

## **Probation in objects**

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# PROBATION IN OBJECTS

Probation is woefully underrepresented in the penal field, described as the Cinderella service, never invited to the ball, and fighting invisibility (Robinson, 2016). Probation in objects aims to amplify probation culture and occupational identity by exploring the stories objects can reveal. Our work is influenced by Mark Doel's *Social Work in 40 Objects* (2017), an exploration of professional identity in social work through objects. Exploring identity in probation practice has largely involved qualitative interviews (Robinson and Svensson 2014), although work such as the Howard League's *Supervisable* project (Fitzgibbon, 2016; Graebisch, 2017; McNeill, 2017) and *Picturing Probation* (Carr et al., 2015) has evidenced the use of creative methods in research exploring experiences of supervision.

Since introducing our work on Probation in Objects in [Issue 17](#) of *Probation Quarterly*, we have been inviting participants to submit objects that they associate with their experience of probation and we have received 21 images so far. Objects are accompanied by a short narrative to provide a visual representation of probation from those who have lived it. As researchers, we have positioned ourselves as curators, tasked with collecting, analysing and categorising the objects. In this article, we aim to provide an update on some of the emerging themes: clothing and identity, emotion in probation work, and reflection in probation practice. In doing so we aim to embody Doel's approach:

*"If this were a physical exhibition of artefacts, various rooms would house collections of objects illustrating different themes" (Doel, 2017: 7).*



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As such, we invite the reader to visualise these themes as rooms in an exhibition, all linked by topic of probation, but each exploring a different aspect and providing an alternative representation.

## Clothing and Identity

What you wear can communicate an array of information about your identity to those around you, even if you do not intend to do so. Probation work is not immune to this effect, and in categorising and analysing the objects, the theme of probation identity as being intertwined with clothing began to emerge. This is primarily seen in the [coat stand](#), the [lanyard](#), and the [Clarks shoes](#). Clothing is a powerful form of expression and these objects, deliberately and inadvertently, convey information on personality, status, values, and political ideologies (Satrapa et al., 1992). As such, these objects represent the physical manifestation of a probation officer, an expression of identity and meaning.

Whilst the notion that a probation officer is required to “wear many hats” is familiar (Ugwudike et al., 2019), one participant instead defined their work by the various jackets worn in their work. The coat stand conveys not only the practical and literal use of jackets worn to court, home visits or prisons, but also the symbolic jacket “offering a chat, a smile, support and guidance to those in need of them”. Despite the lack of distinctive “visual cultural symbols” (Mawby & Worrall, 2013, p. 141) or a prescribed probation uniform, there are still implicit shared understandings of how clothing interacts with probation work. Demonstrated by the question “Why do all probation officers wear those \*\*\*\*\* stupid shoes?”, said of the Clarks ‘Cornish pasty’ shoes. This specific shoe style clearly implied

something innately probation, a belonging to the profession. Be it the style or practicality that made the shoes a popular choice for probation staff, they demonstrate the influential role clothing can play in communication. Conversely, clothing can be used as an explicit form of messaging: “the probation lanyard provides many practitioners with the opportunity to express their own personal and professional interests and identity.” For this participant, their lanyard provided them with a space to represent their identity and values, displayed through badges and ribbons. Clothing, therefore, stands as a non-verbal tool, providing us with a representation of probation work that transcends the spoken word.

## Emotion in Probation Work

The complex role played by probation officers demands considerable emotional management and there is growing recognition of the emotional labour required for probation work (Fowler et al., 2017; Westaby et al., 2020). The objects presented in this theme collectively share a sense of emotion in probation work; those objects include [A Sense of Freedom](#), the [Romanian probation poster](#), the [ultrasound](#) and [stress](#).

*A Sense of Freedom* by author, Jimmy Boyle, is described by one participant as “the reason I became a Probation Officer.” That the impetus to embark upon a career in probation began with “feeling deeply moved” when understanding the reasons that could lead a person to become involved in the criminal justice system, speaks to the essence of probation work. Emotional connection and a desire to “affect change” through providing “belief, support and opportunity”, resonates with the welfarist roots of probation to advise, assist, and befriend.

This core notion that probation is “something that is done to people and experienced by people,” (Sexton, 2015, p. 115) extends beyond England and Wales. Another participant, a probation officer from Romania, emphasised that the “beneficiaries of probation services are first of all human beings, with a past, but equally with a present and a future.” The potential of this “people first” (Annison et al., 2008) approach to probation is highlighted in the submission of a pregnancy ultrasound. Following a lengthy period of supervision, this participant described the “young angry person, I had the privilege to walk alongside and see his fight to become an adult that he wanted to be.” Seen here, the use of emotions in probation work was facilitative of effective practice and better relationships (Phillips et al., 2020), framed by the participant as “an example of positive probation work in the community, with people and their families.” In the years after this supervisory relationship ended, the participant found the ultrasound scan in their in-tray with the message that the person wanted them to “be one of the first people to know he was going to be a dad.” Yet, the recent political prioritisation of probation as a service to “assess, protect and change” (HMPPS, 2021) creates a complex climate for undertaking this nuanced emotional work. The focus on probation practitioners’ abilities to manage cases and increasingly heavy caseloads, in a culture of control leaves less space for this important relational work to take place (Garland, 2001; Phillips et al., 2020). The submission of stress as an object depicts this tension between care and control (Dominey & Canton, 2022), warning that “service needs to be kinder to staff to sustain a stronger, healthy, more resilient workforce.”

## Reflective Probation Practice

On one level all the submissions involve reflection, as to be expected, this is embedded in the occupational culture (Worrall and Mawby 2013) it is a key skill in probation work (Ainslie et al., 2022), a priority for probation education (Gregory, 2007, Ainslie 2020), a coping mechanism (Burrell, 2020) and form of resistance to managerialism (Gregory, 2010). This theme coalesces around submissions that mention or represent reflection as a utility in and of itself. The participants submitted objects that were practical and directly assisted reflection-in-practice or reflection-on-practice (Schon, 2016), for example, [the mug](#), the [Romanian probation poster](#), [tape recorder](#), and the [Probation Officer’s manual](#). These objects also had layers of meaning and were at once metaphorical, personal, socio-political, and historical. The mug represents an away-day activity for staff in Avon and Somerset, who were asked to reflect on ‘Probation’ and submit a word. This created a word cloud which collated and displayed words in order of size with words that are submitted more frequently appearing in larger lettering. The participant took pride in knowing that integrity, to be honest and have strong moral principles was the most frequently chosen word. This was a collective reflection which showed unity and shared values. These values are transmitted in the poster from the Romanian Probation Service “nu judeca o greșeală ca pe o regulă” translating to “do not judge a mistake as a rule.”

This resonates with the idea of working with offenders, not on them and building trust with people on probation (Shapland et al., 2012), in a similar sentiment to the relational aspect of probation work that was clear in the emotion theme. The tape recorder is submitted to represent the start of the journey to become a reflective practitioner. The ability to reflect is an “important tool” to problem solve, empathise, process emotions and cope in difficult times and reflective practice allows practitioners to challenge their assumptions and knowledge (Ainslie, 2020). Finally, the reflection on the Probation Officer’s manual suggests a socio-political dimension to the resources that are embraced at a given point in time or relinquished; heralding organisational changes to how the work is approached. These representations and objects signify the importance of reflective probation practice at both a meso and micro level.

## Conclusions

Whilst existing work details the origins and development of probation practice, this project considers probation in a way not previously attempted. As analysis and curation of the probation in objects collection continues, we aim to contribute a visual dimension to existing work by facilitating the development of “visual cultural symbols” (Mawby and Worrall, 2013: 141). Though the collection of objects submitted by participants is rich and varied, these emerging themes begin to suggest some of shared ways probation is visualised.

In endeavouring to develop this research, we have a continuing relationship with the National Justice Museum in Nottingham, who hosted our HMPPS Insights event in 2023. Through this connection we hold ambitions of working towards a probation exhibition at the museum. Also of note to those interested in this work may be [Root and Branch](#) a travelling exhibition and collaboration between HMPPS and Englesea Brook Museum, displaying the roots of probation in the Temperance movement.

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