Criminogenic Thinking among Justice-Involved Persons: Practice Guidelines for Probation Staff[1]

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What Do Probation Staff Need to Know about Criminogenic Thinking?

Many terms are used to describe the thinking that underlies criminal behavior: *procriminal attitudes*, *antisocial cognitions*, *criminal thinking*, and *criminal thought process*, just to name a few.[2] Since this type of thinking itself is not illegal, the term *criminogenic thinking* is more applicable and refers to *cognitive patterns that facilitate antisocial, criminal, and self-destructive behaviors* (Mitchell & Tafrate, 2012; Whited et al., 2017). The goal of forensic cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) interventions is to alter the thinking patterns that drive risky and criminal decisions in broad life areas (e.g., relationships, routines, and habits) while increasing thinking that leads to productive decisions, prosocial outcomes, and ultimately a non-destructive life (Morgan et al., 2018; Tafrate et al., 2018).

Criminogenic thinking isn't unique to justice-involved clients. It's something we all have, to one degree or another. In training workshops, we sometimes make this point by having participants pair up; the trainee in the client role follows this instructional set: "Talk about something you do or don't do that you think is not helpful or not healthy" (this type of exercise is also called a *real-play*). Trainees in the client role often pick a lifestyle issue such as unhealthy eating habits, reckless driving, shopping sprees, staying up too late, or procrastinating on projects. Trainees in the probation officer role are instructed to interview their "client" with a goal of pinpointing the specific thoughts that preceded the unhealthy behavior: What does it sound like in the client's mind when they give themselves "permission" to engage in self-defeating behaviors? After a few minutes or so, we debrief the group and get examples of these permission giving moments. Here are some typical examples that emerge in group after group:

- "I've had a long day, I deserve it."
- "Just this one time."
- "No one will know."
- "It's not really hurting anyone, so why not."
- "Fuck it."

It quickly becomes obvious to trainees in the client role that they can sound a lot like justice-involved clients because we all have criminogenic thinking moments. This exercise is beneficial because once probation officers understand the *nature* of criminogenic thinking, they know what to look for in their clients (e.g., the permission-giving moment prior to a risky/criminal behavior).

Since probation clients are not making risky decisions 100 percent of the time, it is also instructive to identify the other voice—their prosocial thinking when healthier choices are made. To that end, in the second half of the real-play, trainees in the probation officer role interview their "client" with a goal of pinpointing the specific thoughts that preceded a time when the person made a healthy decision in the same situation: What are thoughts like in the client's mind when they don't give themselves "permission" to engage in self-defeating behaviors and instead choose a healthier outcome?

Changing criminogenic thinking does not involve a sudden seismic shift in thinking so much as a gradual strengthening of thinking that is already (perhaps weakly) present in the client. The process of addressing criminogenic thinking in supervision is one of (1) building clients' awareness of the impact their thoughts have on decisions, (2) weakening criminogenic thinking that precedes risky decisions, and (3) strengthening prosocial thinking that leads to better decisions and outcomes.

What Are Common Pitfalls in Addressing Criminogenic Thinking?

Several pitfalls may emerge in probation settings when it comes to assessment and case planning. We highlight three in particular that we believe can lead to misidentification of relevant cognitive supervision targets.

Pitfall 1: The rearview mirror. Often criminogenic thinking is assessed from a "rearview mirror" perspective in which clients are asked about their attitudes toward their most recent or past offenses. In this way of operating, probation officers are likely to obtain statements in which clients minimize the offense or avoid taking full responsibility for prior criminal behaviors. This maneuver typically produces minimizations and justifications (Maruna & Mann, 2006), and sometimes expressions of regret. Unfortunately, this type of conceptualization misses the main

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[2] There are also many terms used to describe people receiving services in community corrections (e.g., probationer, parolee, probation client, justice-involved client/person, etc.). Throughout these practice guidelines we use the term "client" in the interest of brevity.

point, because the focus is on thoughts that come after the destructive decisions and behaviors have been made.

The original cognitive models developed by Ellis (1957, 1962) and Beck (1963, 1967) were formulated around "hot cognitions" that precede and exacerbate symptoms of anxiety and depression (e.g., "What were you telling yourself right before you got depressed last Tuesday?" "What were you saying to yourself when you became anxious about going to the party and decided to avoid it?"). Imagine the absurdity of solely asking people what they thought about their past depressive or anxious episodes after the fact (e.g., "Looking back, what do you think now about being depressed last Tuesday?"). The cognitive focal point of interventions for mental health problems is about the thinking that leads to the symptoms (Barlow et al., 2017; Beck, 2011; DiGiuseppe et al., 2014), not the thinking that follows them. We suggest the same principle be applied to forensic CBT. Target the criminogenic thinking that precedes specific instances of risky and criminal behavior, not the thinking that follows.

This does not mean that asking clients about how they view their past criminal actions is unnecessary or unproductive. For example, asking them to look in their rearview mirror can reveal how they have mentally reinforced their behavior (which makes it more likely it will recur) and reveal other relevant criminogenic thinking patterns in their risk profile. The point is that assessment of criminogenic thinking should not be done solely as a rearview mirror enterprise, nor should such thoughts be the focus of supervision or intervention.

Pitfall 2: Mistaking mental health symptoms for criminal risk factors. Major mental disorders are common across justice-involved populations (both in prisons and probation/parole), with prevalence rates exceeding those found in non-justice community samples (Brooker et al., 2012; Steadman et al., 2009). This can lead to the assumption that mental health symptoms have a causal relationship with criminal behavior, and that addressing the symptoms will reduce recidivism. This perspective is embedded in the idea that criminal behavior is primarily a product of psychological distress. There is an intuitive appeal to the notion that targeting mental health symptoms will reduce recidivism; however, criminal behavior is largely determined by larger criminogenic life areas (e.g., criminal peers, unemployment, substance misuse, criminogenic thinking patterns, etc.). For most cases, focusing on mental health symptoms alone is unlikely to have a significant impact on future criminality (Bolaños et al., 2020; Bonta et al., 2014; Morgan et al., 2012; Peterson et al., 2014; Skeem et al., 2016).

Adding to the misconception, CBT interventions were developed within a mental health context and have established themselves as one of the most empirically supported intervention modalities for a wide variety of psychological disorders (Butler et al., 2006; Kazantzis, 2018). Although restructuring dysfunctional thinking patterns is central to CBT-oriented interventions, a meaningful distinction can be made regarding the nature of the thinking patterns that should be targeted when addressing mental health disorders versus criminal behavior. Criminogenic thinking is not the thinking that drives mental health symptoms. Specifically, typical anxious and depressive thinking patterns overestimate and exaggerate potential dangers, emphasize self-blame, and undercut self-efficacy (Barlow et al., 2017; Beck, 2011; DiGiuseppe et al., 2014). In contrast, criminogenic thinking patterns involve a tendency to underestimate risk in favor of overly optimistic and self-serving predictions, shift blame to others, and are unrealistically self-confident (Kroner & Morgan, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2015; Walters, 2014). An example of anxious thinking in the workplace would sound like, "I know my boss is going to fire me if I'm late again and then I'll never find another job" whereas, criminogenic thinking sounds like, "It's no big deal if I'm late for work, nothing much happens in the first hour of my shift anyway. My boss is lucky I show up to begin with."

Even for probation clients who present with both mental health and criminal problems—as is common—the cognitions that amplify their dysphoric symptoms will be different from those that drive their criminal decisions. Thus, an exclusive focus on the thinking that drives mental health symptoms is ill-advised when working with clients if a goal of supervision and intervention is to reduce their justice involvement. If CBT interventions aimed at reducing justice-involvement are to match the effectiveness of those developed to reduce anxiety and depression, understanding the thinking patterns that drive criminal behavior is critical. This means that mental health treatment referrals for clients will supplement, but not replace, efforts by probation officers to address criminogenic thinking. Hopefully, the benefits clients obtain from mental health treatment, such as a reduction in psychological distress, will make their efforts to alter criminogenic thinking in the risk-relevant areas of their lives more productive.

Pitfall 3: The "attitude" problem. Criminogenic thinking is not about the client's general demeanor or attitude toward being supervised. Clients who report for intakes and state that their sentence seems unfair and that referrals for intervention are unnecessary may be perceived as having a "negative attitude" and exhibiting high levels of criminogenic thinking. Conversely, clients who state they are amenable to court-ordered conditions, office visits, and community referrals may be perceived as having minimal criminogenic thinking. While there is evidence that criminogenic thinking is associated with poor responsivity and program attrition (Best et al., 2009; Garner et al., 2007; Mitchell et al., 2013; Olver et al., 2011; Taxman et al., 2011), this is a flawed marker for identifying criminogenic thinking. A client's attitude toward supervision is heavily influenced by previous experiences with "the system" and a whole range of chaotic personal life circumstances. Another factor influencing client cooperativeness is the relational style of the probation staff. A relational style that is authoritarian, overly directive, and lacks compassion will elicit discord, noncompliance, or lead to the client shutting down (Kennealy et al., 2012; Moyers & Miller, 2013). Further, clients who are pleasant and cooperative can simultaneously harbor thinking patterns likely to produce another offense. The strategies described below will provide more useful indicators of criminogenic thinking than the client's attitude and demeanor during the intake process.

What Do Criminogenic Thinking Patterns and Thoughts Sound Like?

We find it helpful to distinguish between criminogenic thinking *patterns* and criminogenic *thoughts*. Criminogenic thinking patterns emerge from individual experiences, environmental circumstances, and reinforcement histories. They are abstract and operate like rules or assumptions people live by and produce criminogenic thoughts. Patterns can be likened to wearing a set of goggles that color the world a certain way. Criminogenic thoughts are more automatic and spring up spontaneously in response to different events. They become the words that people utter out loud and/or to themselves (i.e., the "permission giving moment" described earlier).

Thinking patterns are important because they influence thoughts over time and across situations (Beck, 2011). For example, a client with an entrenched pattern of Exploit (see Table 1 below) might have the following thoughts across situations in his life:

- **Work:** "When my boss takes a lunch break, I'm not going to ring up the sales. I'm just going to pocket the money. I need the money more than he does. He'll never know."
- **Family:** "I'll crash on my brother's couch for the summer. He owes me anyway."
- **Intimate relationships:** "I'm not that into her. I'll just use her for sex for a few weeks and try to get close to her friends."
- **Friendships:** "I don't really like Rick. But I'll hang with him once in a while because he has a car that I can use on weekends."
- **Parenting:** "Why should I pay child support. My ex's boyfriend has money and can pay for stuff."

Notice how the cognitive theme *Exploit* (criminogenic thinking pattern) is manifested in a variety of ways and influences how this client thinks in the moment (criminogenic thoughts) and acts (decisions/behaviors) across a range of life situations. Not all the resulting decisions in this example are criminal. However, the presence of this pattern will put this client at risk for future criminality. Also, such thinking is likely to have a damaging effect on the client's relationships and career path.

Another complexity is that criminogenic thinking is multifaceted and not adequately represented by a single cognitive pattern. Criminogenic thinking patterns can be conceptualized effectively by taking into consideration the empirical literature that has emerged since the mid-1990s around a collection of self-report assessment instruments for use with justice-involved populations (these are marked in the reference list *). Because each of these instruments feature multiple subscales, a sizable array of distinct criminogenic thinking patterns has emerged. When considered as a whole, this literature reveals 13 broad-spectrum thinking patterns that can be useful in guiding supervision and intervention (see Table 1). Keep in mind that no client has all 13 patterns. In applying this model to a specific case, probation staff identify the criminogenic thinking patterns—usually one or two—that most commonly drive criminal and destructive decisions for that case.

The literature on criminogenic thinking patterns is still a work in progress with several unanswered questions and controversies remaining to be resolved. Some of these issues are discussed later in this paper. Nonetheless, this literature can serve as a practical guide. In training workshops, we present a variety of audio clips from probation office visits and ask probation officers to listen for criminogenic thoughts, as they are verbalized by clients,

TABLE 1.
Criminogenic Thinking Patterns and Criminogenic Thoughts

Criminogenic Thinking Pattern	Description of Pattern	Sample Criminogenic Thought
Identifying with Antisocial Companions	Viewing self as being similar to, and relating best to, antisocial peers; sees relationships with prosocial peers as unimportant.	"I don't have anything in common with people who live a straight life."
Disregard for Others	Belief that the needs/rights of others are unimportant; antipathy/hostility toward others; lack of empathy and remorse for hurting others.	"There's no point worrying about people you hurt."
Emotionally Disengaged	Belief that avoiding intimacy and vulnerability is good; lack of trust; fears of being taken advantage of.	"I don't talk about personal issues. If I open up to someone, they will take advantage of me."
Hostility for Criminal Justice Personnel	Adversarial and suspicious attitude toward police, lawyers, judges, case managers, and so forth.	"Probation officers just want to violate you. That's why they always ask about your address—so they know where to find you when they want to arrest you."
Grandiosity & Entitlement	Inflated beliefs about oneself; belief that one is deserving of special treatment.	"I won't go to treatment unless you can find a facilitator smarter than me."
Power & Control	Seeking dominance over others; seeking to control the behavior of others.	"Nobody can tell me what to do. I tell other people what to do."
Demand for Excitement	Belief that life should be focused on thrill seeking and risk taking; lack of tolerance for boredom.	"There is no better feeling than the rush I get when stealing."
Exploit	General intent to exploit situations or relationships for personal gain when given the opportunity.	"Why should I pay child support? She has a rich boyfriend who can support my kid."
Hostility for Law & Order	Hostility toward rules, regulations, and laws.	"Laws are there to hurt you, not help you." "That's the way I am. I make my own rules."
Justifying and Minimizing	Justification, rationalization, and minimization of harmful behaviors.	"If I don't sell drugs in my neighborhood, somebody else will."
Path of Least Resistance	"Easiest way" approach to problem solving; a "no worries" and "no plan needed" and "in the moment" style of life.	"Everything will take care of itself."
Inability to Cope	Giving up in the face of adversity; low frustration tolerance.	"When I don't understand things, I give up." "All these programs and appointments you're making me do are stressing me out, I'd rather be back in jail."
Underestimating	Underrating the negative consequences of risky behaviors; over-confidence in decision-making skills.	"What's the worst thing that could happen to me—nothing!" "I won't go to jail for selling. I know all my clients."

and then connect those thoughts to larger criminogenic thinking patterns. Probation officers get very good at this exercise. With practice they eventually use the 13 patterns like "hooks" to hang information, which helps to organize what they are hearing from their clients and guide future discussions.

How Do Probation Staff Start Conversations with Clients about Criminogenic Thinking?

When it comes to addressing criminogenic thinking, the initial challenge for most probation officers is that they do not know how to access their client's thoughts and launch into productive conversations about thinking. The challenge for most clients is that they are unaware of the destructive impact their thinking is having on their lives. As described earlier, the *first step* is to bring the client back to the actual criminal event and the moment that preceded the risky/destructive decision and behavior. This includes official offenses (especially recent ones) that have triggered justice-involvement, violations of probation conditions, and even incidents for which the client was never formally charged. As a rule, the more events explored, the greater the likelihood that relevant thinking patterns related to risky decisions and criminal behavior will become evident.

The *second step* is to ask questions that are likely to access in-the-moment criminogenic thoughts. Keep in mind that many justice-involved clients are unaware of their own fleeting thoughts, so gentle persistence is sometimes required. Here are some question stems that can be helpful:

- "What were you telling yourself when you… [went to the street corner to sell drugs]?"
- "What were you telling yourself that gave you permission to… [touch her inappropriately]?"
- "What was going through your mind when you… [hopped into the car to take it]?"
- "Tell me the exact thought you were saying to yourself when you... [had that last beer before you drove home]."
- "What was going through your mind when you gave yourself permission to… [hit her]?"

Exploring offenses with clients is likely to reveal a complex behavioral chain of events. There may be multiple decision points to ask the client about. For example, what was the client thinking when he got in the car with Tony? What was going through his mind when he and Tony were discussing plans to break into the house? What was he telling himself that gave him permission to pry the window open and climb into the house? Probation officers will need to decide the point(s) in the chain that are most relevant to pursue.

In terms of understanding the case, the *third step* is to connect the criminogenic thoughts that emerge to one or two of the 13 larger criminogenic thinking patterns. Some thoughts connect neatly to a pattern, while others may represent a blend of several patterns. Those patterns that are most relevant for a particular client will become the cognitive focal points during supervision.

A conversation about client thinking isn't a one-shot deal or single session endeavor. It's more like a thread to keep pulling on. Therefore, it will be important to *hover* around a thinking pattern or two over the course of supervision.

What Techniques Can Probation Staff Use to Alter Criminogenic Thinking?

The process of cognitive restructuring with probation clients is to gradually weaken the influence of their criminogenic thinking on decision-making, while strengthening the influence of their prosocial thinking. There are myriad ways probation staff can stay focused (i.e., hover) on criminogenic thinking patterns and work to alter cognitions (for details, see Tafrate et al., 2018). We will briefly describe five of our favorite techniques.

(1) Make the client aware of a conspicuous criminogenic thinking pattern. The delivery style of CBT is active-directive (led by the practitioner). Therefore, when probation officers believe they have identified a relevant criminogenic thinking pattern for a client, they can begin a focused conversation about that pattern using language like:

> "We are all guided by our thinking. As we go through life, we develop rules for how we interpret things, see ourselves, and react to others. With repetition our thinking becomes automatic and inflexible, and we become less aware of how our thinking guides our everyday choices. Some of the ways of thinking that people live by can cause problems for them. Would it be OK if I shared with you one pattern I noticed? [most clients say "Yes" when asked this way] One pattern that comes up for you is a tendency to . . ." [describe the pattern].

In most cases, more than one criminogenic thinking pattern will exist. Resist the temptation to discuss multiple patterns at once. Put the focus on one pattern at a time.

It is important to describe the thinking pattern by using non-judgmental language. For example, do not say, "You have a tremendous disregard for others." Rather, say, "You have a tendency to look out for yourself and not always think about how your actions affect others." Do not say, "You are emotionally disengaged." Instead, say, "You have a tendency to avoid showing your emotions to others, because you think they will take advantage of you, or it will make you look weak." Techniques for describing criminogenic thinking patterns in client-friendly language have been presented elsewhere (Tafrate et al., 2018).

Once the thinking pattern is put on the table, the impact of the pattern on the client's life can be explored with several key questions:

- "How has this way of thinking affected your life overall?"
- "What kinds of things have you lost in your life when you followed this way of thinking?" [Ask about areas such as relationships, jobs, money, health, freedom, respect, opportunities.]
- "What will keep happening if you continue to follow this way of thinking?"
- "What is a new way of thinking that might work better?"

(2) Have the client self-monitor a criminogenic thinking pattern or thought. One way to raise awareness is to have the client self-monitor when a specific criminogenic thought or thinking pattern emerges in the client's day-to-day life. This exercise also provides an opportunity for clients to talk back to and reshape their own thinking. This can be done on a worksheet, blank piece of paper, or any type of notes application on a smartphone.

To start, the probation officer identifies the thinking pattern to monitor (again, using non-judgmental language). The client is asked to pay attention to situations where the thinking occurs. Once noticed, the client writes down: (a) a brief description of the situation or circumstances where the thinking emerged, (b) the initial thoughts as a sentence in the client's head, (c) the decision and action that was taken—positive or negative, and (d) an alternative way of thinking that would lead to better decisions and outcomes.

It is often useful to work through this exercise together with a real-life example the first time it is assigned, so that the instructions are clear. The exercise is then reviewed

at the next office visit. We have been surprised by the willingness of many clients to complete such an assignment. Many (but not all) want help and will seize the opportunity to do something to improve their own lives. If the exercise is not completed, another recent example of when the pattern emerged can be reviewed together during the next office visit.

(3) Consistency/Discrepancy discussions: Explore a recent decision that is consistent with better thinking and a recent decision that is discrepant with better thinking. Once discussions around better ways of thinking have occurred, in subsequent contacts, the probation officer can ask for recent examples of decisions the client made that were consistent with the better ways of thinking and examples of decisions that were inconsistent (i.e., destructive). Here are some straightforward questions:

- "Tell me about a decision you made recently that was in line with the better thinking we talked about. Recall, your better thinking was ______."
- "How do you think your life can be different if you keep making decisions that are consistent with better thinking?"
- "Tell me about a decision you made recently that wasn't in line with the better thinking we discussed last time."
- "What makes the decision inconsistent with the better thinking?"
- "In the past, how have decisions like this gotten you in trouble?"

These kinds of discussions can enhance motivation for change, provide opportunities for the client to receive reinforcement for prosocial thinking and decision-making, and foster increased awareness of the link between prosocial and criminogenic thinking on their behavior.

(4) Client-generated solutions. Another way to strengthen the connection between prosocial thinking and decision-making is for clients to generate ideas about what would help them be more likely to act on their better thinking in the future. Again, direct questions work best:

- "What's one thing you could do that will make it more likely for you to follow the better thinking in the future?"
- "What would help you make a decision based on better thinking in the future?"

(5) Role-play criminogenic and better thinking. Probation officers who are adventurous can strengthen prosocial thinking by engaging the client in role-playing healthy thinking in response to their own criminogenic thoughts. The purpose of this exercise (also called the *two voices role-play*) is to build clients' ability to counter their own destructive thinking. During the role-play, the probation officer plays the role of the client's criminogenic thoughts and verbally presents these to the client. The client plays the role of the better thinking voice and tries to counter the criminogenic thinking. Below is a brief sample dialog:

Officer: Today we are going to do a little acting. I'm going to be a voice that is tempting you to hang out with your friends who get in trouble. I'm going to say the kinds of things that come from that voice. I want you to be the better thinking voice and counter what I say. So, we are going to role-play these two voices. We will start slow. Ready?

Client: Okay.

Officer: I can still hang out with my friends that are getting arrested as long as I don't do anything wrong. What they are doing won't affect me.

Client: I only get arrested when I hang out with these guys. It sometimes ends badly for me.

Officer: Good job. That was great. Now, do you think we can kick it up a notch?

Client: Yeah.

Officer: But these guys are like my family. They're always there for me.

Client: They weren't there for me when I got arrested last time. They vanished and left me to deal with the cops. I'm on probation and I don't want to go back to jail. I can't risk it.

Officer: Good. You handled it again.

Officer & Client: [Both laugh]

Officer: How can you strengthen that voice moving forward?

This type of exercise can be done periodically to provide repeated practice for countering criminogenic thinking. One advantage of this role-play is that it's memorable for the client. We understand that at first this exercise may seem odd or unusual for probation officers. With a little practice, many officers find this to be among their favorite techniques. Also, consider what's at stake for clients in some situations: Loss of freedom? Physical injury? Death? Why not practice skills with clients that might improve their real-world decisions and reduce the most serious negative outcomes?

What Topics Need More Scientific Attention? (for curious readers)

There are still a number of unanswered questions regarding criminogenic thinking. We raise several questions that require further investigation to bring more clarity to this area.

How many criminogenic thinking patterns are there? As noted earlier, criminogenic thinking instruments have multiple subscales, with each measuring a different constellation of patterns. The 13 patterns we emphasized come from a conceptual review of these available self-report assessment instruments. To our knowledge, there has never been an attempt at a statistical integration of *all* the instruments. Such an analysis might reduce the number of patterns even further.

There is also the possibility that other relevant patterns may emerge that are not being currently measured on any instruments. For example, McGill et al. (2021) found that the "code of honor" (e.g., the idea that perceived disrespect warrants retaliation) is a strong predictor of violent behavior. This suggests that more patterns may be identified in the future.

Are all patterns equally criminogenic? It seems likely that some patterns may be more relevant for offending while others are more connected to the establishment of the working alliance with probation staff. For example, Hostility Toward Criminal Justice Personnel seems unlikely to be a thinking pattern that leads to someone being placed on probation. Instead, the pattern may represent a barrier or responsivity factor for working with clients who will see probation staff negatively as part of a punitive system. Probation officers must be mindful that clients in communities that are routinely subjected to unprofessional policing practices may enter supervision with negative views toward officers.

A related area of future exploration is the extent to which different criminogenic thinking patterns or "profiles" might be related to specific offenses. For example, we have noticed that a Demand for Excitement seems to emerge in cases where youth describe stealing cars and a Power and Control theme seems strong in domestic violence cases. We are not aware of any studies that have attempted to match specific patterns with offense profiles outside of those that involved sex offending.

What about girls and women? Over the past few decades, a notable controversy has emerged regarding the relevance of criminogenic thinking to justice-involved girls and women (O'Hagan et al., 2019). Largely based on qualitative accounts, feminist scholars posit that such thinking patterns are not particularly germane to the criminal conduct of women, arguing that women largely become enmeshed in the justice system due to a constellation of systemic factors linked to patriarchal oppression,

sexual victimization, intimate partner abuse, economic hardship and survival needs, childcare responsibilities, and a desire to maintain relationships (e.g., Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996). Feminist scholars argue that an unfortunate byproduct of focusing on criminogenic thinking in correctional assessment and treatment is the placement of unnecessary blame and responsibility on girls and women by decontextualizing their criminal behavior (Hannah-Moffat, 2006; Van Dieten & King, 2014).

Further fueling the argument that criminogenic thinking is an androcentric construct is the fact that men are more highly represented in the justice system worldwide and, resultantly, criminogenic thinking models, formulations, and instruments have primarily been developed on male samples—potentially rendering these tools less relevant to women. Notwithstanding these concerns, a recent pilot study suggests that criminogenic thinking in justice-involved women is highly relevant and was a better predictor of new arrests for women than for men. However, the specific criminogenic thinking patterns that predicted rearrest for women were different than those found in men (Jones et al., 2021).

Summary

In the face of life's challenges and struggles everyone has the potential to crave excitement, make excuses for poor conduct, or fail to sufficiently consider the impact of one's actions on the suffering of others. For some people, such patterns become more prevalent and automatic, setting the stage for decisions that are likely to lead to criminal behavior, cause harm to oneself and others, and create a cycle of justice-involvement. By recognizing and assessing criminogenic thinking patterns when they emerge in supervision, probation officers have the opportunity to reduce a significant risk factor. This is a process that will entail directly (but nonjudgmentally) bringing these destructive patterns to the clients' awareness and using CBT techniques to weaken the criminogenic thoughts that precede poor decisions, while reinforcing the prosocial thinking that precedes better decisions. Because criminogenic thinking patterns are likely to be longstanding with a history of strong reinforcement, altering them is a gradual process. Similarly, the strengthening of healthier thinking patterns will take time, as clients experience the real-world reinforcement of newer ways of thinking. Thus, addressing criminogenic thinking occurs over the course of supervision rather than during one or two office visits.

Key Terms

Criminogenic thinking: Thoughts and beliefs that facilitate criminal, antisocial, and self-destructive behavior.

Criminogenic thinking patterns: Cognitive rules or assumptions that produce criminogenic thoughts and guide criminal behavior across different life areas.

Criminogenic thoughts: Automatic thoughts that spontaneously arise in response to different situations. Such thoughts influence in-the-moment decisions.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT): A relatively short-term treatment focused on the way a person's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are connected and affect one another. Clients are taught skills to alter thinking and behavior patterns that contribute to their problems.

Active-directive: An interaction style where the focus of the office visit is led by the practitioner (e.g., probation officer), while also actively involving the client. Office visits are organized and structured with a beginning, middle, and end.

Forensic CBT: CBT interventions to alter the thinking patterns that drive criminal/antisocial behavior, while increasing thinking that leads to productive decisions and prosocial outcomes.

Key Takeaways

1. The nature of criminogenic thinking is familiar to all of us. It's that fleeting voice in our minds when we give ourselves "permission" to do something harmful or self-defeating.
2. In working with probation clients, it is critical to target the thinking that precedes specific instances of risky and criminal behavior, not the thinking that follows.
3. Criminogenic thinking *patterns* are important because they operate like internal rulebooks, influencing a client's spontaneous thoughts and decisions across situations.
4. The first step in altering criminogenic thinking is to raise clients' awareness of the consequences of their own thinking and its impact on day-to-day decision-making.
5. There are a variety of cognitive behavioral techniques that probation officers can use to alter criminogenic thinking. A focus on criminogenic thinking should be an ongoing part of supervision.
6. Although criminogenic thinking is considered a major risk factor for criminal behavior, it is often misunderstood. Our knowledge in this area is still evolving.

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