

Antecedents and outcomes of correctional officers' attitudes towards federal inmates: An exploration of person-organization fit

Doctoral thesis, Carleton University¹

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Correctional officers (COs) receive considerable attention from social scientists and policy makers. They represent the largest occupational group of the prison system and are responsible for maintaining the security, peace and order of institutions. These duties are carried out within the context of their employer's guiding philosophy, which in organizations such as the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) includes the ideals of empathy, humane treatment and rehabilitation.

Given their number and influence, COs are ideally placed to implement this value system and in turn positively influence the inmates with whom they interact frequently. It is important, therefore, to gain insight into their attitudes, particularly as these attitudes relate to inmates and the prison system. It is equally important to understand their overall work adjustment by measuring their job stress, job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

This article summarizes a larger-scale study contained in the thesis. It highlights the strong influence of attitudes on work adjustment and lends support to person-organization fit theory. In essence, the theory predicts better overall adjustment for workers whose attitudes and values are congruent with those of their employer. For CSC, this means that empathic, non-punitive and pro-rehabilitation employees should demonstrate the highest levels of work adjustment. However, adjustment should also be influenced by the prevailing attitudes of an employee's actual workplace.

Background

A precursor to much of the research on COs is a well-known study that was conducted by Zimbardo and his collaborators in 1973.⁴ Zimbardo created a mock prison at Stanford University and randomly assigned male students to "prisoner" or "guard" roles for an extended period of time. The results were unexpected and dramatic. Animosity between the two groups became so intense that the experiment was terminated early. Among "prisoners", Zimbardo observed misconduct, depression and helplessness while among "guards" he noted stress, dissatisfaction and contempt for inmates.

A vast amount of research has since been undertaken to assess COs' correctional attitudes and thus far the evidence is mixed. While COs generally hold more negative views than other correctional workers (for example, parole officers, chaplains, health staff and managers), studies suggest that many COs empathize with offenders and prefer rehabilitation to punishment. Regrettably, predicting these attitudes has proven to be fairly difficult.

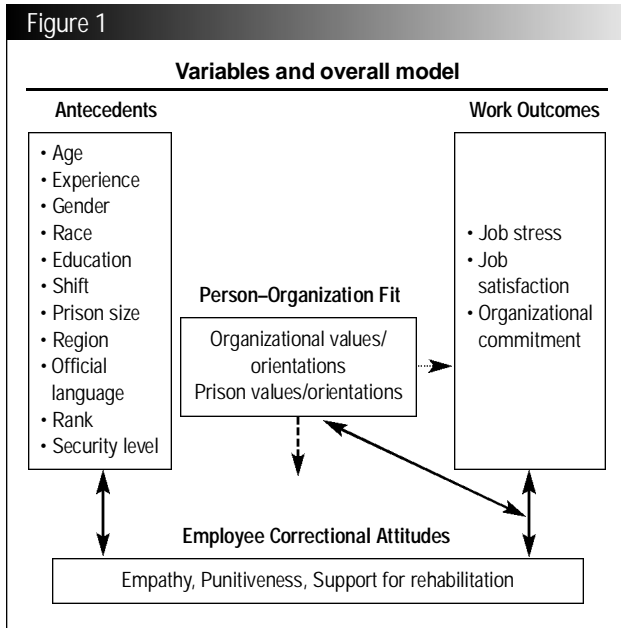
More recently, researchers have shifted their attention to job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment among correctional staff. High stress levels and poor health outcomes have often been observed among COs. Members of this occupational group have also reported lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment relative to other prison workers. As it stands, researchers have still not fully explained these findings. The current study hypothesized that the influence of attitudes on overall adjustment might have been overlooked.

Person-organization fit theory provides a useful framework to explore this type of question. Basically, "Fit" it is said to exist when there is congruence between organization and employee values and attitudes.

The current study

The current study examined four issues. First, it measured the correctional attitudes (for example, empathy, punitiveness and support for rehabilitation) and work adjustment (such as, job stress, job satisfaction and organizational commitment) of COs and other workers at CSC. Second, it used multiple regression to predict attitudes and work adjustment. Third, the study explored the extent to which attitudes were related to work adjustment. Finally, using person-organization fit theory, the study examined whether institutional and organizational characteristics moderated the influence of attitudes on work adjustment. Figure 1 lists the variables used in the study and depicts possible inter-relationships. As can be seen, a number of variables were expected to predict the study's three attitudes of interest. These

attitudes were in turn expected to predict work adjustment; however, this relationship would be mediated by organizational and workplace influences as shown by the central box in figure 1.



Methodology

Subjects

Subjects were participants in the Correctional Service of Canada's 1996 *All Staff Survey*.⁵ A random sample of the total staff population was selected so as to generate a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error for each CSC work site and for each occupational group. As a result, 7,157 names were selected to participate; from which 4,961 questionnaires were completed (a 69% response rate). A total of 1,376 correctional officers responded to the survey representing 28% of the entire sample.

Instrument

While most questions in this study were designed by a steering committee of CSC employees and union representatives, items relating to the main independent and dependent variables of interest were drawn from existing and previously validated measures, such as the Empathy Subscale, the Punitiveness Subscale, the Support for rehabilitation Subscale, the Job Stress Subscale, the Job Satisfaction Subscale, and the Organizational Commitment Subscale.⁶

Procedure

Questionnaires for this study were distributed to every Canadian Federal prison and administered by an external consulting firm to randomly selected participants. Institutional managers were instructed

to give staff the necessary time required to complete the anonymous survey during their shift. After completion, respondents sealed their questionnaires in envelopes provided by the consulting firm.

Results

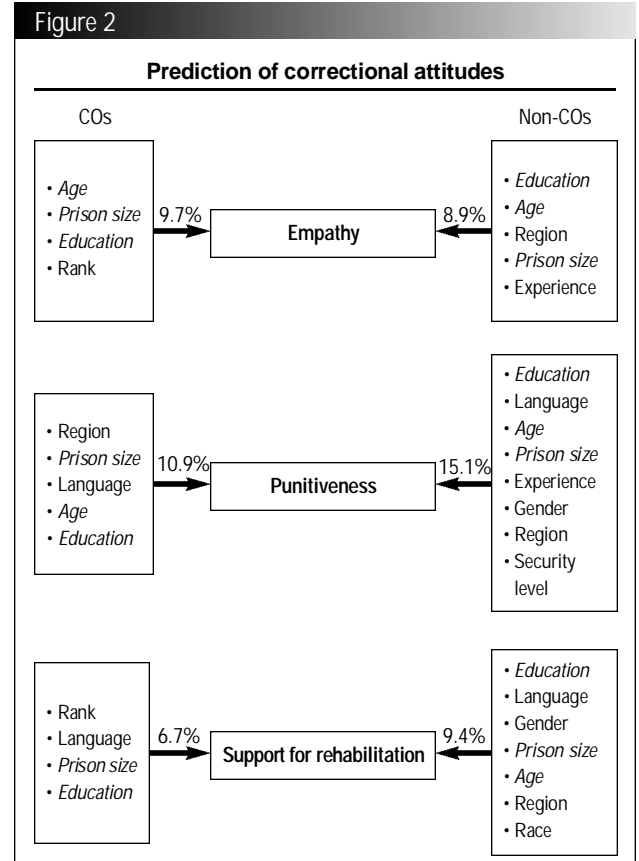
Attitudes

Compared to workers in other occupational groups, significantly fewer COs were found to be empathic $\chi^2(1, N = 3,679) = 202.26, p < .001$ or supportive of rehabilitation $\chi^2(1, N = 3,765) = 141.07, p < .001$.

As well, a significantly greater number were classified as punitive $\chi^2(1, N = 3,773) = 169.90, p < .001$. COs were also compared separately with other occupational groups on the three attitudinal measures of interest. Among the 10 types of prison workers studied, COs held the lowest empathy ($F(11, 3,667) = 52.50, p < .001$) and support for rehabilitation scores ($F(11, 3,761) = 44.42, p < .001$). With the exception of the Technical/Institutional Services group (who scored higher than CO IIs), they also held the most punitive attitudes ($F(11, 3,753) = 39.74, p < .001$).

Predicting attitudes

The large boxes in figure 2 identify the strongest predictors of correctional attitudes for COs and non-COs, that is, variables that remained significant



in the multiple regression analyses.⁷ While regression equations were statistically significant, the smaller boxes show that the level of explained variance for each equation was relatively modest ranging from 6.7% to 15.1%. Both demographic (for example, age, education) and workplace variables (such as, prison size, security level) were important determinants of correctional attitudes. Specifically, higher education levels, older workers, smaller prisons, and lower security levels were associated with more positive attitudes.

Work adjustment

COs were compared with non-COs on three measures of work adjustment. Again using the subscale mean as the cutoff, it was found that a significantly greater proportion of COs were dissatisfied with their work $\chi^2(1, N = 3,791) = 169.97, p < .001$ and less committed to the organization $\chi^2(1, N = 3,728) = 242.08, p < .001$. However, they were not more likely to report high levels of job stress $\chi^2(1, N = 3,756) = 2.35, p = .125$.

COs were not significantly different from other types of workers in terms of overall job stress. Instead, it was the Case Management Officer (parole officer) group who reported the highest stress levels. Still, COs scored significantly lower on measures of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. On the other hand, managers in the prison system provided a contrast to these findings. They were significantly more committed to the Correctional Service of Canada and generally more satisfied with their job.

Predicting work adjustment

Multiple stepwise regression analyses predicting job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment were conducted with the same independent variables that were used to predict attitudes towards inmates. However, to explore the contribution of attitudes on work adjustment, empathy, punitiveness, and support for rehabilitation were included as additional predictors. To examine the influence of the correctional environment itself on work outcomes, the prison's overall level of empathy, punitiveness, and support for rehabilitation were also entered into the equation.

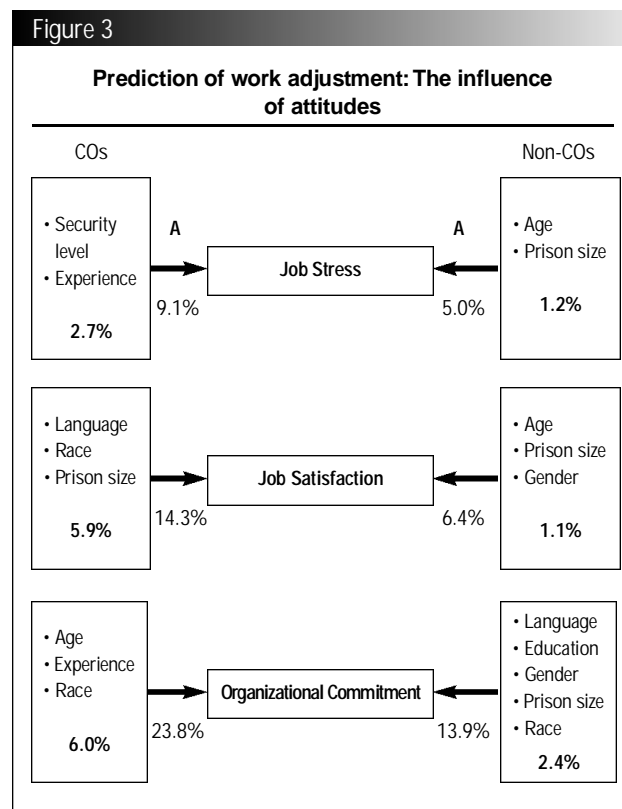
Attitudes towards inmates significantly predicted measures of work adjustment. In fact, these variables were the strongest predictors of stress, satisfaction and commitment among COs and non-COs alike. Interestingly, punitiveness was the strongest determinant of job stress, whereas job satisfaction and organizational commitment were largely explained by an individual's support for rehabilitation.

The importance of attitudes on work adjustment was explored in a second fashion. Multiple stepwise regression analyses were again conducted to predict job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. This time, the three correctional attitudes of interest were entered separately as a block rather than simultaneously with other traditional predictors.

The capacity of correctional attitudes to predict the variance in work adjustment scores was striking, and far more important than traditional predictors (age, race, gender, education). Among COs, the explained variance in job stress improved from 2.7% to 9.1%. For job satisfaction, the explained variance increased to 14.3% from 5.9% and in terms of organizational commitment the explained variance rose a remarkable 23.8% from only 6.0% when attitude scores were not entered as a block. Similar, albeit smaller effects were found for non-COs. The key message from all of these analyses is that, regardless of an individual's duties, work adjustment seems largely driven by correctional attitudes (see Figure 3).

Person-institution interactions

The previous sets of analyses showed that individual attitudes towards inmates were important predictors of job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. However, person-organization fit theory suggests that individual and organizational variables should interact and influence work outcomes in important ways.



Contrary to expectation, no significant interactions were found. The prison's overall level of empathy, punitiveness, and support for rehabilitation did not significantly increase or decrease an individual's adjustment on the job. For example, it mattered little where an empathic CO was employed. Based on the study's analyses, this individual should normally demonstrate lower job stress, higher job satisfaction, and more commitment to the organization. In short, individual attitudes appear to override the institution's collective attitudes, and the interactions of the two, in determining the overall adjustment of COs and non-COs.

Discussion

Results demonstrated generally negative attitudes among COs. Only 26.2% were assessed as being empathic while only 26.6% could be said to hold non-punitive attitudes. Despite CSC's orientation in this regard, only about half of these participants (52.9%) supported offender rehabilitation.

These findings were disappointing. Researchers have long argued that COs are ideally placed to encourage positive behavioural change and improve the atmosphere of an otherwise impoverished social environment.⁸ It is likely that current rehabilitative efforts are being compromised in prison. In a situation where most front-line staff disapproves or doubts the effectiveness of rehabilitation, it is difficult to imagine how offenders can benefit fully from the programs that are currently being offered to them. At the same time, current levels of empathy and punitiveness are likely impeding efforts to improve the social atmosphere of federal prisons.

On the other hand, the work duties of COs are primarily custodial and disciplinary. Cell searches, strip-searches, armed escorts, tower watches, counts, discipline, and general surveillance are core activities for COs and not particularly conducive to positive attitudes or affect. Continuing efforts to expand the role of COs to include reintegration activities could lead to improvements over time. The rise in academic credentials in this occupational group is encouraging especially given the strong link between education and positive attitudes.

In this study, education emerged as a strong predictor of empathy, punitiveness, and support for rehabilitation. This was somewhat surprising considering previous research in the area.⁹ Also surprising was that, despite their more positive attitudes, highly educated individuals reported significantly lower job satisfaction. This may suggest that highly qualified individuals might be under-utilized and/or under-compensated by their employer. The organization may need to give special

attention to this group of employees. Despite having the training and correctional orientations most likely to effect positive change in offender behaviour, educated workers do not appear to be drawing much satisfaction from their duties. Given their dissatisfaction and lower commitment, CSC seems at risk of losing a valuable segment of their workforce.

The finding that large institutions predict negative attitudes seems timely given the current movement towards building larger prisons. If in fact an objective of the correctional system is to create an environment that is conducive to positive interactions with inmates and encouraging of rehabilitation, then increasing the size of prisons may not be the best course of action. Instead, prison officials should consider the finding that workers from treatment centers and women's prisons were significantly more positive than respondents from more traditional prisons. Not only are these institutions smaller in size, they also tend to be more focused on programs and effective staff-inmate interactions.

The hypothesis that positive attitudes towards inmates would be associated with better work adjustment was strongly confirmed. The strength of these relationships ranged between $r = .13$ for empathy and job stress, to $r = .40$ for support for rehabilitation and organizational commitment. While directionality and causality cannot be inferred here, it is clear that empathic, non-punitive, and pro-rehabilitation workers showed better outcomes than those who were not.

Given their attitudes towards inmates and the corporate value system in place at the Correctional Service of Canada, which conflict with these attitudes, COs were expected to demonstrate poorer work adjustment than employees from other occupational groups. With the exception of job stress, this prediction was supported. COs were significantly less satisfied with their work (64.6% vs. 83.3%) and significantly less committed to the CSC than non-COs (50.3% vs. 75.4%).

It would certainly be unfair to pin lower work adjustment scores solely on poorer correctional attitudes. There are probably several other reasons why COs might feel less satisfied with their job and less committed to their employer than other workers. The fact that Case Management Officers reported higher levels of job stress despite having more positive correctional attitudes suggests that job functions, workload issues and professional development need to be considered in future research.

In a strict sense, correctional systems are mandated to administer court-imposed sentences in a way that optimizes public protection. Traditionally, public protection has been equated with punishment, strict

rule enforcement, rigid management structures, and an emphasis on certain physical infrastructures (for example, fences, towers, and weapons). Recognizing that most inmates return to the community, modern correctional systems have expressed a philosophical shift away from punishment and custody towards treatment and reintegration. This expanded interpretation of public protection is encouraging, especially in light of the accumulated evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of well-designed correctional programs.⁹ What is more, empathic, non-punitive, and rehabilitative milieus hold the promise of a healthier correctional environment and perhaps a healthier work environment.

A well-articulated and publicized mission statement at the Correctional Service of Canada suggests that senior administrators have embraced this new corporate orientation; one that genuinely resembles a Human Services Model. Regrettably, adherence to these views decreases as one moves down the organization's hierarchical structure. Among COs, arguably the employees most responsible for creating and maintaining the prison atmosphere, correctional attitudes were predominantly negative. Under these conditions, person-organization fit theory predicts poor work adjustment such as increased job stress, decreased job satisfaction, and lower organizational commitment. The work adjustment data obtained from this large sample of prison employees strongly confirms the prediction.

It was thought that individual attitudes would interact with workplace attitudes to affect job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. For example, an empathic individual employed in a non-empathic milieu should demonstrate poorer work adjustment. Similarly, a person indifferent to rehabilitation should report decreased work adjustment in a prison where the prevailing sentiment was pro-treatment. These expectations were not supported. Instead, positive correctional attitudes were related to positive work outcomes

regardless of a prison's collective views or prevailing atmosphere. These findings suggest that compatibility with the employer's values is more important than compatibility with the actual work unit (i.e., Person-Workplace fit).

The Correctional Service of Canada's apparent tendency to promote individuals with the "best fit" provides additional support for the theory in question. The study found that unit managers held more positive attitudes than correctional officer II who in turn held more positive attitudes than correctional officer I. It appears that empathy, support for rehabilitation and non-punitiveness significantly increases one's chances for promotion. Alternatively, it may be that promotion or the promotional process itself, changes attitudes by providing opportunities to appreciate the importance and value of empathy and treatment. Job competitions at the Correctional Service of Canada often test candidates' understanding of the mission statement, and its accompanying values/principles. Thus, the process of studying for job exams might in and of itself attenuate negative attitudes.

Therein lies an interesting opportunity for the organization to shape particular attitudes among their employees. A reward system that is based more fully on correctional orientations would build a workforce that is better equipped to reintegrate offenders and ultimately protect the public. Added benefits would likely also include enhanced work adjustment and improved prison conditions.

Staff recruitment represents another important venue for shaping the workforce. In addition to academic qualifications, recruiters at the CSC should also assess candidates' attitudes during the hiring process. As Bowen et al. (1991) argued, selecting people with compatible values instead of specific skill sets creates a more flexible workforce. In the present context, it may also create a safer and healthier environment for citizens both inside and outside of penitentiaries. ■

¹ Abstract of Larivière, M. (2001). *Antecedents and outcomes of correctional officer attitudes towards federal inmates: An exploration of person-organization fit*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. Ottawa, ON: Carleton University.

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⁶ Please see thesis for references.

⁷ Equations for the multiple stepwise regression equations, excluded variables, correlation matrices, factor analyses and collinearity diagnostics are available from the author.

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