

~ **Title:** Exploring the experiences of South Wales Probation staff that access the Offender Personality Disorder Pathway

Running head: Experiences of Probation Staff that access Wales OPDP

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Within a prison and Probation population context, personality disorders have been estimated to be present in up to 50% of individuals (Brooker et al., 2011). Such individuals have faster reconviction rates and higher uncompleted treatment rates (Minoudis et al., 2012). Working with people with personality difficulties may result in negative staff attitudes towards such individuals, conflict between staff members and staff burnout (Freestone et al., 2015). Consequently, the Offender Personality Disorder Pathway (OPDP) has been developed to provide specialist psychologically informed support to high risk offenders who present with personality difficulties, and to the staff who work with these complex individuals. (NOMS and NHS, 2023). This is achieved, in part through the delivery of a case consultation and psychologically informed case formulation (Joseph and Benefield, 2012).

There is currently a small but growing evidence base which has begun to show the impacts and effectiveness of OPDP services (McMurran and Delight 2017; Moran, et al., 2022; Ramsden, Lowton and Joyes, 2014). Whilst some of the research has used quantitative methods, much of the research is localised and makes use of qualitative methods to provide a detailed understanding of the area being examined.

Consultation and formulation processes have been a key focus for OPDP research (Wheable and Davies, 2020). Consultation provides a dedicated forum in which the Probation Practitioner meets with OPDP specialist staff for discussion, reflection and idea generation. The formulation can be viewed as a specific product arising from the consultation process which seeks to provide ‘hypotheses about the causes, precipitants and maintaining influences of a person’s psychological, interpersonal, and behavioural issues’ (Eells, 2007, p. 4).

The OPDP consultation process has been reported by Probation Practitioners to provide emotional support, a space for reflection and validation, and reassurance that they are working effectively (Blinkhorn et al., 2021). Further, in a study conducted in the Yorkshire and Humber region, Probation Practitioners reported that through consultation they had an opportunity to pause and reflect, enabling them to increase their understanding of the people on Probation they supervised, improving their relationship with the person on Probation and supporting risk management (Radcliffe, Carrington and Ward, 2020). Additionally, staff self-ratings of knowledge, confidence, motivation and understanding of the person on Probation have been found to increase after a consultation had taken place (Knauer, Walker and Roberts, 2017). Team consultation in which groups of staff meet with OPDP personnel has also been shown to improve Probation Practitioners’ understanding and awareness of personality disorders and to promote a more person-centred approach to service delivery despite some frustrations with the process (McMullan, Ramsden and Lowton, 2014).

Psychological formulations appear to improve the relationship quality between the person on Probation and Probation Practitioner (Shaw, Higgins and Quartey, 2017) with collaborative case formulations (formulations developed with both the Probation Practitioner and the person on Probation present) associated with a more effective working relationship, a stronger working alliance, improved confidence, and higher levels of trust (Shaw, Higgins and Quartey, 2017). Whilst there are important limitations with the consultation and formulation research such as possible response bias and lack of views from certain groups such as ethnic minorities (Moran, et al., 2022), this body of work suggests that consultation and formulation within the OPDP may have a number of beneficial impacts.

Alongside consultation and formulation, specialist personality disorder awareness training has been found to give rise to a number of immediate, self reported changes for staff. These include an increase in understanding and knowledge of personality disorders and improvements in staff perceptions of their clinical skills and capability to work with individuals with personality difficulties (Davies et al., 2014; Ebrahim et al., 2016; Lamph et al., 2014; Parker, 2016). However, research looking at the long-term effects of this training have found mixed results (Parker, 2016; Ebrahim et al., 2016). Alongside training, reflective practice (e.g. Schon, 2002) has also been promoted as part of workforce development. The one study to investigate Probation staff's experience of reflective practice sessions found that such sessions were viewed as useful and had a direct impact on Probation Practitioners' work with individuals (Webster et al, 2020).

Whilst perceived impacts of specific aspects of pathway delivery (e.g. training, consultations and reflective practice) have shown promise, no research has examined Probation Practitioners' overall experience of accessing the suite of OPDP services, nor have any been conducted within the Wales context. The issue of context is potentially important because of the mixture of policy and delivery functions devolved to the Senedd (Welsh Government) or retained and delivered centrally by the UK government. For example, whilst justice policy in Wales remains the responsibility of the UK Government, the Welsh Government has responsibility for policy areas such as crime prevention and community safety. In addition, areas including addressing substance misuse, education, health and accommodation, which all directly affect those within the criminal justice system in Wales, are devolved. Consequently, the criminal justice system across Wales is made up of multiple parts, overseen by different organisations and which interface with a large number of other agencies (e.g. five health boards, 22 local authority areas) which are not necessarily co-terminus with the six Probation

Delivery Units (PDUs) established following the (re)unification of Probation services and processes in 2021.

This study aims to provide a detailed examination of the views of a small group of Probation Practitioners from a single PDU in relation to the range of core OPDP services as delivered within Wales. Using a single PDU means that participants will interface with the same external organisations whilst still providing an insight into practice within the Welsh context. Such a study will allow the appropriateness of generalising from the English context to the Welsh context and vice versa to be considered and to identify other aspects of the OPDP services (beyond training, consultation and formulation) that may warrant further study.

Method

Design

A qualitative design using reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was utilised. Participants were purposively sampled from two Probation offices (one city, one town) within a single Probation Delivery Unit (PDU); the busy city office is centrally located and holds several teams of Probation staff; the town office, based in a police station, houses a single team.

Procedure

Ethical approval was sought and received from the University of Nottingham ethics committee and the National Research Council for HMPPS. Recruitment of participants was conducted using purposive sampling (Willig, 2001); staff within the PDU who had accessed the OPDP were invited to participate via an email containing a study factsheet sent by a researcher unconnected to the present study. Those potentially interested in participating were given an information sheet which described the study purpose and confidentiality including the handling of safeguarding disclosures. Informed consent including the right to withdraw prior to interview transcription was obtained from participants prior to the interview taking place.

Individual semi structured, audio recorded, face to face interviews lasting between 45-58 minutes were held with five participants. Interviews were informed by a topic guide and participants were given the opportunity to be interviewed away from their regular workplace however, four opted to undertake the study at their work site. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author, with interviews rendered anonymous during this process by replacing names with participant numbers and removing all potentially identifiable information (e.g. places, unique events).

Participants

Recruitment of participants was conducted using purposive sampling (Willig, 2001) as staff across the PDU who had accessed the OPDP were invited to participate in the study and were given a time frame within which to respond. In the event of a high number of responses, the OPDP Research Officer circulated an email, constructed by the researcher, outlining that the first five participants to reply would be chosen. The evaluation drew on participants employed by the Probation Service who had accessed the OPDP, therefore, potentially having similar experiences. Whilst only female Officers replied, diversity was not targeted particularly but the sampling did not discriminate in recruiting from a professional group.

The female participants' ages ranged from 24 years to 45 years and three worked within the city office whilst two were based in the town office. Role experience ranged from a trainee (with 13 months experience) to a qualified Probation Officer with more than 10 years' experience, and three participants had worked in two or more PDUs during their career (see participant summary in table 1).

Participant	Location	Years qualified	Number of PDUs worked in
1	Town office	Less than 1 year	2+.
2	Town office	5 years	1
3	City office	1 year	1
4	City office	Trainee Probation Practitioner (13 months)	2+
5	City office	10+ years	2+

Table 1: Participant work location, years qualified and number of PDUs worked in.

Approach to analysis.

Data were analysed using the thematic analysis methods described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts were read repeatedly prior to initial coding. The codes were analysed and organised into initial themes which were revised into overarching themes and subthemes. A reflective diary was kept by the researcher throughout the period of the research and discussions took place between the authors and another researcher to examine the process of analysis and the emergence of themes. A number of further processes were employed to enhance analytic rigour (Braun and Clarke, 2006), namely: accurately recording the data;

recording themes in an internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive manner and ensuring data was analysed, interpreted, and made sense of, rather than paraphrased or described.

Results

Three main themes which contained seven subthemes were identified within the data: *The OPDP as a process for understanding personality disorder*; *Tensions with organisational context* and *Establishing a collaborative working relationship with the OPDP team*. These themes and subthemes are described in further detail in the text below.

The OPDP as a process for understanding personality disorder

Participants described *The OPDP as a process for understanding personality disorder* through formal training and through pathway ‘interventions’ such as consultation and formulation. One participant noted ‘the OPDP) offers confidence to be able to say I’m struggling... it’s a place to get advice’ (participant 4 lines 118 & 126) whilst another participant described how OPDP input allowed for a greater understanding of people’s complex presentation ‘(post consultation)... I could engage people to a higher degree which felt like quite a shift’ (participant 2, line 28). All study participants, except one, had undertaken the Personality Disorder Knowledge and Understanding Framework (KUF) training. Participants described how this training built their knowledge and confidence, and how consultations with OPDP staff increased their understanding of complex personality disorder presentations and the nature of personality difficulties. This included becoming more adept at recognising possible personality traits and consequently responding in a more effective and appropriate manner; “I think it is really useful to take a back seat and explore their own life and why they are acting the way they do” (participant 1, line 44). Whilst participants found it difficult to recall specific learning derived from the KUF training, they indicated that knowledge derived from OPDP consultation meetings and KUF training changed the way emotional regulation difficulties were approached and increased their knowledge of specific models and theories to aid understanding (e.g. schemas, emotional/attachment theory).

Participants described how the learning that came from their contact with staff within the OPDP led to a broader generalising of knowledge across their caseload. An important factor in staff feeling able to access the support and resources of the pathway was viewing OPDP staff as an ‘ally’ in delivering services to those within the scope of the pathway. While Probation Practitioners were generally aware of the work of OPD staff within the PDU, interviews revealed a general lack of knowledge about the wider Wales OPDP service and role.

Fostering a broader understanding to include a knowledge of relational practice and the impact of trauma on individuals may be useful and might be achieved through OPDP staff sharing information during consultations and training.

Tensions with organisational context.

Participants recognised a number of tensions present both within the organisation and their role which impacted upon their work and their interactions with the OPDP.

As part of their role in *Managing the screening process*¹ (a method for the early and appropriate identification of those who might benefit from the OPD pathway) participants discussed the briefing/guidance they had received from the OPDP. Participants considered the screening tool to be accessible; - '*the screening process is probably the easiest referral for probation*' (participant 1, line 26), and saw it as a useful guide for identifying cases they needed to discuss with OPD pathway staff. Some participants described how their confidence and understanding in using the tool had been developed through being guided by an OPD consult. However, participants also highlighted limitations they considered to be present in the screening process. These included the sometimes lower priority of the screening task 'practical' challenges (e.g. where the completed assessment was stored and how it could be accessed after completion) and the basis for the screening items (i.e. why some items were included and others not). Participants also recognised that the screening process was only as useful and reliable as the information it relies on which is found within the Offender Assessment System (OASys; a risk management framework used by the Probation Service). Specifically, participants noted that information within OASys could be missing, out of date or inaccurate. Participants also described holding information in mind which had not been included into the current OASys due to workload issues which again questioned the accuracy of the information being used to screen.

Caseload pressures were experienced as a barrier to being able to engage with and use OPDP resources and opportunities. The development of OPDP specialist service provision coincided with some major organisational changes which led to one participant stating - '*It felt like the service had absolutely no idea what on earth was going on at the ground floor*' (participant 2, line 16), and that having access to OPDP specialists was

¹ Since this research the screening process has been revised.

'like as if your house is on fire and someone turns up with Farrow and Ball paint and you're like, that is beautiful...are you mad? Can you please help me with my house on fire?' (line 16)

For those who feel at saturation point, the timing of and access to additional resources may require careful planning and delivery. Participants also highlighted competing demands within a stretched service and the challenges of prioritising one important task over another:

'I'm sure management would argue that I should be prioritising an Initial Supervision Plan or something...but I come out of a (consult) meeting thinking I'm glad I put time aside for that' (participant 1, line 110).

Whilst participants were aware of *The OPDP Specialist Probation Officer role*, only two participants had worked alongside a Specialist Probation Officer. Participants reported that this role had been uninhabited for over eighteen months in some areas, and where new appointments to this role had been made, participants were interested, but vague, about how this role would work alongside the OPD Psychologist. It was evident that participants generally adopted a passive and uncritical stance towards the advice and support they were offered by OPDP staff. This was particularly evident in the consultations with psychologists; whilst there was evidence that hypotheses were collaboratively examined and revisited, several participants felt unable or unwilling to challenge the view, opinion, ideas or recommendations made by the pathway psychologist.

"They [the psychologists] are really intelligent...I would love to be able to read people as much as them...I do feel slightly less educated leaving here. More informed but less educated" (Participant 1, line 92).

This may reflect a power dynamic between different roles and responsibilities within Probation services, a reverence for knowledge or an 'idealising' position that the psychologist was placed (or placed themselves) in.

Establishing a collaborative working relationship with the OPDP team.

Participants discussed the importance of collaboration and how this shaped their work and their opportunities for reflection and review.

Participants also recognised the significance of working alongside the person on Probation they supervised with support from the OPDP seen as a vehicle for *Changing the perception of people on Probation and interventions*. Through developing their understanding about working with individuals with personality difficulties, participants credited OPDP interactions as impacting positively on the way they worked. Using a collaborative approach

was seen to enable a greater understanding of the person's needs and risk. Whilst consultations could provide validation – '*I find the listening the Psychologist does is really useful*' (participant 1, line 56), these meetings could also directly challenge participant's beliefs and practices. However, this was experienced as supportive – '*I never had an impression they were there to judge you*' (participant 2, line 80); with participants feeling able to be honest and to continue to ask for support - '*If I've messed up [the suggested approach] I can get further support*' (participant 4, line 126).

Changing perceptions of interventions was also evidenced through shifts reported by participants in the ways they provided interventions '*[I used to use] a one-size -fits -all approach in terms of engagement*' (participant 2, line 30) and their approach to evaluating and revising interventions. For example, participants described feeling supported to engage in a process of trial and error whereby, an approach agreed within consultations would be tried and if it was unsuccessful a further consultation could allow new options and possibilities to be identified and tried.

The process of consultation was seen to *Increase own resilience and incorporating reflective practice* through examining the emotional aspects of working with complex cases. *Increasing own resilience levels* emerged as participants spoke of the impact working with personality disorder has on them. Participants spoke of the need to look after oneself however this also showed itself in the post interview debriefing period. On one occasion, a participant became tearful, describing how overwhelmed she felt talking about her experiences of working in a particular team and of feeling unsupported by the wider organisation. She had referred to these emotions during her interview and afterwards disclosed that this was the first opportunity she had taken, outside her team, to verbalise her frustration and sadness. Whilst she declined access to further support, this example serves to underscore the demands on individuals and the pressure upon one's own resources and resilience. Several participants considered the time they spent with Wales OPDP as being a space to access (emotional) support that was not offered elsewhere. Participants acknowledged the value provided by the reflective space created within consultations and noted the importance of being able to speak with their colleagues about difficulties,

'It definitely helps in that you've got the space to sort of talk through the things that maybe have kept you up the night before' (participant 4, line 112)

However, participants were also acutely aware of how stressed others around them may be feeling. This space to think was also viewed as essential to workplace development:

‘Professionally you felt you were able to develop...through the reflective practice...it gave you a bit of time to unpack where you were going...’ (participant 2, line 70)

These descriptions highlight the need for spaces in which ones work and emotions can be meaningfully discussed in order to shape practice, develop greater resilience and build ‘stronger’ teams.

Discussion

Two of the main themes identified within the data – *The OPDP as a process for Understanding Personality Disorder* and *Establishing a collaborative working relationship with the OPDP team* - speak directly to a key objective of the pathway namely improving the “competence, confidence and attitudes of staff working with complex offenders who are likely to have PD” (Benefield et al, 2015, p5). The Personality Disorder Knowledge and Understanding Framework (KUF) training which is collaboratively delivered by ‘expert by experience’ and ‘expert by occupation’ facilitators (Davies et al, 2014) was seen to build confidence and knowledge. However, participants’ inability to recall specific information from the training reinforces the need for ongoing development opportunities such as those provided by consultation and reflection in order to sustain confidence to work with the OPDP client group (Davies et al, 2014).

Tensions and pressures were evident, arising from the working environment and factors such as potential power differentials. Changes to Probation Service structures, working practices and priorities were particularly noted through *managing the screening process* and *caseload pressures*. The service level target-led approach to delivery (HMPPS, 2017) gave rise to conflicts in prioritising work (assessments/ reports/ plans versus face-to-face work). However, these challenges are not new; for example, Shapland et al. (2012) asserted that there has “been too much emphasis on meeting targets within probation which has emphasised the speed and timeliness of processes at the expense of addressing outcomes or the quality of processes and interactions” (pg 47). Such issues also speak to the likely shared experiences of the role both across and beyond the Welsh context.

Additionally, ensuring specialist roles were filled was identified as essential if access to a service is to be delivered in an equitable way. Both caseload pressures and staffing concerns were seen to impact the ability of Probation staff to make the most effective use of the OPDP resources on offer, a finding which was also evident in a previous study from the English context (Radcliffe, Carrington & Ward, 2020). Additionally, high caseloads and the transfer of cases from one probation practitioner was seen to impact the ability of staff and the

service to both ‘hold in mind’ the individual, their needs, and their risks (NIMHE., 2003) and provide an effective therapeutic alliance (Roth and Pilling, 2013) in which boundaries and interpersonal dynamics can be considered (HMPPS and NHS 2018) and consistent community care and supervision can be provided (O’Meara, Edwards and Davies, 2020).

It was evident from the interviews that participants accepted the advice and support offered by the OPDP team, especially from Psychology staff, without challenge. Although revisions to hypotheses and formulations were undertaken collaboratively participants generally felt unable or unwilling to contest these. Whilst untested in this study, it is possible that Psychologists were held in an ‘idealised’ position because of their training and the ideas they brought to the discussion. Despite this, participants in this study spoke consistently of the OPDP support they received and how this enabled them to address, formulate and manage challenging behaviour. Further study is required to better understand this dynamic and any positive and negative impacts it may have on effectively delivering a high quality service.

Fostering an understanding and resilience through consultation and reflection reflects a wider recognition of the need for reflective practice (Clarke 2017; Cracknell 2016) and staff supervision (Davies, 2015; 2021) within the Probation Service. The national OPDP Practitioner’s guide (NOMS and NHS, 2020) sets out the importance of ‘look(ing) after yourself... seek psychologically informed supervision and support’ (pg 5) as a guide to developing resilience and highlights the impact this can have on staff’s well -being. The national OPDP Practitioner’s guide (NOMS and NHS, 2020) holds that ‘Practitioners working with individuals who have offended and have significant personality difficulties face substantial challenges in their day-to-day work..... (and) need to have regular protected reflective time....(as) ’thinking space’ ... (to)...reflect on how staff work together as a team and with their clients’ (pg 96). Radcliffe, Carrington and Ward (2020) also found the consultation process to be an important reflective space for Probation Practitioners. Establishing internal strengths and accessing external supports are acknowledged within the process of developing resilience (Adams, 2015) with clinical supervision helping to ‘normalises emotional responses’ (pg 8) when working with personality difficulties (Ebrahim et al., 2016). Clearly, further work is required to examine the ways in which staff supervision and reflective spaces are facilitated and used as part of the OPDP service however, these seeming positive views about reflection within consultation provide a solid justification for such research to take place.

Study limitations and further research

This study drew on a limited number of perspectives from a self-selecting group in a single geographical region. Whilst this provided ease of access to participants and some homogeneity around wider practices and service expectations, it is possible that different experiences exist elsewhere. However, the commonalities between the findings reported here and those from elsewhere suggest that whilst some localised issues and opportunities may exist, the similarities between services and / or experiences may allow findings to inform practices more widely. All participants knew of the lead researcher although the lead researcher had not worked directly (e.g., providing supervision or OPDP consultation) with any of the participants. It is possible that knowledge of and the position / wider role of the lead researcher impacted upon disclosure and detail within the interviews, especially with respect to sharing negative experiences. Whilst the lead researcher was not a psychologist, this may also account for the lack of a critical stance towards the OPDP / consultation processes within the participants' interviews. Further, only female Officers replied to the invite and subsequently participated in the research. Whilst no sampling frame was employed for this study, it may be important to explicitly consider the views of male Probation Officers and / or utilise a purposive, diversity informed sampling strategy in the future.

Due to the nature of this study, the experiences of people on Probation was not sought. It is, therefore, unknown if the change in understanding and practice the participants noted is viewed in the same way from those they supervise.

The above limitations could be addressed through further research. In addition, research to understand the role of consultation in promoting knowledge and skills development would be valuable. As already noted, understanding the ways in which advice and information is received from Psychologists and the ability of staff to challenge this is worthy of investigation. Finally examining the impact of dedicated staff supervision and reflective practice opportunities outside the consultation process should be considered.

Conclusion

Engagement with the OPDP service through training and consultation appears to positively impact staff confidence and knowledge. The consultation process was seen to be a flexible, non-judgemental and enabling approach, which provided a reflective space through which to increase resilience levels. This suggested that for these participants at least, a key OPD pathway goal was being met i.e. improving the competence and attitudes of staff working with complex people within custody or the community (Joseph and Benefield, 2012). Recognition of the importance of collaborative relationships evident within participant narratives fits with existing

evidence of the importance of this for engagement and a working alliance (Roth and Pilling, 2013), indeed this may also contribute to enhance the relational skills of the person on Probation accessing the pathway – another of the key pathway goals (Joseph and Benefield, 2012).

Participants revealed a general lack of knowledge about wider OPDP practice, and minimal understanding or curiosity about the service across the UK. This raises important questions about access to information and the extent to which Probation Practitioners view their practice from within their PDU rather than within the wider context of prison and Probation services. Consequently, OPDP consultation may have a critical role in providing information and increasing awareness of resources that may be available.

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