Prisoner Reentry and Recidivism According to the Formerly Incarcerated and Reentry Service Providers: A Verbal Behavior Approach

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Abstract

Successful reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals into communities is important because of both the personal and emotional costs to the former offender and the social and financial costs to the community and criminal justice system. Prior research examining reentry success has used structural and psychological explanations for better understanding the processes that contribute to recidivism. Using B.F. Skinner's (1957) Theory of Verbal Behavior as a theoretical foundation, twelve focus groups totaling 128 formerly incarcerated persons and reentry service providers were conducted that explored perspectives of the current reentry system, views on recidivism, and opportunities for improvement. Results indicate that a Verbal Behavior approach enhances the understanding of reentry when examined as a metacontingency with a goal of a particular outcome. Implications for reentry intervention are discussed.

Keywords

Reentry, Incarceration, Recidivism, Development, Theory of Verbal Behavior, Social Disorganization

Over the past three decades, the United States has experienced incarceration rates that have nearly quintupled, with 1,610,584 prisoners currently incarcerated in state and federal prisons (Sabol, West & Cooper, 2009). High rates of incarceration also indicate that the majority of formerly incarcerated individuals will inevitably re-enter communities each year, with estimates indicating that approximately 825,000 people exit prison annually (Glaze & Bonczar, 2009). Improving the fate of those re-entering the community is important, as prisoner reentry is often associated with adverse social outcomes that include poor health and well-being outcomes (Visher & Travis, 2003), work and substance abuse challenges (Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001), and even a greater chance of death for the formerly incarcerated (Binswanger, 2007). Moreover, as Lynch (2006) suggested, "reentry is more than recidivism" (pp.405-406) – to this end, recidivism does not assess how well an individual is doing, how prosocial he/she is, the nature of their relationship with family or service providers or accomplishing particular reintegration goals or objectives.

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Reentry and recidivism is unmistakably a challenge for all involved. While some states such as California suggest recent improvements in recidivism rates (a two year recidivism rate of 54.23% for paroled felons released in 2005) (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, 2008; Zhang, Roberts, & Callanan, 2006), the most recent Bureau of Justice Statistics indicated that 67.5% of United States prisoners released in 1994 were rearrested within 3 years (Langan & Levin, 2002). Due to the sheer volume of incarceration and reentry, as well as indicators that an uncomfortable majority of individuals do not succeed in their attempts at reentry, there is a clear need for examination of the process. This paper discusses the ongoing person – context dynamics of incarceration, reentry and recidivism and the broader context within which these dynamics have evolved for key actors within the reentry process.

However, theory-based, non-traditional examinations of prisoner reentry are needed to better understand potential ingredients for reentry success. With a general behavior analysis approach and a the specific application of B.F. Skinner's Theory of Verbal Behavior (1957) as a theoretical foundation, focus groups were conducted with both formerly incarcerated persons and reentry service providers to examine the factors that influence significant recidivism rates. The objectives of this study were: (a) to describe the perspectives of formerly incarcerated persons and other reentry service providers about reentry issues within communities with high concentrations of probationers and parolees; (b) determine whether the Theory of Verbal Behavior provides an adequate elucidator of how the interlocking verbal behavior paradigm of reentry may be producing many of the reinforced behaviors that lead to recidivism, and (c) to determine the ap-

plied implications for behavior analysis-based prisoner reentry strategies. The results are expected to help inform community-level reentry efforts to make institutions and systems more responsive to the needs of formerly incarcerated individuals and their families. A better understanding of the role of Verbal Behavior in the interrelatedness between person, group, and expected/reinforced behavior can help better construct a verbal wordplay, clearly reinforcing and diminishing the behaviors that lead to recidivism.

SKINNER'S THEORY OF VERBAL BEHAVIOR

One aspect of the larger behavior analysis approach is Skinner's (1957) "verbal behavior." According to Winokur (1976), he describes the process of analyzing verbal behavior as "a verbal analysis of talking" (pg.1). More specifically, Skinner (1957) describes the process of learning and behavior analysis through "talking" as a "behavior reinforced through the mediation of other persons who must be responding in ways which have been conditioned precisely in order to reinforce the behavior of the speaker" (pg. 225). Skinner further contends that the basic premise and tenets of the Theory of Verbal Behavior is fundamentally consistent and applicable to other forms of behavior (Winokur, 1976). Therefore, the analysis of expected behaviors in other forms should be consistent (from a Skinnerian approach) with the process of verbal behavior and is rooted in (verbal) reinforcement.

> *"Verbal behavior is shaped and sustained by a verbal environment – by people who respond to behavior in certain ways because of the practices of the group of which they are members. These practices and the resulting interaction of speaker and listener yield the phenomenon which are considered here under the rubric of verbal behavior" (p. 226).*

According to Winokur (1976), the "significant events" (p. 5) of verbal learning include: a) deprivation, b) stimulus, c) response, d) reinforce and e) contingency – where he presents examples of the verbal behavior phenomena through animals (consistent with traditional Skinner) and human, operant behavior-structured interaction. However for the process of analyzing verbal behavior, Winokur (1976) suggests that an "interlocking verbal behavior paradigm" (p. 13) is what Skinner uses to describe this process specifically for human verbal interaction. Here, it is suggested that within a verbal episode, a contingency is constructed where deprivation leads to a verbal interaction that produces a stimulus, a response, and subsequent resolution to the deprivation reinforces future behaviors. As an advance of this theoretical approach, Glenn (1988; 2004) proposes the idea of "metacontingencies." Whereas contingencies "involve contingent relations between the specific activity of individual organisms and specific environmental events, and each organism's behavior has a unique history" (Glenn, 1988, p. 167), a metacontingency "is the unit of analysis encompassing a cultural practice, in all its variations, and the aggregate outcome of all the current variations" (Glenn, 1988, p. 168). Within the context of this work, the metacontingency (cultural practice) of reentry through the words of reentry service providers and recently incarcerated individuals is examined in order to contemplate the process of deprivation, stimulus, and behavior reinforcement.

PRISONER REENTRY

Disparities in rates of incarceration and recidivism are attributed to a variety of causes, from simple demographic characteristics to more distal environmental and policy factors (Clear, 2007; Pager, 2007; Travis, 2006; Western & Pettit, 2005; Western, 2006, pp.50-51). Racial and ethnic minorities, particularly African-Americans and Latinos, are more likely to come from situations of social and economic disadvantage and more highly represented in the criminal justice system (Cole, 2000; Walker, Spohn & DeLone, 2007). When looking at African American men, Western (2006) found that during the last twenty years disadvantaged men have become less engaged in crime yet more involved than ever in the criminal justice system. Factors include increased use of prison sentencing for crimes, longer sentencing for crimes, and the large increase in incarceration for substance related offenses (p.50). Further, prior research indicates that differential processing within each stage of the criminal justice system exacerbates SES or demographic factors (Crow, 2008; Mitchell, 2005; Schlesinger, 2005).

Appropriately, researchers also indicate that similar types of structural factors that influence racial and ethnic economic disparities also adversely influence prisoner reentry (Clear, 2007; Kubrin & Stewart, 2006). Specifically for African-Americans, racial concentration (Clear, 2007; Sampson & Wilson, 1995) and "concentrated disadvantage" (Anderson, 1999; Wehrman, 2010; Wilson, 1996) are presented as structural barriers to reentry, with similar expectations for Latinos.

RE-ARREST AND RECIDIVISM

Several contemporary theoretical explanations are offered for why returning prisoners often recidivate, including dysfunctional personal attributes and a lack of self-control that is less amenable to change (Austin, 2001; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001), insufficient positive attachment to social groups, institutions and supports (Clear 2005; Kubrin, Squires & Stewart 2007; Marbley & Ferguson, 2005), unsavory tendencies in parole supervision (Aos, Miller & Drake, 2006; Austin, 2001; Latessa & Lowenkamp, 2006), the uniformity and rigidity of the prison experience as a source of institutionalization (Lynch, 2006), and how certain communities burden residents with a stigma, social constraints, territorial confinement and institutional boundaries that foster recidivism through denied opportunities and hyperscrutiny (Wacquant, 2000). Numerous approaches to combating recidivism stress reformation of structural factors (Austin, 2007; Clear, 2005; Jacobson, 2005; Petersilia, 2004), with the contention that diminished community level resources and social supports greatly increase the reentry burden and risk of re-arrest (Kubrin et al., 2007; Silver, 2000; Wikstrom & Loeber, 2000).

This study examined the intersection of individuals within the metacontingency of reentry on a verbal level, what sorts of descriptive stimuli are offered by the reentry service providers, how they are received and responded upon by formerly incarcerated individuals, and what behavior(s) are reinforced that pro-

duce high recidivism rates. Generally, the expectation of "successful" prisoner reentry is not simply desistence from crime (Lynch, 2006; Phillips & Lindsay, 2011). Positive reengagement in society, including housing, self-sustaining education or employment, a healthy peer network and emotional well-being are essential to success. The qualitative, focus-group study design allows for examination of the discourse of the participants acting in the reentry dynamics, with the aim of clarifying potential influences on behavior(s).

METHOD

The data was collected as part of a larger study, the Reentry Reinvestment Project and conducted by the Advancement Project (AP) Los Angeles. The larger study explored prisoner reentry in Los Angeles County, initially using CDCR quantitative data on parolees and probationers on a single date in 2004. Once statistical data was available of how incarceration and reentry was distributed geographically, ethnically, and by gender, it seemed necessary to qualitatively measure potential contributions to reentry trends within the community.

It was necessary to listen to the voices of actual reentry service providers to understand the issues present for those under criminal justice supervision. Further, it was deemed imperative to obtain a range of perspectives in order to minimize potential biases of only hearing from either those on parole and probation. The focus group format allows nuanced and contextual data for explaining complex dynamics in a manner that would be limited through quantitative data analysis. Therefore, researchers used the focus group format to investigate the perspectives of formerly incarcerated individuals, family members, parole officers, and community-based service providers seeking to meet the needs of the reentry population. Permission to use the data and secondary data analysis was granted by the Advancement Project Los Angeles and approved by the authors' University Institutional Review Board.

PARTICIPANTS

This study draws participants from a subsample of the overall sample that included 128 respondents that were divided among 18 focus groups over six months. Most participants (67%) were male and more than 60% were African-American, followed by about 21% Latino. Participants represented all education levels, with about 63% indicated a high school degree as their highest level of education. Seventy-seven percent (77%) of respondents were not working at the time of the focus group discussion. Although most participants were in prison or jail for less than 3 years, almost 20% of respondents were in for 3 or more years.

Convenience sampling was used to construct the overall study subgroups: (a) formerly incarcerated persons (FIPs), (b) family members of formerly incarcerated persons (FM), (c) service providers (SP) and (d) parole officers (PO). The largest proportion of groups included formerly incarcerated persons; followed by parole officers, service providers, and family members. One focus group combined FIPs and family members. This particular study concentrated on the twelve focus groups of formerly incarcerated persons and service providers. Among formerly incarcerated persons, 53 were in services and 15 were out of services at the time of the focus group discussion.

Participant Setting. Participant samples were sought in areas of Los Angeles with the highest concentrations of parolees and probationers, as identified using 2004 data from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and priority regions were identified from the quantitative data in Phase I of the overall study. For the focus groups, regions that had clusters of Census tracts with the highest concentrations of people under criminal justice supervision, identified as being greater than 2 standard deviations above the mean, were selected. Convenience samples within these Census tracts were obtained with the assistance of Los Angeles community-based organizations. Some organizations provided site-based support and coordinated the focus groups, while others were provided with contact information for the investigators so that they could share the information with other programs in their provider social network, potentially leading to additional participants. Interested individuals were invited to voluntarily participate, but no organization made it mandatory for their clients to be involved in the project. While incentives were provided as a token of appreciation for involvement, several individuals and organizations declined, in order to avoid potential perceptions of bias among participants.

MEASURES AND PROCEDURES

A team of three facilitators oversaw all focus group execution, with most groups having one moderator and one assistant moderator serving as a note taker. All facilitators were actively involved in the development of focus group materials, preserving similarity in questioning and probing across groups. Focus groups lasted approximately 1.5 hours.

The focus groups assessed perceptions regarding how to refine current services and opportunities in a manner that can make a meaningful difference for people under criminal justice supervision. The structure of the focus group followed the 6 themes below: (1) motivation and readiness (to leave prison); (2) critical periods (during the transition); (3) challenging and helpful factors (during the transition); (4) visions of success; (5) what can be done (to improve people's chance of a successful transition); (6) social networks and quality of relationships (upon return). Facilitators used focus group guides to steer discussions toward coverage of these topics; however, discussions were allowed to deviate for relevance as necessary.

RESULTS

DATA ANALYSIS

Initially, a deductive approach was used to group and synthesize material based on focus group question themes (e.g., motivation and readiness to leave prison, critical periods during the transition from prison to the community and challenging or helping factors during the transition). Subsequently, an inductive strategy was used to discover emergent themes based solely on the presenting data (e.g., location). The systematic coding procedure was facilitated through *HyperRESEARCH* qualitative analysis software (ResearchWare, 2005). Key steps in the inductive process were: (a) open coding of the original transcribed material based on repeating ideas; (b) grouping repeating ideas into constructs based on conceptual coherence and sensitizing

themes; (c) sorting and reorganization of constructs based on preliminary analysis of the content; (d) developing a code map for constructs and codes for purposes of counts and analyses; (e) frequency counting based on grouped and sorted constructs; and (f) refinement of constructs based on counts and analyses. Subsequent to this round of coding, final coding themes and quotes were reviewed by the research team to establish consensus and face validity.

Respondents not only answered specific questions, but also provided great insight into reentry as an interactive process between personal characteristics and contextual realities. Broad and specific themes emerged from respondents and will be discussed in greater detail.

THE SYSTEM

Respondents consistently cited feeling a "system" was at work at many levels. The criminal justice system was described by all groups as yielding enormous influence through the development and enforcement of policies, and a deliberately reinforced cycle of incarceration, ultimately inhibiting their chance for success. Further, the belief was that certain groups and residents of certain communities were disproportionately impacted. Formerly incarcerated persons and service providers alike felt the criminal justice system was bogged down with problems due to overcrowding. They felt this excess volume allowed inefficiencies to continue at each stage of incarceration and reentry including imprisonment, programming, transition planning, parole support, caseload management and court processes. Some believed their potential for success was being sabotaged, while others felt it was merely how life works. Yet, it was clear that the series of perceived obstacles to successful transition back into the community were major challenges.

Issue 1.1 – A Deliberate System

> *"They want you to go back out and fail. Try to rob somebody and try to hustle. So now they got you back and you're another number you're not a name anymore. You're a number. And that's more percentage of that money from Sacramento; to allocate more money. We'll see you back in here. And they say that! Most of the guards say that. And, they do usually see them back in there. I don't know what the percentage is, but there is a high percentage of repeat offenders. But I think the programs just don't care. We sit around in these one on ones and you're like what's up?" (FIP).*

For many respondents, historical and current trends, such as prisons teeming with minority inmates, ineffective services and communities with heavy law enforcement presence, created the impression that negative conditions were not by accident. Incarceration, scrutiny by the criminal justice system and the negative residual effects of incarceration were perceived as part of a larger effort to stifle, contain and exploit communities of color for profit.

For the formerly incarcerated and service providers, the net impacts were little support within destabilized communities and families, a recipe for perpetuating negative norms and involvement in the criminal justice system.

> *"Which goes back to saying, you know, give a person a chance, you need to start, not just throwing them out with $200 and saying, 'go fend for yourself.' You know, that's basically what it is, and that's why there's such a big return rate." (FIP)*

> *"You know you've sent them out here, there, and everywhere. And we deal with a lot of these clients that come from prison and their main thing is that with the parole office it doesn't really assist them with the jobs that they were going to help them with or with the housing. We say that we don't want them to go back to prison but yet the only place that they have to go to is back home where all the lifestyle is at." (SP)*

Unhealthy conditions and treatment within detention were considered another perceived byproduct of overcrowding and deliberate practices. A female respondent referred to the conditions of incarceration as slave-like and inhumane.

> *"And its f*cked up. And when you finally get to a bed you're so damn tired and the mattress smells like ... you can't forget that you did a crime - you did something to be there. I know in other countries it's probably 1,000 times worse, so we should be grateful for what - that we are in the United States. But we're not animals and I'm a descendant of slaves, I am not a slave. I read those books and they said they were back to back to back, and the toilets..." (FIP)*

Issue 1.2 – A For-Profit System

It was also clear that respondents sensed the financial implications of working for low wages while still imprisoned. Prisoners did not share in the profits of their production output, but they understood the profit value for employing companies. They extrapolated from this the degree that those under the criminal justice system are a financial commodity.

> *"They get me in a t-shirt factory. I'm making 200 t-shirts a day… 100% cotton. They sell the t-shirts to a company for $10 a t-shirt; I make 20 cents an hour. I make 200 t-shirts a day. You notice what they make on me a day? …They giving me $2. And then they want 30% of that? Forty percent of that? I ain't even making $2." (FIP)*

> *"I mean, they keep working you, anywhere you go. You stay in the prison and they work you. You make shoes, you make pants, you make hats and they sell the stuff for fifteen, twenty dollars. This system is not going [to work]... it's not designed to work." (FIP)*

LOCATION

Respondents were quick to highlight the role that location played in their lives. Location was important because of both its influence on how individuals obtained their offense charge and because of its influence on their likelihood for success upon release. Continuing from the belief that simply being from a certain neighborhood or from a certain ethnicity influenced their chances of being arrested, respondents also highlighted the enormous challenge it can be to get on one's feet when released

back into certain *communities with minimal resources*. Even when engaged in services, location was described as a burden.

Issue 2.1 – In a Disadvantaged Community with Minimal Resources

> *"They'll put them right in the heart of the ghetto. Speaker: You have to go to any homeless shelter that's available. And most of them are in bad areas." (FIP)*

> *"A lot of these [drug rehabilitation programs] are mainly in the areas of that are infested with crime, gangs and parolees. Drugs right downtown. You know. And stuff like that. And sometimes you have to go back to that way you came from. If you got busted there, you're going back there. You know, it's kind of hard to get transferred somewhere else. They don't want you." (FIP)*

Being released to a disadvantaged community with little money or connection to gainful employment or housing was considered one of the most powerful forms of sabotage for returning individuals. It was seen as a "set-up" to return to *old behaviors* such as illicit income generation or substance use to cope with reentry related stressors.

Issue 2.2 – Old Detrimental Behaviors versus a Fresh Start

> *"I got [out] with just $100.00. By the time I made it to [my city], I think I had about a little under $30.00 bucks. I was debating, should I purchase something to eat or should I call my father up. He would have been upset. So by twelve o'clock I ran into my son-in-law, on drugs. First thing he tried to do, I'm not even in [town] like three hours, and he's trying to give me a handful of drugs. 'Here man, you ready to make some money?" (FIP)*

> *"Most criminals are drug addicts. 80% - 80% of criminals are drugs addicts. Most of people are in for non-violent crimes, all to do with some type of drugs. So if a person gets out of prison with nowhere to go, no finances, no anything, and he can't get anything going for himself, you know, within the first month when he gets out, 9 out of 10 times they're going to go back to criminal activity to support himself. You got to eat. Regardless, you have to eat to live." (FIP)*

But, not everyone felt that simply being there meant that you had to succumb to opportunities to engage in high risk behaviors; often activities that were a pre-incarceration norm. Some felt that ultimately the individual was stronger than the environment.

> *"You still could stay focused up in that environment. I don't see why it should be a problem for you to have to say, well now I'm off parole and I'm going to hang in the neighborhood. I'm just going to go on back and start kicking it with the homies? Instead of standing here with the homies, I can live here, but I ain't got to deal with them." (FIP)*

The consensus among formerly incarcerated persons and service providers alike was that in additional to personal fortitude, additional strategies for avoiding recidivism included physically moving to a new, and more positive, environment.

Issue 2.3 – Cost of a Better Environment

> *"Put them right in the ghetto; right in the projects; right downtown. You have to try to move them out of that neighborhood. Put them in the element where they can be successful. They are going to float. Not maybe swim but float. They're not going to sink." (FIP)*

> *"If you think about having a neighborhood where it's predominately people who have been in prison, come out of prison, it's not a choice. It's the only place they can live coming from prison." (SP)*

> *"I changed my surroundings you know. I didn't go into my old neighborhood. My mom did have a home. She had the kids over there. I went over there to visit Mom and the kids. I leave there, I go home. I didn't go around, you know, showing everybody in the neighborhood this and that. I didn't do none of that. And slowly but surely, little stuff that I wasn't supposed to be doing, you know, that went away." (FIP)*

EMPLOYMENT

Respondents, including the formerly incarcerated and service providers, cited the importance of employment for very practical reasons –making money and self-sufficiency. But respondents also included the socio-emotional aspect of working. Working was believed to instill a degree of pride and satisfaction in the task itself. More importantly it was believed to foster a connectedness to society as a whole. Gainful employment was widely considered out of reach for formerly incarcerated persons. They highlighted many obstacles to getting a job, with the most obvious being an *unwillingness to hire the formerly incarcerated.*

Issue 3.1 –"Who's Gonna Hire a Felon?"

> *"They've got nothing to look forward to they're just saying: "How can I make it today? What can I do? Hope I don't get busted." And there's nothing really like that. And I've had this, they say: "Call these numbers and they'll hire parolees." They'll hang up on you! That's right; they don't know nothing about it. "These jobs will hire parolees." Wal-mart might, but that's the only store that will." (SP)*

> *"When I first got out I went to Wal-Mart because my parole officer had given me this paper that told me Wal-Mart hires felons. So I go there and I know that I can't do no cash register. I go there and I'm like "Can I just box stuff?" and they said 'No.'" (FIP)*

Respondents also discussed that the *job skills acquired in prison were often inconsistent with needed skill-sets* in the community, even within the same field or trade. But, more importantly the opportunities to learn relevant job skills during incarceration were considered minimal. Respondents also felt that outside of actual skill-sets, many incarcerated individuals needed substantial coaching about the soft-skills of obtaining a job and staying in the workplace (e.g., appearance, demeanor and interviewing).

Issue 3.2 – Putting Skills to Use

> *"As far as being prepared I don't feel like they sent me out with anything. And it's like I did 6 whole years and I took 2 vocational classes and stuff but it's like that don't count. You got these little certificates but ... it's like meaningless. You feel good about yourself in there. You acquire some skills and stuff or whatever." (FIP)*

> *"When I went through the prison system up north I went to a fire camp. I went to a fire camp for a year and a half fighting fires on the hill right next to the fire department. But yet and still when you get out and I go to apply for the fireman job or U.S. Forestry job if you're a felon, you're frowned upon. Because you are a felon you might get put in this stack instead of this one." (FIP)*

REENTRY TRANSITIONING

The ability to obtain meaningful employment was repeatedly linked directly to the need for a strong transition plan while still incarcerated. Respondents felt strongly that the foundation of reentry success or failure was closely linked to reentry transition; described as three related but distinct phases, (a) pre-release dynamics, (b) adjusting to the community after release (i.e., negotiating the minefield), and (c) the nature of programs and services available or not after release.

Issue 4.1 – Pre-Release Dynamics

From respondent's stories, it was clear that experiences prior to release were not universal; except for the unpredictability and often volatile nature of prison life. Level of preparation and pre-release support varied. Both the formerly incarcerated and service providers highlighted these challenges.

> *"In prison when you get down to 2 weeks they go on this thing we call pre-release. To me it's kind of messed up for some people. Everybody does it different; but the last week we had nothing to do. There's no more work; no more school; no nothing. You just walk around the yard, just dumb. You don't know what to do, but then you get in trouble." (FIP)*

> *"And then when they get out they can't get the jobs. They can't get all of these things that they need. That's why I think a lot of it starts even before they get out. I'd like to see a very good assessment done; which would include not only emotional life but also how they were brought up, education, etc." (SP)*

Discussion of transition stages and the importance of successful integration back into society supported prior reentry literature (London & Myers 2006). Many felt unprepared and overwhelmed without proper transition planning or assistance. A case manager to assist throughout the process was heavily discussed. Those with strong transition plans described the enormous benefits of planning.

Issue 4.2 – Adjusting to the Community: Negotiating the Minefield

> *"You've got waiting lists. You have things you have to do. So I'd either slept on the street or the mission for about 2 weeks, downtown before I could get in here." (FIP)*

> *"A case manager, I think, to help them and deal with all that paperwork and stuff just before you have to get into places. I never knew those things existed. There are all kinds of resources that we have no idea of knowing. And they are educating in those areas that can help us. We call hotlines, you know; look in the Yellow Pages for help. But it's... they're limited. But if you have someone that's educated that's going to be willing to take you on and show you the way, I think would help." (FIP)*

Issue 4.3 – Programs and Services

> *"You teach them how to dress. Teach them how to - you've got to re-manicure them all over again. You know what I mean? So they can go out… If you've been in the penitentiary and you're female what are you going to do once you get out? They say "go on a job". You don't even have a suit or a dress to go on a job." (SP)*

> *"We just try to build them up; their self esteem. Most of the people that come in here have very low self-esteem. They feel like they can't change or, you know, no way out of the lifestyle that they've been [in]." (SP)*

One formerly incarcerated person reflected on the blows to esteem.

> *"When you're inside, you get broken down immediately. Don't look at me. Walk this way, walk this line. Speaker: It dehumanizes you. Speaker: Yeah, if you're going to break me down for as long as you're going to break me down then keep me locked up. I can't even get outside and play but only a little bit. And then you're going to send me right out and expect me to succeed? With no help." (FIP)*

Another service provider reflected on this dynamic, where outside service providers are dealing with basic need issues, but also the psychological toll often taken on the formerly incarcerated.

> *"We try to get them to elevate beyond a learned behavior and mentality that they have and not only do we do it in the groups and the lectures that we have we bring in outside people in as an example that they can elevate beyond that level." (SP)*

Program quality was a major concern in the literature, among parolees and with service providers. Parolees felt service quality hinged on approach, comprehensiveness and comfort with the advocate. Service providers were concerned about whether services were actually carried out and if parolees received the proper help they needed.

> *"Even in some of the places that have gotten funding to assist them it doesn't appear that it's really about the client when they get to these places. It's more about the places that have the resources keeping their facility running rather than treating the needs of the client when he comes here. Some of these people coming out of the penitentiary you have to look at why they went: drug and alcohol related crimes, lack of education and lack of resources." (SP)*

MENTAL HEALTH

Beyond the practical importance of solid transition planning when returning to the community, was the potential to influence a person's emotional adjustment. A distinction was made between helping to cope and addressing a diagnosed mental health problem. Literature often focuses on improving access to mental health services during reentry for purposes of addressing a diagnosable mental health problem (Visher & Travis, 2003). Our respondents shared how they experienced an array of emotions in their transition from prison. Some were ready, some were extremely fearful, and some were in a relative emotional no-[wo]man's land. When individuals were at an emotional fork-in-the-road, some described turning toward spiritual guidance. But, a common sentiment shared by many was that the entire process took its toll emotionally. Changes in everyday society, family and children, a job, housing, and prior reentry failures, were some of the issues presented as emotionally taxing. They suggested it would have been a helpful to have someone available to help them process these feelings and not necessarily with medication.

> *"I been there 13 years, they never told me nothing about the streets; nothing about living. Or, [if] you're a little stressed out.. 'my daddy died, my mom died.' [Doctor:] 'Oh, you don't feel so… you're down… here just take these with some water.' You get used to taking pills every day." (FIP)*

> *"When I came home - the baby that I had when I was in prison - he was 2 years old. Walking and talking. "Who the hell is you?" And it was just a trip because the baby had no idea I was his mother. No idea and it was hurtful." (FIP)*

A clear dichotomy in emotional well-being was apparent between those that received assistance with transitional planning (i.e., by a community-based program or family), and those that did not. Individuals with planning in place, usually housing and a job, or residential treatment, expressed more positive emotions about their release.

> *"I was in that situation where I came home to my family, they were there, my job was secure, so right there I had a positive thing, you know, that was for me, so I was blessed with that." (FIP)*

> *"I was enthused about getting out because I knew I had somewhere to go that would help me to save my life." (FIP)*

Not everyone was disconnected from resources due to lack of support. Some had support and didn't take advantage of it due to their own resistance. It became apparent that some individuals lacked trust and were resistant to authority or those that symbolized extensions of the criminal justice system.

SURVIVAL FOR THE FORMERLY INCARCERATED

Formerly incarcerated persons described being in a system that appeared stacked against them, where everywhere they turned it seemed like they couldn't get the help they needed. The result was feeling they did not have the opportunity to improve their lot in life. The sentiment was that all hope can seem lost. Many felt frustrated, rejected, targeted, and like they were backed against a wall. Some acknowledged that indeed there were career "hustlers" and criminals that believe that mainstream and legal work was too much to adapt to, or not worthwhile. Akin, to Moffitt's life-course persistent offenders, these individuals were the ones that made a personal choice to continue their risky behaviors.

But, most formerly incarcerated persons felt that after being rejected repeatedly and having little legitimate resources to work with, survival instincts kicked in. They described that in these instances old habits become more attractive, and people often resorted to any means necessary to generate income and support themselves and possibly their family. The formerly incarcerated were aware of the risks taken and knew that illegal behaviors significantly increased their chance of violating parole and landing back in prison. They were also painfully aware that for many, the cycle in and out of prison was the norm. System-induced survival was both cause and effect for respondents and the relationships were all too clear to them.

CROSS-CUTTING THEME: THE PAROLE OFFICER

The parole officer surfaced throughout all focus groups as the most prominent key to success or failure for those that did not have a family to turn to upon release. The parole officer was cited as dictating the ability to access resources, instigating violations, being antagonistic, but also as understanding, generous, and willing to go beyond what was necessary. The parole officer was viewed as having enormous discretion on prospects for success. Respondents were most frustrated at what was believed to be a general absence of the parole officer during the critical reentry period. They believed that the parole officer could be more active as a case manager and do more to link individuals with services. Further, they felt that too often parole officers would promise resources and then never deliver. A handful of the more than 100 individuals in our focus groups expressed positive experiences with their parole officer. This handful of respondents spoke of caring and invested parole officers willing to provide support throughout their successful transition.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the deprivation, stimulus, response, and reinforcement within the metacontingency of reentry. First according to Skinner (1957), an echoic verbal operant process is the paradigm taking place within this metacontingency, where "the speaker's verbal behavior... produces the stimulus" (Winokur, 1976, p. 84). Within the basic principles of reentry, reentry service providers provide the verbal expectations to the recently incarcerated individuals (e.g. finding employment and housing, limitations on social interactions) and explain the consequences of not adhering to the behavior(s). Holding a basic assumption that recently incarcerated individuals hold the goal of succeeding with their reentry, they would hold a behavioral preference for meeting the terms of their parole (the reinforced behavior) compared to recidivating (the alternative behavior).

Through analysis of the focus groups, several significant themes emerged. Both formerly incarcerated persons and reentry service providers suggested that many obstacles begin well before the actual release date and extend far beyond it. Reentry providers shared many of the sentiments of the formerly incar-

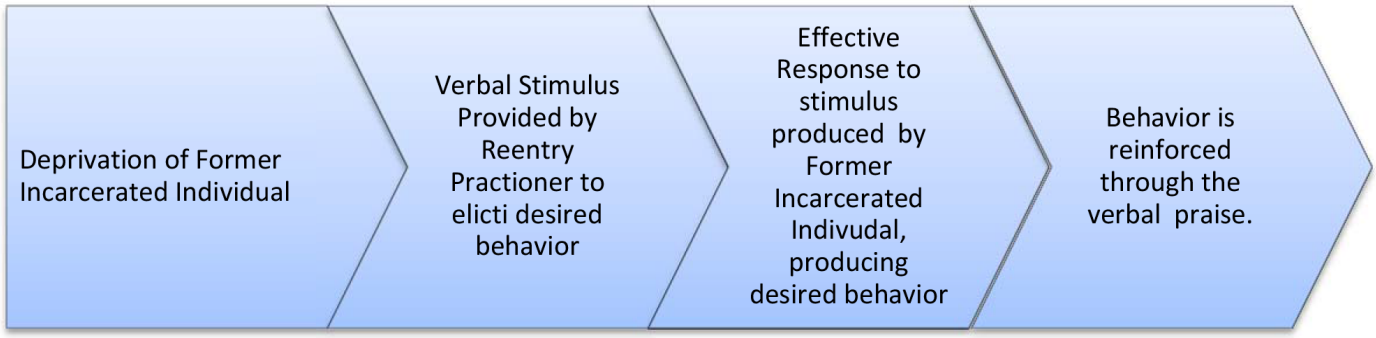

Figure 1. Theoretical Metacontingency Reentry Model Using Theory of Verbal Behavior

cerated, particularly the challenging obstacles they face. Both groups additionally agreed on core themes about the overall system, the impact of geography, employment challenges and the perils of the transition process, but service providers offered more in depth narrative when discussing actual service delivery after discharge. Results of the focus group discourse echoed prior research emphasizing the pressures of denied supports and opportunities within the community (Kubrin et al., 2007; Silver, 2000; Wikstrom & Loeber, 2000).

CHALLENGES, CONSTRAINTS, AND VERBAL BEHAVIOR

The articulated challenges for formerly incarcerated individuals, echoed by service providers, were a system of persistent and oppressive structures operating before, during and after discharge. Geography exacerbated inefficiencies in this system, due to disadvantage and minimal resources, increased chances of arrest, and inhibited chances for a fresh start upon discharge. Indications of difficult transitioning into the community, including lack of preparation beforehand, necessary decision-making and relationship re-engagement at time of discharge, and poor linkages to community resources are consistent with prior findings (Hanrahan, Gibbs & Zimmerman, 2005; Visher & Travis, 2003). Within these reentry environments, both the formerly incarcerated and service providers described resistance from employers to hire individuals with a criminal record; consistent with prior literature (Fahey, Roberts & Engel, 2006; Graffam et al., 2008; Holzer, Raphael & Stoll, 2003). The importance of prerelease employment training on perceived employability of formerly incarcerated persons has been documented (Graffam et al., 2008) as has the potential value of other strategies like using labor market intermediaries and providing comprehensive lists of strengths/assets to combat employer aversion to hiring formerly incarcerated individuals (Fahey, Roberts & Engel, 2006; Holzer, Raphael & Stoll, 2003). Formerly incarcerated individuals distinguished experiences of negative emotional stress from experiences of instability due to having a mental health disorder. Emotional well-being was linked to the pressures of finding housing, securing employment, and accessing needed services while also avoiding risky behaviors. Often, unsuccessful negotiation of the above obstacles left a feeling of hopelessness that prompted a "survival mode" or a "by any means necessary" approach to security, food, and shelter. Lastly, formerly incarcerated offenders described parole officers as an omnipresent force that was often more of a barrier than a resource for success.

When examining the challenges and constraints of reentry from the lens of "verbal behavior", additionally significant themes emerge. Referring back Skinner's (1957) components of verbal behavior and Glenn's (1988, 2004) conceptualization of "metacontigencies", the function of reentry should ideally demonstrate a deprivation, stimulus, response, and reinforcer that produces the operate behavior of parole-based compliance. Using this ideological, verbal-behavior model of reentry, the deprivation is represented by the former incarcerated individual's lack of abundant opportunities towards social appeasement. Next, it becomes the reentry practitioner's responsibility to inform them of the expected behaviors to be produced, acting as a stimulus for the formerly incarcerated individual to arrive at the expected behavior. The communicated stimulus elicits a response from the formerly incarcerated individual that in turn produces a behavior that will be reinforced.

In this theoretical model, the metacontingency of reentry can produce a verbal behavior operant where an individual either produces a positively reinforced behavior upon complying with the verbal descriptive(s) of the reentry practitioner or can be negatively reinforced behavior when defying the verbal

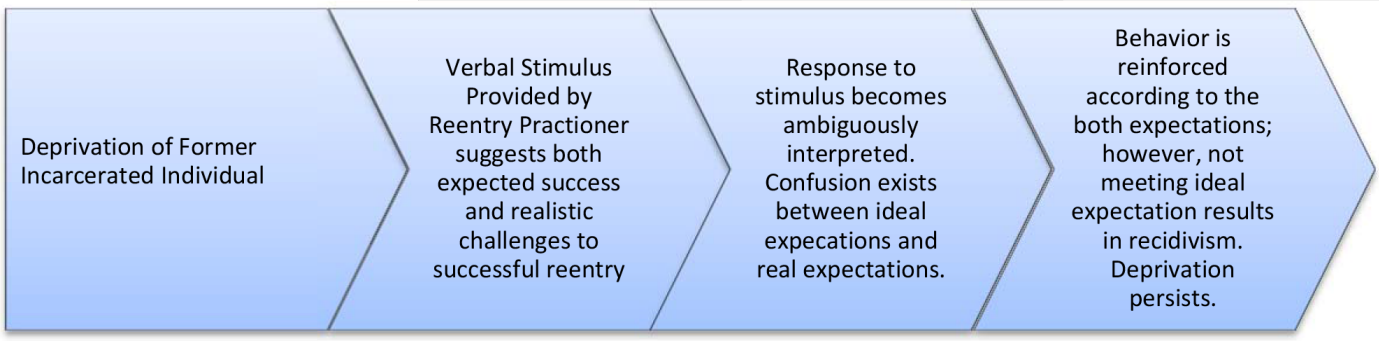

Figure 2. Metacontingency Reentry Model Using Theory of Verbal Behavior from Focus Groups

descriptive(s). However, based on the analysis of the data provided by the reentry service providers, the praxis of the model seemingly produces behavior-based challenges for both reinforcement and the lessening of deprivation. As indicated in the discussion of group discourse, both the formerly incarcerated individuals and the reentry service providers indicated numerous social challenges that both groups face individually and collaboratively. Not only does the deprivation internally apply for formerly incarcerated individuals (as indicated in the theoretical reentry metacontingency), but also for the ability of reentry service providers to elicit the desired behavior. As a result, the verbal stimulus produces (as indicated in the results) mixed messages by reentry service providers. On the one hand, they are fundamentally expected to be encouraging, uplifting service providers that want and expect the best for their clients. They provide clear verbal explanations of the state's expectations for successful parole/reentry and provide basic guidance on how to achieve the desired operant behavior. On the other hand, they know that the realistic process of successful reentry for formerly incarcerated individuals is a socially formidable task, with limited resources and a skeptical, unforgiving public. If they at all provide verbal communication to their clients regarding these realistic challenges, then the result is an unclear and contradictory stimulus. Subsequently, an unclear, contradictory verbal stimulus inevitably produces an unpredictable result and a reinforcement that becomes consistent with the formerly incarcerated individual's particular metacontingency and verbal behavior.

For example, verbal responses from the reentry service providers such as "We say that we don't want them to go back to prison but yet the only place that they have to go to is back home where all the lifestyle is at", or "If you think about having a neighborhood where it's predominately people who have been in prison, come out of prison, it's not a choice. It's the only place they can live coming from prison" indicate that there is a verbal disconnect between the expected behavior and the real-world perceived behavior. As a result, the operant-based response becomes arbitrary and therefore produces inconsistent responses that are reinforced to the contingency rather than the metacontingency. Although this research model did not measure their verbal behavior directly within the metacontingency, the researchers believe the conversations were neither "taboo" nor non-generalizable beyond the focus groups. Ultimately, even the best-intentioned reentry service provider is reinforcing verbal behaviors between the mixed verbal messages of idealistic success and realistic failure.

IMPLICATIONS

Several practice implications exist that can help reentry service providers work to improve reentry success for formerly incarcerated persons and families. One practice implication would be to provide training and/or guidance to reentry service providers and their departments on the effects of contradictory or ambiguous verbal messaging on expected behavior outcomes. A thorough, practical explanation of Skinner's (1957) theory of verbal behavior, as well as the increased potential for recidivism based on poor, inconsistent verbal communication would presumably improve the overall metacontingency. In addition, it would allow for careful communication that presents both the expectations and challenges to a recently incarcerated individual, while remaining rooted in the reinforcement of positive behaviors and the goal of a successful completion. Finally, the verbal behavior training can be extended to the family and other parties invested in the success of the recently incarcerated individual.

Additionally, a "reentry coalition" could position itself to transcend individual reentry specific networks augmenting the metacontingency. More specifically, a "reentry coalition" would strengthen the consistency of verbal behavior administered by the reentry service providers by increasing available system level supports and opportunities and promoting consistent verbal behaviors by minimizing contradictory intentions, behaviors and contexts.

Future research can employ quantitative models to better understand the potential integration of the Theory of Verbal Behavior within a framework of reentry. When including the elements of verbal behavior, assessing the interrelatedness of discussed constructs like self-efficacy, norms, attitudes and criminal behavior could additionally be explored in a more robust manner. An additional element of future research could be to conduct field research (e.g. "ride-alongs") to qualitatively document and code the verbal behavior model interaction between reentry service providers and recently incarcerated individuals. Rather than capturing their impressions within a focus group and generalizing the verbal behavior to the metacontingency, field research would allow for capturing the straightforward verbal behavior.

The primary shortcoming of this methodological approach was obtaining data through a convenience sample. Although the respondents were not perceived to be a unique sample, the possibility existed that there were characteristics unknown to the researchers that influenced the respondents. Further, recommendations are offered with an understanding that modifications would be necessary to address unique contextual issues. Implementation of recommendations must be practical and feasible to specific systems and communities (Jacobson, 2005).

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