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4-23-82
Offender Rehabilitation: The Appeal of Success

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Corrections workers have been repeatedly told that their efforts at offender rehabilitation are unlikely to be profitable. The pundits have stated that correctional rehabilitation programs have been tried, tested, and found wanting. They have been advised that research has demonstrated that treatment of delinquent and adult offenders is an ineffective response to criminal behavior; that according to Martinson (1976) “nothing works.”

While Martinson’s conclusion was the most widely disseminated and the most popularized, his rallying cry for the antirehabilitation zealots was supported by the conclusions of many others: “...there is no evidence to support any program’s claim to superior rehabilitative efficacy” (Robison & Smith, 1971); “...no delinquency prevention programs can be definitely recommended” (Wright & Dixon, 1977); “...evidence supporting the efficacy of correctional programs is slight, inconsistent, and of questionable reliability” (Bailey, 1966). Such pronouncements have served to engender feelings of pessimism, hopelessness, and even worthlessness among correctional workers. The “nothing works” conclusion did not go unchallenged. Rather, it sparked a long and heated debate throughout the criminal justice system about the effectiveness of correctional intervention. In the field of criminal justice, few questions have stimulated so much controversy. The debate raged (literally) for more than 30 years and had major impact not only on criminological theory, criminal justice policy, and correctional services. It stimulated the development of new correctional models such as radical nonintervention and justice as fairness (cf. Empey, 1979). In large measure, these were viewed as palatable alternatives to the much criticized medical disease model which was thought to provide the underpinnings for correctional treatment. Moreover, it provided support for corrections’ swing to the “right” (not necessarily, “correct”) as exemplified by demands for a return to fixed sentences, sure and swift

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punishment and deterrence. Other factors, of course, were at play such as the growing conservatism of North American Society and the economic pressures that faced correctional managers who were hard pressed to provide funds for expensive treatment programs which seemed to pay limited dividends.

Effective Correctional Programming

Ironically, now that the dust thrown up during the debate has begun to settle, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the antigovernment move- ment in corrections was based on a faulty premise: the assumption that treatment does not work. That conclusion has more and more been called into question. Even Martinson changed his views on the matter (cf. Martinson & Wilks, 1977; Serrill, 1975). The contention that treatment has been a failure is simply wrong. As a matter of fact, as Palmer noted (1975), Martinson in his original work identified a substantial number of successful programs.

Confirmation of the potency of correctional treatment was obtained in our recent reviews (Gendreau & Ross, 1979; Gendreau & Ross, 1981; Ross & Gendreau, 1980) of the correctional literature from 1973 to 1980. Almost all of the conclusions about treatment ineffectiveness were based on pre-1967 research! Our examination of the literature revealed a substantial number of treatment programs which have been demonstrated in methodologically impressive research to be effective in offender rehabilitation. We did not find panaceas, but we did find clear evidence that some treatment programs when applied with integrity to appropriate target populations can be effective in preventing crime and/or in reducing recidivism.

As we noted in our reviews the results of these effective programs were not trivial. Reductions in recidivism ranged from 30 to 60 percent in some well-controlled studies. They were not short-term effects. Positive results were found for as long as 3 to 15 years after treatment! They were not limited to one correctional setting. Successful results were found in community-based diversion programs, probation programs, and in institutional programs
for hard-core juvenile delinquents and multivariable adult offenders.

The evaluation of these programs involved research methodology as stringent as one can find in any criminal justice literature. Thirty-three per cent of the studies were randomized experiments, 25 percent employed baseline line comparisons, and 20 percent used matched comparison groups.

The evidence of the success of correctional treatment is far greater than is the evidence of the success of other correctional approaches, including deterrence, and it is based on much more sophisticated research (Gendreau & Ross, 1981).

Not all programs "work." Many have been successful, but many others have failed and will, no doubt, be reported in the future. Given the variety, quantity, and quality of programs that have been tried, the complexity of the individuals they attempt to change, and the nature of the settings in which they have been used, this is precisely what one should expect. And yet, we expect across-the-board success. Corrections never seems to be content unless it is enamoured with some new elixir. We all seem to alternate between an obsession for some miracle-promising new approach and a depression engendered by its failure to live up to the unrealistic expectations with which it is introduced. "Panaceaphilia" characterized our initial romance with treatment during the sixties when we thought we could make everything better, no matter what the wisp phenomenon as Martinson (1970) once concluded. Effective programs also differ from unsuccessful programs in terms of the explanatory model of criminal behavior on which they are based. No successful programs were found which were based on the oft-maligned medical disease model. On the contrary, most of the programs were based on a social learning conceptualization of criminal behavior (cf. Bandura & Walters, 1963; Neiszl, 1978). They focused not on correcting underlying psychopathology but on modifying inappropriate behavior, family reasoning, or social perceptions, or on changing antisocial attitudes or developing interpersonal or vocational skills. It seems to us, therefore, that what we need is to attempt to change aspects of the offender's functioning which are not correlated with his illegal behavior, but rather are part and parcel of the crucial issue of what is likely to be successful in modifying the probability that they will recidivate. Successful programs select as targets for their intervention not vague factors such as "emotional adjustment" or "personality" but concrete identifiable factors which are known to engender successful behavior modification programs for juveniles. This research, among others, give eloquent testimony to the fact that we must attend to therapeutic integrity (cf. Quay, 1977)—the degree to which the program practices what it preaches, the therapeutic integrity (cf. Quay, 1977)—the degree to which it actually provides what it is supposed to provide and the degree to which various program components contribute to program success. By analyzing the differences between experimental investigations of the chronic delinquent, the study of such programs to determine which of the program's components contribute to program success. By analyzing the differences between experimental investigations of the chronic delinquent, the study of such programs to determine which of the program's components contribute to program success. By analyzing the differences between experimental investigations of the chronic delinquent, the study of such programs to determine which of the program's components contribute to program success.

Some programs will work; some will fail. It is important to attempt to determine which approaches have promise and which have not.

Some Prescriptions for Effective Intervention

Our research is not yet at the stage where we can state without qualification exactly what factors differentiate successful and unsuccessful programs. However, our examination of the available literature does allow us to offer some useful guidelines which can assist the criminal manager or practitioner in deciding which approaches have the greatest likelihood of success.

First, it should be noted, that presently no one technique can be thought of as the panacea, the treatment-of-choice. Effective programs encompass a wide range of modalities. They include behavioral counselling, contingency conditioning, role playing, employment skills training, cognitive development, modeling, operant conditioning, peer group programs, family therapy, and group therapy. Not all programs are equally effective with all types of offenders or in all settings. For example, offenders with sociopathic traits respond much better to a highly structured concrete program, e.g., token economy, than to an unstructured program that promotes open communication (Jessor, 1978). It is now possible to categorize offenders in terms of the degree and kind of supervision to which they are likely to respond favorably (Andrews & Kiesling, 1980). Research has also identified some offenders for whom specific correctional treatments are likely to have a deleterious effect (e.g., Andrews, 1980; O'Donnell & Fo, 1980). Indeed, differential treatment cannot any longer a "will of the wisp" phenomenon as Martinson (1970) once concluded. Some programs will work; some will fail. It is important to attempt to determine which approaches have promise and which have not.

References


