



# Hidden voices: Practitioner perspectives on the early histories of probation in Ireland

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## Abstract

Probation practice, past and present, is under-researched in Ireland, with limited attention paid to the personal accounts of the people of probation such as administrators, probation officers, clients and rehabilitation workers. This article presents findings from the first phase of a project which aims to construct a comprehensive and multi-faceted historical account of probation practice in Ireland from the perspective of core stakeholders. It begins with an overview of its 'formal' history, before presenting key findings from interviews with probation officers who began work in the 1960s and 1970s. The core objectives of the project are to shed light on probation officers' occupational identities, map the probation sub-field, and bridge the 'governmentality gap' between official and frontline narratives; goals that are achieved through the application of an oral history methodology. A thematic framework of analysis is employed in order to better hear the individual and collective voices at the frontline of probation in Ireland during the timeframe.

## Keywords

Agency, Ireland, oral history, penal policy, probation

This article presents results from the first phase of a project which aims to construct a comprehensive and multifaceted historical account of probation practice in Ireland from the perspective of administrators, probation officers, rehabilitation workers and clients.

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While the histories of other Irish criminal justice agencies and penal policymaking in general (e.g. Rogan, 2011) are fairly well documented, the work of the Probation Service has received little empirical scrutiny. Though valuable studies exist, they focus largely on the general history of the Service (McNally, 2007; 2009) or the experience of contemporary probationers (Healy, 2012). The study is therefore the first of its kind to chart the evolution of probation work and its personal, legislative and socio-political contexts from multiple stakeholder perspectives. This article considers the findings emerging from interviews with probation officers from the 1960s and 1970s cohorts. As will be shown, these interviews shed valuable light on their occupational identities and the probation sub-field, and highlight tensions as well as areas of agreement between the 'official stories' of probation and the lived realities of officers.

McNeill et al. (2009: 419) coined the term 'governmentality gap' to capture the 'lacuna in the existing penological scholarship which concerns the contingent relationships between changing governmental rationalities and technologies on the one hand and the construction of penalty-in-practice on the other'. While official narratives, as set out in policy documents and political statements, provide insights into the penal climates inhabited by penal agents, a complete account must also consider how agents negotiate, influence and subvert these discourses. The practices of penal agents are shaped by their *habitus* (a collection of durable and deeply held assumptions, values and beliefs that shape actors' relationships to the social world) and position in the *field* (a social space with its own set of rules, knowledge and capital that shapes *habitus* and mediates the impact of external developments) (Page, 2013). But, since absolute control over the actions of penal agents is impossible, power is always exercised through an ongoing negotiation between policymakers, managers and practitioners. These interactions create a space where acts of resistance can flourish. Goodman et al. (2015) take this argument further by conceptualizing penalty as a strongly contested field wherein actors compete in a perpetual struggle for power and legitimacy. Those with the most capital at a particular time acquire the power to shape the vision and practices of the penal field. For Goodman et al. (2015), penal history is not characterized by periods of consensus and rupture but by ongoing conflict between penal agents.

Contemporary research provides evidence of a governmentality gap between official and frontline narratives, revealing that probation officers continue to endorse penal welfare principles despite the transition to more punitive and risk-oriented models at policy level (see, for example, Burke et al., 2016). Probation officers appear to use agency to protect their occupational cultures against colonization by dissonant worldviews. For example, Mawby and Worrall (2013) found that officers rely on agency to 'craft' their jobs in ways that facilitate the construction of meaningful occupational identities within challenging organizational environments. Probation officers may be able to withstand external pressures to change because their personal philosophies naturally incline towards welfare, rehabilitation and social justice ideals (Grant, 2016). These core values are fortified through education, reflexive practice and the experience of working with moral ambiguities in real-world situations (Canton, 2011).

Though large-scale acts of resistance are rare, Carr and Maruna (2012) provide an example from Northern Ireland where officers collectively refused to undertake mandatory supervision of politically motivated offenders in the mid-1970s on the basis that it

was unethical to collude in the criminalization of political ideologies. However, most acts of resistance are minor in nature and common examples include exaggerating a clients' needs to access support or spending more time with a client than permitted under the rules (Carey and Foster, 2011). Nevertheless, Cheliotis (2006) argues that all acts of resistance, however small or clandestine, signal the presence of a counter-hegemonic discourse which may ultimately precipitate change within an organization.

The existence of a 'governmentality gap' highlights the need to study practitioner narratives alongside official discourses to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the probation sub-field. Although a growing body of evidence highlights disparities between official and frontline narratives in contemporary probation work, it is unclear whether this gap is a uniquely late-modern phenomenon or also existed in earlier historical periods. The uncertainty surrounding this issue represents an important gap in knowledge since policy and practice were (arguably) more aligned at other times in the history of probation, particularly during the penal welfare era. This article aims to contribute to the historical and theoretical discourse on these issues by exploring Irish probation officers' occupational identities and mapping the contours of the probation sub-field during the 1960s and 1970s. Specifically, it analyses the dominant 'official' and practitioner narratives underpinning probation practice, and explores how probation officers used agency to respond creatively to difficult social and organizational contexts.

## **Irish Probation in Context**

The development of legal practices and organizational structures in probation services vary across Europe but, in most states, followed the establishment of legislative provision (see Robinson and McNeill (2016) for a discussion of the development of probation across Europe). Probation services were formally introduced in Ireland under the Probation of Offenders Act 1907, whereby courts could issue probation orders, release offenders on probation and appoint probation officers to 'advise, assist and befriend' their supervisees. The subsequent Criminal Justice Administration Act 1914 introduced powers to recognize and subsidize societies providing care to people on probation, and allowed additional conditions to be added to recognizance orders. Both Acts were enacted before Ireland gained independence from Britain in 1922. Given a shared history, language and culture, one might expect the development of Irish probation practice to mirror that of Britain but, despite common legislative and administrative origins, their developmental trajectories began to diverge after 1922. For instance, probation practice in Ireland is still governed by the 1907 Act (though new legislation - the Criminal Justice (Community Sanctions) Bill 2014 - is pending). In contrast, probation philosophies, practices and structures in England and Wales have experienced continuous transformations in the intervening years (Robinson, 2016).

Like many Anglophone jurisdictions, Ireland has a long history of 'penal philanthropy' (Garland, 1985), and a commitment to 'rehabilitation'; that is, an emphasis on volunteers working under a quasi-religious, (re-)educational model (McNally, 2007; Rogan, 2012). The religious influence endured longer in Ireland where close ties between the Catholic Church and the State resulted in conservative social policies and the 'catholicization of the public sphere' (Patterson, 2006: 14–15). McNally (2007: 12) argues that

the most significant development in social policy up to the 1970s was the adoption of the Catholic principle of subsidiarity which advocated ‘the restoration of the state, burdened by excessive duties, to its rightful place, which was not to do everything itself, but to direct, watch, urge and restrain subsidiary organisations’. Consequently, religious orders and voluntary charitable organizations, such as the Legion of Mary and St Vincent De Paul, provided the bulk of rehabilitation services until the 1960s.

By this time, many other Anglophone jurisdictions had created formalized probation structures. For example, probation services in England and Wales were embracing penal welfare principles and practices, and emphasizing professional development (Vanstone, 2004). In contrast, Irish penal policy making during this period is widely regarded as under-developed, slow to change and conservative; perhaps even to the point of ‘official neglect’ (Rogan, 2011: 74). Such inertia may be explained by a passive over-reliance on the voluntary sector, along with low crime and imprisonment rates (although the period was also characterized by high rates of ‘coercive confinement’, with more than 1 per cent of the population incarcerated against their will in a variety of institutions, such as Magdalen laundries (O’Sullivan and O’Donnell, 2012)). While politicians, policymakers and the legislature did not substantively contribute to the development of offender supervision during this period, the judiciary was proactive in developing the non-statutory practices of adjourned supervision (deferral of sentence for a specified time with supervision) and the suspended sentence (suspension, in whole or in part, of a custodial sentence subject to the issuance of a recognizance order to comply with conditions).

The Probation Service, which operates as an agency within the Department of Justice and Equality (previously known as the Department of Justice), was perceived to be particularly over-stretched, under-resourced and unappreciated at this time (McNally, 2007). The Service employed just six probation officers during the 1960s, with support provided by the voluntary sector, and its management structure consisted of one Chief Probation Officer who focused on administering the status quo (McNally, 2009). The Service was demand-led, and primarily under the direction of the judiciary in the Dublin Metropolitan District Court and the Dublin Juvenile Court (McNally, 2009). The state refused to establish probation officers as civil servants until the mid-1950s, leaving them without pension rights or security of tenure, and on a very low salary. Probation staff eventually became affiliated with the Institute of Professional Civil Servants, an early incarnation of probation officers’ trade union (McNally, 2007).

### *A turning point*

The 1960s marked a paradigm shift within social policy and culture, although Daly (2016: 256) notes, ‘the rhetoric of change was not always matched by reality’. Penal policy was also evolving, largely owing to the character and drive of the Minister for Justice from 1961 to 1964, Charles Haughey, who employed a liberal, rehabilitative and outward-looking approach to penal policymaking, to which the polity was surprisingly receptive (Rogan, 2012). His greatest contribution to the development of the Probation Service was the creation of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Juvenile Delinquency, the Probation System, the Institutional Treatment of Offenders, and their After-Care, in 1962. Recommendations made by the Committee had ‘as their aim the social rehabilitation of

the offender' (Dáil Debates, vol. 198, col. 124, 27 November 1962; Rogan, 2012: 12). The Committee's contribution included the appointment of two prison welfare officers, and a Probation Administration Officer to manage the Service's activities (though the latter appointment proved deeply unpopular among staff due to its conservative nature) (McNally, 2007). Haughey's successor, Brian Lenihan, maintained a rehabilitative discourse and followed through on most promises, but any impetus for reform was quashed by 1966 with the appointment of Micheal Ó Moráin as Minister for Justice (Rogan, 2011).

The most significant report of this era was an investigation of the Probation and After-Care Service commissioned by the Minister for Justice in 1969 to identify areas that could be improved and implement any recommendations (Department of Justice, 1969). The report, which was never published, proposed a nationwide expansion of the Service based on a regional structure and the introduction of a formal management structure. It clarified the responsibilities of officers, and endorsed the use of volunteers, though with clearer guidelines on task allocation (McNally, 2009). The report also recommended that probation management should foster a close relationship with the Department of Justice, based on trust, dependability and loyalty (McNally, 2007). A second report of note concerned an investigation into Reformatory and Industrials Schools Systems in 1970 (the Kennedy Report) (Kennedy, 1970) which emphasized the need for core involvement of the Service within the juvenile justice sphere. During this time, the first piece of comprehensive research on probation in Ireland was also completed (Hart, 1974) and its findings served to further engage the Service with international discourse (McNally, 2009). Official probation statistics were not published until 1980 by which time 1121 people were on probation or adjourned supervision, including 134 women and 667 children aged 15 or under (O'Donnell et al., 2005).

Notwithstanding the Department's distracted and insular approach to policy making during the 1970s (Rogan, 2011), the concept of penal welfarism continued to gain traction. Indeed, this era represented 'a major break with the past and the first evidence of a new, planned and structured approach' (McNally, 2007: 21). Perhaps the most significant organizational and cultural shift followed the appointment of the first Principal Welfare Officer in 1972 which coincided with an unprecedented expansionary period (McNally, 2007). The number of officers grew from eight to 47 between 1970 and 1973, with posts in seven centres established outside Dublin and within prisons and detention centres. Arguably, these changes were precipitated by deteriorating social conditions, including increased crime rates, escalating prison numbers and an emerging drugs problem, as well as a reduction in the availability of volunteers.

Whereas faith in the rehabilitative ideal at an international level collapsed during the 1970s, it continued to thrive in Ireland, perhaps due to the absence of rigorous intellectual debate and a very small criminological community (Kilcommins et al., 2004). In 1979, the Service was renamed the 'Probation and Welfare Service', emphasizing its endorsement of penal welfare principles. The values underpinning the 1907 Act also remained dominant but its provisions were increasingly interpreted in their broadest form to facilitate innovation (McNally, 2007). By 1975, all new probation officers were required to have a degree in social sciences but management training was virtually absent. McNally (2009) notes that, while the centralized management structure facilitated rapid expansion, it did so at the expense of skills development for managers. The

newly appointed administrators tended to be cautious and retained a firm hold on decision making (McNally, 2009).

The 'official' narrative of the period was thus characterized by themes of isolation, expansion, professionalization and rehabilitation. This study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of this era by taking into account the local practitioner narratives that often get subsumed into more general, explanatory interpretations. By collecting participants' spoken memories of their occupational lives and identities, this project is the first of its kind, not only to shed light on previously unknown and undocumented facts, but to invite the reader to imagine the facts as each individual lived them. The need for a historical understanding of probation work is recognized elsewhere and oral history projects have been completed in Northern Ireland (Carr and Maruna, 2012) and Scotland (McNeill, 2010).

## Methodology

The *Histories of Probation* project aims to achieve a comprehensive, multifaceted understanding of change and continuity in probation policy, culture, philosophy and practice over time. For the first phase, semi-structured oral history interviews were conducted with probation officers, administrators and rehabilitation workers to gather their recollections of probation work (phases II (oral history interviews with probation clients) and III (archival and documentary analysis) are not yet complete). This article reports on the findings that emerged from oral history interviews with 14 administrators and officers who joined the Probation Service between 1960 and 1979. Although the sample may appear small, it should be noted that there were just six probation officers in the 1960s, rising to 166 by 1981 (McNally, 2007).

Eleven participants were recruited with the assistance of the Probation Service who sent letters of invitation to potential participants. Interested participants then contacted the research team directly. A further three were recruited with the help of existing participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the host universities and the Probation Service, and protocols were put in place to protect participant welfare, covering issues such as: informed consent; confidentiality and anonymity; voluntary participation and well-being. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in the homes of participants between June 2015 and July 2016. Guiding themes included: career overview; reasons for joining the Service; perceptions of the Service; caseloads; daily routines; decision making; perceived changes and continuities. Vignettes were also employed to assess supervision techniques. Interviews were recorded and transcripts were analysed using MAXQDA, qualitative data analysis software. Inductive thematic analysis (Clarke et al., 2015) was used to explore hidden and overt meanings in the data. The researchers read each transcript several times to familiarize themselves with its content, then assigned codes to the raw data. Next, overarching themes were identified, named and reviewed to ensure that they accurately reflected the transcript content and codes.

To protect participant anonymity, specific details about participants and their working lives cannot be provided. Broadly speaking, the sample of seven men and seven women comprised six probation officers, four senior probation officers, three administrators and one voluntary rehabilitation worker. All were retired at the time of the interview with the



oldest aged in their 80s. There were no educational requirements before 1975 and some of the earliest recruits in our sample spent a decade or more working in other fields, including banking and the civil service, before joining the Service. Participants' careers spanned the period 1964 to 2014. Their supervision experiences were diverse and they worked with a variety of offences and clients, including males and females, adults and children, both in prison and in the community.

The use of an oral history methodology illuminates stakeholders' lived experiences of the Probation Service, and allows us to not simply record and preserve the past, but to construct history from primary sources. Oral history methods are particularly suitable for capturing the experiences of non-elite groups whose lives and careers rarely leave official paper trails (Perks and Thomson, 2015). Oral historians recognize that no single stakeholder group has a monopoly on knowledge and advocate the collection of multiple accounts from a range of stakeholders (Ritchie, 2015). Through the documentation of shared experiences, this methodology safeguards against the tendency to 'assume' a particular account, and preserves historical evidence which would otherwise be allowed to dissipate. A key criticism of the method is that it relies upon human memory, which is renowned for its bias, subjectivity, prejudice and imperfect recall (Ritchie, 2015). Though this criticism is valid, the benefits far outweigh the disadvantages provided that interviewers are aware of potential pitfalls and employ the necessary tools to promote accuracy (for example, the use of factual memory aids). Moreover, participants' subjective interpretation of what was – or was not – important is arguably as important as historical facts, if not more so (Ritchie, 2015).

Narrative analysis facilitates an interpretation of historical material and events that is not entirely reliant upon the precision of participants' accounts (Smith, 2002). Though these narratives capture individual experiences, albeit within a professional context, the voices merge to reveal a collective perception of the Service, and its relationship with core stakeholders. The fact that accounts may be peppered with contradictions, assumptions, biases and imperfect recollections, only serves to construct a more authentic anatomy of probation practice by revealing points of historical contention.

The following sections present the key themes that emerged from this analysis. Participant quotes are used throughout to illuminate the findings; each was carefully chosen to represent, and illustrate, the views of the sample as a whole. The 1960s and 1970s cohorts are analysed jointly as members of the 1960s cohort would be too easily identifiable otherwise. In addition, the analysis suggested that there are more similarities than differences between the two groups, enabling us to treat them as a single cohort for analytical purposes. Pseudonyms are used throughout to further protect participant identities.

## **Stagnation, Change and Innovation**

Participants characterized the management cultures of the Service and the Department of Justice as conservative, controlling, secretive and unsupportive. This description is consistent with the prevailing view of penal policy making during that era (see Rogan, 2011). Departmental resistance to change was particularly frustrating for officers who wanted to improve the Service's reputation, status and practices. Patrick's exasperation at what

he perceived as a dearth of intellectual curiosity within the Department is evident from the following quote:

They were lazy. That's the truth. They didn't want to be doing anything over and above the bit of work that they were doing. There was nobody there that was looking into this, or finding out about that, and putting the two together and saying 'look we really need change here'. Change was something that was anathema to them.

Participants' negative perceptions may be at least partly explained by the governance structures in place at that time. The Service had only a very basic management structure until the 1970s (McNally, 2009) and many participants commented on the lack of leadership experience and skills at senior levels which, in their eyes, undermined the creation of a clear and coherent 'vision' for the Service (Margaret).

Yet, other participants reported very positive relationships with management and even those who felt unsupported in their work frequently mentioned examples of progressive policies that were spearheaded by senior civil servants. The most cited example in this regard was the expansion of the service in the 1960s and 1970s which was initiated by officials at the Department of Justice. Seamus, who was involved in the establishment of several rehabilitative services throughout his career, described the favourable responses he routinely received from management as follows:

He [probation administrator] was very progressive. Like you see it was up to people to identify a need. And if you identified a need and you set it out, how it could be met, [he] would support it and the Department would as well. I found the people in the Department that would have come up with the money had no problem.

Conversely, probation officers described their own occupational culture in very agentic terms; for example, Peter characterized officers as 'pioneers' while Seamus stated 'we were out in a green field and you had to try and develop the service with very little policy or that at the time'. Although the absence of a hierarchical structure was seen as an impediment to progress, it also gave officers latitude in their day-to-day lives. Many interviewees introduced important innovations during their careers, revealing a high level of autonomy and an entrepreneurial spirit. Key innovations included establishing new programmes to fill gaps in rehabilitative services, seeking out new sources of funding to implement these programmes and drawing on international evidence to enhance service provision. Interestingly, these innovations seemed to be more common among officers who worked outside Dublin city, perhaps facilitated by their distance from management and the Department. Sarah's quote provides a good illustration of the pragmatic and 'can-do' attitude possessed by many officers of that era:

Well, this would come very, very strange to you but I had never any contact with prisons, prisoners or anything like that. And I did a few courses [...] and, at the end of one course, it was supposed to be – do a survey, report something. And, out of the blue – and that's why I think it was divinely sent – because out of the blue I said 'why don't we do something about prison aftercare?' Ahh!! Because there was no prison aftercare. [...] And anyhow I got a little group together but they weren't interested so I had to do it myself.



Participants also innovated by forging meaningful links with the community, including local employers who in some cases funded rehabilitative services or provided jobs for probation clients. This communitarian philosophy is evident in Edward's quote:

[Community involvement is] something that I lean towards because I remember when I was in both [places], I got onto committees that were only beginning then, they were these community ones that have developed more since then. And it was to try and get the local people involved in their own areas. [...] So they were good in that, it wasn't all professionals [...] Local people involved so it was good that way.

Despite operating in a conservative penal climate, these accounts show that officers routinely embraced innovation, contradicting the standard characterization of the criminal justice field as stagnant and resistant to change, at least at ground level. Yet, some counter-narratives, like Seamus', also suggest that the innovative managerial spirit of the 1960s was not as short-lived as previously thought (see Rogan, 2011) but endured, among some policymakers at least, well into the 1970s.

## **Volunteerism, Professionalization and Adaptation**

As noted above, motivations for probation work up to the 1970s are largely assumed to be vocational in nature due to the dominance of the Catholic Church in social service provision. In reality, participants' pathways into the Service were diverse, often occurred by chance and were not always vocationally motivated. Officers' backgrounds included stints in education, banking, commerce and the civil service. A majority joined the Service because the job seemed interesting and/or represented a stable source of employment and many said that they did not really know what the job entailed when they signed up. Peter's comments illustrate his motivation for joining the Service as well as his awareness of its reputation as a vocation:

A lot of people regarded the job that I did in the probation services as vocational. That's why we struggled so often to get proper pay rises! [...] To me it was a means to an end. I needed to live. I needed to bring up a family. It was just doing what ordinary people do. [...] It's not 'oh, I want to do wonderful things'. You want to do that but the real thing is you just want to have a better, more financially rewarding, job that you like doing and that you feel you're good at.

Despite protestations to the contrary, participants' accounts evidenced a strong sense of vocation and many were involved in extra-curricular activities, such as sitting on committees and management boards, running rehabilitation programmes, and supporting probationers and their families. Seamus' volunteering ethos is evident in his comment that: 'well I worked long hours and in fact I was never concerned about the hours that I worked, especially when you're working with committees and in groups'.

In addition, it was evident that Catholicism represented an important background influence. A number of early appointees originally trained as seminarians and many of these were subsequently appointed to management positions. As Thomas observed, 'all the early promotions were people who had a clerical background'. Moreover, several participants were involved with the Legion of Mary, a Catholic lay organization whose

members engage in voluntary work in the community. Membership of the Legion was common in the 1960s and young people joined as much for social, as religious, reasons. This voluntary engagement often sparked an interest in probation work as can be seen from Ellen's quote.

I was involved with the Legion of Mary [...] I was never interested in the proselytizing bit [...] I was only in my late teens so I got involved with youth groups. And we used to do all kinds of things with young people. So that got me interested in the whole area of working with people who didn't have all the advantages as it were.

As discussed earlier, volunteer officers were often relied upon to deliver probation services, a tradition that stretched back to the early days of the Service and persisted well into the 1970s. Participants had mixed views on the use of volunteer officers with some, like Seamus, regarding it as a useful way to fill gaps in services. As he stated, 'I realized very fast you see that look I needed assistance and help. And the only thing I could think of was volunteers.' Conversely, Patrick opposed the use of volunteers, stating:

they didn't really have any standing. First of all, the confidentiality of the probationer was violated and second of all, the Legion of Mary's meeting was violated by strange people coming who weren't members. [...] It was terrible, I must say. I had to go to meetings at night and listen to what was being said about me probationers. I don't think so.

The practice was legitimized by the Catholic principle of subsidiarity which advocated a limited state role in social service provision (McNally, 2007). However, many participants felt that the lack of state-sponsored rehabilitation services undermined their capacity to work effectively with clients. As Catherine commented, '[w]e had nothing for them except to find them a job'. Some officers adapted to these challenges by relying on religious organizations to fill the gaps in service provision. Mary's quote shows that religious organizations were often the only source of employment and/or accommodation for probation clients:

Now for the girls, especially the ones who came from the country and had no accommodation, they'd be veering onto the streets. And you'd have to get them accommodation. And the hospitals were great because they had accommodation with work. And they had an income if they would stay in it but very often they would take flight. They weren't work-oriented. And then the much-maligned convent of course.... And they were terrific, really.

Until 1975, officers were not required to have formal qualifications and their training consisted solely of a six-week induction course. As Mary explained, 'I hadn't a clue! [...] I went into [the probation administrator's] office and she welcomed me and she handed me a list of names and addresses and said that was my work!' Many adapted by drawing on their life experience and transferable skills from previous occupations to enhance their work practices, and some also gained qualifications later in their careers. Participants welcomed the decision to introduce a social work requirement for probation officers, regarding it as a formal acknowledgement of the professional status and credibility of their work. However, some older officers were ambivalent about the shift towards professionalization,

with Margaret commenting, ‘training will only make a potentially good person better. But it won’t make a bad person... it won’t give them any insights or anything.’

Consistent with the official narratives discussed earlier, Catholic social values and a culture of volunteerism influenced probation practice during this period. Yet, officer narratives provide a deeper understanding than official accounts alone, revealing that participants resented the depiction of their work as a vocation and believed that this was used as a justification for poor pay and conditions. Consequently, they fought for professional status and state-funded services which, they felt, made their work more credible and effective.

## **Insularity, Openness and Assimilation**

Despite a brief surge of interest in rehabilitation, it is widely agreed that the atmosphere surrounding policymaking during the 1960s and 1970s was insular and conservative (Rogan, 2011). Again, participant narratives reveal a more comprehensive picture since many actively sought out examples of international best practice or drew on their experience in other fields to enhance their skills. International influences came from a variety of sources including Scandinavia, continental Europe, the USA and Canada but mainly England. In participants’ eyes, Ireland often compared poorly; for instance, the officers who supervised children felt that legislative and service provision for children was inadequate (278 children aged 17 or under were on probation in 1969, *Dáil Debates* vol. 241, col. 10, 23 October 1969). As Catherine explained: ‘[w]ell, I brought back that they had a Children’s Act [in England] which was carefully abided by. And we had nothing like that really in Ireland. Well, it was there but it was under-used.’ In addition, a number of participants created opportunities to learn from other jurisdictions either by applying for funding to travel abroad or researching international developments. Their intellectual curiosity is illustrated by Edward’s statement that ‘you were always trying to get a better angle on how to get across to people. [...] You’d be trying out these things and they did, they made your interventions better.’ Those who travelled abroad were struck by the innovations they encountered and these experiences likely influenced their work at some level. Margaret’s quote documents her excitement at visiting a state-of-the-art women’s prison on a fellowship abroad: ‘[The prison] was all electronic and everything. And a marvellous governor who thought rehabilitation started the day they (the prisoners) came in. And great ideas and everything.’

However, not all felt that the material they gathered received the attention it deserved. As Patrick noted after a research visit that encompassed several European countries:

I wrote a very full report, reported on every day practically that I was there to be on the safe side. And I was complimented by the person who was dealing with it for the very full report I had given. [...] I brought them back but it went onto a shelf and they’re still there as far as I know!

Yet, while the majority expressed doubts about the level of interest in foreign innovations at management level, some recounted conversations with senior officials about international developments, which suggests that some policymakers were more open to external influences than previously thought.

Additionally, the pre-1975 recruits developed transferable skills during previous careers which they brought to their work in the Service. Only some had worked or trained in the 'helping professions' including general social work, psychiatry and childcare, but these skills proved invaluable, particularly given the absence of substantive formal training. Seamus' professional background inspired him to introduce group-work programmes for probationers. As he explained:

I suppose I wasn't just thinking of one to one, I always would consider the needs of the clients and the best way to meet the needs of the clients. And I suppose that's why the most effective way to deal with someone with an alcohol related problem was, I always felt[...] would be done in a group setting.

It is widely assumed that criminological research was scarce and had little to no impact on criminal policy and practice (see Kilcommins et al., 2004) but this narrative is once again contradicted by participants' experiences. For instance, several completed their own research or commissioned evaluations of the rehabilitation projects they developed. Sarah's pride in the research she conducted as part of her university degree was evident when she described the lecturer's reaction, saying 'it was highly recommended [and] the lecturer, she said "it should be built on because it is based on fact and it's not on theory"'. At the same time, most officers referred to the ethos of the Probation of Offenders Act 1907 – to 'advise, assist and befriend' – as the core guiding principle of their practice. This attitude was exemplified by a 'hands on' approach which treated home visits as a standard feature of probation work, allowing officers to achieve in-depth understandings of clients and their families. As Ellen explained 'we always considered that to be very important because, to see people in their own environment with their family, particularly if you were dealing with... like we would have had a lot of juveniles then'.

Like the official narratives presented above, officer narratives ultimately confirm the dominance of penal welfarism and the 'advise, assist and befriend' ethos of the 1907 Act. Yet, they also challenge received wisdom about the perceived conservatism of the period by revealing an openness to international developments, and an emphasis on research and evaluation, among practitioners and certain policymakers.

## **Activism, Accountability and Resistance**

As noted above, many participants described ongoing tensions between management and frontline officers. Several felt that their work was not sufficiently recognized or supported by the Department or probation management, with Peter concluding '[the Probation Service is] a caring organization that in some ways doesn't care'. Similarly, Catherine felt that the Department viewed probation officers as 'unmanageable' and as 'troublemakers', observing 'they'd no time for us'. Even participants who later took up management positions expressed ambivalence about moving away from frontline work, with Ellen commenting 'when I was brought back into head office, it felt like I nearly had my wings clipped'. Many complained about the low professional status of probation officers and management; for example, the head of the Probation Service had a lower rank than the directors of other criminal justice agencies, while the salaries of the first

cohorts of probation officers were at the lower end of civil service pay scales, with women paid less than their male colleagues.

Participants frequently portrayed themselves as rebels against the bureaucracy and culture of secrecy that, in their view, dominated the upper echelons of the civil service. As Peter commented, 'at certain times you've got to be courageous. You've got to say "no" and that's led me into trouble at times.' This attitude contrasts starkly with his perception of the prevailing culture in the Department which he framed as 'whatever you say, say nothing. You can only be questioned about something you've said or that you've written down.' Likewise Margaret expressed her admiration for colleagues who were unafraid to speak the truth, stating:

Oh I think a lot of the people in [the Service]. The people who were brave enough not to kowtow to, now I was always speaking up at our team meetings and everything. People who could stand up and say now this should be done and that should be done. You weren't being listened to.

In response to unfavourable organizational conditions, participants engaged in various forms of resistance, ranging from fairly minor to relatively serious acts up to and including legal and industrial action. Catherine's quote provides an example of a subtler form of resistance when she describes her refusal to engage in an interview as part of a round of promotions because she believed that it was a charade and that she would never be successful:

I remember I didn't even get my hair done. You'd all get your hair done before an interview, always. I didn't bother. And I went in and [the interviewer] had these difficult questions for us. And I looked at one – 'I don't know the answer to that' – took the question, stood up, said 'good morning' and walked out. He never saw me again. [There was a very bad relationship there] but it wasn't just me. It was all of us. [...] It seems to be that we were unmanageable or something like that. [...] But in fact we were only thinking of the children and ourselves. We wanted to upgrade the Probation Service.

One of the most frequently quoted stories of resistance concerned the successful lodgement of a claim for better pay and conditions during the 1960s. Many, including Mary, referenced the even poorer working conditions endured by their predecessors who 'weren't even established. They had no pensions or anything.' Participants felt that their victory in this dispute marked an important turning point in probation history and increased their professional standing and credibility. As Patrick explained, 'this award, I felt, caused the Department to take us a lot more seriously and was the main reason for the development of the Service at that time'. The IMPACT trade union, which was established in the 1950s, represented a key ally in these actions with Peter describing the relationship between the unions and management as 'antagonistic, they just didn't like one another. If one said something was black the other one would say it was white.'

Many also highlighted their willingness to speak out against perceived injustices, an attitude reflected in Patrick's comment about a formal complaint he made against a worker who had mistreated a child. He stated, 'I was glad that I made it, I stood up to it and I did something about it. All that I could do.' In fact, probation officers' willingness

to lodge official complaints against the mistreatment of children residing in church-run institutions, at a time when this issue was largely ignored by society and state, is well documented (McNally, 2007). Additionally, a number of participants mentioned an article, published in a national newspaper, which was critical of the Service and appeared to have been informed by a probation officer, with Mary commenting: '[s]o there was uproar over that, yeah. [...] And some people thought she was being very disloyal to her former colleagues but she wasn't. She was drawing attention to the deficiencies because of lack of support and so forth.' Participants' stories thus reveal an important counter-narrative based around a sense of justice, activism and accountability that operated alongside, and in tension with, the well-documented culture of secrecy within the Department of Justice. They also reveal how participants used agency to challenge – and change – aspects of the organizational and penal fields.

## **Discussion**

The study used oral history interviews and official accounts to explore the occupational identities of probation officers and map the probation sub-field during the 1960s and 1970s. This era represents a critical moment in probation history, a time when the rehabilitative ideal entered a period of crisis internationally but experienced a brief upsurge in Ireland. Our study supports the contention that Ireland's unique penal trajectory was not so much a 'catch up' exercise with England and Wales, but arose instead from a series of local political, social and cultural circumstances. In many ways, officer accounts coincided with the image of a peripheral country and nascent state still finding its feet in terms of leadership, direction and identity, and with the social, political and economic consequences such a position begets. The hidden voices of the officers ultimately reveal a more nuanced understanding of penal policy and probation practice than emerges from studies based on examinations of official documents alone, sometimes contradicting but at other times supporting existing assumptions.

Overall, officers tended to portray themselves as pioneers whose primary concern was the development, promotion and enhancement of probation practice. While they desired professional recognition, their accounts reveal a practice philosophy embedded within Catholic social values and characterized by a deep sense of vocation. Probation officers described themselves as progressive and intellectually curious, seizing opportunities to develop their knowledge through research, education and engagement with international best practice. Other core occupational values included a rebellious spirit, a strong sense of social justice and an anti-authoritarian stance. Ultimately though, the philosophy of the Probation of Offenders Act 1907 was at the heart of probation practice and officers strove primarily to 'advise, assist and befriend' clients and their families, and forge strong links with the communities in which they worked. Despite high levels of consistency across participant accounts, some counter-narratives, or differences in emphasis, were evident. For instance, some described an adversarial relationship with management while others felt supported in their endeavours. Equally, some appreciated gaining professional status while others perceived their work as more of a vocation.

Probation officers enjoyed a high level of autonomy which enabled them to respond creatively and agentially to challenging social and organizational contexts. Four strategies



in particular were used by officers to cope with adversity, namely: (1) innovation where officers established new programmes, initiatives or community links to fill perceived gaps in practice; (2) adaptation where officers drew on established support systems outside the criminal justice system to assist their clients; (3) assimilation where officers incorporated transferable skills from previous careers or developed their knowledge through engagement with international practices; and (4) resistance which took several forms up to and including legal and industrial action.

While our findings support the perception of penal strategy as conservative and insular, our interviewees also told of a Department of Justice that, significantly, offered little resistance when met with innovative proposals from probation officers. Consciously or otherwise, this created a space for probation practice to progress in a 'ground-up' manner. This effect played out in the day-to-day relationship between practitioners and management whereby officers strove to reinforce their own progressive values and beliefs in their practice. For instance, probation officers responded to the lack of overt support from the Department by learning from international developments. These findings support the view that penal agents possess agency and can, to a greater or lesser extent, shape the development of penal policy and practice (see, for example, Cheliotis, 2006; Mawby and Worrall, 2013). It is likely that the loose organizational structure of the Probation Service during this period provided officers with a high degree of autonomy and the freedom to innovate. This contrasts with the more formal organizational structure of probation services in England and Wales at that time, which was comprised of semi-autonomous and locally administered probation areas.

At a time when details of widespread clerical abuses continue to emerge, our study also depicts a more complex societal dialectic whereby religious institutions provided sometimes the only assistance available to clients, owing to a penal system that fell short of providing even basic supports. Left with little choice but to draw on outside voluntary assistance to supplement their practice, it would appear that our officers were bound not so much by religious motivations (though certainly religion played a part in individual cases), but by a dedication to the practice and a determination to progress. This interpretation correlates with the push for professionalization that came with the modernization of the Probation Service during this period. These findings add to the official narrative by revealing how officers engaged in a day-to-day struggle to 'advise, assist and befriend' their clients in a meaningful and professional way, in the face of limited state support.

The findings also support the idea of a 'governmentality gap' (McNeill et al., 2009), showing that probation practice is best conceptualized as a multifaceted, contested and dynamic phenomenon that emerges out of ongoing negotiations between a range of stakeholders, including 'proximate policymakers' such as the government, the civil service and advocacy agencies, as well as practitioners (Rogan, 2011: 15; more generally, see Goodman et al., 2015). Irish probation practice during this period was shaped by a variety of political, social and cultural trends, including conservative political values, low crime rates and Catholic social values. Despite an increasing focus on risk and public protection in recent years, contemporary probation practice remains largely welfare-oriented and probation officers are regarded as highly qualified professionals. The longevity of the Probation of Offenders Act 1907 suggests that conservatism has replaced the pioneering spirit of the 1960s and 1970s. Nevertheless, the absence of

change could also be seen as radical given recent shifts towards punitiveness in the Irish and international penal landscapes (see Healy (2015) for a discussion of the narratives underpinning probation services in the present day).

## Conclusion

Despite a vast literature on contemporary probation work, less attention has been paid to the preceding historical era. The penal welfare era is often painted in broad brush strokes and/or portrayed nostalgically as the ‘golden age’ of penal history, a time when practitioners and policymakers were in agreement that offenders could be reformed through benign, and scientifically informed, interventions. However, such grand narratives fail to capture the messy, complex and contradictory reality of penal practice (Zedner, 2002). Practitioners are also sometimes accused of penal nostalgia and selective remembering of the past. Indeed, some might argue that the largely positive self-portraits emerging from this study raise questions about the objectivity of retrospective accounts. It is of course possible that other stakeholders, such as probationers, experienced supervision differently. McNeill (2010) for instance found that supervision in Scotland during the 1960s was variously experienced by probationers as helpful, harmful or as a holding mechanism designed to minimize the harms associated with offending. While this possibility will be explored further in future phases of the research, it is notable that official accounts of the time portray probation officers in a favourable light, as dedicated workers striving to make positive contributions to offenders’ lives in challenging socio-political circumstances (see further Healy, 2015).

Mawby and Worrall (2013: 153, emphasis in original) provide a useful way to think about nostalgia which, for them, ‘acts as a powerful mechanism for resisting a narrative of decline and maintaining a positive work identity *in the present*’. Though subjective, personal narratives offer an ‘organised interpretation’ of events, bring shape and meaning to life experiences and help to structure the narrator’s sense of self (Murray, 2015: 87). It is hoped that this study provides a better understanding of probation officers’ occupational identities and the probation sub-field during a critical period of probation history.

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