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# **‘Helping, Hurting, Holding and Hands Off’: Preliminary Findings from an Oral History of Probation Client Experiences of Supervision in Ireland**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents preliminary findings from the *Histories of Probation in Ireland* project which aims to provide an extensive, fine-grained account of Irish probation practice from the 1960s onwards. The core objective of the paper is to highlight patterns emerging from client participants’ lived reality of probation, which is achieved through the application of an oral history methodology. The paper provides an overview of relevant literature, before outlining the research design and explaining the methodological approach of the project. Findings are presented from interviews with current and former probation clients who experienced probation in the 1980s up to present day. A thematic framework of analysis, ‘helping, hurting, holding, and hands off’, is employed in order to understand the individual and collective voices experiencing probation in Ireland during the timeframe.

## INTRODUCTION

Qualitative, historical accounts of the experience of probation remain sparse internationally. This paper forms one part of an ongoing project, *Histories of Probation*, which aims to fill the gap, by providing a comprehensive, critical historical examination of probation practice in Ireland from the perspective of key stakeholders, (clients, officers, administrators and voluntary sector workers), from the 1960s to present. Findings from the first phase of the project shed light on the experiences and occupational identities of probation officers (Healy and Kennefick, 2019). This paper offers findings from the second phase, which involves oral history interviews with client participants from the 1980s onwards,<sup>1</sup> in order to describe and understand their lived experience of probation. The paper begins with an overview of relevant literature on probation histories and client experiences, before outlining the research design, methodology, and participant sample. Next, preliminary findings from interviews with current and former probation clients are presented and analysed. The thematic lens applied draws on, and supplements, McNeill’s (2009) ‘helping, holding, hurting’ framework for understanding

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<sup>1</sup> The researchers are continuing to attempt to source participants from the 1960s and 1970s.

supervision experiences, which evolved from McNeill's own oral history study of Scottish probation (McNeill, 2008). As such, our paper contributes fresh insights to the field of probation supervision both nationally and internationally.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical historical accounts of probation work remain sparse at national and international level, with the exception of the United Kingdom, where a number of studies have built a complex and far-reaching account of the history of probation in England and Wales (Vanstone 2004, 2008; Raynor and Vanstone, 2002), Scotland (McNeill, 2005, 2009, 2012), and Northern Ireland (Carr and Maruna, 2012). A dominant strand of the literature uses critical, thematic analyses to explain the evolution of probation practice. For instance, Robinson (2016) examines shifting policy narratives to illuminate changes to practice over time (see also, Mair and Burke, 2011; Healy 2015). Another strand constructs an historical account through documentary analysis, most notably, Vanstone's (2004, 2008) study of the evolution of probation theory and practice, which evaluates historical materials against a wider political, social and scientific backdrop. There is also a line of literature that considers historical contexts in terms of contemporary community supervision issues. For instance, Philips (2010) places the significance of historical understandings of probation in the implications for transferability of probation techniques, arguing that a top-down approach to reform can displace unique working practices.

There is an evolving international literature on people's experiences of supervision in contemporary criminal justice studies. Capturing and analysing the perspectives of those subject to community sanctions gained momentum from criminal career research that emerged in the 1960s onwards (e.g. Wootton, 1959; Davies, 1979). More recent studies relating to people's experiences of probation have been subsumed into a wider literature base on desistance theory and practices, exploring themes such as the relationship between the client and the practitioner (Rex, 1999; Burnett and McNeill, 2005; Morash et al., 2015; Healy, 2012; Skeem et al., 2007); the development of pro-social identities (Maruna, 2001); and the elucidation of the 'pains of probation' (Durnescu, 2011). Recent European literature continues to emphasise the primacy of the supervisory relationship as a core condition of supporting the desistance process (Burnett and McNeill, 2005; Durnescu et al, 2013). Further, though some

research highlights painful experiences (e.g. Hayes, 2018), many studies focused on client experiences tend to reveal largely positive accounts of probation supervision (Durnescu et al, 2013). For instance, the literature suggests that supervision is more likely to be viewed in a positive light when clients are provided with practical help in respect of problems relating to housing, health, employment and finances (e.g. McCulloch, 2005). That clients seek direction from their supervisor is a consistent theme in the literature, following Mayer and Timms' (1970) 'supportive-directive' typology, and Trotter's (1993, 1996) 'pro-social' modelling approach, which encourages the use of praise and reward as a means of motivating people to adapt behaviour. Rex's (1999) study suggests that clients welcome strong direction from their supervisors, as it signals genuine concern and expectation about their behaviour. Braithwaite (1989) has also found that firm intervention can contribute to the reintegration of the person.

The giving and receiving of help is not a straightforward process, however, and experiential studies indicate that the attitude with which help is provided is as important as the practical benefits of the help itself. For instance, Burnett and McNeill (2005) note the difference in the emotional response of clients when a supervisor supports their 'intrinsic motivation' to change, in contrast with attempts to achieve change by force which tend to yield more negative outcomes (Burnett and McNeill, 2005: 231). Similarly, Morash et al's (2015) study demonstrates that a punitive or authoritarian style is met with resistance and anxiety in women under supervision, whereas a supportive approach is more likely to elicit positive outcomes. Rex (1999) also found that overly authoritarian supervisory practices can backfire and induce conflict and non-cooperation. Further, studies focusing on the pains of probation show how help can lead to harm, when supervision is perceived as intrusive (Durnescu, 2010; Ditton and Ford, 1994).

More subtle responses to supervision lie in the client's understanding of their supervisor's ability to provide meaningful help. For example, Rex's (1999) study emphasises the struggle clients experienced in maintaining a decision to desist from crime, and the doubts about their supervisor's capacity to support them beyond that of monitoring their situation. Conversely, there is a sense from this study, in particular, of the benign power of being under supervision. Rex (1999: 376) highlights how, for some, the mere fact of being on probation can provide a barrier to engaging in criminal activity, without losing face amongst peers.

Fewer studies explore probation client perspectives through an historical lens. Of particular relevance are a series of empirical analyses of probation stakeholder experiences that have been conducted in respect of Northern Ireland (Fulton and Parkhill, 2009; Carr and Maruna 2012), Scotland (McNeill, 2012) and Ireland (Healy and Kennefick, 2019). Ireland has witnessed the development of a rich and evolving literature on the history of criminal justice and associated institutions (O’Sullivan and O’Donnell, 2012; Rogan, 2011; Kilcommins *et al*, 2004). However, studies on the history of probation in particular are fewer in number, with existing works focusing on the general history of the Service (McNally, 2007, 2009) and the relationship between the probation service and the penal voluntary sector (Swirak, 2018; Healy and Kennefick, forthcoming). It is noteworthy that some existing studies contain aspects of oral testimony in the context of the Probation Service, though they are limited in scope (e.g. McGagh, 2007).

This paper draws on McNeill’s (2008, 2009, 2012) oral history of Scottish supervision, which involved a small-scale study involving former probation practitioners, educators and clients who experienced probation in Scotland during the 1960s. McNeill, together with Beth Weaver, conducted oral history interviews with a view to supplementing the arguably scant ‘official’ accounts of probation during the period prior to the organisational restructuring which took place when Scottish probation work became part of the general social work structure following the introduction of the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 (McNeill, 2012). A key theme that emerged was the sometimes conflicting narratives of probation experiences, as helping, holding or hurting, and the significance of the practitioner’s role in affecting the meaning, nature and experience of the sanction for the client. Our thematic analysis of clients’ oral history narratives adds nuance to the historical account of the Irish probation landscape, in addition to bolstering the wider, international literature on r experiences of probation from both contemporary and historical perspectives.

## HISTORIES OF PROBATION IN IRELAND

The project consists of three phases. Phase I (Probation Officers, Administrators and Voluntary Workers) and Phase II (Probation Clients) involve a qualitative analysis of oral history interviews relating to experiences of the Service and supervision, as appropriate, from participants from the 1960s to present day (see further; Healy and Kennefick, 2019). Phase III

(Documentary Analysis) examines archival records with a view to mapping the evolution of probation practice, policy and culture from 1922 onwards.

## Methodology

Phases I (interviews with probation officers) and II (interviews with people under supervision) employ an oral history methodology in order to augment the ‘history of probation’ with the unique ‘probation histories’ that emerge from the recollections of core stakeholders.

Oral history is a compelling methodology because it unearths undocumented experiences and offers subjective evidence that ascribes a particular meaning to the recent past (Thomson, 1999; Abrams, 2016). An oral history not only records accounts of the past, but provides a means of assembling history from primary sources (Perks and Thomson, 2015). By gathering personal testimonies of a particular phenomenon, it is possible to draw out shared understandings that test our assumptions and entrenched judgements about existing historical accounts. Even where individual accounts conflict, oral history has the capacity to embrace multiple perspectives and provides a space to explore differences in interpretation (Nyhan and Flinn, 2016). Further, when faced with the potential fallibility of human memory (e.g. O’Farrell, 1979), personal accounts of the past signal deeper, unconscious meanings regarding culture, perceptions, beliefs and values. Such testimony also provides a means of understanding how people make sense of their past, and so it may be characterised not only as a source, but as a subject of oral history in its own right (Thomson, 2011). Conducting a critical analysis of the oral testimony of those who have experienced supervision through the application of a thematic framework, then, adds an authentic and nuanced layer to our understanding of the history of Irish probation in Ireland.

## Sampling

Semi-structured oral history interviews were conducted with 25 male participants who experienced probation from the 1980s to the present day: spanning the 1980s (five), 1990s (seven), 2000s (five), 2010s (five), and up to present day (four), including three participants serving a life sentence. Participants were recruited with the assistance of the Probation Service (nine), community organisations funded by the Probation Service (seven), voluntary organisations (seven), and from responses to newspaper advertisements (two). All participants

had experienced supervision in Dublin. In addition, two participants had experienced supervision in Limerick, and one in England. The majority of participants experienced supervision through a probation order (eight), with others engaging with the Service during their prison sentence (five), and as part of post-custody supervision conditions (five), suspended sentence conditions (one), community service (one), and through the Children's Court (one) and a residential school (one). Some experienced multiple forms of supervision across a number of years, with many finding it difficult to recall exact dates, durations and age at time of supervision. That said, of those that could recall, the duration of the supervision period ranged from 6 months to life. Some participants were reluctant to disclose offence type, of the remainder, the following offences were reported: property offences (five), non-fatal offences against the person (four), drug related offences (three), murder (one), and driving offence (one). All but one of the participants were currently or had in the past engaged with a network, organisation or sponsored service, which could differentiate this cohort from the experiences of the general client population. Codes were assigned according to the order in which participants were interviewed (i.e., the code 'PC5' corresponds to the fifth 'probation client' interviewed).

Interviews were loosely structured and the guiding themes and prompts included: pathways to probation; typical day as a probationer; helpful aspects; least helpful aspects; positive and negative experiences, and; perception of supervision over time. A vignette was also employed to assess supervision experiences. The vignette consisted of a fictional account of a probation client whose story was told in four parts, with each part accompanied by a series of questions asking participants to explain how they thought their probation officer would have dealt with the fictional client in the scenario. The purpose of the vignette exercise was to gain insight into client perspectives of the assessment and treatment process, their personal theories about the causes of offending and desistance, and their understanding of the related response of supervisors to various types of behaviour, such as non-compliance. 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 findings are designated as preliminary until such time as female accounts, and accounts from individuals who experienced probation pre-1980, are obtained and analysed.

## PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The following analysis draws on McNeill's (2009) framework for understanding supervision experiences and aims to build on his work in two ways: first, by adding a new dimension to the framework and second, by exploring the powerful emotions elicited by the supervision experience. Such frameworks constitute useful tools for conceptualising supervision experiences but also run the risk of over-simplifying complex phenomena. As McNeill (2009) notes, the different dimensions are closely interlinked and frequently overlap. To contextualise the findings and avoid over-simplification, it is important therefore to briefly discuss the nature of the supervisory experience, which is revealed by our findings to be complex, subjective and porous. First, our research confirms that supervisory experiences are multi-faceted and cannot always be neatly classified into distinct 'types' of encounters. For example, supervisory experiences varied both within and between individuals; most of our sample had been on probation more than once and recounted different kinds of experiences at different moments in their lives. PC2 (2010s cohort) had a short-lived supervision experience as a teenager and characterised officers of that era as being 'all about authority' and 'ticking boxes.' However, he believed that officers encountered later in his life displayed more empathy, support and understanding. He attributed these shifts to changes in the Service and his own attitude, acknowledging that, as a teenager, 'I wasn't in the right place, state of mind to realise what they were trying to do for me.' Interestingly, his experience contrasts somewhat with other accounts which suggest that probation practice changed little during this period but has become increasingly structured and less welfare-focused in recent years (see e.g., Healy, 2015). This highlights the need to consider personal as well as 'official' accounts of supervision, leading to our second observation, that supervisory experiences are subjective, and similar practices are perceived differently by individual probationers. For instance, in our study home visits were described as helpful by some and as intrusive by others. To illustrate, PC1 (1980s cohort) commented 'she [probation officer] was very good. She called out to the house, got to know the family and became a friend of the family.' Conversely, PC6 (1980s cohort) stated 'it's kind of like, okay, the government is coming to me house to see if I am okay or is everything okay in the house, like you know, and I remember my Da wasn't working and he got offside [as a result of the visit].' Third, supervision does not operate in a vacuum and people's experiences were sometimes shaped by external circumstances, both positive and negative. For example,



PC16 (1980s cohort) felt apprehensive when first placed under supervision because he had previously experienced institutional abuse and maltreatment, becoming distrustful and guarded around authority figures as a result. Consequently, his engagement with probation was in his words not ‘the healthiest’ and he believed that the order had minimal impact on his life or offending. Bearing these caveats about the nature of supervision in mind, the different dimensions of the supervision experience are now explored.

### *Helping*

According to McNeill (2009), ‘helping’ relates to the classic probation philosophy of ‘advising, assisting and befriending.’ Helping experiences were described by many of our participants who tended to characterise supervision in positive terms if officers offered advice and practical support, attempted to build rapport, put a clear supervision plan in place, and actively sought out rehabilitation opportunities. Existing research shows that such experiences can contribute to increased satisfaction among probationers (e.g., Durnescu et al., 2018; Healy, 2012). Probationers also valued officers who demonstrated empathy, were caring but assertive, were willing to advocate on their behalf, and communicated a belief in their ability to change. They appreciated officers who listened, took the time to get to know them, and communicated clearly. The following quotes in particular highlight the powerful impact of high-quality professional relationships built on trust, acceptance and support. PC15 experienced significant difficulties with gardaí on release from prison, explaining ‘every time the police seen me, they just arrested me.’ Feeling hopeless, he contacted his probation officer to say, ‘look I’m going to finish my sentence and just leave me alone.’ Instead, she arranged for him to decorate her house and spend time in the probation office to keep him off the streets. He remained in touch with his probation officer and still has some contact over thirty years later, saying:

They tried to do their best for you. [...] Now the one that stood by me, [NAME], she stood by me through thick and thin, through everything and I was even asked to go to her retirement party, that’s how well I got on with her because I done her house up and minded her husband, [...] he didn’t judge me. [PC15, 1970s/80S]

Despite initial reservations around engaging with probation, PC18, a life sentence prisoner, found that his relationship with his probation officer created a safe space to complete difficult

personal work. Though many years have passed, he continues to meet this officer regularly for coffee and a chat.

I felt that somebody was actually listening to me, that I could talk about stuff that was very important for me that I never spoke about before and I could speak and you know not fear it going anywhere else ... every aspect of my life was opened with [PO] you know. [PC18, 1990s]

Testifying to the strength of this relationship, he concluded 'I remember saying one day, I said there was only two people in the world who know me, my wife and [PO].' In terms of the emotions activated by helpful supervisory experiences, hope emerged as the strongest. Hope, as expressed by our participants, reflected Burnett and Maruna's (2004: 395-396) definition as having 'both the 'will and the ways': the desire for a particular outcome, and also the perceived ability and means of achieving the outcome.'

### *Hurting*

McNeill (2009) found that probation may be experienced as hurtful when overly focused on surveillance, enforcement, or threats of enforcement. These kinds of pains were also evident in our study. Probation was characterised by participants as hurtful when perceived as intrusive, inflexible, and focused on monitoring and punishment rather than support. Hurtful experiences often arose from relational issues; for instance, some participants described their encounters as disrespectful, while others found it difficult to build trust with probation officers due to personality clashes. Frustration also emerged when participants felt that officers did not listen to them or failed to recognise attempts to change. PC11 (1990s cohort) described probation as overly intrusive and highlighted a power imbalance between the officer and himself, noting that non-compliance with even some requirements could be met with a bad report or a 'threatened' return to court.

Probation officers think they're guards and fucking have the power to send you to prison if they want like they can easily write a bad report and you'll get locked up so I was like well we're not getting on so what's the point in getting a report. I'll go back to prison meself. [...] I know that's part of their job, I understand that part but when you have your appointments, you're going to your appointments, what did you do with

your week, well it's none of your business really. I'm here because I have an appointment. I've done whatever you asked me to do, I've done. If you want to know everything and then you don't tell them or they threaten you with the courts. [PC11, 1990s cohort]

PC24 (2010s cohort) did not get on with his first probation officer, describing her as 'grumpy,' and felt that he had been labelled by her as a 'bold person.' At the time of the interview, he was no longer in contact with his family and believed that his probation officer's negative view of him, expressed during meetings with his mother, was a contributing factor.

Just really the old woman [PO], that's it. She was negative, you know what I mean. She was labelling me. Like my ma was with me and all so she was making my ma fight with me and all. Where me ma wouldn't really be like that. So she was making people act different around her. So that was negative. She changed. She changed me ma's perspective to who her son is. Said like 'He's out robbing cars, you don't have control over him, this that and the other,' you know what I mean. I don't have family so there was no point fighting for family all them years. [PC24, 2010s]

The pains of probation are of course already well-documented in the literature (see e.g., Durnescu, 2011; Durnescu, 2019; Griffin & Healy, 2019); however, our findings also highlight the emotional burden imposed by these pains. In particular, feelings of anger, frustration, sadness, and resentment are palpable in the above quotes. Ultimately, PC11 became so exasperated with the supervisory experience that prison seemed a preferable option. He was subsequently returned to prison on a different charge. OPC24 also ended up back in court, although his later experiences were more positive. As he explained, the judge gave him a 'second chance' and assigned him a different officer who proved more helpful and supportive. While it could be argued that these examples show probation officers simply doing their jobs (by holding people to account for their actions) or participants deflecting responsibility for their behaviour (by blaming the officer for causing conflict in relationships), we suggest that these experiences should be classified as 'hurtful' when experienced as such by people under supervision. While the pains arising from perceived power imbalances and stigmatisation may be subtler than those arising from overt abuses, these examples show that they can still elicit a powerful emotional response and may ultimately undermine the utility of supervision.

## *Holding*

In McNeill's (2009) framework, holding describes a sense of being monitored and restricted or, more positively, a kind of harm minimisation strategy where a chaotic life is safely contained, albeit temporarily within the confines of a probation order. Other scholars have highlighted this dimension of supervision; for instance, Hayes (2018) observes that the structure of probation can help some people to feel a greater sense of control in their lives. This theme was less evident in our research, tending to overlap quite strongly with either the helping or hurting themes. The first quote, from PC17 (2010s), illustrates an experience at the boundary between helping and holding. As can be seen, PC17 found that the structure of the probation order helped to change his routines, expose him to law-abiding lifestyles, and generate a sense of calm and security.

The most helpful for me personally was just keeping out of trouble, having a structure, having a plan so Monday-Friday between 2-4 I'd have to be here so that was definitely most helpful because it was good structure, it was a good opportunity to see how, I hate to say normal, but how normal working people was living and how much more calmer and better it was than the life that I was living previous to that. So that would have been the most helpful, just as a bit of an eye opener. [...] And it wasn't too overwhelming, like 2 hours isn't a lot just to come in and see what they had to offer. [PC17, 2010s cohort]

Alternatively, PC5's (2000s cohort) experience is located at the intersection between holding and hurting. On the one hand, he was reassured on being told that the purpose of supervision was to help him stay out of the prison system, as illustrated by the following quote.

Like they keep making it clear look we're not here to put you back into prison [...] we're here to try and get you out, stay out and manage your sentence so that's good they kind of say that from...[...] so kind of reassured from the start but yeah as I say I haven't had much experience working with probation outside, it's all been inside so yeah I think it will be alright. [PC5, 2000s cohort]

On the other hand, he felt constrained by the knowledge that post-release supervision would tie him to a criminal past he wanted to leave behind. When asked if he wanted probation

support after release, he responded, 'To be honest no. [...] I'd rather forget about jail completely and move on. Now I have no choice' [PC5, 2000s cohort].

### *Hands-off*

The final theme does not appear in McNeill's (2009) framework but has been added here to capture another dimension of participants' supervisory experiences. For some, probation supervision seemed inconsequential, constituting a minor commitment that imposed minimal restrictions on their lives and asked little of them in return. Such individuals typically said that probation meetings were rare and/or brief or that their officers seemed detached and laissez-faire in their approaches to supervision. Others admitted that they themselves were disengaged from the supervision process. Many of these supervision experiences, particularly if they took place many years earlier, were only half-remembered. Some appreciated the hands-off approach, largely because they preferred not to engage with the Service. PC16 (1980s cohort) was apprehensive about his first probation order due to a distrust of authority figures and a deep immersion in criminality and drug addiction. Consequently, he engaged instrumentally with probation supervision, complying merely to avoid prison rather than to stop offending, and felt it had a minimal impact on his life.

It didn't have any restrictions for me. It didn't, you got probation and you seen it as a victory, didn't go to prison, you got out of it. I'll go in and I'll tick the boxes. The probation officer tells me to turn up at 2 o'clock, I'll be there at ten to 2, you know what I mean. The probation officer asks me a question or wants me to do this, yes sir, no sir, 3 bags full sir. Play the game, you know play the system like and that's what I done so it didn't impact on me. It certainly didn't stop me committing other crimes. [PC16, 1980s cohort]

Such experiences generated little emotional response in those subjected to it. However, probation supervision was also perceived as irrelevant in a more problematic way. Several participants wanted and needed assistance, and even asked for help on multiple occasions, but found that none was forthcoming. In such cases, strong emotions were provoked, including resentment, helplessness and anger, as is evident in the following quote.

So what's the difference if I'm clean or not cause I was going to her for weeks and weeks and weeks clean and she didn't really do anything for me...[...] and then I go in dirty and she doesn't really do anything for me so...[...] It's just a formality. She has an appointment with me today, it's just to see how you're getting on and off you go. [PC10, 2010s]

This aspect of the supervision experience is perhaps less well-documented, although Crewe and Ievins (2021) describe a 'loose' form of penal power within the prison system that imposes few restrictions or requirements on prisoners but can be experienced as painful by those subject to it. In such cases, prisoners can feel forgotten because they receive little support and are offered few rehabilitative opportunities.

## CONCLUSION

The research employed and developed McNeill's (2009) 'helping, holding, hurting' framework to further comprehend probation supervisory experiences from a historical perspective in Ireland though, as noted above, experiences of supervision are complex and can vary both between probationers and within probationers over time, making it difficult to distinctly categorise individual experiences (McNeill, 2009). In some ways, the findings also mirror Crewe and Ievins' (2021) work on 'tight' and 'loose' forms of penal power. For instance, 'helping' experiences may be evoked by approaches that are responsive to people's needs, respect and preserve their sense of self and enable them to take an active role in decision-making. 'Tight' forms of penal power that impose strict obligations on people – even when they are provided with the resources to meet these requirements – may generate the kind of 'hurting' experiences discussed earlier in this paper. Lastly, 'hands-off' experiences may be elicited by 'loose' forms of penal power, described as fairly undemanding in terms of their requirements but also unresponsive to people's needs. As our participants' experiences showed, such approaches can have a powerful impact, leaving some people feeling frustrated and abandoned.

The findings have contributed to knowledge about supervision in several ways. The 'hands-off' dimension added by this paper highlights experiences where probation supervision bore minimal relevance to the lives of probation clients. This approach was welcomed by some but

brought about feelings of hopelessness and of being left behind in others. The research also shows that being under probation supervision can elicit a broad range of powerful emotions, an aspect of the supervisory experience that is currently under-researched. As can be seen from the findings, emotions varied from hope to anger, frustration and hopelessness. Moreover, there are instances where the lines between ‘helping’ ‘holding’ and ‘hurting’ can become blurred (see also Hayes, 2018). Experiences of supervision were considered helpful if probationers felt listened to and probation officers took a solution-focused approach to rehabilitation. Efforts to help became hurtful if supervisory techniques were considered intrusive, if a probationer felt misunderstood, or if their efforts went unacknowledged by their probation officer. With regards to ‘holding,’ the findings show that probation can offer a more stable routine for clients, which can lessen anxiety and promote an alternative lifestyle. However, for others who want to move on, probation supervision is seen as a constant reminder of a criminal past.

While participants acknowledged that they had to be in the right state of mind to accept help, the findings suggest that probation officers play a significant role in adding meaning to the client’s experience of supervision. Irish research on the experience of probation supervision is scarce, but this finding is consistent with existing Irish and international work which suggests a positive supervision experience is contingent on the building of rapport with the client, the implementation of clear and achievable supervision plans, the offering of practical support and advice, and the provision of opportunities for rehabilitation (Durnescu et al., 2018; Healy, 2012). Positive supervisory experiences that incorporate these practices are more likely to evoke feelings of hope in the probationer.

While this article has foregrounded the experiences of those under supervision, it is important to note that others, such as probation officers, may offer very different accounts. Every perspective is equally valid, though, and our research project attempts to capture the experiences of diverse stakeholders including people who have been subject to supervision, probation officers, and policymakers (see e.g., Healy and Kennefick, 2019; Healy and Kennefick, forthcoming; for overviews of probation in Ireland, see Healy, 2015; Carr, 2016). Ultimately, historical accounts such as those discussed in this paper provide a better understanding of supervisory experiences, illuminating the lived experiences of people under supervision, animating official accounts and adding nuance to existing scholarly research on the evolution of probation practice.

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