

Self-regulating mechanisms as predictors of retention among correctional officers

BY RALPH A MORGAN, PH.D.



Introduction

Corrections Departments around the country are experiencing unprecedented shortages of correctional officers. The State of Michigan is down 800 officers. Florida is down 5,000 officers.. Similar conditions exist throughout the country, with Georgia experiencing 40% attrition, North Carolina at 37%, South Dakota is 27%. Nearly every state boasts similar numbers. What are the factors that contribute to this dysfunction? Are there systemic issues that produce these results? Certainly, much of the problem lies in the institutionalized practices that have produced the current climate. An area that has been left unexplored, however, lies in the structure of personality as it relates to retention.

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I recently conducted a study that surveyed officers across the country to determine whether the self-regulating mechanisms of resilience, self-efficacy and emotional intelligence were significant predictors of intention to stay employed as correctional officers. The results, although not earth-shattering, opened a channel to some of the self-regulating mechanisms that have an effect on intent to stay, and, more importantly, relationships among these self-regulating mechanisms.

There are many factors that contribute to an officer's decision to remain an officer. Income and benefits, job security, family support, retirement concerns, retirement planning, comfort on the job and more. Although all of these considerations most certainly have an impact on the decision to stay employed, they are not the entire picture. In my examination of just a few elements of personality, it is clear the personality in the uniform is an integral part of that decision. My study looked at just three self-regulating

mechanisms and found that, combined, they represent 12% of the ability to predict intent to stay. A look at the results of this study will show these mechanisms are important, while some artful examination of additional self-regulating mechanisms may offer a look at a greater percentage of the decision. Equally, or more important, might be the balance, or lack of balance, in personality that contributes to disease and somatic illnesses.

Self-regulating mechanisms

“Self-regulatory systems lie at the very heart of causal processes. They not only mediate the effects of most external influences, but provide the very basis for purposeful action.” (Bandura, 1991). Without going too far into Bandura's Social Learning Theory, it is enough to say we learn how to regulate ourselves through the mechanisms we develop in our personality. A healthy personality has a nucleus of self-regulating mechanisms that usher us through life circumstances in balance. An absence of self-regulating behavior that fits the environment we are in makes it difficult to navigate the environment safely.

Bandura identifies self-efficacy as the most critical self-regulating mechanism because it refers to people's belief in their ability to exercise control over their own functioning and over events that affect their lives. The creation of self-efficacy grows out of the development of a skill set that enables one to understand how they fit in the circumstances they place themselves in and, subsequently, negotiate their way safely through those circumstances. When we superimpose this idea over the correctional officer's attempt to function and manage the events in their prison environment, we can see how important self-efficacy is.

In my dissertation, I identified two additional self-regulating mechanisms I believed to be important to correctional officers; resilience and emotional intelligence. Resilience is the ability to bounce back from adversity. Emotional intelligence is the ability to allocate the appropriate amount of emotion to the circumstances that present. Combining the three self-regulating mechanisms, and comparing them to Intent to Stay employed, provided a snapshot of how just a couple of self-regulating mechanisms affect Intent to Stay, or retention. Keeping in mind all of personality is self-regulating, just looking at these mechanisms can only plant a seed

in the discussion of the part that personality plays in the decision to stay employed and, as we will see, in the subsequent health conditions that evolve from life in the prison environment. The results of this study clearly indicate, however, that self-regulating mechanisms are a significant part of the decision to stay employed in the correctional officer position and they certainly contribute to the health of the officer going forward.

Results

Resilience significantly predicted Intent to Stay when Self-Efficacy and Emotional Intelligence were held constant, $B = -0.37$, $t(95) = -3.54$, $p < .001$. This indicates, on average, a one-unit increase in Resilience decreases the value of Intent to Stay by 0.37 units. Self-Efficacy significantly predicted Intent to Stay when Resilience and Emotional Intelligence were held constant, $B = 0.59$, $t(95) = 2.24$, $p = .028$. This indicates, on average, a one-unit increase in Self-Efficacy increases the value of Intent to Stay by 0.59 units. Emotional Intelligence did not significantly predict Intent to Stay when Resilience and Self-Efficacy were held constant, $B = 0.08$, $t(95) = 0.82$, $p = .414$. Based on this sample, a one-unit increase in Emotional Intelligence does not have a significant effect on Intent to Stay.

A Pearson's R was applied to the data, as a post hoc power analysis, and the results produced some remarkably interesting relationships. The result of the correlations was examined using Holm corrections to adjust for multiple comparisons based on an alpha value of 0.05. A significant positive correlation was observed between resilience and self-efficacy ($r = 0.74$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.64, 0.82]). The correlation coefficient between resilience and self-efficacy was 0.74, indicating a large effect size. This correlation indicates as resilience increases, self-efficacy tends to increase. A significant positive correlation was observed between resilience and emotional intelligence ($r = 0.41$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.23, 0.56]). The correlation coefficient between resilience and emotional intelligence was 0.41, indicating a moderate effect size. This correlation indicates as resilience increases, emotional intelligence tends to increase. A significant negative correlation was observed between resilience and turnover intent ($r = -0.24$, $p = .018$, 95% CI [-0.42, -0.04]). The correlation coefficient between resilience and turnover intent was -0.24, indicating a small effect size.



This correlation indicates as resilience increases, turnover intent tends to decrease. A significant positive correlation was observed between self-efficacy and emotional intelligence ($r = 0.42$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.24, 0.57]). The correlation coefficient between self-efficacy and emotional intelligence was 0.42, indicating a moderate effect size. This correlation indicates as self-efficacy increases, emotional intelligence tends to increase.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to survey correctional officers in each of the self-regulating mechanisms of resilience, self-efficacy and emotional intelligence, and compare the results of those surveys to the results of a survey on intent to stay, to determine whether those mechanisms could predict intent to stay. The outcome of the study was resilience and self-efficacy do predict intent to stay among correctional officers. Interestingly, resilience had a negative impact on intent to stay. This, I believe tells us something about the environment and culture in corrections. More testing is needed to expand understanding of this phenomenon, but it is clearly not what I would expect.

Just as important as this outcome, however, is the results of the Pearson's R. The relationships between the self-regulating mechanisms showed they predict one-another more significantly than they predict intent to stay. The implications of this discovery impact far more than retention. If personality is our self-regulating mechanism,

and health is a product of that regulation, then the balance of our self-regulating mechanisms, i.e., personality, is the key to our health.

As resilience increases, self-efficacy increases. As resilience increases, emotional intelligence increases. As self-efficacy increases, emotional intelligence increases. These relationships show the reciprocal interdependence of these self-regulating mechanisms. If we accept these are all important self-regulating mechanisms, and we recognize there are more self-regulating mechanisms, such as critical thinking and objectivity, then the idea of balance begins to look like a key to correctional officer health.

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A recent study conducted by Spinaris & Bocato (2019) for the State of Michigan, for instance, looked at officer wellness and found that; “Using weighted survey statistics, approximately 1 in 6 of all MDOC employees are estimated to meet criteria for Major Depressive Disorder on a valid screening instrument. Examining depression rates by Working Group, about 1 in 4 of custody employees working at male facilities, and about 1 in 8 support staff in headquarters (i.e., not managers), meet criteria for Major Depressive Disorder. Using weighted survey statistics, approximately 1 in 2 of all MDOC employees are estimated to score in the range of medium to high Generalized Anxiety on a valid screening instrument. This rate is 16 times the national average, and nearly 10 times the rates for military (all personnel, not just active combat). Using weighted survey statistics, nearly 1 in 4 of all MDOC employees are estimated to meet criteria for PTSD on a valid screening instrument, with almost 1 in 2 (41%) of custody staff working at male facilities meeting criteria for PTSD. Every Working Group in MDOC was estimated to have PTSD rates higher than those of first responders (which are estimated to be 10%). The rates of

PTSD at MDOC are nearly seven times higher than the national average in the general population. Using weighted survey statistics, nearly 1 in 5 of all MDOC employees are estimated to meet criteria for alcohol abuse on a valid screening instrument, with 1 in 4 of custody staff working at male facilities and about 1 in 6 managers/supervisors in headquarters met criteria for alcohol abuse. The national rate of alcohol abuse in the general population is estimated to be 7%, making MDOC’s overall rate 2.7 times higher than the national average. It is also two times higher than the estimated rate among first responders (9%). Weighted survey estimates indicate approximately 9% (about 1 in 11) of all MDOC employees reported scores indicative of suicidal ideation on a valid screening instrument, and a need for immediate mental health supports. And of greater concern is a total of 34 (1%) survey respondents reported they are currently and actively planning to commit suicide. Using weighted survey statistics, we estimate approximately 1.1% (n = 139) of all MDOC employees are currently actively planning to commit suicide.” (Spinaris & Bocato, 2019, p. 5)

This study, as painful as it is to read, is far too much the reality across the country. The issue for officers is one of quality of life and longevity. A Desert Waters report from 2018 indicated, on a national average, many correctional officers live only 18 months after they retire. The life expectancy of a correctional officer is 59, compared to the national average of 75. And while these statistics have been around for some time, and programs have been developed to combat them, are we doing enough? Have we done enough to give correctional officers the tools and the character to be successful? Is making it to retirement successful if 18 months is all you have left? Although it may seem dramatic, to a correctional officer it is a horrific sentence to consider.

There has to be a better way, a comprehensive approach to the development of the correctional environment that integrates the correctional officer in a seamless flow with the system. Providing officers with mechanisms that maintain the balance in their bodies, and integrate them in a system that is designed to move people, requires attention to the self-regulating mechanisms that are trained into officers as they are matriculated into the system. Learning the skills of an officer must go beyond self-defense, restraints and cell rushes to build in psychological mechanisms that maintain balance in a very

dynamic and volatile system. The methods employed to move people through the system must be as dynamic as the population being moved and the volatility must be managed with delicate nuances that control that balance.

It is time to develop programs that teach self-care in every sense of that term. Learning to detox from the toxicity of the correctional environment every day, learning to focus on flow, learning to manage situations as they develop and learning to get back into balance when the system disrupts your balance are just a few of the self-regulating behaviors that are necessary to stay healthy and feel good about corrections work.

There has been a good amount of research into the nature of the correctional environment. We know the nature of the beast. What we don't know is how to tame the beast. Our efforts must focus on the health of the people who do the work in corrections as much as we focus on the prisoner population. Continued research and an expansion of the training in the area of self-regulation are essential for the correctional officer going forward. The construction of a system that helps the officer feel more

comfortable at work requires a willingness to use a more holistic systemic approach to the design of the system. Futuristic corrections will have to look different. The architect of the future must build the system around the officers, as well as the prisoners.

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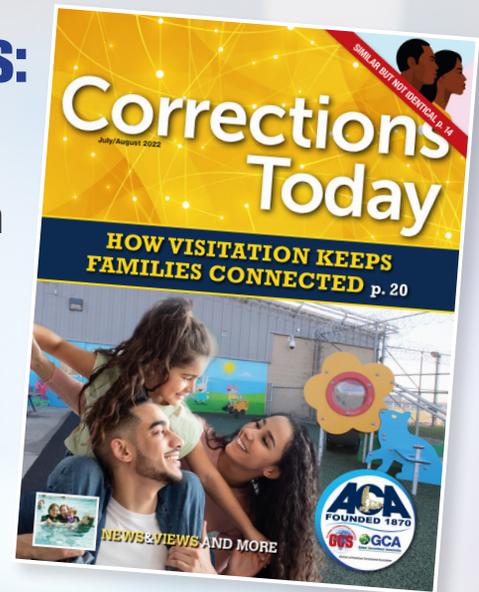
Ralph A. Morgan, Ph.D., has served in our armed forces as a Special Forces soldier, was decorated with the Silver Star, and has held numerous positions in the correctional continuum. His career began as an investigator for domestic relations and went on to see positions as a probation agent, a parole agent, a human resource developer, and an administrative assistant to the warden of several Michigan prisons.

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