Community Management of Offenders: The Interaction of Social Support and Risk

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RELATIONSHIPS AND SOCIAL support have been found to be important both to the commission of crime and to how people desist from such behaviors. Hochstetler et al. (2010) define social support as the amount of support (emotional and instrumental) that someone receives to help with everyday activities. Several studies have found that, in addition to being offered through advice and counsel, social support can be provided both formally—for example, by government assistance programs—or informally, such as through groups of friends, schools, and churches (McLewin & Muller, 2006; Pratt & Godsey, 2003). Commentators in this area also use the term social capital to describe the everyday social connections between individuals within communities and the cognitive and emotional processes that these connections entail (Cullen, 1994; Meadows, 2007; Bales & Mears, 2008).

Halpern (2005) suggests that most forms of social capital have three components: (1) a social network; (2) a cluster of shared norms, values, and expectancies between individuals belonging to that particular network; and (3) sanctions that help to maintain norms within the group or amongst members. Using these three components it is easy to see how social support and positive pro-social networks can be vital to supporting people in desisting from criminal behavior. While social capital may entail "criminal social capital" where networks facilitate offending, other support networks such as family or areas of pro-social engagement such as a workplace can also encourage desistance (Mills & Codd, 2008). Research into the life-course theories of offending, such as that by Laub and Sampson (2001, 2003), has increasingly identified norms, obligations, and interdependencies within social networks that offer tangible resources such as housing and employment; in addition, social networks motivate people to undergo the cognitive and emotional processes that support the termination of offending (Cullen, 1994; Mills & Codd, 2008; Bersani, Laub & Nieuwbeerta, 2009).

Defining and Conceptualizing Social Support

Criminological research has often identified the significant contribution of criminal social networks in encouraging and supporting continued offending. Traditional risk factors that have been noted include criminal associates and family criminality (Farrington et al., 2001; Lykken, 1995). Social networks that an individual perceives as supportive but that include criminal peers (i.e., other substance users and offenders) have been found to contribute to negative outcomes such as substance use relapse, criminal justice involvement, and victimization/violence (Peters & Wexler, 2005). Within many of the current offender risk assessment tools, criminal networks and criminal peers—including the criminal histories of family members and any gang membership and associations—are part of the calculations of offenders' risk of re-offending or risk of order violation (Gendreau et al., 1996; Cullen & Agnew, 2003; Andrews & Bonta, 2007).

Researchers into social capital as it has been traditionally conceptualized and measured have not provided detail on specific pro-social elements that could be quantified and measured. Most definitions of social capital and social support tend to be neutral, such as that by Bourdieau (1986), who defined social support as the "resources available to members of social networks as a result of their social connections." Most research studies examining factors and elements making up pro-social networks or social support processes related to offending have not grouped these separate factors into one measurement of social capital or social support. Criminologists have measured how individual factors such as poverty, social exclusion, domestic violence, low socio-economic status, truancy, and poor mental health (Gendreau et al., 1996; Cullen & Agnew, 2003; Broner et al., 2009; Hochstetler et al., 2010) contribute to the risk of offending. Researchers have then inferred that combinations of these individual factors produce or result in poor social capital.

As researchers have focused more on theoretical developments regarding the complexity and interaction of the variety of factors involved in desistance, they have paid increasing attention to the differences between positive and negative social capital and their overall effects on criminal behavior. The current debate in this area appears to be split between those who argue that low social capital influences the occurrence of criminal behaviors and those who believe offending behavior weakens existing pro-social bonds. Most research appears to argue that offending behavior further erodes already weak social support. That is, offending is most likely among those already identified as being "at risk" due to their social environments and family backgrounds. Studies have shown that early delinquent behavior facilitates social disconnection by those "at risk," disrupts development of pro-social bonds, and facilitates associations with deviant peers (Laub

& Sampson, 2003; Schreck & Fisher, 2004; Schreck, Stewart, & Fisher, 2006; Chen, 2009; Cobbina et al., 2010).

Sources of Social Support for Offenders

Social support (social bonds) has been found to contribute to the formation of pro-social identities (Braithwaite, 1989; Murray, 2005). Social bonds theory attributes this to the stake in conformity that ties to family, employment, or educational programs create: In other words, they constitute a reason to "go straight." Where these bonds are absent, individuals have less to lose from continuing to engage in offending behaviors (Clear, Waring, & Scully, 2005; Laub & Sampson, 2001; Ward & Maruna, 2007; McNeill et al., 2005). In some cases offenders with strong ties to negative social networks (e.g., criminal gangs) actually have something to lose by not engaging in offending behavior (Melde & Esbensen, 2012).

Sampson and Laub (1993) argue that social ties held by adults are important because these ties create systems of obligation that retrain someone from acting upon criminal propensities. To date, processes encouraging effective reintegration following imprisonment have generally emphasized involvement by offenders in a variety of social institutions, such as family, school, work, and social service and civic organizations.

Pro-social relationships have also been found to reduce offending behavior by reducing situational opportunities for criminal behavior. This may be one reason that involvement in employment may operate as a protective factor against re-offending (Giordano, Cernkovich & Rudolph, 2002; Maruna & Toch, 2005).

Other research advocates the direct intervention and activation of social capital (Farrall, 2004) by repairing an offender's existing social networks (e.g., relationship counseling) or involving offenders' families in offender management itself. Families are most likely to be aware of the circumstances that lead an offender to re-offend, and they often prompt and support offenders to engage in interventions such as drug treatment (Mills & Codd, 2008). However, it is also important to recognize that not all families are a positive influence in the lives of their members. Some families may themselves engage in criminal activity or be the cause of the offending; in such cases, they are unlikely to promote desistance (Farrington, et al., 2001; Farrington & West, 1993; Farrall & Sparks, 2006). Families in areas of low social capital, those lacking extended social support networks outside the immediate family, and families that offer negative relationship models, such as those characterized by domestic violence and substance abuse, are unlikely to have the appropriate material and social resources to provide effective social support to their members.

The members of offenders' families have also been shown to face significant challenges and stressors as a result of a family member's imprisonment or community sentence. Consequences have included financial and housing problems; social stigma and victimization; and loneliness, anxiety, and emotional hardship (Murray, 2005). The children of prisoners have been found to experience more hostility or bullying at school as well as psychological harm and behavioral disturbances as a result of parental involvement with the criminal justice system (Bocknek, Sanderson, & Britner, 2009; Phillips & Zhao, 2010; Murray, Farrington & Sekol, 2012). Research also suggests that the responsibility to provide social support to offenders falls disproportionately on women—partners, mothers, and sisters—regardless of the gender of the prisoner (Codd, 2005; Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Continued stress compromises the ability of such families to provide effective and positive social support over time. Therefore, those seeking to develop effective social support networks for offenders must often focus upon other networks and relationships.

Providing Social Support Through Community Supervision

Theoretical work in the area of effective community supervision has tended to focus on identifying and addressing risk factors and targeting criminogenic needs as the most effective way of "addressing offending behavior" and reducing recidivism. Most of those working within corrections are familiar with the principles of targeting interventions and correctional treatment based on the risk and need principles discussed by Andrews and Bonta (2007) (risk, need, and responsivity). However, consensus on what constitutes effective practice in community supervision remains an area of investigation for correctional researchers.

What is clear from the emerging evidence base on community supervision is that those who work with offenders tend to achieve limited results unless they first establish and then maintain an effective working relationship. Studies in desistance have identified the building of a professional working alliance as a necessary basis for achieving compliance and nurturing the motivation to change (Burnett & McNeill, 2005; McCulloch, 2005; Ward & Maruna, 2007; McNeill, 2009). Research suggests that the quality of a working relationship between offender and officer can have as much influence as the content of any intervention and is a major predictor of success or failure of efforts to help people change (Smith, 2004). Offenders appear to interpret advice about their behaviors and underlying problems as evidence of concern for them as people, and are seemingly motivated by displays of interest in their well-being (McNeill, 2006). Research examining practitioner skills and supervision styles has discovered that quality professional relationships require the use of strong communication, engagement, counseling, and interpersonal skills; practitioners with these skills and the ability to accurately convey empathy, respect, warmth, and "therapeutic genuineness" are the most successful in encouraging desistance (McNeill et al., 2005; Maguire & Raynor, 2006; Tatman & Love, 2010). Studies of the contribution of therapeutic relationships to motivation to change have found that a significant percentage of overall behavioral change (in some cases upwards of 30 percent) can be attributed to the therapeutic relationship (Assay & Lambert in Hubble et al., 1999; Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Kozer & Day, 2012).

Research on effective correctional practice also points to the importance of practical assistance to offenders by case managers. The actions of a case manager in providing practical assistance may confirm his or her trustworthiness to the offender. This suggests that it is critical to establish loyalty and trust with offenders in order to give the relationship between the offender and the supervising officer legitimacy (Robinson & McNeill, 2008; Maguire & Raynor, 2010). Relationships perceived by the offender to be based upon trust and reciprocity are more likely to elicit "normative compliance," based on a sense of moral obligation, a wish to maintain the relationship, and the perceived "legitimacy" of the conditions imposed. This is in contrast to "instrumental compliance," which is influenced by deterrents and incentives but does not affect the person's internal value system (Bottoms, 2001) and therefore is unlikely to achieve long-term commitment to desistance from criminal behavior.

Evidence is mixed on the best way to provide practical assistance in developing social support for offenders under community supervision. Some researchers have found that offenders do not expect direct action, but value the opportunity to discuss their problems and receive informal advice and guidance to help them understand and address them (Rex, 1999; Marshall & Serran, 2004; Rocque et al., 2013). However, increasingly the weight of evidence in this area suggests that direct intervention and activation of social capital through repairing an offender's existing social networks (e.g., relationship counseling) or creating new social networks is preferable for most offenders. In the case of creating new networks, the supervising officer can achieve this through assisting and supporting offender engagement with identified pro-social institutions and broader community resources. With existing networks, community corrections staff need to carefully assess their appropriateness. As discussed previously, some families with appropriate pro-social attitudes and connections provide such support, but certain families will not have this capability. The supervising officer must assess the family of origin of each individual offender to grasp their likely contribution (positive or negative) to an offender's motivation to desist from crime.

Offender-Centered Strategies to Improve Social Support

The current literature on effective practice also discusses the need to review the available resources for supporting change within an offender's social networks in light of pro-desistance factors, including the offender's positive qualities and strengths. To maximize success, the supervising officer needs to recognize, exploit, and develop an offender's competencies, resources, skills, and assets (Schoon & Bynner, 2003). Such approaches to case management have been termed "person-centered." The officer seeks to facilitate participation by engaging with what matters to the offender, using the offender's own frame of reference, and being flexible rather than imposing a pre-formulated plan (Marshall & Serran, 2004).

Research indicates that social support manifests differently for particular offender groups. For example, research on sexual offenders has found that for this group social support risk factors related to reoffending include negative social influences, rejection and loneliness, lack of concern for others, lack of cooperation with supervision, impulsivity, and poor cognitive problem solving (Hanson, Harris, Scott & Helmus, 2007; Thornton, 2002). Proposed solutions have included the use of specially trained community volunteers to provide social support to such offenders. The provision of this social support, in conjunction with other strategies, appears to address the loneliness, negative social influences, and lifestyle instability that are known to lead to recidivism among sexual offenders. The development of a therapeutic alliance with this type of offender is more difficult for correctional officers due to the high compliance requirements for these offenders. Providing an independent external person for support and guidance is likely to be a more effective means of improving social bonds for such offenders (Wilson et al., 2009).

For offenders with diminished capacity, such as those with intellectual disabilities or acquired brain injuries, improving social capital requires correctional officers to identify abuse or manipulation within a social network. Such offenders are much more likely to have problems maintaining appropriate boundaries with others and often lack the capacity for self-protection. For offenders with mental health issues, the processes associated with negotiating familial and other relationships are often a source of conflict and stress. Successful development of social support and pro-social relationships for offenders with these difficulties is likely to require assistance from specialists in the mental health or intellectual impairment area (Broner et al., 2009).

Female offenders present another area of future research in the intersection of effective community supervision and improvement of social support. Relationships are often central to female offending behavior. Researchers have shown that for many women relationships can promote offending (Alarid et al., 2000; Griffin & Armstrong, 2003), and that family ties can be an important and successful protective factor in reducing offending. Most female offenders live with their children and serve as the primary caregiver. This relationship promotes attachment to conventional institutions such as schools and other pro-social networks (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Cobbina et al., 2010).

The development of social capital supporting desistance from offending behavior for women is highly likely to involve addiction treatments, as substance abuse has been found to have particularly negative effects on women's social support networks (Mallik-Kane & Visher, 2008). In addition, significant proportions of the female offender population have experienced physical and sexual abuse, including high rates of domestic violence. Officers must exercise caution when dealing with social networks where abuse may be occurring. Upfront involvement and collaboration with specialist DV services and workers who can act as victim advocates is most likely to be effective in gaining the required information while ensuring personal safety (Crowe et al., 2009).

Desistance from crime has been described as a process initiated by the perception of an opportunity to claim a pro-social identity during a period of readiness to reform. Research notes that the development of this "readiness to reform" seems to be slower for young offenders. Among this group, structured, family-based interventions appear to provide the best social bonds. Research consistently shows that when families are involved, outcomes are better (Copello & Orford 2002; Liddle, 2004; Hochstetler et al., 2010). However, as noted before, this depends upon the type of family environment available to the young person. In many cases the family of origin may not be the best option, and the supervising officer may need to investigate and develop other pro-social networks and supports in its place. In these instances, the recommended approach is to develop alternative social networks that can provide similar types of support over an extended period of time (months and years); such support includes advice, mentoring, reducing time spent with delinquent peers, and increasing pro-social activities. Short-term crisis services are unlikely to provide the required protection or connections for young people (Hawkins, 2009).

Conclusion

Despite the important role they play in providing stability and support for an offender during transition, families of offenders report limited avenues of support. In current models of community corrections, the responsibility to bring about behavioral change rests heavily upon an offender—but without an accompanying acknowledgment of the capacity-building and social support that offenders need to implement such change long-term. Stress management skills, relapse prevention strategies, problem solving and goal setting, forward planning, and an ability to manage spare time, boredom, and loneliness are all important skills that can serve as protective factors for an offender coping with life in the community. Such skills can all be ameliorated

through improvements in the social capital available to an offender. Deficits in social networks are likely to be well-established for the majority of offenders; therefore, repairing and/or creating new networks and social bonds require support. A focus on strategies assisting offenders in improving their social capital is showing positive outcomes by increasing the motivation and commitment of offenders to desist from crime. Making the development of social support for offenders a core part of correctional practice will greatly enhance the effectiveness of community supervision.

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