Training Parole Agents: How Prior Criminal Justice Work Shapes Attitudes and Beliefs

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PRISON TREATMENT AND rehabilitative programming have had varying levels of support among the general public and politicians since Martinson's "What works?" findings (Martinson, 1974). Over the past few decades, many correctional environments have adopted inmate and offender-based programs that follow a cognitive-behavioral approach to rehabilitation for lower recidivism rates after release from prison (see, Saxena, Messina, & Grella, 2014; Van Voorhis, Spiropoulos, Ritchie, Seabrook, & Spruance, 2013). In general, research shows that cognitive-behavioral interventions can be effective if they address known factors that promote criminal behavior and focus on changing inappropriate behavior (Latessa, Cullen, & Gendreau, 2002). This study explores the relationship between support for rehabilitative programming among correctional staff and respondent characteristics (sex, race, and age) and job classification. Additionally, it reveals how previous work experience in the criminal justice field impacted new parole agents' knowledge, attitude, and beliefs about modeling appropriate behavior for offenders, showing support for offenders' reentry into the community, and understanding the principles on which effective correctional intervention programming is based.

Background

Prior research examined differences among correctional staff attitudes toward offender treatment and rehabilitative programming by various demographic characteristics. For example, attitudes and beliefs differed greatly by the sex of the respondent. Findings showed that female probation officers were significantly more likely to prefer rehabilitative programming compared to male officers (Miller, 2015). Female correctional officers displayed a more "human services orientation," focused on interpersonal communication, and disagreed with punitive approaches to corrections more than their male counterparts (Hemmens & Stohr, 2000; Johnson, 2002; Stohr, Hemmens, Kifer, & Schoeler, 2000).

Support for offender programming also differed by the age of respondent. Kelly (2013) found that correctional officers aged 21-30 showed less support for correctional rehabilitation initiatives and a greater inclination for maintaining strict and punitive control over inmates compared to officers from other age groups. Similarly, other research findings showed that correctional staff under the age of 25 were custody-oriented and focused more on inmate discipline (Young, Antonio, & Wingeard, 2009). In general, research showed that support for the punitive treatment of inmates decreased with age (Kelly, 2013; Maahs & Pratt, 2001; Stohr et al., 2000), with older correctional officers reporting the most engagement and support for inmate rehabilitative programming (Miller, 2015).

Finally, we examined support for correctional programming by the race of the respondent. These findings showed differences in attitude along racial lines. For example, Maahas & Pratt (2001) found that correctional officers who were racial minorities held more favorable attitudes toward treatment and rehabilitative programs than did White officers; additionally, Grattet, Lin, & Petersilia (2011) found that African American officers held less punitive attitudes toward offenders than did other racial minority groups.

Other findings about support for correctional programming by staff characteristics were less clear. Specifically, staff education level showed mixed results for support of rehabilitative programming. Overall, some research in the U.S. showed that the educational level of correctional staff played no significant role in attitudes toward treatment and rehabilitative programming (Hemmens & Stohr, 2000; Maahs & Pratt, 2001). However, findings from outside the U.S. revealed that more highly educated staff showed more support for treatment and rehabilitative programming (Burton, Ju, Dunaway, & Wolfe, 1991).

Research regarding the number of years an officer was employed in a correctional setting (i.e., job tenure) also presented mixed findings. Some research found that as on-the-job experience increased, attitudes about punitive treatment decreased (Kelly, 2013), and officers who had the most years of service reacted positively toward less punitive inmate treatment and rehabilitative programming (Antonio & Young, 2011; Stohr et al., 2000). Other findings revealed that tenure diminished support for correctional rehabilitation, with an apparent increase in the likelihood for staff to engage in custodial responses to offenders (Cullen, 1989).

In addition to staff characteristics like sex, age, and race, previous research examined job classification as a factor related to attitudes

and beliefs about offender programming. Overall, findings suggested that job classification strongly predicts support for prison rehabilitation programs (Griffin, Hogan, & Lambert, 2012; Robinson, Porporino, & Simourd, 1996), possibly due in part to differences of the job such as aspects of supervision, job autonomy, role strain, and administrative support (Lambert, Hogan, Moore, Tucker, Jenkins, Stevenson, & Jiang, 2009; Lambert & Paoline, 2012). Kelly (2013) found that correctional staff whose roles related to overseeing the well-being of prisoners (such as healthcare staff) took a less punitive approach to incarceration, while staff who were responsible for ensuring successful operation of the prison (such as security and residential staff) treated inmates more punitively. Other findings revealed that treatment staff were more inclined to recognize the benefits of rehabilitation compared to correctional officers, who were more custody-oriented and less likely to support rehabilitation of offenders (Gordon, 1999; Lariviére & Robinson, 1996; Young et al., 2009). Finally, parole staff in community supervisory roles maintained a less enforcement-oriented focus, while maintenance and technical staff showed low levels of support for rehabilitation (Lariviére & Robinson, 1996; Steiner, Travis, Makarios, & Taylor, 2011).

Work History

Previous research revealed how characteristics of correctional staff such as age, sex, years of service, and job classification are associated with support for rehabilitative programming, perceived responsibilities for correcting inappropriate behavior, and modeling appropriate behavior for a correctional population. How do these attitudes and beliefs come to be? Do correctional staff develop them while on the job? In other words, are they the result of learned behavior from fellow peers who share the same job classification and workplace duties? Alternatively, do correctional staff enter the profession with a previously determined set of attitudes and beliefs about how incarcerated populations should be treated?

Mandatory training provided to newly hired correctional staff is designed to educate employees about the correctional environment, policies and procedures, and protocols for interacting with inmates and offenders. This training may provide sufficient instruction for many staff to learn the duties associated with their job and perform their roles adequately; however, a standard curriculum may not consider the diverse backgrounds and lived experiences of all employees appropriately. For example, newly hired employees who have a prior criminal justice work experience may already possess the attitude and beliefs that previous research suggests are related to age, sex, years of service, and job classification. In these instances, a preconstructed training curriculum may fail to convey information in a manner that best resonates with the individual characteristics of the new employees.

Curriculum developers and training facilitators may need to more carefully consider audience background. While individualized training sessions for correctional staff are not feasible for obvious reasons, identifying who the audience is, including prior work history, may help instructors tailor the training in a manner that will be most receptive to new employees.

Present Analysis

This study adds to the current body of literature regarding the relationship between correctional job classification and attitudes toward offenders, perceived effectiveness of the rehabilitative process, and accepted roles and responsibilities among staff employed in the criminal justice system. In this analysis, responses on a self-administered questionnaire (SAQ) were gathered from staff recently hired by Pennsylvania's Board of Probation & Parole (PBPP). The staff were surveyed during a mandatory eight-week new employee training regulated by the Board. All staff included in this analysis were undergoing training to become parole agents employed by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The main purpose of the study was to assess new parole agents' knowledge, attitude, and beliefs about modeling appropriate behavior for offenders, showing support for offenders' reentry into the community, and understanding the principles on which effective correctional intervention programming is based. Findings showed that parole agents' prior work history in the field of criminal justice measurably correlated with knowledge, attitude, and beliefs about effectiveness of offender treatment programs and their responsibilities for facilitating successful community reentry.

Method

Sample

The focus of this analysis was to compare how prior work experience in the criminal justice field impacted parole agents' knowledge, attitude, and beliefs about modeling appropriate behavior for offenders; support for offenders' reentry into the community; and understanding of the principles on which effective correctional intervention programming is based. An agent's response to the following question uncovered prior work experience in the field: Is this your first time being employed by a criminal justice agency? Respondents indicating a previous work history were prompted to specify each job title, location, and length of time (years) of criminal justice-related employment. Overall, 6.5 percent of respondents (22 out of 336) did not provide an answer to this question.

Among the parole agents who responded, four broad categories of work history were found. These categories included *no prior* criminal justice experience (NP), prior *probation and parole* experience (PP), prior *custody or law enforcement* experience (CLE), and prior *social services or social work* experience (SSW). The category of NP included respondents who indicated no prior work experiences in the criminal justice field; PP consisted of respondents who reported a prior work history as an adult or juvenile probation or parole officer at the state or county level; CLE included correctional officers and police officers from state prisons or county jails, military police and personnel, investigative and security experience; and SSW consisted of prior counseling, case management, social work, or youth development experiences.

Procedure

The data used in this analysis were gathered from a SAQ completed by newly hired parole agents employed by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Data collection occurred during a four-year period from April 2014 through January 2018. PBPP offers three orientation training sessions for new employees annually; generally, these trainings commence in January, April, and September. During the data collection phase of the study, PBPP cancelled some orientation training sessions, while at other times researchers were unavailable to collect data from certain cohorts.

Overall, data was gathered from 10 separate cohorts representing newly hired parole agents. The trainings were eight weeks in duration and provided detailed instruction about PBPP policy and procedures, including responsibilities and roles for community supervision, contact with offenders, tactical training, treatment and rehabilitation, etc. The number of agents enrolled in each session during the data collection phase of this study

varied significantly from a low of 14 agents to a high of 64 agents.

The mandatory training provided parole agents with much information about the state-operated organization of probation and parole and their individual duties and expectations for community supervision of offenders. Agents received intensive instruction about meeting offenders' needs for treatment and rehabilitation in the community during week two of the training. The specific materials included an overview of evidence-based practices related to motivational interviewing and case planning. Agents were trained to administer the Level of Service Inventory-Revised tool and to identify criminogenic needs among offenders. Researchers attended the orientation session during the fifth week of the training. They were present to explain the study, address specific questions, and obtain respondent consent. The researchers distributed the SAQ and collected the completed instrument. Staff from PBPP were not present at any time when the study was being explained or data was being gathered. The individually completed questionnaires were never viewed by parole administrators.

The questionnaire gathered responses on numerous topics related to appropriate supervision of offenders and successful reentry into the community. Approximately 25 questions or statements assessed agents' knowledge about duties and responsibilities, attitudes about offender treatment and rehabilitation, and understanding about risk and needs, including factors contributing to or promoting criminal behavior. Responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree). Agents also reported demographic characteristics and their work histories related to the criminal justice field. Drafts of the

questionnaire were provided to PBPP for review and validation purposes. During several meetings, specific statements or questions were added, removed, and/or modified for clarity. After PBPP gave final approval of the SAQ, the revised instrument was pilot tested during one training session prior to the official start of the study in order to assess the clarity of instructions and readability of the SAQ among agents. Findings from the pilot study provided valuable insights and facilitated minor revisions to the questionnaire.

Results

Respondent Characteristics

Table 1 shows demographic characteristics for the full sample of parole agents participating in the new employee orientation training offered by PBPP and provides a comparison by prior criminal justice work experience. Overall, a total of 336 respondents completed the questionnaire that assessed knowledge, attitude, and beliefs about modeling appropriate behavior for offenders, showing support for offenders' reentry into the community, and understanding the principles on which effective correctional intervention programming. The full sample of parole agents was young (mean age of 33.6), male (58.9 percent), and White (84.7 percent). The respondents reported an average of 7.5 years of work experience in other criminal justice agencies prior to starting in PBPP.

The table also reveals findings about the specific type of prior criminal justice work experience the agents had by separating responses into the four broad job categories. About one-third of the respondents were NP agents (N=106), followed by CLE (N=96), SSW (N=57), and PP (N=55). The data revealed several differences among the four groups. For example, one difference was related to age,

where the mean age of NP agents (31.3 years) was younger than the other groups: PP agents, 33.3 years; SSW agents, 34.4 years; and CLE agents, 35.4 years. Another clear difference among the groups was related to respondents' sex, where the overwhelming majority of CLE and PP agents were male (71.4 percent and 63.5 percent, respectively), compared to just slightly more than half of the SSW agents and slightly less than half of the NP agents (51.9 percent and 45.9 percent, respectively). While all groups were predominantly White, NP agents reported slightly more racial diversity, with 10.8 percent self-identifying as Black compared to the other groups (PP, 9.1 percent; SSW, 7.0 percent; and CLE, 5.3 percent). Finally, CLE agents reported a longer prior criminal justice work history than did PP agents and SSW agents (9.2 years, 6.7 years, and 5.8 years, respectively).

This analysis focused on comparing agents' responses based on prior criminal justice work experience. Table 2 shows responses by the four categories of work experience examined in this analysis: NP, PP, CLE, and SSW. Separate ordinal regression analyses were conducted using the three statements about understanding of and support for offender rehabilitative programming as dependent variables, while controlling for an agent's prior work history. Overall, the analyses showed significant differences among the work categories. For example, SSW agents (4.39) more strongly agreed with the statement "Treatment/rehabilitation programming can contribute to lowering recidivism among offenders" than did CLE agents (4.20). This finding was statistically significant beyond the .05 probability level. Responses for NP agents (4.36) and PP agents (4.40) also showed more agreement and were statistically different from those of CLE agents beyond the .10 probability level.

TABLE 1
Demographic characteristics for all respondents and by prior criminal justice work experience

Demographic Characteristics	response category	all respondents	1 no prior CJ work experience	2 prior probation or parole	3 prior custody or law enforcement	4 prior social services/ social work
		(N=336)	(N=106)	(N=55)	(N=96)	(N=57)
age	years (M)	33.6	31.3	33.3	35.4	34.4
sex	male (%)	58.9	45.9	63.5	71.4	51.9
race	White (%)	84.7	78.4	83.6	91.5	89.5
	Black (%)	8.3	10.8	9.1	5.3	7.0
CJ work experience	years (M)	7.5	--	6.7	9.2	5.8

Table 2 also reveals that NP agents (1.42) and SSW agents (1.39) more strongly disagreed with the statement, "Overall, nothing works with regard to offender treatment," than did CLE agents (1.64). These findings were statistically significant beyond the .01 probability level. Differences in level of disagreement between PP agents (1.51) and CLE agents were statistically significant beyond the .10 probability level. Generally, there was a low level of disagreement and indecisiveness for the statement, "Offender programming is more effective as a sanction to punish poor behavior than a strategy to promote good behavior." Differences among responses by the four work categories were not statistically significant beyond the .10 probability level.

Table 3 shows responses about agents' perceived impact on community-supervised offenders by the four categories for prior criminal justice work experience. Separate ordinal regression analyses were conducted using the four statements about perceived impact as dependent variables, while controlling for agents' prior work history. Respondents from each work category reported levels of agreement with the statement, "Promoting pro-social behavior among offenders is a requirement of a parole agent's profession," and levels of disagreement with the statement, "What I say or how I act around offenders has little impact on their daily behavior." None of the differences in responses by work category, for either statement, were statistically significant beyond the .10 probability level.

The table also reveals findings from two other statements about agents' perceived impact on community-supervised offenders. There was a low level of agreement and indecisiveness for the statement, "Family and friends have more impact on an offender's behavior than do parole agents." SSW agents (3.81) reported greater indecisiveness about this statement than did CLE agents (4.01), who were the work category expressing the most agreement. These findings were statistically significant beyond the .10 probability level. Also, many respondents expressed uncertainty when responding to the statement, "Staff who facilitate treatment/rehabilitation groups impact an offender's behavior more than the supervising parole agent." Differences among responses by the four work categories were not statistically significant beyond the .10 probability level.

Discussion

Support for prison programming varies widely among the general population. In this article we examined how characteristics of correctional staff impact the support for treatment and rehabilitative programming by predicting attitudes and beliefs among newly hired parole agents based upon previous work experience in the criminal justice field. Overall findings revealed that the majority of parole agents were young, male, White, and had several years of prior work experience in the criminal justice field. When agents' prior work history was compared, it was found that CLE agents were, on average, older, more likely to be male, and less racially diverse. This group of agents

TABLE 2

Agent understanding and support for offender rehabilitative programming by prior criminal justice work experience

Statement 1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree	1 no prior CJ work experience (N=106)	2 prior probation or parole (N=55)	3 prior custody or law enforcement (N=96)	4 prior social services/social work (N=57)	Grp diff, sign
Treatment/rehabilitation programming can contribute to lowering recidivism among offenders.	4.36	4.40	4.20	4.39	3<1, p=.053 3<2, p=.064 3<4, p=.021
Overall, nothing works with regard to offender treatment.	1.42	1.51	1.64	1.39	1<3, p=.009 2<3, p=.088 4<3, p=.004
Offender programming is more effective as a sanction to punish poor behavior than a strategy to promote good behavior.	2.16	2.04	2.23	2.04	

Note. Responses for each item: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree

TABLE 3

Parole agents' impact on community supervised offenders by prior criminal justice work experience

Statement 1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree	1 no prior CJ work experience (N= 106)	2 prior probation or parole (N=55)	3 prior custody or law enforcement (N=96)	4 prior social services/social work (N=57)	Grp diff, sign
Promoting pro-social behavior among offenders is a requirement of a parole agent's profession.	4.35	4.29	4.23	4.35	
What I say or how I act around offenders has little impact on their daily behavior.	1.61	1.65	1.71	1.65	
Family and friends have more impact on an offender's behavior than do parole agents.	3.96	3.96	4.01	3.81	3>4, p=.082
Staff who facilitate treatment/rehabilitation groups impact an offender's behavior more than the supervising parole agent.	2.98	2.80	2.93	2.89	

Note. Responses for each item: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree

also had the longest history of criminal justice work experience prior to starting employment as parole agents for PBPP. Previous research showed how characteristics like age (Kelly, 2013), sex (Miller, 2015), and race (Grattet et al., 2011) impacted attitudes and beliefs about the criminal justice system and those who are prosecuted and incarcerated for criminal behavior. This study's findings about how prior criminal justice work experience affected responses offers initial evidence that differences in knowledge, attitude, and beliefs may be revealed by job category.

In this study, CLE agents reported that the greatest differences in responses among the work categories came from CLE agents, who were less likely to record agreement that rehabilitative programming can lower offender recidivism rates and also were less likely to disagree with the "nothing works" mentality about treatment. The demographic makeup of this group, including the large percentage of males, lack of racial diversity, and number of prior years of criminal justice work experience, may account for the overall differences from the other work categories, which is consistent with previous research findings. Clearly, the regular training materials related to meeting the needs of offenders through community-based treatment and rehabilitative programming did not resonate with and/or were not convincing for many CLE agents. These findings suggest that a more refined training approach for new employees may be preferable, including one that focuses on the lived experiences of correctional officers and law enforcement officers, military police and personnel, and investigative and security staff.

Other responses to the SAQ revealed findings about how the newly hired parole agents perceived their impact on offenders supervised in the community. Many agents showed a weak level of agreement about whether an offender's family and friends impact him or her more than the supervising agent, with SSW agents showing the most indecisiveness. This finding is problematic, because offenders may often be surrounded by family and friends in the community who have antisocial personalities, are substance abusers, and/or make poor life decisions. In these situations, the outcome for offenders can be severe, including involvement in further incidents of criminal behavior and a possible return to prison. An astute agent will be aware of the social environment of his or her offender and should intervene when and where necessary to refocus the offender and restate the agreed conditions of parole.

Also concerning was the finding that agents deferred to group facilitators as primarily responsible for offenders' behavioral change. This finding suggests additional and/or a modified staff training curriculum may be required for newly hired parole agents. Agents should recognize that time spent with offenders during mandatory contacts is important and can impact and determine an offender's success in the community. Agents will likely have more one-on-one contact with offenders than a group facilitator will. Therefore, time spent with the offender should involve reinforcing and practicing skills learned during rehabilitative programming. It is clear that all agents, regardless of prior work experience, need to feel more empowered about the positive impact they can have on offender behavior and that behavioral change is not solely learned and mastered while participating in rehabilitative programming.

Limitations

There are limitations associated with the study's data collection procedures that are worthy of mention. First, all findings were gathered through a SAQ exclusively. Respondents may have concealed their true beliefs by providing the most socially desirable response, despite being instructed that their responses were anonymous and would not impact their employment status in any way. Additionally, this study represented a post-test-only data collection approach. The main concern is that this approach does not provide information about changes in attitude or beliefs over time. For example, were the parole agents' knowledge, attitude, and beliefs about modeling appropriate behavior for offenders, their support for offenders' reentry into the community, and their understanding of the principles on which effective correctional intervention programming is based different at the start of the new employee training session compared to when the questionnaire was provided during week five? This line of questioning would be appropriate if the purpose of the current study was to assess the effectiveness of the training curriculum, provide education, and/or alter agents' personal opinions about treatment and rehabilitation. However, the purpose here was to establish a baseline for knowledge, attitude, and beliefs among newly hired parole agents who were starting their employment with PBPP. Because of the study's purpose, the detrimental effects of a one-time data collection approach are minimized.

Finally, during the data collection phase for this study, PBPP began implementing the Effective Practices in Community Supervision (EPICS) program at the new employee orientation training sessions (Latessa, Smith, Schweitzer, & Labrecque, 2012; Smith, Schweitzer, Labrecque, & Latessa, 2012). This program was a modified version of the Strategic Training Initiative in Community Supervision program that originated in Canada (Bonta, Bourgon, Rugge, Scott, Yessine, Gutierrez, & Li, 2010; Bonta, Bourgon, Rugge, Scott, Yessine, Gutierrez, & Li, 2011). EPICS was delivered in three days and at various weeks throughout the training orientation, starting at the end of 2015. The influence of EPICS on the current study was minimal, as it only impacted data collection efforts from three training cohorts. Findings from these cohorts were analyzed separately and then compared with the aggregate findings from cohorts questioned before EPICS was delivered. Findings from this comparison showed that agents who received EPICS training reported slightly more agreement with their responsibility to promote prosocial behavior and slightly more disagreement that offender programming is more effective as a sanction than in promoting good behavior. All findings by job category remained the same.

Conclusion

The main purpose of the study was to assess new parole agents' knowledge, attitude, and beliefs about modeling appropriate behavior for offenders, showing support for offenders' reentry into the community, and understanding the principles on which effective correctional intervention programming is based. Findings showed that parole agents' prior work history in the criminal justice field measurably impacted knowledge, attitude, and beliefs about effectiveness of offender treatment programs and their responsibilities for facilitating successful community reentry. These findings suggest that mandatory orientation training sessions for parole agents, and possibly correctional staff in general, should consider the employment history and background of individual employees. Training curriculum should be examined with a goal of adding and/or modifying materials to address the lived realities and experiences of the new employees.

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