Overview of How Interpersonal Communication Improves the Lives of Women on Probation and Parole

Sandi W. Smith, Merry Morash, Amanda J. Holmstrom, Brandon Walling, & Elizabeth A. Adams

Michigan State University

The Importance of Knowing How Interpersonal Communication with Agents Improves the Lives of Women on Probation and Parole

Here we define and show that interpersonal communication is critical to agent-client relationships and positive outcomes for the clients. We overview our findings from our program of research and provide links to other reports on separate studies that answer these questions and show how communication promotes positive outcomes.

We explore the following:
What is interpersonal communication and how does it fit into agent communication?
What were the findings related to communication patterns and relationship style?
What were the findings related to social support messages?
What were the findings related to memorable messages?
What are the implications for practice?

Who did we study?

The 402 women we studied were on probation or parole because they had committed felony offenses. They were recruited for the research because they lived within a 90-minute drive from the research office and had past or current problems with substance misuse. We initially interviewed these 402 women 3 months after the start of their probation or parole, and then at 3-month intervals after that for the second (97% retention) and third interview (94% retention). We surveyed the 73 probation and parole agents who supervised the women to coincide with the Time 1 interview with the women. Finally, we collected data on technical violations of supervision conditions, arrests, and convictions since the start of supervision.

What is interpersonal communication and how does it fit into agent communication?

Interpersonal communication is defined in terms of interactional and behavioral outcomes, its message-centered focus, and through developmental approaches.

Within the interactional and behavioral approach (Cappella, 1987), interpersonal communication occurs when two people exchange messages and mutually affect one another's behavior, whereas in the message-centered approach (Burleson, 2010) "people who have established a communicative relationship exchange messages in an effort to

generate shared meanings and accomplish social goals" (p. 151). Within the developmental approach (Miller & Steinberg, 1975), people can move from cultural to sociological to psychological levels as they communicate with one another. Our research on the interpersonal communication between agents and the women they supervise can fit within these conceptualizations of interpersonal communication in that agents and their clients exchange messages, have goals, affect one another, and are related by their interlocking roles at the sociological level.

What were the findings related to communication patterns and relationship style?

Probation and Parole agents use both conversational and conformity communication patterns with clients as they serve the dual roles of support and control for their female clients. Conversational communication encourages all parties to express their opinions. Conformity communication emphasizes agreement with the person in authority.

Perceptions of a conversational communication pattern or a supportive relationship style afforded benefits across all studies reviewed here. Benefits include lessened anxiety, reactance, and restoration of freedoms, and increased drug/alcohol and crime-avoidance self-efficacy. The same patterns led to self-reports of less substance abuse and official reports of fewer probation and parole violations, arrests, and convictions.

Below we list the titles and links to of some articles that provide evidence for this material:

1. The Effects of Probation and Parole Agent Relationship Style and Women Offenders' Risk for Recidivism on Offenders' Responses to Supervision Interactions

   https://cj.msu.edu/community/epps/pdfs/epps-reports-eppar.pdf

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

   https://cj.msu.edu/community/epps/pdfs/wipp-reports-ppacsacinqrwo.pdf

3. Probation/Parole Agent Style & Women Offender's Reactions to Supervision Interactions

   https://cj.msu.edu/community/epps/pdfs/wipp-reports-ear.pdf

4. Probation and Parole Officer Communication Style as an Antecedent to Reactance, Self-Efficacy, and Restoration of Freedom for Drug- and Alcohol-Involved Women on Probation and Parole

   https://cj.msu.edu/community/epps/pdfs/wipp-reports-ppocsarserfdaiwpp.pdf

5. Precursors to Probation and Parole Agent Communication Patterns with Female Clients

What were the findings related to social support messages?

Social support refers to communicative aid provided to a person who is, or appears to be, in need (Burleson, 2003). Social support is critical for system-involved women, as it is associated with a variety of positive outcomes, including reduced recidivism and desistance from substance abuse and other illegal activity. There are a variety of support types that may be helpful in stressful situations. Types of supportive messages include informational (advice or guidance), emotional (expressions of comfort and caring), esteem (efforts to bolster another's self-esteem), tangible (offers of services or resources), and network support (help in achieving membership in groups with shared similar interests).

Our findings indicated that multiple support types are needed for the complex stressors inherent in this context, as

well as the insight that tangible and network support from agents are lacking; this gap should be met directly by agents or through referrals to programs that can provide such support. Pragmatically, our research indicates that nearly all supportive messages were viewed positively by women. This finding suggests agents could provide helpful types of support more frequently. Given constraints associated with providing tangible and network support, agents could expand the range of supportive communication they provide clients to include more emotional and esteem support.

Below we list the titles and links to of some articles that provide evidence for this material:

1. Supportive Messages Female Offenders Receive from Probation and Parole Officers about Substance Avoidance: Message Perceptions and Effects

   https://cj.msu.edu/community/epps/pdfs/wipp-reports-smforfpposampe.pdf

2. Precursors to Probation and Parole Agent Intent to Send Informational, Emotional, and Esteem Social Support Messages to Female Clients

   https://cj.msu.edu/community/epps/pdfs/epps-reports-pppai.pdf

3. The Nature and Effects of Messages that Women Receive from Probation and Parole Agents in Conversations about Employment

   https://cj.msu.edu/community/epps/pdfs/epps-reports-nemwrpp.pdf

What were the findings related to memorable messages?

Memorable messages are verbal messages which may be remembered for extremely long periods of time and which people perceive as a major influence on the course of their lives. Women on probation and parole have unique needs and experiences. They may be unsure about to how to behave in certain situations because they are trying to learn more prosocial thinking and behavioral patterns to change their previous criminal behavior. Given these circumstances, memorable messages may be of crucial importance in shaping how women think and behave in new and ambiguous situations. This research examined how different types of memorable messages came to mind as system involved women assessed their own behavior. Different types of memorable messages came to mind when they did something that made them feel proud, when they stopped themselves from doing something they would later regret, and when they did something that made them feel ashamed.

For a more complete look at these findings, we list the title and a link to a report below.

Agent Memorable Messages Recalled by Women on Probation and Parole

https://cj.msu.edu/community/epps/pdfs/wipp-reports-mma.pdf

What are the implications for practice?

Agents can plan the communication pattern that they intend to use with their clients that prior research has shown to be most helpful to the recipient. In most cases, this is a conversational communication pattern.

A conversational pattern of communication is the "best fit" for promoting positive change. Even in situations when a conformity pattern might typically be used, such as with women who have higher levels of technical violations, recent arrests, and substance abuse, the agent could engage them in conversation and mutual problem-solving to adopt a more conversational communication pattern.

Using social support messages frequently enhances outcomes for system-involved women. Almost all attempts to use them are seen as positive by the recipients of them, so agents should consider providing them more often.

Memorable messages can be either positive or negative. They are often recalled as system-involved women assess their own behavior of which they are either proud or ashamed or when they decide not to engage in a potentially negative behavior.

A focus on communication and messages is important for probation and parole agents as they try to improve the lives of the system involved women with whom they work.

References

Burleson, B. (2010). The nature of interpersonal communication: A message-centered approach. In C. Berger, M. Roloff, & D. Roskos-Ewoldsen (Eds.), *The handbook of communication science.* (pp. 145-165). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Cappella, J. (1987). Interpersonal communication: Definition and fundamental questions. In C. R. Berger & S. H. Chaffee (Eds.), *Handbook of communication science* (pp. 184-238). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Miller, G. R., Steinberg, M. (1975). Between people: A new analysis of interpersonal communication. Chicago: Science Research Associates