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Lifelong learning programs in prison: influence of social networks on participation

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Abstract

This paper investigates the relationships between social contacts of prisoners and participation in lifelong learning activities. Literature on factors related to the decision to participate mainly concentrate on personal or on organizational level. Factors affecting the relational level are seldom taken into consideration. Based on a literature review and analysis of focus groups, the findings demonstrate the positive as well as the negative relationships on a wide range of social networks. The discussion highlights the need to acknowledge the importance of social networks and demonstrates how these findings may be implemented in order to optimize lifelong learning programs in prison.

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Introduction

In this paper, lifelong learning in prison is defined as participation to education, vocational education, wellbeing and health courses, cultural and sport activities. Research has documented the positive association between participation in prison activities and improvement of basic skills (Vacca, 2004), contribution of self-worth (Coyle, 2009) and reduction of recidivism (Petersilia, 2003). Although these positive associations are recognized, little is known about factors that lead to greater participation (Hall & Killackey, 2008; Johnsen, 2001; Rose, 2004). Research about motivators and barriers to participate in correctional programs mainly concentrate on personal (micro-level) or organizational level (exo-level). The relationship between factors on relational level (meso-level) and participation is seldom taken into consideration (Brosens, 2012). In response to this, we examined the role that social contacts play in the decision of prisoners to engage in lifelong learning activities. Both the motivators and barriers that prisoners face are considered, in relation with their social contacts inside and outside the prison.

The literature on social networks and participation is related to the social capital literature. Although different authors use the same concept, they use different basic assumptions and stress other aspects in defining social capital (e.g. Bourdieu, 1986; Coyle, 2009; Putnam, 2001). Nevertheless, a consensus exists that social capital refers to the

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possibility of individuals to benefit from membership in a social network or other social structures (Portes, 1998). Some academics view civic engagement/participation and social networks as core concepts (e.g. Abbott, 2010; Baum & Ziersch, 2003; Guillen, Coromina, & Saris, 2011), both theoretically as well as in the operationalization of social capital (Lindström, 2005). In the following sections, we describe some aspects of social networks that are inherent to participation: social support, being dependent on others to carry out an activity, perceptions by others, and the size of a social network.

Social support (1), one of the most important functions of a social network (Heaney & Israel, 2008), can be instrumental or emotional. The first refers to getting information, guidance, material resources and practical services from others; while emotional social support encompasses getting care, having feelings of trust and confidence and the encouragement of personal values (Lindström, Hanson, & Östergren, 2001). The positive relationship between getting social support and participation is frequently demonstrated in research in social sciences (e.g. Wang & Eccles, 2012; Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009). However, in prison one study was conducted on this theme and found an adverse relationship. Prisoners who did not receive emotional support from other inmates did not go to group activities because they are resisted against talking in group and reveal personal things or problems (Baerten, 2010).

Another concept interwoven with participation is being dependent on others to carry out an activity (2). For instance, people with disabilities and older people experience this as a social barrier for the reason that they depend on someone else to participate (Badia, Orgaz, Verdugo, Ullán, & Martínez, 2011; Blomqvist & Edberg, 2002).

How an individual thinks being perceived by others, in other words the perceptions of the social network (3), can also have an influence on lifelong learning participation. In a prison setting, the desire to reconnect with and to satisfy family members showed to be an important motivator for participation. Some prisoners wanted to give something back to their children or other family members by following a vocational training and by doing so acting as a role model. Also human treatment by activity providers gave prisoners the feeling of being a human and not a prisoners (Spark & Harris, 2005). However, the way an individual is perceived by others does not always have a positive relationship with participation. For instance, disabled people expressed that they are afraid of being mocked during their participation (Badia et al., 2011).

A last concept interrelated with participation is the possibility to enlarge a social network, conceptualized as the size of the social network (4). This was for instance, for women in poverty who participated to adult educational activities an important goal (Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009). The possibility to meet others during the activities is considered as one of the main reasons why prisoners participate (Condon, Hek & Harris, 2008; Schlesinger, 2005).

Currently, the available research on the role of different social networks for participation to prison programs is limited. However, we have found a few studies that focused on this topic and revealed that some groups are positively and/or negatively related to participation: fellow inmates, family and friends, and activity providers (e.g. Baerten, 2010; Condon, Hek, & Harris, 2008; Lee, 1996; Schlesinger, 2005; Spark & Harris, 2005). This article attempts to provide deeper insights into the networks that are related to prisoners' decision to participate in lifelong learning activities. The research undertaken as a part of this study addressed 2 research questions: (1) Which social networks of prisoners are related in the decision to participate in prison programs that foster lifelong learning? (2) What are the positive and negative outcomes of these social networks?

1. Methods

The data for the present research were derived from a qualitative study in a prison in Flanders (Belgium). The aim of this study was to explore the factors that influence peoples' decision to become engaged in prison activities. The prison is a remand prison but due to the contemporary overcrowding in all the Belgian prisons, also prisoners who serve their sentence are locked up in this prison.

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