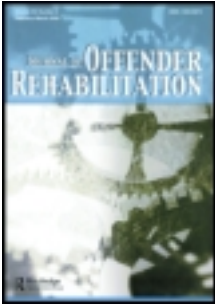


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Nicolette Fariello Springer ^a, Brandon K. Applegate ^b, Hayden P. Smith ^c & Alicia H. Sitren ^d

^a University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida, USA

^b University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida, USA

^c University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina, USA

^d University of North Florida, Jacksonville, Florida, USA

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Exploring the Determinants of Probationers' Perceptions of their Supervising Officers

NICOLETTE FARIELLO SPRINGER

University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida, USA

BRANDON K. APPLGATE

University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida, USA

HAYDEN P. SMITH

University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina, USA

ALICIA H. SITREN

University of North Florida, Jacksonville, Florida, USA

Despite the widespread use of probation in the United States, little is known about how offenders perceive this sentence or the officers who provide their supervision. The present research measures and evaluates perceptions of the probation process, specifically probationers' perception of their probationer officer, and examines characteristics associated with these perceptions. The sample consisted of 347 probationers drawn from a large urban county office. A self-administered survey was utilized to reveal probationers' views of their probation officer. Overall, the probationers expressed positive feelings regarding their probation officers. They were fairly satisfied, and a majority of probationers felt officers were fair, competent, helpful, and clear. Perceptions were more positive among clients who were supervised by an officer of their own race.

KEYWORDS *corrections, perceptions, probation, probationers*

Probation is the most widely used sanction in the United States. At the end of 2006, more than 4.2 million offenders were serving probation sentences throughout the country, which is almost twice the number of people incarcerated in our nation's prisons and jails (Glaze & Bonczar, 2007). Between 1995

Address correspondence to Nicolette Fariello Springer, Department of Mental Health, Law and Policy (FMHI), 13301 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MHC 2735, Tampa, FL 33620, USA. E-mail: nspringer@fmhi.usf.edu

and 2006, the number of persons on probation has climbed 30% (Glaze & Bonczar, 2007). Despite the widespread use of probation in the United States, little is known about how offenders perceive this sentence or the officers who provide their supervision. The current study investigates probationers' views of their officers and seeks to begin understanding those views by exploring possible correlates. As a prelude, we discuss changes in the nature of probation and the state of current knowledge on probationers' perceptions.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF PROBATION

Boston boot maker John Augustus is considered the father of probation. In 1841, he convinced the Boston Police Court to release a man charged with being a "common drunkard" into his custody (Augustus, 1972). After three weeks, the reformed man returned to court where a judge ordered him only to pay a small fine. Over the next 15 years, Augustus extended the same support to 1,800 other arrestees and reportedly posted a total of \$243,234 in bail (Augustus, 1972). A wealthy and religious man, Augustus carefully chose the individuals he aided. He personally interviewed each offender and limited his program "mainly to those who were indicted for their first offense, and whose hearts were not wholly depraved, but gave promise of better things" (Augustus, 1972, p. 19). Augustus assisted each offender with housing, employment, and educational needs while the court was provided with a progress report.

Augustus' successful probation program inspired most modern concepts of community corrections. Probation, growing first for juveniles and more slowly for adults (Hamai, Ville, Harris, Hough, & Zvekic, 1995; Latessa & Allen, 1997), embodied prominent ideals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Rothman (1980) noted that this era embraced individualized sentencing and a move away from incarceration as the sole method of punishment. Probation offered the promise of maintaining community ties while offenders were provided supervision and were supported with services that would help them become law-abiding citizens.

The orientation of probation toward assistance and treatment—if it ever truly was embraced in practice—did not last. The success of probation and rehabilitative approaches to offenders in general was called into question in the late 1970s (Martinson, 1974; Cullen & Gilbert, 1982). By the 1980s, regular probation was being supplemented with increased conditions, and intensive supervision probation had gained popularity. Over the last several decades, probation has undergone a series of important developments including widespread adoption of case classification and the addition of various intermediate sanctions. At its inception probation focused on reform; however, probation has begun to concentrate more on the offenders' compliance with conditions than on reformation. Steiner, Wada, Hemmens, and Burton (2005) examined changes between the 1992 and 2002 statutes

establishing the functions of community corrections in each of the 50 states. The authors found changes in favor of treatment as well as increased control. On balance, however, their review led Steiner and his colleagues to conclude that “punishment is now the prevailing correctional ideal mandated for community corrections” (p. 154). The rhetoric accompanying such changes typically casts increased intensity of supervision, control, and swift sanctions for any breach of probation conditions in terms of community protection rather than harsh punishment. Still, punitive correctional goals undergird this movement. Community protection—when it is promised through increases in the risk of prompt apprehension and incarceration for misconduct—equates to incapacitation. As Gendreau and Cullen (1994) point out, claims of enhanced community safety also are based on a belief in deterrence—that “increased surveillance and the threat of various sanctions will induce a commensurate fear of punishment for offenders in ISP’s” (p. 72). The popularity of intensive supervision probation has helped shift the focus of probation from assistance and guidance to enhanced supervision coupled with increasingly punitive conditions.

Feeley and Simon (1992) describe a broad shift in corrections that is consistent with developments in the nature of probation. The “new penology” as they describe it, involves focusing on classification, risk management, and efficient processing of cases. In terms of probation, the individual offender is no longer the primary concern. Rather, probation departments focus on the management of potentially dangerous groups at an aggregate level. Following this risk management approach leads to increased attention to risk assessment and increases in surveillance and control. Contrary to a supportive approach to probation, mechanisms such as more frequent drug tests instead became the focus of the sanction and have overshadowed attempts to assist the probationer.

Although scholars may recognize that probation is currently oriented toward surveillance and control, it is not completely clear how probationers see their experience. Some evidence suggests that probation can be a sentence that is more severe than prison in the eyes of offenders. Other research suggests probationers’ hold very positive opinions of their supervising officers. Below, we review this literature.

PROBATIONERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF PROBATION

The largest body of literature touching on perceptions of probation concentrates on inmates, arrestees, and probationers’ views of incarceration versus alternative sanctions and the severity of criminal justice sanctions in general (McClelland & Alpert, 1985; Crouch, 1993; Apospori & Alpert, 1993; Petersilia & Deschenes, 1994; Spelman, 1995; Wood & Grasmick, 1999; Wood & May, 2003; May & Wood, 2005). In one of the earliest of these studies, McClelland and Alpert (1985) asked arrestees to assign numerical scores to a list of

alternative penalties in comparison to incarceration. Respondents were told to equate a score of 100 to one year in jail. All other sanctions were to be ranked based on this assumption. Multiple sanctions were allowed to be given the same score. Arrestees with previous criminal justice experience scored incarceration lower than other penalties that criminal justice professionals had thought to be "intermediate" in severity (Morris & Tonry, 1991). Apospori and Alpert (1993) later confirmed these findings using similar methods with a sample of 157 arrestees and a longitudinal design.

Petersilia and Deschenes (1994) interviewed offenders and correctional staff to examine their perception of sanctions. They reported that intensive probation in some circumstances is perceived as equally severe as prison. For instance one year of intensive probation would be equal to six months in jail or three years of regular probation (Petersilia & Deschenes, 1994). Additionally, one year in jail was viewed as equally severe as one year in prison and three years under intensive supervision probation (Petersilia & Deschenes, 1994). These results suggest that many offenders would prefer incarceration to intensive probation. Similar results were reported by Spelman (1995) who also asked offenders to rate the severity of 26 felony sanctions, ranging from six months probation to five years in prison. The results revealed that offenders viewed certain forms of probation as one of the more severe sanctions. For example, one year in jail would be equal to only two years on intensive probation. In fact, intensive probation was very often ranked more punitive than various lengths of incarceration (Spelman, 1995). Similarly, May, Wood, Mooney, and Minor (2005) found that offenders currently serving a community-based sentence saw one year in prison as equivalent to only two years on probation.¹

Anecdotal reports from offenders reveal several possible reasons that a probation sentence, particularly intensive supervision probation, may be less palatable than imprisonment. Spelman's (1995) subjects reported beliefs that probation is less likely to provide opportunities for self-improvement, requires closer and more oppressive supervision, interferes with work, requires payment of fees and fines the money for which may not be easily available, and is a "trap." As a respondent in Spelman's study observed, "Probation has too many conditions. If you can't meet them, you end up in jail anyway. I'd rather just do the time and pay off my debt to society that way" (p. 126).

Demographic variables also play a role in offenders' perceptions of sanctions (Crouch, 1993; Wood & Grasmick, 1999; May & Wood, 2005; May et al., 2005). Crouch (1993) surveyed 1,027 violent and nonviolent inmates regarding their penalty preferences. He reported that African American respondents held a stronger preference for prison than whites. Older inmates also tended to prefer prison, while those who were married preferred probation over incarceration. Gender may also determine a preference for a particular sanction (Wood & Grasmick, 1999; May & Wood, 2005). A survey of nonviolent offenders revealed that men perceive alternative

sanctions as more punitive and are less willing to partake in them compared to their female counterparts (Wood & Grasmick, 1999).

Studying offenders' perception of the relative severity of probation has been revealing, and this body of literature is essential for developing a continuum of sanctions (May et al., 2005). The near-exclusive focus on punitive aspects of probation, however, neglects other dimensions of probationers' perceptions. In parallel areas such as mental health treatment, researchers attend to concepts such as client satisfaction and client-caregiver communication and respect (Garland, Haine & Boxmeyer, 2007; Martin, Romas, Medford, Leffert, & Hatcher, 2006). Moving beyond considerations of punishment and examining how probationers view their supervising officers promotes a more complete understanding of the nature of contemporary probation.

We were able to uncover only one prior study that explored probationers' perceptions of their supervising officers.² Mair and May (1997) surveyed 1,213 offenders in England and Wales on a host of issues related to their punishment experiences. Eighty-four percent of the respondents were serving straight probation sentences with the remaining serving some form of a split sentence. Of most relevance here, the probationers were asked to respond to 13 statements regarding their supervising officer. For each statement, the respondents indicated their degree of agreement or disagreement on a five-point scale. They were also provided the option of responding "don't know" (Mair & May, 1997, pp. 44–45).

The offenders' responses revealed mostly positive feelings toward their probation officers. Eighty-one percent strongly agreed with the statement, "PO is always patient with me" and nearly as many (80%) strongly agreed that their "PO is completely straight talking with me" (Mair & May, 1997, p. 45). The respondents also tended to believe strongly that their probation officer listened to them and would not reveal information that they shared with their probation officer in confidence. Although responses were somewhat less strong, the probationers also generally agreed that their supervising officer would help them "sort out" their problems, help them "come to terms" with past experiences, be available to talk to if they were thinking of "getting into trouble", and stand up for them (Mair & May, 1997, p. 44–45). More than two-thirds of probationers at least slightly agreed with these statements. Furthermore, half strongly agreed that they thought of their "PO as a friend" (Mair & May, 1997, p. 45).

Four statements posed to the offenders were phrased to express negative characteristics of the probation officers. The responses to these statements showed that the respondents' positive regard was not simply a tendency to acquiesce. Seventy-eight percent of the probationers strongly disagreed with the statement "PO talks down to me" (Mair & May, 1997, p. 45). More than two-thirds also strongly disagreed that their supervising officer "tries to push me into things I don't want to do," "doesn't really care

about what happens to me," and "always seems to be in a rush" (p. 45). In short, extremely few respondents held negative views of their officers.

The studies reviewed above reveal a possible paradox. On the one hand, probation has become increasingly oriented toward surveillance and control. Further, offenders sometimes perceive probation, particularly when it involves multiple conditions or intensive supervision, as a more severe punishment than a short period of incarceration. On the other hand, Mair and May's (1997) respondents were quite positive toward their officers. It is certainly possible that the contrast can be explained by differences between the United States and Great Britain, but this has not yet been examined empirically. In addition, Mair and May (1997), the only existing study on probationers' views of their officers, did not explore potential correlates of these attitudes. The present study, therefore, complements the extant literature by assessing American probationers' perceptions of their supervising officers. It also explores the extent to which variations in these perceptions are related to demographic characteristics and aspects of the probation experience.

METHODS

Sampling and Data Collection

The data for this article were collected between May and September 2006 through self-report surveys distributed to county probationers in a large metropolitan area. Participants were solicited to complete the survey as they waited to meet with their probation officer at the county probation office. This department serves all community corrections offenders in the county, and all face-to-face meetings with probation officers are conducted at this single location. The research reported here reflects a sample of 347 respondents.³ Some analyses, however, are based on fewer cases due to missing data on individual items.

In an effort to encourage candid responses, we informed each respondent that their answers would be kept completely confidential and would not be shared with their supervising officers. We also made a concerted attempt to appear separate from the probation department. During data collection visits, we refrained from interacting with the staff as much as possible, and each researcher wore a prominent name badge emblazoned with a university logo. The questionnaire itself also clearly identified the study as being conducted by the University of Central Florida and emphasized confidentiality.

Because we were unable to randomly select respondents from the department's client roles, we attempted to obtain a sample that was as representative as possible in two ways. First, we approached every person who arrived at the probation department during each data collection visit. Second, the days and times of data collection were varied. Notably, statistical comparisons show that the sample is equivalent to the population of 4,184 clients

who were serving a probation sentence with this agency at the time of data collection in terms of age, race, gender, and current offense. Still, by collecting data from individuals who were at the probation office for a contact visit with their officers, we excluded those on the lowest levels of supervision. In particular, probationers who were supervised only by telephone were not included in the study.⁴

Operationalization

The survey instrument consisted of three sections. The first section posed general questions regarding the respondent's sentence, time and effort devoted to meetings with their officer, and prior experience with probation supervision. The second section focused on the probationer, inquiring about demographic and other background information. Questions in the final section were designed to measure the respondent's perceptions of their probation officers on five dimensions: fairness, clarity, competence, helpfulness, and general satisfaction. The individual items comprising the indexes, which were originally designed for this study and to our knowledge have not been used previously, are shown in Table 1. For each statement, respondents could select from one of four points on a Likert scale: strongly agree (4), agree (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1). Each index was created by summing the values from individual responses and dividing by the number of items each respondent answered, thus returning the index to the original scale and producing a possible range from 1 to 4. Where necessary, individual items were reverse coded before including them in the index. In this way, higher values on each index indicate more positive perceptions.

We examined three areas as possible correlates of probationers' perceptions. First, respondent demographic characteristics were collected. The self-report survey included four separate questions addressing race, marital status and education. The categories of race were White/Caucasian, Black/African American, Asian, and other. Initially, race and Hispanic ethnicity were measured separately. The survey responses revealed, however, that the probationers did not make this distinction. They consistently marked "other" for race, and indicated in the subsequent question that they were of Hispanic origin. To be consistent with the probationers' conceptions of themselves, we combined our race and ethnicity variables into a single measure. Anyone who indicated that they were Hispanic was coded as such regardless of their answer to the first question, and anyone who did not mark White or Black on the first question and also did not mark Hispanic on the second question was coded as "other." We combined these variables into a single race measure with the categories White, Black, Hispanic, and other.

Marital status options included never married, married and living together, married but separated, divorced, and widowed. Respondents were given six answer choices regarding their highest level of education

TABLE 1 Perceptions of Probation Officer

	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)	Mean
Fairness index (Cronbach's Alpha: 0.77)					3.33
My probation officer treats me with respect	53.6	40.8	4.4	1.2	
My probation officer treats Blacks, Whites, and Hispanics the same	43.4	50.8	4.5	1.3	
My probation officer is fair	39.4	55.4	3.7	1.5	
My probation officer respects my cultural background	30.4	63.8	4.2	1.6	
My probation officer is consistent in enforcing rules	33.1	61.9	3.8	1.3	
My probation officer treats men and women the same	39.7	56.0	3.3	1.0	
Clarity index (Cronbach's Alpha: 0.77)					3.32
My probation officer is clear about his/her expectations of me	38.1	56.2	4.2	1.5	
I know what my probation officer does not want me to do	41.4	54.9	2.5	1.2	
I know what my probation officer wants me to do	34.7	62.2	2.8	0.3	
Competency index (Cronbach's Alpha: 0.74)					3.25
My probation officer does a good job	43.4	50.3	5.7	0.6	
My probation office knows his/her job	43.1	53.5	2.8	0.6	
My probation officer keeps track of whether I comply with the conditions of my sentence	45.3	51.7	2.4	0.6	
My probation officer does not have the skills or experience to be a good probation officer*	6.0	6.0	50.5	37.5	
My probation officer understands my situation	28.0	47.0	17.5	7.5	
Satisfaction index (Cronbach's Alpha: 0.69)					3.12
My probation officer has realistic goals for me	27.9	53.3	15.5	3.3	
I am satisfied with my probation officer	39.0	52.1	6.3	2.7	
My probation officer spends too little time meeting with me*	4.5	9.9	57.7	27.9	
My probation officer spends too little time on my case*	3.5	10.8	62.3	23.4	
Helpfulness index (Cronbach's Alpha: 0.77)					2.86
My probation officer would help me if I asked	33.8	53.6	11.4	1.3	
My probation officer helps me achieve my goals	20.0	49.1	25.6	5.3	
My probation officer has helped me find services I need	12.9	41.6	37.9	7.6	

*Item was reverse coded for inclusion in the index.

completed: Never attended high school, some high school but did not graduate, high school/GED, two-year college degree, four-year college degree, and graduate or professional degree.

Second, we considered the race of the supervising officers. Here our interest was not in whether probationers reacted differently to Blacks, Whites, Hispanics, and so on. Instead, we examined whether cross-race supervision influenced the probationers' views. We asked the probationers what race they believed their probation officer to be. Similar to respondent race, our attempt to separate race and Hispanic ethnicity did not coincide well with probationers' views. Thus, two questions that separately asked about race and Hispanic background were combined, and probation officer race was classified as White, African American, Hispanic, other, or don't know. If we were able to determine that the respondent and his or her probation officer were of the same race—White, African American, or Hispanic—we coded them as racially concordant. If their races diverged or if we were unable to determine what race one or the other was (i.e., other or don't know), we coded them as racially discordant.⁵

Finally, we collected data on aspects of the probation experience under the expectation that the amount of contact and the degree to which probationers faced challenges to completing their sentence might influence their impressions. We inquired about the frequency of visits with their probation officer, amount of time spent with their officer, time spent waiting for their officer, and time missed from work due to required visits. The distance the probationer had traveled and the amount of time he or she spent commuting to the probation office for visits were also assessed. Respondents were given four options to describe their frequency of visits: Once a week, every other week, once a month, or less than once a month. Three open-ended questions allowed probationers to provide the amount of time they had to wait prior to their last visit, actual one-on-one time with their probation officer, and length of travel time for a one-way trip to meet with their probation officer. Responses were recorded in minutes. We also requested they estimate their distance traveled in miles. Probationers who indicated that they had missed time from work in the past 30 days to meet with a probation officer were asked to report how many hours they had missed.

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

Examination of the demographic characteristics and probation experiences revealed that we obtained responses from a diverse group of probationers. Fifty-one percent of respondents identified themselves as White, 20.3% as Black, 24.4% as Hispanic, and 3.8% as other. Eighty-one percent of the sample was male and 18.8% was female.

Education level ranged from “no high school” to a “Graduate/Professional degree.” A combined 22% of probationers stated they did not attend high school or only completed some high school. The majority (50.3%) of respondents acknowledged graduating from high school or earning a GED. An additional 14.6% possessed a two-year degree however only 8.5% completed a four-year degree, and just 6.1% had earned a graduate or professional degree. Employment questions revealed that 84% of probationers were employed with an average annual income of \$29,000. Forty-two percent had missed work at some point to meet with a probation officer.

Fifty-six percent reported they had never been married compared to only 15% who stated they were married and living with their spouse at the time of data collection. A combined 28.3% were divorced or had been married but were now separated, and less than two percent were widowed. In the analyses that follow, these three categories are combined to reflect all those who were not currently with a spouse. Probationers reported they met with their probation officer an average of 2.97 times before completing the questionnaire. It was also found that 43% of respondents had served a prior probation sentence.

Perceptions of Officers

Overall, the probationers expressed positive feelings regarding their probation officers. They were fairly satisfied, and a majority of probationers felt officers were fair, competent, helpful, and clear. Table 1 details these perceptions. Regarding aspects of fairness, they were particularly enthusiastic that their officer treated them with respect, with more than 94% strongly agreeing or agreeing. They were slightly less certain that the rules were enforced consistently or that their officer respected their cultural background. Here, the percentage of respondents who strongly agreed dropped to a third or less. Even for these items, however, more than 90% agreed or strongly agreed. This pattern of high regard was also revealed for aspects of their officers' clarity. Most respondents were certain that their officers were communicating expectations clearly, and very few said they were unsure of what their officers did and did not want them to do. Overall, the probationers also seemed to believe that their probation officers are good at their jobs, with more than 85% expressing confidence in several dimensions of their officers' competence. The only notable slippage in this regard is shown in the final item in the competency index. About one in four thought that their officer did not understand their situation. Still, the satisfaction index results show that on the whole, probationers were satisfied with their officer. A large majority, (over 80%) believed their officers held realistic expectations and spent adequate time with them and on their case.

Of all the indexes, respondents were least enthusiastic about their officer's degree of helpfulness. Nearly one-third felt their officer did not help

them achieve their goals, and about 46% did not think their officer had helped them find needed services. Even so, the helpfulness index mean reveals that, on balance, probation officers were more often perceived to be helpful than unhelpful.

Table 2 displays the possible correlates of the probationers' perceptions of their officers. As the table shows, most variables were unrelated to perceived officer characteristics. Perceptions of fairness, clarity, helpfulness,

TABLE 2 Probationers' Views of their Supervising Officers by Demographic Characteristics

Correlate	Fairness index	Clarity index	Helpfulness index	Competency index	Satisfaction index
Prior probation sentence					
Yes	3.32	3.31	2.84	3.25	3.12
No	3.39	3.36	2.97	3.31	3.11
Employment status					
Yes	3.32	3.31	2.84	3.25	3.12
No	3.39	3.36	2.97	3.31	3.11
Marital status					
Never married	3.35	3.37	2.86	3.28	3.13
Married and living together	3.22	3.22	2.83	3.15	3.04
Married but separated	3.29	3.22	2.75	3.18	3.00
Divorced	3.38	3.30	2.94	3.31	3.21
Widowed	3.36	3.25	2.83	3.36	3.18
Education					
Never attended high school	3.42	3.44	2.77	3.46	3.12
Some high school but did not graduate	3.33	3.26	2.91	3.22	3.11
High school graduate/GED	3.34	3.31	2.87	3.28	3.13
Two-year college degree	3.35	3.39	2.80	3.29	3.16
Four-year college degree	3.20	3.31	2.74	3.18	3.12
Graduate or professional degree	3.41	3.38	2.96	3.22	3.03
Probationer's gender					
Male	3.32	3.30	2.86	3.23	3.11
Female	3.33	3.33	2.87	3.31	3.17
Race of probationer					
White/Caucasian	3.32	3.35	2.87	3.27	3.17
Black/African American	3.36	3.31	2.87	3.28	3.12
Hispanic	3.30	3.23	2.77	3.17	3.01
Other	3.53	3.48	3.23	3.52	3.26
Probationer's perception of their officer's race					
White/Caucasian	3.34	3.35	2.87	3.30	3.18
Black/African American	3.30	3.28	2.83	3.24	3.04
Hispanic	3.41	3.42	2.73	2.93	2.90
Other	3.58	3.00	3.00	2.80	3.25
Don't Know	3.36	3.27	2.98	3.16	3.08
Probationer and officer are same race					
Yes	3.39*	3.43**	2.97*	3.36**	3.23**
No	3.29	3.24	2.79	3.19	3.04

*Index means are significantly different at $p \leq .05$.

**Index means are significantly different at $p \leq .01$.

TABLE 3 Probationer's Views of their Supervising Officers by Probation Experience Variables (Pearson Correlations)

Correlate	Fairness index	Clarity index	Helpfulness index	Competency index	Satisfaction index
Frequency of visits	0.047	-0.019	0.056	0.033	0.029
Length of last visit	0.060	0.017	0.080	0.047	0.063
Wait for last visit	-0.101	-0.132*	-0.099	-0.191**	-0.223**
Travel time to office	-0.112*	-0.079	-0.105	-0.084	-0.117*
Travel distance to office	-0.110*	-0.105	-0.102	-0.115*	-0.163**
Missed work for visit	0.074	0.088	0.124*	0.087	0.057

*Correlation is significant at $p \leq .05$.

**Correlation is significant at $p \leq .01$.

competence, and satisfaction were not significantly related to having served a prior probation sentence, marital status, education, or the employment status of the respondent. The perceived race and ethnicity of the probation officers also were not related to any of the five indexes, nor were the race or gender of the probationer. The only clear and consistent relationship was for whether probationers and probation officers were the same race or different races. Probationers who perceived their officer as the same race as them tended to be more positive. The differences were not dramatic—about a five to seven percent increase in each index score—but they were statistically significant and highly consistent across dimensions of perceptions.

Correlations between probationers' views of their supervising officers and variables related to their overall experience with probation are illustrated in Table 3. These correlations center around the probationers' perception of use of their time. Perceptions of fairness, clarity, helpfulness, competence, and satisfaction were not significantly related to frequency of visits or length of visits. However, the length of wait time prior to their last visit was negatively correlated to perceptions of clarity, competency and satisfaction. The amount of travel time required to attend each appointment was negatively correlated to perceptions of fairness and satisfaction. Similarly, the distance traveled was also negatively correlated to perceptions of fairness and satisfaction as well as competency. Missing work to attend a probation appointment was the only significantly positive correlation linked to the helpfulness index.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Current day probation would be unrecognizable to John Augustus due to the ideological shift in corrections over the last 30 years. Contemporary probation practices place a greater emphasis on risk management rather than individual needs of offenders. By ignoring the individual perceptions and

experiences of probationers, practitioners and researchers limit their understanding of probation and as such, limit aspects of evaluative measures that affect program policy. The close one-on-one interaction between a probationer and their supervising officer is unique to probation. Prison and jail inmates interact with several officers as well as other inmates, creating a very different experience. The present study has attempted to explore the unique bond between individuals and their probation officers and to understand the correlates of this relationship. While Mair and May (1997) have studied probationers' perceptions of their supervising officers in Great Britain, this is the first study of its kind to examine American probationers' perceptions of their probation officer.

Before discussing the findings of our study, we should note its limitations. First, the current sample reflects only one probation office in the state of Florida. Therefore, generalizing these findings should be done conservatively. Notwithstanding this limitation, it should be noted that Florida is the third largest employer of probation and correctional officers in the nation behind California and Texas (Gottfredson & Moriarty, 2006). Additionally, Florida supervises the fourth largest population of probationers (Glaze & Bonczar, 2007) and currently has 151 community corrections operations (Florida Department of Corrections, 2007). Furthermore, nearly all 67 counties maintain at least one county level office (Florida Department of Corrections, 2007).

Previous literature suggests that both the officers' self-perceived role and the orientation of the department itself can affect the experience of the offender (Gordon, Moriarty, & Grant, 2003; Kifer, Hemmens, & Stohr, 2003; Vaughn, 1993). Probation officers can be conflicted between their law enforcement and social work roles (Fulton, Stichman, Travis, & Latessa, 1997). To compensate, many officers alternate between the two functions, which can affect their daily duties (Clear & O'Leary, 1983). An officer's individual philosophy can influence the relationship between him or her and the client. It has been suggested, however, that their own attitude may be secondary to the orientation of the department as a whole (Clear & Latessa, 1993). Like many bureaucratic institutions, probation departments follow a chain of command. The tone of the office and the manner in which officers interact with clients are set by the directors and managers of each unit. This is not to suggest that a completely uniform experience is provided to all probationers—individual officers' strategies and personalities influence their relationships with their clients. Still, a department's values and climate provide a strong organizational influence (Clear & Latessa, 1993). The current study's findings, therefore, may have been shaped by the unique aspects of this department. Future studies should survey multiple departments in order to achieve a greater level of generalizability and to investigate the possibility that probationers' perceptions vary according to organizational features.

A second limitation was that our sample excluded the lowest risk probationers. Probationers on the lowest level of supervision in the county we studied are contacted only by telephone. They were not included because they would not have been reporting to the probation office. Fortunately, however, all other probationers were available to be included in our sample. Only in extremely rare cases do officers conduct field visits; all supervision is carried out in the probation office where we sampled participants.

A final limitation of the present study involves the possibility that respondents felt compelled to cast their officers in a positive light. As we noted earlier, the research team systematically differentiated itself from the probation staff during data collection visits, and the questionnaire emphasized that individual responses were confidential. Still, some respondents may not have trusted these assurances. As an alternative, we could have surveyed probationers only after they completed their supervision and would, therefore, be free to "speak their mind." While this approach may have improved the veracity of answers among those who responded, we had rejected it because it would also exclude probationers who were revoked. By sampling active cases, we were able to include respondents who would later complete successfully as well as those who ultimately would not. Including the opinions of both groups seems important to an accurate portrait of probationers' views. Future studies may wish to sample completed cases for comparison with our results.

The results of the current study revealed that the 347 probationers surveyed expressed positive feelings regarding their probation officers in terms of fairness, clarity, competency, and satisfaction. These dimensions all yielded mean responses of agreement above eighty-five percent—slightly higher than Mair and May's (1997) findings of an average of eighty percent of agreement. Also akin to Mair and May, the current findings show responses to questions relating to helpfulness yielded lower levels of agreement from probationers. Averaging across the three survey items, 70% of our respondents agreed their officer was helpful in comparison to Mair and May's average of 66%. Cumulatively, both studies demonstrate that, overall, probationers have a very positive view of their probation officer. Notably, the few negative views expressed were not limited to a singular, small group of probationers. Certainly, the relatively high reliability among items within each index shows there was a tendency for respondents to express consistent views across items, either positive or negative. Further, the indexes were all correlated at .5 or above, revealing consistency among dimensions. Still, the respondents expressed variation in their views. The negative responses were not the result of only a few disgruntled probationers; they were dispersed throughout the sample. Thus, the largely positive views also were not isolated but represented broad feelings across the entire sample.

Despite this positive outlook, previous literature suggests that offenders still view probation as punitive (McClelland & Alpert, 1985; Crouch, 1993; Apospori & Alpert, 1993; Petersilia & Deschenes, 1994; Spelman, 1995; Wood & Grasmick, 1999; Wood & May, 2003, 2005). Petersilia and Deschenes (1994) reported that offenders rated certain forms of probation as equally severe as incarceration. This reveals a paradox. Although, probationers perceive probation as difficult, their opinion of their supervising officer remains positive. One explanation for this phenomenon may be the rapport built between the probationer and their officer. Unlike, incarcerated prisoners who interact with several officers, probationers generally communicate with only one officer throughout their entire sentence. This one-on-one interaction creates a personal connection that is unique to probation. Such a positive working relationship would otherwise be unattainable in a jail or prison setting. Even in light of probation's increased focus on risk management, the rapport between the two provides probation officers with the opportunity to affect their clients in a manner that would be out of reach to their jail or prison counterparts.

In the present analysis of the possible correlates of probationers' perceptions of their supervising officers, only one clear and consistent relationship emerged: Probationers who perceived their officer as the same race as themselves tended to express more positive views of their officer. On average, index scores were 5.3% higher when the officer and the probationer were racially concordant than when their races diverged. Although not a staggering difference, the effect of racial concordance was statistically significant and highly consistent across dimensions of perceptions.

In social psychology, the finding that people tend to evaluate members of their own group more positively than members of another group is ubiquitous (Smith & Mackie, 2007). In-group bias has been observed for a variety of characteristics including race, sex, economic status, and even when assignment to groups is based on seemingly trivial criteria (Smith & Mackie, 2007). Once applied to specific, dyadic client-staff interactions, however, the research on the effects of racial concordance is equivocal. Knipscheer and Kleber (2004) reported that minority mental health clients who were ethnically similar to their counselors were more satisfied with their treatment experience. Similarly, LaVeist and Nuru-Jeter (2002) found a trend toward greater satisfaction among patients who were the same race as their physicians, even when controlling for how much freedom the patient had to choose his or her doctor. In contrast, there is less convincing evidence that the racial similarity of treatment providers and clients affects more concrete outcomes such as retention in treatment, resolution of mental health problems, and illegal drug use (Atkinson & Schein, 1986; Maddux & Desmond, 1996; Sue, 1988). For example, compared to the methadone maintenance clients who were racially matched to therapists, unmatched clients in Maddux and Desmond's (1996) study were not more likely to complete the one-year

program, were just as likely to be incarcerated, and tested positive for cocaine and morphine use at equivalent rates.

Although, parallels exist, there are also important differences between the nature of probation and medical or mental health treatment, not the least of which is how staff and clients are assigned. Unlike probationers who may be assigned to an officer arbitrarily, based on offense or risk level, or for administrative convenience (e.g., equalizing caseloads), medical patients often choose their physician and many mental health clients are at liberty in selecting a therapist. In any case, the current study did not allow for random assignment of staff. It is, therefore, important to recognize that other factors may account for the apparent influence of racial concordance.

Current probation roles show substantial racial diversity. Nationally, 45% of adults on probation are not White, including 29% who are African American and 13% who are Hispanic (Glaze & Bonczar, 2007). Limited by the absence of literature on racial matching in criminal justice, as well as the contradictory findings in other fields, the authors feel it would not only be premature but inappropriate to conclude that our results support matching probationers and officers on race and ethnicity. Rather, our findings reveal a need to further explore possible correlates between racial and cultural identity and the probationer-probation officer relationship.

NOTES

1. Jones (1996) provided a notable complement to this line of research. In a study of 15,044 North Carolina probationers facing revocation, 1,147 chose to serve out the remainder of their sentence under incarceration. Black males and those who had been serving an intensive supervision sentence were significantly more likely to elect incarceration over a community-based punishment.

2. Allen (1985) also provides evidence of probationers' views, but his study assessed perceptions of the goals of probation and suggestions for improving the system. His study did not report on probationers' opinions of their supervising officers.

3. A total of 379 surveys were distributed. Thirty-two were not included in the analysis because the respondent did not indicate they had ever met with a probation officer.

4. Only an English version of the questionnaire was available to participants, therefore those who could not read English were excluded. Accommodations to assist illiterate probationers were not available. Consequently, those probationers were also excluded.

5. The total number labeled as discordant was 52.

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