



Stress and Recidivism: a Review on Social Factors Towards Recidivism through the Perspective of Stress

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Abstract. Multiple studies have indicated that correctional programs with stress management sections have significant influences on recidivism [1, 2], yet to the best of the author's knowledge, few studies identified stress as a crucial element within the transitions of the criminals — most viewed the correlations between the social factors (i.e. employment, community supports, close relationships, etc.) and recidivism while barely any study highlighted stress, which comes after these social factors but before reoffending, as the subject. By adopting a different perspective, the author aims to emphasize the significance of stress in reduction of recidivism. The author sorts past articles to look into the potential stresses of released prisoners specifically, which are mostly bounded to social factors. As a literature review, this article select updated and widely-accepted literatures to identify what people have known about this cross-sectional topic, as well as the research gap within it, hoping to guide future studies so that they can better support correctional programs and counseling to ex-prisoners.

Keywords: Stress, coping, recidivism, corrections, literature review

1 Introduction

Since the foundational publication of Evidence-Based Corrections: Identifying What Works [1] in 2000, a large amount of studies came out to test the effectiveness of different types of correctional programs in different situations but with similar scientific rigor. Programs with cognitive components, however, are constantly identified as effective. Interestingly, cognitive or cognitive-behavioral programs are not only adopted in correctional settings but also as an effective solution towards stressful clients in counseling [2]. With basically the same theoretical backgrounds and settings of sessions, the cognitive programs in the two settings seem to be have similar effects to their targets. Meanwhile, a typical cognitive-behavioral design of correctional programs partly consists of skills to deal with potential social problems of the prisoners upon release [3], including employment, acceptance of the community, ties to close relationships, etc.. However, by applying Lazarus' cognitive appraisal theory [4] and Characteristics of Stressful Situations theory [5], it won't be difficult to realize that these themes are all stressful to most of the prisoners. The skills taught in the

correctional programs can also be viewed as the combination of emotion- and problem-focused coping strategies through the perspective of stress.

Though such similarities, to the best of the author's knowledge, the correlation between the cognitive correctional programs and the reduction of reoffending was never interpreted as a correlation between stress and recidivism, which, if proved to be true, can lead to a brand new foundation in the design of correctional programs. The point of this literature review is to see the viability to make the interpretation mentioned above. This review looked into the potential stresses of the released prisoners, as well as their consequences and corresponding coping strategies or systematic supports. It also identifies some research gaps that need to be filled if the perspective of stress is to be adopted so that scholars can test this interpretation and ultimately utilize it to reduce recidivism.

2 Main body

2.1 Connections Between Recidivism and Social Factors

Before addressing the stress from these social factors, it would be necessary to review the connections between recidivism and these social factors. Scholars have attached great importance to social factors when considering recidivism since 1960s. With repeated studies on employment, community supports, intimate relationships, and other social matters that might hinder the ex-prisoners from returning to the society in the past 60 years, it is now crystal clear that the social factors are eminently influential to the rate of recidivism. Due to the limitation of length, this paper will go over the three major aspects of these social factors, with no meaning to diminish others.

Starting with employment which can determine much more than one's economic status. It has been repeatedly shown that employment statuses can influence reoffending in different ways [6], of which the most direct one is that employment can reduce one's tendency to engage in crimes that targets on money [7]. Past research also showed that people are less likely to engage in invasive behaviors and heavy alcohol use when they are under employment and thus lowering the possibility of reoffending [8]. Job satisfaction is also significantly related to recidivism [9]. It has been theorized that employments provide the ex-prisoners with senses of identity and meaning of life, as well as the restrictions on their routines and can therefore diminish criminal behaviors. Correctional programs with skill training or job facilitation were identified as working [1, 2].

Community supports can also be a strong predictor of recidivism. Kyvsgaard [10] indicated that being excluded and marginalized by the community increases reoffending. Pro-criminal communities, which refers to the communities that value criminal behaviors as just and legitimate, significantly increases the likelihood to reoffend [11]; to the opposite, supportive networks of relationships that are pro-social lead to a lower likelihood [12]. Correctional programs with identification of these concepts and facilitation to embrace pro-social communities were identified as working [1, 2].

As for ties to intimate relationships, which might be the most primary psychological, material, and financial support for most of the reentering prisoners, have very fundamental influences on their involvements in criminal behaviors, primarily with three components [6]: the strength of the ties, level of emotional supports, and cognitive changes. Stronger ties to the intimate relationships, higher level of emotional supports from them, and solidier and more pro-social values of them are associated with lower possibilities to re-engage in criminal acts. Some correctional programs with sessions on skills to get along with close relationships were successful, but the effectiveness of the sessions alone was not evaluated.

It is important to notice that social factors never work independently, though originated from a different aspect of sociology, the intersection theory can be applied well on the theme of this article, in the sense that each factor has influences on others, and that any change of one's status shall depend on the changes of the overall situation of these social factors, in contrast to any individual factor.

2.2 Psychology of Stress

In order to make the statement that the social factors can be considered as stresses, it is important to reaffirm the psychology of stress, primarily on the formation and the characteristics of stresses. Only with such standards can people determine whether these social factors are stressful or not.

Stress is commonly defined as “the circumstance in which transactions lead a person to perceive a discrepancy between the physical or psychological demands of a situation and the resources of his or her biological, psychological, or social systemns.” [5] The theory about the formation of stress that is widely-accepted is the cognitive appraisal theory of Lazaruas [4]. The idea of cognitive appraisal is that people assess life events on two levels: they firstly use primary appraisal to judge the attribute of the event to see if it is irrelevant, good or stressful to themselves; if the event is identified as stressful, they further utilize the secondary appraisal to assess their resources to see if they can meet the demands. Lazarus Folkman also pointed out the five characteristics that make a situation stressful, including life transitions, difficult timing, ambiguity, low desirability, and low controllability [5].

2.3 Social Factors as Stressors for Reentering Prisoners

With the theories of stresses determined, the stress levels of the three major social factors mentioned above can be determined.

Starting with the employment issue, it is nice to know the positive correlation between steady employment and lower recidivism. However, challenges stand between ex-prisoners and steady employments. Studies continue to show high rates of unemployment among ex-prisoners and that former offenders have obstacles getting jobs [13]. On the one hand, employers are less willing to hire someone with a criminal record and thus making these ex-prisoners unattractive job candidates [14]; On the other hand, the lack of education and skills of most of the prisoners are even worse eroded during their sentences, making them incapable of doing decent jobs [6]. It is clear that

discrepancies exist between the demand to have a steady occupation and the prisoners' limited resources. Employment issues include all five characteristics of stressful situations:

First, life transition consists of not only the transition from a prisoner to an ex-prisoner, but also the transition from a job candidate to a job candidate with stigma. For those who are imprisoned for the first time, they also live with this stigma for the first time. Second, difficult timing is primarily caused by the length of their sentences, making them start their career much later than expected. Third, The lack of knowledge of the request of the labor market and sometimes the lack of understanding of one's own abilities makes the reentering prisoners unclear about the situation, and thus causes ambiguity. Fourth, being unattractive job candidates and constant failure in job search are undesirable; Fifth, the reentering prisoners have low control over their employments, including enrollment, types of the jobs, quality of the job, etc. In conclusion, employment issues should be considered as very stressful for a large proportion of reentering prisoners.

In terms of community supports, studies have indicated that time spent in prison weakens one's connection to the mainstream society and a conventional life, marginalizing the reentering prisoners and lead them to dissociate from the community. At the same time, the communities themselves have general exclusions towards the ex-prisoners, constructing their image based mainly on their criminal records rather than their entire personalities [15]. What's worse, establishment of relationships inside a prison are very much likely to be pro-criminal [11] and thus hinders embracements of pro-social supports. Discrepancies exist between the demands to merge into a supportive and pro-social community and a lack of such social resources. Four characteristics of stressful situations are involved in the matter of community supports:

First, the reentering prisoners go through a change of environment and relationships. They are to detach from the established network of relationships with their inmates while forming new ones. Second, the unfamiliarity to the conventions, rules, and people of the community and the society makes it ambiguous for reentering offenders to live within it. They also have problems finding the helps that they need. Third, it is undesirable to leave an already established network of relationships. It is also very undesirable to be excluded by a community. Fourth, ex-prisoners have low control over the communities' opinion on them. At the same time, most of them cannot select the community to live in, which means they have minimal control over their choices. In conclusion, the issues around community should be considered stressful for the majority of reentering offenders.

As for intimate relationships, although strong, supportive and pro-social intimate relationships seem to diminish the likelihood of recidivism significantly, these attributes are usually absent for most of the reentering prisoners because their initial offending itself (in contrast to reoffending) is very likely to be the consequence of weak, unsupportive or pro-criminal intimate relationships in the first place [16]. Meanwhile, scholars haven't noted any substantial change of one's intimate relationships' values and conventions to deal with events. Discrepancies lie between the demands of pro-social anchoring and emotional supports and the lack of corresponding social resources.

All five characteristics of stressful situations can be used to assess the ties with close relationships:

First, the reentering offenders need to adapt to the conventions of the family members. It's also the first time for them to live with their family as a member with stigma. The composition of the family might change, and their place in the family might change, usually to the lower end. Second, the ex-prisoners start to take their responsibilities of the family later than expected. Such responsibilities includes financial, reproductive, supportive ones, etc.. Third, the attitudes of the intimate relationships are usually unclear in the view of the reentering offenders, so as the conventions of the family and the self-placement of themselves. Fourth, it is undesirable to be hated or excluded by any member of the family. For certain individuals, going back to home with a criminal record can be stigmatic and undesirable. Fifth, reentering prisoners have low controllability to the close relationships' attitude towards them. At the same time, most of them are forced to live with their families, while beyond 50% rely on their family to survive [17], representing low control over their choices.

The close relationships, in the end, also serve as stressors for the reentering offenders.

3 Discussion

Through a systematic analysis, the author identified all of the three major social factors as stressful for at least a large proportion of reentering offenders. With the identification of the similarities between correctional programs and stress-targeting programs and the synthesis of past literatures, the results enable the author to form two hypotheses that, stress level or ability to cope with stresses is strongly correlated with rate of recidivism. In order to support these hypotheses, future studies need to test each's correlation with rate of reoffending. In order to differentiate the two possibilities, experimental design might be needed so that "stress level" and "coping abilities" can be controlled independently. If any of the hypotheses proofs to be true, relevent workers might be able to form a universally effective program rather than problem-focused sessions to reduce the recidivism of the society and thus keep people safe.

In terms of the limitations of this article, the most primary one is that the concept "stress of reentering prisoners" is abstracted from a theoretical model with indirect evidence. Though widely-accepted theories, rigorous logics and abundant supportive evidence, there's chance that the deduction is be falsed due to unconsidered factors. As long as believing investigations on stress are not done among reentering prisoners, scholars need to be cautious to make a conclusion. Another limitation of this review is that it only reflected on the three major social factors. Cultures and the social ecologies of different places can be another limitation of this review, in the sense that the supporting literatures are primarily done with a western background. However, based on the successful inter-cultural applications of both the stress theories [5,6] and correctional programs [1,2,4], the likelihood that culture can be very influential to the current topic is relatively little. Last but not the least, the intersection theory can always

hinder the analysis of any single element of a complicated social issue, with no exclusion of the theme of this paper.

4 Conclusion

Empirical studies constantly told us that cognitive and cognitive-behavioral correctional programs are effective in reduction of recidivism, yet few dig deeper to understand the mechanism of this effectiveness. By identifying multiple similarities between correctional programs and stress-targeting programs, this article proposed a perspective to view stress as they key element in the correlation between the cognitive correctional programs and reduction of reoffending. Through a systematic analysis, the major social factors are all considered stressful for reentering offenders and thus, it would be legitimate to view the success of cognitive and cognitive-behavioral correctional programs through the perspective of stress. Future studies should focus on collecting direct evidence of the stress level of reentering offenders, as well as on differentiating "stress level" and "ability to cope" in order to guide future correctional programs scientifically.

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