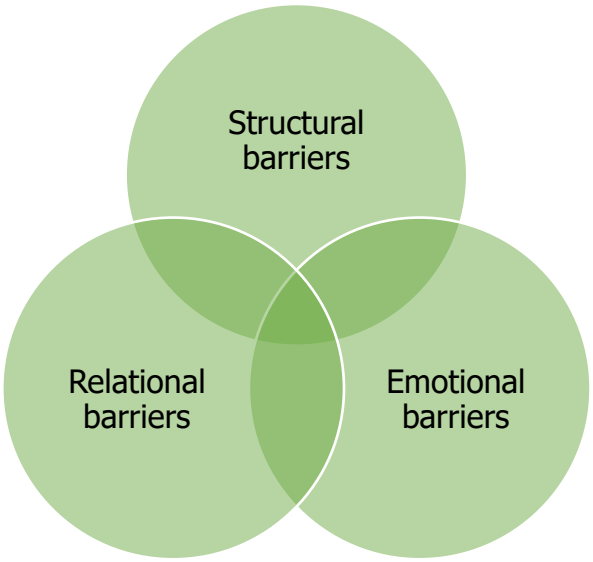
> *"It's absolutely key to the job. It is one of the fundamental skills that you need to be a good probation officer." (Abby PO Generic)*

> *"… 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 PQIP/NQO)*

Participants discussed the aims of professional curiosity primarily in terms of risk assessment and said that it was, in the main, about asking questions to get a full picture of the risks that people faced and posed.

2.2. Barriers to professional curiosity

In our interview data (which we explore further in Phillips et al. (forthcoming)) we asked practitioners about their experiences of enacting professional curiosity on a daily basis and this highlighted barriers in three key areas.



Structural barriers

Time – or rather, a lack of time – occurred frequently during our discussions about the barriers to professional curiosity. This is perhaps unsurprising in a service which has long been under-staffed and under-resourced (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2020a).

[4] 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.

> *"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 was not only about having time on a day-to-day basis. Our participants said they need time to get to know the people on probation so that they know what questions to ask; to interpret the answers and synthesise the knowledge gained from asking questions; and 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 also talked about needing time to develop the skills required to be good at professional curiosity and to create and nurture good working relationships with other institutions. This is key considering the idea that professional curiosity relies on good inter-agency working in order to maximise opportunities for obtaining information from a range of sources.

Relational barriers

Alongside the problem of time, our participants suggested that professional curiosity relies on the development of good relationships with people on probation (which, in and of itself, requires time). Good working relationships allow them to know what questions to ask and makes it easier to encourage people on probation to open up so they can get the information they need. Thus, 'good' relationships underpin professional curiosity, suggesting it is more than staff simply being able to ask questions and not take things at face value. This is all the more important because professional curiosity risks damaging good 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)*

Staff can be prevented from being professionally curious due to the rule of optimism (Revell and Burton, 2016; see also the earlier Academic Insights paper 2021/14 by Hazel Kemshall), and we saw evidence of this in our interview data:

> *"Yeah. And are there other things that I'm missing because I don't realise there's something that's a barrier? Well, the same thing I said, I suppose*

you focus so much on wanting them to do well, wanting everything to be okay." (Isabela PO Generic)

This means that staff have to be able to develop positive working relations with people on probation whilst – at the same – being distrustful and sceptical about their chances of success. All of this means that professional curiosity both relies on and jeopardises good working relationships between practitioners and people on probation.

Emotional barriers

The final group of barriers we identified in our data relates to the emotional challenges of being professionally curious (Burton and Revell, 2018). Participants argued that one needs a high degree of emotional awareness in order 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 the difficulties of 'reflection-in-action' (Schön, 1983). Essentially, Toby's comment suggests that practitioners need to work hard – emotionally and cognitively – and that these processes occur simultaneously. This takes place in a context of insufficient time, high workloads, difficulties in training, and issues around gaining information from other agencies. This is then potentially further exacerbated by the need for surface acting (see the earlier Academic Insights paper 2020/03 by Phillips et al.) which can increase the risk of burnout amongst criminal justice staff (Salyers et al., 2015; Schaible and Six, 2016)

Being professionally curious evokes certain emotions which can act as barriers to action and so the need to have sufficient time and be emotionally aware is important. In particular, participants talked about a 'fear' of being professionally curious. This fear – in part – stems from an uncertainty about what they might uncover should they ask professionally curious 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)

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.

3. Conclusion

Our research shows that it is not enough to just ask practitioners to think the unthinkable, look out for disguised compliance (a potentially problematic concept in itself), and ask questions. Staff need a workable and contextualised definition of what professional curiosity should look like in probation. There is currently a widespread acceptance amongst probation practitioners that professional curiosity is primarily about risk assessment and risk management, although this does vary depending on role and level of experience. There is a need for the Probation Service (and other bodies such as HM Inspectorate of Probation) to be clearer about what they want professional curiosity to entail and achieve.

More fundamentally – and regardless of the definition that is adopted – there needs to be a recognition that professional curiosity is hard work, especially in the current climate of high workloads, high staff turnover, and high-risk caseloads. This is even more the case when one recognises the emotional labour that a professionally curious approach requires, as well as the professional ramifications of not being professionally curious enough. As a result, using professional curiosity as a measure of effectiveness should be avoided within accountability processes, not least because it can exacerbate the barriers we have identified.

To support and enable staff to enact professional curiosity, the following are required:

Time and space to ask the right questions, analyse and act	• Staff need to be given the time to ask the right questions and know when someone may or may not be being truly compliant as this makes it easier to be professionally curious. Moreover, staff need time to digest, analyse and act on the answers that comes from deeper and more searching questioning.
Time and space to develop relationships	• Staff need the time and space to be able to develop good working relationships with people on probation so that the right questions are asked at the right time, limiting the damage that might occur as a result of asking intrusive questions.
Emotional support	• Emotional support should be provided for staff when it comes to dealing with the answers from the difficult and searching questions they are being required to ask.

There is some evidence – albeit limited – that professional curiosity can be a useful tool to assess and manage risk and support people to change. However, if the Probation Service wishes to pursue a model of practice which is underpinned by this approach then more needs to be done to ensure that it can fulfil its potential.

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This publication is available for download at:

www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation

Published by:

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation
1st Floor Civil Justice Centre
1 Bridge Street West
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ISBN: 978-1-915468-17-8

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