‘You’re trying to juggle everything’: Understanding the consequences of emotional labour for senior probation officers in England and Wales.

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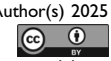

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'You're trying to juggle everything': Understanding the consequences of emotional labour for senior probation officers in England and Wales

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Abstract

Much academic research has explored what it means to be a practitioner in the criminal justice system and a small body of research explores the roles and experiences of leaders. However, very little research has sought to understand the critical role of line managers in supporting front-line practitioners and activating the policy goals of an organisation situated – as they are – in the middle of an institution's chain of command. Good line management can improve worker well-being, organisational commitment and job satisfaction. In doing so, line managers perform high levels of emotional labour which – in turn – creates potentially adverse impacts on their own well-being. This article explores how line managers in probation – Senior Probation Officers – experience and cope with the consequences of having to perform emotional labour. We present the analysis of qualitative data gathered with 26 Senior Probation Officer (SPOs) and 2 senior

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managers across England and Wales exploring the effects of performing emotional labour and toxin handling. We also identify how they cope with these consequences through formal and informal sources of support such as 'communities of coping'. We conclude by considering what our findings say about the interplay between individual and organisational factors and how the ways in which probation managers are asked by the organisation to use their emotions is detrimental to the well-being of SPOs and the organisation more broadly. We offer ways the Probation Service can refocus organisational priorities and goals to ameliorate the emotional toll felt by SPOs and benefit the organisation as a whole.

Keywords
Coping mechanisms, emotional labour, management, probation, toxin handling

Introduction

Over recent years, there has been increasing academic research on what it means to be a practitioner in the criminal justice system and with that the development of a body of literature which does so through the lens of emotional labour – which is 'work that requires the engagement, suppression, and/or evocation of the worker's emotions in order to get the job done' (Guy et al., 2008: 97) – and how criminal justice practitioners perform it to achieve the goals of the organisation (e.g., Gunby and Carline, 2020; Martin, 1999; Mastracci and Adams, 2020; Nylander and Bruhn, 2020; Oliveira et al., 2023; Ricciardelli and McKendy, 2020).

As in many countries around the world, the Probation Service in England and Wales forms a key part of the criminal justice system, supervising people convicted of an offence in the community and supporting people in prison to prepare them for release. In England and Wales probation practitioners supervise people serving Community Orders, Suspended Sentence Orders and people under supervision in the community following release from prison (on licence). The Probation Service also has a statutory duty to prepare reports for courts (pre-sentence reports) and parole hearings and works with other agencies to manage the risk posed by people convicted of offences such as terrorism and sexual offences through systems such as Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA). In England and Wales, the Probation Service's tagline is 'assess, protect, change' (Her Majesty's Probation Service, 2021), encompassing the multiple aims of probation: public protection, risk management and rehabilitation. Probation work thus requires practitioners to work closely with individuals who may have caused significant harm, will have experienced multiple disadvantages and – in many cases – are leading chaotic lives. Probation work is inherently stressful, and practitioners experience multiple stressors daily (Norman and Ricciardelli, 2022; Phillips et al., 2016). As research has demonstrated, one way probation places significant pressures on individual practitioners in relation to other criminal justice work roles is through asking them to regularly perform emotional labour to achieve the goals of the organisation (Westaby et al., 2020). As such, probation work poses a risk of harm to practitioner health and well-being (Maier et al., 2024; Norman and Ricciardelli, 2022).

Probation is not alone in posing risks to practitioners through the presence of organisational stressors and the requirement to perform emotional labour (see, e.g., Brunetto

et al., 2014 [police]; Martínez-Iñigo et al., 2007 [GPs]; Maxwell and Riley, 2017 [school leaders]; Nylander et al., 2011 [prison officers]; Pisaniello et al., 2012 [nurses]; Sloan, 2014 [public sector workers]). Recognition of these potential harms to practitioners presents organisations with a legal duty to implement systems to protect workers from work-related harms. One such method of supporting practitioners is through line management supervision which can act as a buffer between emotional exhaustion and well-being (Huo et al., 2022). Indeed, research has found that good line management can be a protective factor for staff well-being and job satisfaction (Eby et al., 1999; Huo et al., 2022).

In England and Wales, probation practitioners are line managed by Senior Probation Officers (SPOs) who, in turn, play a significant role in supporting probation practitioner well-being. The role of SPOs in the Probation Service has until very recently received little attention in research. This is despite their pivotal role as 'frontline managers' (Harding et al., 2014) of practitioners such as probation officers (POs), probation service officers (PSOs) and residential workers (RWs).[1] SPOs are at the *front* and *centre* of the organisation hierarchy and are expected to provide an important link between senior management and frontline staff in the delivery of the Probation Service aims to 'assess, protect and change' (Her Majesty's Probation Service, 2021; Westaby et al., 2023).

The breadth of the SPO role has been raised as a concern by the inspectorate of probation with SPOs 'managing too many staff and holding multiple responsibilities prevents staff from being sufficiently supported to deliver a quality service' (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, 2020: 29; see also His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, 2024b). This presents risks to the Probation Service's ability to fulfil its duty to support staff and for those staff to effectively supervise people on probation and thus fulfil the aim to 'assess protect, change'. Furthermore, links have been made between the amount and breadth of work SPOs undertake and serious further offences (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, 2023).[2] His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation reviewed the broad span of control occupied by SPOs and how this 'impedes their ability to provide effective management oversight on a volatile and high-risk caseload' (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, 2024b: 27), specifically 'reduc[ing] the time they have available to provide effective professional oversight of the work of the practitioners they line manage with individual cases' (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, 2023: 13) leading to the development of a culture of fear of serious further offences amongst SPOs (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, 2024b). This evidence – along with previous research on SPOs (Westaby et al., 2023) – suggests the role is too broad and potentially unsustainable due to competing expectations of SPOs as both developer and manager.

This article develops previous analysis of the complex and dynamic emotional labour undertaken by SPOs in their role as frontline managers in the Probation Service (Westaby et al., 2023). Specifically, this article extends knowledge around the consequences and coping mechanisms for SPOs trying to negotiate a broad and complex work role. The article exposes the ways in which probation managers are asked by the organisation to use their emotions and argues this is detrimental to both individuals and the organisation more broadly.

Line management, probation and emotional labour

SPOs play a pivotal role in the delivery and management of probation in England and Wales. What little research that exists in this area identifies the changes SPOs experience when moving from being a probation officer to taking on responsibility for supervising frontline probation staff (Brown, 1969), and where SPOs find job satisfaction from their role (Thornborough, 1970). Separately, research has focused on the lack of clarity and identity of SPOs and the extent of accountability they face in their role as middle managers (Boswell, 1986). It has also brought to light the growing breadth and expectations of the role and consequential push and pull of staff and organisational demands (Coley, 2020; Davies, 1984). SPOs must simultaneously develop those they supervise as educator and experienced senior practitioner, as well as perform a managerial role (which includes caseload allocation, performance management, management oversight in line with organisational policies, countersigning OASys assessments and reports and reviewing MAPPA and lifer cases) to manage probation practitioner performance (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation) leading to a 'tangled web of a role that demands supporting learning and development of their staff, alongside performance accountability and risk management' (Westaby et al., 2023: 42).[3]

SPOs, emotional labour and its consequences

Emotional labour, defined by Hochschild (1983: fn. 7), is 'the management of a way of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display … which is for a wage'. Employers require employees to adhere to feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983) or display rules (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993) when interacting with others. These rules can be societal, occupational or organisational (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). Societal display rules are overarching norms developed within society over time. Occupational display rules relate to a worker's job role and are often informal professional expectations shared by members of a particular occupation. Organisational display rules meanwhile derive from the organisation itself and are more often explicitly communicated through policies, standards, recruitment, training and supervision (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 1983; Mastracci and Adams, 2019; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1989).

Adherence to display rules occurs through surface- or deep-acting or a genuine emotional response. Surface acting is where a worker's emotional displays are incongruent with their feelings whereas deep acting requires the worker to align their feelings with the expected emotional display (Hochschild, 1983). Finally, genuine emotional responses happen when feelings and emotional displays naturally align. Yet the worker is still expected to control their genuine feelings in accordance with organisational and/or occupational display rules (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993).

SPOs' identities are 'controlled' by the Probation Service through expected emotional displays about organisational policy (Westaby et al., 2023). SPOs must surface act by suppressing frustration and instead present a neutral or professional demeanour and deep act by putting themselves in the position of policymakers to understand the expectations being communicated to themselves and frontline workers (Westaby et al., 2023). Relatedly, SPOs perform emotional labour as a way of 'controlling' or managing the

emotions (e.g., anger or sadness) of frontline staff. In the study by Westaby et al. (2023), SPOs describe using empathy to connect with the challenges faced by frontline staff, build rapport and help 'control' difficult emotions. SPOs use empathy to couch organisational policy and directions in an acceptable way, effectively sanitising messages from senior management and walking a difficult line between the manager and senior practitioner components of the role (Westaby et al., 2023; see also Robinson et al., 2016).

Emotional labour can lead to various positive and negative consequences. Positive consequences often result from a person feeling they are good at emotion management leading to increased job satisfaction (Wharton, 1993). In public service jobs such as probation work, emotional labour can give meaning to the work and contribute to an increased sense of community (Guy et al., 2008; Shuler and Sypher, 2000). Workers who 'tune out' organisational expectations or moderate ambiguity by using emotional labour to avoid awkward situations have also reported increased job satisfaction (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Morris and Feldman, 1996).

Emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation often correlate with how workers present emotional displays. For example, where workers use deep acting, they are less likely to become depersonalised – detached from their job role with less need for the worker to protect themself from the inability to cope with feelings of emotional dissonance (Brotheridge and Lee, 2002). Where surface acting is used, the likelihood of depersonalisation along with feelings of inauthenticity and burnout increases (Bono and Vey, 2005).

Emotional pain and 'toxin handling'

Emotional pain can be external such as concern for an ill family member or tensions within a family being brought into the work environment (Frost, 2003). Alternatively, it can emanate from inside an organisation from, for example, the emotional demands of 'people work', or situations where workload is unmanageable. Common workplace events such as organisational restructuring, personality conflicts, significant staff turnover or nonstop change (Frost, 2004; Gallos, 2008; Ward and McMurray, 2015) as well as dramatic events such as mass redundancies or fundamental policy changes can contribute to emotional pain. It can also manifest in seemingly commonplace events such as everyday decisions, mistakes or pressures from established organisational structures (Gallos, 2008; Mumby and Putnum, 1992). Regardless of how organisational pain manifests within a workplace, it can give rise to similar emotions, such as anger, anxiety, frustration, fear or worry.

Whilst emotional pain is an inevitable consequence of working within organisations, how it is managed makes a difference to staff who experience it (Gallos, 2008). A failure to manage emotional pain successfully risks it increasing over time to a point where the environment within a workplace becomes toxic (Appelbaum and Roy-Girard, 2007).

Emotional pain and toxicity can be dealt with by workers themselves as they 'process pressure and disappointment' by engaging with friends and family, exercise, or other offloading activities (Gallos, 2008: 355). However, where workers are unable to deal with emotional pain themselves, it needs to be recognised in organisations – often by managers – and removed from the workplace by those managers (Steiner, 2004). At this point managers become 'toxin handlers' (Frost, 2004), tasked with recognising the emotional pain

of others and 'being able and willing to act to help them with their suffering, to alleviate their situation' (Appelbaum and Roy-Girard, 2007: 22).

'Toxin handlers' therefore must possess certain qualities making them able to handle the emotional pain of other workers, most crucially, the ability to be empathetic (Kulik et al., 2009). This empathy relates to the emotional skill of recognising when and how emotional reactions in others might be becoming toxic as well as being empathic in action, understanding the position of those experiencing emotional pain (Daniel, 2017; Frost, 2003). Subsequently, 'toxin handlers' may act 'to absorb or redirect toxic messages and acts from others (leaders-managers) to protect their groups' (Appelbaum and Roy-Girard, 2007: 22; see also Daniel, 2017) using the skill of buffering to absorb toxic messages themselves or by reframing toxic messages shielding colleagues from their damaging effects (Frost and Robinson, 1999; Frost, 2003).

However, managers may also experience role conflict when using time dedicated to formal managerial responsibilities to undertake 'toxin handling' work (Metz et al., 2014). Role overload may also occur where managers act as 'toxin handlers' as well as formal manager and are unable to cope with the two demands simultaneously (Kahn et al., 1964; Metz et al., 2014). Studies of middle managers have stressed the importance of recognising 'toxin handling' explicitly and providing resources through training and support for them to handle emotional pain as 'handling the emotional undercurrents that accompany organizational change and growth takes time, skill, and care' (Gallos, 2008: 355). However, just as emotional labour is often a hidden form of labour (Hochschild, 1983), 'toxin handling' is seldom seen in job descriptions (Frost, 2007) and therefore should be considered 'hidden work' which is 'often more pervasive than recognized' (Frost, 2003: 1). The work of 'toxin handlers' can encompass 'high personal risks' and with persistent handlingthey can internalise others' reactions, become 'ill, physically, and emotionally, and can often burn out' (Appelbaum and Roy Girard, 2007: 22; see also Daniel, 2017).

Coping mechanisms

Coping mechanisms and strategies are crucial in alleviating potentially negative consequences of performing emotional labour and toxin handling by frontline managers. Formal coping mechanisms are accessed through organisational line management structures. In the Probation Service, SPOs are supposed to receive regular supervision encompassing performance and accountability functions alongside a dedicated reflective space to aid experiential learning and coping with the emotional demands of practice.[4]

An important interpersonal coping mechanism is the ability to have 'off-stage' time (O'Brien and Linehan, 2018: 697) – a physical space only occupied by other staff in similar work roles (Grandey, 2000). These off-stage spaces inhabited by other middle managers provide opportunities to establish 'communities of coping' (Korczynski, 2003: 58) – informal employee support networks that ameliorate the potentially negative consequences of performing emotional labour. These communities are inclusive in nature and allow participants to feel the emotions they experience are common to others in similar situations (Wincup, 2001). They are therefore a form of social sharing within the workplace which 'offers the opportunity to reframe events and reduce emotional

arousal associated with complex stressful situations' (O'Brien and Linehan, 2018: 698). Communities of coping also allow colleagues to share ideas about ways of handling emotional pain in those they supervise (Metz et al., 2014).

Data and methods

This article draws upon data from a mixed-methods study undertaken across 2020–2021 in the National Probation Service[5] (NPS) which explored the implementation of a reflective model of supervision, professional curiosity in probation, emotional labour and burnout. The findings of these survey data are published elsewhere (Phillips et al., 2022, 2024). The focus of this article is analysis of semi-structured interviews with 28 SPOs and senior managers[6] (26 SPOs and 2 senior managers) undertaken online during early 2021. Qualitative analysis has the potential to capture an in-depth understanding of the potential consequences of performing emotional labour for those SPOs interviewed. Our interviewees were selected randomly from a larger group of SPOs ($n=218$) who completed an online survey focusing on emotional labour, well-being and staff supervision and volunteered to participate in a follow-up interview discussing in more detail the same themes as the online survey.

Ethical approval was provided by the research team's institution and access was approved by Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service [HMPPS]. Participants worked in a diverse range of probation geographical regions and operations (e.g., Generic,[7] Approved Premises, Court, Prisons, OPD Pathway,[8] IOM[9]). SPOs were largely representative of the gender make-up of the wider service (we interviewed 20 females and 8 males). The SPOs and senior managers interviewed had worked in the NPS for between 5 and 29 years and had been in the position of SPO between 1 and 17 years. Participants with supervision responsibilities supervised between 5 and 17 probation practitioners. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were recorded, transcribed and given pseudonyms. The data was analysed thematically (Braun and Clark, 2019) using the following sensitising concepts: desirable emotional labour consequences, undesirable emotional labour consequences, 'toxin handling' and personal and interpersonal coping mechanisms. The findings section presents our analysis of the data in alignment with these concepts and through comparison with the extant literature. We then conclude the article by discussing the implications of the research, paying particular attention to recommendations for how the Probation Service can better support SPOs with the emotional demands of their role.

Findings

Consequences for SPOs of performing emotional labour

Participants identified various positive effects of certain aspects of their job as a frontline manager:

> the SPO job can be fantastic because when you've worked with a probation officer on something that they're struggling with and you see them make a real breakthrough, they go down to see an

> individual and they come back up and they burst into your office and say I've talked to them and, yeah, actually I feel like I'm making progress and that's brilliant really. (Ursula, SPO Generic – 2 years' SPO, 16 years' service)

We saw evidence that people with a natural proclivity towards work requiring the performance of emotional labour obtain job satisfaction from providing support to frontline staff (Wharton, 1993):

> I mean I would say it's largely positive, you know. At the end of the day there's a reason why you end up in these sorts of jobs… You're finding it challenging but it's real, it's people, it's not a spreadsheet, it's not a cash register, it's not having to be nice to people that you can't stand because you're trying to sell them something, you know. I think we need to be honest about that. (Colin, SPO IOM – 10 years' SPO, 17 years' service)

As has also been identified in previous studies of frontline probation practitioners (Fowler et al., 2017; Westaby et al., 2020; Westaby et al., 2023), SPOs are well versed in emotion management and particularly understand the need to build and maintain relationships with those they supervise having engaged in such work as frontline staff, albeit in a different context, with probationers. Indeed, SPOs drew comparisons between their work as managers and previous frontline work with people on probation:

> I think as a manager and a senior manager what I realised was I could still make a difference by working with other staff on their development and the work that they are doing with individuals, so I was able to impart my experience and work with them to develop their skills. (Zara, Senior Manager – 5 years' SPO, 16 years' service)[10]

Studies point to probation staff finding a lot of meaning from this side of their work – working with people on probation (Fowler et al., 2017; Guy et al., 2008; Westaby et al., 2020) and it is these skills possessed by SPOs that also provides job satisfaction and appears to be one of the reasons for moving into the SPO role. The positive consequences of performing emotional labour seem to emanate from the developmental rather than managerial side of their role. However, we also heard about the negative consequences of performing emotional labour:

> I think the emotional impact of dealing with a team … who you can see are technically overworked, you've got a WMT [Workload Management Tool] telling you they're overworked, you can see it in their faces and you can hear it in their voices when they're talking to you and you're just like oh my god, I am trying to keep these people in work so the job's done but I actually also feel like I am perpetuating and adding to their emotional distress right now. (Sutton, SPO Generic – 1 year' SPO, 13 years' service)

Here, the emotional impact of their work seems to result from the (increasingly) managerial aspects of their role (Boswell, 1986; Brown, 1969; Thornborough, 1970) which manifests in Sutton's case in the expectation that he allocates cases to those he supervises despite them being overworked. Participants expressed guilt tied to a sense of responsibility for high workloads of frontline staff and the resulting emotional distress their staff

experience and express. Thus, whilst SPOs gain job satisfaction from supervising frontline staff, they also described the emotional toll that may occur:

> I try to be as supportive as I possibly can… I guess what comes with that is that you start to pay an emotional toll sometimes which is why we get so many holidays, etc., because you're hearing about people's difficult home situations or their health situations or mental health situations or, you know, I have people dealing with some incredibly distressing case events in the last 12 months with all sorts of trauma counselling being needed. (Eugene, SPO Generic – 3 years' SPO, 16 years' service)

SPOs appear to become 'containers' (Bion, 1962; Ruch, 2007) for difficult emotional situations experienced by staff. Containment is achieved through the supervisory relationship and can support staff in dealing with the uncertainty and anxiety experienced because of the complexity of their practice (Ruch, 2007). While managers may not be able to offer immediate solutions to difficulties, the experience of containment can offer relief and enable practitioners to keep going. The absence of emotional containment risks the development of insecure professional autonomy and de-personalised practices (Ruch, 2007) and as such, can be viewed as an essential part of the SPO role.

Managing the emotions of those they supervise as well as their own emotional responses though is particularly emotionally draining:

> It can be quite draining, I think, because you're kind of someone that your team will hopefully talk to about things, so you've got what your staff put on to you … but I suppose it can be quite difficult to detach yourself and I suppose not take it personally or not take it home with you because people's lives are complex, service users' lives are complex, but staff lives are very complex as well and that can be emotionally draining. (Heather, SPO OPD Pathway – 5 years' SPO, 12 years' service)

It is clear from this analysis that SPOs experience adverse effects from the emotional labour they perform when seeking to achieve the goals of the organisation and protect their staff from several organisational stressors such as high workloads and complex, emotionally charged work.

SPOs, emotional pain and 'toxin handling'

As is the case in other organisations, SPOs are required to handle the emotional pain of those they supervise (Frost, 2004). Both the performance of emotional labour and the handling of emotional toxins creates the potential for both positive and negative effects. Our SPOs talked generally about the emotional labour they perform and commented more specifically on their role as 'healing managers' (Kulik et al., 2009: 696) whose job it is to manage the emotional pain experienced by frontline staff:

> I believe my main role is to obviously, you know, protect the public, you know, I understand why I'm here and employed to do this, but I see the importance of my role in making sure that the team, the probation officers who I manage are okay and that can be very much about helping them to manage how they're feeling about the work that they're doing and helping

> them to manage how they're feeling about ridiculous workloads, not feeling cared for by the organisation. (Demi, SPO Prison – 17 years' SPO, 26 years' service)

SPOs also described the emotional toll that occurs as a result of allowing others to offload their emotional pain onto them as frontline managers:

> I think as an SPO you've got the biggest emotional bucket going. You do tend to take everybody's problems on board, be that personally and professionally and then where does that go? (Grace, SPO Approved Premises – 6 years' SPO, 21 years' service)

> That sense of responsibility to looking after other people and making sure that peoples mental health is intact, people are physically not killing themselves really to do the job, particularly when you know that there isn't enough resource or capacity to help those people, so there's this constant … challenge of staff coming to you to want you to resolve the problem when actually no matter what you do it's not going to solve the problem. (Maia, SPO Generic – 4 years' SPO, 17 years' service)

A key part of the SPO role involves allowing frontline staff to offload their negative emotions, and this can be an important way of ameliorating the potentially negative consequences of performing emotional labour for those they supervise (Smith and Grandey, 2022). However, this must be managed by the SPO as the conduit and container for that emotional pain (Ruch, 2007), which can result in emotional exhaustion. When frontline staff take their emotional pain to their SPO, this requires a concomitant increase in resource from the SPO (Metz et al., 2014). This increase in resource (i.e., social support provided to frontline staff) means that psychological and physical harms to frontline staff might be avoided. However, as Frost (2007) maintains, SPOs need to have the resources gained, for example, through prior experience or training, to deal with the emotional toll they feel after handling such toxins. Our participants often described the emotional toll they felt as filling up their – often deep – 'emotional buckets'. However, these buckets are not bottomless and so SPOs require good quality line management supervision themselves.

Whether the resource is available and sufficient support provided is often dependent upon whether toxin handling is seen as part of a job role. Often 'toxin handling' is not referenced in managers' job description and as such not recognised by organisations (Frost, 2007). Managers who act as toxin handlers inevitably end up performing at least two work roles, the formal 'manager' and the informal 'toxin handler' with the potential for role conflict. Our SPOs described the many roles, including 'toxin handling', they were expected to perform:

> You are dealing with so many different things. You are managing your practitioners, you've got all the HR side of things[11] where you're having to deal with all the absence, the SOP [Single Operating System] and that side of management, performance. You are implementing new guidance and practice and you're dealing with people's emotional needs, practice needs, you're working towards targets, you're trying to drive targets forward when you know that people are under pressure as well. You're trying to juggle everything. (Zara, Senior Manager – 5 years' SPO, 16 years' service)

As has been seen to be the case in relation to human resource managers more generally (Kulik et al., 2009; Metz et al., 2014), the lack of recognition of – and concomitant resources to support – the 'toxin handler' role risks potentially adverse psychological and physical effects and particularly burnout through emotional exhaustion.

Coping mechanisms

Formal coping mechanisms. Talking to line managers or other senior staff is important for some SPOs as a way of offloading:

> When I was an SPO my line manager put me forward to have the structured support,[12] so I've had it myself and I found it really beneficial. Surprisingly … I found it was actually nice to have that space to talk through things. (Zara, Senior Manager – 5 years' SPO, 16 years' service)

> I think if I didn't have a good line manager … this job would be far, far more difficult and I also have – we have a deputy head here as well who I have a really good working relationship with that I can go to for support as well. (Brianna, SPO Generic – 3 years' SPO, 13 years' service)

Probation practitioners are supervised by SPOs in accordance with the organisation's Reflective Practice Supervision Standards (RPSS) which explicitly recognises the emotional aspects of their job role (Ainslie et al., 2022a; Westaby et al., 2020). Our analysis here suggests this method of supervision should be incorporated into the line management of SPOs as this may ease the consequences of the emotional labour they perform when supervising frontline staff.

Accessing formal support was for some SPOs, however, not so straightforward and our analysis identified several barriers that shed light on what it means to be a manager in probation as well as the culture that exists within the Service:

> Yeah, I think I have supervision but the supervision I have I would say is less, I don't necessarily feel safe enough to offload in that way and possibly haven't needed to so much in this role (Demi, SPO Prison – 17 years' SPO, 26 years' service)

> I think there's that element of if I have this support, could that be seen as a weakness? You know. Does that mean that I'm not coping? Does that mean that I'm not able to…. (Zara, Senior Manager – 5 years' SPO, 16 years service)

The feeling that formal line management is not a 'safe space' to offload or the perception that exposing vulnerabilities is a weakness could be related to the role managers play in assessing the performance management of those they supervise. Some SPOs link the need to repress emotions during supervision sessions to conform to the managerialist way in which they themselves are supervised:

> So, I think there's a lot of pressure on an SPO to be a lot of things to a lot of people and I don't think necessarily we get the support. I mean obviously we get supervision but, again, there's a kind of script, these are the things that I need to talk to you about, yeah … my experience is generally there's always an agenda and these are the things that I need to go through with you. (Heather, SPO OPD Pathway – 5 years' SPO, 12 years' service)

> The supervision of middle managers is very corporate at the minute. I think it would really benefit from being more reflective and more, probably more dedicated to emotions and feeling than it currently is, and I think the top of the organisation needs to look at itself for that with – they even call supervision accountability. So, my boss's supervision with his line manager is called accountability, it's not called supervision and that in itself gives you a feel of where the organisation are looking. (Toby, SPO Generic 3 years' SPO, 7 years' service)

SPOs do not feel confident sharing certain emotions in meetings with their line managers. This may be because of the inherent difficulties in carrying out a role that is simultaneously managerial and developmental. Philips (2011) maintains that in managerialist organisational cultures there is the risk that meetings with line managers feel more like a box-ticking exercise and focus on targets, the management of risk and protection of the public rather than discussions about practitioner well-being. This – we would suggest – has led to the marginalisation of emotion when supervising SPOs despite evidence that one way of protecting staff well-being is through supporting workers to be emotionally reflective during supervision (Ainslie et al., 2022b).

Interpersonal coping mechanisms. Interpersonal coping mechanisms such as informal support networks or 'communities of coping' (Korczynski, 2003: 58) were more commonly discussed by SPOs. These forms of support mean SPOs can deal with the emotional toll resulting from the performance of emotional labour:

> In the office I'd go to another manager and have a moan… They'd calm it down (Lillian, SPO Generic – 1 year' SPO, 19 years' service)

> I think having other managers in the office helps because sometimes you just want to have a rant about something and just do it and that's it. Having other managers helps. (Yasmine, SPO Prison – 1 year' SPO, 5 years' service)

> So, there was a group of us as court managers and there were a few of us who would just use each other as sounding boards. So we would do that. (Tianna, SPO Courts – 24 years' SPO, 28 years' service)

Previous research demonstrates how frontline probation practitioners rely on peers to provide support relating to the emotional burden of managing the emotions of others (Burke et al., 2020; Knight et al., 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic reduced the ability for colleagues to engage in communities of coping with negative effects on staff well-being (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, 2020). Practitioners and managers were isolated during the COVID-19 pandemic and described how lonely they felt as frontline managers (see, e.g., Phillips et al., 2021; Ainslie et al., 2022b), but more fundamental structural issues were also raised:

> You can link in with your colleague managers or your SPO court managers but, you know, it's finding the time to do that, you know, to ring somebody and say I need to have a chat, I'm at the end of my tether. (Jemima, SPO Courts)

> You've got a really good, up to 20 people around you to support you, plus whoever else you can get hold of, and you go to be a manager, and you've got your own office and you shut the door. There's nobody behind you, there's nobody next to you to talk to, you're very much on your own which for some sites is a real problem, especially if you're the only manager or there are some managers like AP [Approved Premises][13] managers, their nearest colleague is 40 miles away and you end up feeling quite isolated and you end up – it is a lonely job. I didn't like that. (Toby, SPO Generic – 3 years' SPO, 7 years' service)

Although 'communities of coping' can reduce the potentially negative consequences of performing emotional labour and handling toxins, some SPOs find it difficult or even impossible to tap into this important resource. As Jemima suggests, having time to seek out informal support has been a common theme highlighted by SPOs in relation to the many and varied roles they are expected to perform and aligns with previous studies of frontline probation practitioners (Ainslie et al., 2022a; Ainslie et al., 2022b; Phillips et al., 2021; Westaby et al., 2020; Westaby et al., 2023).

While Toby alludes to the fact that in his previous role as a frontline probation practitioner, he had other frontline colleagues to turn to for support. However, his move into a frontline manager role meant that he had no access to that kind of support anymore. Managers feeling isolated in a large organisation was a key theme relating to barriers to accessing support through 'communities of coping'. This was particularly pertinent for SPOs in specialist roles such as in Approved Premises or Victims Units who must undertake their role at a physical and organisational distance from others working in similar roles.

Discussion and conclusion

This article contributes to knowledge in several important ways. It is the first study of emotional labour consequences for SPOs in their role as frontline managers in the Probation Service. It draws on and applies concepts from the theoretical fields of emotional labour consequences and 'toxin handling' by human resource managers and middle managers in criminal justice institutions to enhance our understanding of the challenges that managers face in penal institutions. Moreover, our analysis has wider relevance for managers in other organisations, especially other criminal justice institutions where managers have been neglected in research.

There are some limitations to the study such as a self-selecting sample which was likely skewed toward those SPOs wanting to discuss emotional labour. Likewise, the gap between the initial survey and interviews (resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic) meant some participants who indicated on the survey they were happy to be interviewed did not respond to invites to participate in follow-up interviews. Only those people who were still in post and with the capacity to be interviewed responded positively. Our sample is therefore not representative of the SPO population, and the findings are to be understood in that context.

Nevertheless, it enables us to think more deeply about the interplay between individual and organisational factors and its impact upon the performance of emotional labour by SPOs and positive and negative consequences. SPOs told us about the deep sense of satisfaction they, as experienced senior practitioners, derive from the emotional skills they

possess in developing and supporting their staff its positive impact on frontline practice. That is not to say the emotional labour performed by SPOs is without its challenges. We see that as 'healing managers' (Kulik et al., 2009: 696), SPOs must 'contain' (Bion, 1962; Ruch, 2007) difficult emotional situations and manage the emotional pain suffered by frontline staff (Frost, 2007). However, whilst this is difficult and challenging work, there is an alignment between emotional labour expectations of the organisation that SPOs support and develop staff and the individuals feeling that this is a worthwhile part of their job role.

However, new public management (Philips, 2011) and the legacy of Transforming Rehabilitation and, more recently, reunification (Tidmarsh, 2024) has led to a prioritising of organisational factors which impact negatively on the emotional labour consequences for managers in probation. A sharpened focus on public protection and the management of risk by the Probation Service has led to a prioritisation of managerial aspects of the SPOs' job role and particularly management oversight in line with organisational policies. In turn, SPOs feel guilty that the management side of their role in fact 'adds to their [frontline practitioners'] emotional distress' (Sutton SPO Generic – 1 year' SPO, 13 years' Service). This is ameliorated by SPOs through emotional labour that supports and protects frontline staff, and their containment of difficult emotions experienced by those they supervise. However, emotional labour and 'toxin handling' remain very much hidden labour (Frost, 2003; Gallos, 2008; Hochschild, 1983) leading to a lack of 'resource or capacity [for SPOs] to help those people' (Maia SPO generic – 4 years' SPO, 17 years' Service).

This focus on public protection has resulted in policy changes and managerial practices that have prompted a culture of fear and blame in the Probation Service. This has had the effect of not only 'contributing to defensive operational practice' (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, 2020: 33) but also intensifying the negative consequences of performing emotional labour. SPOs are expected to have management oversight of all cases managed by frontline staff and as one SPO states:

> The emotional load of SPOs in sentence management is enormous… It impacts on your health and family life… You have to work extra hours almost every day. It is far too much and simply not sustainable… The management oversight policies put huge pressure on you and it means that SPOs are essentially responsible for all cases. (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, 2024b)

Frontline staff and middle managers have unfeasibly high workloads for several years with Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (2021) reporting that only 44% of SPOs and 37% of POs in CRCS, 87% of PSOs and 46% of PO in the NPS believed their workloads were manageable. By managing too many staff and holding multiple responsibilities, SPOs are unable to support frontline sufficiently to deliver a quality service (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, 2024b). Inevitably emotional buckets must become ever deeper to deal with frontline staff's 'ridiculous workloads, not feeling cared for by the organisation' (Demi SPO Prison – 17 years' SPO, 26 years' Service). This in turn increases the potentially negative emotional labour consequences for

SPOs, both physical and psychological, and particularly emotional exhaustion resulting from burnout (Kulik et al., 2009; Metz et al., 2014).

To alleviate the deleterious effects of performing emotional labour and toxin handling SPOs talked to us about coping mechanisms they used. Both formal (line management) and informal (communities of coping) coping strategies were described, but also the barriers to access. In terms of the formal coping strategies, it was suggested that SPOs felt that their supervision was a tick-box exercise, and some did not feel safe in talking to line managers about perceived vulnerabilities. This 'corporate' (Toby SPO Generic – 3 years' SPO, 7 years' Service) way of supervising SPOs is perceived as lacking an emotional dimension – in sharp contrast to how SPOs are expected, through the RPSS to conduct supervision of frontline practitioners. Whilst 'communities of coping' inevitably require a 'community' of practitioners, SPOs described how 'there's nobody behind you, nobody next to you to talk to' (Toby SPO Generic – 3 years' SPO, 7 years' Service) discussing the isolation they feel in their management role. It would seem, from our findings, that SPOs are stuck in an organisation which does not provide adequate formal support but with insufficient capacity to seek out informal sources of support.

This apparent prioritisation of a managerialist approach in the Probation Service has led to a marginalisation of emotional labour performed by SPOs which makes the job meaningful while, at the same time, exacerbating the potentially negative consequences of performing emotional labour. SPOs, then, find themselves in the invidious position of experiencing difficulties in accessing both formal and informal coping mechanisms whilst doing a job which is deleterious: this gives risk to potentially serious implications for the well-being of SPOs.

However, the Probation Service can and, indeed, should take action to align organisational and individual factors to support, protect and develop SPOs as the 'lynch pin' (Harding et al., 2014: 1216) between frontline staff and senior managers. The Probation Service must recognise that the organisation drives the shape and impact of emotional labour because emotional labour is performed to achieve organisational goals. Emotional labour does not have to be injurious: policy decisions influence the emotional culture of the workforce and the consequent impact on frontline managers. More needs to be done to reduce the expectation from senior management that SPOs sanitise organisational directives and consider how organisational policy might contribute to emotional pain experienced by frontline probation staff.

Therefore, we would suggest clearer definition of the SPO role is needed (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, 2024b), and the benefits to SPO well-being from recognising emotional labour and 'toxin handling' in job descriptions should be emphasised. Explicit reference to 'toxin handling' in middle manager job descriptions can limit the potentially negative consequences from performing this role (Daniel, 2017; Kulik et al., 2009; Metz et al., 2014). 'Toxin handling' can also form part of 'role enrichment' (Metz et al., 2014: 250) such as the positive feelings 'toxin handlers' get from helping others (Marks, 1977) but only if staff are supported in doing so.

Emotional labour and 'toxin handling' should be incorporated into both SPOs' and senior probation staff training and recognised and implemented through the supervision of SPOs. The RPSS identifies the emotional demands of frontline staff, and SPO training now includes guidance on supporting staff in the emotional aspects of their job role with

reflective practice having the potential of facilitating such discussion (Ainslie et al., 2022a; Westaby et al., 2020). However, SPOs highlighted this needs to be explicitly incorporated into their line management and its benefits in easing the emotional toll they face when supervising frontline staff (Westaby et al., 2020). Informal coping mechanisms used by managers should also be encouraged with communities of coping facilitated within the Probation Service, particularly for managers working in specialist roles, such as APs and the courts.

To conclude, managers across the criminal justice sector and beyond may experience similar challenges to those discussed by SPOs in the context of probation. As such this article contributes to knowledge beyond that of probation or criminology more generally. Organisations rely on line managers to support the well-being of frontline practitioners and our analysis demonstrates that attention needs to be paid to the emotional labour and its consequences of managers as much as that of practitioners. Middle managers across different work cultures are required to perform emotional labour and toxin handling but the interplay between individual and organisational culture factors will be unique to the setting. Thus, whilst the analysis in this study is a useful starting point more needs to be done to fully understand how managers are expected to use their emotions to fulfil organisational goals whilst protecting staff well-being.

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Notes

1. Probation officers (POs) have completed a trainee probation officer programme (currently the Professional Qualification in Probation) and supervise people on probation who present a very high/high risk of serious harm. Probation service officers (PSOs) have not undertaken a trainee probation officer programme and are generally responsible for supervising people who pose a medium/low risk of serious harm. Residential workers (RWs) are PSO-grade probation practitioners who work in Approved Premises supporting service users, the majority of which have been released from prison on license.
2. Serious further offences are 'specific violent and sexual offences committed by people who are under probation supervision or have very recently been under probation supervision at the time of the offence' (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, 2024a: 4).
3. For a more detailed discussion of the history of the SPO role, see Westaby et al. (2023).
4. For a more detailed discussion of the Reflective Practice Supervision Standards, see Ainslie et al. (2022a) and Westaby et al. (2021).

5. Transforming rehabilitation (TR) reforms in 2015 led to the 35 publicly owned Probation Trusts being replaced by the publicly owned National Probation Service (NPS) and 21 privately owned community rehabilitation companies (CRCs). Probation practitioners were assigned to work either in the NPS as a civil servant or as an employee of a CRC (National Audit Office, 2016). The NPS was responsible for managing offenders posing a high risk of harm to the public, while CRCs managed offenders who posed a low-to-medium risk (Ministry of Justice, 2013). However, after recognising that TR was 'irredeemably flawed' (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, 2019: 3), probation services were reunified from 26 June 2021 under the publicly owned probation service (Her Majesty's Prison Service and Probation Service, 2019).
6. The survey was released in February 2020. However, research was paused between March 2020 and November 2020 due to the NPS rolling out an effective delivery model (EDM) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, at the time the survey was released, participants were Senior Probation Officers but had become Senior Managers. Therefore, senior managers randomly chosen were interviewed about their recent experiences of being in the role of Senior Probation Officer.
7. Generic denotes probation staff who work in a community probation delivery unit (PDU).
8. Probation staff working within an offender personality disorder pathway (OPD Pathway) team are trained to work alongside other professionals in the criminal justice system and NHS staff such as a forensic or clinical psychologists. The OPD Pathway team provides psychologically informed pathway to prisoners and people under probation with a severe personality disorder and who pose a high risk of harm to others, or a high risk of reoffending in a harmful way.
9. Integrated Offender Management (IOM) is a multiple-agency scheme including police and probation staff and agencies to manage locally persistent and problematic offending as well as participants who present higher risks of harm e.g. through domestic violence, urban street gangs or weapon carrying.
10. While Zara was a senior manager at the time of interview she had only very recently been promoted and agreed to be interviewed about her time as an SPO.
11. For example, Occupational Health referrals, arranging specialist equipment to make reasonable adjustments, pregnancy-related risk assessments, agency staff arrangements, staff recruitment, building-related concerns, performance management, complaints, disciplinary action, and yearly appraisals.
12. Structured support is 'Structured Professional Support' offered to staff by HMPPS (see also His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, 2024: 4).
13. Approved Premises in England and Wales are probation hostels that primarily house people who pose a high risk of harm following release from prison.

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