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Brief Literature Review on Conscientiousness and Responsivity to CBI Programming

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Criminal justice systems across the nation are beginning to emphasize rehabilitative approaches to corrections. In particular, a burgeoning subdiscipline for clinicians and academics is how individual differences contribute to cognitive-behavioral intervention (CBI) programming for moderate-risk offenders when measured in terms of recidivism rates. CBI is a style of rehabilitation that emphasizes changing clients' thoughts (cognitions), emotions (affects), and behaviors within a variety of "high-risk" situations that may otherwise motivate a person to snap and behave antisocially, or even criminally. The general area that this falls into is evaluative research of rehabilitative programming, which targets persons who are being or who have been processed by the criminal justice system. This topic is of consequence to its general research area because criminal justice professionals need to know what works in order to provide effective interventions to offenders. Without evidence-based programming that is known to benefit offenders, the criminal justice system runs the risk of offenders continuing to commit crimes, get incarcerated, and begin the entire criminal justice process anew while wasting tax dollars on ineffective interventions. When administered properly, CBI programming can be utilized both during served sentences and after reintegration into society so that ex-offenders can have a smoother transition into society as they maneuver through other social obstacles like housing.

By studying if individual differences (e.g. personality traits) contribute to specific responsivity, programming can be determined to be ineffective for the general population and redesigned in a manner that is beneficial for the largest number of clients. To that end, this literature review provides a conceptual foundation for potential future studies, based on what previous researchers have found in their own studies. With this knowledge, future researchers will be better equipped to make sense of findings once they analyze their data and offer salient recommendations for programmers on how to optimize their intervention and for researchers to guide what constructs and dynamics should be studied next.

Upon reading the extant corpus on my general area of interest, it became apparent that other academics have already been intrigued by questions of programming efficacy. Despite the theoretical strengths of CBI in explaining human behavior through the perspective that risky cognitions and emotions that can be replaced with more prosocial ones through conditioning, such programming has not always found success. A critical study to this effect looked at a particular type of CBI known as aggression replacement training (ART) to see whether it reduced recidivism rates in adult offenders. ART has many similarities with general CBI curricula as it emphasizes behavioral rehabilitation through its modules of "skillstreaming" as well as affective rehabilitation with its anger control modules (though general CBI tends to address other maladaptive affects as well). ART's key difference with general CBI, however, comes in its approach to cognitive rehabilitation, since ART focuses on moral reasoning,

whereas general CBI tends to take a more descriptive and utilitarian approach towards prosocial and antisocial cognitions, with morality only tangentially being referenced during “roadmapping” of “risky” and “replacement” thoughts (Goldstein et al 2016: 16-19).

The findings of the ART study were that the program did not generally reduce recidivism rates for all offenders, but that those who did go through ART had slightly lower recidivism rates than those who did not (Lardén et al 2018: 485). These findings are important, as they suggest that CBI is better than nothing, but that there are lurking variables that seem to moderate its effectiveness for many offenders. This study’s primary limitation is that it does not address what those lurking variables might be; it simply infers that they may exist based on the study’s results. The question of what is contributing to program efficacy is one that can be empirically answered by future research, particular by studies that would look at how personality traits contribute to reduced recidivism rates after going through CBI programming.

Despite the shortcomings of the Lardén study, lurking variables have been analyzed by the specific responsivity literature. For instance, one study was interested in determining if coping styles significantly contributed to recidivism rates. This study found that having individuals who were diagnosed with a mental disorder and utilized emotion-oriented coping were more likely to recidivate than persons who also had a mental disorder but utilized task-oriented coping (LaCourse et al 2018: 56-57). This is an important finding, as it suggests that transient mental sets and/or stable mental states contribute to how likely a person is to recidivate. As such, CBI programming can be an effective intervention as it aims to replace risky thinking and emotions with prosocial thinking and emotions to minimize a client’s likelihood of committing future crimes. The limitations of this study is that coping mechanisms tend to be behaviors utilized in the moment that they are triggered and can be difficult to capture in a self-report survey, like the one LaCourse et al administered. Analyzing individual differences that are stable and constantly present within individuals, like personality traits, is an interesting question that should be explored further by future studies. This could be combined with a follow-up study that would aim to distinguish whether the aforementioned transient mental sets or stable mental states are more predictive of recidivism, or if both factors are equally powerful predictors.

Another study looking at specific responsivity aimed to find different dimensions of specific responsivity that can be targeted by a type of CBI known as Reasoning and Rehabilitation (R&R). R&R specializes in addressing the cognitive components of antisocial actions, personalities, persons, etc. Due to this specialization, R&R is one of the few CBI-style programs that has successfully devised a version of its curriculum to specifically target persons with mental disorders, dubbed R&R2MHP (Young et al 2016: 1). This study was critical for

the specific responsivity subdiscipline as it determined that R&R did not reduce clients' recidivism rates in general, but did reduce them for particular subgroups, like whites, high-risk offenders, and low-anxiety offenders (Voorhis et al 2013: 1270). This study's main limitation is that it is not an exhaustive list of individual differences that may contribute to specific responsivity. As such, there is potential for future researchers to build on this study and look at what other psychological and demographical aspects may affect responsivity to CBI programming, like personality traits.

Personality traits and the criminal justice system have been studied in tandem before. For instance, a seminal study found that prisoners have higher degrees of trait conscientiousness, which can also be understood as responsibility, than the general population (Eriksson et al 2017: 241). These findings were interpreted to be because prisonization develops a necessity for inmates to become more responsible to maintain their safety from other inmates and correctional staff. This study is limited in that it only describes a phenomenon observed during incarceration and does not consider how this higher than average degree of conscientiousness may contribute to future recidivism rates. This is a question that future research could answer by looking at how trait conscientiousness and recidivism rates are related, perhaps with time spent previously in prison as a moderating variable.

Another influential contribution to the literature is the conceptual mapping of the reentry process within U.S. correctional facilities. Researchers have developed a quasi-graph theoretical social network that links courts, probation offices, reentry facilities, and social program offices to get a better understanding of the system that persons convicted of crimes have to navigate in order to reenter the community. The researchers concluded that the current reentry landscape in the U.S. is fraught with too much ambiguity, is not streamlined, and can be affected by the personal nuances of individual public servants of the criminal justice system to the point where there is no clear path for offenders to reenter the community (Nhan et al 2016: 12-17). Questions that this study leaves unanswered are primarily practical ones: what can be done to streamline the reentry process, which actors in the criminal justice system have too much discretion, what should offenders do to make their reentry go as smoothly as possible, *et cetera*? These are all important questions for responsivity, since a process that is too amorphous and unnavigable will be deleterious towards client responsivity to programming. This study can serve as a conceptual mapping of the criminal justice system and offer a sense of theoretical place and space that researchers could review when designing future studies to ensure that any entities which could contribute to answering questions related to the experience of persons processed through the criminal justice system are accounted for.

After considering what the extant corpus knows and does not know, future research should be encouraged to study how trait conscientiousness contributes to CBI programming efficacy in terms of recidivism rates. The current literature suggests that there is utility to CBI-style programming, but that its treatment effects are being blocked by individual differences within clients, and perhaps even by the structure of the criminal justice system itself being its own impediment from successfully processing offenders back into the community, where they will surely face further social obstacles regarding housing, federal documentation, healthcare, and so forth. Particular levels of some of these variables, like having low-anxiety, are associated with better results from specific brands of CBI. Other categories, like being non-white, are associated with worse results from those same CBI-style brands. By studying what other factors relate to the efficacy of CBI, program developers can reevaluate curricula and rewrite them in a manner that is more inclusive to the diverse clientele that they are meant to serve. Some potential hypotheses worth investigating are whether more conscientious clients perform better in CBI programming and whether they have lower recidivism rates than less conscientious clients. If these hypotheses are confirmed, then there is utility in CBI programming so long as clients are willing to treat their lessons seriously and be responsible students. If these hypotheses are not confirmed, two conclusions must be considered; the first is that if students perform well on CBI programming, irrespective of their conscientiousness, then the program is exceedingly well-written and gets its message across to all different types of students. The second conclusion is that if students perform poorly on CBI programming, irrespective of their conscientiousness, then the program does not effectively teach its lessons to students and needs to be reworked.

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