

An Intersectional Analysis of Agentic Efforts Individuals Under Community Supervision Describe to Improve Their Lives

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Reasons for Examining Agency and Social Location in Desistance Research

Personal agency, or the ability to exercise individual choice, is broadly recognized as important to desistance from illegal behavior. It remains unclear how people with criminal histories see themselves exercising agency within their desistance journeys. In other words, not much is known about the specific actions people choose to take to stop breaking the law. Likewise, little is known about how social location, specifically racial/ethnic minoritized status and gender, is related to agentic efforts to stop offending. Our key objectives are to examine racial/ethnic and gender differences in how people on probation and parole describe their agentic efforts to improve their lives and how these efforts connect to desistance.

The Study

We analyzed data from qualitative interviews conducted with 277 men and women under community supervision in Michigan who have been convicted of a felony. Of the 277 participants, 141 (51.50%) were members of a minoritized racial or ethnic group, and 182 (65.70%) identified as men. During the interviews, participants were asked to describe what they have been doing to improve their lives since beginning parole or probation. We first identified all life-improving projects, which were then sorted by thematic similarities, before examining how the nature of these projects varied by race/ethnicity and gender.

19 different life-improving projects were noted, which were categorized into three overarching *project types*:

<p>Type 1) Avoidance projects – projects that help participants avoid negative or illegal situations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid illegal behaviors • Avoid substance use • Avoid system-involved people • Avoid places • Avoid everyone • Stay at home • Participate in legal activities
<p>Type 2) Interpersonal relationship projects – projects to improve or develop relationships with specific individuals or make connections with prosocial groups</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child relationship • Family relationship • Interpersonal relationship • Socialization • Support group • Support person • Child rearing
<p>Type 3) Cognitive projects – projects involving changing patterns of thinking, beliefs, or shifts in perspective</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cope with feelings • Improve self-image • Cultivate a positive mindset • Think about consequences • Think about the future

Key Findings:

Agentic Projects Vary by Race/Ethnicity and Gender

Most participants described a desire to avoid further involvement with the criminal-legal system, and the strategies used showed some differences by gender and race/ethnicity.

- The life-improving projects taken on by **minoritized men and women** were typically **self-guided and self-sustained** with a focus on limiting time out in public. For example:
 - Minoritized men tended to spend time with their children **at home**, rather than on social outings.

- Minoritized men and women had **limited involvement** in legal activities outside of employment.
 - Minoritized men and women were likely to **seek support from informal channels**, like family or friends, rather than formal institutions.
 - The life-improving projects discussed by **white men and women** more often involved **formal, institutional support** and took place in the **public sphere**. For instance:
 - White men and women described taking their children on **social excursions**, such as to the park or zoo.
 - To stay busy and limit the risk of legal trouble, white men and women engaged in a **wide range of legal activities**, including going to therapy, obtaining a gym membership, or socializing with friends.
 - White women were the most likely to discuss using **formal support networks**, like participating in Alcoholics Anonymous, to achieve prosocial relationship projects.
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Recommendations for Practitioners and Policy Makers

Identify the types of life-improving projects individuals under community supervision are pursuing. Such information can be utilized by probation and parole agents to respond to their clients' needs and priorities, and provide individualized support, advice, and referrals. This type of matching strengthens the "**service-need fit**," which is related to reduced risk of recidivism.

Additionally, identifying the agentic efforts of men and women on parole or probation can improve rapport and facilitate a more **supportive agent-supervisee relationship**, which is also connected to decreased risk of reoffending.

Source:

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