

Rethinking Recidivism: A Communication Approach to Prisoner Reentry

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Abstract

Prisoner reentry is one of the main criminal justice challenges confronting the United States, especially as the costs of recidivism and incarceration take increasing tolls on city and state budgets, and the effects of criminal activity are felt by families and local communities. Our goal in this article is to develop an alternative approach to prisoner reentry. Our contention is that many reentry efforts focus mainly on the visible effects of recidivism (e.g., parole violations, criminal behavior, and treatment compliance) but do not get at the underlying causes that lead to recidivism in the first place. While traditional methods of surveillance and control focus on the observable problems of recidivism, we argue that the underlying cause is a communication breakdown of being cut off from networks and meaningful relationships that provide the necessary social capital needed for successful reintegration. Therefore, we propose reframing prisoner reentry from a communication perspective, and developing subsequent communication solutions. We suggest that mentoring is one such communication solution, and we present a case study of a successful reentry mentoring program. Our case study uses a mixed research methodology, including quantitative data from a third-party assessment and qualitative data from in-depth interviews. Our key conclusions are that mentoring provides important communication links to enable coordinated service delivery for ex-prisoners, and that mentoring is a valuable conversational resource to help socially construct a favorable postrelease environment for successful reentry. Our target audience are those interested in prisoner reentry and reforming the overall criminal justice system.

Keywords

prisoner reentry, recidivism, communication, mentoring

Introduction

Prisoner reentry is a prevalent topic in contemporary discussions of criminal justice and public safety in the United States. Prisoner reentry involves all the activities and programs involved in helping former inmates integrate back into their communities and become productive members of society (Travis and Visser 2005). Prisoner reentry is not an optional strategy—it is an unavoidable result of incarceration because virtually all inmates will be released from prison (Petersilia 2004; Travis and Visser 2005). Interest in reentry efforts continues to grow as the costs of recidivism and

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incarceration take increasing tolls on city and state budgets, and the effects of criminal activity are felt by families and local communities. In 2008, the Federal Government brought much-needed attention and support to the issue of prisoner reentry with the passage of the Second Chance Act, which authorized \$165 million in grants to support reentry programs, and created a national reentry resource center to provide training and disseminate best practices. Across the political spectrum, there is widespread agreement that prisoner reentry is one of the main criminal justice challenges confronting the United States (Garland, Wodahl, and Mayfield 2011; Mears et al. 2006).

Prisoner reentry receives extensive attention from both academics and practitioners, and the details of previous studies and reports are well known (see Petersilia 2009; Stern and Carrel 2009; Travis 2005). Despite the diversity of stakeholders involved in the issue of prisoner reentry, there is surprising consensus about the basic storyline shaping today's reentry context. Beginning in the 1970s, our criminal justice system experienced major philosophical shifts away from the ideals of rehabilitation to more punitive approaches to crime centered on incarceration. Much of this was motivated by the "nothing works" approach to criminal justice that arose in response to Robert Martinson's (1974) research on prison reform. Other research at the time, such as James Q. Wilson's (1975) book *Thinking about Crime*, fueled the emerging "tough on crime" movement that would define criminal justice policies throughout the 1980s and 1990s and into the twenty-first century. This brought an unprecedented change toward using detention and incarceration as the principal strategies for public safety (Guy 2011) and ushered in a slew of new laws—mandatory minimums, truth-in-sentencing, zero-tolerance, three strikes—to "get tough" on crime. The result was a massive increase in the prison and jail population throughout the United States, which currently sits at about 2.5 million people (with nearly 7 million people under some form of supervision by the state)—more than a fourfold increase since 1973, despite only a 30 percent increase in the general population during that same time period. Of those currently in the system, 95 percent will be released, with most serving 12 months or less behind bars (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2012). They will return to their communities with significant disadvantages: restricted employment eligibility, limited access to welfare and other subsidies, the potential of terminated parental rights, and often untreated addictions and mental health issues. Two-thirds of them will violate the terms of their parole or commit another crime within three years of release (Langan and Levin 2002), sending them back to prison or jail at a tremendous cost to taxpayers and governments—state prison budgets are second only to Medicaid spending—as well as untold damage to families, local communities, and overall public safety (Trimbur 2009). Not only is there a massive increase in the number of people returning from prison, but these people have greater needs, receive less help, and face more restrictions than ever before (Petersilia 2004).

Thus, a consistent narrative about reentry emerges that is often repeated as the prologue for most publications and reports about prisoner reentry: In the United States, we have a large prison population, virtually all these prisoners will be released, most are unprepared to integrate back into society, former inmates face increased difficulties at every turn, most will commit additional crimes and be sent back to prison or jail, and the whole process is a huge burden on budgets and society. Therefore, we must improve our reentry efforts so former inmates can integrate back into their communities successfully. The question, of course, is how best to do this.

Accordingly, our purpose in this article is to address this question by developing an alternative approach to prisoner reentry. Our contention is that many reentry efforts focus mainly on the visible effects of recidivism (e.g., parole violations, criminal behavior, and treatment compliance) but do not get at the underlying causes that lead to recidivism in the first place. While traditional methods of surveillance and control focus on the observable problems of recidivism, we argue that the underlying cause is a *communication* breakdown of being cut off from networks and meaningful relationships that provide the necessary social capital needed for

successful reintegration. Therefore, we propose reframing prisoner reentry from a communication perspective, and thus are in need of corresponding communication solutions.

We develop this communication-based approach in contrast to conventional criminal justice perspectives that see recidivism as resulting from bad personal choices and flawed character. We highlight *mentoring* as a promising, but underutilized reentry strategy that is most in line with our communication approach to prisoner reentry. By applying insights from communication theory based on a *constitutive model of communication*, we develop an applied orientation toward prisoner reentry that illustrates how mentoring relationships create and restore the social fabric that is necessary for successful reintegration. We then present a case study of a successful reentry mentoring program, including interview data from participants and data from a third-party assessment report. We conclude with a discussion about the implications of our research and the value of mentoring for successful prisoner reentry. We begin by rethinking the notion of prisoner reentry to justify the development of our communication approach.

Rethinking Prisoner Reentry

Current policy discussions of prisoner reentry are dominated by the concept of recidivism—whether or not former inmates violate the terms of their parole, commit new crimes, and return to prison or jail. There is widespread agreement that recidivism is a major problem in today's criminal justice system: two-thirds of all prisoners released will be arrested again within three years, and more than half will be reincarcerated (Hughes and Wilson 2007). Many in the criminal justice system use these disparaging results to justify and expand punitive policies of surveillance and control, perpetuating a “recidivism reduction narrative” (Steen, Lacock, and McKinzey 2012) that presumes ex-prisoners are a threat to public safety and thus require continued retribution.

To date, most reentry programs and policies are administered through the criminal justice system, either at the state or local level. These include reentry courts, release preparation programs, and vouchers for services on release. Other efforts known as “intermediate sanctions” involve a host of options designed to balance the punitive impact between prison and parole, such as house arrest, electronic monitoring, day reporting centers, split sentences, and community service. Despite their ideological appeal, there is limited empirical evidence that these programs actually reduce criminal behavior, and the general conclusion is that they are not effective at reducing recidivism (Akers and Sellers 2004; Andrews et al. 1990; Lipsey and Cullen 2007; Martinez 2006). The problem is that these programs are concerned primarily with supervision and control—not rehabilitation—and they create a regulatory environment that increases the likelihood that people will recidivate based on technical violations, not criminal activity. Most former inmates are also required to pay for their own mandatory counseling and supervision, despite the higher barriers to income and employment that former inmates face (Burke 2001). Any misstep by the parolees (e.g., missing a child support payment or failing a drug test) constitutes a parole violation and could potentially send them back to prison. In this context, it is easy to see how even the most dedicated former inmates can fail to fulfill their obligations and thus recidivate. In fact, from 1980 to 1998, the number of people reincarcerated for violating parole or other conditions of their release increased sevenfold (Petersilia 2009).

Conversely, an alternative paradigm of *reintegration*—concerned more with the support for and rehabilitation of ex-prisoners—is emerging as a better way to approach prisoner reentry (Lynch 2006). Recent studies suggest that programs designed specifically to help ex-offenders reintegrate into local communities (e.g., vocational training, housing assistance) do a much better job of helping ex-prisoners achieve stability and self-sufficiency (Stafford 2006). Recidivism is consequently reduced, but more as an indirect effect of pursuing other tangible, positive outcomes (e.g., housing, sobriety), not from a direct concern with monitoring behavior to ensure

compliance. Examples include the Forever Free program located at the California Institution for Women (Wellisch, Patten, and Cao 2004), the Boston Reentry Initiative (Braga, Piehl, and Hureau 2009), New York's Community and Law Enforcement Resources Together (Jacobs and Western 2007), California's Preventing Parolee Crime Program (Zhang, Roberts, and Callahan 2006), and various Project HOPE programs administered in places like Hawaii, Utah, and Virginia. Yet most of these programs are still administered through the criminal justice system and often provide limited postrelease care, whereas current research demonstrates that desistance from crime happens predominantly away from the criminal justice system (Farrall 1995; Maruna and Toch 2005), and thus, programs will be more successful if they are community based and administered away from institutional settings (Petersilia 2004). Accordingly, other studies demonstrate that voluntary, community-based programs that enlist the service of "intermediaries" (Pager 2006) or "boundary spanners" (Pettus and Severson 2006) are effective at helping ex-prisoners meet their basic needs, especially regarding employment and housing. These programs include volunteers from faith-based organizations and dedicated case workers from nonprofit organizations; others involve family members as partners in the reentry process (Martinez 2006). Although this reintegration paradigm challenges current assumptions about punishment and surveillance in favor of rehabilitation and support, it has yet to impact most policy decisions, which still focus on recidivism reduction and retribution (Steen et al. 2012).

Why are these reintegration programs more effective at reducing recidivism, whereas conventional approaches of supervision and control are less successful? We argue that increased surveillance and control focus on the problems of recidivism but do not get at the underlying causes. On the surface, it may seem that the problem is simply a matter of parolees breaking the law who need to be disciplined and reincarcerated. But if supervision and control are not effective at reducing recidivism, perhaps mere disobedience is not the underlying cause. If we go deeper and ask *why* people violate parole, we get a more complicated picture involving the breakdown of relationships, trust, and connections within society. Simply put, former inmates are released into a difficult environment with overwhelming demands they are ill-prepared to meet, despite the best of their intentions.

Obedying the law is not simply a function of choosing not to commit crimes; it is also the result of having sufficient access to resources and opportunities—social capital—that make criminal activity unfavorable and less likely. Social capital develops through networks as people are connected to others who can provide information and mutual benefit (Bourdieu 1986). These webs of relationships have "collective value" (Putnam 2000) because they connect people to opportunities and information they otherwise would not have access to (e.g., employment and educational opportunities, information about raising kids or managing finances, and knowledge of how to navigate city government or the legal system). The concern for most ex-prisoners, however, is that incarceration has cut them off from networks that provide social capital, making it incredibly difficult to manage the complexities of postrelease life. Others never had these connections to begin with, which certainly influenced their criminal activity in the first place (i.e., social breakdowns often occur before—not just as a result of—incarceration). Therefore, we turn to communication theory to provide insights about the relational aspects of prisoner reentry, and we apply these theoretical insights to understand the value of reentry programs that emphasize mentoring and personal relationships.

Communication Theory and Prisoner Reentry: Applying a Constitutive Model of Communication

Although not always thought of as a traditional social science, the interdisciplinary field of communication has strong roots in socio-psychological and socio-cultural traditions of human

interaction (Craig 1999), with deep concerns for applied knowledge and a pragmatic approach to social issues (Craig and Tracy 1995). Currently the field is heavily influenced by a *constitutive model of communication* that theorizes communication as a dynamic social process that produces and reproduces the collective meanings that structure our social reality (Craig 2007). This is in contrast with a *transmission model of communication* that sees communication as merely a linear process of data transfer and message exchange. Simply put, a constitutive model is based on the claim that communication does not merely express but also creates social realities (Searle 1995). From a constitutive approach to communication, then, the main questions are of influence and possibility—what social realities are being produced and with what effect (Ashcraft, Kuhn, and Cooren 2009).

Basically, a constitutive approach to communication theorizes that our social realities are constituted in and through communication; there is no independent social reality that exists “out there” prior to human interaction. This perspective does not suggest a form of nominalism where the material world is only a matter of perception. Rather, the material world takes form as a social reality by the meanings we create and sustain through communication (Deetz 1992). A criminal act, for example, certainly exists independently of human perception. But whether this is indeed viewed as criminal (vs. justified), and whether the corresponding consequence is viewed as retributive (vs. rehabilitative) are all matters of interpretation based on human interaction and the social structures that enable certain interpretations to persist over others. Similarly, the realities of a parole hearing do not develop outside of communication and merely await expression, but rather come into being through communication as the meanings of key concepts like “compliance,” “progress,” or “sobriety” are negotiated and agreed on (or not) among key people involved.

In addition, a constitutive approach to communication claims that social realities *emerge* based on the context and quality of interactions; they are not reducible to individual actors or actions (Taylor and Van Every 2000). For example, a term such as “self-sufficiency” is not merely an individual characteristic of an ex-prisoner but rather an emergent property of a system of interactions and relationships that will be sustained (or not) based on the quality and consistency of those interactions. Thus, if we apply these insights from communication theory to the context of prisoner reentry, we will look to develop programs that foster and sustain quality interactions to constitute a favorable context for successful reintegration.

Practically speaking, what would this application look like? We believe that *mentoring* is a promising—but underutilized—reentry strategy that applies the insights of communication theory and exemplifies a constitutive model of communication. Reentry mentoring involves volunteers who work to build trusting relationships with former inmates through consistent, nonjudgmental support and guidance (Fletcher, Sherk, and Jucovy 2009). Previous research even indicates that a majority of ex-offenders would participate in a voluntary mentorship program if it were available (Morani et al. 2011). But despite their intuitive appeal, there are very few established reentry mentoring programs in the United States, and this type of mentoring has received virtually no attention in the extant research literature. The Ready4Work program and the corresponding report by Public/Private Ventures is a notable exception, though this program focuses exclusively on employment, and the report is primarily a how-to manual, not an academic investigation. On the rare occasion that mentoring is mentioned in previous research, it is usually a brief afterthought or an underdeveloped recommendation. For example, Clear, Rose, and Ryder’s (2001) thorough investigation of reentry ends with a list of specific recommendations, including “Matching ex-offenders to community mentors” (p. 346), yet no further analysis is provided. Similarly, the Urban Institute’s extensive report on prisoner reentry includes a brief sidebar recommendation to “involve local faith institutions that can facilitate mentoring support in the neighborhood to parolees and their family members” (p. 43), but again, no further explanation is offered. Thus, we do not have a strong conceptual foundation to ground a mentorship approach toward prisoner reentry,

nor do we have documentation of exemplar cases to inform applied research and practice. This is problematic because we need a much better understanding of prisoner reentry mentoring to justify continued pursuit of these programs and to guide future decisions and resource allocations.

Consequently, we transition to a case study of one of the few established reentry mentoring programs in the United States. We describe the background and operations of this organization and report on both quantitative and qualitative assessments of their program. We then discuss our findings in light of communication theory to develop an applied orientation toward prisoner reentry and the value of mentoring programs. We suggest that mentoring is an important application of communication theory to the context of prisoner reentry, and that a constitutive model of communication can help explain the value and success of reentry mentoring programs. We conclude with a discussion about the implications of our research and applying insights from communication theory to the context of prisoner reentry.

Case Study: FOCUS Reentry

Facilitating Offenders Seeking Uplifting Solutions (FOCUS) Reentry is a mentoring program operating in Boulder County, Colorado. FOCUS grew out of a community partnership among nonprofit organizations and religious congregations called “Restoring the Soul” (RTS) Faith and Community Partnerships. In 2004, the RTS advisory board became aware of an important gap in Boulder County social services: assisting ex-prisoners as they transition from jail back into society. Minimal resources existed for ex-prisoners, and navigating the criminal justice system was a formidable challenge for them. People often violated the terms of their parole or committed new crimes, thus returning to jail at a great financial burden to the County and personal cost to local communities. The RTS advisory board conducted some research about prisoner reentry and decided that a mentoring program for Boulder County jail inmates was the best way to improve the current system. The initial plan was presented to the Boulder County sheriff, who liked the idea and signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) supporting the program. The MOU specified the details of the FOCUS program and explained how mentors would complete a mandatory jail orientation and background check. The jail would also play an active role in determining eligible participants and matching mentors with inmates.

The first FOCUS mentor began volunteering in 2005. By 2008, there were more than a dozen mentors in the field, and ex-prisoners were “graduating” from the program (usually a one-year process). FOCUS began with a modest budget of \$12,000 as a line item in the broader RTS budget. Through various public and private funding sources, this budget has increased to approximately \$120,000. The money is used to pay salaries for the part-time executive director and part-time staff, fees for licensed therapists, miscellaneous training materials, and emergency needs for ex-prisoners. FOCUS now operates as part of a larger nonprofit umbrella organization called The Collaborative Community, which also oversees RTS. The Collaborative Community has a separate board that oversees both programs, although FOCUS has its own advisory council plus a review board. A local Presbyterian church gave FOCUS an office in their building to coordinate day-to-day operations, and also allows FOCUS to host many of the mentor training sessions at the church.

Program Philosophy and Procedures

FOCUS was created around the idea of empowering the self. For many ex-prisoners, their notions of self-empowerment have been eroded by the criminal justice system, substance abuse, destructive behavior patterns, lack of family and social support, and other circumstances of their upbringing. FOCUS believes that ex-prisoners need to take responsibility for their current decisions and actions—regardless of past experiences—to develop or restore a sense of self-empowerment. Mentors can help

facilitate this process, but FOCUS believes strongly that a nonaggressive, nonjudgmental approach is best. Mentors may help explore the implications of various decisions and ask open-ended questions that encourage reflection, but they are careful not to offer solutions without permission. The goal is to encourage ex-prisoners to develop their own strategies for accomplishing goals and overcoming obstacles. Advice and assistance are offered only if requested by the mentee.

This approach to mentoring is based on the principles of motivational interviewing, which is the cornerstone of FOCUS's mentor training. Motivational interviewing is an approach to counseling that focuses on exploring and resolving ambivalence to develop motivations that facilitate individual change (Rollnick and Miller 1995). It is one of the most established and widely disseminated counseling techniques, with an extensive amount of empirical support for its underlying principles (Miller and Rose 2009). Essentially, motivational interviewing is a collaborative conversation to strengthen a person's own motivation for and commitment to change. This conversation is based on four distinct principles: expressing empathy, supporting self-efficacy, rolling with resistance, and developing discrepancies. FOCUS mentors are trained in the basics of motivational interviewing during their initial 15-hour training sessions. FOCUS training also involves jail orientation and topical workshops, such as "Trends in Criminal Thinking" and "Mental Illness and Substance Abuse in the Offender Population."

After training is completed, mentors are paired with a current inmate who is approaching release and requests to be paired with a mentor. FOCUS tries to limit their involvement to inmates that have already pled guilty or have been sentenced, thus ensuring the inmates will remain in Boulder County long enough for the program to be beneficial. Mentors begin meeting with inmates at the jail on a weekly basis to develop rapport and start discussing a postrelease strategy (e.g., paperwork for entitlement programs, housing, employment, medication, and rehabilitation). Mentors often pick inmates up from jail to help them manage the critical first 24 hours after release. Many people are incarcerated in unfamiliar locales where they do not have social or family connections, and they are released with no access to transportation, income, shelter, or even appropriate clothing (people incarcerated during the summer might be released in the winter). Facing such an immediate deficit, it is incredibly tempting for ex-prisoners to quickly fall back into criminal activity and unfavorable behavior patterns. Mentors offer an invaluable service by providing a first point of contact on release and helping people through their initial transition. Mentors often drive former inmates to appointments and help them manage the overwhelming amount of paperwork and responsibilities that are necessary to comply with the terms of their release.

Mentors and mentees continue to meet on a weekly basis for approximately 12 months. Each signs an informal contract to define the partnership, though either party is free to terminate the agreement at any time. In addition to helping manage the details of the mentees postrelease responsibilities, the overall goal of these weekly meetings is "normalization." That is, demonstrating normal patterns of behavior and activity that are expected for successful reintegration. Mentors and mentees go out for meals, go hiking, go to the library, go shopping, do volunteer work, and so on. These activities encourage prosocial behaviors and provide a context for productive conversations. During the formal mentorship process, mentors file a weekly report to FOCUS (but not shared with anyone in the criminal justice system) and continue attending monthly training sessions. There is no official end to the mentorship agreement—FOCUS encourages a "soft close" where each partnership negotiates the next phase in their relationship. Some people move on, others continue simply as friends.

Third-Party Assessment

After six years of operation, anecdotal evidence and informal evaluations indicated that FOCUS was relatively successful. But as FOCUS continued to grow, the advisory board felt it

was necessary to have a third party conduct a formal assessment of the program. In 2011, FOCUS hired Northpointe—a nationally recognized criminal justice consulting and research firm—to evaluate the FOCUS Reentry mentorship program. Northpointe studied a sample of 22 FOCUS mentees and compared them with a control group of 22 additional ex-prisoners not involved with FOCUS. All subjects were drawn from a jail population in Boulder County, Colorado. The FOCUS group was given an intervention in the form of mentoring and the control group consisted of comparable subjects who applied to participate in the FOCUS program but could not be taken into the program because mentors were not available at the time (thus mitigating the self-selection bias mentioned above). Both groups were tracked for comparable amounts of time. On average, participants were involved in the FOCUS program for a little more than 10 months. Of these, 6 mentees completed the program, 8 were still participating at the time of the study, and 8 voluntarily withdrew from the program. Those who withdrew may have left for reasons beyond their control (e.g., moved elsewhere) and not necessarily because they were dissatisfied with the program.

Northpointe collected extensive data on all participants, some of which were available through the jail's database, whereas other information came from progress reports and surveys completed by FOCUS participants. This data covered things like access to housing, food, education, transportation, medical care, and substance abuse treatment. Perhaps most importantly, the Northpointe report tracked the number and type of new arrests for all participants in the study. Numerous statistical tests were performed to explore the differences between the treatment and control groups and assess the effectiveness of the FOCUS program. A full reporting of these statistical analyses is beyond our purposes in this study, but two important results are worth highlighting. First, the number of new arrests during the evaluation period was much larger for the control group than for the FOCUS group. There were 26 new arrests in the control group and 9 new arrests in the FOCUS group. Second, all of the new arrests in the FOCUS group were for misdemeanors or petty offenses, whereas 7 of the new arrests in the control group were for felonies. Overall, the recidivism rate for the FOCUS group (9 new arrests, 0 felony offenses) was significantly lower than the recidivism rate for the comparable group of control participants (26 new arrests, 7 felony offenses). The Northpointe report concludes, "The large time commitments by the mentors and mentees no doubt contributed to the effectiveness of the intervention" (p. 28).

Interviews with FOCUS Mentors and Mentees

In addition to the quantitative assessment provided by Northpointe, we sought to gain a deeper understanding of FOCUS Reentry by talking to individuals involved in the program. We wanted to hear stories and examples of the mentoring program to better comprehend its value. We conducted 10 in-depth interviews with FOCUS participants—six mentors and four mentees. Of the mentors, five were female and one was male. Of the mentees, two were female and two were male. All interview participants were Caucasian and between the ages of 30 and 60. All mentees had been in jail for felony convictions and had served multiple sentences of various lengths. Two mentees were still formally involved in the mentorship program, the other two had "graduated" but still continued to meet with their former mentor on an informal but consistent basis. All mentors had been involved with FOCUS for at least two years and all had worked with multiple mentees in the past. In all, 9 interviews were conducted face-to-face at local coffee shops; 1 interview was conducted over the phone. Interviews ranged from 28 to 47 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis, resulting in 88 pages of single-spaced text. All interviewees were given pseudonyms in our analysis below.

We developed two broad questions to guide the analysis for this part of the case study. First, how do interviewees understand and experience the FOCUS program? Second, what is the nature of the

mentor-mentee relationship in this context of prisoner reentry? Working from these two questions, we analyzed the data using a basic qualitative thematic analysis. Throughout the analysis, we followed the precepts of the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990) by “comparing (a) data with data, (b) data with category, (c) category with category, and (d) category to concept” (Bryant and Charmaz 2007, p. 607). We used the qualitative analysis software, NVivo 8, to organize the data and structure the coding process for this study.

We began by using an open, emic coding scheme to explore the participants’ conceptualizations of their “communicative actions” in relation to the FOCUS program (Lindlof and Taylor 2002, p. 80). During this first step, we assigned each thought, idea, word(s), and sentence(s) a representative code or theme. The initial round of open coding yielded 24 codes. Then, we engaged in several rounds of axial coding to help draw links between categories, create new categories, and rename or collapse categories where the data deemed it appropriate (Strauss and Corbin 1998; see also Charmaz 2006). The axial coding process revealed four categories in response to our first question and six categories in response to our second question.

Results of Interview Data Analysis

Our first research question sought to explore how interviewees understand and experience the FOCUS program. Data analysis revealed four core characteristics: FOCUS Reentry is *flexible*, *voluntary*, *independent*, and *supportive*. Second, we wanted to understand the nature of the mentor-mentee relationship within the specific context of prisoner reentry. Our analysis revealed that the mentors situate and resituate themselves along a continuum ranging from *friend* to *parent* as they enact their various roles, which include *support*, *empower*, *navigate*, *engage*, *detect*, and *protect*. We explain these themes and provide representative quotes below.

Characteristics that Explain How People Understand and Experience FOCUS

Flexible. The interviewees provided several examples that highlight the flexible structure of rules within the FOCUS organization. While FOCUS has several guidelines that they try to establish in the mentor-mentee relationships (e.g., the pair signs a tentative agreement to meet for one year), the guidelines are adaptable based on individual needs and circumstances. For instance, mentees Dolly, Grant, and Jim all said their relationships ended naturally without an artificial stopping point after one year. As Jim explained,

We just realized we were friends. It was like, we’re not going to go anywhere. He’s in my phone, we still keep in touch, still go out to lunch. I still definitely see him as a mentor for me. If I have specific questions career-wise, profession-wise, I call him up.

Even though the official mentoring relationship seemingly ended, Jim still kept in touch with his mentor. A mentee named Delaney also highlighted the flexibility of the FOCUS program. When asked about what is required to remain eligible, Delaney explained that FOCUS does not establish strict rules and guidelines for participation:

They’re very patient. They understand addiction. They understand that it’s an uphill battle to get back into life again after you’ve had trouble and problems with something like that. I’ve had some problems with my recovery and they don’t set any laws against, like, you can’t have a relapse or else you’re out of the program. They understand the issues. They really—I’m pretty amazed that they understand as well as they do, that they know that it’s such a struggle for people.

While FOCUS does have a written contract, it is not enforced strictly, thus contributing to the flexibility of the program.

Voluntary. In addition to this flexible structure, FOCUS is also characterized by its voluntary nature. Nearly all of the mentors and mentees talked about the importance of this characteristic. Fundamentally, FOCUS is a voluntary program. Incarcerated individuals choose to sign up for the program of their own volition, and mentors willingly serve the organization with no possibility of financial gain. A mentor named Dana explained that by enlisting volunteer mentors,

The focus is way more on really being a help and less on people's egos, less on where I'm going to go from here, less on financial gain, and more the focus can really be on the healing aspect.

A mentee named Jim echoed Dana's comments stating that if there had been lots of requirements and forced regulations, he would have "cut loose of it." Finally, a mentee named Randy stressed that he never felt forced to participate in any capacity; all of his actions were voluntary:

I felt like it was always my choice. I could say yes or no. They [the FOCUS administrators] asked me to come to a couple of their meetings. I did not feel any sort of obligations, like, "OK, they gave me a mentor; I have to go to this." They presented it in such a way as, "We'd like to have you there if you want to be there. We'd really appreciate it." That was it. There were no more reminders. They just asked me if I wanted to go and if I wanted to speak.

Overwhelmingly, the interviewees cited the voluntary nature of FOCUS as being one of the key components of the program's success.

Independent. Several interviewees mentioned that FOCUS is a unique organization in that it is distinctly separate from "the system" (i.e., correctional facilities and external monitoring systems like parole). The separateness of the organization was a selling point for the mentees. They were able to see FOCUS mentors as people who wanted to help them through their reentry process as opposed to simply monitor their transition. As Dolly, a FOCUS mentor for several years, explained,

It's a really unique relationship. It really allows for a kind of a trust and a kind of a building of a relationship that I don't think most of the people we deal with have ever had before. We're not part of the system. We have no past with these people. We may not have a future with these people. We're there in a moment of time when they have made a really critical decision to make some changes in their lives.

A mentor named Paige concurred with Dolly's observations and explained that one of the key elements of the mentoring role is that they are not connected to the system, but rather, they are solely there to support the former inmates in their transition. Mentors do not report any information to the parole board or the courts. Mentees like Randy greatly appreciated the independence of FOCUS. He described how he felt both surprised and appreciative when he learned that FOCUS was unlike a traditional, parole monitoring organization. The interviewees emphasized that the independence of FOCUS from the criminal justice system was key to recruiting willing mentee volunteers.

Supportive. Finally, FOCUS as an organization is supportive of both its mentees and mentors. They support their mentees by focusing on their individual needs and their mentors by equipping

and empowering them for success. Again, Dolly's comment clearly highlights the lengths that FOCUS is willing to go to meet individual mentee needs:

If you have a substance abuse problem, you need to have some kind of support group, either you need to be in AA or Women in Sobriety. We've had a couple of people, and I can respect this completely, they don't want to be in one of those groups because they feel like, "Now I'm surrounded by other people that want to party." We have some psychologists on staff that we can arrange for them to have a one-on-one weekly with them. That's one of the requirements.

As Dolly explained, when mentees have individualized needs, FOCUS will do everything they can to meet those needs. Similarly, FOCUS attempts to both equip their mentors in training and empower them by listening to and implementing their thoughts and ideas. In terms of equipping mentors, Martin, Dana, and Tiffany discussed the extensive and continuing training opportunities that FOCUS offered. Dana talked about her appreciation for learning the skills of motivational interviewing, whereas Tiffany talked about the varied meeting content. She explained that the meetings are sometimes focused on training and other times focused on sharing stories and encouraging one another.

Focus not only trains and equips their mentors; they also listen to and empower them to share ideas. Dana's example illustrates the positive outcomes of true mentor empowerment:

For instance, we were at a meeting with all the paid staff . . . and someone brought up the topic of, when a mentor goes to prison, we lose all contact . . . So right there in the meeting, we changed the rule. Which is unheard of in organizations. Usually there is so much bureaucracy, so much fear, so much liability . . . It's unheard of. It's very fluid, and it's very, very client-centered. And the people in power believe the volunteers. Which is another really unusual quality.

In sum, the FOCUS Reentry mentoring program displays four key characteristics. The organization has *flexible* rules, regulations, and guidelines that can change based on need. The mentors and the mentees participate in the organization *voluntarily*. Moreover, FOCUS is an *independent* entity that is still able to work with the criminal justice system to see the most effective reintegration results. Finally, FOCUS is *supportive* of the individual needs to its mentees and equips and empowers its volunteers. Simply put, in the words of one FOCUS mentor, "it's the kind of organizational that does magical stuff" (Dana). This "magic" would not be possible without the unique relationship that exists between mentors and mentees. Next, we look specifically at the nature of the mentor-mentee relationship in the FOCUS Reentry program.

The FOCUS Mentor-Mentee Relationship

The interviewees in this case study described all different kinds of mentor-mentee relationships. Most often, these relationships were represented as fluid, cocreated, and continuously negotiated. The interviewees categorized their relationships as being on a continuum between friendship-based interactions and a traditional parent-child relationship. The nature of the relationship depended on the people and contexts involved, and often changed over time and in response to specific situations.

The interviewees characterized a *parental* relationship as one where the mentor corrected, monitored, advised, and protected the mentee. For instance, Chantel shared her mentor's parental advice in the following excerpt:

[My mentor will say] “We’re going to court tomorrow. You need to settle down. You need to dress down. Put your hair in a ponytail. Please don’t try and look cute.” She’ll offer advice like that in a parenting way.

At the other end of the continuum, interviewees talked about the mentor-mentee relationships as *friendships*. Friendships were characterized by buddy-type interactions where the pair would sit and visit over coffee and just contemplate life. As Mikayla explained,

Eventually the time will come, probably, that she [my mentee] won’t need me anymore, but I would think we would stay friends, because I consider her as a friend and she considers me as a friend. We’re very honest with one another. We have, in my opinion, a really good relationship.

More often than not, interviewees cited examples that typified parent- and friendship-based interactions. One mentor explained that he pushes his mentee often to a breaking point “when something needs to get done,” but that in the end, their friendship remains strong (Martin).

To have constructive mentor-mentee relationships, interviewees told us it was important for mentors to have a good understanding of their role and what they needed to offer in any given situation. The key roles for mentors that emerged from our interview data were *support*, *empowerment*, *navigation*, *engagement*, *detection*, and *protection*. This part of our analysis is summarized in Table 1, which lists and defines six roles and includes representative quotes.

In summary, our interview data from FOCUS mentors and mentees demonstrate that they experience the program as flexible, voluntary, independent, and supportive. These characteristics are what the participants believe make FOCUS Reentry both distinct and successful, and separate the FOCUS program from other reentry efforts described in previous literature. In addition, the mentor-mentee relationship can be characterized on a continuum from friend to parent as mentors enact various roles, which include support, empowerment, navigation, engagement, detection, and protection. In addition to the quantitative third-party assessment described above, these qualitative results provided a well-rounded case study of the FOCUS Reentry program. We conclude with a discussion about the implications of our research.

Discussion

The purpose of our research is to develop a better understanding of prisoner reentry by exploring the underlying causes that influence recidivism. Using insights from communication theory—based on a constitutive model of communication—we argue for a communication approach toward prisoner reentry that focuses on the need to foster and sustain quality interactions to establish a favorable context for successful reintegration. Our central argument is that prisoner reentry is fundamentally a communication issue, rooted in the need to access information and social connections that enable successful reintegration. We also suggest that mentoring is an effective reentry strategy because it is most in line with the underlying communication issues that are at the heart of recidivism. The present case study of a successful reentry mentoring program demonstrates how this kind of program works and illustrates the value it creates for the participants. We conclude by returning to communication theory to discuss several applied conclusions about the value of reentry mentoring.

Table 1. Six Key Roles that Mentors Enact.

Mentor role	Definition	Representative quote
Support	Encourage the mentees and provide them with the social support necessary for success Listen to mentees and engage motivational interviewing techniques to help them think through decisions	<i>And I also gave her someone to talk with and connect with at what seemed to be a very tumultuous, wanting-to-run time in her life, so giving her encouragement to hang in there, continually shining the light on the end of the tunnel, and pointing out her basic goodness and how she could use her basic goodness to hang in there. And what the ramifications would be if she didn't.—Mentor Dana</i>
Empower	Encourage mentees to be self-sufficient Advocate for the mentees' in the court system, with future employers, and other circumstances as needed	<i>There are so many theories on how to help people break that criminal cycle. I have my own opinions. But it does seem to me that you're not going to affect any change with just some rehabilitation program train somebody to be an electrician. You're not going to effect change by giving people everything they need to survive. You're only going to effect change if you help people change the way they see the world and the way they see themselves in the world. And if you're retraining them to be an electrician but you never tell them honesty and integrity and character and other people matter, the things you do affect other people—if they don't ever understand that, it doesn't matter how much education or rehabilitation programs there are.—Mentor Dolly</i>
Navigate	Aid the mentees in completing all of the paperwork necessary to successfully reintegrate Provide other forms of logistical support such as rides to appointments and other meetings	<i>She even went and had my glasses fixed for me, different things like that. Once I got out, I called her and she got me fixed up with a place to stay and went with me to the shelter and I got into the program there. And then she started taking me to Housing and Human Services. She's taken me to various places. I was trying to really remember where-all she's taken me . . . She's done a lot for me. And it makes a big difference, because when you get out of jail, you just walk out the door and if there's no one there to pick you up, you're just on your own. I didn't have a home, I didn't have a place to go, I didn't have anyone to help me. I seriously don't think I would have made it without those guys.—Mentee Delaney</i>
Engage	Interact with mentees on a social level Spend time in conversation to build relationships	<i>I think that kayaking trip was really memorable to both of us. We went up to Gross Reservoir. We took my dog. I've got a Portuguese water dog. My dog rides on the front of the kayak. We're both in a kayak. We get out in the middle of Gross Reservoir and it was a thunderstorm. Oh, my God, it was just really bad! So we paddled back to shore, and we were laughing and laughing. We get on the shore and we're totally drenched, and we have to get the kayaks back on top of the car and get the wet dog in the car. She has such a good sense of humor, and she was laughing and laughing. That wouldn't have happened with everybody. Some people would have been really pissed.—Mentor Paige</i>
Detect	Be attuned to mentee deception in conversations Identify dangerous situations for mentees	<i>Ask a few more questions and not just on the surface believe all the things that are being said . . . Quite frankly, the majority of the people that we work with, they've spent a lifetime perfecting deception and manipulation. Most of the time you can see through it very clearly, and unless you care enough about the person to call them on it, they think they're getting away with stuff. What they don't realize is, everybody else is just exhausted with their lies and manipulation.—Mentor Dolly</i>
Protect	Protect yourself and your mentee from physical and psychological harm and manipulation	<i>The one thing that really stood out with the first guy, and one of the reasons I didn't see him so much after that relationship ended, is that I felt like he kind of played me a little bit . . . I got to know him, I thought, really well. I actually testified for him in court at his parole hearing. His ex-wife was there with a lawyer to make the case against him. And there was me and another of his old neighbors that were there testifying for his character. And I did, and then the judge talked about the initial crime and he basically said it was one of the worst cases of spousal abuse he'd ever seen, and the pictures were really damaging. He did grant the parole, but I felt kind of—I don't know what I would have said had I known the extent of what really happened. I kind of trusted him on that. That was a mistake. I felt burned.—Mentor Grant</i>

Applied Conclusions

Looking beyond the visible behaviors of ex-prisoners, we see a host of deeper communication problems that are the underlying causes of recidivism. When we frame the issue of prisoner reentry in terms of communication, we gain two important insights to help us understand the value of mentoring as an effective reentry strategy: Mentors function as *communication links* to enable *coordinated service delivery* and mentors are *conversational resources* to help ex-prisoners *socially construct* a favorable postrelease environment. We expand on these below.

First, a communication perspective highlights the importance of connections among service providers to enable coordinated service delivery for ex-prisoners. Consistent with the reintegration paradigm explained above, many service providers now acknowledge the need for “wrap-around services” (Raphael 2011) that begin while people are still incarcerated and continue well after release until stability and self-sufficiency have been achieved. However, wraparound service is not possible without communication and coordination across organizations, and few agencies have the incentive or the responsibility to provide this kind of comprehensive care. Prisons and jails generally are not concerned with ex-prisoners after they are released—responsibility now lies with the individual, not the system. Likewise, parole boards and supervisory agencies are largely focused on compliance, and violations are seen as failures of ex-prisoners, not problems inherent to the postrelease process. In addition, one of the biggest challenges for ex-prisoners is the fragmentation of social services and parole obligations necessary for successful reentry. Postrelease involves a complicated arrangement of responsibilities to a variety of disconnected agencies, making these obligations very difficult for ex-prisoners to achieve despite their best intentions (Hanrahan, Gibbs, and Zimmerman 2005). Requirements for employment, housing, and rehabilitation, for example, often have conflicting schedules, separate reporting agencies, and necessitate transportation resources most former inmates simply do not have. The strategy of wraparound services needed for successful reentry is often at odds with the prevailing ethos of supervision and control, as well as the independent operations of most agencies and departments in the criminal justice system. Ironically, the very type of service coordination and support needed to ensure successful reintegration is exactly what our current criminal justice and postrelease systems seem designed to discourage.

However, mentors can function as *communication links* to enable the coordination needed for wraparound service. Mentors are not beholden to any particular agency or service provider; they can keep their eye on the entire process for a mentee to ensure that responsibilities are met and obligations are fulfilled. Similarly, mentors facilitate information sharing across agencies that otherwise might not happen. For instance, FOCUS mentors often made phone calls to parole officials, the courts, or housing administrators to provide updates about their mentees and confirm the details of their responsibilities. This enabled people to have a better understanding of the mentee’s situation so they could adapt their services and provide more effective assistance. Without mentors, this type of information sharing is less likely because people are not required to coordinate with other organizations or agencies. But mentors provide the extra energy and motivation needed to make links across a disconnected system (or the extra encouragement to help ex-prisoners make these connections themselves), helping to constitute a level of coordination and wraparound service that is necessary for successful reintegration.

Second, a communication perspective can change how we think about the postrelease environment of ex-prisoners. One of the most important aspects of successful reintegration is a favorable postrelease environment, a context that both enables and encourages progress toward constructive reentry. A key insight from communication theory is that this postrelease environment is *socially constructed*, not just given a priori. That is, our social worlds are constituted by our communication practices—they do not merely “exist” apart from human interaction. Seeing

the postrelease environment as socially constructed does not, however, mean that material reality is unimportant (i.e., it's all perception). Rather, various material realities only have meaning in and through communication. Therefore, the postrelease environment for ex-prisoners must be created and actively maintained, not just accepted as is. Mentoring plays a key role in how this meaning is created and sustained for ex-prisoners, and whether or not they develop meanings that constitute a favorable postrelease environment.

Mentors are valuable *conversational resources* to support ex-prisoners in this process of social construction. If our social realities are constituted by our patterns of interaction, then it is vital that we have people to communicate with to make sense of our current situation and envision a new future. Productive sensemaking happens when we are able to process our understandings with other people and see how our ideas unfold (Weick 1995). Unfortunately, most ex-prisoners face a "communication deficit" because they have so few people in their lives who provide a safe context for meaningful and constructive dialogue. Conversations are important sites for reflection, insight, and innovation, but many ex-prisoners lack sufficient access to this valuable resource. So many former inmates are caught in a generational cycle of incarnation and need people to talk to who will help reconstruct a new version of "normal" to guide their postrelease life. This is where mentoring can help. By providing more opportunities for conversations, mentorship offers ex-prisoners a context for processing the uncertainties and frustrations of postrelease life—and not just more conversation per se, but particular kinds of conversations that are reflexive and transformative—consistent with the tenants of motivational interviewing explained above. Mentorship also multiplies the amount of sensemaking interactions ex-prisoners engage in, thereby increasing the chances that constructive solutions will emerge. In addition, mentorship conversations provide ex-prisoners opportunities for safe expression, such as venting about a boss without hurting their employment prospects, or admitting to struggles with sobriety that will not be reported to parole officials. Thus, a key application of communication theory is finding ways to increase the conversational resources for ex-prisoners so they can socially construct a favorable postrelease environment. Mentorship is an important part of this process.

Limitations

Despite these valuable conclusions, this study is not without limitations. First, the FOCUS program itself has caveats that should be mentioned, including self-selection bias and the potential for manipulation. The voluntary nature of the program adds a level of "self-selection bias" (Latimer, Dowden, and Muise 2005) to the program because the inmates involved have already demonstrated a willingness to seek help. This makes program assessment difficult because ideal treatment and control groups cannot be created—forcing inmates to participate in a mentorship program would be counter to the philosophy of mentoring. However, this problem can be mitigated by comparing inmates who participate in a mentoring program with inmates who did not, yet were still eligible and willing to participate. The third-party assessment we described above takes this approach. In addition, there is always a concern that ex-prisoners could manipulate the mentors and take advantage of the program (consider the excerpt above in Table 1 about the mentor who felt "burned" after he testified at his mentee's parole hearing). FOCUS is aware of this possibility, and mentors are trained on how to respond to and avoid manipulation as best they can. Mentors are also taught not to be too idealistic. The mentors learn that many ex-prisoners have developed an approach to life that is adversarial and manipulative; the former inmates need to develop new ways of thinking, and change will be slow. Furthermore, the FOCUS program is set up in such a way that manipulation serves little purpose. FOCUS is voluntary, and mentors do not report to the criminal justice system, so there is little to gain from manipulation. Mentors are free to end the relationship at any time, so ex-prisoners know that if

their mentor feels manipulated she or he may just walk away. Finally, FOCUS recognizes that mentoring has its limits and some people simply will not be compatible with a mentoring relationship.

We should also note an important qualification about the scope of the FOCUS program. FOCUS is implemented within a county jail setting, whereas much of the reentry literature centers on people returning from prison. We not only recognize the significance of this distinction but also suggest that the results of our research demonstrate the initial success of the FOCUS program and the overall value of mentoring as a reentry strategy. The mentoring approach of FOCUS is justified because it adheres to many of the best practices articulated in the prisoner reentry literature, including social support, cognitive/behavioral modeling, positive reinforcement, community involvement, and distance from institutional settings (Petersilia 2004). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that mentoring programs like FOCUS could be successful in prison contexts for a number of ex-offenders. Accordingly, an important next step for this line of research is to evaluate if alternative strategies like FOCUS exhibit strong correlations between “program integrity” (Lowenkamp, Latessa, and Smith 2006) and reductions in recidivism.

Another limitation of this study is that the FOCUS program does not fully adhere to the “risk principle” of prisoner reentry, an established best practice that suggests higher levels of treatment and intervention should be reserved for higher-risk cases (Andrews et al. 1990; Lowenkamp, Latessa, and Hollsinger 2006). The Boulder County jail does not allow high-risk inmates to participate in the FOCUS program—people with histories of sustained violence, profound mental illness, or histories of sexual offense are ruled ineligible because they require more specialized and intensive care than FOCUS can offer. However, the FOCUS program does indirectly support the risk principle because it frees up resources so the Boulder County jail can devote more attention to high-risk inmates.

Finally, we acknowledge that our interview data come from a small sample and is not necessarily generalizable to all ex-prisoners or other mentoring programs (although we certainly expect that similar themes would be prevalent in other contexts). However, generalizability is not the primary goal of in-depth qualitative research. Instead, we sought to provide a detailed explanation of the “lived experience” (Koschmann 2012) of the participants to enhance our understanding of prisoner reentry mentoring.

Supporting Mentorship Programs

Despite the value that mentors can provide, there are few established mentorship programs in the United States, and they are usually seen as a peripheral luxury to an already overburdened and underfunded criminal justice system. Instead, we suggest that mentorship should play a much more central role in the prisoner reentry process and should be a funding priority for foundations and other grant providers, especially since mentoring does a better job of addressing the underlying causes of recidivism instead of just reacting to visible effects. Of course, the strength of mentoring programs is that they are not part of the criminal justice system, so we are not suggesting that the courts or parole agencies develop mentorship programs. Instead, local and state governments should explore ways to fund mentorship programs in ways that preserve their independence. This could involve grants or contracts to pay operating costs, staff salaries, or training materials, as well as funds to reimburse mentors for various expenses (e.g., travel and meals). One of the biggest challenges for FOCUS is recruiting new volunteer mentors, especially men. Additional resources could be used to improve recruiting efforts to reach more potential volunteers and support their development.

Funds could also be allocated to existing nonprofit organizations to encourage them to develop a mentorship program, rather than creating a new entity from scratch. Money could be reallocated from less-successful programs administered through the criminal justice system to mentoring programs that promise more successful reentry outcomes. Even when additional funding is not possible, the criminal justice system can still support mentoring programs by giving mentors access to inmates prior to release and cooperating with program representatives to handle administrative details. Whatever the case, local and state governments should find more ways to support mentorship programs as part of a comprehensive prisoner reentry strategy. The partnership between FOCUS Reentry and the Boulder County Jail is one such example to provide a best-practice model for other communities.

Conclusion

In response to the “nothing works” movement that transformed the criminal justice system, we can confidently say that mentoring does in fact work—in terms of reducing recidivism and fostering successful reintegration. Mentoring is not a panacea for all ex-prisoners, but it can be effective for many former inmates and thus alleviate some of the stress on government budgets and public safety caused by recidivism. Mentoring provides a supportive context to offset the punitive and controlling aspects of the criminal justice system and increases the chances that ex-prisoners will reintegrate into society more successfully. Therefore, this study contributes to the “knowledge construction” efforts (Cullen and Gendreau 2001) of those working to demonstrate what works in prisoner reentry.

Furthermore, it is not only the services that mentors provide that create their value but also the nature of their position. Mentorship programs are voluntary for ex-prisoners, and mentors themselves are volunteers. This reduces the implicit adversarial relationship that comes with mandatory postrelease requirements and encourages a sense of motivation and ownership in the mentoring process. In addition, mentors are not formally part of the criminal justice system and do not have allegiance to any particular agency. They are seen as supporters and advocates, not proxies of supervision and control. Mentors usually represent nonprofit or faith-based organizations that operate independently and are not bound to the bureaucratic obligations of the criminal justice system. This means mentors can offer a level of flexibility and personalized service that former inmates need to make progress. Mentorship programs do not necessarily provide the specific services needed for reentry, but their unique position facilitates a level of coordination among service providers that enables the type of wraparound care that is necessary for successful reintegration.

The success of reentry mentoring is not based on a whim, but rather coincides with key insights from communication theory, which helps explain the value of mentoring as a reentry strategy and provides a theoretical foundation for further investigation. Communication theory—based on a constitutive model of communication—has important applications for prisoner reentry: seeing the importance of communication links to enable coordinated service delivery and understanding the value of conversational resources to socially construct a favorable postrelease environment. These applications of communication theory are thus consistent with the overall ethos of applied social science to make an impact on the daily life of communities, people, and organizations.

Finally, the FOCUS Reentry mentorship program profiled in our case study provides a poignant example of this impact in the lives of people like Anthony. He hit rock bottom after the accidental death of his young child and turned to a life of drugs and crime in the midst of his despair. For several years, he was in and out of jail and overwhelmed by the demands of parole

and the criminal justice system. But eventually, he got connected with a FOCUS Reentry mentor and began to restore his life. He is now out of jail with stable housing and employment, he is clean and sober, and has repaired the broken relationships with his family. As Anthony explained,

FOCUS has kept me from reentering [jail], absolutely, positively, without a doubt. They provided that foundation. I had a solid place to step, and today I still step on that solid place, and I say, "Thank you, Lord," because somebody sent those people to me. I didn't do it myself. There's a reason they found me, and there's a reason they've held on to me, and there's a reason I've stayed out of jail, and that's FOCUS.

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