

The Probationer's Perspective on the Probation Officer-Probationer Relationship and Satisfaction with Probation

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ACCORDING TO THE Bureau of Justice Statistics, over 7.3 million people in the United States were under some form of correctional supervision in 2007, over five million of whom were on probation or parole. Studying the factors that influence the outcomes of parolees and probationers is of critical importance: If rates of recidivism can be reduced among community corrections clients, the benefits are great, both in terms of public safety and the costs of incarceration and supervision. One factor that has the potential to influence the outcome of parolees and probationers is their relationship with their supervision officer. The present study explores probationer perceptions of their relationship with their probation officer (PO) and its association with their perception of the helpfulness of probation.

The popular expression in the service industry that "the customer is always right" reflects the importance of customer satisfaction in the world of commerce. Businesses, in an effort to retain customers, seek to implement high-quality customer service practices and advertise their excellent customer service as a means of attracting new customers. In the realm of criminal justice, the importance and role of customer (or offender) satisfaction is much less firmly established. Indeed, the general public may contend that offenders are not held sufficiently accountable for their actions and are not punished severely enough. In fact, it has been argued that when addressing

customer satisfaction in the criminal justice system, it is the *public* whose customer satisfaction is paramount, not the *offender* (Rhine, 2002). However, exploring the perceptions of probationers about probation and their supervision officers is potentially a resource in the continued effort to make the criminal justice system more effective and efficient.

Little has been published regarding the satisfaction of probationers with probation or with their PO. In a survey of 468 probationers by Arizona's Maricopa County Adult Probation Department, 86 percent were satisfied overall with probation, and 89 percent felt as though they were working with their PO to develop strategies to assist in completing probation (Cherkos, Ferguson, & Cook, 2008). With respect to the PO-probationer relationship, the results were favorable: 94 percent of those surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed that their probation officer spent a reasonable amount of time with them; 92 percent felt as though they were treated respectfully; 91 percent felt they were kept informed about how they were doing on probation; and 90 percent felt their PO listened to them. The results suggest an association between the PO-probationer relationship and the perceived helpfulness of probation. Also of note, the positive qualities of the PO-probationer relationship that received high levels of endorsement (e.g., patience, trust, open communication, willingness to listen) are similar to qualities that have been

found to be important for effective relationships between therapists and clients (Lambert & Barley, 2002).

Researchers in the field of psychology have long found that the quality of the therapist-client relationship, also known as the therapeutic or working alliance, has a significant impact on client outcomes (Lambert & Barley, 2002). In fact, the therapist-client relationship has been found to account for 30 percent of the variance in client outcome, twice as much as that accounted for by the type of therapy delivered (Lambert & Barley, 2002). Three dimensions seem to underlie positive therapist-client relationships: a trusting relationship, agreement on the goals of treatment, and agreement on the tasks needed to achieve these goals (Bordin, 1979; Horvath & Greenberg, 1989).

One implication of the importance of the therapist-client relationship for probation administrators may be that choosing a particular offender supervision model is not as important as making sure that the right staff are in place to deliver the model. If the relationship between PO and offender impacts probationer success in a manner parallel to that of therapist-client, then it is crucial for POs to be able to cultivate relationships with their clients that maximize the likelihood of probationer success.

As noted by Burnett and McNeil (2005), the findings from psychology on the importance of the therapeutic alliance translate

to the criminal justice field: "To conclude that relationships and practical support matter in delivering effective probation work is hardly startling. However, we think that these conclusions need to be re-stated because, as we have argued, they have been neglected in the service's enthusiastic and well-intentioned pursuit of effectiveness through the design and delivery of effective programmes" (Burnett & McNeill, 2005, p. 237). A small body of research has emerged that indicates an association between PO-probationer relationship and recidivism (Annison, Eadie, & Knight, 2008; Barry, 2007; May & Wood, 2005; McNeill, 2006; Wormith, Althouse, Simpson, Reitzel, Fagan, & Morgan, 2007). In addition, a meta-analysis of core correctional practices found that the establishment of open, warm, and enthusiastic communication styles and the development of mutual respect and liking between the offender and the criminal justice professional administering treatment is associated with lower recidivism (Dowden & Andrews, 2004).

The importance of a positive relationship between probation officer and probationer is not lost on the probationer. In qualitative research with 60 probationers, Rex (1999) found that offenders felt more committed to stopping their criminal behavior if they were positively engaged in the relationship with their probation officer. Offenders defined positive relationships by whether the PO displayed empathy, was able to listen well, treated them with respect, and allowed them to talk freely. In fact, several participants identified these relationship qualities as helping them to complete probation successfully. Rex concluded that it was overwhelmingly important for the offenders to engage in a positive relationship with their probation officer in order to achieve pro-social changes.

The significance of the relationship is understood by the POs as well. Bracken (2003) surveyed 75 POs about the importance of various skills needed to effectively supervise offenders. Three of the top four skills identified by POs concerned relational abilities: coping with offender emotions, interpersonal communication skills, and interviewing skills. Annison et al. (2008) surveyed 257 PO job applicants and found that the two leading reasons they were seeking the profession were because they enjoyed working with people and wanted to help offenders. Significantly, in a subsample of current POs, a lack of one-on-one contact with offenders was listed as a key reason for PO job dissatisfaction. The

above findings suggest that POs recognize the importance of a skill set necessary to create a good relationship with probationers, are interested in developing productive relationships with their probationers, and are unhappy when opportunities to do so are not provided. A great deal of frustration that POs experience may have less to do with their probationers than with variables such as caseload size and agency politics (Johnson, 1998).

In summary, research suggests that probationer satisfaction with their PO is linked with their relationship with their PO. Further, the qualities that make productive relationships in probation seem to be similar to the working alliance identified in psychotherapy as important in the change process. Both probationers and POs appear to identify these common elements as important in developing an effective working and helpful relationship.

The primary purpose of the present study was to examine the association between probationers' perception of their relationship

with their PO and their sense of the overall helpfulness of probation. Secondly, the research sought to address whether probationers' perception of the relationship varies by demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, and ethnic background) or probation characteristics (such as number of times on probation or number of probation officers). Finally, the study attempted to ascertain the general satisfaction level of the probationers.

Method

Participants

Participants were probationers reporting to three Connecticut probation offices on the days that the study survey was administered. Two hundred and two adult probationers consented to complete the survey. Participants' demographic information is provided in Table 1. The age, ethnicity, and gender breakdown of the sample did not differ significantly from that

TABLE 1.
Participant Characteristics (N = 202)

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Age Range		
18-30	87	43.0
31-40	46	22.8
41 and older	65	32.2
Missing	4	2.0
Gender		
Female	170	84.2
Male	31	15.3
Missing	1	0.5
Ethnic Background		
White	84	41.6
African American	66	32.7
Hispanic	44	21.8
Other	8	3.9
Probation Office Type		
Urban	141	70
Suburban/Rural	61	30
Number of Times on Probation		
One	103	41.6
More than one	60	51.5
Missing	39	6.9
Number of Probation Officers During Current Probation Term		
One	84	51.0
More than one	104	29.7
Missing	14	19.3

of the Connecticut probation population. The refusal rate was estimated at 25 percent.

Client Satisfaction Survey

The client satisfaction survey was based on one used by Cherkos and colleagues (2008) due to its brevity, ease of comprehension, and focus on the PO-probationer relationship. For purposes of the present study, several items were omitted or revised and additional items on the PO-probationer relationship were created. The resulting survey consisted of several demographic items (e.g., age range, ethnic background, gender), and probation information items (e.g., length of time on probation, number of times on probation periods), followed by 15 questions oriented around probationers' perception of their probation officer (e.g., "My probation officer is knowledgeable"), the professionalism of the office environment (e.g., "The receptionist greets me in a pleasant and professional manner"), and one item concerning the overall helpfulness of probation ("My probation experience is helping me to stay out of trouble"). The response choices for the items were on a Likert scale: a = "strongly agree," b = "agree," c = "disagree," and d = "strongly disagree." For data analysis purposes, the response choices were assigned values of 4 (strongly agree), 3 (agree), 2 (disagree), and 1 (strongly disagree).

Of the 15 client satisfaction items, 11 specifically concerned probationers' satisfaction with their relationship with their PO. In keeping with Bordin (1979) and Horvath and Greenberg (1989), these items concerned the bond between the probationer and officer (e.g., "My probation officer listens to me"), the degree of agreement between the probationer and officer in the goals necessary to address in supervision (e.g., "My probation officer has worked with me in determining what things I want to work on"), and the degree of agreement between the probationer and officer on the tasks necessary to achieve those goals (e.g., "My probation officer assists me in finding services"). The 11 items were summed to yield a relationship satisfaction score ($M = 34.59$; $SD = 6.19$; $\alpha = .90$). Scores on the 11-item measure ranged from 14 to 44, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction.

Procedure

The project was approved by an institutional review board before data collection. On three randomly selected days, probationers arriving for appointments in one urban and two suburban/rural probation offices were approached

individually for participation in the survey. The surveyor, who was not an employee of probation, explained that participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. The surveyor received consent orally and in writing. Participants completed the survey before meeting with their probation officer. Participants placed their completed surveys in an envelope and then in a collection box.

Results

Relationship Satisfaction and the Overall Helpfulness of Probation

Scores on relationship satisfaction were regressed on responses to the final item of the survey, "My probation experience is helping me to stay out of trouble." In order to first account for the influence of demographic and probation variables on this dependent variable, the independent variables were entered hierarchically. Demographic variables were entered on the first step of the equation, probation variables were entered on the second step, and relationship satisfaction was entered on the third step. The significance of the change in R^2 was used to evaluate the significance of each step in the regression.

As summarized in Table 2, neither demographic nor probation variables were significant predictors of ratings of probation helpfulness. Only relationship satisfaction emerged as a significant predictor, F change (1,111) = 42.30, $p < .001$, with higher relationship satisfaction being associated with higher ratings of probation helpfulness. The

correlation between relationship satisfaction and ratings of overall probation helpfulness was .54, indicative of a large effect size.

Relationship Satisfaction and Participant Demographics

Analyses did not indicate that relationship satisfaction varied as a function of demographic variables. The relationship satisfaction score of male participants ($M = 34.61$; $SD = 5.95$) did not differ significantly from that of female participants ($M = 34.56$, $SD = 7.45$), $t(161) = .04$, $p = .97$. White participants ($M = 35.25$, $SD = 5.58$) did not differ significantly from nonwhite participants in their responses ($M = 34.07$, $SD = 6.56$), $t(161) = 1.22$, $p = .22$. Nor did relationship satisfaction differ as a function of age range, with the 18- to 30-year-old group ($M = 33.54$, $SD = 6.17$) yielding similar scores to the 31- to 40-year-old group ($M = 35.62$; $SD = 6.15$) and the 41 and older group ($M = 35.21$, $SD = 6.16$), $F(2,158) = 1.85$, $p = .16$.

Relationship Satisfaction and Probation Variables

Analyses did not indicate that relationship satisfaction varied as a function of probation variables. The relationship satisfaction score of participants at the urban office ($M = 34.99$; $SD = 6.24$) did not differ significantly from that of participants in the suburban/rural offices ($M = 33.80$, $SD = 6.05$), $t(162) = 1.17$, $p = .25$. The relationship satisfaction of participants who had been supervised by one officer during their current probation term ($M = 35.63$, $SD = 6.26$) did not differ significantly

TABLE 2.
Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Probation Helpfulness

Predictor	Probation Helpfulness			
	β	t	R^2	R^2
Step 1			.01	.01
Gender	-.08	-.52		
Age range	.04	.57		
White/Nonwhite	-.08	-.60		
Step 2			.02	.01
Probation office type	-.10	-.72		
Number of times on probation	-.04	-.28		
Number of probation officers during current probation term	-.04	-.26		
Step 3			.29	.27*
Relationship satisfaction	.06	6.50*		

Note. * $p < .001$.

from participants who had been transferred at least once during their current probation from one officer to another ($M = 33.95$, $SD = 6.30$), $t(150) = 1.64$, $p = .10$. The relationship satisfaction of participants serving their first sentence of probation ($M = 34.44$; $SD = 6.56$) did not differ from those serving their second or more ($M = 34.48$, $SD = 5.29$), $t(131) = -.03$, $p = .97$.

Overall Client Satisfaction

Table 3 presents a summary of participants' responses to all of the items on the client satisfaction survey with *strongly agree* and *agree* ratings collapsed into one category. Overall, the summary data indicate strong client satisfaction with probation. For 10 of the 15 items, 80 percent or more of respondents fell into the *strongly agree/agree* category. No item fell below a 66 percent rate of endorsement of *strongly agree/agree*.

Discussion

The primary purpose of the present study was to examine the association between the PO-probationer relationship and probationers' perception of the helpfulness of probation. As measured by a brief survey, PO-probationer relationships marked by qualities common to the working alliance identified in psychotherapy such as trust, respect, and mutually agreed-upon goals were correlated with, and predictive of, probationers' perceptions of the overall helpfulness of probation. In fact, the PO-probationer relationship was a better predictor of perceived helpfulness than demographic or probation characteristics.

The high level of satisfaction that probationers expressed with the relationship with their PO and the high level of agreement with the statement that probation was helping them stay out of trouble are encouraging reminders that the work of the PO is significant and influential and that how POs interact with their probationers can have a positive influence on their clients' lives. Many POs may be surprised to learn that probationers are mindful of their relationship with their PO. The findings imply that, at an agency level, program directors and administrators should continue to explore staff training initiatives that facilitate the relationship between the PO and probationer.

The study did not find that the PO-probationer relationship differed as a function of probationer race, age, gender, number of times on probation, or the number of probation officers they had been

TABLE 3

Summary of Client Satisfaction Survey Responses

Item	N	Strongly agree or agree % (n)
My PO spends a reasonable amount of time with me during visits	201	95 (190)
My PO and I work together to help me complete probation successfully	200	95 (189)
My PO treats me respectfully when I meet with him or her	201	93 (187)
My PO is knowledgeable	190	93 (176)
My PO listens to me	199	92 (184)
My PO lets me know how I am doing on probation	198	90 (178)
My probation experience is helping me to stay out of trouble	191	87 (166)
My PO has worked with me in determining what things I want to work on	198	86 (170)
My PO compliments me when I make good decisions	196	83 (166)
I feel my PO cares about me	194	82 (160)
My PO understands me	192	82 (151)
I trust my PO	191	79 (157)
My PO is optimistic about my future	192	79 (154)
The receptionist greets me in a pleasant and professional manner	198	76 (151)
My PO assists me in finding services	193	69 (133)
When visiting my PO, the wait time in the lobby is usually reasonable	199	66 (132)

assigned. This optimistically suggests that the PO-probationer relationship qualities associated with a positive attitude toward the helpfulness of probation may be developed with probationers from varying demographic and probation backgrounds. However, further study of the PO-probationer relationship by a greater variety of PO, probationer, and organizational variables than those measured in the present study may be able to identify predictors of poor relationships and means of remediating them.

Consistent with the Maricopa County study by Cherkos and colleagues (2008), probationers appeared to be satisfied with probation. All but two of the 15 items were endorsed as strongly agreed or agreed by more than 70 percent of the participants. The two items which fell below 70 percent, "My PO assists me in finding services" (endorsed as strongly agreed or agreed by 69 percent) and "When visiting my PO, the wait time in the lobby is usually reasonable" (endorsed as strongly agreed or agreed by 66 percent) point to areas for potential improvement that may be perceived as beneficial by both PO and probationer.

One limitation of the present study was the relatively small sample size, especially with respect to female probationers. If this

study is replicated, we recommend that efforts be made to strategize methods for ensuring more potential for female probationer input. Another limitation was the potential influence of the participant refusal rate on the findings. It is possible that probationers who are satisfied with probation may be more willing to participate in such a survey, biasing the results in a more positive manner than is reflected in the total population. It is also possible that probationers who are disgruntled and feel they are being treated unfairly may be more willing to participate in such a survey, biasing the results in a more negative direction. Another limitation of the study concerns the level of trust the participants had in the confidentiality of the survey. Those administering the survey assured participants that all results would be anonymous and confidential, but it is likely that not all participants were confident that this was truly the case and therefore some may not have answered truthfully.

Psychotherapy research has examined the proportion of variance in positive outcome that is accounted for by the working alliance as compared to the specific therapy technique (Lambert & Barley, 2002). It would be useful to conduct parallel research in community corrections to explore the associations between the PO-probationer relationship,

community corrections programming, probation completion, and recidivism. Further understanding of the emerging importance of the PO-probationer relationship can potentially aid in making parole and probation systems more responsive and effective.

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