



The community-based supervision of offenders from a positive psychology perspective



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ABSTRACT

In this paper we outline a new model of supervision practices for offenders who are supervised in community settings. Much of the previous work in this area utilized deficits based approaches that primarily seek to reduce risk or remove offence-related behaviors or thinking. We suggest that the concept of well-being or human flourishing that is articulated in the positive psychology literature has important implications for how offender supervision services could be delivered. We propose that the effectiveness of supervision can be further improved if supervising officers are able to integrate practices which promote psychological protective factors in addition to managing risk of further offending. We further suggest that positive psychological practices can be used to develop a more comprehensive and effective model of supervisory practices. In particular, case supervision designed to increase psychological flexibility, self-efficacy, optimism, and hope are hypothesized to be especially effective in ensuring compliance and promoting the adoption of pro social lifestyles.

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1. Introduction

The supervision of offenders in the community is, in most western societies, the most widely utilized criminal justice sanction (Barton-Bellessa & Hanser, 2012). It provides non-custodial sentencing options for large numbers of offenders who commit less serious crimes, while at the same time enabling prisoners to be released back into the community to serve part of their prison term under supervision. The rationale for this criminal justice sanction is well-established. First, it prevents a large number of offenders from experiencing the detrimental effects of incarceration while holding them accountable for their crimes (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Bonta & Wormwith, 2013). This in turn enables offenders to maintain contact with their families and potentially allows them to continue to be productive members of society. Second, offenders in the community have been shown to fare better than those in prison in terms of recidivism, with programs or services provided in the community accounting up to a 35% reduction in recidivism, compared to only 17% for those that are delivered in prison settings (Andrews & Bonta, 2006). Third, there is evidence that the alternative sanction, imprisonment, leads to increases in the likelihood of recidivism among many offenders, and consequently compromises the public safety agenda (Teague, 2011). Fourth, community based offender supervision is by far the most cost efficient way of administering justice. The average cost of a prisoner in the US, for example, is over \$29,000 per year compared to only \$2000 for a year of supervision on probation or parole (Moore, 2009). This equates to about one sixth of the costs of imprisonment (Bales et al., 2010).

In this article, we provided an overview of the history of the offender supervision practices, and the risk–need–responsivity (RNR) model that has characterized probation and parole service delivery over the past three decades. We reviewed what is already known about the effectiveness of approaches that draw on this conceptual orientation. We then highlighted the conceptual and empirical basis of positive psychology, and suggested that the effectiveness of supervision can be further improved if supervising officers integrate practices which promote psychologically protective factors. We further suggested that positive psychological practices can be used to develop a more comprehensive and effective model of supervisory practices. In particular, case supervision designed to increase psychological flexibility, self-efficacy, optimism, and hope are hypothesized to be especially effective.

2. A brief history of offender supervision

While community based offender supervision represents a safe and inexpensive way of delivering punishments, there has been a long standing tension between its overarching goals of public protection and those of offender rehabilitation (Skeem & Manchak, 2008). The 1950s and 1960s saw a significant growth in psychotherapeutic models of offender supervision that emphasized the importance of casework being underpinned by humanitarian principles. The focus on offender rehabilitation was accepted as a legitimate means of protecting the public and gained enormous popularity across the western world (Paparozzi & Gendreau, 2005). Reflecting this mandate, Community Correctional Officers (CCOs) viewed their role as agents of change and strived to assist offenders to lead productive lives in the community. They assumed counseling roles and facilitated activities which were aimed at addressing offenders' needs across a wide range of areas, such as education, employment, housing, and mental health (Cromwell & Killinger, 1994).

In the early 1970s, there was a major shift in penal and probation policy. The growth in the prison population and emerging evidence of higher recidivism rates for offenders under community based supervision led to a move away from the casework approach to a brokerage model of service provision. Advocates of this policy change argued that the casework based rehabilitation failed to deliver on the promise of reduced recidivism and that many offender services (e.g., education,

employment, housing, and mental health) could be more readily and effectively provided by external agencies (Cromwell & Killinger, 1994). In line with this policy realignment, CCOs ceased to act as the primary agents of change; instead, their role was to determine needs, locate services, and refer offenders to appropriate agencies in the community.

The emergence of the brokerage model of offender supervision coincided with claims made by some researchers that “nothing works” in offender rehabilitation (Lipton, Martinson, & Wilks, 1975; Martinson, 1974). This pessimistic conclusion soon began to shape the offender supervision agenda and eventually gave rise to the ascendancy of the “justice model”—a way of working which emphasized the importance of retributive (“just desert”) ethical principles (Steen & Bandy, 2007). Proponents of the “just desert” principle argued for an increased system of sanctions and repudiated the idea that community based supervision was an appropriate response to crime. Thus, there was a conceptual shift from a concern with rehabilitation to a normative stance where the intent was to punish the crime. From this perspective, the aim of supervision was to signal the wrongness of the offense to the offender and the community by instituting sanctions that attempt to “balance” the moral ledger (Ward & Salmon, 2009). The intent was to simply impose a proportionate punitive sanction that corresponded to the social harm resulting from the offense and the offender's culpability (von Hirsch, 1990). With this retreat from rehabilitative ideals to retribution principles came political opportunism as conservative governments across the western nations increasingly turned to crime policy as a way of maximizing their political gains (Garlad, 2001; Steen & Bandy, 2007). Politicians soon embarked upon passing new legislation to reflect their “get tough” on crime stance and, at the same time, embraced the belief that offenders had to be held strictly accountable for their crimes, and that rehabilitation ideals only served to weaken their personal responsibility (Cromwell & Killinger, 1994). In the absence of data that rehabilitation was actually effective in reducing reoffending, the sole aim of supervision became that of communicating the wrongness of offenders' actions—rather than to assist them to live “better lives.”

3. The risk–need–responsivity (RNR) model

Despite the fluctuation across the rehabilitation and punishment continuum over the years, the past three decades saw incremental advancements in the way in which offenders are supervised in the community. In particular, the adoption of the RNR model, also known as the “What Works” literature, is arguably responsible for much of the improvement that has occurred in evidence-based offender supervision practices in most Anglophone jurisdictions. The RNR initially evolved from meta-analytic studies by Canadian researchers (e.g., Andrews, Bonta, & Hoge, 1990; Dowden & Andrews, 2004). According to this model, the *risk principle* is concerned with matching the intensity and level of services with an offender's assessed risk of recidivism. It stipulates that the majority of scarce correctional resources should be allocated to moderate-high risk offenders in order to ensure public safety. According to the risk principle, services for low risk offenders should be kept to a minimum. In addition, this principle emphasizes that low risk offenders should be separated from medium-high risk offenders in order to prevent them from learning more criminal behaviors and becoming serious offenders. The *need principle*, on the other hand, stipulates that services should target criminogenic (i.e., dynamic risk factors) needs predominately, with particular emphasis on what Andrews and Bonta (2010) call ‘the central eight’ – anti-social personality, pro-criminal attitudes, pro-criminal associates, substance abuse, relationship problems, low levels of education/unemployment, and criminal history. Finally, the *responsivity principle* broadly falls into two categories – general and specific. General responsivity is concerned with utilizing empirically supported social learning and cognitive behavioral techniques when dealing with offenders in areas of their criminogenic needs, whereas specific responsivity seeks to tailor the

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