

Seeing eye to eye: Parole officer and parolee views of crime desistance¹

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The primary objective of parole supervision is to help parolees live a more pro-social life in the community, that is, to desist from committing crime. Identifying factors that are perceived by parole officers and parolees to be important in crime desistance could improve success in parole supervision and the understanding of crime desistance.

Thirty-four parole officers and 61 parolees from six major cities in western Canada completed a 30-item survey questionnaire on how much (on a five-point rating scale) they agree or disagree with different markers for crime desistance. In a semi-structured interview, the same participants were also asked to respond to the general question of what they would consider to be important markers for crime desistance. The interview responses were content analyzed using the smallest meaningful unit of analysis.

Parolees and parole officers generally agreed on most factors related to crime desistance. Whereas parolees recognized important criminogenic and protective factors key to crime desistance when asked by way of the questionnaire, they tended, when interviewed, to place more emphasis on subjective and experiential factors such as motivation and encouragement than on external factors such as peer group and employment. Parole officers' views tended to be more balanced.

The similarities in the views of parole officers and parolees provide further support for the use of current approaches in parole supervision (Bonta & Cormier, 1999). However, parole officers should also pay attention to the parolees' personal and subjective views of what they consider to be important to them in crime desistance, an important responsibility factor.

For case management and service delivery in the community, parole officers with Correctional Service Canada use a general framework that includes a clear understanding of an offender's criminogenic needs or factors related to offending (Bonta & Cormier, 1999). Parole officers in many other jurisdictions use similar approaches. Although this approach is supported by empirical research, its use in parole supervision has been criticized recently

for focusing too much on criminogenic factors (Farrall, 2002).

Crime desistance is "the cessation of a pattern of criminal behaviour" (p. 127, Sommers, Baskin & Fagan, 1994). Research on crime desistance can shed light on the criminal behaviours that can be appropriately targeted for correctional intervention and the most opportune time to intervene (Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1996). A number of theories of crime desistance consider positive and stabilizing social influences such as marriage, steady employment and association with prosocial peers as likely causes of crime desistance (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Warr, 1998). Empirical research on factors related to crime desistance is still in its infancy and, at this time, there is no empirically validated theory of crime desistance.

Identifying parole officers' views and beliefs about factors related to crime desistance is important. Parole officers' perspectives about what will improve their clients' success may influence their decision making, such as recommendations on the management of parolees or even decisions to revoke or not to revoke parole (Katz, 1982; Duffee, 1975). As well, parole officers' philosophical orientations, such as whether they are punitive or rehabilitation oriented, may affect their behaviour on the job and the outcome of cases under their supervision (Dembo, 1972).

A parole officer's views of crime desistance may also influence the supervisory relationship, which has been found to be related to self-reports of improved self-esteem and better chances of crime desistance by parolees (Kyvsgaard, 2000). However, parole officers and parolees have been found to differ in their opinions regarding parole, the primary purpose of which is to encourage and support crime desistance (Hussey & Briggs, 1980). Differences in parole officer and parolee views on crime desistance may impede the formation of positive working relationships.

The objective of this study was to determine similarities and differences in the views of parole officers and parolees regarding factors related to crime desistance.

Method

Procedure

Parole offices in six major cities in western Canada were contacted, informed of the study and invited to participate. Questionnaires and interviews were completed by consenting parole officers who were supervising parolees in the community. Parole officers were also asked to inform recent parolees of the study and to invite them to participate by contacting the first author. Parole officers were interviewed at the parole offices; parolees were usually interviewed at a parole office or a halfway house.

Participants

Thirty-four parole officers (41% male; 59% female) agreed to participate. The parole officers had an average of about 5.5 years of experience in community supervision.

The majority of the 61 parolees who participated in the study had been released to the community from a federal correctional institution in western Canada for 30 days or less at the time of the interview. About half of the parolees were on statutory release, about one third were on day parole and about one fifth were on full parole. Most were Caucasian (45.9%), followed by Aboriginal (37.7%), Asian (11.5%) and African Canadians (4.9%). The mean age of the parolees was 34.

Materials

A survey questionnaire was developed to evaluate the views of parole officers and parolees on factors related to crime desistance for high-risk, repeat violent offenders. The participants were asked to think about someone they know or used to know who fit a general description of high risk and who had not reoffended in the community for at least six months. They were then asked to answer the question, "How much do you agree or disagree that each of the following changes stop these people from offending?"

The survey questionnaire consisted of 30 items measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 - *Strongly Disagree* to 5 - *Strongly Agree*. Most of the items were based on dynamic criminogenic factors adapted from the Violence Risk Scale (Wong & Gordon, 2006). Other items measuring protective strategies were derived from the theoretical or research literature on crime desistance. Protective strategies were defined in the present study as factors that are perceived to aid in insulating against the learning or maintenance of criminal behaviour.

A brief, semi-structured interview protocol was developed to assess factors that parolees and parole officers believe cause crime desistance in high-risk, violence-prone offenders. The parolees' and parole officers' responses to the open-ended question, "Generally, from your experience, what can best help a high-risk parolee from staying out of trouble?"⁴ were content analyzed by coding and tabulating responses using the smallest meaningful unit of analysis. The interviews were recorded using audio-tapes and/or written notes.

Statistical analyses (t-tests) were conducted to determine whether there were differences in parole officer and parolee responses to the survey questionnaire and the interview question. The responses to the open-ended question were grouped into categories to reflect their content. For example, employment and family were grouped under protective strategies.

Results

Survey questionnaire

The survey questionnaire asked participants to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the 30 items that are reported markers of crime desistance. The large majority of items had a mean (average) score of 4 or above (see Table 1), indicating that, on average, participants agree with the survey items. Increased motivation to change was rated highest overall by both groups, followed by increased emotional control and increased positive work ethic. All but 4 items received the same ratings from both groups of participants. The total mean score of the survey questionnaire was 4.19 [standard deviation (*SD*) = 0.46].

Overall, the results indicated that parole officers and parolees had a high degree of concordance in their ratings, that is, they agreed with each other much more than they disagreed on the questionnaire items. The ratio of the number of items they agreed on to the number of items they disagreed on is about 6:1.

On the items they disagreed on, parole officers were significantly more likely than parolees to rate 'less time spent in high-risk situations,' 'increased participation in organized leisure activities' and 'increased stability of relationship' as important markers for crime desistance. Parolees were significantly more likely than parole officers to rate 'increased respect for family,' 'decreased cognitive distortions' (phrased as "thinking more realistically") and 'increased compliance with supervision' as crime desistance markers.

Table 1

Comparison between Parole Officer and Parolee Ratings on Survey Items

“How much do you agree or disagree that each of the following changes stop these people from offending?”

	Total sample (N = 95) Mean score	Parole officers (n = 34) Mean score	Parolees (n = 61) Mean score
Motivation			
Increased motivation to change	4.52	4.42	4.57
Increased compliance with supervision	4.04	3.73	4.22 *
Criminogenic needs			
Increased emotional control	4.43	4.40	4.43
Increased coping strategies ^a	4.39	4.36	4.40
Decreased substance abuse	4.37	4.64	4.22
Less time spent in high-risk situations	4.36	4.67	4.18 *
Decrease in violent relationships	4.30	4.21	4.34
Decreased impulsivity	4.29	4.06	4.42
Increased insight into violence	4.28	4.15	4.35
Decrease in time spent with criminal peers	4.28	4.49	4.17
Decreased cognitive distortions ^b	4.27	3.88	4.48 *
Decreased criminal attitudes	4.23	4.03	4.33
Decreased interpersonal aggression	4.19	4.00	4.30
Decreased number of criminal peers	4.12	4.15	4.10
Decreased violent lifestyle	4.09	4.12	4.07
Reduction of criminal beliefs	4.09	4.06	4.10
Decreased weapon use	4.00	3.79	4.12
Decreased emotional problems	3.99	3.97	4.00
Protective strategies			
Increased positive work ethic	4.41	4.24	4.50
Increased prosocial attitudes	4.36	4.18	4.45
Increased respect for family	4.34	4.03	4.51 *
Increase in time spent with prosocial peers	4.26	4.24	4.27
Increased prosocial beliefs	4.16	4.21	4.14
Increase in supportive relationships	4.14	4.24	4.09
Increased number of prosocial peers	4.08	4.30	3.95
Increased acceptance of societal values	4.09	4.00	4.14
Increased stability of romantic relationship	3.91	3.94	3.90
Increased participation in leisure activities	3.84	4.12	3.68 *
Increased participation in treatment	3.84	3.97	3.76
Increased stability of relationship	3.83	4.27	3.58 *

Items rated from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

*Significant difference between parole officers and parolees.

^aIn the parolee survey, this item was phrased as “Increased ability to handle bad situations.”

^bIn the parolee survey, this item was phrased as “Thinking more realistically.”

Semi-structured interview

In the semi-structured interview, the most frequent responses for the total sample to the question “Generally, from your experience, what can best help a high-risk parolee stay out of trouble?” were support/encouragement (30.9%), followed by motivation (25.5%) and treatment (18.1%) (see Table 2). Interestingly, treatment was articulated as important for crime desistance by 18.1% of parolees but only 8.8% of the parole officers.

The only domain that was significantly different between parole officers and parolees was criminogenic needs, which received a significantly

larger endorsement by parole officers (55.9%) than by parolees (28.3%); responses to all the other domains were not significantly different. Parole officers reported abstaining from substances, employment and honesty significantly more often than parolees to the above question. The only responses parolees reported more often than parole officers were family (15% vs. 5.9%), treatment (23.3% vs. 8.8%), religion/spirituality (8.3% vs. 0%) and ‘don’t know’ (8.3% vs. 2.9%), although the differences were not statistically significant. The lack of statistical significance in some of the comparisons of proportions may be due to the lack of power resulting from the small number of responses used in the analyses.

Table 2

Differences between Parole Officers and Parolees in Response to Semi-Structured Interview Question

“What can best help a high-risk parolee from staying out of trouble?”

	Total sample (N = 94) n (%)	Parole officers (n = 34) n (%)	Parolees (n = 60)^a n (%)
Motivation	41 (43.6)	19 (55.9)	22 (36.7)
<i>Support/Encouragement</i>	29 (30.9)	13 (38.2)	16 (26.7)
<i>Motivation</i>	24 (25.5)	12 (35.3)	12 (20.0)
Criminogenic needs	36 (38.3)	19 (55.9)	17 (28.3) *
<i>Insight/Recognizing triggers</i>	16 (17.0)	7 (20.6)	9 (15.0)
<i>Abstaining from substances</i>	12 (12.8)	10 (29.4)	2 (3.3) *
<i>Avoiding criminal peers</i>	12 (12.8)	7 (20.6)	5 (8.3)
Protective strategies	31 (33.0)	16 (47.1)	15 (25.0)
<i>Employment</i>	16 (17.0)	11 (32.4)	5 (8.3) *
<i>Family</i>	11 (11.7)	2 (5.9)	9 (15.0)
<i>Community support</i>	13 (13.8)	7 (20.6)	6 (10.0)
Treatment programs	17 (18.1)	3 (8.8)	14 (23.3)
Other	21 (22.3)	12 (35.3)	9 (15.0)
<i>Honesty</i>	8 (8.5)	6 (17.6)	2 (3.3) *
<i>Religion/Spirituality</i>	5 (5.3)	0 (0)	5 (8.3)
<i>Keeping busy</i>	6 (6.4)	3 (8.8)	3 (5.0)
Do not know	6 (6.4)	1 (2.9)	5 (8.3)

^a One respondent did not complete this question.

* Significant difference between the responses of parole officers and parolees.

Note: Participants may have mentioned more than one response to the question. If parolees mentioned at least one of the italicized items, it was tabulated for the non-italicized/bolded item above it (e.g., if participants reported motivation, this means their response was motivation and/or support/encouragement).

Discussion

The questionnaire survey results suggest that parole officers and parolees generally have similar views regarding what it takes to be successful in the community and desist from crime. Both groups endorsed motivation, reduction of criminogenic needs and protective strategies very highly (most ratings >4) suggesting that, overall, parole officers and parolees tended to see eye to eye regarding what could contribute to crime desistance. Even those in the present sample who were persistent offenders with extensive criminal careers recognized the importance of criminogenic and protective factors in crime desistance. Talking the talk does not seem to be the issue; many of them likely stumbled in the past while walking the walk.

The interview data are consistent with the survey data; there are many areas of similarity between the two groups. One area that was highly endorsed by both groups was the importance of motivation in

crime desistance. Parole officers and parolees could use this area of consensus as a common starting point towards building a functional working relationship. Most of the responses to the open-ended question – for example, motivation/support, employment and abstaining from substances – were consistent with similar studies in the literature (Brown, 2004a; Brown, 2004b; Rex, 1999; Seiter, 2002; Farrall, 2002). One area that parole officers tended to mention more than parolees was criminogenic need, in particular, abstaining from substances.

There tended to be more areas of difference and larger differences⁵ between the two groups in the interview data than in the questionnaire data. The observed differences could be attributed to the data collection methodology. That is, in contrast with the questionnaire, in the open-ended interviews, participants were given greater freedom to prioritize the expression of their views and to discuss any number of issues they wished.

The results suggest that parolees focused on the more internal and experiential aspects of crime desistance such as motivation rather than on the more external aspects such as employment (positive work ethic), which was among the highest ranking items in the survey data but was very minimally mentioned in the interview data by parolees. Parolees appeared to recognize the importance of both criminogenic and protective factors in crime desistance as evidenced in the questionnaire data. Judging from the interview data, however, they considered internal factors such as motivation, support and encouragement to be of higher priority than external factors such as peer group, employment and community support. Parole officers' views tended to be more balanced.

Overall, parole officers and parolees agreed more than they disagreed about factors involved in crime desistance; however, there were differences. Parole officers tended to focus more than parolees on offending-related behaviours (e.g., substance abuse and time spent in high-risk situations), and to some extent on protective strategies such as employment.

Disagreements between the supervisee and supervisor have been found to have negative effects on working alliances (Norrie, Eggleston & Ringer, 2003). Parole officers and case managers can use the many areas of agreement and commonality with parolees to build functional and strong working alliances, on the basis of which they could work with those they supervise to resolve potential areas of perceived disagreement. These areas of disagreement may be no more than subjective rankings of perceived needs, an important responsiveness factor, rather than fundamental differences in the philosophy of crime desistance.

In sum, for factors related to crime desistance, parole officers and parolees were quite similar in their views, providing further support for the use of current approaches in parole supervision (Bonta & Cormier, 1999). Notwithstanding this, the differences indicate that parole officers should also pay attention to parolees' personal and subjective views of what they consider to be important in crime desistance, an important responsiveness factor. ■

- ¹ Manuscript based on findings from Parhar, K. (2004). *The development of the positive self change theory of crime desistance: Perceptions of parole officers and parolees*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. Advisor: Stephen C.P. Wong.
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- ⁴ The question was modified slightly to facilitate the parolees' comprehension of the question.
- ⁵ Some differences between the two groups are quite large in magnitude but not statistically significant, probably because of the lack of power due to small sample sizes.

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