

# Changing Probation Officer Attitudes: Training Experience, Motivation, and Knowledge

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**SEVERAL DECADES OF** correctional research have served to identify the most effective strategies for reducing offender recidivism. This research has led to the development of a core set of intervention principles that, when adhered to, show meaningful and consistent reductions in recidivism. These principles of effective intervention are so strongly supported empirically that they are now considered a necessary component to any successful rehabilitative initiative. Initial investigations into “what works” have now become more focused on how to improve upon the reductions in recidivism gained from implementing these established principles. Recent empirical inquiries have identified the potential importance of probation and parole officer (PO) attitudes in shaping their behavior with correctional clients and in turn influencing the outcome of the offenders they supervise.

In one of the earliest theories of probation supervision, Klockars (1972) posited that PO attitudes influence officer role perceptions and officer behavior. Klockars stated that the practice of probation supervision ultimately results from the interaction of departmental context, the legal and logical definition of revocation, the psychological approach of the probationer, and, most important, the

“working philosophy” of the officer. Clear and Latessa (1993) studied role conflict among POs and found that officer philosophies are a function of both personal and organizational factors, and that officer attitudes can be changed. More recent research conducted by Paparozzi and Gendreau (2005) supports the view that community-based supervision programs would do well to employ POs with balanced law enforcement/social casework orientations. Clearly, research regarding the importance of PO attitudes is gaining more significance. Many community correctional agencies are changing their organizational policy from being grounded in compliance to focusing on research-based rehabilitative strategies that bring about offender change and reduce recidivism (Bourgon, Gutierrez, & Ashton, 2011).

Recently, POs have been asked to do more than just serve as case managers. Their everyday tasks have evolved as the research on effective intervention strategies has gained support. In brief, this literature shows that punishment-based strategies fail to have an appreciable effect on offender outcome (Gendreau, Goggin, Cullen, & Andrews, 2000). In order to positively affect the rate at which offenders recidivate, correctional

interventions must include models for change that adhere to the principles of effective intervention. The correctional literature has come to term these practices the “what works” model of offender rehabilitation.

Over the last several decades, research attempting to identify the best practices in correctional intervention has shown that rehabilitation programs can reduce recidivism. However, this is not to say that all rehabilitative efforts are equal. Programs that show the largest reductions in recidivism adhere to the well-established principles of effective intervention. In fact, meta-analytic evidence has suggested that the clinically relevant and psychologically informed principles of risk, need, and responsivity are associated with significant reductions in recidivism (Andrews et al., 1990; Dowden & Andrews, 1999a, 1999b; Lipsey, 1989). The risk principle states that the intensity of the program should match the risk level of the offender (e.g., higher-risk cases receive more intensive services). The need principle, on the other hand, suggests that offender intervention strategies target criminogenic needs (dynamic risk factors) that are causally related to criminal behavior, such as pro-criminal attitudes, anti-social associates, and antisocial personality. Finally,

the responsivity principle denotes the importance of matching the style and mode of intervention to the abilities, motivation, and learning style of the offender. Research has further indicated that cognitive behavioral/social learning-based interventions are generally the most effective with offenders. In their most recent review of these principles, Andrews and Bonta (2010) state that the more a program adheres to the principles of risk, need, and responsivity, the larger the observed reductions in recidivism.

To further enhance the positive outcomes associated with offender rehabilitation, Andrews and Kiessling (1980) introduced the five dimensions of effective correctional practice. These five dimensions are considered to be at the core of effective treatment delivery and are seemingly just as important as meeting the principles of risk, need, and responsivity. The five dimensions are: effective use of authority, anti-criminal modeling and reinforcement, problem solving, use of community resources, and quality of interpersonal relationships between staff and client. These five dimensions are based on the social learning theory of criminal behavior and echo the most empirically validated intervention strategies for aiming to obtain positive behavioral change within offenders (Andrews & Kiessling, 1980).

Of late, an influx of new training programs has offered POs guidance toward the implementation of the principles of effective intervention and the five dimensions of effective treatment delivery (Bonta, Rugge, Scott, Bourgon & Yessine, 2008; Lowenkamp, Lowenkamp, & Robinson, 2010; Lowenkamp, Robinson, VanBenschoten, & Alexander, 2009; Taxman, 2008; Trotter, 1996). A specific program of this type is the Integrated Behavioral Intervention Strategies (IBIS) developed by Lowenkamp, Koutsenok, and Lowenkamp (2011). IBIS consists of two main components: motivational interviewing and EPICS-II. The developers of the program argue that while each component is based on effective intervention research, IBIS is a different approach to training, because it integrates each component into a comprehensive set of practices (Lowenkamp et al., 2010).

Not surprisingly, there is a large body of literature that highlights the importance of staff training on programs that adhere to the principles of effective intervention and stress the core dimensions of effective treatment delivery. This body of research indicates that training can significantly impact client/

officer interactions and can also lead to lower offender failure rates. Evaluations of these models demonstrate empirical effectiveness and consistently show a relative reduction of recidivism of up to 25 percent (Bonta et al., 2008; Dowden & Andrews, 2004; Robinson et al., 2012; Taxman, 2008; Trotter, 1996). Furthermore, research has indicated that when POs are trained on the principles of effective intervention, they focus more on the rehabilitative function of the job and dedicate more time to strategies that promote behavioral change (Fulton, Stichman, Travis, & Latessa, 1997).

Bonta et al. (2008) found that probationers receiving supervision from POs trained on the "what works" literature recidivated at a rate of 46 percent, while probationers receiving supervision from untrained POs recidivated at a rate of 64 percent. Additionally, the simple act of discussing criminogenic needs with probationers led to significant reductions in recidivism (Bonta et al., 2008). In a preliminary attempt to decipher the relationship between PO attitudes/orientations and client outcome, Whetzel, Pappozzi, Alexander, and Lowenkamp (2011) surveyed POs in three federal districts who had previously been trained in evidence-based practices. The survey data indicated that the federal POs who completed the surveys were balanced in their approach to offender supervision (Whetzel et al., 2011). In a related research study analyzing the effect of on-the-job coaching for trained POs, Lowenkamp et al. (2012) found that face-to-face coaching sessions after POs were initially trained in evidence-based practices increased the likelihood that officers would actually use their newly learned skills.

This body of research shows that training on evidence-based practices for use in community correctional settings can change a PO's attitude toward a more balanced supervision approach and can increase the likelihood that POs will feel positive about delivering treatment to their clients (Fulton et al., 1997). This research examines the effect that evidence-based training has on increasing officer knowledge of the "what works" literature and changing officer attitudes toward service delivery.

## Methods

The current study uses data from a sample of San Diego County POs ( $N = 300$ ) that were engaged in a three-day training. Specifically, the data were gathered through a survey that was administered immediately before the

beginning of Day 1 of the training, and again immediately after the training was over on Day 3 of the training curriculum. The survey (Table 1) was designed to glean the participants' knowledge, views, and attitudes about several aspects of their own training participation, criminogenic needs, and the prospect of offender change. The current study does not use demographic or professional experiential data, although there was non-systematic variation regarding years on the job and other aspects of job experience.

### *The Training*

The training that the San Diego County POs participated in was titled Integrated Behavioral Intervention Strategies, or IBIS (Lowenkamp, Lowenkamp, & Robinson, 2010). The IBIS training involves an intensive three-day curriculum that covers several areas of evidence-based correctional intervention strategies. Specifically, IBIS includes instruction on the theory and rationale behind motivational interviewing, as well as on several aspects of EPICS II—Evidence-Based Practices in Correctional Supervision—II.

Motivational interviewing (MI) is a strategy of officer-client interaction that is gaining wider implementation across many correctional agencies in the U.S. (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). The fundamental principles and practices of MI involve first teaching trainees the theory behind the strategy as well as research supporting its efficacy. Other concepts include the expression of empathy, supporting self-efficacy in the individual, and developing discrepancy. Specific micro-skills involved in MI training (i.e., the vehicles through which the aforementioned concepts are implemented) include the use of open-ended questions, affirmations for prosocial statements and behaviors, various types of reflections designed to reveal to the offender ways in which their thinking and behaviors are problematic, "rolling with resistance" to avoid power struggles, shifting focus and helping the offender reframe antisocial sentiments, and helping the offender to elicit "change talk," further reinforcing the beginnings of behavioral change (Miller & Rollnick, 2002).

As noted above, IBIS training includes aspects of the EPICS-II curriculum/skill set, including the importance of appropriate relationship building and coaching skills and instilling the ability to give constructive feedback. Also included are knowledge and exercises designed to impart the skills that allow the officer to explain behavior (and in

TABLE 1.

Survey Item	Pre		Post	
	N	%	N	%
How would you describe yourself as it relates to this training?				
Prisoner	77	26	30	10
Prodigy	91	30	29	10
Pupil	60	20	214	71
Passenger	72	24	27	9
We can predict how offenders will do (adjustment) based on how we as officers interact with them.				
True	132	44	248	83
False	168	56	52	17
The top criminogenic needs are:				
Substance abuse, gang affiliation, employment	94	31	19	6
Attitudes, peers, personality	73	24	270	90
Family, substance abuse, financial	87	29	10	3
Housing, attitudes, self-esteem	46	15	1	<1
Motivation is something that people either have or they do not.				
True	188	63	46	15
False	112	37	254	85
People with problematic behavior must accept their problem.				
True	183	61	72	24
False	117	39	228	76
External pressure and consequences is the only way to make people change.				
True	129	43	37	12
False	171	57	263	88
POs' expectations for their probationers' abilities to change have NO effect upon whether change occurs.				
True	102	34	14	5
False	198	66	286	95
Eliciting probationers' thoughts or viewpoints on their behavior can be helpful to increase their motivation toward change.				
True	170	57	258	86
False	130	43	42	14
The best way to motivate probationers to change is to help them to resolve their ambivalence about change.				
True	114	38	242	81
False	186	62	58	19
How motivated are you to utilize IBIS in your work?				
Not motivated at all or unsure	211	70	53	18
Somewhat to very motivated	89	30	247	82
To what extent do you expect that IBIS will be successful in working with your clients?				
Not successful at all to unsure	197	66	61	20
Somewhat to very successful	103	34	239	80

turn behavioral change)—in other words, breaking down the basic elements of behavior in an effort to increase the offender's awareness of his or her own behavior, how that behavior originates, and how to change it.

A great deal of information regarding radical behavioral change strategies is included in IBIS as well. For example, methods of effective reinforcement, effective disapproval, and the appropriate use of authority are covered as means by which prosocial behavior can be reinforced while antisocial behavior can be extinguished. In addition, the founding principles and theory behind the cognitive model are included as well, focusing on problem solving and integrating cognitive principles with behavioral reinforcement strategies.

#### *Data Elements from the Survey*

The survey asked officers to assess their attitudes toward their training participation (i.e., how they see their role/status as a trainee). In addition, officers' views regarding the top criminogenic needs were assessed, as were officers' beliefs regarding the prospect for offender change, the importance (and source of) motivation to change, the importance of gleaned offenders' views, and the officers' attitudes regarding their own motivation to use the skills they were being taught by the IBIS training.

#### **Results**

Table 1 presents the results of the pre-post analysis using the survey data. Several noteworthy changes appear to have occurred, at least attitudinally, between the pre-survey assessment and the post-survey assessment. For example, the first question asked: "How would you describe yourself as it relates to this training?" The possible responses included "prisoner," "prodigy," "pupil," or "passenger." The percentage of training participants who rated themselves as "prisoners" dropped 16 percent (from 26 percent to 10 percent pre- to post), while the percentage who described themselves as "pupils" increased 51 percent (from 20 percent to 71 percent pre- to post). A 20 percent decrease from pre- to post-survey was observed in the number of those who considered themselves a "prodigy" (30 percent to 10 percent), while the percent who considered themselves "passengers" decreased from 24 percent to 9 percent. It appears that trainees responded to the training in a way that reduced their obstinacy, decreased over-estimation of their existing skills, increased

their views of their need to learn more, and reduced complacency.

The extent to which POs have influence over offenders through the officer-client interaction was assessed by this true/false question: "We can predict how offenders will do (adjustment) based on how we as officers interact with them." The percentage of officers who answered this question as "true" increased nearly 40 percent from before to after the training (44 percent to 83 percent). Officers were also asked to choose one of four different sets of criminogenic needs (i.e., "the top three criminogenic needs are:"). The sample was spread fairly evenly across all four different sets at the pre-survey measurement point; however, the percentage of respondents that chose the "top three" that included attitudes, peers, and personality increased from 24 percent to 90 percent after the training. The responses to this question indicate that trainees gained a more empirically-based view of what the top criminogenic needs are within the offender population. For comparison, consider that the set listed as "housing, attitudes, self-esteem" dropped from 15 percent to less than one percent after the training.

Several more indicators of positive change in the training participants occurred through the use of six true/false questions designed to tap a number of different aspects of behavioral change in the offender population. For example, when presented with the statement "Motivation is something that people either have or they do not," those responding "false" increased from 37 percent to 85 percent. The importance of offenders "accepting" their problems was assessed through the statement "People with problematic behaviors must accept their problems," where those responding "false" increased from 39 percent to 76 percent. The effect of coercive supervision practices was assessed through the statement "External pressure and consequences are the only ways to make people change," where the percentage of those answering "true" decreased from 43 percent to 12 percent.

The officer-client interaction was assessed through three true/false questions as well. For example, officers' expectations were assessed through the statement "POs' expectations for their probationer's abilities to change have NO effect upon whether change occurs." Training participants answered "false" at a rate of 66 percent before the training and 95 percent afterward. Similar change was revealed through the statement "Eliciting probationers' thoughts or viewpoints on their behavior can

be helpful to increase their motivation toward change," where those who responded "true" increased from 57 percent to 86 percent post-training. Likewise, the statement "The best way to motivate probationers to change is to help them to resolve their ambivalence about change" resulted in an increase of 38 percent (pre-training) to 81 percent (post-training). These three questions in particular reveal positive changes regarding training participants' beliefs in the power of their expectations, the importance of gleaned offenders' thoughts about their own lives and motivation, and the best ways to motivate offenders.

Two questions were included to ascertain the PO's views regarding the IBIS training as a whole. For example, the statement "How motivated are you to utilize IBIS in your work?" resulted in an increase for the response "Somewhat to very motivated" from 30 percent to 82 percent post-training. Likewise, the statement "To what extent do you expect that IBIS will be successful in working with your clients?" resulted in an increase from 34 percent to 80 percent for the response "Somewhat to very successful."

While the results presented above do not involve the use of a comparison group and do not incorporate statistical control, it appears that the training had an immediate effect on several indicators regarding knowledge of evidence-based correctional practices, belief in self-efficacy regarding offender change (on the part of probation officers), and an increasing awareness of the importance of core correctional practices and the effectiveness of the IBIS skills. All tests of the relationship between response contingencies pre and post training were statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ).

## Discussion

The present research represents a comparison of pre-training knowledge and beliefs to post-training knowledge and beliefs for a sample of San Diego County POs who participated in a three-day skill-based training. The current study did not incorporate a control/comparison group or statistical control. Nonetheless, there were several important findings.

The training appears to have had an immediate effect on several beliefs and knowledge bases noted above. At the very least, these changes represent an attitudinal change on the part of the POs who were participating in the training. While attitudinal change on the part of the PO does not automatically equate to behavioral change, the importance of attitudinal change should not be underestimated. For

example, Fulton et al. (1997) demonstrated the statistically significant effect of parole officer attitudes and how they relate to desired correctional outcomes (i.e., successful discharge from supervision).

More recently, and within the context of evidence-based practices in supervision, Bourgon et al. (2011) demonstrated the importance of officer attitudinal change (on the part of the correctional officer) and how this change can relate to increases in positive outcomes for probationers. Indeed within the context of Bourgon et al. (2011), it appears that training for POs in particular may hold great importance when it comes to changing attitudes regarding effective curricula and practice.

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