Dirty Work in Probation: The Breadth and Depth of Taint Amongst Specialist Roles.

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Introduction

Elias describes a key characteristic of the civilization process as 'hiding 'behind the scenes' of what has become distasteful' (1939:121). Overall, this can be applied to the delivery of punishment in society, with prison and probation work largely hidden from society. Probation has been described as suffering from the Cinderella complex (Robinson 2016) whereby community sanctions are a key player in the role of punishment in society yet remain under-researched when compared to prisons. Probation has been subject to political change that has had an impact on the penal system more broadly, including the punitive turn, austerity, victim focus, the logic of risk and rise in managerialism (Garland 2001). This has included the failure of strategic reforms to change the way it is organised and delivered. In analysis of media coverage of the Probation Service in England and Wales, Phillips (2014) explains how probation adopted a defensive position in response to *Transforming Rehabilitation* (TR) reforms. Phillips (2014) suggests that probation had become the 'whipping boys of the media' (Maruna, 2007: 113) and draws on Mawby and Worrall's (2013:105) argument that probation had become 'tainted' or 'dirty'. A cultural legitimacy deficit for a welfarist approach working with undeserving clientele makes probation vulnerable to organisational change (Tidmarsh, 2024: 475). This suggests that - unlike the police (De Camargo 2019) – probation lacks what Hochschild ([1983], 2012, p. 163) terms 'status shield'; an occupational status in society that protects individuals from the negative perceptions of others. In their analysis of the absence of 'large-scale resistance' to *TR (*2018: 20) Deering and Feilzer identified a combination of factors including scant media coverage, no public probation voice, senior leaders ceding to political will and an absence of public understanding. Despite traumatic organisational change (Robinson 2022), stagnating pay, struggles with recruitment and retention of staff, practitioners find positives in a commitment to the profession and the endurance of an 'offender-centric ideology' (Tidmarsh 2022: 180; Millings et al 2023). Robinson (2016: 95) issues a 'call to arms', challenging scholars to theorize probation work given the focus on prisons to the exclusion of community sanctions. It is in this context that this article adopts the lens of 'dirty work' as an analytical framework to show how marginalised specialist workers, working with a stigmatised population experience and manage 'dirty work.'

Specialist roles in the Probation Service

When this research was conducted, the government announced the decision to terminate Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC) contracts. The process of reunification merged CRC with the National Probation Service (NPS) in June 2021. To date, a handful of studies have explored the experiences and views of probation workers during this tumultuous period in CRCs (Cracknell 2022; Tidmarsh 2022; Westaby et al 2022; Tidmarsh 2020; Burke et al 2020; Phillips et al 2021; Burke et al 2017; Deering and Feilzer, 2019; Robinson, 2016). Fewer studies focused

on the NPS (Ainslie et al 2022; Phillips et al 2022a; Phillips et al 2022b; Phillips 2021; Robinson 2020; Phillips et al 2016) and at the time of writing just a few studies on the Probation Service following reunification have been published (see Millings et al 2023 and Tidmarsh 2022; 2024). Within this recent body of literature probation workers tend to be treated in generic ways although Robinson has explored the specialist role of court probation staff (2017; 2019 & 2020); Irwin-Rogers (2017) and Reeves (2011) focus on staff in Approved Premises (APs); and Renehan (2023) explores facilitators of domestic violence perpetrator programmes.

Beyond these studies very little attention has been paid to those working in specialist roles, for example, residential workers in APs, Court workers, Victim Liaison Officers (VLOs), Group Programme Facilitators, Prison-based probation workers and Community Payback teams. Despite the importance of these roles in contributing to the organisation's overarching goals of rehabilitation and public protection they have rarely been analysed in research nor feature in the public's imagination of what probation is about. Through consideration of these roles using the lens of 'dirty work' we begin to see that probation culture is not monolithic (Mawby and Worrall, 2013) but varies in purpose, the nature of the work and level of contact. Such analysis therefore allows for a deeper, theoretically informed understanding of probation culture, the impact on the workers themselves and strategies they use to cope.

These marginalised roles are likely to be staffed by Probation Service Officers (PSOs) who are paid less than a qualified Probation Officer (POs). PSOs – a particularly under-analysed grade in probation – can work in offender management teams, Unpaid Work teams, Approved Premises (hostels), the courts or one of the victims' teams (Ministry of Justice 2021). By 2012 the PSO grade made up 50% of main grade probation staff (Mair 2016). There are currently 4,413 full time POs and 6,950 full time PSOs (HMPPS, 2023). Despite outnumbering POs, very little has been written about roles likely to be occupied by PSOs. Concerns have been raised that PSOs are not sufficiently trained to supervise people in the community (Turley et al 2011). Moreover, the increased use of PSOs has been understood as illustrative of the deskilling and de-professionalisation (Annison 2013; Mair 2016) of probation work that has been witnessed in England and Wales because it provides cheaper labour and efficiency savings (Fitzgibbon and Lea, 2014).

The allocation of work and thus responsibility according to risk – so Probation Officers manage people assessed as medium and high risk and PSOs work mainly with people assessed as a low risk of serious harm – was reflected in TR when caseloads were divided along the lines of risk of harm creating and exacerbating an 'us' and 'them' culture (Tidmarsh, 2020; Cracknell 2022). Despite the structural critique of probation officer work being deskilled and de-professionalised by the introduction of the PSOs, there is recognition that the role involves highly skilled and complex work. At the heart of Fitzgibbon and Lea's (2014) critique is a concern that the complexity of this work is undervalued in both the training and nurturing of people employed in these roles. It is useful to note these hierarchies in the service and the ways different forms of work

confer status: the complexity, seriousness of risk in the work appears to reflect the status of that work within the organisation.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to outline the nature of specialist probation work. Residential Workers are part of a wider team who provide 24-hour cover at an AP site, which is a temporary home for people released from prison (MoJ, 2023). The AP workers or residential workers are in a setting where individuals assessed as very high, high or medium risk of serious harm and – as such - can be mandated to reside in an AP on release from prison. APs aim to resettle and rehabilitate individuals who have committed a serious offence and support the safety of the community in the first months after release from prison (HMI Probation, 2021). Although they have also been described as semi-penal institutions (Barton, 2017) to reflect the fact that the aims of the AP have been as much about public protection through 'night curfews and a restrictive supervision and surveillance regime' as about rehabilitation (Marston and Reeves, 2022: 152). Court workers, meanwhile, support magistrates with sentencing decisions, answer questions from the bench and support rulings where there is a breach of a community order (MoJ 2023). Court workers are as 'old as probation work itself' and can be understood as the 'frontline' of probation work where defendants encounter probation for the first time and sentencers have contact with probation workers (Robinson, 2018: 1). The 1990 Victim's Charter placed new obligations on the Probation Service to contact victims of certain crimes to prepare release plans and take into consideration any concerns the victim may have about the release of a prisoner (Enterkin and Crawford 2000). VLOs maintain contact with victims during sentencing and facilitate understanding of the criminal justice system. They inform victims about the release and licence conditions that perpetrators must comply with. The prison-based probation worker manages the custodial sentence in prison, completing sentence planning, risk assessments, screening for interventions and handover to the community-based probation worker (HMI Probation 2022). If the probation worker in one of these roles has not completed the Professional Qualification in Probation their starting salary and range is lower than a qualified Probation Officer. Press (2021) argues that low paid, dirty and necessary jobs often come with low prestige and little interest from the public. In addition to receiving lower salaries, these roles are under-researched, lack visibility to the public and are consequently less valued in society.

Dirty work, taint, depth, and breadth

Given Press's (2021) characterisation of dirty work and the context for specialist workers in probation, this lens is appropriate to explore staff experiences. Hughes' (1951, 1958) term dirty work has been applied across a variety of occupations and services to understand work that society regards as unpleasant, disgusting or morally questionable. Occupations can be considered stigmatised in different ways, best understood through three different forms of 'taint' (Kreiner et al 2006, Goffman 1963, Hughes 1951, 1958). A stigmatised group is one where their identity or image causes doubt about the humanity of the members and their value

as people is seen as blemished, spoiled, or flawed (Ashforth et al, 2006; Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Goffman, 1963).

Practitioners can experience taint in a number of ways, rooted in the type of work that they do. Physical taint refers to occupations associated with tangibly offensive things such as garbage or death (e.g., embalmers dealing with dead bodies) or performed under highly noxious or dangerous conditions (such as roofers or soldiers). Social taint refers to occupations involving regular contact with stigmatised populations (such as prison guards' associations with convicts) or with servile relationships built into the social structure (e.g., chauffeur or butler). Moral taint refers to occupations that are regarded by a significant portion of society to be sinful or of dubious virtue (such as erotic dancers or pawnbrokers) or in which deceptive or intrusive methods are commonly used (e.g., telemarketers or repossessors). To this initial framework we might add emotional dirt (McMurray and Ward 2014) which covers jobs that require practitioners to deal with challenging, burdensome or out of place emotions (e.g. Samaritans listening to callers in distress). Work that is 'emotionally dirty' requires practitioners 'to induce or suppress feeling to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others' (Hochschild 1983: 7). The marginalisation of emotion is reflected in the conceptualisation of 'dirty work' where emotions are a by-product of physical, moral and / or social taint, rather than a distinct 'dirt' when emotions appear out of place. Finally – and more specifically related to criminal justice work – psychological taint alludes to the psychological processes necessary to work and cope with the 'contamination' that emanates from work with people who are mentally unwell and harmful effects of prison work (Garrihy 2022). Dirty work has been observed in a range of jurisdictions and across criminal justice settings from barristers (Gunby and Carline (2016); to Danish prison officers (Lemmergaard and Muhr 2012) and to a limited extent in probation work (Mawby and Worrall 2013).

Despite engaging in 'dirty work' - and contrary to early work by Goffman (1963) that saw stignatization as a mechanism leading to low self-esteem and 'identity destruction' (Ashforth, Kreiner and Sluss 2006: 619) – people find value in their work through the eyes of each other and outsiders through a process of 'dignifying rationalisations' (Hughes 1971: 340). We see this in the context of mental health workers (Morris 2016); probation workers (Mawby and Worrall 2013); samaritans volunteers (McMurray and Ward 2014); barristers (Gunby and Carline 2020); prison staff (Eriksson 2023, Garrihy 2022) and the police (De Camargo 2019; De Camargo and Whiley 2023). Such rationalizations can include taint management strategies adopted by Irish Prison Officers that allow them to refocus, recalibrate, reframe and deploy techniques of neutralisation (see Garrihy, 2022); or strategies of self-legitimation seen amongst police officers (Debbault and De Kimpe, 2022); or efforts to retain positive identities through developing ideologies that reframe, recalibrate and refocus their work (Worrall and Mawby, 2013). In lieu of a status shield to provide protection from the negative perception of others (Hochschild 1983; De Camargo 2019) these occupational ideologies can be seen as coping strategies. Thus, workers reframe their work by foregrounding the virtues and benefits of their roles; recalibrate

by adjusting the standards that represent the extent of the dirt; and refocus by recounting rewarding aspects of the job (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999; Kreiner *et al* 2006).

Dirty work occupations are nuanced and complex and so a classification system that reflects the diversity in how dirty work is experienced by workers is helpful in drawing out out the 'type, scope and intensity of dirty work' (Kreiner, Ashforth and Sluss 2006: 4). Workers within any given role are unlikely to have homogenous experiences of 'dirt' and dirty work. Kreiner et al's (2006) typology suggests that we should explore dirty work and associated taints through the concepts of breadth and depth. Breadth refers to the proportion of work that is dirty. For example, a coroner deals with dead bodies regularly (high proportion) and firefighters are defined by their primary activity; fighting fires (high centrality). Meanwhile, depth refers to the intensity of that work or how much the worker is directly involved in the dirt. Thus, police officers deal with hardened criminals (high intensity) whereas security guards deal with the general public (low intensity). Drawing on work by Dick (2005), Kreiner et al (2006) acknowledge that occupations can be tainted on multiple dimensions, offering the example of a police officer who works in dangerous conditions (physical taint) with criminals (social taint) and use coercive methods (moral taint). These dimensions are summarised and applied to prison work in figure 1 and later to probation work in figure 2.

Figure 1. here

Probation can be understood as a tainted occupation when considered through the lens of Kreiner et al.'s (2006) 'dirty work'. In turn, this can shed light on the occupational culture that exists in probation; because probation workers have regular contact with stigmatised groups, they 'run the risk of being stigmatised too' (Mawby and Worrall, 2013: 105). Probation workers can feel like society reluctantly accepts the necessity for probation and that the taint in this context relates partly to the public not knowing what probation work involves (Mawby and Worrall, 2013: 9). This article aims to expand on this work by exploring the 'type, scope and intensity of dirty work' (Kreiner et al 2006: 4) undertaken by probation workers in specialist roles through depth and breadth. By analysing the unique experiences of probation workers whose roles hitherto have been overlooked this article develops existing knowledge on the way in which probation can be understood as dirty work (cf. Mawby and Worrall, 2013) and illustrates the value of deploying the concept of taint and dirty work to organisations that comprise staff carrying out a range of roles.

Methods

This article uses data that were generated as part of a wider study of the implementation of the Reflective Practice Supervision Standards (RPSS) which formed part of a broader policy programme in the NPS called Skills for Effective Engagement Delivery and Supervision (SEEDS2). This study included considerations of practitioner emotional labour and staff wellbeing. The study deployed two methods of data collection including a survey about staff wellbeing disseminated in March 2020 and semi-structured interviews conducted between January and

March in 2021. In the survey we asked participants if they were willing to be interviewed. Those who volunteered were randomly selected for interview. This article only draws on these semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis of the practitioner interviews generated a significant insight into the perceptions of taint for workers in specialist roles. This prompted further analysis using *a priori* concepts of depth and breadth as an analytical framework. In total we interviewed 61 participants comprising 30 front-line probation workers, covering diverse operational roles, such as residential workers, victim liaison officers, prison-based probation officers and community-based probation officers. Further to this, we interviewed 28 senior probation officers and 3 learning and development probation officers who delivered the SEEDS2 training (see Westaby et al 2021). The gender ratios in the service were broadly reflected in our sample with 43 interviewees identifying as women and 18 identifying as men. Recent HM Prison and Probation workforce statistics (HMPPS 2023) shows there are 16, 164 women and 5,209 men working in probation. This is nearly a 70/30 split between women and men. Participants were from a diverse range of NPS divisions. We did not collect demographics including tenure in position or age which is a limitation of the study. The data in this sub-sample includes 14 participants in specialist practitioner roles outside of the probation officer main grade supervising people on probation in the community. Within this sample there were victim liaison workers (n=3), approved premises staff (n=3), prison-based probation workers (n=4) and court workers (n=4).

The interviews were not originally designed to explore dirty work. The data has – instead – been re-analysed through the lens of dirty work to illuminate the ways in which staff in specialist roles experience marginalisation in the occupational context. Limitations of this include a small sample and all the workers' perceptions of contamination are subjective and cannot be generalised (De Carmago, 2019). That said, we have been able to identify themes which are common across and within each specialist role and so the findings offered below represent a consistent message from an albeit small sample of people working in specialist roles in probation. The interviews were focused on staff supervision, reflective practice and emotional labour and so our data needs to be understood in this context. The quotes presented below best illustrate the themes we generated through our analysis. We did not ask specific questions about dirty work, and the data on this theme represents the perceptions of our participants, shaped by the study's overall focus. The research was approved by Sheffield Hallam University's Ethics Committee and HM Prison and Probation Service National Research Committee and the NPS Senior Leadership Team. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were transcribed and analysed to identify key themes. A team member collated and coded instances where dirty work was applicable, this was then recoded by team members to ensure accuracy of interpretation using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006)

Findings

We start our findings by identifying the concept of taint for specialist workers as it emanates from the public, from within the organisation and from outside the organisation. We move on

to consider how specialist workers in probation experience breadth and depth of taint before showing how probation workers reframe, recalibrate and refocus (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999; Kreiner *et al* 2006) to manage taint in their work.

Specialist probation roles and taint

The specialist probation workers we interviewed experienced physical, social, and moral taint from the public, from people within other organisations and – perhaps surprisingly – from people within their own organisation. One unique feature of working in an AP is the physical location which means residents and staff can be in contact 24 hours a day:

> We would be responsible for room searches, drug and alcohol testing, running purposeful activities for the men that we work with. (Robin, Residential Worker)

Thus, Robin, who had a previous job working with homeless people and had been in this role for three years explained that staff experience physical taint by being in contact with tangibly offensive items such as bodily fluids which are required for drug testing and they work with stigmatised populations, such as people who have committed sexual offences. When recounting an initiative whereby POs can shadow AP workers, Mitchell who had a previous career in security, as a bodyguard and worked in his current role for two years, describes how probation colleagues responded:

> They're like, wow, how do you deal with this all day? (Mitchell, Probation Service Officer)

Having this type of question directed at you can be a common characteristic of occupying a dirty role, where people express their surprise and disbelief at the challenging work being done. For example, Samaritans volunteers describe similar responses to their emotional work (Ward and McMurray 2014), and it is reflected in Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) article entitled "How can you do it?" What stands our finding apart from others is that here we see taint emanating from people within their own organisation rather than from those outside the profession. This points to the presence of social taint from one person to another within the same organisation. In the context of TR, HMI Probation (2021:15) found thatCRC staff felt like they were perceived by former (NPS) staff to be less skilled and 'second class' and our data develops our understanding of the extent and persistence of what we call intraorganisational taint in a probation context.

The physical and social taint was expressed slightly differently by Court Officers. For this group, social taint had its roots in their contact with stigmatised populations and emanated from the public, whilst inter organisational taint was rooted in the sense that others in the criminal justice system saw them as occupying a servile relationship with the court:

> Well, we have always been the poor relation. Do you know what, in the Crown Court and in Magistrates Court there is this big picture of who is who in court. And everybody is on it, bar the cleaner, but probation aren't on it. (Claudia, PSO)

Efficiency considerations and 'factory-like offices' means that court workers can feel like they are 'servants of the (court's) clock' (Robinson 2020: 77) and this was reflected in our own data. This taint from outside the organisation felt by Claudia, who had been a probation worker for 20 years and spent 15 years in court, is hitherto unexplored. We also identified examples of moral and emotional taint experienced and felt by VLOs. In this work, Vicki, who had worked in various roles in probation across their 15 years of service with 5 years as a VLO described victims as being 'angry at the system'. Another VLO Karen, who joined probation as an administrator in 1978 and worked for 23 years as a VLO said 'we do get a lot of abuse'. Vicki goes on to say that 'some victims will struggle to get past that [anger], some victims will see us as a representative of that system and so sometimes they do direct their anger at us.' The VLOs in our study experienced moral taint from being involved in a system that the victim sees 'as being very unjust' (Vicki):

> I've learnt to say, or not to say, 'I know how you're feeling' because I don't. And the number of times, a couple of times it's caused such an emotional backlash for me Karen, VLO)

In response to the need to perform emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) Karen has learned to use her own emotional response to avoid offending a victim who will be experiencing strong feelings. Earlier in her interview Karen says, 'we do get quite a lot of abuse when they [victims] don't like what we're telling them.' In addition, Vicki commented, 'sometimes that anger is directed at you [VLO] because that is what they see.' This anger and frustration expressed by victims could be seen as 'emotional dirt' in that VLOs experience feelings that are out of place or directed (in their eyes at least) at the wrong person. As with Samaritans volunteers (Ward and McMurray 2014) VLO's hear emotions that have not been heard, worked through or managed and this threatens the VLO's belief in the system they are part of.

Nikki, a prison-based probation worker for eighteen months, describes emotional dirty work in the disbelief experienced from a member of the public when she reflects on her complacency at receiving another threat:

> I think, in this line of work, you kind of go, 'Oh. I've got another threat.' You do become a little bit complacent or a little bit jaded by it. It's like, 'Oh. Another one,' but actually, when you talk to people who aren't in this line of work, they're like, 'Say what?' You forget that it does have an impact. (Nikki, Prison Probation Worker)

In this quote Nikki expresses some of the emotional taint and the consequences of performing emotional labour going on to say she 'will hit a large glass of gin' at home to cope with the impact (Phillips et 2016; Westaby et al 2022). Moreover, she recognises an emotional detachment which

comes from the commonplace nature of aggressive behaviour in prison. When the person responded with 'Say what?' there appears to be a realisation of the impact of this work and that the behaviour does not meet the norm for people in the public. This is consistent with the psychological taint that occurs because of the 'pernicious effects' of prison work (Garrihy, 2020, p. 2). This spillover (Crawley 2004; Westaby et al 2016) represents a behaviour-based conflict and desensitisation whereby a work-based attitude to a common place experience is normalized by practitioners yet remains highly unusual to those outside the profession.

We also see evidence of interorganisational moral taint for prison-based probation work:

> You try to challenge in a jokey way because obviously you get a bit of a reputation for being, oh, you know, she's very PC [politically correct]. (Caitlyn, Prison Probation Worker)

Caitlyn, who joined probation in 2002 and qualified as a Probation Officer in 2004, is pointing to the challenge of working with what she describes as 'old skool' prison officers and is keen to avoid becoming morally tainted by her caring approach to working with people in prison for fear of being branded politically correct.

We can see from the above that AP workers, court staff, VLOs and prison-based probation practitioners we spoke to all experienced some form of physical, social, moral, emotional or psychological taint. Our data also shows how taint is multi-dimensional (Kreiner et al 2006: 621) and that taint appears to be external (coming from the public), coming from inside the organisation (intraorganisational) and from other criminal justice workers outside the organisation (interorganisational). Ashforth, Kreiner and Sluss (2006: 621) acknowledge that the 'type, scope and intensity of dirty work vary considerably across occupations.' Our data shows this varies across roles within the same organisation and that a sense of perceived invisibility and marginalisation amongst peoples' accounts of working in these roles can compound the feeling of being tainted by one's role. The hidden nature of this work is a common characteristic of other occupations categorised as dirty work, arguably in the probation roles examined here this is compounded by being hidden within their own organisation (Press 2021; McMurray and Ward 2014; the Butler Trust campaign for Hidden Heroes (www.HiddenHeroes.uk, 2024); Eriksson 2023, and Liebling 2000). What we already know is that probation workers experience social taint partly because of limited public knowledge and a reluctance to find out more (Mawby and Worrall 2013; Phillips 2014; Deering and Feilzer 2018).

The breadth and depth of taint in specialist probation work

Our data not only highlights the diverse types of taint but also sheds light on how specialist workers are isolated and experience stigma in terms of breadth and depth in nuanced ways (Kreiner et al, 2006). This differs across roles including the residential workers in Approved Premises (APs), Court Workers, Victim Liaison Workers (VLOs), and prison-based probation workers.

Working in an AP can be categorised as high breadth and depth (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). In relation to how taint is experienced, staff must carry out the 'day-to-day running' (Robin, RW) of the AP. Whilst Mitchell (PSO), describes 'high demand' residents who are 'constantly at the window.' This relates to the office in some APs where the workers sit behind a glass window to protect them from residents. This window can serve to reinforce an 'us versus them' (see Irwin-Rogers 2017; Phillips 2014) atmosphere which further stigmatizes residents, metaphorically holding taint at bay. Participants described AP work as comprising a high proportion of activities that result in physical taint and explained how they are directly involved in these tasks, for example, urine testing and searching bedrooms. Mitchell and Robin used similar phrases including 'first line of defence' and 'first line of call' to describe their role. They work with a stigmatised population for a large part of their day resulting in social taint. The image of a probation worker behind a computer in 'open-plan offices, undertaking important but routine risk assessment and risk management' (Mawby and Worrall 2013: 113) was expressed as an aspiration:

> It would be nice to go and sit in their [probation officers'] office and have a quiet hour talking to somebody and thinking. (Mitchell PSO)

Although this is a narrow conceptualisation of the probation officer role, Mitchell's imagination is symptomatic of the pressure he feels working in an AP as a PSO.

As we have seen, the court team probation workers experience physical and social taint in their work which simultaneously conveys a sense of breadth in the proportion of their work that is perceived as being dirty. Furthermore, Henry, a probation service officer in the Magistrates' Court - who had worked in probation for over thirty years in numerous roles and had worked in the court for around three years at the time of the interview - describes reading about distressing circumstances:

> With your morning coffee you move down and there's a picture of someone [who] has put a hammer in their mother's head. (Henry PSO)

The banality of dealing with distressing information whilst having a drink in the morning conveys physical and emotional taint and depth in the intensity of everyday work. Moreover, the dual social taint of being in a servile relationship with the court and frequently working with stigmatised populations awaiting to be sentenced combines to create taint that is both broad and deep.

VLOs experience multiple dimensions of taint in their role, too. In relation to breadth, a high proportion of their work requires them to cope with and support victims with their emotional responses to being a victim of crime. Vicki and Karen expressed how their role involves supporting victims who express their anger by being abusive towards the VLOs who they judge to be part of an unjust criminal justice system. The intensity and depth in this work is expressed by Karen who reveals they do 'get quite a lot of abuse.' In prison work, probation officers experience inter- and intraorganisational taint with Rebecca, who joined probation in 2019 and

qualified in 2020 explaining that when she started working in the prison many people said you can 'go home at the end of the night and know where they are' so it will be less stressful than working in the community. That is not what Rebecca found, saying 'I still go home worrying about my cases.'

The status of roles in probation work can be linked to the complexity of the work, seriousness of the risk and skills involved (see figure 2).

Figure 2. here

AP workers deal with dirty work in a residential setting all day and this can be understood as high breadth and depth. Court workers, meanwhile, felt socially tainted in the court hierarchy and physically tainted by the work, resulting in high-breadth and low-depth taint. VLOs experienced moral taint visiting victims and this appears to be high breadth and low depth. The frequency of this feeling of taint is not as clear for these workers, although we would suggest that - unlike the AP worker, for example - they can take shelter from taint by returning to an office or office-like environment. Withstanding this, Kreiner et al (2006, p. 621) argue that some roles that have high breadth and depth due to a single predominant dimension. As such, the source of the taint appears to vary from predominantly physical for AP workers to moral for VLOs and social for court workers. It is more difficult to surmise for prison-based workers partly because taint for this group relates to the spillover of the work on the workers personal lives which does not feature in Kreiner et al's (2006) model although we would suggest there is value in doing so. The persistent worry for the prison-based worker suggests high breadth and depth, through the regularity of her contact with stigmatised populations and the sustained intensity of this work and the contamination of their lives outside of prison is consistent with Garrihy's (2022) notion of psychological taint.

A positive professional identity through self-legitimation

While the negative consequences of occupational stigma are to be expected, they give rise to an interesting conundrum around how positive identities are constructed in the face of performing dirty work (Mawby and Worrall, 2013: 106). Contrary to the work of Goffman (1963) that stigmatization leads to identity destruction and low self-esteem we can see how participants reflect on, make sense of, and overcome, notions of 'dirty work' through reframing, recalibrating and refocusing their work. In turn we can use this to cast further light on the concept of professional identities in probation. Thus, Robinson (2020: 73) describes court workers as being 'largely contented' and finding safety in their role, despite the turbulence in probation; Millings et al (2023: 345) found a 'strong sense of duty of care' to people on probation and colleagues which seemed at odds with difficult working circumstances. All our participants had actively chosen to work in their current role and implicit in these 'dignifying rationalisations' (Hughes, 1971: 340) are their motivations for working in their job. This theme - of finding a positive work identity - is a process we observed amongst AP workers, court workers and Victim Liaison Officers. We found that workers 'reframe' by foregrounding the

virtues and benefits of the work; recalibrate by adjusting the standards that represent the extent of the dirt and refocus by recounting rewarding aspects of the job (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Kreiner *et al.,* 2006).

Thus, Robin illustrates how he reframes his work by explaining how he counters the stigma residents face by treating them as humans, adopting a transparent approach and challenging staff. Mitchell, meanwhile, refocuses on the rewarding aspects of the role keeping residents safe and focusing on the value of helping residents 'progress back into society':

> You've got to have your wits about you and 12 hours of having your wits about you can be quite tiring, but I come home with a smile on my face because I know I've done something today that I've enjoyed, do you know what I mean?

We were able to identify a sense of pride when AP workers use phrases such as 'first line of defence' and 'first line of call' which we can interpret as them highlighting the perceived virtuous nature of the job. This, then, can be understood as them reframing their perception of how their role is seen as dirty. This reframing is unique to this role in probation and allows staff to focus on the overarching priority of protecting the public by holding the line between ordered society and people who threaten social solidarity through the commission of an offence. This could be further understood as a technique of self-legitimation (Bottoms and Tankebe, 2012) in which specialist probation practitioners legitimate their own power through a sense of moral righteousness (Debbault and De Kimpe 2022).

In the Magistrates' Court, PSO Henry refocuses on the rewarding aspects of the work saying, 'I prefer mags because it's just like ongoing crisis intervention, which I enjoy':

> It's whatever it will do to actually prevent more victims being created. Very often obviously rehabilitation is what will do it, then it's a win-win. The victims come first every time.

Henry also reframes the benefits of his court work to society by illustrating the value in his role and how this prioritizes the victim. In victim work Vicki and Karen also find reward and value in knowing they are protecting the victim who they framed as 'the forgotten part of the criminal justice system.' Karen explains the reward and value in 'telling people when somebody is coming out, so they are not just walking down the street and seeing an offender.' Vicki goes on to add substance to how she sees her work as worthwhile:

> In terms of emotional management, it can be quite rewarding to feel like you help and support somebody through quite a difficult period in their life. (Vicki)

Prison-based probation workers framed the importance of their work in terms of public protection, rehabilitation and preventing further victims. Nikki found value from feeling like she could focus on the 'rehabilitative relationship' in prison more than is possible in the community,

due to the absence of enforcement and monitoring work. Brendan, who had worked for the probation service for 10 years, qualifying as a Probation Officer in 2016 meanwhile explained the challenging work in prison, high caseloads and how he orientates himself with his core values:

> I mean my whole value obviously, why I joined, is still to reduce obviously the number of victims there are, that's what I always come back to for me.

Prison-based practitioners - more than any other of our respondents - refocused the challenges of their role by being thankful for being part of a supportive team:

> 'I'm lucky that I've got a really good team. I don't know what I would do if I didn't.' (Rebecca PO)

> 'The staff teams that we've got, you do feel like people care about each other. (Brendan PO)

It is possible that within the prison where probation workers are in the minority of staff a community of coping (Phillips et al., 2016) where it is safe to share experiences of taint with those who have shared values, approaches and behaviours is appreciated.

A consistent theme in the self-legitimation of these participants is a focus on the victim and preventing future victims. Whilst probation workers do not share the crime fighting status of detectives (Innes 2003) participants were doing the work to protect the public, albeit using different strategies to the police. We see evidence of taint management strategies that represent a strong occupational culture in the absence of a status shield for probation workers in roles that experience multidimensional breadth and depth in this 'dirty work.'

Discussion

This article has used the theoretical framework of 'dirty work' to develop 'what we think we know about penal cultures' (Robinson 2016: 85). The exploration of the 'depth and breadth' of dirty work in probation (Kreiner et al 2006) has offered fresh insight into the subjective experiences of probation workers in specialist roles in APs, the Magistrates' Court, victim liaison work and prison. The unique contribution of this article is that it exposes the diversity of the roles in the probation service to analysis rarely afforded them and shows that workers in these roles can experience taint using the multi-dimensional model of breadth and depth. Moreover, our analysis shows that the primary dimension of taint varies from role to role, with physical taint being most pertinent for the AP worker and moral taint being more relevant for the VLO. Our analysis also makes an intervention by developing Kreiner et al.'s (2006) concept of dirty work to consider the direction of taint as well as its breadth and depth. This allows us to move beyond public perceptions and homogenous understandings of occupational culture by revealing the nature of perceptions of different workers and how this contributes to culture

and hierarchies within and between organisations through what we call interorganisational and intraorganisational taint.

The nature of interorganisational taint has implications for understanding the way multi-agency working between probation and other institutions plays out and sheds light on how probation workers feel their roles in the penal system are valued, or otherwise. Intraorganisational taint, meanwhile, casts light on how an 'us' and 'them' culture within the organisation is both created and then perpetuated (Tidmarsh, 2020; Cracknell 2022). Finally, the analysis presented above develops knowledge on how probation workers construct their professional identity and how it is reflected by people outside their role. The identification of the multi-dimensional nature of taint breadth and depth and concomitant taint management strategies (Garrihy 2022) has implications for predicting and mitigating the consequences of working in stigmatised roles and thus has relevance for organisations well beyond probation and criminal justice.

Analysis of the subjective experiences of probation workers in specialist roles reveals the extent of dirty work in these roles and how occupational culture can protect workers. The hidden nature of the role is part of the problem of not having a status shield which gives rise to potentially important implications (Hochschild 1983, p.163; De Camargo 2019). Unlike police officers, probation practitioners do not deal with the public at large but victims and people who offend who – in turn – may not feel able to communicate their role or good work. In fact, to the contrary, our participants appear to experience a deficient sense of legitimacy. Despite this there is a strong feeling from workers that their work is helping victims and people on probation. Rather than having a status shield, probation workers appear to use their values and beliefs in rehabilitation, protecting victims and helping someone in difficult circumstances to shield themselves from the stigma that arises from doing dirty work.

Whilst the taint experienced in specialist roles varies in nature and origin, the absence of cultural legitimacy for working with people who are seen as undeserving of care, shapes the way probation workers self-legitimate (Tankebe and Bottoms 2012; Debbault and De Kimpe 2022) by drawing on similar values, beliefs, and supportive colleagues. This could be seen as indicative of the strength of occupational culture in probation. This enduring legacy of shared values and beliefs in probation can therefore be conceptualised as an 'occupational cultural shield.' An avenue for future research would be analysis of how processes of self-legitimation play out across all roles in the field of community sanctions. Ultimately then, our analysis suggests that the taint that specialist probation workers experience from colleagues within probation and the wider criminal justice system is considered more important than taint which is directed towards them from wider society. Moreover, our analysis identifies the workers reframe, recalibrate, and refocus their roles to draw self-esteem, pride and self-legitimacy from their work and the aims of their organisation.

What is clear from our analysis is that specialist probation worker's roles are underrepresented in empirical research, misunderstood within and outside the penal system and experiences are diverse in their nature, intensity, and focus. Moreover, we suggest that analysis of the roles through the concept of dirty work explains this under-representation. During a period when the recruitment and retention of experienced staff in probation in England and Wales is critical (Carr 2023), initiatives to increase the prestige of the role rather than reducing the visibility of the profession further still with a generic nomenclature would be helpful. The work in these specialist roles requires skill, certain forms of emotional labour and demands coping strategies that are tied to being on the margins of a marginalized service. The probation service in England and Wales is currently experiencing increasingly high levels of sickness absences due to 'mental health and behavioural disorders' (HMPPS, 2023), further underlining the need to value the mental health of probation workers, training, and education to maintain a healthy workforce. Thus, the voices of all probation workers ought to be 'prioritised, privileged and understood' (Eriksson 2023: 339) in policy and research.

To conclude, this article has used the concept of dirty work to understand and expand on the concept of dirty work, demonstrating the unique experiences of specialist workers in probation through the lens of breadth and depth. Of course, it is understood that taint cannot tell us everything about what it means to work in a specialist role in probation but doing so allows us to understand the hierarchies and structures that shape the field and therefore practice and practitioner experiences. Furthermore, it highlights the way core values in probation inform the taint management strategies of probation workers, particularly those working in the margins and how they use those values in conjunction with their own unique roles to manage taint. Probation is not alone in having specialist workers working on the fringes of the organisation. For example, Police Community Support Officers in the police service or Operational Support Grade staff in prisons all occupy potentially specialist and marginalized roles. Thus, we would suggest that further use of the concept of dirty work, breadth and depth and taint management strategies would prove fruitful in terms of understanding culture, hierarchy, and staff wellbeing in criminal justice organisations beyond probation.

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Figure 1

Typology	Criteria	Examples
Breadth	The proportion of work that is dirty or centrality of that dirt to that occupational identity.	For example, Prison Officers are in contact with a stigmatised group every day and are defined by their role. (high proportion / centrality) *And high intensity
Depth	The intensity of dirtiness and extent to which worker is directly involved in dirt.	Prison Officers are involved in the daily lives of the stigmatised population. (high proportion, centrality and high intensity)
Multiple dimensions of taint	Depth and breadth greater in occupations tainted on multiple dimensions.	Prison Officers may experience danger (physical) in daily work with people who have committed offences (social) and be working towards rehabilitation (moral).

Figure 2

Typology	Criteria	Examples from our research
Breadth	The proportion of work that is dirty or centrality of that dirt to that occupational identity.	For example, AP workers, VLOs and Court workers are in contact with a stigmatised group every day and are defined by their role. (high proportion / centrality) *And high intensity
Depth	The intensity of dirtiness and extent to which worker is directly involved in dirt.	AP workers are involved in the daily lives of the stigmatised population. VLO's and Court workers to a lesser extent (high

		proportion, centrality, and high intensity). However, the moral taint for VLOs and social taint for Court workers could result in high depth.
Multiple dimensions of taint	Depth and breadth greater in occupations tainted on multiple dimensions.	All the roles experience physical, social, and moral taint in their daily work with people who have committed offences be working towards rehabilitation and public protection.

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Biographies