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Target, audit and risk assessment cultures in the probation service

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Abstract

This article traces the rise of managerialism in the probation service in England and Wales before exploring the impact of these changes through reference to in-depth observation and interviews in probation. The article considers how national standards affect practice; how audits feature and their impact on accountability; and how the use of risk assessment tools are perceived and resisted in two probation teams in England Wales. The article then turns to changes implemented by the Coalition Government and highlights some tensions between managerialist occupational cultures in probation and what might occur in the near future.

Introduction

Managerialism has had a significant impact on the probation service and has included the introduction of technological solutions to risk assessment and offender control; the pervasive use of targets to manage workload and practice; and the extensive use of rules to standardise practice. This article focuses on the way managerialist techniques have impacted on the occupational culture in the probation service and the bearing this might have on what could happen in the service following policies introduced by the new government. The article begins with a brief overview of managerialism in the service before moving on to look at the

role targets play in shaping occupational cultures. I then consider the impact of audits, specifically those which are implemented after serious further offences (SFO) and the manner in which risk assessment affects practice. Finally, I explore some very recent policy changes and discuss some of the implications these might have when implemented in the managerialist culture described.

Methodology

The data on which this paper is based were collected as part of fieldwork toward a Ph.D., which involved extensive observation of probation staff, 31 semi-structured interviews with staff, as well as thematic analysis of policy documents. The first research site (RS1) was in a large city whilst the second (RS2) was located in a medium-sized semi-rural town. The period of fieldwork in RS1 took place over a period of 6 months beginning in October 2009 whilst fieldwork in RS2 took place over 4 months starting in April 2010. In many instances the two sites were very similar and so I only differentiate between the two when relevant.

The period of observation included, *inter alia*, observing supervisions; office-based work; prison visits; home visits; MAPPA meetings as well as holding discussions with members of staff in a variety of settings. Comprehensive fieldnotes were taken throughout and have been analysed thematically using software focussing on: the use of discretion; the role of rehabilitation; punitiveness amongst staff; risk assessment and management; and, importantly for this article, the impact of and attitudes to managerialism. RS1 was a large office, which contained more than one OMU, and so interviews were also conducted with members of other OMUs. Similarly, observation took place with members of other OMUs although the main focus was on the one OMU in that office. As described by Bauwens, doing observation

in probation enables the researcher to identify 'similarities and discrepancies' in what probation officers say and what they do (2010: 41). Moreover, observing practitioners over an extended period of time allowed me to witness particular events unfold so that rather than data being dependent on practitioners' memories, actual incidents were observed. Furthermore, conducting interviews after a period of observation allowed me to probe staff about incidents which were of particular relevance to my research, thus augmenting and clarifying my own inherently interpretive fieldnotes.

It would be remiss to not start this article with a brief discussion about the nature of 'occupational culture'. As Garland has pointed out, 'the notion of 'culture' is notoriously multivalent, both as a theoretical concept and as an object of analysis' (Garland, 2006: 420). Defining an organisation's culture, therefore, is likely to be an almost impossible task (Keup et al., 2001). This, however, appears to be a fatalistic approach and so, in the interests of simplicity, I take occupational cultures to mean 'shared ways of seeing, thinking and doing' things (Thompson et al., 1996: 647). Because culture is multivalent it must be stressed that what I present below cannot be read as the *only* occupational culture in probation but as illustrating particular 'occupational cultures' which flow from the rise of managerialism.

Managerialism in the Probation Service

Although managerialism arguably came later to criminal justice agencies than other public services, its impact has been no less pervasive (Ashworth, 2009: 63). The rise of managerialism in criminal justice and the probation service has been dealt with, in detail, elsewhere (see Beaumont, 1995; McLaughlin et al., 2001; Raine and Wilson, 1997; Whitehead and Statham, 2006) and so this is a brief overview of the phenomenon.

Managerialism arrived at probations door in the late 1970s and early 1980s in response to a variety of perceived problems in the penal sphere and the service in particular. At the time there was increasing scepticism about the effectiveness of probation and its use of casework especially in light of Martinson's review of interventions delivered by the penal system (1974). There were also concerns around the perceived 'softness' of probation as well as a desire to reduce an expensive and burgeoning prison population (cf. Garland, 2001). Thus, managerialism was introduced to improve the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the service. In this regard the Statement of National Objectives and Priorities (SNOP) (Home Office, 1984) 'took the form of redefining and reordering the Services' objectives and putting public protection to the fore' (Raynor and Vanstone, 2007: 67) and 'signalled the Home Secretary's intention to subject probation policy to a degree of control never previously attempted' (Morgan, 2007: 92). An important and enduring manifestation of this control was the introduction, in 1992, and subsequent revisions of national standards (see Ellis et al., 1996; Hedderman and Hough, 2000). Suffice it to say that the introduction of national standards heralded an expanded inspectorate and 'represented a challenge to the professional autonomy of individual probation officers, [and] were associated with growing demands for management performance data and practice accountability' (Morgan, 2007: 92).

It was hoped that the election of a Labour government in 1997 would lead to an 'upturn in [the probation service's] fortunes within a more enlightened approach to law and order' (Burke and Collett, 2010: 232). Alas, this did not transpire and the march of managerialism continued throughout Labour's time in office. During this period, the Service became increasingly micro-managed to the extent that, by 2001, managerialism, in the form of modernisation, had been 'institutionalized and normalized' (McLaughlin et al., 2001: 313).

The advent of the National Offender Management Service followed: the word management in its title is sufficient to indicate the underlying philosophy of the penal system in the early 21st Century (cf. Feeley and Simon, 1992). Following the election of a Coalition Government in 2010, Burke and Collett have offered the following assessment of Labour's legacy in relation to the probation service:

> It seems to us that what originally offered hope – 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime' has increasingly become the slogan under which a reductionist focus on managerialist and technical policy fixes has critically impacted on probation. Being tough on crime has been supported by a welter of targets and pronouncements that at the local level have become counterproductive. Perverse incentives have delivered damaging outcomes in terms of both probation practice and wider criminal justice operations and at the same time provided the rationale for more intrusive bureaucratic control. (Burke and Collett, 2010: 242)

More recently, the Justice Committee has published a report on the role of the probation service in which they criticise 'the overly-administrative approach to engaging with offenders' as well as a 'leaked "restricted" Ministry of Justice report which outlines the results of a 2008 survey of direct contact with offenders which found that probation staff spend only 24% of their time in contact with offenders' (Justice Committee, 2011: 18). It was in this climate that the fieldwork described above was carried out. Having set out the context of the research, I turn to the issue of what managerialism looked like in practice, focusing on three prominent themes: targets, audits, and risk assessment tools.

A Target Culture

Targets have the potential to be counterproductive (Burke and Collett, 2010) because they can be arbitrary; not people-focused; out of a practitioner's control; competing; coercive; and too simplistic in the context of the ineffable nature of success in probation (Whitehead, 2007: 40-45). Whilst these criticisms are valid they do little to get to the heart of how managerialism has impacted on the occupational culture of probation. Thus, it is imperative

to combine the actuality of practice with the theoretical issues raised around the extensive use of targets. This raises questions around how practitioners perceive targets and what a target-driven probation service actually looks like.

Managerialism has, over the years, become a pejorative term which, when one considers its beginnings might not be wholly deserved. For example, the few offender managers[1] (OM) in my study who worked in the Service during the 1970s and 1980s argued that the introduction of SNOP and national standards were seen as necessary:

> …[when I started] there was so much fluctuation and differentiation in how different people delivered the job. National standards brought in some equity – that was the major thing – they made it so that the people were given the same guidelines so it wasn't down to individual officers. That improved practice no end … so if [offenders] didn't get on with their officers there was no room for people to be discriminatory – it wasn't widespread but it happened. (RS2, PO, Interview)

For this particular probation officer (PO), national standards, 'embodied good practice' and this view was common amongst OMs in both research sites. Good practice in this sense is not only about seeing offenders at regular intervals or doing court reports on time but it is more broadly related to standardisation, considered a positive development:

> [A PO] asked me what I had observed so far and whether I had seen a lot of differences between how people worked. I said that I hadn't very much variation. She was surprised but thought it was good because it meant that 'we're doing something right, I suppose' (RS1, Fieldnotes)

In this sense the standardisation that managerialism is supposed to bring about has indeed been internalised. This is despite OMs taking time to stress that their work is focused on the individual, that work must be tailored to their needs and risk profile, and that this is

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[1] The term offender manager denotes both probation officers and probation services officers. Where relevant I distinguish between the two.

something which demands flexibility and relativity. Already this raises questions about a

possible tension between a managerialist culture and the work that OMs see themselves

doing.

There was a pragmatic acceptance that targets have to be done in order to get paid; be

accountable to stakeholders (offenders; managers, colleagues, the Trust; politicians; victims

and the general public) and justify the service's existence. Targets, on the whole, were

accepted:

> [Targets] are an integral part of our day-to-day working life – they are there for a
> reason and I can see why they are there. I have nothing against national standards
> 'cos there needs to be things in place to make sure things get done and without
> them then it would be chaotic – it helps me having national standards 'cos it
> means I know what to do and when to do it… (RS2, TPO, Interview)

However, the same OM followed this comment up with:

> There are problems with it 'cos things need to be implemented such as codes and
> authorised absences and disability scores and so many things get added on so you
> lose track as to whether you have done it and then you get told off for missing it
> when you didn't even know about it… but in regards to standards, whatever job
> you have – you have to accept that there is a process to follow. (RS2, TPO,
> Interview)

Targets are, as indicated by the OM above, a significant aspect of probation work and this

was reiterated by many during fieldwork. One PO offered the following assessment of how

targets feature:

> Targets are like the coat hanger – something to hang everything off… It becomes
> automatic to do the targets- you just get on with it and then do the rest of the
> stuff. Targets are good 'cos they make you do certain things – they ensure you
> see the higher risk clients regularly – you can't let them drop off. (RS2, PO,
> Fieldnotes)

The same PO went on to describe, in interview, how targets are 'omnipotent' (RS2, PO,

Interview), suggesting that targets are all-knowing and *the* thing the Service should be

moving towards. This is not altogether negative – as already inferred, targets are considered to have some positive attributes. However, when we look more closely at OMs' attitudes towards targets some problems arise. Firstly, many OMs questioned the usefulness of targets which are overwhelmingly quantitative in nature and fail to take quality or an individual's circumstances into account: in essence they argue that because it is 'easier to measure things like times [as opposed to]… the subtleties of working with somebody …the tangible things get far too much emphasis' (RS1, Team Manager, Interview). Secondly, because targets are 'omnipotent' they take on a threatening nature. For example, when talking about targets in RS1 four OMs highlighted the possibility of redundancies and the impact of this on their attitude towards targets:

> … I am more aware of those and try and hit those at all costs 'cos that impacts on me and my future in the probation service, particularly with possible redundancies on the horizon (RS1, PO, Interview)

OMs have an ambivalent attitude towards targets: they are necessary in that they focus energies and define priorities but they are too simplistic in the way things are measured and can cause OMs to become fearful of not hitting them.

Turning to more negative aspects of managerialism, one question that is raised concerns the way targets are interpreted. As one OM put it, targets 'encourage people to resort to the minimum which helps them to think that they are doing a good job – if they have hit the target, then they have done a good job' (RS2, PSO, Fieldnotes). Thus OMs use targets to legitimate their own work despite the problems that so many of them raised. The three OMs who raised this issue all said that because they didn't work to the minimum, their work either suffered or they were forced to work extra hours (they were not the only OMs to work more than their contracted hours but they stressed that this was the only way to work above and

beyond national standards). This is concerning if we take the following comment into account:

> …because the national standards are the minimum the system is geared towards it – all the warnings etc.: surely they should be aiming for something higher 'cos if you miss the minimum you fail. (RS1, PO, Interview)

This is related to another downside to targets: that if something goes wrong 'the service won't back you up 'cos they give you guidelines and if you don't act within them they wont take the blame' (RS1, PO, Interview). Targets put considerable pressure on OMs both in terms of making them hit the targets and then in terms of holding them to account. This is problematic when one considers the high caseloads in the Service:

> most [targets] embody good practice- none of them are completely irrelevant. The difficulties arise in the context of resources- colleagues get concerned when getting an OASys done on time is more important than seeing an offender. (RS2, PO, Interview)

In RS1 a workload tool was in operation: each week a spreadsheet would be emailed round all staff, detailing each OM's workload as a percentage. If an OM is between 95% and 100% then they were considered to be working at capacity; between 100% and 110% was considered to be amber whereas over 110% was 'in the red' and indicated over-capacity (see NAPO (2010) for more information on workload tools). The majority of OMs were over capacity although the meaningfulness of such a figure was questioned:

> I asked [a PO] if you could tell the difference between 127% and 117%. She said, 'No, not really … I don't even know how it is worked out'. She then asked [another PO] the same question: 'no, I'm always flat out although sometimes I am more flat out than others'. (RS1, Fieldnotes)

Nevertheless, it was used to allocate work as well as hold OMs to account: during fieldwork in RS1 it was announced that a high workload could no longer be used as a defence in the case of a serious further offence and NAPO encouraged OMs to inform their manager on a weekly basis of the fact that they were officially overworked (NAPO, 2009). Although this

would not result in OMs being relieved of work or reducing the extant likelihood of an offence being committed it was considered an acceptable way of OMs deferring some responsibility for their actions. That an OM can defer responsibility in such a technical way is an important effect of managerialism on probation practice.

Another example of how targets are used to hold OMs to account comes from a team meeting where an SFO enquiry was discussed. The enquiry had highlighted the fact that, contrary to requirements, a particular form had not been faxed to the Ministry of Justice on the day of release. A long discussion ensued about the form before a PSO pointed out that 'it wouldn't have stopped him from committing the offence anyway' (RS1, PSO, Fieldnotes) a sentiment with which the team wholeheartedly agreed and one which is highlighted by Merrington and Stanley (2007: 440). I was able to discuss this matter in more detail with the PSO who had not sent the requisite form:

> [Another PSO] had an SFO which annoyed me – she was on leave and I volunteered to see her client for induction and a couple of sessions. That person went on to rape someone- I had only seen them two or three times and I got a positive in the report 'cos I had been to the person's house which I didn't have to do – I had gone above and beyond national standards but the one thing they picked out was that I failed to fax a form to HQ saying that he had been released on licence even though the police knew that he was out on licence – all the form did was tell them what his conditions were – that would not have stopped that person from raping that girl but as far as NOMS are concerned, the fact that I didn't do that was a serious error so there is a certain antipathy to the idea that their failure is my fault but that is how we are measured and [the manager] has made it plain. (RS1, PSO, Interview)

In this example, then, the presence of rules and audits have done nothing to improve practice or reduce the risk posed by an offender; rather all it did was irritate a member of staff to the extent that he feels antipathy towards the organisation that manages the service.

The prevalence of targets also has an impact on the time spent with offenders, a finding confirmed by the Justice Committee (2011). OMs in my sample described reducing reoffending as one of the main aims of their job. Reducing reoffending is achieved via risk management and rehabilitation. OMs gave numerous definitions, objections and clarifications about what rehabilitation means for them but what is relevant here is that OMs saw supervision and accredited programmes as the main tool with which to rehabilitate offenders. As described by the Justice Committee (2011: 18) and observed during fieldwork, long supervision sessions are a rarity in probation today and this can be related directly to the prevalence of targets:

> I would like to say that a lot of work is done working with offenders: doing work
> to reduce their risk of reoffending and risk of harm but you don't always have
> time, even as a TPO [trainee probation officer], to work with someone 'cos in the
> back of your mind you are thinking that you have that to do and this to do and we
> have to meet all these targets which we get pulled up for. (RS2, TPO, Interview)

Furthermore, pressure to complete tasks on time would mean that some offenders were not given the same chances as others, purely because of pressures to meet targets:

> I spoke to [a PO] briefly- she said that someone hadn't come for a PSR interview
> yesterday but she had too much to do so wasn't going to offer another
> appointment… She said that she felt like she should've given another
> appointment but that she was just too busy. (RS1, PO, Fieldnotes)

The proliferation of targets has also had an impact on face-to face dealings with offenders. I observed several instances in which OMs would recommend a course of action to an offender simply because it would contribute to their national standards:

> She also offered a skills4work appointment and said that this could count as one
> of his national standards. (RS1, PO, Fieldnotes)

Although national standards here enabled the offender to access a service which he may benefit from, the implication of the PO's comment was that he would not have to see her that week if he went to a skills4work session. When we take into account the fact that some

appointments, such as skills4work appointments are valued less than other appointments

national standards can be seen to be watering down the level of service that an offender

receives.

An Audit Culture

Managerialism in the probation service brought with it a raft of audits, inspections and

reviews (Morgan, 2007) which, as seen above, can demoralise and irritate staff. There is,

however, another important implication of the widespread and automatic use of audits in

probation. Firstly, an SFO and the subsequent review was something which was feared by

OMs in my sample:

> We then got on to talking about SFOs – he said they are scary but it comes down
> to finger pointing – there is no way you can know what someone will do. (RS2,
> PSO, Fieldnotes)

During fieldwork in RS2 a TPO's offender was suspected of committing an SFO and this

case illustrates the impact of the SFO review. When the TPO found out that the offender had

possibly committed an SFO (the police wanted to press charges on grounds of suspected

GBH) the first thing she did was speak to her PDA. They went through the file to check that

all procedures had been carried out. This included checking the offender's pre-convictions,

his OASys review, PSR etc. The focus was on whether or when something had been done

rather than how it had been done. At one point the TPO said 'isn't it sad that the first thing

you do is look at reviews' (RS2, TPO, Fieldnotes). Colleagues were supportive and took time

to reassure the TPO who was visibly upset by the whole episode especially when, at one

point, she identified something in the PSR that had not been done. Meanwhile, a colleague

checked whether GBH was classified as a serious further offence which it turned out not to

be. The TPO was visibly relieved at this news before saying 'look at me, there's someone in

hospital and all I'm bothered about is whether it's an SFO or not' (RS2, TPO, Fieldnotes).

The possible SFO dominated the TPO's work for the next few days; at one point she

said that she was 'not worried about the victim dying in a professional sense but was

worried in a humane sense' (RS2, TPO, Fieldnotes). She was able to say this because

she felt she had carried out all checks and reviews satisfactorily. She had done nothing

wrong and, as a colleague pointed out, it wouldn't have been her fault had the victim

died. The impact here of managerialism is clear: the TPO was primarily concerned

about whether she had done everything correctly – the possibility of an SFO review was

mentioned almost immediately whilst the victim was barely considered. This is not a

criticism of the individual TPO who was simply doing what the service asked of her.

Rather it is intended to illustrate how the form-driven review process detracts attention

away from victims and protecting the public and pulls it towards protecting one's own

back through technical procedures. What's more, you could argue that the public were

at neither more nor less risk as a result of the OM's actions – the offence had been

committed and the OM could not reasonably have been blamed. Yet she was taken

away from supervising other offenders for several days whilst the administrative

procedures around a possible SFO were implemented.

As well as detracting OMs away from their work, and contrary to their *raison d'être*, audits

and targets an be considered particularly ineffective at holding the service to account:

> JP: …you said that the service has to justify itself – how can it justify itself
> without audits and quality assurance?
> PO: Yes, but who are things like audits and quality assurance things aimed at?
> They are not aimed at the public – if I was to ask someone in the street or a
> politician they are unlikely to have read the latest inspection report- people in
> probation look at it. (RS2, PO, Interview)

This view was represented across OMs during fieldwork where there was a tension between the introduction of managerialism in order to improve accountability and the way that accountability actually functions. OMs said that the Service needs to be publicise itself better and that members of the public have little knowledge of what probation does, never mind how it does it. Compelling OMs to meet targets and perform well in audits is unlikely to achieve this. It is probably *because* of this tension that when asked about whom they feel accountable to no OMs mentioned the general public first (although the majority did after further probing questions).

In a similar vein, one PSO said, in response to whether she feels accountable to her clients that she does but 'only on a personal level: they are not auditing anything' (RS1, PSO, Interview). This may explain why, when asked about accountability towards clients, most OMs rephrased the term to 'having a responsibility to them'- a subtle difference which implies a less concrete and formalised version of accountability. It most probably also explains why the courts rarely featured in the lists of stakeholders to whom OMs felt accountable despite the courts being the providers of the majority of work which comes the Service's way. Managerialism was introduced to strengthen accountability and, to an extent this has been achieved: experienced members of staff reported feeling that they were more accountable than when they joined the service in 1970s or 1980s. However, the means with which accountability has been encouraged appears to work against other important developments in the probation, such as the focus on public protection or the continued need to be accountable to both clients and the courts.

A Risk Assessment Culture

The final aspect of managerialism to be discussed here is the use of risk assessment tools, which, as with targets, were seen to be unproblematic in terms of ensuring offenders receive a similar level of service regardless of their circumstances and staff skills. Risk assessment tools are seen as making practice more objective; standardised; and, crucially in terms of managerialism, evidence-based:

> Everything has to be *evidenced* – everything is *evidenced* … if you saw reports from years ago it would say 'in my opinion' or 'my assessment of this is…' whereas now OASys has taken us away from that. You might see the line but the assessment is based on what OASys is saying…' (RS1, PO, Interview)

> She thinks that these tools have their uses – in that they provide an objective truth, … if they are done correctly, she said, they provide a useful counterpoint to the subjective/professional truth that an offender manager creates. (RS2, PO, Fieldnotes)

On the other hand, widespread use of risk assessment tools means that offenders are assessed to the extent that 'we spend so much time planning how to mange someone's risk that we have no time actually managing the risk! The focus is very much on doing that risk assessment, [ensuring] that [it] is on time and that it covers everything so it's not the best thing' (RS1, PO, Interview). Moreover, the tools encourage OMs to place considerable emphasis on the numerical score that they output to the extent that numerical risk scores are seen as the only way of measuring risk (despite widespread criticism of OGRS in particular and the way that the numbers are seen as arbitrary):

> Some OMs were discussing SARA[2] and were complaining that they 'didn't even know the point of SARA, that it just covers the same things as OASys and it doesn't even come out with a score… it's just yes or no answers and then low, medium or high risk just like OASys' (RS1, PO, Fieldnotes).

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[2] Spousal Assault Risk Assessment

OASys was considered by most OMs to be a useful, if cumbersome, tool for assessing risk. OASys focuses an OM's mind in a similar but more productive way to the way targets focus work. What this means, however, is that there is a heavy dependence on OASys with each offender seen as having, essentially, very similar issues. There *are* risk factors that are highly correlated to offending but the standardised style of OASys (and pre-sentence reports) meant that the face-to-face work done with offenders was remarkably similar:

> Observed a supervision with [a PSO]. As with other supervisions I have seen this week, [the PSO] started by asking a general question about how the offender's week (or month) had been before moving quickly through their family situation; their work; their drug and/or alcohol use before giving them the opportunity to ask questions and finishing off by arranging the next appointment. (RS1, Fieldnotes)

A subsidiary question to how external forces have impacted on occupational culture is whether such forces are resisted. Thus far I have presented little in the way of resistance because targets and audits are seen by OMs as compulsory: there is no way around working towards them, even if it is unconscious and despite the implications of doing so. Conducting risk assessments, however, does allow for resistance although it is important not to conflate the exercise of discretion with resistance. OASys in particular utilises dynamic risk factors which allows OMs to influence the score with their own professional knowledge and experience. It is thus possible to appear resistant when the intention is to act professionally, although one PO did think that 'exercising discretion is a way of resisting' the direction that policy forces you towards (RS2, PO, Fieldnotes). Resistance appears when a risk assessment is conducted in the framework of other managerialist inspired limitations such as referrals to accredited programmes and the allocation of a tier.

The advent of Accredited Programmes was a key factor in the rise of managerialism in the probation service, particularly in the framework of What Works (cf. Hedderman, 2007;

Merrington and Stanley, 2007). Accredited programmes have strict eligibility requirements which are implemented to maintain a programme's integrity as well as ensure that a programme adheres to the risk and needs profiles of offenders. This means that an offender who has an OGRS score of 50, for example, might not be eligible for a programme which has been identified as potentially beneficial. In some cases an OM will decide to deliver sections of the programme in a one-to-one setting but this is not always feasible or safe. Alternatively, an OM may contact the programme tutor and argue their case and I observed this on several occasions. However, this option can lead to a situation where an OM has to justify their decision again, at a later date during an audit which acts as a deterrent to the utilisation of professional judgment. An alternative option is ''jiggling' around with OASys to make sure that they get the right score' (RS2, PO, Fieldnotes). As already mentioned, OASys does allow for defensible decision-making but I doubt that this is what is implied here.

As well as being used to devise a risk management plan, risk assessment is used to allocate resources. That 'resources follow risk' has become a key philosophy underpinning resource allocation in the probation service and was a significant driver in the move towards specialist as opposed to generic teams in the early 2000s (Robinson, 2005). When inducted onto their sentence, released from prison, or periodically reviewed, offenders are given a tier, with tier indicating the lowest risk offenders and tier 4 indicating the highest. The tier is worked out using a variety of factors such as index offence, OASys score and aims of the sentence. The principle of resources being directed at higher risk offenders was seen as unproblematic in terms of Tier 4 and Tier 1 for OMs in my sample. However, there was equivocality about the effectiveness of such a principle for tier 2 and 3 offenders because they were considered to have higher needs than their tier necessarily indicated:

> … I think the lower the risk the more likely to commit a serious crime. I think the
> higher the risk, yes, the higher risk and all the alarm bells are on and everyone is

buzzing around but I think it is the people who do these one off things – you know, the little burglar who is running around and who no one is taking much notice of – I think those are the people who go on to commit further serious offences. (RS1, PO, Interview)

Although needs are taken into account by OASys (and OMs believed this to be the case to varying degrees) risk was seen as the primary factor in an OASys score. This would lead to discussions in the office about tiering offenders:

PO1:   He's tier 4, can you reduce someone's tier before they come out?'
PO2:   Yes, if he is in open and is doing well and has done well on ROTL[3] then yes.
PO1:   But if I reduce the tier then it will have to be tier 2 'cos of his offence.
PO2:   No, just make it a tier 3.
PO1:   I can't do that… it is rigid… it's not a case of "ip dip doo, you're tier 2"'.
PO2:   That's silly.

(RS1, Fieldnotes)

Note that PO1 in the previous example had been qualified for 2.5 years where as PO2 had been in the Service for almost thirty years: it was clear throughout fieldwork that experienced POs were much more likely to resist managerialist techniques than recently qualified POs, or PSOs. There was clearly confusion about how rigid the tiering framework should be implemented and this confusion opened up the possibility for resistance as the following example, from a very experienced PO, illustrates:

JP: …okay, so is there ever a temptation to raise or reduce an offender's tier or risk level…
PO: I've done it…
JP: because of the resources they'll get…
PO: I've done it- yeah…
JP: because they've got more needs than that tier allows?
PO: hmmm [affirming and nodding]…

(RS1, PO, Interview)

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[3] Release on Temporary Licence, or 'home leave'.

This PO is, effectively using her discretion to re-tier offenders as she sees fit for reasons that she sees as relevant to that offender. OMs also re-tier offenders in order to manage workload:

> PSO: … with different tiers and stuff … I think sometimes we change the tier to suit the service rather than the client…
> JP: in what way?
> PSO: There'd be certain clients who are a certain tier and so would need to go to a PO but we would change the tier and give them to a PSO – obviously we would get less time for that than what the PO would get 'cos it would be a higher tier at the time so we feel as if we are doing the same work as PO's but we don't get as much time with our clients – well, we don't get as much time allocated to us.
> (RS1, PSO, Interview)

Workload allocation via risk assessment is resisted by some OMs. Whilst this overcomes some of the problems associated with the workload tool and the over-dependence on static risk factors in some risk assessment tools, it can result in offenders being supervised by PSOs rather than POs; and being seen more or less often than the risk tool and national standards dictate. Risk assessment is supposed to result in an objective and standardised form of working but this does not always seem to occur. There is a tension, then, between the perceived benefits of risk assessment tools and the actual implementation of the score that is created by them. This can be explained by referring to the fact that OMs see their work as being focused on the individual: it was evident during fieldwork that OMs do not think that that offenders (or people more generally) can be put into boxes and they resented the way risk assessment encourages them to do so.

A New Culture

The Coalition Government published revised national standards in April 2011 (Ministry of Justice, 2011). The new standards dramatically reduced the number of targets that OMs have to meet – the absolute lack of numbers in the document is notable; as is the number of pages which has been reduced from 38 to 4. The standards undoubtedly give more discretion to

OMs although including standards like 'purposeful contact is made with the offender promptly after order   commencement/release on licence' or 'the sentence is enforced' (Ministry of Justice, 2011: 3) could be seen as deliberately vague in the context of privatisation (Towers, 2011). Whilst this development is likely to be embraced by many involved with the Service, it raises questions about how the managerialist culture described above will interact with such changes.

The government is also going ahead with plans to improve offender engagement. Again, this is to be welcomed: a probation service which works to engage offenders in their sentence may well achieve 'better' 'results'. However, when OMs feel more accountable to management than other stakeholders, doubts should be raised about how these changes will manifest. It is commendable to help OMs engage better with offenders but in order for this to work, they need to be able to held to account by offenders. This does not currently happen and, I argue, is something that needs to be addressed.

A culture that has fear of not seeing people in specified timeframes as one its motivating features, or one which enables the use of resistance resulting in skewed risk assessments has the potential to lead to confusion or, worse, despondency. Similarly, a culture in which accountability flows upwards as opposed to downwards may well struggle when attempts to improve offender engagement are implemented. On the other hand, these policy developments may lead to an invigoration of probation practice: a situation in which OMs are able to do the work that they feel is right for that individual offender. It must be also be remembered that probation Trusts now have considerable autonomy over how they conduct themselves and what targets they set for staff: it is possible that these new organisations and policies may result in a renewed sense of professionalism amongst staff. Change has been a

constant feature of the probation service over the last few decades: how these changes will

manifest when they embed in the occupational cultures described above is, yet again,

unknown.

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