The working life of electronic monitoring officers

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Abstract
Monitoring officers are responsible for putting electronic monitoring (EM) policy into practice and ensuring that offenders are monitored and that alleged non-compliance is investigated. Arguably, they are a new criminal justice profession and exploring their working values and practices is important if we are to understand how EM operates and to address questions about its effectiveness. This article explores monitoring officers’ attitudes to their work and their working practices. It highlights how safety concerns impact upon their work and identifies a range of strategies which are used to deal with their anxieties. It also examines whether monitoring officers have an identifiable occupational culture concluding that while they share a working orientation, a strong cohesive occupational culture is absent. However, differences in working values were identified among monitoring officers, which mirror the range of working credos identified in other criminal justice professionals. The extent to which the work of monitoring officers is affected by EM being operated by the private sector is also explored as well as the policy implications of the findings.

Keywords
electronic monitoring, monitoring officers, occupational cultures, private sector, working credos

Introduction
The use of electronic monitoring (EM) in the criminal justice system has grown significantly over the past decade or so (Ministry of Justice, 2009a). It is an increasingly important part of the penal landscape in the UK and elsewhere but comparatively little is known about its operation. In order to begin to explore questions about how it operates, its impact and its effectiveness it is necessary to study the personnel who are responsible for the day to day operation of EM, the monitoring officers. EM is often portrayed as a ‘virtual prison’ or ‘an electronic ball and chain’ and is conceptualized as a technological and surveillance-based punishment (Nellis, 2004, 2006). However, in common with other technological solutions such as CCTV, its efficacy depends on the personnel who...
operate it (McCahill, 2002). The reliance on monitoring officers arises for a number of reasons including: that they play a leading role in ensuring that individuals consent and co-operate with EM (see Hucklesby, 2009); and that monitoring officers are responsible for fitting and maintaining the equipment and policing compliance (see Hucklesby, 2009). Monitoring officers are the public face or embodiment of EM (Liebling and Price, 2001; Paterson, 2007). They are largely responsible for putting EM policy into practice dealing with offenders and their families and friends on a daily basis. How monitoring officers operate is likely to differ from formal policy. Research elsewhere has uncovered a significant gap between the capabilities of the technology and its practical operation (McCahill, 2002). This disjuncture between the theory and practice of technological solutions has been explained in terms of how far the technology fits with existing organizational, occupational and individual concerns of those involved in operating it (McCahill, 2002).

In England and Wales EM is an important element of the private sector criminal justice enterprise. It is currently operated by two private companies (G4S and Serco) who are involved extensively in the provision of a wide range of services within the criminal justice system and broader security functions. The private security industry and the personnel working within it have been comparatively well researched but most of this work has concentrated on its guarding and ‘policing’ functions (Button, 2007; McCahill, 2002; Rigakos; 2002; Wakefield, 2003). Parallels have been drawn with similar functions carried out by the police (see Button, 2007). Commonalities and linkages have been made between state and private sector personnel particularly in relation to the ways in which they interpret their working environment and mould their working practices to accommodate their assumptions and values (see, for example, Button, 2007; McCahill, 2002). In particular, Reiner’s (2000) seminal work on police occupational culture has been applied and adapted to personnel working in the private security industry (see, for example, Button, 2007). The environment in which monitoring officers work shares some characteristics with front-line police work in that they are not office-based and spend most of their time ‘on the road’. This differs from many private security personnel who are often based in one place at least during individual shifts and frequently for longer periods (Button, 2007; MaCahill, 2002; Wakefield, 2003).

The nature of monitoring officers’ work is aligned more closely with offender management functions than with policing because it involves carrying out punishments imposed by the courts. However, the extent to which their role is aligned with other offender management functions is questionable. Monitoring officers’ role is about ‘control’ rather than ‘care’. Their primary function is the enforcement of electronic monitoring for the courts. While monitoring officers have a duty of care to offenders, their role does not formally extend to reforming or rehabilitating offenders. Therefore, it can be distinguished from some other criminal justice professions such as probation officers whose work retains a rehabilitative element despite moves towards a more enforcement function (Chui and Nellis, 2003).

A relatively small number of studies have been undertaken into the personnel involved in the provision of offender management functions (Crawley, 2004; Crawley and Crawley, 2008; Kauffman, 1988; Liebling, 2004; Liebling and Price, 2001; Paterson, 2007; Rutherford, 1993). Although the nature of the day to day work of some of these
professionals may be similar to monitoring officers, the environment in which it takes place differs markedly. First, many studies have focused on prison officers who work in institutional settings rather than in the community. As a consequence prison officers expect support from their colleagues if difficulties arise and they, and their working practices, are relatively visible to managers (Kauffman, 1988; Liebling and Price, 2001). Second, all but two of the studies relate to public sector employees (McLean and Liebling, 2008; Paterson, 2007). Some of the research has drawn parallels between police and prison officers’ occupational cultures and has suggested that there are common features between the two (Crawley, 2004; Crawley and Crawley, 2008; Liebling and Price, 2001). Generally, however, research has tended to suggest that working values are less cohesive and more diverse within offender management than policing (Cavadino et al., 1999; Liebling, 2004; Rutherford, 1993). This may be because they have focused upon employees at different levels (see Crawley, 2004; Rutherford 1993). Commonly, the strongest and most cohesive occupational cultures have been identified in lower level employees. But even here cultures of ‘offender managers’ tend to be dynamic and fluid, reacting and adapting to suit particular incidents and changes in the environment while still sharing some common values (Kauffman, 1988; Liebling and Price, 2001). However, there are still significant gaps in our knowledge about the working values and practices of ‘offender managers’.

The existence of an occupational culture suggests that one set of values and beliefs dominates throughout a profession and results in personnel following similar working practices. By contrast, several studies of criminal justice personnel have identified a number of different sets of working values or credos. Working credos are ideal types and can be defined as ‘the values and beliefs that shape the work and professional careers of criminal justice professionals’ (Rutherford, 1993: 3). Commonly, three dominant working credos have been outlined namely: the punishment credo; efficiency credo; and the care/humanity credo (Liebling, 2004; Rutherford, 1993). Personnel who adhere to the punishment credo dislike offenders and morally condemn them; hold crime control values; and believe in the swift and harsh punishment of offenders. Personnel who adhere to the efficiency credo lack an ideology and give prominence to the values of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Their overriding concern is the smooth and shift operation of the criminal justice process rather than any ‘moral mission’ (Liebling, 2004; Rutherford, 1993). A belief in the possibility of offenders’ rehabilitation and some empathy with suspects, offenders and victims is a core value of the care/humanity credo. Strict adherence to the rule of law and due process values are also important to this credo. It has been suggested that the values encompassed in the efficiency credo may be held in conjunction with either the punishment or care/humanity credos (Lacey, 1994; Liebling, 2004).

An important consideration is whether concepts and research findings relating to public sector personnel can be translated to private sector criminal justice employees. Significant differences exist between the context and habitus in which private and public sector criminal justice personnel operate which are likely to shape their working practices alongside working values and/or occupational cultures (Chan, 1996, 1997; Kauffman, 1988; Liebling and Price, 2001; McLean and Liebling, 2008). McLean and Liebling’s (2008) comparison of the views of public and private sector prison officers suggests that
structural differences between the sectors are one influence on prison officers’ views of management, prisoners and their authority.

There are a number of key structural divergences between the private and public sector within criminal justice which are likely to impact upon the work of monitoring officers. The first distinction between public and private sector criminal justice agencies is the constitutional and legal position of public sector personnel (especially the police) which gives public sector personnel additional authority and powers over and above those held private sector employees and ordinary citizens. Second, state employed personnel have extensive infrastructures to support their work generally and to provide back up when required. Third, public sector criminal justice agencies have long histories and traditions which are largely absent from private sector agencies. These may result in more entrenched working practices. Fourth, public sector agencies often employ individuals for long periods and provide extensive training, career progression and job security resulting in relatively stable and cohesive workforces. By contrast, private sector employees receive much less training which is not as intensive, have little opportunity for career progression, have less job security and are employed for shorter periods of time so staff turnover is high (Button, 2007; McLean and Liebling, 2008; Wakefield, 2003). Fifth, the public sector criminal justice workforce tends to be highly organized and unionized. Both the police and prison officers have professional organizations (the Police Federation and the Prison Officers Association respectively) who have significant clout, protecting their interests and voicing their concerns about working practices. By contrast, monitoring officers tend to belong, if at all, to one of the large unions with diverse memberships who are not engaged in protecting the interests of a coherent group of workers. Consequently, organized representation of monitoring officers’ interests is minimal. Finally, private sector agencies work to strict contracts which require them to deliver certain services with financial consequences if they fail to do so. While some of this culture has been transported into public sector agencies, it is arguably diluted and certainly does not have the same immediate financial consequences for agencies.

The differences between the positions of public and private sector personnel in criminal justice are important. They have led to suggestions that shared assumptions or occupational cultures within the private security sector are likely to be significantly weakened (Button, 2007; Schein, 1992). However, the divergences between the two sectors may be overemphasized as the boundaries between them have become blurred because of a number of factors, namely: that they all work within the criminal justice system; that there is significant movement of personnel between the sectors; and because of cross-fertilization of policies and practices (McLean and Liebling, 2008).

Research Design and Interviewee Sample

The research described in this article was exploratory and part of a broader study examining compliance with EM curfew orders (Hucklesby, 2008, 2009). The research was undertaken in one private sector company (G4S) responsible for operating EM in England and Wales. The findings may not be generalizable to other EM operators particularly outside the UK where EM is organized differently (see Whitfield, 2001). The article draws on two sources of data collected as part of the study namely, observations
of monitoring officers at work and interviews with them. In terms of observations, 55 shifts were observed each lasting between four and eight hours. Twenty interviews were conducted with monitoring officers employed by one of the EM contractors. Monitoring officers gave their informed consent to be interviewed. The interviews were in-depth and semi-structured. They lasted between an hour and a half and three hours and usually took place before shifts began. Interviewees were asked about their employment backgrounds, their reasons for applying to be monitoring officers, the training they had received, their views on supervision and management, EM and offenders as well as how they went about their work, how they dealt with specific events and any problems or concerns they had relating to their work.

Interviews are a valid and viable way to explore monitoring officers’ views and experiences but the drawback is that they can only explore what monitoring officers say they do. There may be substantial differences between what monitoring officers say and what they do in practice. However, this problem appeared to be minimal because they openly discussed deviant practices suggesting that they did not feel inhibited about divulging details about their working practices. Some of them also depersonalized their answers by discussing issues in the third person. Additionally, observations provided a different, less formal, environment for conversations with monitoring officers as well as direct observations of their working practices. It is possible that the presence of a researcher impacted upon how monitoring officers went about their work but the triangulation of methodologies will have made the findings more robust.

The interviewees worked in two field branches of the company. Ten monitoring officers from each branch were interviewed constituting a third of the officers who worked in each of the offices. Eleven women were interviewed, split almost equally between the two branches. This mirrors the proportion of women employed as monitoring officers generally and is significantly higher than the proportion of females employed as police or prison officers (Ministry of Justice, 2009b). This raises interesting issues about what, if any, impact the larger number of female monitoring officers has on working values and practices and the potential for occupational cultures to develop and thrive. The mean age of interviewees was 38 (range 22–59 years). All but one of the interviewees was White. Monitoring officers were selected for interview by length of service so those who had been employed as monitoring officers longest were interviewed because they would have the greatest experience and knowledge of the work. All of the interviewees worked for the company for at least 11 months. On average, they had worked for the company for two years which compared with public sector employees is a relatively short time.

The employment backgrounds of the interviewees were diverse. Only one of them had never worked full-time before and she was the only one who was a graduate. Of the others, two had been in the armed forces and four had worked in the security industry. Two interviewees had worked installing cable television. The majority of other monitoring officers had worked in retail, office or factory environments.

The Working Environment of Monitoring Officers
Monitoring officers are in a structurally weaker position than most security or criminal justice personnel. They have no special authority and they work on offenders’ own
territory, in their homes, rather than in an institutional or public space. Most security personnel working in environments such as hospitals, universities and shopping malls have authority to be there and have a range of powers available to deal with individuals including forcibly removing people or banning people. By contrast, monitoring officers require offenders’ and householders’ ‘consent’ to be on their property limiting their authority. The position of monitoring officers also differs from the police and other security personnel because they do not wear a military style uniform which acts as a visible symbol of power and authority. Most monitoring officers are reluctant even to wear their relatively informal uniforms because it identifies them adding to their feelings of vulnerability.

Monitoring officers work shifts mainly in the evening and at night when most electronically monitored curfews operate. Monitoring officers either work from local branches or from home. Those who work from home do not routinely visit branch premises. Generally, their contact with branches is remote, via hand held electronic devices, faxes and telephone calls. Monitoring officers who are based in branches generally go there at the beginning and end of their shifts. This gives them the opportunity to catch up and socialize with colleagues. Once ‘on the road’ much of the work is undertaken alone. However, in certain types of cases, involving juveniles, women and identified risky individuals or areas, visits are sometimes undertaken in pairs. This may involve monitoring officers working together for a whole shift or meeting up to carry out one or two jobs. Opportunities for socialization within and outside the workplace were more limited than those described in studies of the police or private security personnel particularly because socializing after shifts is curtailed by finishing in the early hours of the morning (Button, 2007; Cain, 1973, McCahill, 2002).

The vans used by monitoring officers were easily identifiable at the time the research was taking place. Monitoring officers work out of regional offices so they are often required to travel considerable distances during shifts particularly if they are tasked to work in rural or semi-rural areas. Those who work from home usually have their ‘own patch’ whereas office-based staff work in different areas and have no choice about where they are sent.

Monitoring officers’ roles include installing and decommissioning equipment, checking equipment, investigating alleged non-compliance, completing visit/breach reports and undertaking random mobile monitors (RAMS).1 They work to task lists with additional visits being added during shifts. They have a high degree of discretion and autonomy in the way in which they carry out their work. They are not under direct supervision of their managers and it is up to them how they complete their allocated tasks. There are some constraints upon their autonomy: some tasks have to be completed during certain time-frames; they may be required to meet up with colleagues to do jobs which require double crews; or additional visits may be allocated to them.

The work of monitoring officers is overseen by management in a number of ways. First, cars are fitted with tracking devices. Second, monitoring officers are required to book on and off sites at the beginning and end of visits by telephoning their supervisors. Third, visit reports are submitted to managers after every shift. While the visit reports can be conceptualized as monitoring, the first two methods perform a surveillance function. Interviewees generally welcomed the monitoring and surveillance of their
work largely because of their safety concerns. Before examining some of these issues in more depth, the next section explores whether monitoring officers have an identifiable working culture.

Monitoring Officers’ Working Culture?

There were a number of identifiable attributes that were shared by monitoring officers which will be discussed in this section. A key question is whether these are strong enough to constitute a coherent occupational or working culture. In many ways the working environment of monitoring officers lends itself to the creation of a working culture. It shares many attributes with the working environment of the police including high levels of autonomy, low levels of supervision of working practices, working on the streets and in offenders’ homes resulting in heighten levels of the danger and isolation from ‘normal life’ because of the night working involved. By contrast, other elements of a strong occupational culture highlighted in police studies were missing (Reiner, 2000). There was little evidence of a high level of camaraderie or internal solidarity among monitoring officers probably because of the lack of joint working.

In common with the police monitoring officers had a clear sense of mission. They strongly believed in the courts’ decisions that offenders should be punished and electronically monitored and that it was their role to ensure that this happened. Their sense of mission, however, was much narrower and more focused than that identified in studies of the police where policing is identified as a way of life or vocation and not just a job (Reiner, 2000). Monitoring officers did not see themselves in the same way. Their jobs were just that and were not all encompassing or a way of life. Nor did monitoring officers display a hunger for action associated with police culture. Instead, their modus operandi was peace-keeping and avoiding confrontation which aligns their working values with prison officers rather than police officers (Liebling and Price, 2001; Yoo, 2008).

Monitoring officers did however share a sense of pragmatism with the police in that their main concerns were to get the job done as quickly as possible without mishaps and with the minimum of fuss and work on their part.

Interviewees held largely punitive attitudes towards offenders particularly in relation to non-compliance. For example, without exception, they thought that breaches were dealt with too leniently by the courts and that more offenders who breached should be sent to prison. Monitoring officers also articulated an ‘us and them’ culture with offenders. Monitoring officers were suspicious of offenders and their families and did not trust them. As one interviewee explained: ‘Some of these people can be very crafty, have to watch what you say. Some are very devious and them [sic] and their family will use stuff you say against you.’

They generally did not believe the reasons provided by offenders for non-compliance. They were also wary of entering into any dialogue with offenders believing that they would use it to their advantage subsequently. Monitoring officers were particularly concerned about explaining about EM technology preferring instead to keep its operation a mystery. However, monitoring officers held different views of offenders depending on who the offenders were. Some groups including drug users, youths, sex offenders and in some cases minority ethnic groups were viewed as ‘rubbish’ which resonates with
accounts of police occupational culture and racism in the Prison Service (House of Commons, 2006). Other groups including older offenders and some women were largely viewed as ‘victims of circumstance’. Monitoring officers had a general understanding of the predicament of offenders’ families and that EM can make the lives of families difficult especially when they visited properties late at night. However, some families were viewed as more deserving of sympathy than others and the standard of accommodation was a key determinant of this.

Monitoring officers were socially isolated which mainly emanated from the fact that they worked shifts usually during the evening and at night. They reported having little, if any, social life and seeing very little of their partners, families or friends. Their isolation appeared to arise for these practical reasons rather than being a result of the ‘siege mentality’ identified in the police (Reiner, 2000). Monitoring officers had limited social contact both inside and outside of work.

Studies of the police have highlighted their sexist attitude towards women and their dislike of working with them (Reiner, 2000). The opposite was the case for monitoring officers. Male monitoring officers made no mention of not wanting to work with women although several did suggest that additional safety concerns arose for women. Women were viewed as an asset but on the basis of gender assumptions about what they could do. Their perceived abilities to calm down difficult situations and offenders were viewed as their main quality and utility. Women are also a practical necessity because female monitoring officers were required to be present during visits to juveniles and women at the time of the research.

Evidence of a strong occupational culture was absent. Most interviewees shared general attitudes towards their work and the people they came across while working. Within this there were some subtle yet important differences in interviewees’ views. These differences mirror the working credos of public sector criminal justice professionals but do not fit them exactly probably because of differences in the general orientation of monitoring officers and their work (Cavadino et al., 1999; Liebling, 2004; Rutherford, 1993; Scott, 2008). Three working credos were uncovered by the research with a possible fourth identified by monitoring officers but not encountered directly. Each of the credos will be discussed in turn and a summary can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1. Typology of monitoring officers’ working credos**

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Probation worker</th>
<th>Pragmatist</th>
<th>Technician</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>View of offenders</td>
<td>Some empathy and trust</td>
<td>Non-judgemental</td>
<td>No empathy and heightened suspicion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time on each visit</td>
<td>As long as it takes to do it thoroughly</td>
<td>As long as it takes to fit the equipment and explain the requirements of EM</td>
<td>As short as possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information/ advice provided</td>
<td>Yes, general advice provided</td>
<td>Only in relation to EM</td>
<td>As little as possible</td>
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Seven interviewees could be described as ‘Probation workers’. The values displayed by these interviewees included ensuring that they treated offenders with respect. They were also more likely to discuss helping offenders and their families. They had a heightened level of trust in offenders compared to the other credos as well as a greater awareness and empathy of offenders’ lives and circumstances. They ensured that offenders and their families received all the necessary information about EM and took extra time and care ensuring that they knew everything they needed to know. They provided offenders and their families with advice about EM and other issues whether or not these were related to EM. They were often chastised by other monitoring officers for taking too long completing jobs. An interviewee explained her working values: ‘I have a habit of staying with people for too long because I want to help them. Other people are in and out as quickly as they can. Not me I want to help them.’

Half of the monitoring officers interviewed were ‘Pragmatists’. Their main concerns were ensuring that they completed tasks efficiently and effectively. They held non-judgemental attitudes towards offenders and their families. They stuck to their job description providing only scant information and advice to offenders and only in relation to EM mainly because they displayed a lack of trust in offenders. One interviewee explained:

we don’t see ourselves as like probation officer type people … [we] enforce a sentence but in a non-judgemental, non-aggressive way, you know, without being like a prison guard or a police officer … we’re not there for support, we’re there to enforce … [we don’t have] a supporting role.

Technicians were the smallest group comprising three interviewees. Their main priority was to fit the equipment and get the job finished as quickly as possible. They had no sympathy or empathy for offenders or their families and had a heightened mistrust of offenders. Consequently, they kept their distance from them with little or no time spent talking to, or interacting with, offenders or their families. Some of these interviewees used derogatory terms to refer to offenders. One member of this group explained the main role of monitoring officers in the following terms:

More on the engineering side of things in the front line. I try and play down our role in the scheme of things. If people ask me what is going to happen I say [that I] just have to put the kit in and take it out.

Another ‘technician’ explained why she was suspicious of offenders and distrusted them: ‘Keep to the company line or else you can get accused of all sorts. These people stitch you up … you have to be careful with them.’

Many interviewees discussed a possible fourth credo, ‘the authoritarian’ but none of the interviewees could be identified as belonging to this group nor was an authoritarian encountered during observations. According to interviewees’ accounts, these monitoring officers operated as if they were police officers, accusing offenders of breaching their orders. Two interviewees described the working values of this possible credo:

Well some of them go round as though they are policeman and they [are] not.
some people go out of their way to annoy people. You get to some people’s houses and they are already wound up from the last visit.

Having examined the working orientation of monitoring officers the next section discusses their key concern – vulnerability and safety.

**Vulnerability and Safety**

The overarching concern of interviewees was their personal safety and ensuring their safety was the major context in which their work was undertaken. They reported always feeling vulnerable and sometimes feeling unsafe. One interviewee commented: ‘[I feel vulnerable] when I am out on my own. I would say most of the time when I am out I feel vulnerable.’ A second interviewee said: ‘I feel safe but a bit exposed, out on a limb’, while another commented ‘most of the time nothing will happen but you don’t know’. Many examples were provided of incidents when they had been verbally or physically abused and when they felt unsafe and ‘at risk’.

Nearly all interviewees reported being verbally abused and this was viewed as an occupational hazard. Six interviewees reported being physically attacked which resulted in significant injuries and psychological effects. Abusive incidents were only reported to managers if they were particularly serious. By contrast, news of incidents spread quickly among monitoring officers. They were discussed openly among the group sometimes over significant periods of time.

A number of reasons were provided for monitoring officers feeling vulnerable and unsafe while working. First, the job was viewed as inherently more risky because most of the work is undertaken in the evening and at night. Second, the localities in which they work are viewed as hazardous because they are often socially deprived marginized areas with high levels of crime and anti-social behaviour and known for their hostility to formal institutions of authority. Interviewees often reported that they had to visit areas alone where they believed that the police refused to go either without back up or at all. Indeed, the contrast between the police and monitoring officers is stark with police officers and community support officers generally patrolling only in pairs.2 Feelings of insecurity were heightened when escape routes were limited, when house numbers and street signs were missing making the identification of premises difficult and in unfamiliar areas. One interviewee explained: ‘sometimes you drive into a street and you don’t feel safe but it always seems worst as well if you don’t know where you are going, if you are in an area that you don’t work much.’

Third, interviewees felt that they were easily identifiable because of their distinctive vans and the time of day they worked. Fourth, family and household members and other visitors to offenders’ accommodation were a source of concern as well as physical and verbal abuse for interviewees. Similarly, monitoring officers often reported turning up to premises where large groups had congregated and/or where alcohol and drugs were being used. Fifth, the premises they visited were unfamiliar and escape routes unknown increasing the risks of getting trapped. Sixth, the poor standard of much of the accommodation they visited was cited as increasing feelings of vulnerability. Seventh, interviewees felt vulnerable because they were acutely aware that there was no immediate
back up if something went wrong and that a considerable time was likely to elapse before assistance arrives. Finally, even though there was general support for tracking devices in cars, interviewees made the point that this tracked vans and not individuals leaving them vulnerable when they were away from their vehicles.

**Dealing with Feelings of Vulnerability**

The strength of concerns about safety meant that interviewees’ major preoccupation was ensuring that they did not get into situations which might lead to their safety being compromised. These findings resonate with Liebling and Price’s (2001) accounts of prison officers’ assessments that a good day was one where nothing happened and no incidents took place (see also Yoo, 2008). They identified ‘peacekeeping’ as a significant element of prison officers’ role relying on verbal strategies rather than force to maintain the peace although force is always available as back up. The use of force is not an option available to monitoring officers partly because no support or back up is available from others. Instead, they relied upon an alternative range of strategies for dealing with their feelings of vulnerability and insecurity. The strategies adopted differed between personnel and depended upon situational factors.

The first set of strategies involved not undertaking visits. Company policy was that if monitoring officers felt unsafe before or during a visit they were not required to complete it and simply had to inform managers of their decision. All interviewees were aware of this policy and some of them reported that they had refused to make visits. Others suggested that it was not as straightforward as the policy suggested, mainly because of their personal mission to ensure that offenders were monitored. There were other less explicit ways of avoiding doing particular visits which included leaving them until late in the shift in the hope that supervisors would reallocate them to another monitoring officer. A second strategy was to report that they had visited offenders’ properties when they had not. A monitoring officer explained:

She is horrible, last time I had her on the sheet [I] left it [un]til late and never did it. … [I’m] not doing her tonight, there are ways around it. Usually I just leave it [un]til they say drop the job. I have been up and just posted a contact letter through. I am not going to jobs that [I] do not want to do.

A second monitoring officer commented:

I have done it once, it was late at night about 11.30 and the area I had to go was bad. I did not go and reported a no show. [I] should not have done it … I did not want to go. [I] should have phoned up and said that I did not want to go … that I did not feel safe going but that does not look good.

This practice can have serious ramifications for offenders because they may be reported as absent from their curfew address leading to breach proceedings being instigated. Similar types of activity have been described in studies of private security personnel and have usually been attributed to illegitimate reasons such as laziness or a lack of
commitment to the work (see McCahill, 2002). While such explanations may be valid in some circumstances, feelings of vulnerability and safety provide more compelling reasons for such behaviour.

Monitoring officers used a range of instrumental strategies to enhance their safety. These were linked to pragmatic considerations of doing tasks as quickly and safely as possible without confrontation and were linked to conflict avoidance. Using such strategies sometimes resulted in tasks not being completed properly as one monitoring officer explained: ‘If you are nervous in someone’s house, you would want to get the job done as quickly as possible and get out and obviously you are not explaining things properly and fitting equipment correctly.’ Monitoring officers often used workload and time constraints as excuses to leave properties and avoid lengthy conversations with offenders or other occupants of the house.

Another way of avoiding conflict and improving monitoring officers’ safety was to distance themselves from the police and deny that they had any authority or decision-making power. They would commonly use phases such as ‘I’m only following orders’ and ‘I don’t make decisions’. Others used the mechanism of stating that they were ‘only equipment engineers’. These strategies neutralized and denied that they have any power or authority and resonate with the techniques of neutralization used by offenders to deny responsibility for offences (Matza, 1964; Sykes and Matza, 1957). Kauffman (1988) and Scott (2008) identified that similar strategies were used by prison officers to neutralize their guilt for violating their own moral codes while working in the prison (Kauffman, 1988) or to construct a different ‘moral realm’ inside the prison to that which exists outside (Scott, 2008). Kauffman (1988) also proposes that techniques of neutralization were used to ensure officers physical and psychological survival resonating with this study where they were explicitly linked to the need to ensure monitoring officers’ personal safety.

Another ‘safety’ strategy of monitoring officers was to avoid confrontations with offenders by saying that visits were to check equipment when their purpose was to investigate possible breaches. Accusing offenders of breaches was seen as particularly problematic behaviour in terms of ensuring the safety of monitoring officers. Monitoring officers spoke widely of others who acted in an authoritarian manner and just ‘like police officers’. In so doing they were viewed as threatening the safety of other monitoring officers. One interviewee explained: ‘The monitoring officer’s attitude can have some impact on the way we are treated. If you go in with “you will do this and you will do that”, it winds them up.’

A third range of strategies adopted by monitoring officers were normative and linked to managing situations and engaging with offenders rather than avoiding contact and possible conflict with them. Normative strategies included treating offenders with respect and in a non-authoritarian manner, not accusing them of non-compliance, talking to them ‘normally’ and using banter, jokes and humour. Monitoring officers usually dealt with difficult situations by talking offenders down or by ‘killing them with kindness’ as one interviewee called it. The similarities between these accounts and those of prison officers in terms of their reliance upon verbal communication to avoid conflict and keep the peace are notable (Liebling and Price, 2001). Female monitoring officers were perceived to be particularly good at using these types of strategies and male monitoring officers.
often utilized them in this way because they were able to ‘smile and talk to offenders’ and calm situations down.

Concluding Comments
The working practices of monitoring officers are largely dictated by concerns about personal safety. Feeling unsafe and vulnerable impacted upon how they went about their work and resulted in them using of a range of strategies to reduce their vulnerability. Monitoring officers utilized three broad categories of strategies to deal with their concerns: avoiding visits altogether; instrumental strategies which were conflict avoidance strategies; and normative strategies which attempted to manage situations so conflict did not arise. The selection of strategies was dynamic and situational and depended upon the particular circumstances they faced. However, monitoring officers had strategies of choice which were linked to their working values or credos. Some strategies fitted with some working credos more than others. So it is likely that instrumental strategies would be used most widely by ‘pragmatists’ and ‘technicians’ whereas normative strategies were more likely to be used by ‘probation workers’. The link between working values and practices exists but the direction of causation is unclear. Furthermore, situational and environmental factors (i.e. safety concerns raised by the nature of the work) muddy the relationship between working values and practices and may be the predominant factor in explaining the relationship between them.

Environmental factors had a strong influence on monitoring officers’ working practices. The fact that they work during the evenings and at night, largely on their own, in offenders’ homes and without immediate back up contributed to the way they carried out their work. They shared some of the attributes of occupational cultures of other criminal justice professions including mission, pragmatism, suspicion and isolation but the solidarity and cohesion evident in other occupational groups was lacking. Considerations about safety overrode any need to ensure that they were an accepted member of a working group. What was evident was that a loosely defined shared working orientation existed rather than a clearly defined occupational culture.

Although monitoring officers shared values there were also some important distinctions between them which fitted into three working credos. The credos were similar to those found in previous research (Rutherford, 1993) but the factors which defined them took account of the particular working environment of monitoring officers. The credos form a continuum based upon three aspects of their working values: the extent to which they empathized with offenders’ situations and trusted them; pragmatic considerations about getting the job done; and the extent to which they saw their role as providing offenders with information, guidance and support. The two extremes of the continuum were the ‘Probation worker’ who empathized with offenders’ situations and trusted them; pragmatic considerations about getting the job done; and the extent to which they saw their role as providing offenders with information, guidance and support. The two extremes of the continuum were the ‘Probation worker’ who empathized with offenders and offered guidance, information and support during visits and was willing to spend additional time with offenders and the ‘Technician’ who kept time spent and interactions with offenders to a minimum because of a lack of empathy and a heightened mistrust of them. There was some indication that monitoring officers’ orientations to different credos were linked to their initial reasons for applying to become monitoring officers and their expectations of what the job entailed. It would be useful for this aspect to be explored in future research.
The possible existence of a fourth working credo ‘the authoritarian’ which was not directly attributable to interviewees raises a number of possibilities. First, ‘authoritarians’ may not exist or they may not have been interviewed for the research. Second, it may demonstrate differences between what monitoring officers say they do and what they actually do. This raises a crucial question for this type of research because it is difficult to gauge the extent to which working beliefs articulated during formal interviews and informal discussions translate into working practices (Waddington, 1999). Observations throw some light on this relationship but working practices may be affected and sanitized by the presence of the researcher. A third possibility is that monitoring officers react to situations in different ways and use a variety of strategies to deal with offenders. So they adapt their working style to provide the most appropriate response in particular circumstances and sometimes this may be an authoritarian response. It is possible, for example, that monitoring officers become more authoritarian the more vulnerable or unsafe they feel. If this is the case it suggests that situational factors can lead to working values being overridden in specific situations. Fourth, the findings may be an example of ‘pluralistic ignorance’ (Katz and Allport cited in Klofas and Toch, 1982) or a ‘sub-cultural myth’ (Klofas and Toch, 1982). These describe situations in which prison officers (or others) outwardly display anti-prisoner views despite not believing them in the mistaken belief that these views are held by colleagues (Kauffman, 1981; Klofas and Toch, 1982).

EM is a punishment based on a technology but it relies on monitoring officers to function. The technology needs to be fitted, monitored and kept in working order and offenders have to be made aware of the restrictions placed upon them in order to comply. This research suggests that differences exist between what the technology is capable of and how it operates in practice, which are explained, in large part, by how monitoring officers go about their work. They have a direct impact on the integrity of EM and its efficiency in providing a robust punishment. For example, offenders are not monitored as the courts intended if equipment is not fitted correctly. If visits are not undertaken, when required, equipment may continue to malfunction, offenders may not be breached and some offenders may be wrongly breached. Offenders’ experiences of EM will also differ resulting in inconsistencies in treatment and outcomes. Concerns about safety and feelings of vulnerability militate against monitoring officers spending time with offenders ensuring that they are fully conversant with the requirements of the order making breaches more likely. Encounters between monitoring officers and offenders are more likely to be rushed, less convivial and more distant so that offenders are less likely to view their experiences positively. Offenders have a choice about whether to comply so that what happens during these encounters may be crucial, impacting upon compliance and resulting in different attitudes to, and levels of compliance with electronic monitoring (see, for example, Hucklesby, 2009; Tyler, 1990). Taking account of monitoring officers’ working practices and concerns when drawing up policies and procedures for the operation of EM is likely to result in the more effective operation of EM, lower rates of non-compliance and offenders being monitored as intended by the courts.

The central policy question raised by the findings is how to reduce monitoring officers’ feelings of vulnerability and ease their safety concerns. The solution, from monitoring officers’ perspective, was to always work in pairs bringing practice in line with other public sector agencies. But such a solution would be costly and is unlikely to be viewed
as feasible under current or future contracts when the Government is expected to be looking for savings. It is also doubtful that such a policy would be adopted when the requirement for two monitoring officers to attend visits involving minors and women has been removed recently. An alternative strategy would be to put additional health and safety measures in place. For example, monitoring officers were in favour of increasing levels of surveillance of their work to provide greater levels of safety and accountability. Such views raise interesting questions about the relationship between being subject to surveillance oneself while also overseeing the surveillance of others particularly in relation to whether working with surveillant techniques makes individuals more tolerant and accepting of surveillance generally.

Monitoring officers are unlikely to view any additional health and safety measures as adequate because they consistently compared their working environment with that of the police. Certainly the lack of the same level of infrastructure, which enables the police to respond swiftly to incidents involving their staff, is a major drawback of private sector (and third sector) involvement in criminal justice services. However, distinctions between the private and public sector can be too starkly drawn because not all statutory criminal justice agencies (for example the Probation Service) share the levels of emergency response available to the police when working in the community or in offenders’ homes. A greater level of co-operation between private sector companies and public sector criminal justice agencies may go some way to dealing with monitoring officers’ safety concerns, for example, by the police providing a priority response to EM companies. However, this approach would raise questions about whether the private sector should be reliant on state agencies for emergency assistance, potentially adding hidden costs to private sector involvement in criminal justice services.

Private sector involvement in EM provides an important context to monitoring officers’ work. The research raises questions about whether personnel would work differently if they were employed by the public sector and whether their concerns would be less and/or different. But assessing the impact of the private sector is difficult because comparisons are being made between different types of organizations carrying out distinct functions. Consequently, it is impossible to untangle the influences of the private sector and the environment in which monitoring officers operate on their working practices. The similarities between the working credos of public sector criminal justice personnel and monitoring officers suggest that the nature of the employment is one determinant of how roles are carried out. However, private sector involvement undoubtedly does influence how monitoring officers work. The strict terms of the contract under which the companies and their employees are required to operate provides the EM companies and monitoring officers with limited flexibility to determine and change practices. Additionally, companies work under the financial constraints of the contracts and are required to make a profit for their shareholders. While the public sector also has constraints within which it has to work, these are of a different nature to those faced by the private sector.

Currently electronic monitoring operates largely in parallel to state operated criminal justice agencies. Contact and co-operation between electronic monitoring companies and state criminal justice agencies and their personnel is limited. This has implications for monitoring officers’ feelings of safety because they felt that they could not rely on the
police for back up. Furthermore, the state sector was used as a yardstick by which to measure working conditions among monitoring officers and some of them viewed state criminal justice agencies as their career destination of choice. The working conditions of state employed personnel were always viewed as superior by monitoring officers, not in financial terms but in terms of dealing with their safety concerns, raising questions about whether private sector involvement in criminal justice has resulted in a fracturing of criminal justice provision into a two tier system. This would have implications for cooperation between public and private sector providers of criminal justice services as well as for the vision of a fully integrated criminal justice process working together for a set of common aims.

The vision behind the introduction of contestability (tendering out of criminal justice functions) within offender management specifically and criminal justice more generally is for greater involvement of the private and voluntary sector in the provision of criminal justice services (Carter, 2003). The experience of electronic monitoring suggests that several challenges are raised by greater private sector involvement in the provision of criminal justice services. These include how to manage or harmonize different working conditions across sectors and how to ensure that standards of safety for employees are at an acceptable, if not consistent, level across the criminal justice sector.

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Notes

1. RAMs are used when electronic monitoring equipment cannot be installed at an address and linked to the usual monitoring system, for example when there is no mobile telephone coverage and no landline is available. Instead, monitoring officers are required to visit addresses and use handheld equipment from outside the property to check that individuals are there.


References


**Biography**

*Anthea Hucklesby* is Reader in Criminal Justice and Deputy Director of the Centre for Criminal Justice Studies at the University of Leeds. Her research interests lie broadly in criminal justice and how the system deals with suspects, defendants and offenders.