Probation and Parole Agent Communication Patterns as Antecedents to Clients' Reactance and Acts to Restore Freedoms: Moderating Effects of Emerging Adult Status and Gender

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Reasons for Examining How Probation and Parole Agent Communication Patterns Effect Client Responses

- Research establishes that agent relationship style and communication patterns are important to client supervision outcomes.

- Aim: To **identify communication patterns agents use that bring about desired effects vs. undesired effects,** so that agent selection and training can encourage the most effective approaches agents can use when they talk with clients.

- Specifically, this study focuses on how different ways that supervising agents communicate with their clients affect two client behaviors that are predictive of recidivism: association with peers who break the law and substance use.

- The study also considers how these relationships between agents' communication patterns and effects on client behavior may differ among for clients among different client gender and age groups, to inform agent interventions to be most effective for clients belonging to various age and gender groups.

The Study

In a sample of 289 men and women under supervision for a felony conviction in Michigan and at risk for recidivism, we analyzed quantitative interview data regarding their perceptions of and responses to communication patterns in the agent-client relationship. Of the 289 participants, 152 (52.6%) were on probation and 137 (47.4%) were on parole. The age range for study participants was 18 to 70 years, and 64 (22.1 %) participants were categorized as emerging adults aged 25 or younger, and 225 (77.9 %) were categorized as age 26 or older. As for gender, 192 (66.4 %) participants identified as men and 97 (33.6 %) identified as women. Participants self-reported

race and ethnicity: 129 (44.8 %) White (not Hispanic), and 159 (55.2%) identified as a minoritized race/ethnicity or another race (includes multiracial). One participant did not report on their racial and ethnic identification. During the interviews, participants were asked a series of questions to measure how they reacted and behaved after communication with their agents.

The study focuses on the effects of probation and parole agents' use of **two patterns of communication** with clients they supervise:

- **Communication Pattern 1: <u>Conformity Communication</u>**
  - A person in authority (i.e., the supervising agent) telling the client what to do and expecting compliance.

- **Communication Pattern 2: <u>Conversational Communication,</u>**
  - Encourages open two-way communication and decision-making between the client and the agent, regardless of one person having more authority than the other. For instance, motivational interviewing uses this approach in which agents and clients communicate to agree on common goals and joint effort to achieve them.

The study also focuses on the following **psychological** and **behavioral** effects/outcomes for clients' responses to each communication pattern:

- **Reactance:** A motivational state marked by distress, anxiety, resistance, and a desire to restore freedom. For instance, when recipients (clients) of communication fear that what they heard threatens their personal freedoms, they may plan to restore those freedoms, which in turn could lead to protesting behaviors and actions contrary to what the communicator (agent) intended.

- **Restoration of freedom**: The psychological process and subsequent actual behavior that is enacted to restore the threatened freedom, such as enacting the forbidden behavior, or associating with people who enable or engage in the forbidden behavior.

- **Avoiding Substance Use**

- **Avoiding Criminal Peers**

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Key Findings

Conversational Communication was related to **low feelings of threat to freedoms (i.e., reactance)** and **limited intended actions to restore freedoms (i.e., restoration), both of which predicted** self-reported **behavior to avoid associating with people who break the law** and **to avoid substance use**.

Conversational Communication supported →

  lower psychological **reactance** and **lower restoration**, →

   and **increased** behavior to **avoid criminal peers** & **avoid substance use.**

Conformity Communication predicted **increased reactance**, which predicted **increased freedom restoration** and **lower levels of behavior** to avoid people who break the law as well as **lower levels of** avoiding substance misuse.

Conformity Communication predicted →

  increased psychological **reactance** and **increased restoration**, →

   and **less** behavior to **avoid criminal peers** & **avoid substance use.**

⭐ Overall, probation/parole **agents' use of conversational communication** appeared to benefit clients regardless of life stage and gender.

⭐ **Conversational communication** had the strongest positive effects for **emerging adults (ages 18-25)**.

Recommendations for Community Supervision

Our findings have clear implications for the selection and training of supervising agents. **Supervising agents can enhance their effectiveness in influencing positive behavioral outcomes for their clients by using a conversational communication approach (rather than a conformity approach)**. Agents can engage in conversational communication by behaviors such as asking the client's opinion, creating space to discuss emotion, and encouraging the client to consider multiple angles of an issue. One specific way for agents to enact these behaviors is by asking their clients open-

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ended questions, such as "How do you feel about this?" or "Have you considered other ways of thinking about this problem"? By asking open-ended questions and engaging in other behaviors that prioritize the viewpoint of the client, agents may learn information that may help them in their supervisory efforts and that minimizes clients' experiences of reactance.

On the other hand, agents should <u>avoid using a</u> **conformity communication** approach, when possible, as conformity communication involves messages that discourage open communication, for example, by telling clients that agents' opinions are best and that clients should not question them. Though agents do have a duty to enforce the expectations of community supervision, **our research indicates that agents will be more successful in reducing clients' reactance and unwanted behaviors by doing so in a way that allows clients to feel heard and understood (by using a conversational approach).**

Source:

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