

Effects of Moral Reconciliation Therapy on Female Felony Offenders in a Prison-Based Therapeutic Community

Katherine D. Burnette, Kimberly J. Prachniak, Alex Leonard,
Kenneth D. Robinson, E. Stephen Swan,
Correctional Counseling, Inc.

& Gregory L. Little
Advanced Training Associates

In January 1998, Correctional Counseling, Inc. (CCI) of Memphis, Tennessee implemented a drug treatment program for female offenders housed at the Tennessee Prison for Women (TPW), a state of Tennessee prison located in Nashville. The program was organized and gradually developed as a drug therapeutic community and is operated under contract from the Tennessee Department of Corrections (TDOC) with initial funding through RSAT. When the program began, it was housed in a 141-bed Annex of the TPW. In October 2001, the program moved into its own dormitory in the main TPW complex. The program houses 64 female offenders with each participant in the program for at least six months. Since its beginning, the program has essentially operated at full capacity. The program utilizes Moral Reconciliation Therapy (MRT®) as its primary treatment component (Little & Robinson, 1988) and maintains all the traditional aspects of therapeutic communities.

Several previous outcome evaluations of the TPW Program have been published. Those papers included findings from a total of 912 female offenders who had entered the program and were released either because of program completion or other reasons. The present study evaluates the recidivism of all participants who have been released from the program and presents pre- and posttest results from the 2004-2005 clients.

Method

Participants

From 1998 through June 2005, 759 female program participants were paroled. These participants were assessed for rearrests after their release from prison. From July 1, 2004 to June 30, 2005, 94 female offenders participating in the program completed a battery of pre- and posttests to assess changes in relevant personality variables. The program completion rate for participants during this time period was 74.5 percent. Prior years showed completion rates of 82, 72, and 73 percent. During 2004-2005, participants averaged 262.9 days in the program. A total of 285 drug usage urine screens were obtained

from program participants. Each of these urine screens tested for seven different primary drugs of abuse. None of those was positive for any drug use.

Assessment Instruments

CCI utilizes a battery of five pre-and posttests to assess client changes over the course of programming. The pretests are administered at the time of program intake and immediately upon program graduation or dropout. The five tests employed in the CCI therapeutic community are all research tests and are considered to be reliable, valid, and meaningful. All have been shown to have varying levels of predictive ability. A list of the tests is below.

1. The ***Prison Locus of Control*** (PLOC) is intended to measure the degree to which an individual believes she has control over her life. Low scores are an indication of internal control (Pugh, 1994).

2. The ***Life Purpose Questionnaire*** (LPQ) is designed to assess the degree to which an individual perceives purpose or meaning in her life. Higher scores are an indication of more perceived purpose in life (Habras & Hutzell, 1982).

3. The ***Short Sensation-Seeking Scale*** (SSS) is a 10-item questionnaire designed to assess risk-taking behaviors. Lower scores are an indication of low levels of antisocial behavior (Zuckerman, 1984).

4. The ***Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support*** (PSS) is designed to assess the degree to which an individual believes she has support from three different areas: ***friends, family, and significant others***. Higher scores indicate increased support (Zimmet, et. al., 1988).

5. The ***Defining Issues Test*** (DIT) is an objective measure of an individual's moral reasoning as defined by Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning. The test measures eight different scales (Rest, 1986).

Results

Pre- to Posttest Results

A series of repeated measures *t*-tests were conducted on all pre- and posttest scores on clients who were discharged during this report period. A total of seven significant results were found. All of the changes from pre- to posttest were highly desirable. Scores on the LPQ dramatically increased ($t_{83} = 5.43$; $p = .000$) showing that clients had significantly more perceived purpose in life after program participation. This result has also been found in all previous reports from the program. Scores on the PLOC dramatically decreased ($t_{83} = 4.89$; $p = .000$) showing that clients became more internally controlled after program participation. As with the previous test variable, prior reports have showed a similar finding, which is highly desirable. Scores on all three Social Support scales significantly increased showing that program participation increased support from friends, family, and significant others (respective results are: $t_{83} = 4.32$; $p = .000$; $t_{83} = 2.5$; $p = .014$; and, $t_{83} = 2.58$; $p = .012$), also usually found in prior reports. Scores on the second lowest moral reasoning

level, DIT scale 3, significantly decreased from pre- to posttest ($t_{83} = 3.98; p = .000$), a desirable finding. Finally, pre- to posttest scores on the “rules orientation” moral reasoning level (DIT scale 4) significantly increased ($t_{83} = 2.49; p = .015$). All of these results indicate that the program is having a highly beneficial effect on program participants.

Dropouts versus Stayers Pretest Results. A series of independent sample *t*-tests evaluated possible pretreatment differences between program dropouts and stayers. Most dropouts were terminated from program participation for disruptive behavior while a much smaller proportion left voluntarily. *T*-tests and correlations were performed to determine if pretest scores were predictive of program completion or dropout status as well as pretreatment differences. Fourteen *t*-tests were run on pretest scores of all test variables to evaluate possible pretreatment differences between program stayers and dropouts. Interestingly, three of these were statistically significant. Note that in prior studies, pretreatment differences have not been found. Program stayers were found to have higher levels of support from friends at the time of program entry ($t_{92} = 2.44; p = .017$). Stayers showed higher scores on the lowest level of moral reasoning (DIT scale 2) at the time of program entry ($t_{92} = 2.42; p = .017$). Stayers showed lower program entry levels on a DIT scale (A) measuring how much control one gives to a perceived authority ($t_{92} = 2.17; p = .033$). In essence, at the time of program entry, dropouts during this period of the program have low levels of reasoning on DIT scale 2, low perceived support from friends, and they are amenable to influence from individuals they deem as authority figures.

Dropouts versus Stayers Posttest Results. A series of independent sample *t*-tests evaluated differences in posttest scores between program dropouts and stayers. These were performed to determine the effect of remaining in the program upon eventual test scores. Fourteen *t*-tests were run on posttest scores of all test variables to compare dropouts and stayers. However, if there were significant pretest differences in stayers and dropouts in these results, the findings would not necessarily be attributed to program participation itself. Five results were statistically significant.

Stayers showed significantly higher posttest scores on the LPQ ($t_{82} = 2.21; p = .03$). Since pretest scores on this variable were the same for dropouts and stayers, the result indicates that remaining in the program does increase life purpose. Stayers showed higher levels of support from friends on the posttest, however, since this was also found on the pretest, it cannot be asserted that support from friends is affected by program participation. Stayers showed lower DIT scale 3 posttest scores ($t_{82} = 1.99; p = .05$) than dropouts, and pretreatment scores on this variable were similar in both groups. Therefore, decision-making from the perspective of pleasing others is reduced as a

consequence of program participation. Stayers also showed higher levels of reasoning from DIT scale 4, a “rules following” orientation ($t_{82} = 2.62; p = .011$). Pretreatment differences were not found in this variable. Thus, increases in decision-making based on following rules can be attributed to program participation. All of these findings are not only desirable, but they demonstrate that the program has a very real impact on personality change.

Evaluations To Determine Causes of Client Change

Prior reports have evaluated the possible factors responsible for the beneficial test result changes observed in program participants. In brief, results have typically shown that the actual time clients spend in the program isn't the most critical factor. The actual level of client participation in the primary treatment elements of the program appears to be most important. The TPW program employs Moral Reconciliation Therapy (MRT®) as its primary treatment. MRT has 12 objective steps that participants complete progressively. A series of Pearson correlations evaluated the relationship between clients' test scores, both pre- and posttests, with client age at entry, race, days spent in the program, and the number of MRT steps completed to determine the influence of these variables on possible changes in test variables.

Days in program. Of the 28 correlations performed to evaluate the relationships between days in program and other variables, six were statistically significant. Days in program significantly correlated with Sensation-Seeking pretest scores ($r_{94} = -.214; p = .038$) indicating that high sensation seeking at the time of program entry tends to be related to less time spent in the program. Days in program also significantly correlated with DIT scale 2 pretest scores ($r_{94} = .239; p = .02$) indicating that high levels of low moral reasoning at the time of program entry tends to be associated with remaining in the program. This result supports findings outlined in the prior section. DIT scale 3 pretest scores also significantly correlate with days in program ($r_{94} = -.233; p = .024$) indicating that lower levels of pleasing others at the time of entry is associated with remaining in the program. This finding also supports the results in the prior section. In addition, lower pretest levels of the authority orientation on the DIT are associated with remaining in the program ($r_{94} = -.218; p = .035$), a finding supporting results in the prior section.

Days spent in the program were significantly correlated to posttest scores on the support from family scale ($r_{94} = .234; p = .032$) and the support from friends scale ($r_{94} = .419; p = .000$). These results show that time spent in the program does increase these desirable variables and support findings in the prior section.

Age. Of the 28 correlations performed to evaluate the relationships between client age at program entry and other variables, only two reached statistical significance. Age was significantly correlated with the DIT scale measuring the authority orientation posttest scores ($r_{94} = -.234; p = .023$) indicating that

clients who are older at the time of program entry tend to show lower levels of this undesirable reasoning level. This result also supports a prior finding. In addition, client age was found to correlate with the support from friends posttest score ($r_{94} = -.326$; $p = .002$) showing that older clients tend to develop lower levels of support from friends.

Race. Three of the 28 correlations measuring the relationship between client race and personality variables were significant. White participants tend to show higher posttest scores on life purpose ($r_{94} = .236$; $p = .032$), higher sensation seeking posttest scores (a measure of antisocial personality) ($r_{94} = .275$; $p = .012$), and lower posttest locus of control scores indicating more perceived control ($r_{94} = -.237$; $p = .031$).

Moral Reconciliation Therapy steps completed. Of the 28 correlations performed to evaluate the relationships between MRT steps completed and other variables, eight reached statistical significance—the most of any variable. Three of these were on pretest scores. The friends social support scale ($r_{94} = .229$; $p = .026$) and DIT scale 2 scores ($r_{94} = .246$; $p = .017$) both correlated with the number of steps completed. These results mean that participants who entered the program with higher support from friends scores and higher DIT scale 2 scores tended to complete more steps. The pretest DIT scale measuring authority was also correlated with subsequent step completion ($r_{94} = -.259$; $p = .012$) meaning that clients who entered with lower authority scores tended to complete more steps.

The five significant correlations between MRT step completion and test scores shows, as in previous reports, that the completion of MRT steps is the most important program factor in personality change. By contrast, time in program showed only two significant correlations with the posttest scores. Posttest locus of control scores were related to the number of steps completed ($r_{94} = -.291$; $p = .007$) showing that locus of control became more internal as steps completed increased. Support from significant others ($r_{94} = .302$; $p = .005$) increased as steps completed increased. Support from family ($r_{94} = .323$; $p = .003$) increased as steps completed increased. Support from friends ($r_{94} = .513$; $p = .000$) increased as steps completed increased. Finally, scores on the rules following orientation on the DIT ($r_{94} = .254$; $p = .02$) increased as steps completed increased. In summary, all of the data indicates that the program clearly has an impact on clients' personality variables and that MRT steps are the primary element of change.

Recidivism Results

Post-release recidivism data was collected on program completers in late June 2005. From 1998 through 2001, 579 program participants were paroled. These participants average 33 months of release. A total of 202 of these participants had been rearrested or violated for technical reasons (not

reincarcerated) by 6/30/05. Thus, the rearrest rate for these participants was 34.9 percent.

An additional 180 participants were released from January 2002 to the present. These participants averaged 21 months of release. A total of 28 were rearrested or had technical violations. Thus, the rearrest rate after 21 months was 15.5 percent. The majority of “rearrests” were for technical violations (not new criminal charges).

A 2002 report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (June 2002, NCJ 193427) reported on two-year recidivism rates of female offenders in 15 states including Tennessee. That study reported that within two years of release, 49.9 percent of released female offenders had been rearrested. The TPW rearrest rate after 21 and 33 months are both highly favorable in comparison to the national study. In sum, the present report appears to show that recidivism is strongly reduced by the TPW program.

Summary & Discussion

The results summarized in this report are all highly favorable. The program continues to have a high completion rate (74.5 percent) and continues to have a 100 percent sobriety rate. In addition, all of the testing results are highly positive and in desired directions. Scores on the LPQ dramatically increased over the course of program participation showing that clients have significantly more perceived purpose in life after program participation. In addition, participants show a more internal locus of control as a result of program participation meaning that they have more of a sense of personal control over their lives. Dramatic increases in all three social support scales also occurred over the course of program participation. Finally, participants in the TPW TC showed a decrease in reasoning in the lowest moral reasoning scale and an increase in reasoning in the rules orientation scale. These beneficial changes should be observed in an objective lowering of subsequent recidivism.

The present report shows that, after an average of 33 months of release time, 34.9% of participants were rearrested. Participants who had been released for an average of 21 months showed a 15.5 percent rearrest rate. Comparable two-year recidivism rates of female offenders shows that 49.9 percent of released female offenders are rearrested. The TPW rearrest rate after 21 and 33 months are both highly favorable in comparison to the national study. In sum, the present report appears to show that recidivism is definitely reduced by the TC programming provided at the TPW.

The present report evaluated the available objective variables in the program to determine what programmatic features may be most responsible from the observed changes in client outcomes. Consistent with all prior reports on this and other programs, the most important factor that is directly related to beneficial client changes is the number of MRT steps completed. The TPW

program appears to be exemplary in fulfilling its mission and both the staff of the program and the Department are to be commended. The program is meeting all of its stated goals and objectives and is having a measurable beneficial impact on participants.

References

- Hablas, R., & Hutzell, R. R. (1982) The Life Purpose Questionnaire. In: S. A. Wayrytko (Ed.) *Analecta Frankliana*.
- Little, G. L., & Robinson, K. D. (1988) Moral Reconciliation Therapy: A step-by-step treatment system for treatment resistant clients. *Psychological Reports*, 62, 135-151.
- Pugh, D. N. (1994) Revision and further assessment of the prison locus of control scale. *Psychological Reports*, 74, 979-986.
- Rest, J. R. (1986) *Manual for the Defining Issues Test*. Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Center for Ethical Studies.
- Tennessee Department of Corrections (2001) *TDOC Release Trends and Failure Releases, 2001*. Nashville: Tennessee Department of Corrections
- Zimet, G. D., Dahlem, N. W., Zimet, S. G., & Farley, G. K. (1998) The multidimensional scale of perceived social support. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 52, 30-41.
- Zuckerman, M. (1984) Experience and desire: A new formula for sensation seeking scales. *Journal of Behavioral Assessment*, 2, 101-114.