Impact of experienced professionalism on professional culture in probation

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Abstract

The level of work engagement is an important aspect of organizational culture. In this empirical study the relation between engagement and experienced professionalism of probation officers is investigated. Starting from ideal-typical theories on professionalism, a psychometric instrument for measuring experienced professionalism was developed and administered to a sample of Dutch probation officers. Two reliable scales could be constructed that account for 64% of the variance in work engagement. Of these, professional ethos (humanistic values) is the most important predictor of work engagement in probation. Professional facilitation (support from the surroundings), however, also contributes to engagement.

Keywords: Work engagement - Organizational culture – Professionalism - Measurement

Introduction

Over the last decade consistent attention has been paid to professionalism in probation. The following topics can be found in the literature. Leach (2003) mentions as aspects of professionalism in probation

> *"a commitment to a high quality qualification training, an expectation of continuing learning, improving expertise among qualified practitioners and an enthusiasm for maintaining and developing the knowledge base on which the work of the service rests through study, research and recording and writing up developments".*

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Robinson (2003), for example, points to the use of evidence based methods and instruments as factors that enhance professionalism. On the other hand, she mentions a counter perception with respect to these instruments, as these might entail a process of de-skilling, the erosion of professional autonomy and, ultimately, a process of de-professionalization. As is also described by Baker (2005), there is a contrast between the technicality that is attached to protocols and other routines and the autonomous decision making that is an important aspect of professionalism (see also May and Buck, 1998). Baker (2005) quotes from a relatively recent survey among probation officers that linked low staff morale to a perceived decline in freedom and discretion. It turned out that "the level of prescription and regulation often impeded effective work with offenders" (Farrow, 2004: 210). As practices become increasingly technical (i.e. standardized, programmable, or subject to routine), indeterminacy is reduced and professional status is undermined. In a recent article Dale and Trlin (2010) provide the following quote from a probation service manager:

> "the danger is that we could head to a very mechanical application of a practice model and you will typically attract people who will like that remote mechanical way of working, [but] repel people who want to come in and be colourful and do their own thing".

This picture is confirmed by Gregory (2009) who, reflecting on her own career as a probation officer, describes the importance of judgment and reflection upon the unique and particular circumstances of the person to be helped which, according to her, is not readily reduced to the straightforward application of technique.

Measuring professionalism

As will be clear, the issue of professionalism is important in the context of probation and is experienced by the work field as an important aspect of motivation and organizational culture. However important the skillful application of evidence based methods may be, professionalism is in our view more than the use of skills and tools. Professionalism is a multidimensional concept. At least three perspectives seem intuitively relevant: values, skills and organization.

This study tries to enlarge insight in the concept of professional probation among probation officers and the impact on their daily practice. In a survey among probation officers different perspectives on their professional role are related to their level of work engagement.
With respect to the measurement of professionalism, the literature in Industrial and Organizational Psychology gives evidence of a long-standing tradition. The earliest contributions are Hall's (1968) professionalism scale which is revised by Snizek (1972). This instrument measures five dimensions: use of professional organization as a major referent, belief in public service, belief in autonomy, belief in self-regulation and sense of calling to the field. The items used by these authors seem somewhat judgmental and competency-based, however. Also, more recently instruments were designed for specific contexts such as education, and medical settings (see for example Arnold, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2006). These instruments mostly aim to measure professional behaviors.

Apart from the predominantly competency-based measurement paradigm towards professionalism, there has also been for decades a more sociological and/or ideal typical approach to professionalism that focuses on characteristics of occupations or professions as a

whole rather than on attributes or competencies of individual workers (see for example Freidson, 1983; 1994; 2001). This approach will be used here too. The focus is on identifying the characteristics that distinguish professional occupations from non-professional occupations. Frequently mentioned attributes in the ideal typical literature are professional ethos, dealing with complex practice situations and the internal organization of the profession. As for the professional ethos, Freidson (2001) describes this as "an ideology that asserts greater commitment to doing good work than to economic gain and to the quality rather than the economic efficiency of the work". With respect to complexity, Freidson (2001) mentions indeterminacy, time pressure, diversity and unicity. Abbott (1988) refers in this respect to incompleteness and ambiguity of information. These aspects can be described as internal challenges of the work. With respect to the internal organization, aspects such as determining, judging and guarding the qualification level of professionals are mentioned in the literature.

As we wanted to combine the ideal typical approach with a measurement approach, we converted the above ideal typical characteristics into constructs of individual difference. More specifically, we measured the extent to which a probation officer experiences professional ethos, feels challenged by complexity in his work and feels supported by the internal organization of his work. Thus, we expect a professional probation officer to have a high professional ethos, to feel facilitated by his professional surroundings and to experience a positive challenge in performing his job. Accordingly, the three dimensions of professionalism in probation that we propose are professional ethos, professional facilitation and professional challenge.

Work engagement

As for the dependent measure in this study, we chose the concept of work engagement or flow (see Bakker, Albrecht, and Leiter, 2011 for a recent overview). As is indicated by these authors, work engagement is a "positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption". Research has indicated that engaged employees are highly energetic, self-efficacious persons who exercise influence over events that effect their lives (Bakker, 2009; Schaufeli et al., 2011). This suggests that work engagement is important to enhance the discretion of probation organizations despite protocols and other routines. Engaged probation officers can also enhance their job crafting, that is, look themselves for opportunities that make their job more fulfilling (see for example Bakker, 2010). Hence, by investigating the relation between experienced professionalism and work engagement of probation officers, we hope to contribute to stimulating a positive and proactive organizational culture in probation. Accordingly, our hypothesis in this study is that professional ethos, professional facilitation and professional challenge will have a positive effect on the level of work engagement of probation officers.

Design of the study

Instruments

An item pool with professionalism items was generated by 4 experts on probation services. They were asked to reflect on the goals and values of probation officers, the challenges that officers face in the work, for example with respect to the experienced complexity of the work, and the internal organization in the work as officers experience it.

The six engagement items were derived from the shortened version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli et al., 2006) by the same probation experts. Three items were discarded, because they were assumed to be unsuitable for the probation context.

All items were measured on a 6-point scale with the following categories: 1 totally disagree, 2 largely disagree, 3 somewhat disagree, 4 somewhat agree, 5 largely agree and 6 totally agree. Table 1 shows the items and their descriptive statistics.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics

Items of the professionalism scales (means and standard deviations)
Professional ethos
1) To me working mainly means earning money (1.83, 1.19)
2) In my work, I have an important societal contribution (3.97, .79)
3) My work is a "vocation" to me (2.97, .95)
4) My work yields a lot of personal sense making for me (3.56, .85)
5) In my work, a number of non-material values are clearly central to me (3.93, .69)
6) In my work, I can shape a number of my ideals in a practical way (3.44, .84)
7) My work makes the world a better place (3.22, .92)
Professional challenge
1) My work offers a lot of clarity about what is asked from me (3.77, .68)
2) In my work, I often take the time to spar with colleagues on how to deal with substantial challenges (3.79, .91)
3) My work gives me a lot of opportunity to construct tailor-made solutions (3.35, 1.08)
4) In my work, I often face complex problems (4.37, .61)
5) In my work, I am supported by adequate instruments and methods (3.16, .95)
6) In my work, I often have to react adequately to unexpected situations that occur (4.24, .67)
7) My work offers me a lot of space for substantial maneuvering (3.62, .86)
Professional facilitation
1) In my work, I clearly feel to be a representative of my profession (3.86, .85)
2) In my work, I have the feeling that my knowledge progression has come to a standstill (1.90, 1.25)
3) My organization stimulates the further development of my professional competencies (3.17, 1.19)
4) My work stimulates the exchange of ideas with colleagues from relevant other organizations (3.23, 1.10)
5) In my work, I feel to be a member of a professional group that is relevant to me (3.64, .92)
6) The world of politics pays little attention to my professional group (3.09, 1.17)
7) In my organization, I feel widely recognized as a professional with added value (3.33, 1.05)
Work engagement
1) At my work, I feel bursting with energy (3.58, .90)
2) I am immersed in my job (3.26, .98)
3) My job inspires me (3.77, .74)
4) I am proud of the work that I do (3.99, .79)
5) I am enthusiastic about my job (3.09, .65)
6) When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work (3.81, .75)

All items were measured on a 6-point scale with the following categories: 1 totally disagree, 2 largely disagree, 3 somewhat disagree, 4 somewhat agree, 5 largely agree and 6 totally agree

Respondents

The data were collected in January 2011 previous to a conference aimed at probation officers that was organized by the Lectorate of Working with Mandated Clients of the Utrecht University of Applied Sciences. A total number of 178 probation officers who are attached to the three probation organizations in the Netherlands attended the conference, 128 of whom (32 men and 95 women) completed the questionnaire using a web based survey. Thus, the response rate was 76%, which we consider as a good result.

The majority of the participants were educated at the bachelor level (N=103) and were working in a control role (N=89) and/or advisory role (N=49) within probation. Also, responses were collected on the background variables "years in job" and "years in probation". The majority of the respondents (N=74) were working between two and five years in their current job, and between three and ten years in probation organizations in general (N=72).

Analysis

Principal component analysis followed by item analysis was conducted to check the dimensional structure of the probation items. Next, independent *t*-tests and correlation analyses were used to explore the relations between the background variables and the scale scores. Finally, we performed linear regression analysis to assess the effect of the probation scales on the work engagement scale

Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the items in the study. The factor analysis resulted in a solution with three factors explaining respectively 16.8, 13.5 and 11. 7 % of the total variance in the professionalism items.

Table 2 gives the rotated component loadings. Only variables with loading above .50 are presented.

Table 2 *Component loadings*

Variables	Component loadings		
	1	2	3
1 My work stimulates the exchange of ideas with colleagues from relevant other organizations	.73		
2 In my organization, I feel widely recognized as a professional with added value	.70		
3 My organization stimulates the further development of my professional competencies	.67		
4 In my work, I am supported by adequate instruments and methods	.63		
5 In my work, I can shape a number of my ideals in a practical way		.81	
6 My work yields a lot of personal sense making to me		.71	
7 My work is a "vocation" to me		.69	
8 My work makes the world a better place		.68	
9 In my work, I often face complex problems			.64
10 In my work, I often have to react adequately to unexpected situations that occur			.63

Inspection of Table 2 shows that we find three separate scales reflecting consecutively *professional ethos*, *professional facilitation* and *professional challenge*. Note that item 4 was supposed to measure professional challenge (see Table 1), however, its clustering with the facilitation items makes sense, because it more reflects organizational support than challenge. Cronbach's alpha is . 71 and .77 for facilitation and ethos, respectively. No alpha could be computed for challenge, as only two items are loading sufficiently on this dimension. For the work engagement items, alpha is = .83, which is, despite the lower number of items, still

comparable to the values reported by Schaufeli and Bakker (2006). Dividing by the number of items for each scale, yielded scale totals on the same 1 to 6 metric as the items.

The means scale scores (and variances) for professional challenge, professional ethos and professional facilitation are respectively 5.31 (.55), 3.76 (.48) and 4.23 (.78). On the above mentioned 1 to 6 scale this means that probation officers find their work to a large extent challenging, are somewhat neutral with respect to being value driven and feel a little more than somewhat facilitated.

The correlations between the professionalism scales are as follows. Between professional ethos and professional challenge $r = .24$ ($p < .01$), between professional ethos and professional facilitation $r = .40$ ($p < .01$) and between professional facilitation and professional challenge $r = .23$ ($p < .05$). With respect to the correlations between the background variables and the professionalism and engagement scores, only significant values were found between age and work engagement ($r = .21$, $p < .05$), age and professional facilitation ($r = .38$, $p < .01$), total probation time and work engagement ($r = .22$, $p < .05$) and total probation time and professional facilitation ($r = .24$, $p < .01$). This means that older officers are more engaged and feel more facilitated than younger workers. With respect to group differences, professional facilitation scores differed significantly ($t = 3.10$, $p < .01$) between male ($M = 3.18$) and female ($M = 2.62$) probation officers. This means that male probation officers feel more professional facilitation than females. Finally, with respect to the types of probation officers, we found significant group differences for engagement ($t = 2.88$, $p < .01$) and professional challenge (t= 2.91, p < 0.1). Probation officers in an advisory role score higher on engagement and professional challenge (M =resp. 2.48 and 1.89) than workers in a control role (M = resp. 2.14 and 1.58).

A linear multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess the effects of the three dimensions of professionalism on engagement. In line with the above results, age and probation time and dummy variables for advisory and control roles were included as independent variables. Thus, the effects of the three dimensions of professionalism on work engagement could be cleared from any confounding effects due to age, total experience in probation and executing an advisory or control role within probation. The analysis results in a R^2 of .64 which, using Cohen's f^2 (see Cohen, 1988), yields a large effect size of 1.78. Figure 1 gives the regression weights.
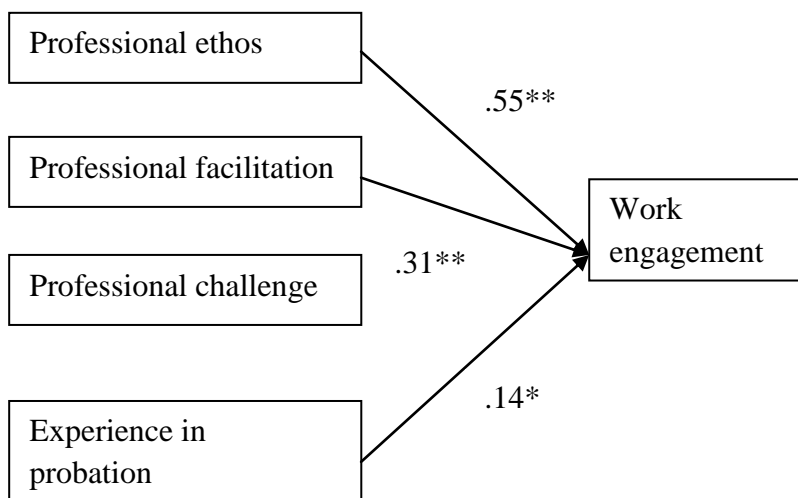

Figure 1 Standardized Regression weights

Inspection of Figure 1 shows that the level of work engagement of probation officers is positively related to the level of professional ethos and professional facilitation that they experience. The standardized regression weights show that professional ethos is the most important determinant of work engagement, followed by professional facilitation. The level of professional challenge does not have a significant effect on work engagement. Finally, it can be seen that total experience in probation has an independent effect on work engagement. The more experience probation officers have in the field, the more work engagement they feel.

Conclusion

Three dimensions were found in the work-related perceptions of probation officers.
1) professional ethos, that is, humanistic values, 2) professional facilitation, that is organizational embedding and 3) professional challenge, that is, experiencing complexity in the work. These results lead to the following conclusions.

- If values play an important role in the perception of their work, probation officers report more work engagement.
- If probation officers are embedded and supported in their actual working organization (not professional organization), they also report more work engagement.
- Having more years of experience in the domain of probation contributes a little to work engagement.
- The degree to which probation officers find their work complex is not related to work engagement.
- The average scores for professional ethos and professional facilitation are rather low.

Finally, the multiple regression analysis shows that professional ethos is the most important determinant of engagement in a probation context.

Discussion

This study suggest that probation organizations that want to foster a high engagement of their probation officers should first of all stimulate a high professional ethos, and in addition facilitate the work in a way that is meaningful to individual workers and offer positive work challenges. Especially, the level of professional ethos is an important determinant of work engagement in probation officers. This means that there is a relation between professional values such as idealism, personal sense making and the vigor with which probation officers do their work, suggesting that ethical values are not only an important driver of the performance of individual probation officers, but also an important aspect of organizational culture in probation. However, the results show that the average score for professional ethos is rather low, which implies that there is ample room for improvement here.

Practical recommendations

Organizing regular inter and intra organizational workshops in which the focus is on professional values might be an effective way to stimulate awareness of this issue.
It also turned out from our study that the professional facilitation of probation officers is an important aspect of their functioning and thereby of the organizational culture in probation services. Accordingly, we recommend that specific, serious and demand-based, individualized attention should be paid to competency development, through training, the provision of adequate methods, a positive exchange with other professionals within probation services and with colleagues from other probation services. In this respect a continuum can be described on which different degrees of professional organization can be placed. The lower extreme consists of informal networks of co-workers on the same work domain; on the highest level professional organizations with a strong formal structure are found. We give an overview of the possible platforms for professionalism.

1. Informal networks within a specific probation service
2. Use of communication platforms such as newsletters and websites (often private initiatives)
3. Structured platforms for work discussions
4. Advocacy platforms for probation officers
5. Professional organizations for probation officers.

Organizational versus pure professionalism

With respect to professional facilitation, we focused on the facilitation of probation professionals by the actual organizations they are employed in rather than by professional organizations. The reason for this limitation is that a formal professional organization for probation officers is absent in the Netherlands at this moment. Probation officers in the Netherlands are cooperating on some elements of the first three levels, but have no formal network or organization of professionals. Accordingly, the professional facilitation is more taking place within the setting of specific probation organizations than on an overall "purely professional" level. This means that the actual organization they are employed by, is more important to them than the embeddedness in organizations of professionals. Here we refer to Noordegraaf (2007) who discusses "content" and "control" as crucial aspects of professionalism. According to this author, *"professionals must know and do certain things to be professional (content) and they must be part of professional organizations (control) to acquire content and be regarded as professionals with special privileges"*.

Interestingly, Noordegraaf (2007) distinguishes between pure professionalism and organizational professionalism. Contrary to pure professionalism, from the perspective of organizational professionalism, *"professionals largely have been forced to adapt to organizational and bureaucratic realities that resist autonomous, closed-off occupational spheres"*. In line with Noordegraaf (2007), we think that the control part of probation, which corresponds to our concept "professional facilitation", is to be regarded from the standpoint of organizational professionalism rather than pure professionalism. In the Netherlands, probation officers most likely have to be considered exclusively as organizational professionals. This is reflected in our professional facilitation items that are more indicative of organizational professionalism than of pure professionalism.

We think that for the further enhancement of the practice of probation officers a shift into the direction of pure professionalism is important, however. In this respect, a range of measures can be recommended that, in our opinion, should culminate in the development of a formal professional organization for probation officers. In this respect we refer to the American Psychological Association (see http://www.apa.org) as an example that aims, in their own words, to serve as

- "A uniting force for the discipline
- The major catalyst for the stimulation, growth and dissemination of psychological science and practice
- The primary resource for all psychologists
- The premier innovator in the education, development, and training of psychological scientists, practitioners and educators
- The leading advocate for psychological knowledge and practice informing policy makers and the public to improve public policy and daily living
- A principal leader and global partner promoting psychological knowledge and methods to facilitate the resolution of personal, societal and global challenges in diverse, multicultural and international contexts
- An effective champion of the application of psychology to promote human rights, health, wellbeing and dignity"

Interestingly, one can see that also the promotion of professional ethos is an integral part of the goals of the American Psychological Association.

Limitations

As was clear from the results section, the professional challenge, i.e. dealing with complexity is not related to work engagement in the multivariate context of the regression analyses. We do not think that this dimension is irrelevant to professionalism, however, as
we do find a significant correlation of .30 ($p < .01$) between complexity and work engagement. Also, the mean of the complexity scores is significantly higher for probation workers who are active in an advisory role than for those executing a control task. We think that this difference makes sense, as the advisory task is less restricted by protocols and methods than the control task. Hence, the complexity scale does seem to differentiate between substantially important aspects of the probation work. Our explanation for the lack of predictive success in the multivariate context is that the two scale items, i.e. *In my work I often face complex problems* and *In my work I often have to react adequately to unexpected situations that occur* are relatively well-endorsed i.e. their mean scores are relatively high. Also, their variance is relatively low. This pattern suggests these items were possibly to some extent considered by the respondents as an absolute condition (the work is always complex and there are many unexpected situations) rather than as an aspect of experience on which probation officers differ from each other. We think that this relative lack of variance might explain the non-significant contribution in the multiple regression analysis.

Future research

A number of issues are open to future research. First, more items should be developed for the professional challenge scale, such that its psychometric properties can be adequately studied. Also, increasing the range of items will probably increase the variance of the scale and

thereby enhance its success as a predictor of work engagement in competition with the other aspects of professionalism. Next, more insight on the meaning of the scales can be obtained by administering our professionalism items to other professional groups, such as social workers and medical doctors. Finally, it is worthwhile to investigate whether a high degree of professionalism also coincides with a higher observed performance, besides a higher self-reported work engagement. In this respect, we will consider the feasibility of alternative dependent measures, such as supervisor ratings and/or success ratings by probation clients.

Meanwhile, we like to stress that highly engaged probation officers are probation officers who first and foremost experience a high professional ethos in their work. The literature on work engagement shows a positive relation between work engagement and performance (e.g. Bakker & Bal, 2010; Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008). Accordingly, our results suggest that that also in probation job success might to a considerable extent be value driven. Secondly, successful performance in probation might also be related to the feeling of being facilitated by the organization one is part of. Our study shows that professional facilitation can be provided by the organizational setting one is working in. At least in the Netherlands this is up to now the primary source of professional facilitation for probation officers, which implies that such facilitation is largely defined in terms of organizational goals. We think that this is not necessarily a bad situation, as probation is an important societal function, and it is evident that we have set up institutions to perform that function. It is also very understandable that such institutions imply an amount of steering of the work by the organizations themselves. Leaving all such steering to the work place, however, seems off-balance. Ideal professionals (see Freidson, 2003) are also driven by qualities that are defined by the professional group itself. Also, one can wonder whether there are sufficient checks and balances if professionals are not at all defining themselves what are the important skills, professional qualities and responsibilities in their own work. In short, we think that they must evolve to stronger forms of professional organization. Without the necessary countervailing powers that can be executed by such professional organizations, there is a serious risk that managers and policy makers get too much grip on the content of the probation work. Dealing appropriately with this risk seems all the more important in the current populist climate in which the emphasis is more on harsher sentencing as a political symbol than on evidence-based probation practices (see Pratt, 2007).

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