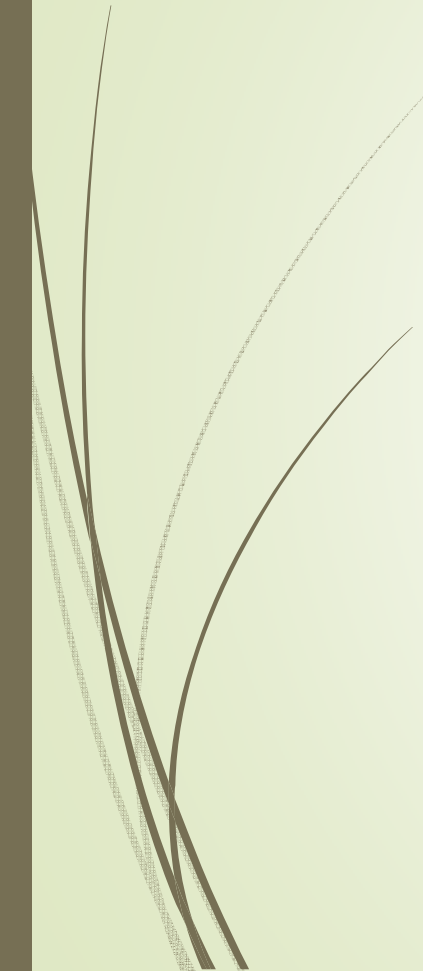Smart supervision of women offenders – a research team partnership with the Michigan Dept. of Corrections

a presentation for the 2016 Smart Suite Research Practitioner Fellows Academy

A study of 402 women on probation and parole, 2011 to the present

Funding for the 6 years of qualitative and quantitative research, extensive cooperation of MDOC

Team of Investigators

Merry Morash, Ph.D

Professor of Criminal Justice

Expertise:
Women Offenders
Gender & Crime
Mixture of Qualitative &
Quantitative Methods

Jennifer Cobbina, Ph.D

Assistant Professor
of Criminal Justice

Expertise:
Incarcerated Women
and Female Parolees,
Qualitative Research

Sandi Smith, Ph.D

Professor of Communication
Director of the Health and
Risk Communication Center

Expertise:
Interpersonal Communication
and Persuasion

Deborah Kashy, Ph.D

Professor of
Psychology

Expertise:
Research Methods & Quantitative
Analysis, Multilevel Modeling
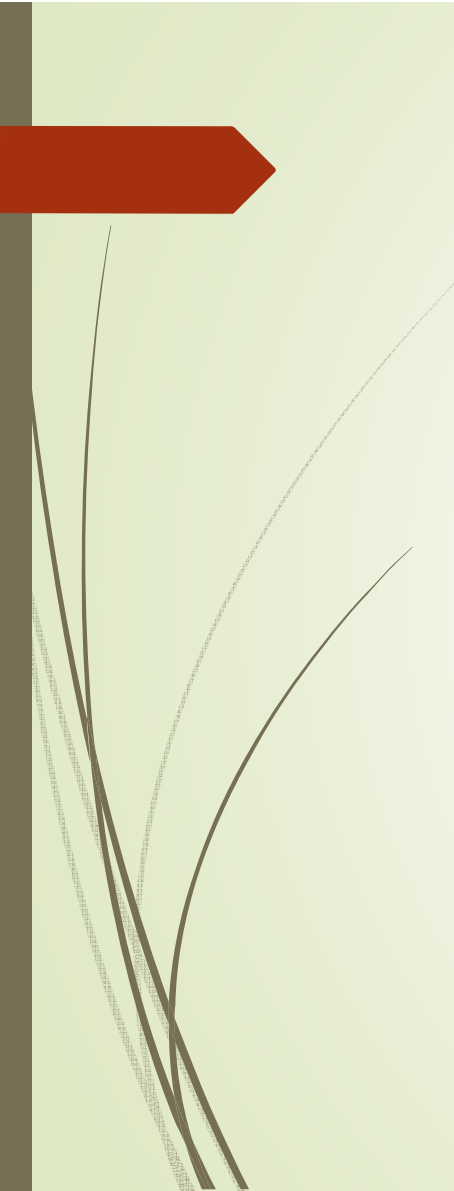
Elements of the partnership

The Context: STRUCTURE OF PROBATION AND PAROLE FOR FELONIES; GENDER SPECIFIC CASELOADS; WORKING TOGETHER FOR 5 YEARS; HISTORY OF MSU-MDOC COLLABORATION

- Research team developed key research ideas, obtained MDOC promise of support, and obtained funding for the research

- MDOC research division and central management team authorized the study and enabled field agents and their supervisors to participate; provides ongoing support in the form of data and help finding women

- Research team provides information to supervisors and management team as it is developed

- Presentation to MDOC management team, their interest in using findings and materials in their training.

- Potential for assessment of training outcomes.

Structure of the talk – cooperation and challenges in research and utility of findings

- Brief overview of the research
- Findings from part 1 – Unique needs of women offenders

  Agent communication style and women's responses

  Communication style and relationship style

  Memorable messages from agents to women

  Supportive communication
- Findings from part II Women's identity development and desistance
- Information sources re: the study

ASK QUESTIONS   PROVIDE INSIGHTS   ENGAGE IN DISCUSSION

Goal: go beyond knowledge from other people's research – build on current MDOC practice so findings are useful (fit)

- **Assess** needs that are related to recidivism and for the high risk women, address them through supervision. (Compass, WRNA, RNR model, LSI, gender responsive)
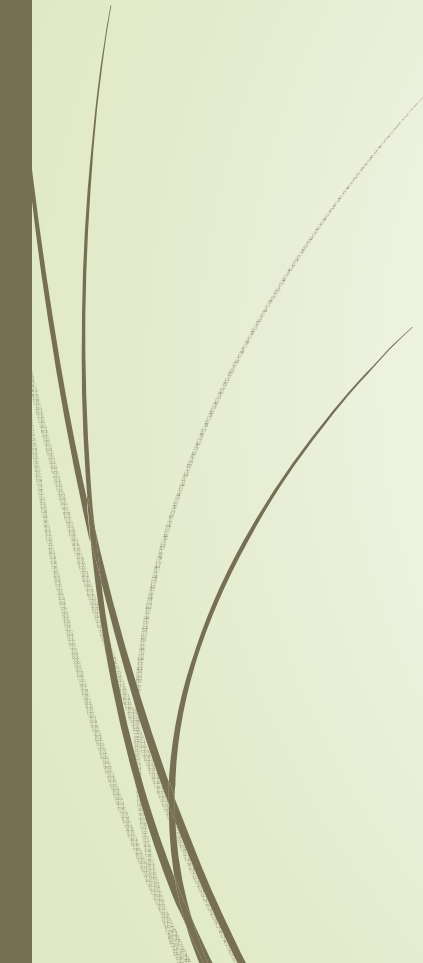
- **Focus only on the needs that predict recidivism**

   OR

   include the **needs that are relevant to women,** their crime, and agent concerns (**the working alliance**)

- Develop a **supportive relationship** that involves trust, fairness, caring; avoid a punitive ("tough") relationship

Two 3 YEAR STUDIES over 6 years

- STUDY 1: What does communication from the supervising agent have to do with outcomes? Other explanations of outcomes?

- STUDY 2: How is a woman's identity development related to her outcomes?

Points of data collection

- Initial data from each of 73 Michigan agents
- 3 months after the start of supervision, the initial interview with 402 women
- 3 months later interview and survey of woman and agent; and 6 months later interview with women(N=379)
- About 2 years pass –

Another interview with all women (300 Plus)

Reassess key needs and risks and strengths for all

Identity development questions for 120 women with most serious prior criminal histories

A year later, another final interview.

Our methods

- A combination of data types -- qualitative and quantitative
- A combination of data sources – supervising agents, records of violations for 18 months, official MSP criminal history and recidivism, in-depth interviews with the women in person and on the phone, in the community, in prisons/treatment/jails
  - Study 1: T1, T2, T3 Retained 379
  - Study 2: T4 (phone – retained more than 75%), T5 (life history in person for highest risk women – 80% plus), T6 (phone – ongoing)

CHALLENGES: retention of women and their agents

TREMENDOUS AMOUNT OF QUALITATIVE DATA USEFUL IN TRAINING-- women explain their needs, how they cope with living in a high-crime area, transportation problems, communication from the agent and what they thought of it, and who they are (identity)

Who are the women?

¾ probation, ¼ parole; substance-involved

- Race/Ethnicity

  49% white, 36.6% black; 11% multiple racial group memberships. Many reported being Hispanic

  - Urban , suburban, rural mix

- Risk of Recidivism (WRNA): 22% Low, 49% Medium, 29% High

- 85% annual income under $10,000

- Almost all women who feel they need alcohol or drug treatment receive it; same with mental health treatment; since Affordable Care Act, some with medical treatment

- High proportions of women not receiving education/training programs, cash assistance, housing assistance but feel they need it

WRNA assessed need

Type of Need	% and N
Education	17.9% (72)
Employment/Financial	75.6% (304)
Safe Housing	9.2% (37)
Mental Illness	54.0% (217)
Child Abuse	52.7% (212)
Adult Abuse	55.2% (222)
Substance Abuse History	54.0% (217)
Substance Abuse Current	16.4% (66)
Total N	402

Questions about what data we have and how we obtained it? How we found the women? Why they let us interview them? How the Michigan Dept. of Corrections supported the study?

Study 1
Unique needs of women

New Knowledge

Study 1   Communication

What is communication and what did we want to know about it?

- How do **conversation and conformity conversational communication style** affect women?

- How are **communication and relationship style** (supportive vs. punitive) related to each other? Does a supportive relationship style matter?

- What **memorable messages** do women offenders remember and find helpful?

- What constitutes **supportive communication** in the probation/parole context?

Finding 1 from Study 1

communication style

Communication style

- Conversational Style

    – encourages open communication on a variety of topics

- Conformity Style

    – reflects obedience to authority

Items to reflect a conversational vs. conformity communication style

- Conversational

When I talk with (Client Name Here), we often talk about things where she and I disagree.

I frequently ask (Client Name Here) her opinions when we are talking

- Conformity

Sometimes I say to (Client Name Here) something like, "my ideas are right and you should not question them."

Sometimes it is necessary to tell (Client Name Here) something like, "a person under supervision should not argue with the PO or the judge."

Possible short-term effects of communication style

- Self-efficacy

  the belief in being able to achieve one's personal desired outcomes (In this case, avoid drug use)
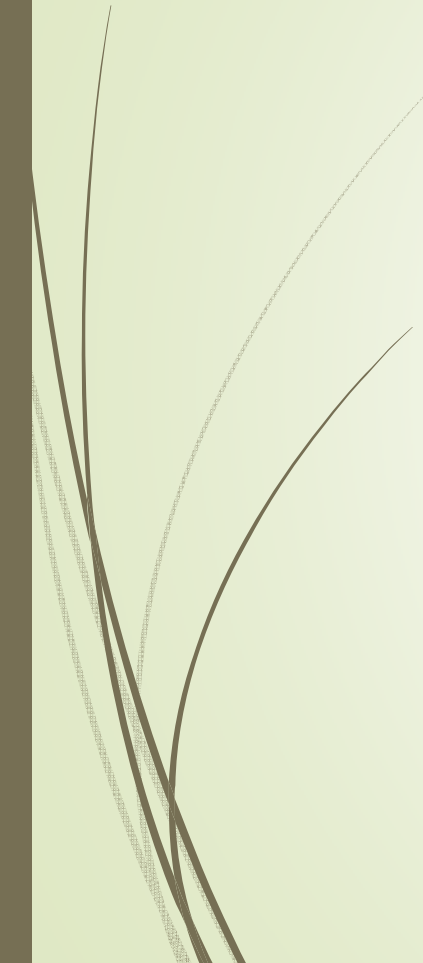
- Reactance

  perception that being able to think, feel, or act freely in the way that one desires is being threatened.

- Restoration

  acting to counteract threats to freedoms (doing the opposite of what told to do)

Effects of communication style on indicators of continued substance use

- Conversational style → higher self-efficacy to avoid drug use + lower reactance → lower self-reported substance use and fewer violations (18 months)

- Conformity communication → lower self-efficacy to avoid drug use + increased reactance → higher self-reported use and more violations (18 months)

Examples of reactance and self-efficacy

21

Reactance "I get very irritated whey my PO tells me what I must or must not do;" "Often I lose enthusiasm for doing something just because my PO expects me to do it."

Self-efficacy to avoid a criminal lifestyle "Talking with my PO makes me more certain that I can avoid people and situations that trigger my drug or heavy alcohol use."

An example of reactance and restoration

Interviewer: So, what did your PO have to say….

Participant: She says that basically she'll lock me up. They do have a place in [state prison]. I told her I'd never been there. She said "Well, keep it up, you'll go." Basically because she said, you know, "Using is against the law. You're breaking the law when you use … buy crack, smoke crack. And if you keep dropping dirty, you go on to prison. No. If you abscond, don't come in, I'm sending you to prison."

Interviewer: Okay, so did it make things better for you?
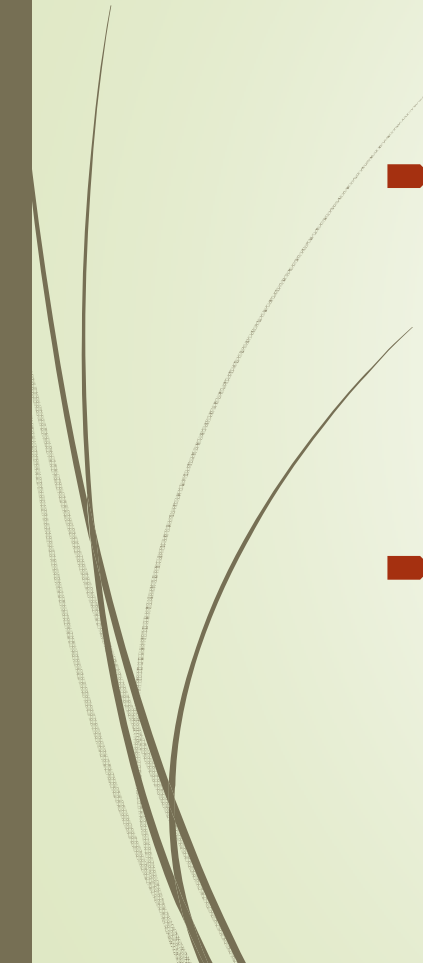
Participant: Got high.

Ways to reduce reactance -- based on communication research

- identifying and stating some similarities between POs and offenders (e.g., both are single parents)

- ending the conversation by stating that offender still has the freedom to choose her actions (motivational interviewing)

- forewarn the offender that what she is about to hear may seem to restrict the offender's freedom s, but there are reasons not to ignore the message

- testimonials, narrative messages, and humor – distraction from irritation (cognitively busy)

Practical application –Fit of MDOC initiatives and utility of findings
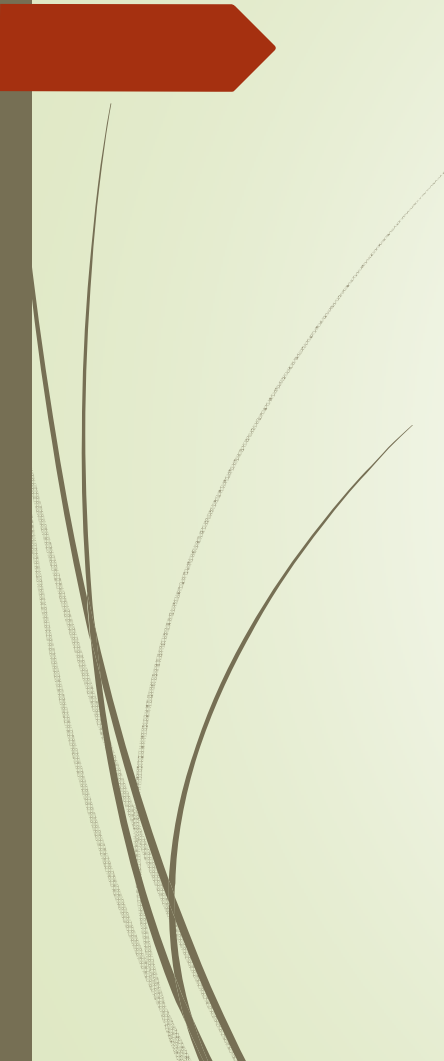
- Using a conversational communication style in which you supply offenders with information, referrals, and support may increase offenders' self-efficacy to avoid drugs and decrease reactance and drug and alcohol use and violations.

- Using a conformity community style by using orders and threats may lower self-efficacy to avoid drugs and alcohol and increase violations.

Finding 2 from Study 1

the contribution of communication style to the nature of the agent-client relationship

Items to reflect supportive vs. punitive relationship style

- Supportive

I want [client] to feel free to discuss the things that worry her

I really care about her concerns

I encourage her to work together with me

- Punitive

I feel it is sometimes necessary to punish [client]

[Client] feels I make unreasonable demands on her

Sometimes it is not possible to talk to [client] without talking down to her

Which type of relationship?

"She is a real likable personality like a regular person who really cares about me. She's not a goody goody either. My present PO is really concerned and nice - but still very stern and firm - really good! In the past they have been harsh and cold, and there has been no follow up. When I was in jail or treatment [past POs] were glad I was out of their hair for a while and were impossible to reach."

Effect of communication style on relationships between agent and client

Communication

- Conversational style that encourages open communication on a variety of topics
- **Talk about needs women identifies**
- Conformity style that reflects obedience to authority

Relationship

- Supportive (trust, fair, caring)

- Punitiveness (tough)

Does not hold for women with most serious criminal histories (agents and women agree)
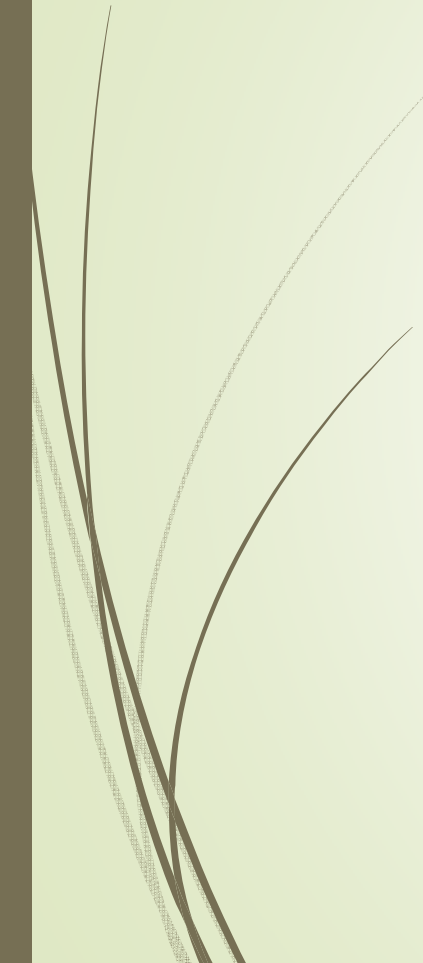
Talk about needs the woman identifies

supportive, fair, caring

Extensive criminal history: Why does this not hold? more cynical? antagonistic to supervision?

How to package complex findings so they are useful

- Women **low** in **Antisocial Attitudes, Antisocial Friends, Anger/Hostility**, and **Depression/Anxiety** at the start of supervision had higher reactance and lower self efficacy to avoid crime when their agents used a punitive style of relationship

- Women **high** in these characteristics had lower reactance and higher self efficacy when their agents used a supportive style.

Finding 3 from Study 1

memorable messages

Memorable messages

- Verbal messages remembered for extremely long periods of time and which people perceive as a major influence on the course of their lives

- Precisely recall message word-for-word

- Memorable messages are one key in the self-assessment of personal behavior that exceeds or falls below personal standards, and therefore they can stimulate behavior change

My memorable message, your memorable message, a client's memorable message

This message comes to mind when:

She does something of which she is proud

She avoids doing something she would later regret

She does something of which she is not proud

?

Do women have memorable messages from an agent?

- 162 (40.3%) women reported at least one memorable message from their PO

- Greater proportion of women on parole (52%) recalled message than women on probation (37%)
  - Leaner social networks? More contact?

Memorable Message Examples

- You control your life, it don't control you.
- If you stay around productive and positive people, they will support you down the road.
- If it come too easy, it ain't right.
- Take time to get adjusted to your new situation (out of prison)
- Have confidence in yourself. Don't let anybody get you down.
- No matter how bad you got it, somebody has it worse than you.
- Have a nice day.

When do women think of memorable messages?

Women recalled memorable messages when they did something they were proud of such as

- Routine activities, such as doing day-to-day tasks
- Goal fulfillment, like going back to school
- Not giving in

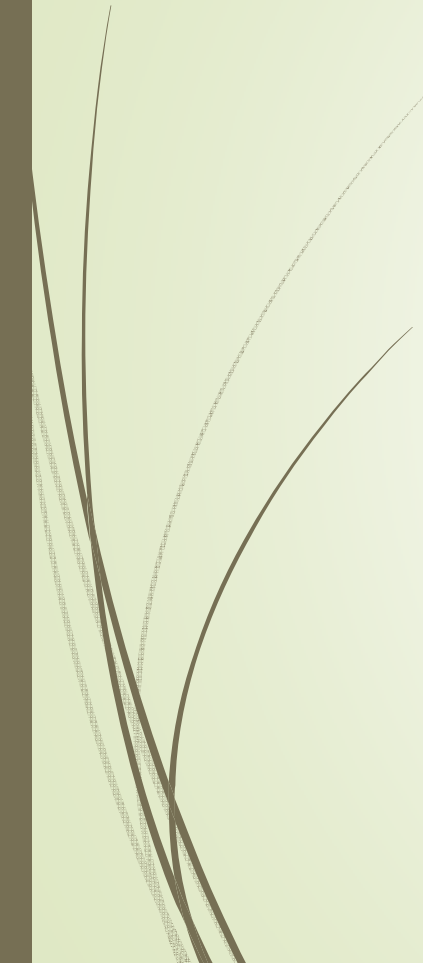| Type of Message	Example	Percent
Behavioral advice Instructions for what the woman should or should not do	"[She told me to] Keep my nose clean."	35%
Motivation Encouraging words	"As long as I put my mind to it, I can do it."	15%
Personal compliment/praise Statements about her progress or qualities the woman possesses that make her special	"I don't fit in with the criminals."	14%
Motivation & behavioral advice Encourages a woman and gives her specific instructions for what to do or not do	"Don't give up, don't lose faith, just keep doing it."	12%
Negative personal statement Comments about the woman's actions, character, or past that are pessimistic	"Every time you take two steps forward you take four steps back. You're always setting yourself up for failure."	11%
Negative personal statement & behavioral advice Pessimistic comments and instructions for what the woman should or should not do	"She don't think I can do it and I'll have to prove to her I can."	5%
Personal compliment & behavioral advice Compliments the woman and has instructions for what to do or not do	"She told me she was very proud of me and stay on the right path."	4%
Motivation & personal compliment Encourages a woman and praises her character at the same time	"That I can do it, that I'm a good person, and a good mom."	2%

When do women recall memorable messages from agents?

- When they did something they were proud of like
  doing day-to-day tasks, going back to school, giving in
  to urges to use drugs
- When messages stopped them from doing something
  they would later regret like giving into urges, such as
  avoiding drugs
- When they did something they were not proud of like
  relapsing or having dirty drops

A Memorable Message

I just remember that she told me that, like after I was on for like six months, she said she was really proud of me. She said, "Everybody in this office thought you were going to fail, nobody wanted you for a probationer. Not to be mean, but just with your substance abuse history everybody thought you were going to screw up and be right back in jail." She just said "I want you to know that I'm really proud of you." Stuff like that. That was cool.

Effects of memorable messages

- Now I think about, "I'm not going to just disappoint my family and friends, it's going to disappoint her too." Cause like I really think she cares.

- Yeah, it impacts my decisions. It has came up that "wow, I want to use." You know, her… she's in the back of my mind too, besides just me and my family.

- When I did have the dirty drop. I thought "oh my gosh, she was just telling me how proud she was of me and then I went and did this."

How women connect messages to feelings and behavior

✓ Behavioral advice messages often made women feel proud for not giving into urges ("I stayed out of trouble and didn't get high").

✓ Women who reported receiving motivation memorable messages were more likely to stop themselves from committing suicide ("[The message] stopped me from committing suicide") and doing things that would inhibit their goal fulfillment than the women who did not report a memorable message.

✓ Women whose memorable messages were negative personal statements tended to stop themselves from giving into urges.

✓ When women did something they were not proud of, motivation memorable messages were most often associated with reports of deteriorating family relationships ("I was clashing with my family").

Study 2   Identity development

What is narrative identity and what do we want to know about it?

- **Contamination** scripts, **redemption** scripts, **future scripts**, **agency**, **generativity**?
- **Barriers** to positive identity development?
- Identity and recidivism
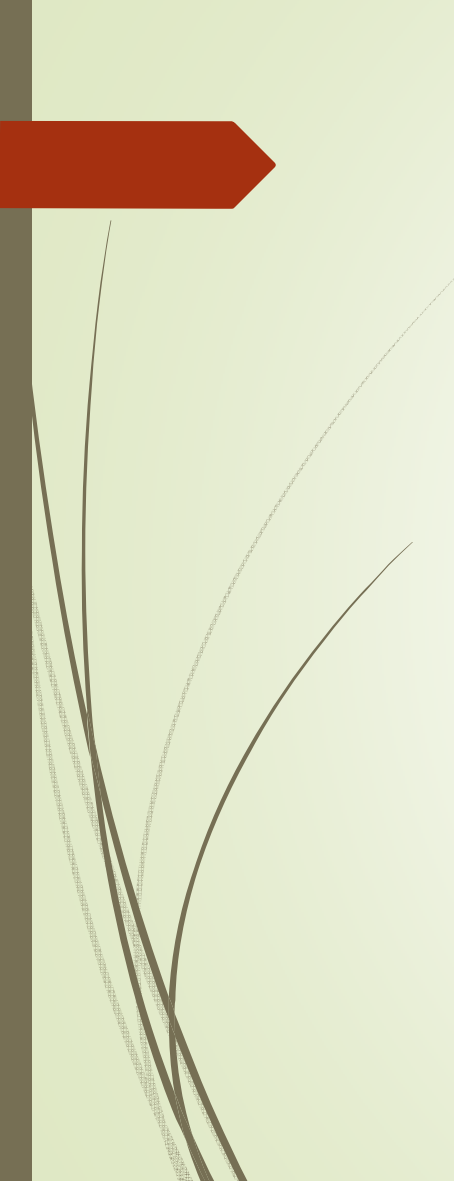
The reason for studying identity

- Agent behaviors, communication, styles are not strong predictors of long-term recidivism.

- How do women act to improve their lives?

- Do women's exercise of agency differentiate those who comply with requirements of supervision? Do their goals and actions explain who avoids police contact and conviction?

- What does identity development have to do with outcomes?

Finding 1 from Study 2

identity -- why of keen interest to probation and parole agents?

Identity in the first year of supervision (Rebecca Stone on parolees)

Evidence of agency

Redemption sequences – making good out of bad

Prosocial future script

Generativity

Vs.

Contamination – bad creates bad → new arrests

Contamination –

Back to School –

To be honest with you, I was just going back trying to set an example, role model [for her daughter]… with my record … I really wanted to do like maybe … X-ray tech or physical therapist, but with my record I knew I really couldn't go nowhere with it.

Using her Certification to Repair Automobile Breaks—

You know I never worked at a place, or anything like that. So, I mean my, my certification, I could do that if I want, you know if I really wanted to. And then you have to have your own tools. Like if I was to fill out some applications or anything like that, they require you have your own tools.

Agency

What have you done to make your life better [after 10 years in prison]?

I know I gotta get up in the morning, so at nighttime I prepare myself. I set my … you know, everything I'm gonna do: take my shower, clothes, I set everything out, set up the alarms clock, get all the proper paperwork I need for that day and, you know, just pay attention to the bus schedule; what time the buses coming or whatever, you know, the times and stuff like that. I'm just on a routine, a very rigid routine and I'm driven. *[Laughs]*

I want to get off it (parole) [laughs]. I want to get my life back, all these people been in my life too long.

Redemption –

Got in touch with my "strong side," "with me" in prison, got rid of a "bad guy"

Yeah, it was always there because it was there before I even got into drugs so I knew what type of person that I was. I just fell short in the middle, yeah.

Refused to get back with her drug using husband.

Generativity

- I can be your mom but I can't go back to treat you for the years I wasn't there. I have to start from now to where you gonna go from here and I just was shaking her and shaking her …..

- So someday you're gonna see me as a motivational speaker telling my life and wanting to help others, especially this is a neighborhood where I got drugs and stuff, where I just started prostituting and … this whole area, and I see some of the same girls that was there with me, and I see new ones.

Finding 2 from study 2

identity (in the short run of 9 months)
and illegal behavior

Comparison of no arrest/arrest groups
Short term shifts in identity – **downward spiral**

The start of supervision: was trying to correct the past, "do what's right," by no longer using, attending support meetings, "giv[ing] back to society" through volunteer work. Avoiding old friends and form new relationships

3 months later: humiliated when her parole officer called her a liar in front of everyone in the office lobby

3 more months later: had reoffended and reported feeling depressed and overwhelmed by her situation.

Comparison of no arrest/arrest groups
Short term shifts in identity – upward spiral

Start of supervision: expectation that she would reoffend when "backed into a corner" because "Who can live broke with no money?"

3 months later: struggling with thoughts about offending but was focused on "avoiding trouble."

3 more months later: staying clean, attending school, and spending more time with her family, and she looked forward to being released from supervision and being independent.

Failures of **identity verification**

- Positive identity themes early on followed by failure of identity verification had more violations

"I go to school, I go look for jobs, and I'm going to counseling, and I attend AA. I don't understand what … why everybody thinks so negative of me. Why does everybody always think I'm doing drugs? I know I used to do drugs but that doesn't mean I'm doing them now."

Identity verification and resulting self-esteem to support prosocial self

PO says "I'm so proud of you, I'm so proud."

It's a positive effect. It's great; it's like a burst of energy. That self-esteem boost you need from her and from within. I haven't been in school because I didn't have the confidence to go back to school. Now I'm ready. You know, now I can sit down, read a book report, write a book report. I didn't have the self-esteem to make those moves. It gets your self-esteem up.

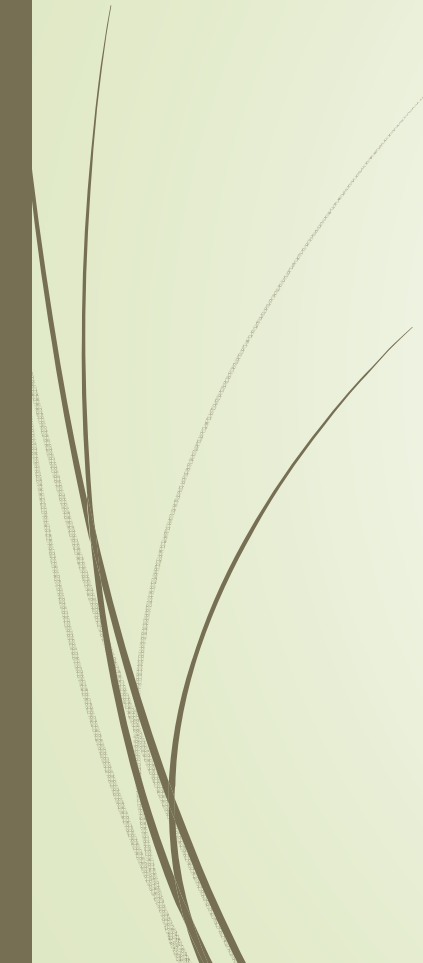**CONNECTS BACK TO MEMORABLE MESSAGES**

Why are clients' identities of keen interest to probation and parole agents?

The future of the partnership

- Develop a pilot training program
- Train agents and women
- Assess outcomes

Improving Supervision for Women Offenders

Goals of the Interdisciplinary ISWO research program:

- Improve understanding and efficacy of parole/probation supervision of women offenders
- Examine whether the style and content of supervision interactions predict women's recidivism and key related outcomes
- Identify measurable dimensions of officers' interactions that best predict outcomes so that these can be taught in training and education programs

Contact Us at:

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(This is the School of Criminal Justice, Michigan State University. Ask for Professor Merry or leave a message for her).

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Also on the website

- **Women Offenders Perceptions of Treatment by Police and Courts**
- **Strategies to Avoid Victimization**
- **DOC Transportation Spring 2014** – **Transportation Problems & Strategies**
- **Effects Of Agent Relationships**
- **A Brief Snapshot of Women on Probation and Parole in South Central Michigan**
- **Memorable Messages From Agents**
- **Staying Out of Trouble in Bad Neighborhoods**
- **Access to Crime Reducing Benefits Programs**
- **Nature of Relationships with Agents**

Contact Information

http://cj.msu.edu/programs/improving-supervision-women-offenders/

Tabs at the bottom take you to all reports, papers, etc.

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The end