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# Transforming Youth Justice

Occupational identity and  
cultural change

**WILLAN  
PUBLISHING**

**Anna Souhami**

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Published by

Willan Publishing  
Culmcott House  
Mill Street, Uffculme  
Cullompton, Devon  
EX15 3AT, UK  
Tel: +44(0)1884 840337  
Fax: +44(0)1884 840251  
e-mail: [info@willanpublishing.co.uk](mailto:info@willanpublishing.co.uk)  
website: [www.willanpublishing.co.uk](http://www.willanpublishing.co.uk)

Published simultaneously in the USA and Canada by

Willan Publishing  
c/o ISBS, 920 NE 58th Ave, Suite 300,  
Portland, Oregon 97213-3786, USA  
Tel: +001(0)503 287 3093  
Fax: +001(0)503 280 8832  
e-mail: [info@isbs.com](mailto:info@isbs.com)  
website: [www.isbs.com](http://www.isbs.com)

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First published 2007

Hardback  
ISBN-13: 978-1-84392-193-6

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Project managed by Deer Park Productions, Tavistock, Devon  
Typeset by TW Typesetting, Plymouth, Devon  
Printed and bound by TJ International Ltd, Treceus Industrial Estate, Padstow, Cornwall

# Acknowledgements

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This book is based on doctoral research I conducted while in the Department of Criminology at Keele University. I am grateful to many people for their generous help throughout this process.

First, I would like to thank Richard Sparks, who supervised the thesis on which this book is based. I am hugely indebted to Richard whose insight, enthusiasm and encouragement has been strongly influential in shaping both this work and my wider career. Thanks also to Anne Worrall, my second supervisor, whose astute advice and support was invaluable throughout my time at Keele. Evi Girling, John Pitts and Tim Newburn have all read earlier drafts of this book in its various forms, and I am extremely grateful for their careful comments.

My thanks for the generous assistance of the Economic and Social Research Council who funded the original research, and the British Academy whose Postdoctoral Fellowship Award has given me the time to write this book. Thanks also to Brian Willan for his kind support and patience during its production.

I am enormously grateful for the invaluable advice and encouragement of numerous other friends and colleagues at LSE, Keele and elsewhere. In particular, I would like to thank my parents, Jessica and Robert Souhami, for their endless support and for putting up with me through all this.

Above all, I would like to thank the practitioners of the 'Midlands' Youth Offending Team for allowing me to do this research, and for offering me their hospitality, insight and trust. Although I frequently made significant demands on their time during an often uncertain and unsettled period I was met with unfailing warmth and kindness. I am deeply grateful to them.

Anna Souhami  
LSE  
December 2006

# Contents

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<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>ix</i>
Introduction	1
<b>1 Transforming youth justice</b>	<b>11</b>
Youth justice in disarray	12
Origins	13
Transforming youth justice	16
Transforming youth justice social work	21
Notes	25
<b>Part 1: A Youth Justice Team</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>2 Experiences and problems of team membership</b>	<b>32</b>
'Not like social workers at all'	32
Defining 'us' and 'them'	35
Cohesion and change	37
Understanding organisational culture	39
Consensus, conflict and ambiguity: the complexity of team membership	40
Notes	44
<b>3 Working in youth justice: the 'normal ambiguity' of social work</b>	<b>46</b>
The police and social work: 'us' and 'them'	46
Inter-agency conflicts	49
What is youth justice social work?	50
The 'normal' ambiguity of social work	62
Ambiguity and the new youth justice	64
Notes	69

<b>4</b>	<b>An unrepresentative representative: being a police officer in a YOT</b>	<b>70</b>
	Being a police officer	71
	Developing a police officer's role on the YOT	75
	Representing the police: 'a hardening of the shell'	79
	An unrepresentative representative of the police	84
	Notes	87
	<b>Part 2: Change and Ambiguity</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Joining an established team</b>	<b>91</b>
	Joining an established team	91
	Developing an inter-agency role	98
	Becoming a YOT	106
	Note	108
<b>6</b>	<b>Change, resistance and fragmentation</b>	<b>109</b>
	A changing team	109
	Practice, tradition and identity	113
	Introducing groupwork: ambiguity and innovation	116
	Resisting change	120
	Developing practice: the aims and values of youth justice work	125
	Notes	129
<b>7</b>	<b>Managing ambiguity and change</b>	<b>131</b>
	Looking for guidance	132
	Management, power and powerlessness	136
	Managing ambiguity: paralysis and creativity	143
	A disintegrating team?	152
	Notes	154
	<b>Part 3: A Youth Offending Team</b>	<b>155</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>A youth offending team</b>	<b>156</b>
	Becoming 'settled'	156
	The changing nature of team membership	161
	The changing boundaries of team membership	164
	Becoming a YOT	175
	Notes	179
<b>9</b>	<b>Occupational identity and cultural change</b>	<b>181</b>
	Transforming youth justice social work	182
	Occupational culture and identity revisited	186
	Culture, policy and practice	188

<b>Appendix: Researching a Developing YOT</b>	<b>195</b>
<i>References</i>	<i>210</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>218</i>

# Introduction

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In 1997, the newly modernised Labour party swept into power after nearly two decades in opposition, promising to make youth crime central to its priorities. It declared a 'radical overhaul' of the youth justice system. It would usher in a new era in the way in which youth offending was thought about and managed. It would change the culture of work with young offenders. And, perhaps most ambitiously, it would transform the structures through which youth justice services were delivered at both a national and local level.

Through the implementation of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, Labour set in train the most extensive reform of youth justice services in fifty years (Goldson 2000c). The formation of inter-agency Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) for the local delivery of services was the cornerstone of the new approach. For the first time, the management of youth offending would become a multi-agency responsibility. YOTs were to replace the specialist teams of social workers in local authority social services 'youth justice' or 'juvenile justice' teams. They would not belong to any one department or agency, but were to consist of representatives from all the core agencies that worked with young offenders – social workers, probation officers, police officers, and education and health authority staff. Through inter-agency cooperation, it was envisaged that youth justice services would become more efficient and effective. Centrally, it would provide for a new and consistent approach among the different agencies who worked with young offenders. It would tackle an 'excuse culture' that was alleged to pervade the youth justice system and encourage the emergence of a 'common approach' to the delivery of youth justice services.

The reconfiguration of the services and structures of youth justice therefore brought about a major upheaval in the youth justice system. For the practitioners working within it, this produced a period of intense disruption, anxiety and uncertainty. Staff from all agencies were being



asked to put aside their accustomed roles and ways of working in place of a new, shared approach that had yet to emerge. Practitioners were thus faced with a series of fundamental challenges to their sense of professional identity and vocation. They were forced to confront questions of the aims and scope of their work. What was the purpose of work with young offenders? How was it to be done? What were the values that should underpin this work? What were the appropriate roles for practitioners to adopt? And what was it to work in an inter-agency way? This was therefore a particularly important moment in youth justice services where core questions concerning the nature and purpose of contemporary youth justice work were at issue, and where wider issues of occupational identity and culture became of crucial importance.

This book explores the underside of the youth justice reforms in the everyday lives and experiences of those professionals whose task it was to enact them. Its focus therefore is not an evaluation of the implementation of the new youth justice measures (for which see, for example, Burnett and Appleton 2004; Holdaway et al. 2001; Crawford and Newburn 2003) but the changes they effected at the level of mundane professional practice. It examines the sweeping national reorganisation of the youth justice system through an ethnographic study of the formation of a single YOT in one locality. It follows a local authority social services Youth Justice Team through its transition into a multi-agency organisation, exploring the challenges this raised for practitioners as they carried out the delivery of youth justice services in the context of organisational change. In particular, it explores the effects of the transformation of the youth justice system on practitioners' sense of occupational identity, culture and vocation.

## **Occupational cultures in criminal justice**

Although Labour's reforms put the occupational culture of youth justice work at issue, there has been little research in this area. However, there has been a long-standing interest in the occupational cultures of some other criminal justice agencies, in particular the police (e.g. Banton 1964; Bittner 1975; Skolnick 1966; Shearing and Ericson 1981; Reiner 2000; Chan 1996, 1997, 2003, to name but a few), and, to a lesser extent, prisons (e.g. Crawley 2004; Liebling 1992) and probation (e.g. McWilliams 1987, 1992; Nellis 1995a, 1995b). Much of the interest in culture in criminological writing focuses on the nature of these occupational cultures and their relationship with service delivery. For example, how do the particular tasks or working environments of an occupation affect the way members see the social world and their role within it? What are the implicit values and assumptions underlying practice? How does the culture of an

occupation mediate practice? In the context of systems of social control, what are the implications for questions of justice and legitimacy? And how might occupational cultures impede organisational change?

Yet despite continued interest in these questions, there has been little critical engagement with the nature of occupational culture itself. Several common themes dominate the way culture is presented in much of this writing. Firstly, occupational cultures are generally understood as aspects of organisational life which are shared by occupational members. They are seen as common working assumptions, values and beliefs which are generated by the specific conditions or pressures arising from distinctive aspects of occupational life. As Reiner puts it in relation to the police, 'cop culture' is a 'patterned set of understandings that help officers to cope with and adjust to the pressures and tensions confronting the police' (2000: 87). The conditions of work facing members of particular occupations thus result in beliefs or responses which are 'general enough and similar enough to identify a distinctive "working personality"' (Skolnick 1966: 70).

The tendency to describe occupational cultures as 'monolithic' has been criticised, particularly in the context of policing (e.g. Reiner 2000). It has been argued that, while occupational members may share some broad aspects of their outlook, there are also significant variations. This is in part a consequence of research which has identified different 'subcultures' within occupations, generated by important differences in aspects of the working environment. For example, research on policing has identified subcultures generated by differences in structural pressures, such as the hierarchical divisions between rank-and-file 'street cops' and 'management cops' (Reuss-Ianni and Ianni 1983), different roles and expertise, like those between uniform officers and plain-clothes detectives (Reiner 2000) or those who undertake routine patrol and dedicated community officers (Fielding 1995), or different environmental conditions such as policing in rural or urban areas (Cain 1973; Shapland and Vagg 1988). These studies have thus focused on identifying variation in occupational life. However, while they are ostensibly studies of difference, they too are founded on the assumption that culture is something that is shared: subcultures describe similarities within particular groups (such as street cops or management cops). Conflicts between these groups are clear: subcultures are discrete and distinct.

For Waddington (1999), the multiplicity of subcultures that have been identified by researchers puts in question this understanding of culture. He argues that 'in the face of all this diversity, sub-culture – as a set of *shared* artefacts – almost disappears completely' (1999: 290 author's italics). Yet the 'near-infinity' (ibid.) of possible subcultural groups need not render them meaningless. There may be important shared experiences among occupational groups which are central to

members' experiences. However, occupational members can instead be seen to belong to multiple, overlapping subcultures. So, for example, a police officer might be a uniform, 'street cop', white, woman, with children, working in a rural area, and so on. These different aspects of her identity provide her with important commonalities of experience with other subcultural members. Yet they are also potentially conflicting and contradictory. Different subcultural alliances may take on particular salience at particular moments. This begins to suggest that tensions, flux and ambiguities may also be a central part of occupational life, something which cannot easily be captured by prioritising a view of culture as those aspects of organisational experience that are shared.

Secondly, cultures are generally understood as those aspects of organisational life which are unique to particular professions. This leads logically from the understanding of culture as a set of shared responses to the specific pressures of particular occupational working environments. In exploring police culture for example, researchers have tended to prioritise and attempt to account for aspects of police officers' outlooks which seem different or unusual, such as an apparent suspiciousness, solidarity and so on. Of course, as some have argued, some aspects of occupational culture might be shared by other occupations which experience similar pressures. So, for instance, writing on police culture has drawn parallels with other hierarchical and potentially dangerous working environments such as those experienced in the military (Skolnick 1966).

A consequence of this understanding of culture is that it necessarily overlooks those aspects of members' experiences which are not a result of distinctive occupational pressures. Those elements of working life generally considered to be 'cultural' in much of this writing – such as working assumptions, values and beliefs – will clearly be shaped by numerous influences outside the boundaries of the organisation as well as those from within. So, for example, their extra-occupational identities and the pressures arising from the broader social, economic and political context may be intrinsic to members' responses to their working environment. So, for example, the gender and ethnicity of a 'street cop' are likely to be important in shaping her cultural outlook alongside her working routines and the danger she experiences. In other words, some parts of practitioners' cultural outlook may be shared outside occupations as well as across occupations. Yet because culture is rarely understood as transcending the organisation, these elements of occupational experiences tend to be overlooked.

Thirdly, research which explores individual practitioners' understanding and orientation to their working culture – which I describe in this book as their 'occupational identity' – has largely taken the form of identifying clusters of shared attitudes or perspectives. Thus, according

to Reiner's typology, a police officer might fall within one of four broad types: an 'alienated cynic', a 'managerial professional', a 'peacekeeper' or a 'law enforcer' (Reiner 1978, see also, for example, Shearing 1981; Walsh 1977). However, some more recent work in the field of policing has implied a more fluid and dynamic relationship between practitioners and the way they see their occupational culture, arguing that police officers are not passively absorbed into the dominant culture but are active choosers in the way in which they employ cultural knowledge (e.g. Shearing and Ericson 1991; Chan 1996, 1997, 2003). This allows for the possibility that cultural knowledge may also be differently interpreted, understood, unknown or ignored at different moments and in different contexts.

Lastly, the relationship between culture and change is something that has concerned much writing about criminal justice professions. There are two main and related strands to the way this relationship is envisaged. Firstly, 'culture' is often seen as a feature of organisations that can obstruct change, for example by reinforcing traditional ways of thinking and acting, or by promoting a resistance to innovation. For example, interest in 'police culture' in particular has arisen from concerns that such informal norms and values impede reform in the police service. Secondly, and in part as a result, attention has been paid to the way that 'cultures' change. An often-noted criticism of the dominant way of thinking about culture in criminological writing outlined above is that it gives little room to account for cultural change, or even acknowledge its possibility (see, for example, Reiner 2000; Chan 1996, 1997). If culture is seen, as Chan puts it, as 'all-powerful, homogenous and deterministic . . . insulated from the external environment' (1996: 112) it is indeed difficult to see how change to these informal values or assumptions could occur, or from where the impetus for change could come. Chan in particular has criticised this tendency in the context of policing, arguing that the changes in the broader external (social, political, economic and legal) context in which policing takes place shapes the way police officers understand and employ cultural knowledge (1996, 1997, 2003). But further, what Chan describes as 'cultural knowledge' and the ways it is employed can also be thought of in a state of change and flux, and similarly influenced and shaped by the external context of the organisation.

In this book I take a different approach to questions of culture than that currently dominant in criminological writing. Rather than attempting to identify a 'culture' of youth justice work, my focus is on the nature of occupational culture and identity itself. What does it mean to be a member of an occupation? What constitutes an occupational identity? In what ways do practitioners understand, account for and manage their sense of occupational identity and membership? How and why is this

sense of identity disrupted? In attempting to engage with these questions, I have drawn on critical management literature – in particular the work of Martin and Meyerson (Martin 1992, 2002; Martin and Meyerson 1988; Meyerson and Martin 1987) and Parker (2000) – to explore different perspectives in the ways that occupational cultures can be understood, and through which the complexity, ambiguity, conflict and flux of organisational life can be captured. These perspectives are outlined in Chapter 2, and form the basis of the analysis throughout this book.

## Research methods

Questions of culture and identity can only be explored by close observation. They are strongly grounded in the lived experience of organisational members. They emerge in the interactions, actions and behaviours of the practitioners involved, and the way these are understood, acted upon and managed in their working lives (e.g. Geertz 1973; Schein 1985; Schwartzman 1993; Van Maanen 1979). As Geertz (1973: 11) puts it: 'Culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly – that is, thickly – described.' An approach is thus required that allows these questions to be explored without artificially abstracting them from the context in which they emerge. Therefore my attempts to engage with these questions are closely grounded in an ethnographic exploration of the formation of a single YOT by one group of actors in a Midlands town.<sup>1</sup>

The book is the result of an intensive, 14-month period of fieldwork. It began in May 1999, when the Midlands team was still a local authority Department of Social Services Youth Justice Team, and ended in July 2000 when the new YOT appeared to have gained a degree of stability and the bulk of disposals mandated by the Crime and Disorder Act had become available to the courts.

The majority of this time was spent in observational research, talking to practitioners about their work, spending time with them in their offices, attending meetings and accompanying them on visits with young offenders. It became clear in the first months of research that the most useful data would be generated within the physical boundaries of the team's offices. This is where the practitioners spent most of their day (reflected in practitioners' association of the building with the team itself, as discussed throughout this book), and where the interactions between members and a large part of their work could be observed. My observations focused on how practitioners understood and talked about their work to me and to each other: the explanations, interactions, gossip and so on. There appeared to be three different types of talk which were

loosely associated with different types of activity, though staff might suddenly switch between these. First, there were relatively formal, public discussions which took place when the team met as a whole. Practitioners often complained in private that this type of discussion was constrained: 'no one says anything'. The most important of these discussions were the regular team meetings, which, as described in Chapter 7, were the only point at which the whole team regularly met and were the main forum for the exchange of information, discussion, complaints and policy-making. They were also useful arenas for practitioners to negotiate their status and for conflict to be expressed and managed. More informal interactions, including the team 'banter', took place while practitioners performed the routine and mundane activities of office life such as doing the paperwork for cases, making phone calls, eating lunch. A third type of talk was marked by what Van Maanen (1992) describes as 'organizational time-outs', which represent a break from the ordinary rules of the workplace. They allow for chatting or gossiping about non-work topics, and 'allow for the expression of sentiments typically unheard (or hushed) during the pursuit of organizational purposes. In most ways, time-outs denote autonomy for the participants ... and a general sense of freedom from organizational constraint' (1992: 39). It was in these occasions that practitioners seemed least constrained in what they said, and where most of the gossiping, bitching and complaining took place. These 'time-outs' would sometimes be marked by a different location, such as moving into the kitchen or going outside to have a cigarette – the 'back places' (Goffman 1959) of the offices – or by an activity or ritual, such as bringing a pot of tea into the main office which would signal a break in the practitioners' work.

The observational research was supplemented by a series of loosely structured interviews to explore practitioners' expectations, preconceptions and anxieties about the shape their work would take. Interviews were conducted in private rooms in the team offices, and with permission (none refused) were tape recorded and transcribed. I intended to interview all team members. But as the team expanded and partnerships with outside agencies and individual consultants developed, the boundaries of the team blurred and the question of who constituted a team member became less clear. However, it appeared that some of these new members had a greater involvement and influence in the team than others. For example, as the first piece of multi-agency practice in the developing YOT the institution of groupwork became invested with practitioners' feelings about the change of identity in the team (Chapter 6). The role of the drama consultant hired to run the groups became of crucial importance, and it thus became important to interview him regardless of his temporary and transient status in the team.

The use of the research strategies in the setting was of course inextricable from the dynamics of the team and my position in it. A methodological account must therefore be to some extent a personal account. The appendix of this book describes some of the dilemmas and experiences of researching the developing team during a time of uncertainty and anxiety, and one in which the notion of team membership became of crucial importance.

## **The organisation of this book**

This book is organised as a chronological account of the formation of the Midlands YOT in order to describe how a complex series of problems and processes unfolded as the team developed. Throughout I have attempted not to deviate too far from the empirical data, but have drawn on criminological literature and critical management theory to illuminate the text.

The first chapter sets the research in its policy context. What was the rationale behind Labour's strategy for the youth justice system? What were the nature of its reforms? And what challenges did this hold for practitioners within it? Chapters 2 to 8 follow the development of the YOT. The research is divided into three parts, marking points which were felt by team members to represent significant changes to the team.

In June 1999, the Midlands team was still felt to be a social services Youth Justice Team. Despite some significant signs of change, the transition into a YOT was not thought to have begun. Part 1 describes the last few months of the Youth Justice Team as staff anticipated the development of a multi-agency organisation. It considers the experiences, complexities and problems of being a youth justice social worker. How did practitioners understand their work, values and identity? What were the implications of the arrival of staff from partner agencies? Chapter 2 describes the problems and experiences of membership of the youth justice team and introduces some of the key ideas about occupational culture that form the basis of the analytical framework of the study. Chapter 3 explores the nature of youth justice social work. It argues that the aims, values and practices underpinning social work with young offenders are characterised by an essential ambiguity. Yet while this 'normal ambiguity' was held to be the essence of the team's practice, it was this that was both targeted by Labour's reforms and made it difficult to defend against innovation. Chapter 4 describes the experiences of the first police officer to join the team. As the first practitioner from a partner agency to join the team, and as a practitioner from an agency commonly felt to be 'in opposition' with social workers, his occupational identity was at issue. This chapter explores the nature of

occupational identity and its implications for the problems and purpose of representing an agency on an inter-agency YOT.

In September 1999, the majority of staff from partner agencies joined the team and the transition to a YOT was now felt to be underway. The second part of the study describes the first months of the fully inter-agency team, as practitioners attempted to develop their roles and practice in the context of rapid change and widespread confusion and uncertainty. It explores the processes and problems of change, and the impact on practitioners' sense of identity and culture. Chapter 5 describes how new staff felt they were outsiders joining an unchanging, established team. It explores the difficulty of developing an inter-agency role, and the impact of the power relations in the team in the way practitioners' roles were shaped. Chapter 6 explores an alternative perception of change. It describes how the team was also in a process of considerable change, and calls into question the notion of established boundaries between social work staff and practitioners from partner agencies. Chapter 7 describes the problems of managing the team in a context of ambiguity and change. In particular, it explores the difficulties in negotiating the new relationships between the central and local governance of youth crime established under the Crime and Disorder Act.

On 1 April 2000 the YOT was officially launched, and the mood of the team appeared to change dramatically. Part 3 describes the first months of the Youth Offending Team. Chapter 8 explores the ways the team had changed from its incarnation as a Youth Justice Team a year previously. It discusses the nature of inter-agency working and the difficulty of forming a team in which the key element of identity is the incorporation of difference.

Chapter 9 draws together the arguments in this book. Why were the effects of organisational change felt so intensely by those practitioners working within it? What are the implications for wider questions of occupational culture and identity? What does it suggest about the purpose and nature of inter-agency working, in particular in relation to Labour's central rationale of developing a shared culture among youth justice practitioners? And how can questions of culture and identity contribute to an understanding of the dissonance between policy and practice?

## **Writing about the team**

Lastly, a note about the way this book is written. The following account seeks to describe the processes involved in the formation of the Midlands YOT as they were understood by the practitioners involved. I have tried



to refrain from attributing thoughts or beliefs to them, or elaborating or interpreting what they have left unspoken. As will become apparent, practitioners' accounts of events in the team demonstrated the ambiguity of their experience: they were at times confused, contradictory or conflicting. Following Martin (1992), I have tried to avoid the implications that the views of individuals or groups of practitioners are accurate descriptions of an 'objective' reality, by choosing phrasing that suggests that alternative interpretations are possible (e.g. 'some practitioners felt', 'many practitioners thought', etc.).

As the following chapters will show, the formation of the multi-agency YOT revealed a complex relationship between individual practitioners and their self-identity as representatives of their home agencies. I have therefore identified practitioners both by proper names and their occupational background (e.g. Duncan, social worker). Practitioners are referred to by the same name throughout the book to maintain a sense of the individual personalities of those involved and the diverse ways in which the unfolding events were experienced. However, I am aware that by separating team members and preserving this individuality the practitioners involved have become more easily identifiable. To try to preserve their anonymity I have changed their names (but not their genders) and excluded some quotations which may have identified them.

## Note

- 1 At the time of the research, the total population of this town was approximately 250,000: the youth population (10–19) was about 60,000. There was a small Black and minority ethnic (BME) population (under 5 per cent), of which the largest minority ethnic groups were Asian and African Caribbean.