Cognitive behavioral therapy and the cost of collective humanity: Commentary on discursive discipline in prisons – Schlosser.

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Schlosser's (2015) book *Inmates' narratives and discursive discipline in prisons: Rewriting personal histories through cogitative-behavioral programs*, offers a much needed challenge to, and critique of, the current status quo in correctional discourse. Throughout this book, Schlosser provides both philosophical and empirical challenges to one of the most commonly used psychological practices in correctional programs – cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). Early in the book Schlosser addresses recidivism at both a conceptual and an epistemological level, building a foundation for her later critique of the "what works" approach which heavily favors CBT. In the middle chapters, Schlosser's discussion of her thematic findings providing empirical support for her notion of CBT as discursive, while simultaneously highlighting the dehumanizing or degrading aspects of the Pathways to Change program. Schlosser's critique of current correctional discourse and the perpetual status quo of CBT should be recognized as a substantial contribution to body literature seeking a humanistic transformation of the criminal justice system in general, and the correctional process in particular.

Schlosser offers a discussion on what is perhaps one of the most important aspects of correctional scholarship – the operationalization or definition of recidivism. Schlosser cites Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) findings stating that roughly two-thirds of prisoners released between 2005 and 2010 recidivated. This is consistent with Langan and Levin's (2002) widely cited study examining prisoners released in 1994. However, as a broadly defined and operationalized outcome variable, recidivism is misleading. Schlosser is critical of the United States Sentencing Commission's overly-broad definition of recidivism due to the reality that such a broad definition fails to depict a clear outcome. Recently, Hamilton and Campbell (2013) examined recidivism as a categorical variable, finding that roughly two-thirds of their sample recidivated. However, new convictions accounted for 13% of the sample, while 50% of their sample was returned for non-criminal revocations. When considering the effectiveness of any correctional modality, it is imperative that the key outcome variable of recidivism be properly defined and/or operationalized. Contemporary research on recidivism suggests that in most instances, recidivism measures capture the discretionary decisions of community corrections officers rather than the criminality of the offender. In a recent program evaluation, my colleagues and I (see Lutze, Drapela, & Schaefer, 2015) found an anomaly when examining technical violations as a recidivistic outcome. While more of the offenders

in the experimental group had at least one formally acknowledged technical violation, on average the offenders in the comparison group have significantly more technical violations. Unable to control for community corrections officer discretion, we concluded that the program significantly reduced the number of technical violations – putting the burden on the offender and his or her willingness/ability to change. However, when looking at new convictions as a sole outcome measure of recidivism, our study found that the program significantly reduced that undesired outcome. By breaking down recidivism into unique categories, our study illustrates Schlosser's critique of recidivism as an ambiguous outcome measure.

Schlosser contextualizes her notion of discursive punishment within the broader social reality of political discourse, highlighting the complex relationship between the ever-changing populace perspectives and correctional practice. Within this context the "expert knowledge" which is the intended to be the agent of personal change for the offender is nothing more than a bureaucratically transformed (see Lipsky, 2010) amalgamation of the assumed desires of the citizens, or at least of those who have the necessary social and political capital. This reality, as articulated by Schlosser, illuminates an important and growing challenge in correctional discourse – client identification. As Schlosser discusses, correctional policies and practices are politically dictated and are bound to the will of the voting public, which raises the ever-present question of who is the client? The challenges related to client identification within correctional discourse are exacerbated by the widespread and seemingly uncritical adoption of the Risk Needs Responsivity Model (see Andrews & Bonta, 2010) by various Departments of Corrections. As a model for correctional discourse the Risk Needs Responsivity approach requires that community or the citizenry be identified as the client as it begins by constructing the offender as a compilation of societal risks which must be managed (See Polizzi, 2014). It should come as no surprise then that a therapeutic approach such as CBT which emphasizes or focuses on the socially undesirable aspects of the individual fits so well within this correctional paradigm. Consequently, as Schlosser illustrates though the inmates' written statements, these socially undesirable aspects of the individuals lived experience are internalized, causing them to routinely acknowledge their faults rather than moving towards a transformed self-concept.

Collectively, Schlosser's qualitative analyses and thematic findings illustrate her conceptualization of the Pathways to Change program as discursive punishment. Consequently, any program founded on a CBT approach will likely produce narratives themes such as those identified by Schlosser due to the here-and-now orientation of the CBT approach. Furthermore, the three themes outlined in chapter 6 would likely be identified in an assessment of any CBT program as such approaches demand the that the client assume full accountability while simultaneously removing the individual from his or her social context. As a social service worker I observed Schlosser's theme of disconnect when attempting to teach action-consequence patterns to my remedial services clients. As part of a stop, think, and react lesson we were strongly encouraged to play checkers, as if having their checker jumped somehow equated to the complexities of their social conditions.

By identifying the narrative themes of detachment from reality and the imposition of expert knowledge, Schlosser further illustrates the dehumanizing reality of the CBT approach in general, and the Pathways to Change in particular. While the issue of disconnect can be overcome by a well-trained professional, the themes of self-blame and degradation are so fully routed in the ontological orientation of CBT that overcoming such challenges will require a philosophical realignment of the collective approach. Schlosser's themes illustrate that the CBT approach, which is the philosophical core of the Pathways to Change model, objectifies the offender allowing his or her lived experience to be reconstructed in the same way one might repurpose raw materials. Of course, as Schlosser points out, this is only deemed to be acceptable because the offender, who violated the informal social contract inherent in the meta-narrative has somehow relinquished his or her basic humanity and is therefore no longer deserving of dignity and respect (see Polizzi, 2014).

Schlosser's crossover themes of choice, responsibility, context, goals, and future are related to perhaps the most discursive aspects of the Pathways to Change program. While choice and

responsibility narrow the offender's verbal and analytical vocabulary to identify themselves as the objective factor of their criminality, context finalizes the individual as an offender and therefore goals are conceptualized with those confines. As Schlosser points out, the resulting vocabulary follows the formula of "I was/am wrong because I was/am bad, in the future I will not be bad." While this approach has been linked to reductions in recidivism, in its multiple forms, Schlosser asks, at what cost? Unfortunately we have yet to develop a cost benefit analysis model that can capture the cost of our collective humanity.

Schlosser's book is a powerful reminder of the great American embarrassment of the latter half of the 20th century – the war on drugs and its bastard offspring mass incarceration. The narratives presented serve a dual purpose: first to illustrate the complexities inherent in the lives of the inmates, and second to humanize those who have been systematically dehumanized through the stigmatizing reality of the criminal justice system. While the former serves to provide a foundation for the storylines that are discursively rewritten through correctional discourse, the latter provides a unique conduit through which the genuine or organic realities of the inmates' narratives can be embraced. While scholars such as Hans Toch, David Polizzi, and Bruce Arrigo have called for a humanistic realignment of American correctional discourse by highlighting the multitude of negative consequences such dynamics evoke, Schlosser provides an empirically driven discussion on the therapeutic disruption produced by the internalization of dehumanizing and discursive practices.

### References

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