

Precursors to Probation and Parole Agent Intent to Send Informational, Emotional, and Esteem Social Support Messages to Female Clients

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The Importance of Knowing the Content and Predictors of the Messages that Probation and Parole Agents Would Like to Send to Women they Supervise

- Probation and Parole agents can be important members of women clients' social networks
- Agents can provide different types of social support to women clients, but we don't know what types they provide most and least often. Knowing this might alert types of support that they underutilize when they talk to clients.
- Documentation of agent predispositions and client characteristics that predict the type of support agents want to communicate can be helpful to agents and the agencies where they work. Documenting this information allows for assessments of whether intended communication is likely to address the needs of clients.

Who did we study?

Thirty-two probation and parole agents reported on what they wanted to communicate to 272 women they had supervised for about three months. Most (87%) of the agents were women. They included about equal numbers of Black and White agents, and a few who identified as Hispanic or Native American. For the 272 clients, almost 50 percent were White, and about one third were Black, and just over 20 percent described themselves as multiracial.

What was the message that agents most often wanted to communicate to the women?

Agents indicated that they wanted to send a particular message for just 51 percent of clients. From the most to the least often type of message, they wanted to provide:

- Information support, such as advice and suggestions
- Emotional support such as encouraging words
- Esteem support, such as providing complements

Agent predispositions and client characteristics predictive of the desired message

- Agents most often wanted to provide informational support in the form of suggestions and advice to women who had extensive criminal histories and who had antisocial attitudes. They least often wanted to provide informational support to women who had educational strengths.
- Agents who used a conversational rather than a conformity approach to talking with clients were most likely to provide them with emotional support. Conversational communication encourages all parties to express their opinions. Conformity communication emphasizes agreement with the person in authority.

Implications for practice

Agents can plan the messages to their clients that prior research has shown to be most helpful to the recipient.

- Information support is most effective when the agent or the client have control over solving a problem.
- Emotional and esteem support are most effective when the agent and the client have limited or no control.
- Agents can base their decisions about the messages to plan and send according to the level of control the agent and client have over the problem.

A conversational pattern of communication is the “best fit” for providing emotional support.

Agents can also consider whether a client’s criminal history and education level are appropriate characteristics to use in deciding the type of support they will provide. Other client characteristics might be important to consider.