

## Social Learning Theory and Prison Work Release Programs

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**Abstract:** The authors' review of literature about Bandura's (1977) social learning theory and self-efficacy leads to implications on how this theory can positively affect prison work release programs and inmate post-release outcomes. Additionally, several causes of deviant behavior have been explained by social learning theory concepts.

Six hundred fifty thousand prisoners are released each year from federal, state, and private prisons into the communities of America (Coley & Barton, 2006). When these ex-inmates re-enter society, they seek employment, but with limited education and low literacy levels their prospects for becoming employed are reduced (Coley & Barton, 2006). A three-year study of 1,205 releases showed a strong positive relationship between prisoners obtaining education of any kind in prison and the reduction of recidivism (Haer, 1995). Because education has been shown to reduce recidivism, federal, state and private prisons offer correctional education classes to inmates. The most widely offered correctional education classes are Adult Basic Education, General Education Diploma (GED) preparation, and vocational training (Coley & Barton, 2006).

Career and vocational training programs have the longest tradition and are considered by many correctional experts to have the most potential for positive results (Snarr & Wolford, 1985). Many prisons work with local businesses to offer vocational training through work release programs where inmates learn a variety of job skills, by participating in on the job training situations. These training programs involve varying degrees of counseling and support for the inmates as well as close monitoring of the prisoners. These programs may include role models and mentoring programs to increase self-efficacy. Inmates participate in these programs to help prepare them for successful reintegration into society. The purpose of this paper is to review literature concerning social conditions which may have led to crime, work release programs, and aftercare. Furthermore, this paper applies the concepts of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory to the process of prisoners participating in these programs.

### Method

To conduct our research we searched for journal articles and books, which presented theoretical viewpoints of Social Learning Theory and self-efficacy as it relates to prison work release programs and recidivism. We were interested in journals which discussed social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and self-efficacy in relation to adult education. We searched for information on the application of social learning theory to pre- and post-release prison educational programs. Additionally, we investigated journal articles which discussed how self-efficacy impacts post-release prison outcomes. We did our search in the educational research library of Florida International University, using the following descriptors: prison work release programs, social learning theory, self-efficacy and adults, Albert Bandura, prison vocational training programs, prison education, and recidivism.

### Social Learning Theory

In an effort to prepare incarcerated persons for a successful re-entry into society, work release programs need to offer more than skill based training. Educational segments of the

program need to include pro-social behavior, so inmates can better understand the consequences of their actions (Listwan, Cullan, & Latessa, 2006). Social learning theory reinforces the idea that learning occurs within a social context. People learn from observing others' behaviors and the outcomes of those behaviors. Albert Bandura, a pioneer and a major contributor to the field of social learning, explains that social learning is a continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental influences. In addition, social learning theory combines both behavioral and cognitive philosophies to form Bandura's theory of modeling, or "observational learning," that states humans are able to control their behaviors through a process known as self-regulation (Bandura, 1991). Self-regulation involves three processes: self-observation, self-judgment, and self-response (Bandura, 1991). Self-observation is when individuals track their own behavior. Self-judgment deals with comparing their observations with standards set by society and themselves. Self-response is when individuals reward themselves either positively or negatively, depending on their own observation of their performance (Bandura, 1991). This paper theorizes that social learning theory, when incorporated as a component of work release programs, can have a positive influence on the reduction of recidivism.

Social learning theory focuses on the learning that occurs within a social context. It considers that people learn from one another, including such concepts as observational learning which has four components: attention, retention, motor reproduction, and motivation (Bandura, 1977).

1. Attention: Individuals cannot learn much by observation unless they perceive and attend significant features of the modeled behavior. An example would be, children must attend to what the aggressor is doing and saying in order to reproduce the model's behavior (Allen & Santrock, 1993, p. 139)
2. Retention: In order to reproduce the modeled behavior, the individuals must code the information into long-term memory. For example, a simple verbal description of what the model performed would be known as retention (Allen & Santrock, 1993, p. 139). Memory is an important cognitive process that helps the observer to code and retrieve information.
3. Motor reproduction: The observer must learn and possess the physical capabilities of the modeled behavior. An example of motor reproduction would be to learn to ride a bike. Once the behavior is processed from attention and retention the observer must possess the physical capabilities to model the behavior (Allen & Santrock, 1993, p. 139).
4. Motivation: In this process the observer expects to receive positive reinforcements for the modeled behavior (Allen & Santrock, 1993, p. 139).

Each of these components of social learning is used in an experiment done by Bandura called the Bobo doll experiment. Bandura believed that aggression is learned from three aspects: aggressive patterns of behavior are developed; second, what provokes people to behave aggressively; and third, what determines whether they are going to continue to resort to an aggressive behavior pattern on future occasions (Evan, 1989). The premises of social learning are that people learn from observing behaviors. The imitated behavior itself leads to reinforcing consequences. Many behaviors that we learn from others produce satisfying or reinforcing results (Bandura, 1977). Bandura combines both behavioral and cognitive philosophies to form his theory of modeling, or observational learning that states humans are able to control their behavior through a process known as self-regulation. Self-regulation exists when a person uses judgment by comparing their own observations with standards set forth by both society and

themselves (Bandura, 1977). Bandura's shift from a purely behaviorist viewpoint to focus on motivational factors and self-regulatory mechanisms that contribute to person's behavior have led to his recognition as father of the cognitivist movement (Evan, 1989). Social learning is a way for people to model behaviors from each other, either positive or negative, depending on their own observation of a performance.

Environmental experiences can also have an influence on social learning. Bandura (1977) reported that individuals living in areas with high crime rates are more likely to act violently than individuals living in areas with low crime rates. This is similar to the theory of Shaw and McKay's social disorganization. They believed that a neighborhood surrounded by culture, conflict decay and insufficient social organization was a major cause of criminality (Bartollas, 1990). People are both products and producers of their environment. They tend to select activities and associates from the vast range of possibilities in terms of their acquired preferences and competencies (Bandura & Walters, 1959; Bullock & Merrill, 1980; Emmons & Diener, 1986). Human expectations, beliefs, emotions, and cognitive competencies are developed and modified by social influences that convey information and activate emotional reactions through modeling, instruction, and social persuasion (Bandura, 1986). Inmates in prison are there because of some type of deviant behavior they have modeled from their environment before going to prison. People tend to model behaviors from others whether it is good or bad, most criminals model deviant behaviors. Social learning theorists have indicated that crime is a product of learning values and aggressive behaviors linked with criminality (Sutherland, 1993). Social learning can have a negative effect in some cases due to certain situations. The prison environment can be an environment of negativity because everyone there has committed a crime. Within the environment of the prison, there can also be opportunities for inmates to engage in some positive social learning through work release programs that provide them with an education and job skills, so they can reintegrate back into society once they are released.

### **Work Release and Vocational Training Program Challenges**

Prison work release programs face many challenges in assisting prisoners in their transition from a world of prison life into a world where they are a productive part of a community. This section introduces the challenges prisoners face in terms of educational levels, environmental factors, and substance abuse.

#### **Education**

One challenge work release programs encounter is increasing the education level of prisoners. Prisoners typically have lower education levels than the national norm. These low education levels make it difficult to provide inmates with the necessary job skills to gain employment, where they can receive sufficient pay to support themselves and possibly their families (Bushway, 2003). Examining the issue of education through social learning theory points out that low education levels among prisoners exist because many prisoners had role models who had low education levels. The application of social learning theory would suggest that prison work-release programs provide prisoners with role models, who have education levels that meet the national norm. Additionally, a mentor who has achieved these educational goals could enhance inmates' prospects for success by increasing self-efficacy. Goals and self-efficacy can be affected by interactions with others (Goto & Martin, 2009)

#### **Environment**

Another challenge work release programs face is many prisoners come from communities where the entire community atmosphere is one of being involved with illegal work (Wilson,

1987). In this environment, the prisoner's association with their peers may have been one of differential association which produced deviant behavior. After release from prison, ex-inmates may be returning to the same community and peers who enabled their previous illegal behavior (Listwan, Cullen, & Latessa, 2005). Social Learning Theory states people imitate other people, with whom they have close contact; therefore, close contact with peers who have demonstrated criminal behavior is a contributing environmental factor which lead to the prisoner's original criminal behavior. When ex-inmates return to an environment where they have close contact with peers who demonstrate criminal behavior, that contact could lead to recidivism. To overcome this situation, prison work release programs would need to place ex-inmates in communities, where legal work is the norm. Aftercare is an important step in reducing recidivism. Ex-inmates often begin their re-entry into society with good intentions but as months go by and social support and services dwindle, they tend to relapse to their previous criminal tendencies (Liswan, Cullen, & Latessa, 2005).

An additional challenge for prison work release programs is dealing with motivation on the part of inmates to participate in programs, and to seek and hold jobs (Bushway, 2003). An environmental factor for increasing positive motivation for prisoners would be helping them gain the ability to reproduce the behavior of continued attendance in work release programs. As social learning theory states, to model behavior, one must have the ability to reproduce the desired behavior. A psychological factor to increase motivation would be to instill in prisoners an intrinsic value for staying in the program and continuing on to long term employment. For prisoners to gain both the environmental and psychological factors needed to maintain motivation to continue participation in work release programs, prisoners would need to alter their ideas about work release programs. Inmates could learn new information about behavior pertaining to work release programs from observing other people's participation in similar programs.

Moreover, social learning theory advocates reward as a means of reinforcement to increase motivation. External reinforcement tactics, in the form of certificates for work accomplished and "student of the week" awards, have met with success when used by the California Department of Corrections (Thomas, 2003). People will avoid behavior which results in negative consequences, but will engage in behavior they feel will have a positive outcome. For this aspect of social learning theory to have an effect on motivation, prison work release programs need to supply reinforcement to inmates in the form of giving them information about the success of ex-inmates who have been through work release programs and successfully reentered society. Additionally, for prisoners to feel there is a positive outcome to their training, work release programs need to teach not only the skills inmates require to seek and keep a job but also the ability to use resources related to employment (Rakis, 2005). To enhance positive motivation for prisoners to participate in work release programs, prisoners should be empowered to succeed by ensuring that needed documentation to apply for jobs after prison release is available for them. Identification documents such as birth certificates and social security information, which is needed for employment is often not available upon the prisoner's release (Rakis, 2005). The lengthy process of procuring these documents could become part of the prisoner release process (Rakis, 2005). By using external and internal reinforcement tactics, intrinsic motivation of inmates to complete work release programs and seek and maintain employment could increase.

### **Substance abuse**

Substance abuse is a major challenge prisons deal with in work release programs.

On a self report survey of inmates, 59 percent reported using drugs within one month prior to incarceration and 28 percent reported using alcohol daily within the year prior to their incarceration (Petersilia, 2005). Programs to help prisoners cease their drug and alcohol addiction are important as research shows that when prisoners complete residential drug abuse programs, it has a positive effect on the reduction of recidivism (Pelissier, et al., 2001). Furthermore, prisoners who have an addiction to drugs or alcohol will not benefit from learning job skills (Bushway, 2003). Prisoners who are addicted to drugs or alcohol came from environments where other people were addicted to drugs or alcohol; therefore, prisoners in substance abuse programs need drug free mentors as role models. Successfully completing substance abuse programs puts prisoners in the position of being able to use the skills they learn in work release programs. Social learning theory's three steps involved with self-regulation could be incorporated into current prison residential substance abuse programs. Through guidance from counselors and mentors, prisoners could go through a process of self-observation. When given information about substance abuse and the harmful effects of addiction, prisoners could proceed to applying this knowledge to judge themselves. Finally, when given tools to quit addiction, both physically and emotionally, prisoners could move into the phase of self-response.

Social learning theory helps to bring into focus the causes which may have contributed to deviant behavior patterns in prisoners. Knowing these contributing factors to deviant behavior can provide prison policy makers with ideas to institute positive program changes, which incorporate concepts from social learning theory. Social learning theory ideas could be incorporated into work release programs' educational curriculum, format, delivery, and aftercare. Additionally, the concepts of Social learning theory and methods to increase self-efficacy could be applied to other correctional education programs, which lead and enable prisoners to participate in work release programs. Prison policy makers should consider the positive impact social learning theory can have if its concepts are integrated into prison work release programs.

#### **Prison Aftercare**

Bandura (1977) stated in his social learning theory that learning would be exceeding laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed and in later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action. A review of the current literature consistently suggests that pro-social behavior should be incorporated in prison educational programs to help inmates better understand the consequences of their actions (Listwan, Cullen, & Latessa, 2006). Work programs for recidivism can be placed into three main categories: jobs in prison settings, short term vocational training in prison and short term assistance in the job search process upon release (Bushway, 2003). Although these work programs for recidivism are straight forward, Bushway identified that one of the issues associated with these programs is the fact prisoners are detached from the legitimate world of work prior to entry into prison. Only 59% of state prisons inmates had high school diplomas or its equivalent and only two-thirds of inmates were employed during the month before they were arrested for their current offense (Bushway, 2003).

Many offenders are from very isolated inner city communities which are detached from the world of legal work (Bushway, 2003). A review of the literature reflects that in places where job variances are scarce, low-skilled and low prestige workers suffer as employers can afford to be more discriminating in their hiring practices (Liemann 1993; Offner & Holzer 2002). With this in mind, it is unlikely that any skill learned in prison, during a relatively short job training

program, will fundamentally alter the cost-benefit calculus that led to the period of incarceration in the first place for more than a number of offenders (Bushway, 2003). Prison work programs can help by providing the prisoner with new skills that can be used for employment, but much of this work needs to be done after release (Bushway, 2003). Furthermore, the literature also suggests that prison environments should radically change to support educational programs that promote pro-social behavior (Bushway, 2003). In addition, the literature supports the theory that prison education systems that include cognitive behavioral treatments such as social learning theory have been found to be twice as effective as non-cognitive programs (Pearson, Lipton, Cleland, & Yee, 2003). The goal of prison educational systems is to change the inmate's desire to want to participate in criminal activity upon release from prison.

The inmate's transition from prison to a pro-social environment is a key component that aids in the reduction of recidivism. Research continuously reflects an inmate's process of constructing new patterns is the most difficult part-old networks need to be abandoned and entirely new networks of friends and social support need to be constructed (Baskins & Sommers, 1998). An inmate will probably have the same network he had prior to entering prison (Bushway, 2003). With this in mind, it is critical ex-inmates receive more support upon their release. Examining work release programs through the lens of social learning theory, the goal is for all inmates and ex-inmates to reach self-efficacy. Self-efficacy beliefs regulate human functioning through cognitive, motivational, affective, and decisional processes (Benight & Bandura, 2003). Moreover self-efficacy can aid in mitigating feelings of failure which can negatively influence prisoners (Lundberg, McIntire, & Creasman, 2008). People's beliefs in their efficacy influence choices they make, aspirations, how much effort they mobilize in a given endeavor, how long they persevere in the face of difficulties and setbacks, whether their thought patterns are self-hindering or self-aiding, the amount of stress they experience in coping with taxing environmental demands, and their vulnerability to depression (Bandura, 1991). Ex-inmates who participate in work release programs need positive role models and further assistance reaching self-efficacy. Many adults have reported that *core people* have increased their motivation and self-efficacy (Goto & Martin, 2009). This information supports the concept of providing positive role models and mentors.

Research also reflects work release programs that support the current process of simply releasing an offender with no support, except a job search, may indicate there is almost no support for the creation of the pro-social network (Bushway, 2003). On the other hand, based on meta-analysis by Wilson (2001), inmates who participate in work release programs are less likely to recidivate than those who do not participate in a treatment program.

### **Conclusion**

A review of the literature reflects prison systems that incorporate components of social learning in their vocational training and work release programs have been successful in reducing recidivism post release from prison (Bushway, 2003). Research is beginning to reflect that policy makers should assert that the success of work release and vocational training programs depends on whether prison management ultimately buys into the goal of avoiding recidivism (Bushway, 2003). Prison systems that support behavior modification programs, such as social learning, tend to spend more money and are difficult to coordinate (Bushway, 2003). However, research has shown these programs can aid in reducing recidivism when executed properly (Bushway, 2003). Many ex-inmates face barriers post-release which prevents them from obtaining suitable employment. For example, ex-inmates have to deal with the social stigma of having been incarcerated, lack of transportation to get to jobs, and having to overcome

technological advances which occurred while they were incarcerated (Klitz, 2010). Finally, motivation, determination and self perseverance were key personal traits for ex-inmates that successfully obtained employment after release (Klitz, 2010). These skills cannot be taught in a social learning program. However, social learning programs promote an atmosphere of hope, self-efficacy, and self-motivation (Bandura, 1991). Ex-inmates need the support of a pro-social community upon release which includes government and non-profit community-based organizations (Klitz, 2010). Research reflects that a strong pro-social environment upon release does aid in the reduction of recidivism (Bushway, 2003).

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