Unlocking Potential: Understanding Pathways to Professional Identity Development for Prisoners in a Missouri Jail

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Abstract

Thousands of individuals reenter society from the U.S. incarceration system each year. Reentry involves challenges in social integration, stigma and discrimination, psychological well-being, and essentially, finding and maintaining employment. Research illuminates the potential of professional identity development for vocational success and reducing recidivism. In this study, a series of professional identity workshops were conducted as a pilot study with a cohort of participants in a Missouri jail. Participants completed a pre- and post-assessment Likert-scale survey. Data was analyzed with an independent t-test between attendees who attended the first workshop (n=19) and those who continued with the second workshop (n=6). Results indicate that three items were significantly different between those who stayed in the workshop and those who dropped out. These were the opportunity to get paid utilizing one's talents; strong interest in one's job; and satisfaction with one's employment. The findings indicate the necessity of giving incarcerated individuals the skills and assistance they need to effectively re-enter society.

Keywords: Incarceration, Professional Identity, Recidivism

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Introduction

The United States confronts a critical problem in its criminal justice system with the highest global incarceration rate, hosting 25% of the world's prisoners despite representing just 5% of the world's population (Alexander, 2012). There are approximately 600,000 individuals that reenter society from prison each year in the U.S. (Bronson & Carson, 2019). Reentry involves reconnecting formerly incarcerated individuals with community through stable housing, education, employment, and avoiding further contact with the criminal justice system. However, reentry includes substantial obstacles such as adverse policies, social stigma, systemic inequalities, and social conditions hindering integration and increasing the risk of reoffending (Mears & Cochran, 2015). In this study, we examined challenges to reentry, risk factors, and the role of professional identity in reducing recidivism. A professional identity pilot study was conducted in a Missouri jail, with participants taking a pre- and post-assessment that was subsequently statistically analyzed.

Reentry Challenges

As noted, reentering society from incarceration is one of the most difficult processes facing individuals in the criminal justice system. Oftentimes, due to the substantial social and economic barriers, many individuals re-offend and thus face reentry numerous times. First, previous studies have shown that the negative stigma labeling of ex-offenders interferes with their successful reintegration into the community following release (Moore et al., 2016). Once a person is labeled as a deviant by society, opportunities in the hemisphere of economics and sociality tend to decrease.

Additionally, disparities in reentry challenges exist along demographic lines. While our research did not collect or analyze demographics, it is critical to acknowledge these disparities and how demographics may have impacted study results. For instance, research indicates that women face greater challenges after their release, including higher rates of both social and financial instability (Agboola, 2017). Furthermore, there are significant racial disparities in incarceration rate, length, and reentry challenges. In the 2010 Missouri Census, Blacks and Whites accounted for 12% and 81% of the general population respectively. Yet, in Missouri prisons, 39% of the jails were Black individuals while White individuals accounted for 57%. Rucks-Ahidiana et. al (2020) find that the formerly incarcerated are most likely to find work in a small number of "felon-friendly" industries, with formerly incarcerated whites having higher employment rates than blacks.

Employment for formerly incarcerated individuals is especially crucial to a successful transition. However, most states have restrictions that prevent people with drug-related felony convictions from qualifying for publicly funded assistance programs, including food stamps (Rubenstein & Mukamal, 2003). Released prisoners often find employment and work in low-skill jobs in food service, wholesale, maintenance or the manufacturing industry (Visher et. al, 2011). This type of employment tends to be low-pay and offers very little upward mobility, as well as lacking essential benefits such as health care, union protection and retirement funds.

Further, a prisoner interview study by Sheppard, A., & Ricciardelli, R. (2020) determined aspects of post-prison employment. Beyond the low pay, the formerly incarcerated individuals described their job as non-gratifying. Some individuals noted that working in low-satisfaction and low-pay jobs was more likely to push them towards criminal behavior (Sheppard, A. &

Ricciardelli, R, 2020). Individuals ultimately hoped to find a stable job with somewhat gratifying work and a livable wage.

Professional Identity

Job satisfaction relates to professional identity. Essentially, professional identity refers to an individual's sense of self that is shaped by their dedication to performing competently and ethically within their profession. This identity can continue to evolve and develop throughout a person's career, and those who possess it strongly identify with the values and role of their profession (Tan, Van der Molen, & Schmidt, 2015). In the formerly incarcerated population, developing a sense of professional identity and self-efficacy can be particularly challenging due to the social and economic barriers they face upon reentry into society. However, it can play a crucial role in enhancing confidence, satisfaction in labor, and sustainable employment. Additionally, it is key to understand that the responsibility of professional self-efficacy does not rely solely on the individual but diffuses to others (employers and society). Interventions such as mentoring, educational training, and experiential learning all can be beneficial for this population while reducing stigma and discrimination.

Methodology

This research explored the efficacy of a professional identity development workshop, implemented in a jail in Missouri, USA. The assessment of this efficacy was segmented into four main themes for the individuals: assessing their own professional identity strengths and awareness, understanding how previous experience relates to employment and professional identity, impact of social support received and needed in their career, inclusion of outside self-defined and specific support for a successful career. The data was collected through a pre- and post-survey that measured the effectiveness of the workshop in enhancing the participants' professional identity.

Target Population and Sampling

A set number of incarcerated individuals (n=19) participated in the pre-assessment data collection of enhancing professional identity. For the post-assessment collection, there were a total of six incarcerated individuals (n=6). The measurements that were used in this study were knowledge about professional practices, professional role model, profession, reference for a specific profession, and professional self-efficacy. The sampling methods utilized in this study included convenience and purposive sampling. The researcher who implemented the data collection had personal connections with the jail's administration, making it simpler to gain access to the prisoners and thus apply the professional identity survey.

Operationalization

The survey was operationalized through a Likert scale and open-ended questions. The Likert scale questions invited individuals to score a series of items on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 denoting strong disagreement and 5 denoting strong agreement. The open-ended questions included topic areas of motivation and workshop interest and satisfaction.

Analysis

While paired t-tests for pre- and post-assessments are the best statistical method, independent t-tests were conducted for the scores of pre-assessment between those who participated in the workshop and those who did not. This is due to random drop out from the workshop among the participants.

Conclusion

We found that three items were significantly different between those who stayed in the workshop and those who dropped out. They were the opportunity to get paid utilizing one's talents ($t = -2.174$, $p = 0.043$), strong interest in one's job ($t = -2.884$, $p = 0.010$), and satisfaction with one's employment ($t = -2.884$, $p = 0.010$).

The purpose of this study was to explore the efficacy of a professional identity development workshop in enhancing this identity among inmates. The study also aimed to investigate how prisoners view their own professional identity strengths and awareness, as well as their prior experiences with work and professional identity. Furthermore, the study examined the social support offenders have had and need in their careers. The results indicate that the professional identity workshop was effective in enhancing prisoners' professional identities. In particular, the opportunity to get reimbursed for one's abilities, a high degree of enthusiasm in one's work, and having a mentor to assist with professional progress were all statistically significant. A t-test also showed a statistically significant difference between the means of these three factors.

Our findings support the existing literature on barriers to reentry, including social capital, perceived structural opportunities, and occupational identity. Providing attention and guidance until financial and social independence was considered equally important. The study's findings emphasize the necessity of giving these individuals the skills and assistance they need to effectively re-enter society, such as pay based on one's talents, a strong interest in one's job, and mentorship.

Acknowledgements

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