

# **Probation and Parole Agent Communication Style, Attention to Client-Identified Needs, and Quality of Relationship with Women Offenders**

Merry Morash, Deborah A. Kashy, Sandi W. Smith, and Jennifer E. Cobbina

## **Reasons for Examining Communication and Recidivism**

High quality probation and parole agent relationships with clients are linked to lower levels of recidivism (Dowden & Andrews, 2004). They are marked by characteristics such as warmth and mutual liking. In contrast, low-quality relationships reduce the effectiveness of interventions that should lead to less recidivism (Skeem, Encandela, & Eno Loudon, 2003). One way that agents can promote positive relationships with the women they supervise is by their choices of how to communicate. Another way to promote positive relationships is for the agent to focus attention on needs that the client identifies, though care should be taken to avoid discussing multiple problems in a short time period (e.g., 6 months).

## **The Research**

We studied the nature and quality of communication and relationships for Michigan women on probation and parole. Because offenders and agents can differ in how they see relationships and communication, we examined this question using both the woman's perceptions of the agent's communication and relationship style (317 women) and using agent perceptions of their own communication and relationship style (255 women). The women who were being supervised also reported on whether agents discussed a variety of different problems that they had and that are common to women offenders.

## **Findings about Communication and Recidivism**

Regardless of the approach to measurement, a conversational style of communication is related to a supportive relationship style that has been linked to lower recidivism. Agents who use a conversational style, for example, talk about areas of disagreement with clients and encourage clients to challenge the agent's ideas and beliefs. These types of communication were linked to relationships marked by the agent's enthusiasm and optimism for the client and fair treatment of the client.

In contrast to conversational communication, authoritarian/conformity communication is characterized by such features as the agent's belief that the client should see her or him as an authority in charge and an absence of client disagreements with the agent. Both the offender's and the agent's view of authoritarian/conformity communication was linked to higher recidivism.

Findings about the amount of attention an agent pays to client-identified problems were more complex. Low-risk offenders with limited criminal histories had less recidivism when the agent addressed needs identified by the offender. However, this was not the case for high-risk offenders with lengthy criminal histories. For high-risk offenders, addressing multiple needs in the short period covered by our research may be overwhelming and nonproductive.

## **Recommendations**

- Conversational communication approaches should be incorporated into training and practice for probation and parole agents.
- Probation and parole agents should be able to recognize authoritarian/conformity approaches to communication, and insofar as possible, should be provided with alternatives.
- For women with multiple needs and lengthy criminal histories, agents should work with clients to prioritize needs to be addressed immediately, so as to avoid negative relationships.

## **References**

Dowden, C., & Andrews, D. A. (2004). The importance of staff practice in delivering effective correctional treatment: A meta-analytic review of core correctional practices. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 48, 203-214.

Skeem, J. L., Encandela, J., & Eno Loudon, J. (2003). Perspectives on probation and mandated mental health treatment in specialized and traditional probation departments. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 21, 429-458.