

How was your day? Exploring a day in the life of probation workers across Europe using practice diaries

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Abstract

This paper presents a reflection upon the preliminary analysis of diary research conducted during the period 2014-2015 in five European countries (England and Wales, France, Norway, Romania and Slovakia). The authors gathered and analysed data from a pilot project which used semi-structured diaries to generate data on probation workers' daily lives with a view to understanding 'a day in the life' of probation officers across jurisdictions. The findings open up questions in relation to diary research in probation practice (diary format, follow-up interview etc.) and we use this article to discuss the relative advantages and benefits of using diary research in this area. We conclude with the argument that diaries as a method of social research hold considerable potential for conducting research in the context of probation but acknowledge that the method we employed requires some development and greater clarification in terms of the aims of the research.

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Introduction

This article explores the way in which the authors went about developing and piloting a research project which uses diaries to generate and analyse data on the daily lives of probation officers. What probation workers actually do is an area of study which has received relatively little attention in comparison to whether their work is effective. However, ascertaining their effectiveness is difficult to fully understand, unless one knows what they do in the first place. It is often the underlying practice which can be used to explain how and why a particular practice might work. Thus, the aim of the research was to generate data on a 'typical' day in probation across jurisdictions with a view to enabling a greater understanding of the similarities and dissimilarities in probation practice in different political, social and economic contexts. In order to achieve this we decided to test the use of diaries to generate these data as we felt that this method offered the potential to provide data that would be comparable across different jurisdictions. The use of diaries in social research is not new, yet they have rarely been used in the context of probation with Robinson and Svensson (2013) identifying only one piece of research which used diaries: Gustavsson's (2004) 'innovative' use of diaries in which he used practice diaries to generate data on 'a day in probation' Thus, we start this article with a brief overview of the different kinds of diaries that have been used in social research. We then use this review to justify our own decisions about what our diary tool would look like, with a specific focus on the way in which the probation context shaped the design of the diary itself. We then discuss the piloting process and some of the preliminary findings to come out of this process. The article concludes with a discussion of the relative strengths and weaknesses of using diaries as a way of conducting research in probation before making some suggestions for future research.

During this research we have discussed many questions in two connected but different areas:

- 1) Is it possible to focus diary research on identifying the range of tasks undertaken by probation workers across Europe; what are the important benefits of complementary (qualitative and quantitative) oriented diary research; and whether this kind of research should be conducted in conjunction with other methods?
- 2) Are diaries a good tool with which to do comparative research in probation?

The following discussion attempts to answer both of these questions. In doing so, we consider the theory behind different diary methods, the tool that we developed, some

preliminary analysis as well as lessons learned as a first step to understanding the potential for the role of diaries in future research in probation practice. We argue that diaries have the potential to be used in quantitative and qualitative research as well as with a view to conducting action research. We used what we call a ‘hybrid’ form of diary research, partly due to language issues. Whilst this presented useful data, it also made analysis somewhat difficult due to a disparity in the amount, as well as type, of data provided by participants in different countries. Thus we conclude that in future research of this kind researchers need to be more explicit in terms of what they are trying to achieve, and what form of diary is most appropriate.

A Brief Overview of Diary research

On the one hand, the use of diaries in social sciences has said to have been neglected (Elliot, 1997). On the other hand, they have been used in very many studies. We found almost 64,000 articles published during the period 2000 – 2014 which used diaries as their research method through structured searches on three databases (Proquest, Scopus, Science Direct). In the early 20th Century, references to the use of research diaries began to appear in social science literature (Sheble & Wildemuth, 2009). Diaries have been used in research in, *inter alia*, social work, social policy, clinical psychology, family therapy, crime behaviour, alcohol consumption, drug usage, and sexual behaviour (Corti, 1993). It is worth making a distinction at this point between diary research and Time Diary Methods and Event History Calendar Methods whereby the latter two tend to cover a longer time span and focuses more on life trajectories than diary research which, in our experience, tends to use shorter time spans and is more focused on daily working practices, patterns and movements (for an overview of longer term diary methods see Belli, Stafford and Alwin 2009).

A diary can be defined as a record of what an individual considers relevant and important in his or her life, for instance; events, activities, interactions, impressions or feelings. It is usually structured by time in some way and is, more often than not, a written document (Alaszewski, 2006). Diaries are used, variously, for planning the future and ensuring that one does not miss appointments, documenting what has happened on a daily basis for either professional or personal reasons, as a form of counselling or catharsis, or as a way of recording the life of an official (e.g. politicians' diaries often get published after they have left office). Regardless of the reason for using a diary, the underlying rationale is to make a record, either prospectively or retrospectively, of what happens in a person's life. Thus we

considered them to hold significant potential for a group of researchers who had started out by thinking about how to do research on 'a day in the life of a probation officer in Europe'. However, diaries are more than just a tool for recording events. They can also be used to help participants understand their own practice by highlighting what they do in the day, whether certain activities take up more time or whether their time is used as productively as possible. . Thus diaries can present a useful opportunity to conduct research that both records and constructs practice in the form of action research.

Using Alaszewski (2006) we can identify three different areas in which diaries can be used in research:

- 1) In historical research written diaries, systematic notes or log books give information about people's actions or events. Examples might include a voyage log, autobiographies or other records about events. In this type of research, the researcher uses existing diaries as a source of new knowledge. The research data are often unsolicited and then discovered, interpreted and analysed. The key differentiator for this kind of research is that the data already exist and the researcher has no control over what information they can analyse.
- 2) Diaries have been used as a proxy survey tool to investigate whether users or consumers are satisfied with products or services. In this kind of research, the diary is used as a tool to answer a research question through testing hypotheses using a range of different groups of people and, in some cases, a control group. The aims of such research tend to revolve around hypothesis testing and the results are contingent upon quantitatively defined opinions (often measured using Likert scales), actions and frequencies.
- 3) In qualitative research diaries have been used as a way of identifying skills and social interactions in processes and socialisation. Here, the diarist (or research participant) is often asked to provide certain kinds of information so that the researcher can generate, analyse and reveal new information about a particular social grouping. In qualitative research, the diary is used as a tool to discover new knowledge together with the author of the diary allowing also the examination of reported events and experiences in their natural, spontaneous context (Bollger, Davis, Rafaeli, 2003). The structure of these diaries tends to be more open and each diary is treated as a case in itself.

There are several methodological issues related to the use of diaries in research. In one respect we have to consider who the author actually is, and what their motivations are for recording their lives in writing. In historical research, the author is often someone who had the resources and the access to write and publish and memoirs are often written with a view to them being published in some form thus coming across as slightly ‘impersonal’ (Elliott 1997). This inevitably affects the data that are recorded. In surveys, errors can arise with recruitment, response rates and attrition which can result in possible bias in data collected from the target group and control group. When using a diary as a method to identify new knowledge, we have to rely on the author to report on his or her actual situation, and not the story he or she thinks we are looking for (Alaszewski, 2006). Moreover, the use of diaries in research has been critiqued for resulting in a mechanistic picture of what the participant’s life looks like as, unless a diarist spends considerable time recording their feelings, motivations and intricacies of daily life, insufficient depth is gained in the data when it comes to meaningful analysis (Latham 2004). Researchers have also raised questions about the use of diaries in isolation as well as issues related to the purpose of the diary (Duke 2012; Bolder, Davis and Rafaeli 2003). That said, we felt that diaries held the potential to generate data which would prove useful in understanding what it was that probation practitioners do on a daily basis – and potentially why they do what they do - across jurisdictions.

Whilst diary research has not been used in the context of probation, it has been used in criminology more broadly. However, much of this research is related to the field of life course development and developmental criminology and thus involves a much longer time span than the method adopted in this piece of research. Similarly, diaries have been used to overcome some of the problems associated with using official statistics for measuring (re)offending rates. That said, there is some research worth drawing attention to. For example, Reiss (1971, cited in Ellis, Hartley and Walsh 2010) found, through the use of diaries written by police officers, that they spent 20 per cent of their time investigating crime. This sort of research illustrates the potential for probation because of the debates over recent years about the extent to which practitioners (in England and Wales at least) spend at their desk undertaking administrative duties as opposed to seeing clients (Justice Committee, 2011: 18).

In addition to solely using diaries to generate data, several researchers have made use of the 'diary-interview' method. Such a combination of methods is not new and so we decided to explore this possibility further. The 'diary-interview' method involves the use of diaries to generate initial data which are then followed up with an interview to discuss the contents of the diary and probe deeper into the data itself. For Zimmerman and Wieder (1977) the diary-interview method offers an opportunity for the social researcher to overcome the ways in which a participant may alter their behaviour when being observed or interviewed when under study in the context of more traditional methods because they are given the opportunity to record their lives prior to coming into contact with the researcher. Thus, arguably, the diary-interview method allows for a more rigorous and reliable dataset to be produced because there is little input from the researcher prior to the initial period of data collection. Latham (2004) has argued that asking participants to write a diary prior to an interview gives the interviewer a narrative with which to start the interviewing process yet he positions the diary as part of the conversation between researcher and participant which begins at the initial recruitment stage and continues into the interview after the period of filling in the diary. In Latham's (2004) case, then, the participant is not asked to 'stand in for the researcher' but is part and parcel of the research process. As a research team, we were conscious of the possibility that using diaries alone could have an impact on our data if we did not follow the participant's week up with them after the event and the arguments in favour of the diary-interview method persuaded us to adopt this approach. Thus we endeavoured to interview the participants within a week or so of them completing the diary.

The diary-interview method also allowed us to consider the potential for this research to be framed as a piece of action research. Action research is a way of conducting research with a view to solving a problem because 'research should not only be used to gain a better understanding of problems which arise in everyday practice, but actually set out to alter things' (Denscombe 2010: 126). Whilst action research is often seen to be research in which the practitioner is a partner in the research, we felt that the diary-interview method would give us the opportunity to aid in the systematic reflective process which is required for this kind of research. However, the focus on solving a problem posed issues for us because this was not the aim of the research as first conceived. The process of action research involves, in the first instance, identifying an issue which requires investigation (McNiff 2013: 90) and this is where we felt our initial use of diaries held the most potential. We develop this idea in the sections below.

Developing the diary

Having done preliminary research into the way in which diaries are used in research settings it was clear that the third ‘type’ of diary research considered above (i.e. qualitative, exploratory research) was most relevant because we wanted to be able to generate data on what probation staff do on a daily basis and compare this with data from other countries. In our initial discussions, at COST meetings, we discussed what data we would find useful before developing our ideas further in terms of the research leading to inductive analytic processes. At the COST meeting March 2014 we discussed the method’s potential for generating data more suited to these aims. In Malta we also discussed the need to decide how structured we wanted our diary to be. It was the group’s inclination to be relatively unstructured in the first instance, simply asking participants to write down the main things they did in each day.

However, as we discussed this further, at a subsequent meeting in October 2014, it became clear that this would inevitably lead to problems in terms of conducting comparative analysis. As a group, we were unable to make meaningful translations between different jurisdictions with, for example, the meaning of supervision being quite different in one country from another. As diaries rely on language, it became clear that we needed to approach the task with a defined language that, at least, we as researchers understood. Thus, we made our diary more structured than it had been at the outset and began to define the different tasks that were undertaken by practitioners in probation settings in the range of countries. This list of terms was then defined and presented as examples of tasks in the diary tool itself (see Figure 1).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE]

The fact that the research was being conducted in the context of probation seemed to present greater definitional issues than, say, had it been conducted in a prison. The places in which probation practice takes place are, arguably, more varied than prison work. Moreover, it was clear that practitioners in some jurisdictions worked in some settings that a practitioner from elsewhere would not and we saw from the group working on the Picturing Probation Project (see Carr et al., this issue) that the environments in which people work vary quite considerably. For example, practitioners in some countries have their own private offices whilst others have a pooled interview room system and, as we see below, some participants

used the word ‘office’ to mean their private office whilst others used it to describe the building more generally. During our discussions we found it difficult to define or identify the most appropriate word in the context of one jurisdiction at times (for example, see the debate around the meaning and appropriateness of the term ‘offender’ in England and Wales, discussed by Ryder, 2013) and to do this across jurisdictions presented many problems.

Thus we were compelled to be more structured than initially planned. It is interesting to note that this change in direction arose from definitional issues which, in turn, began to change the structure of the diary. This was clearly an issue directly related to the chosen method and the comparative element of the research. The diary, then, began to turn into more of a quantitative than a qualitative tool. However, it was felt that this would create more potential for meaningful comparative research and analysis.

In the end, we decided to adopt a hybrid model for the tool (see Figure 1) in order to capture both qualitative and quantitative data. Participants were asked to identify the main activities they undertook in each hour of the day. We were not looking for a minute by minute record of what was done, partly because we were mindful of the time that the diary would take to fill in, but also because we were looking for broad themes and patterns rather than the absolute specifics of what is done across Europe. Thus, the main element of the diary tool is quantitative with participants being asked to tell us what they did, how long they did it for, with whom and where the activity was undertaken. Such data would allow for quantitative, comparative analysis.

However, because we were also interested in understanding why and how practice was conducted differently, one of the main aims of comparative research (Nelken 2012), we wanted participants to add some context to what they did, and why. Firstly, we asked participants to reflect on each day using qualitative comments. For example, we asked them whether the day was a ‘usual’ day, or whether something unexpected happened which structured the day. Not only would this enable us to understand the content of the day, it would also shed light on the extent to which practitioners’ days were predictable and planned or reactive. Secondly, we were interested in the diaries being used for the benefit of practitioners and so we included this section so that they could reflect, and act, upon their day in a more structured way than is perhaps normally possible without the existence of such a diary tool. We wanted the tool to allow practitioners to reflect upon whether they had had a

good day, or whether unexpected occurrences had had an adverse impact on their day. Such reflections could allow practitioners to make more sense of their day with a view to implementing change to cope with adverse circumstances.

As we describe below, the comments proved most worthwhile when we conducted follow up interviews to probe deeper into the participant's week. The interviews focused on participants' experiences of completing the diary, whether it had provided an insight into their lives which they had not had before, whether they would be willing to undertake further research and whether they thought diaries were a feasible or viable tool for conducting research into probation practice.

Preliminary findings

Having designed the tool at our meeting in October 2014, the group approached a range of practitioners in England, France, Norway, Romania and Slovakia. Access and ethics were negotiated locally as per the countries' particularities. Access was easier to obtain in some countries than in others. For example, the researcher in England and Wales found it very difficult to recruit participants, in large part, due to the considerable structural change that was happening in the service at the time. As a result, the data that were generated cannot be generalised or meaningfully compared across countries. Participants were asked to sign a consent form and, alongside a briefing letter about the research, were talked through the process in person. Participants filled in the diary for one week which was chosen by them.

[INSERT TABLE 1 AROUND HERE]

Despite these shortcomings with the generalisability of the data, we have provided a breakdown of the demographic data of participants in Table 1 as this sheds light on both some of the benefits and limitations of the data. Table 1 shows that we managed to recruit 14 participants in all five countries. The ages of participants ranged from 22-54 and levels of experience ranged from 0 years to 23. We can see in Table 1 that, were we to have a greater number of participants, we would be able to make some interesting comparisons around length of service, for example, in countries across Europe. Mawby and Worrall (2013) have, in their work on occupational culture in the Anglo-Welsh probation service, identified three 'types' of probation worker (lifers, second careerists and offender managers) and it is

suggested that whilst these different types share certain values, they differ in terms of their attitudes towards risk management and contemporary and political contexts. A larger scale version of this research might, then, shed light on the way which this development may be playing out in other countries. Similarly, we can see, albeit based on a very small dataset, that the English practitioner spent more time in the office than in Norway, Romania, Slovakia and France perhaps allowing us to shed light on the way in which practitioners spend their time as highlighted above (Justice Committee 2011). A larger dataset would, of course, allow for more meaningful data to make these interesting comparisons. The length of time spent in the office is useful to know because it can lead to greater knowledge around workload as opposed to the relatively simplistic method of calculating workload through the proxy measure of the number of cases held (Phillips 2011: 113). We can also see that the practitioners in Norway, Romania, France and Slovakia are educated to Masters Level whilst the English participant was educated to Bachelors level. Were a larger dataset to exist, we would be able to begin to interrogate correlations between level of education and types of work undertaken, for example.

There is a lot more potential to generate further ideas about the ways in which probation practice plays out differently across Europe using our quantitative data but due to the small scale nature of the research there is no need to go into further depth here. Rather, the above analysis is intended to illustrate the potential for doing this kind of research on a larger scale.

In terms of qualitative data we can also learn lessons from these early findings. For example, there are some clear similarities between the different countries under consideration which suggests that despite community sanctions being relatively diverse, when compared to the prison for example, there are a set of tasks and skills which might be considered key to what it means to be a probation officer such as supervision, sentence planning and so on. Similarly, practitioners across England, Norway, France and Romania spend a considerable amount of time in the office rather than out in the community. This, perhaps, adds to the debates around the way in which probation has retreated from the community it serves and has become a primarily office based occupation (Bottoms 2008). What this does, taking the international element of the research into consideration, is move the debate beyond the confines of England and Wales where it has predominantly been raised. The research, then, helps us to investigate the ways in which theories of penal transformation such as Garland's (2001) 'culture of control' or Wacquant's (2009) 'punishing the poor' which are underpinned by a

late-modern, neo-liberal and globalised view of the world have manifested in jurisdictions which have not yet been subjected to such academic analysis.

We were also able to make some very preliminary observations about the different penal systems in which participants were working and how this helped to constitute their practice. For example, a Romanian participant commented that their work was primarily ‘centred on the beneficiary’ which, arguably, counters the Anglo-Welsh perspective in which probation practice and accountability has, until relatively recently, been increasingly structured by, and directed towards, the centre: ‘Governments have in recent times seen the accountability of public services almost exclusively in terms of accountability to themselves, made effective through the mechanisms of performance targets and indicators’ (Faulkner 2008: 80). Similarly, a French participant described their work being more about ‘administrative tasks than those dedicated to interviews and accompaniments’, suggesting a somewhat managerial approach to probation practice than in Romania. Although the diary tool in itself provided little insight into the actual interactions between the practitioner and the offender we think that these initial findings present opportunities for future research and investigation around the way in which penal culture manifest in probation practice. We found that, although we generated some data on the way in which contact, meetings and plans are made and followed up, we had little on the content of the interaction. This served to reaffirm our belief in the value of the diary-interview method.

When it comes to the qualitative data we can shed light on the utility of using diaries in probation practice, which is the main focus of this paper and the main aim of conducting this pilot study. In the pilot phase we asked participants to use the reflection part of the diary to reflect upon their day, but also to reflect upon the tool itself. Thus we can identify potential for future research in this area. Firstly, the comments that participants provided at the end of each day were invaluable in terms of contextualising the day’s work. For example, one participant noted that the day had been ‘hectic’ but that some time had been created towards the end of the day when a client had not turned up for their appointment. When looking at this one day, we could see that the participant had been busier in the morning, moving from place to place but had spent the afternoon primarily in the office planning a community sentence. Without this contextual information we would not have fully understood the reasons for the day panning out as it did. Although we did not use methodologically standardised categorization according to descriptors, we were able to identify a few dominant

areas which recurred in the qualitative comments provided at the end of each day. For example, we heard that participants felt overworked and were unable to write down the full scope of what they did on a daily basis:

Because of the time, it was not possible to record/mention all visits, telephone calls etc. and there was a lot of it. (Slovakia)

I was not able to manage all the things I have planned, the reason is that is not possible to estimate the number of urgent emails, visits, telephone calls etc. (Slovakia)

Hectic day. (Norway)

We were also able to generate data on where practitioners get value from in their work. For example, the first participant below implies that because they would prefer fewer administrative tasks they get little value from this work. The second comment, on the other hand, suggests that they get value from certain cases:

Stereotyped administrative work is encumbering me. I think the centre of my work should be in professional area (not administration). (Slovakia)

Perfectly decent day. Perfect workload, social and enjoyable workday... Not a normal day. A lot of emotion is involved when a case is reported to the child welfare. (Norway)

This previous comment, from a Norwegian participant, contains what we might think to be a contradiction - that a day with lots of emotion ensued after reporting a case to the child welfare department but also that it was a 'perfectly decent day'. Again, notwithstanding the caveats raised above about generalisability, the data that were generated in this pilot illustrate the potential for doing comparative research into what work probation practitioners find most satisfying, thus feeding into the literature on job satisfaction (Annison, Eadie and Knight 2008).

Emotions play a significant role in the delivery and receiving of justice (Karstedt, Loader and Strang 2011) and have received attention in the context of probation. Knight (2014) has conducted research into the way in which probation practitioners understand emotion yet this pilot shows the potential for diaries to identify which emotions are important to them. For example, in addition to the Norwegian participant's comment above, Slovakian participants described feeling 'mentally tired', 'fed up', 'angry, and 'demotivated' perhaps adding to the literature on burnout and stress in probation whilst the English participant commented upon how it was exciting to get started on the job. That the diary tool gave participants the opportunity to identify emotions on their own, away from the presence of the researcher could potentially lead to the tool being able to identify emotions which have not yet been considered in related research. Moreover, because these emotions are inextricably linked to something that they have been doing, there is the opportunity to make links about what kind of work produces particular emotions.

Reflections on the diary tool

It was clear, when looking at the diaries we got back, that each participant had approached the task with some important differences. For example, one participant in Norway provided information about his work but also about his health problems and discussions that he had had with his manager about them. Thus, we found out that the participant had been swimming during the day to help with his back and had seen a physiotherapist for treatment. We also found out that one of the most important parts of the participant's week had been securing a period of sick leave to help him recuperate from his back injury. Thus, we were given an (unexpected) insight into the way in which his personal and professional lives were linked. The participant in England, on the other hand, provided no information about her life outside of work which meant that our analysis was restricted in terms of making meaningful comparisons with other diaries. There is clearly a lot of scope for participants to take their own approach as to what they write down and, having reviewed the diaries, it became clear to us that we might need to provide more guidance than we had done so far in this pilot. Latham's (2004) approach to diary-interviews suggests a more dialogic approach than the one we took and, on reflection, we did not take sufficient account of the suggestions in much diary research that briefing the participants is key to generating worthwhile data. We would suggest that this was compounded by the international nature of the research because of issues related to different working environments, policies and cultures.

Participants expressed differing levels of satisfaction with the tool. One thing that stood out was the perception of the tool as either a bureaucratic or personal part of the participant's life. One participant in Norway, for example, used the Excel version of the tool and expressed a desire not to engage in future research:

No do not want to use the diary again. We have too many systems to fill corresponding information in. All our tasks are in Outlook in a shared calendar. It had been as helpful as this to get an overview of appointments. We do not want new systems to record what we already do. (Norway)

It was clear from this participant's comments that the diary had not been helpful and was seen as duplicating systems that were already in place. Moreover, another participant said that the diary had not enhanced her professional identity or changed the way in which she sees her work:

Completing this diary did not impact on my usual way of working. This journal was easy but tedious. (France)

Thus, there is a need to enhance the potential for the current tool to be employed as a facilitator of action research although some participants were more positive:

The different way of perceiving this week comes from the way in which I have written down activities and which generated an opportunity to analyze and interpret the complexity and quantity of the probation activity. (Romania)

I have realised how much work I have. (Slovakia)

Another participant said that the diary had helped with:

organising my work as probation counsellor (for example, at the end of some days, seeing daily activities, we concluded that we have had many activities "bureaucratic" or that I failed to make home visits).

As we highlighted above, action research aims to solve a problem. Despite problem solving not being a specific aim of the research at the outset, much of the data we collected suggested that high workloads were an issue across the countries under investigation. The diary tool that we had employed did, then, have some potential for helping participants make sense of their

work, but it was clear that more needs to be done to maximise this potential. Several participants noted that they completed their diary at the end of the day or even at the end of the week making accurate recall difficult, which affects the reliability and replicability of the tool.

However, reflection is a time consuming process and we are conscious of adding to the burden of the tool. Participants, perhaps unsurprisingly, commented on the time spent on filling out the diary tool. One participant from Romania said that it had taken them two hours per day to complete and was considered very time consuming, especially in the context of a service in which workloads are high. Devising a way to make the tool less time consuming should be a priority for any future work of this kind.

The data that were generated in response to the questions in the interviews are, by far, the most useful in terms of working out where to go next with this research. However, the role of the researcher also made an impact on the data that were generated. For example, one member of the research team is employed by the Ministry of Justice in his country and, although he had fewer problems recruiting participants, they seemed more likely to see the research in managerial terms. It is, of course, too simplistic to argue that the researcher's position had an impact on participants' perspectives but, in view of the literature on reflexivity in research, this is something to bear in mind for future research, especially when using a tool which could, relatively easily, be construed as a bureaucratic exercise.

The final question to be posed in this section relates more specifically to the comparative element of the research. Probation is, as we have argued above, an institution which needs to be understood in its own cultural, juridical and political contexts. This can make comparative research difficult, especially because comparative researchers need to understand what criminal justice institutions and their workers are trying to do over and above what they actually do (Nelken 2009). This method appears to offer some potential in overcoming this challenge but only, it should be stressed, with the inclusion of qualitative comments and follow up interviews with participants. When discussing the contents of the diaries, it was clear that we needed to have a person present who understood the culture and politics of the probation service under discussion - to do so otherwise, risked resulting in an ethnocentric approach (Nelken 2009).

Conclusion: future diary based research

At the beginning of this project we set out to discover whether diaries are a good tool with which to conduct comparative research in probation. The short answer to this question is ‘yes, but...’. The pilot process has generated some interesting data which have the potential to contribute to a greater understanding of probation practice across Europe. Diary based research can be a good choice if it is difficult to get face to face or prolonged access to the subject matter that is targeted by the research. A common issue for all diary research methods is that the researcher has to rely on the diarist to obtain access to the data which makes recruitment and follow-up challenging. How to recruit, the use of samples, whom to recruit, and so on, is crucial in generating a suitable sample. In addition to this, we would add the argument that proper briefing materials and a consistent approach, especially in terms of language, are likely to make or break future research of this kind.

The approach adopted in this pilot has raised questions about the viability of using a method which asks participants to write down more than they already do, an issue of particular concern in an institution which is becoming renowned for its reliance on paperwork, reports, bureaucracy and managerialism. However, there is also considerable cause for hope in terms of the future potential for diary based research in probation. The main issue to be tackled is the time it takes for the diarist to record their day. There are several technological advances which might make this easier and present possibilities for future research or, at least, further piloting work. For example, one might consider the use of social media or audio recordings as a way of allowing participants to record their day in real time. This also gives the researcher a possibility to give feedback or to follow up on the received data immediately, although this has the potential to make the task yet more burdensome.

In terms of maximising the potential for the research to impact upon participants’ working practice, there needs to be a greater focus, at the briefing stage, for this. It was our intention for this research not to be seen as a bureaucratic exercise but this was, in some cases, how it was experienced. Thus, there is a need to make this more explicit in briefing materials and to provide participants with more guidance on how best to reflect upon what they have done during their day.

Another key finding to come out of this pilot research is the use of follow up interviews. This is, perhaps, ironic as we started from the perspective that interviews had, arguably, been ‘overused’ in probation research but the contextual information that was offered in these interviews was invaluable. The way in which the tool is structured and administered, and by whom, has the potential to impact on the findings considerably. In addition to this, we were struck, in our initial discussions, by the impact of language and future research needs to take this fully into account and, arguably, do more to mitigate the problems associated with language and definitions.

Although this study was small scale, it has the potential to generate a body of data which will be useful for future comparative work in the field of probation studies. Moreover, it will broaden the way in which knowledge has been generated thus far. The research has raised some important questions and has resulted in many lessons being learned by the research team. The next steps are to redevelop the tool itself, with a greater focus on whether we intend it to be a primarily quantitative or qualitative tool, or whether the focus should be improving practice. These three aims are somewhat mutually exclusive and if we were to say we had only learnt one thing, it is that there is a need for clarity in any future research of this kind.

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