

An Exploration of Employment-Related Personal Projects Undertaken by Women on Probation and Parole

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Abstract

This qualitative research investigates the extent to which 401 women under supervision identify employment-related personal projects (i.e., actions taken to achieve abstract goals) as a way to make their lives better. Psychological theory about personal projects and feminist pathways theory guided the analysis. Findings reveal how project meaningfulness, self-efficacy, and social support to carry out the project affect well-being. Structural barriers, disability, and transportation issues were also identified. Findings suggest that many women pursue and benefit from employment-related projects. Correctional agents can assist women by helping them choose meaningful projects and providing information, resources, and social support.

Keywords

employment, women offenders, personal projects, probation and parole

Criminologists have increasingly recognized the dual influences of an individual's agency and of contextual constraints on the process of desistance from crime (Giordano et al., 2002; King, 2013). Even when opportunities and resources are available to facilitate change, individuals must want to change and must exercise their agency and take

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appropriate actions to change themselves and their lives. However, agentic plans and actions can be stymied by lack of resources and opportunity, stigmatization, and other features of the immediate context and one's location in the social structure.

As noted by feminist theorists (Maher, 1995), some criminologists have depicted women in the justice system as lacking agency, for example, because they have been led astray by partners or are victims who have used drugs or alcohol to cope with trauma. Alternatively, feminist criminologists have recognized that even when confronted with many constraints, women and girls in conflict with the law assert themselves and act to circumvent them (Bosworth, 1996; Jones, 2009; Morash, 2010). The research for this article examined whether and how women on probation and parole exerted their agency to find and maintain employment in an effort to improve their lives. It also explored various factors that inhibited or supported women in achieving their employment-related objectives, and the resulting negative and positive effects on well-being. We studied women's efforts to find or maintain work by examining their employment-related personal projects. Personal projects are actions taken to achieve more abstract goals, and they are a key construct in an ecological theory that considers personal characteristics and context as influences on the pursuit of personal projects that lead to subjective well-being, happiness, and physical and mental health (Little, 1983, 2020).

We focus on women who are supervised in the community because of their numbers and unique needs. In 2016, an estimated 4.5 million people were on probation or parole, and women are a growing proportion of this segment (currently 1 million) (Kaeble & Cowhig, 2018). A common requirement of community supervision is employment, which studies have shown to produce positive outcomes for offenders, including desistance from crime and drug use, improved financial stability, and general well-being (Lageson & Uggen, 2013; Leverentz, 2005; Petersilia, 2004; Skardhamar & Savolainen, 2014; Uggen, 2000; Visser et al., 2008). However, most of these studies focused on men, and relative to male offenders women with criminal histories face unique challenges to finding and maintaining employment. These challenges include skill deficits (e.g., reading, writing, and interpersonal skills), substance abuse and addiction, transportation, and mental and physical disability (Tonkin et al., 2004; van Olphen et al., 2009). Additional research is needed to understand the effects of seeking and maintaining employment on women involved with the criminal justice system.

One goal of the current study is to understand whether women on probation or parole described efforts to find and keep employment as personal projects. Second, informed by past research on personal projects (Dietrich et al., 2012; Dowden, 2004; Pomaki et al., 2009), we investigated how three cognitive factors—project meaning (personal reasons for project pursuit), project manageability (belief in one's capacity to complete the project), and project community (support for project completion)—are connected to subjective well-being or ill-being for women on probation and parole. Because the characteristics and effects of work-related personal projects have only been examined for samples of individuals who do not have justice system involvement, the final goal of this research is to extend the personal projects literature. By

utilizing a sample that is unique to personal projects research and by integrating the contributions of feminist criminology—namely feminist pathways theory (Belknap, 2006; Daly, 1994)—this work investigates the facilitators and barriers to positive outcomes from employment-related personal projects in the contexts common to women in the justice system. Findings lend insight into effective practices for the supervision of justice-involved women and expand the contributions of personal projects theory to the criminal justice discipline.

Personal Projects

To investigate the employment experiences of women under supervision, we drew on personal projects research from the field of personality psychology. Personal projects range from short-term actions to long-term plans (Wallenius, 1999), and they represent the things that people see themselves working on and caring about in their lives (Blunt & Pychyl, 2005). Examples of personal projects include “[I want to] run one mile each day,” “save more money,” or “find a job.” Personal projects act as middle-level objectives that, in our research, are part of more abstract strivings to make one’s life better. As an ecological theory, the explanation of effects on personal projects considers both individual characteristics (e.g., personality traits) and context as influences on the nature of personal projects, and the nature of personal projects affects the subjective well-being of people who undertake them. In the theory, context includes social and cultural norms and prescriptions and relatively fixed features of the environment, for instance, social structure and related resources and opportunities (Little, 2020). The theory that focuses on personal projects also recognizes individual agency as a key influence on the actions that people take (Little, 2014). Thus, the theory is compatible with criminological theories that consider both individual characteristics and context as well as a person’s agency as effects on human behavior.

Based on theory development in personality psychology and accompanying empirical research, three dimensions of personal projects have been shown to predict individual well-being: project meaning, project manageability, and project community (Little, 2014). Project meaning is related to whether individuals see their projects as valuable, worthwhile, and fulfilling. Project community, later referred to in the literature as connection to others (Little, 2020), is defined as perceived social support, including facilitators and hindrances, for an individual’s personal projects and eventual goal attainment. The final project dimension, project manageability, is defined as individuals’ assessments of whether their project is going well and will be successful, and whether they are competent to complete the project (e.g., exhibit self-efficacy) (Little & Chambers, 2003). According to theory about personal projects, individuals who view their personal projects as meaningful and fulfilling, feel there is social support for carrying out their projects, and see themselves as capable of successfully managing and completing their personal projects will experience a sense of subjective well-being, for example life satisfaction, happiness, and pride and enjoyment from their projects (Little, 1983, 2014). Conversely, individuals who do not find meaning in their projects, lack social support, and have a negative perception of their capacity to

successfully complete their projects will demonstrate decreased well-being, for instance, stress, frustration, and depression.

Findings from empirical research on employment-related personal projects are consistent with these expectations. For example, a study by Deitrich et al. (2012) examined the personal goal appraisals of young adults during their transitions from college to work, and how these appraisals were related to stress. They found that individuals who appraised their work goals to be important, attainable, and progressing well demonstrated less stress. In addition, Pomaki et al. (2009) found that goal-related self-efficacy moderated the relationship between goal attainability and well-being (measured by increased job satisfaction and decreased emotional exhaustion) in a sample of 172 nurses. Finally, in a study of 102 entrepreneurs, Dowden (2004) concluded that individuals with higher levels of social support and self-efficacy reported higher levels of personal and work-related well-being. This body of research has confirmed that the three main cognitive factors—project meaning, project manageability, and project community—consistently contribute to positive outcomes in the samples considered. Thus far, there has been no research about the nature and effects of employment-related personal projects for justice-involved women. The current study aims to fill that void.

Theory and research on personal projects suggest that women will experience increases in subjective well-being if the projects have personal meaning and social support, and if women see the projects as manageable. Women who do not have personal meaning in their projects, express a lack of social support, or have negative self-perceptions related to their ability to complete a project will experience decreases in subjective well-being. This process is of interest not only for theoretical reasons, but also because it pertains to the efficacy of requiring employment, the needs for support, and potential employment barriers for women on probation and parole.

The Contribution of Feminist Theories

Relative to male offenders, women on probation and on parole have unique barriers and hindrances that may affect their experiences of taking on employment-related personal projects. According to feminist pathways theory, these barriers stem from the varied pathways through which women become engaged in criminal and deviant behavior and their resulting needs (Belknap, 2006; Daly, 1994). For example, pathways to crime that began with childhood victimization link child abuse to mental illness, including depression, anxiety, and substance abuse (Covington, 1998; Daly, 1992). Pathways that stemmed from extreme economic marginalization are associated with a pattern of poverty, homelessness, and lower educational attainment (Bloom et al., 2003; Richie, 1996, 2001). Relational pathways to crime stemmed from a combination of dysfunctional intimate relationships that, over time, appear to erode self-efficacy and are linked to adult victimization, depression and anxiety, and substance abuse (Covington, 1998). The associated effects of these pathways (e.g., mental/physical disability, economic marginalization, substance use histories) may impact women's efforts to carry out their employment-related personal projects.

In addition, feminist pathways theory acknowledges that women suffer from gender-related systematic and structural constraints related to finding work. Legislation in many states prevents individuals with felonies from working in jobs that involve children and healthcare (Holzer et al., 2001), and a high proportion of women are employed in these types of work (Spjeldnes & Goodkind, 2009). Further, though many offenders face discrimination in the labor force (Baert & Verhofstadt, 2015; Batastini et al., 2017; Galgano, 2009; Pager, 2003; Uggen, 2000), women with criminal records experience greater discrimination than their male counterparts (Berman, 2005; Decker et al., 2015; Ortiz, 2014). In addition to these constraints, justice-involved women have limited human capital (i.e., lack of education, skills, and experience sought by employers) relative to men (Bergseth et al., 2011; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009), which can affect their desirability to potential employers. Given that justice-involved women are structurally disadvantaged in the job market, and have to address multifaceted needs in addition to finding and keeping work, we expect them to confront different barriers to completing work-related personal projects than the non-offender samples studied in the personal projects literature.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: To what extent do women on probation and parole view employment as a personal project that makes their lives better?

Research Question 2: Are indicators of well-being and ill-being embodied in the employment-related personal projects that women on probation and parole describe?

Research Question 3: Do key dimensions of personal projects—project meaning, project manageability, and project community—help us to understand why some but not other projects promote well-being?

Research Question 4: Are facilitators, barriers, and elements of well-being during the pursuit of employment-related personal projects unique to the circumstances of women on probation and parole?

Method

Data

The data were collected as part of two studies of the same sample of women on probation and parole. The first study was designed to determine whether the communication patterns and relationship styles of probation and parole agents were related to women's outcomes. Inspired by narrative identity theory, the second study focused on women's identity development. Apart from the primary purposes of the two studies, because of the importance of considering the connection of agency to outcomes, for five interviews spaced over the two studies the researchers included the question, "What have you done to make your life better?" They followed this question by asking, "Did it make your life better? How?" The present analysis focused on descriptions

of personal projects to search for and work at jobs that women provided in response to these questions.

Sample

In 2011, probation and parole agents were recruited from the 16 Michigan counties within an hour and a half drive from the research office. These counties included rural, suburban, and urban environments, and housed 68.5% of the 2011 state population. The vast majority (94.8%) of agents who were invited to take part in the study agreed. Each participating agent met with a principal investigator to identify eligible clients. Requirements for participating included having started supervision approximately 3 months prior, having been supervised by the same agent for 3 months, having been convicted of a felony, and having a history of substance misuse. The focus was on substance-involved women because they constitute the largest subgroup of justice-involved women (Fazel et al., 2017; Fearn et al., 2016; Lynch et al., 2012), and there is evidence of different influences on women offenders who are and are not substance involved (Morash, 2010; Reisig et al., 2006).

Once eligible clients were identified, multiple methods were used to recruit them as study participants. Agents introduced them to an interviewer at the reporting center to hear about the study, and the interviewer explained human subjects' rights and obtained written consent. If the client consented to sharing of contact information, agents provided phone contact information to research staff who called women to arrange a time to meet and learn about the study. Finally, agents provided women with a project contact card or flyer, so interested women could arrange a time to hear about the study. Of 846 eligible women, 402 took part in the study. Due to an audio recorder failure, the final sample for the present analysis was 401 women. Reasons for not taking part were that research staff were not always on site when women reported to see their supervising agents, and some eligible women neither responded to flyers nor gave agents permission to share contact information. Nonparticipants did not differ significantly from participants in official records of substance use, violations of community supervision conditions, arrests, or convictions in a 12-month period; however, slightly more non-participants were incarcerated a year after supervision began.

The numbers and percentages of the 401 women with data by number of interviews each completed was as follows: 11 (2.7%) women had data for one interview, 15 (3.7%) for two, 74 (18.5%) for three, 61 (15.2%) for four, and 240 (59.9%) for all of five the interviews considered in the present analysis. Little attrition occurred between the first and the third interview (94.3% retention). Attrition was higher from the first to the fourth (75.8% retention) and sixth (64.8% retention) interviews. To assess external validity, we tested for differences in recidivism (i.e., the average number of arrests and convictions at 84 months) between respondents and non-respondents for the fourth and sixth interviews. We did not find significant differences between those who did and did not respond to requests for a fourth interview in the number of arrests (respondents: $M = 1.78$, $SD = 2.86$; non-respondents: $M = 2.35$, $SD = 3.85$; $t(399) = 1.56$)

and convictions (respondents: $M = 2.10$, $SD = 3.43$; non-respondents: $M = 2.33$, $SD = 3.73$; $t(399) = 0.56$). Individuals who did not respond to requests for a sixth interview had a slightly higher number of arrests on average at 84 months than respondents (respondents: $M = 1.65$, $SD = 2.80$; non-respondents: $M = 2.42$, $SD = 3.63$; $t(399) = 2.36$); however, there was no significant difference in the average number of convictions between these two groups (respondents: $M = 1.94$, $SD = 3.37$; non-respondents: $M = 2.55$, $SD = 3.72$; $t(399) = 1.67$).

Procedure

The university IRB approved all study protocol. Women were given incentives that differed by stage of the interview process. At the baseline interview, participants were given an incentive of \$30 in the form of a gift card. Incentives for the second and third interview were gift cards for \$50 and \$75, respectively. The remaining interviews were conducted during the second study, and the incentives were money orders worth \$40 for the fourth, \$75 for the fifth, and \$40 for the sixth interview. Data from the fifth interview were not used for the present analysis as it did not include the question about what women had done to improve their lives.

Coding

For responses to questions about making life better, transcripts of the interviews were unitized (i.e., broken into smaller segments for analysis) such that units were statements about an action a woman took to make her life better plus follow-up information about whether and how the action made life better. To establish units of analysis, two authors discussed the responses and established an initial understanding of the content that would constitute an effort to improve one's life. After unitizing the responses for 43 participants, Guetzkow's U was 0.011 (Guetzkow, 1950) which is an acceptable value since a smaller figure indicates agreement on unitization. These units were then coded to be either employment-related (i.e., related to finding and working at a job), or not employment-related. Two researchers coded material for 40 units. Intercoder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa (Cohen, 1960). The intercoder reliability indicated an acceptable level of agreement ($\kappa = .85$). Only units that were coded as employment-related were utilized for the final analysis.

Coding for the characteristics of personal projects occurred in both deductive and inductive stages. The first stage involved deductive coding, where codes were derived from the personal project literature. These codes included women's descriptions of project meaning (reasons for pursuing a project), project manageability (positive beliefs about ability to complete a project), and project community (social support for completing a project). Units were coded for the presence of these themes, references to the absence of these themes (e.g., a lack of social support), or not mentioned/unclear. Next, women's descriptions of the well-being or ill-being embedded in the action unit were coded as positive, negative, or unclear.¹

After the deductive coding stage, passages were inductively coded. Units were coded to determine the presence of themes relevant to women's pathways to crime and structural barriers common to justice-involved women. The purpose of the inductive coding was to address potential gaps in the personal project literature relevant to a sample of women offenders. A codebook was created by the first author to name and define the observed barriers and facilitators to women's employment-related projects. Barriers to completing personal projects included structural barriers (e.g., having a criminal record), mental and physical disability, and transportation issues. Facilitators included women's references to "keeping busy" as an improvement in one's life that helped them avoid illegal activity. Once a codebook describing the themes was developed, two authors achieved excellent reliability ($\kappa = .88$) on a subsample of 43 cases for both deductive and inductive codes (Cohen, 1960).

Results

Identification of Employment-Related Personal Projects and Associated Well-Being

Our first research question was whether women designated employment as a personal project that could improve their lives. The majority ($n = 235$; 58.6%) of the women identified trying to find or maintain employment as something they were doing to improve their lives at some point in the study. Of the 166 who did not engage in an employment-related project, 77 (46.4%) indicated during one or more of the first three interviews that they could not work. With one exception (a woman who had to be home with children) the reason was a disability. Among the 375 women who had three or more interview transcripts, 57 (15.2%) named employment as a personal project three or more times. Thus, employment was a personal project for many women, and for some women it was repeatedly named as a personal project. Relatedly, of the women that mentioned employment-related personal projects three or more times, the majority ($n = 47$; 82.5%) also mentioned factors that facilitated their projects. These findings support past research which has established that project sustainability can be improved when environmental, relational, and cultural contexts are consistent with the proposed project (Grant et al., 2007).

The second research question was whether women associated personal projects with improvements in their well-being. Indeed, a large number ($n = 158$; 67.3%) of women with employment-related projects mentioned the positive effects of these projects. Some women acknowledged how employment encouraged desistance from crime. For example, when Leslie² was asked if she had done anything to make her life better, she said, "Well I have a job now, so I don't have to commit illegal things to get the money." Also noting this connection, Patricia explained that work "keeps my money flowing so I won't go back into the old ways." Women identified tangible benefits of work related to gaining financial independence and being able to provide for their families. Annette explicitly noted that becoming a nurse made her "able to become a better parent and [her] life was just changed dramatically." Personal projects

related to work improved women's finances and family lives and helped them avoid criminal behavior. These improvements increased women's satisfaction with their pro-social lifestyles. In addition, women recognized particular positive psychological effects of employment as a personal project. They often expressed their feelings of pride resulting from accomplishing work-related goals. Asked what she had done to make her life better, Patricia responded, "Working a real job. Not, you know, selling drugs . . . that's something that I'm proud of." Further, many women enjoyed their work. Donna said that her work gave her "something to wake up and look forward to every day." Prior research has identified pride and enjoyment from personal projects as an important indicator of the connection of projects to well-being (Little, 2014).

A small number ($n = 19$; 8.1%) of women noted negative effects of engaging in employment-related personal projects. Molly explained that "it's not easy looking for a job," and Joan noted that the jobs she was able to get were "nothing that I can live by." As a result of low wages, some women worked multiple jobs. Meg, who was working three jobs at the time of one interview, recalled, "When I'm not at work, I go home and go to sleep. I don't even hang out or nothing, I just sleep. It was wearing me down. . . ." This experience is common among women with human capital and social capital deficits, as they are often forced to work multiple low-paying jobs to obtain necessities for their families (Bruns, 2019). As shown by the data, for a small proportion of women in the sample, employment-related projects were detrimental to their well-being.

The Nature of Personal Projects and Well-Being

Analysis to answer the third research question investigated how previously identified themes in the personal project literature—women's perceptions of project meaning, project manageability, and project community—are related to experience of positive and negative effects for women on probation and parole. Table 1 presents the number and frequencies of women who viewed employment-related personal projects as meaningful, manageable, and supported by other people and also the number and frequencies of projects viewed as having positive or negative effects on their well-being.

Project meaning. When talking about their employment-related personal projects, many women noted project meaning, or the personal value they attributed to their projects ($n = 122$; 51.9%), and a very high proportion of these women described positive effects ($n = 112$; 91.8%). For example, Julia, who worked as an auto factory worker, acknowledged that "dedicating myself to this job and learning everything I can about it. . . makes my life better because, like I was telling you, it gives me a great sense of purpose." Julia found that devoting herself to her job provided her with satisfaction. Some women found the process of obtaining work to be meaningful regardless of the type of the work they would be doing. When Erica was asked what she did to make her life better, she answered, "I got a job! . . . And that was very exciting for me. And it's not good to be proud, but I was very proud of myself. Because I didn't give

Table 1. Effects Associated with Personal Project Facilitators and Barriers.

	Types of effects						Total <i>n</i>
	Positive		Negative		Unclear/no effect		
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Facilitators							
Project meaning	112	91.8	3	2.5	7	5.7	122
Project manageability	17	68.0	0	0.0	8	32.0	25
Project community	15	36.6	0	0.0	26	63.4	41
Keeping busy	14	60.9	1	4.3	8	34.8	23
Barriers							
No project meaning	0	0.0	1	100.0	0	0.0	1
Negative self-perception	2	66.7	1	33.3	0	0.0	3
Lack of social support	3	50.0	2	33.3	1	16.7	6
Structural barriers	3	12.0	6	24.0	16	64.0	25
Mental/physical disability	2	22.2	3	33.3	4	44.4	9
Transportation	4	44.4	4	44.4	1	11.1	9

up, so that was really, really exciting for me, getting a job.” Women who were proud of having achieved the goal of finding work did not necessarily hinge that pride on the nature of their work. Given the systemic barriers to finding a job for women on supervision, pride related to finding work of any kind may be common.

Only one woman (0.08%) expressed a lack of project meaning in her employment-related personal project, and she described the associated negative effects. Jill noted that she was not challenged by her job, and her limited compensation and hours negatively affected her well-being. She finished the tasks associated with her job quickly and spent the rest of her time watching movies on her phone and exercising. She stated, “I make \$7.50 an hour, and it’s only 3 hr a day. . . . it’s the only job I can get now, so [I] just keep pushing through.” Jill’s frustration stemmed from a number of factors, including both a disinterest in her work and the low wage and minimal hours. However, no other women identified negative effects that stemmed from a lack of meaning in their personal projects related to work, which may illustrate that women on probation and parole, who often have little or no work histories or skills, find value in seeking and holding a job of any type, at least in the short run.

Project manageability. Compared to the many women who shared the information that searching for and finding work was meaningful, relatively few ($n = 25$; 10.6%) mentioned belief in their capabilities to find and maintain employment, but most of them ($n = 17$; 68.0%) experienced positive effects. One theme for women who did note their capabilities was the positive effects from excelling at their jobs. Julia explained her attitude toward working and the positive emotional and tangible benefits.

When I got this job, I viewed it as a second chance. I've never had the opportunity to make as much money as I make at this place. . . I made sure that I learned everything I could, I asked every annoying question that I could to learn how to do a great job. . . I'm really good at what I do. . . It makes me feels good, it never doesn't make me feel good.

Women also noted the positive effect of seeing themselves as capable individuals even when they were unable to meet their employment-related goals. For example, Rhonda's approach to job searching was to "just keep going." When called for an interview, she appreciated the experience regardless the outcome. "At least I didn't get scared and just not go. . .if I did it and I didn't get a call back, that's fine, I experienced it." This sentiment was mirrored by Jamie. Even though she was not offered a position, she stated "[I] felt like [I] accomplished something by passing the interview." In spite of the outcomes of their job searches, women's self-directed efforts to find employment had positive effects.

Though three women (1.3%) reported negative self-perceptions of their employment-related abilities, they did not link them to negative effects. For example, Francesca described her outlook on employment during her job search as detrimental to her goals. She explained, "I go through spurts where I just don't want to work. . . [U]sually, I'd be all fucked up thinking, you know, about where this job is gonna take me. It's just a temp service job, and I probably won't get hired in." However, she was able to ultimately derive positive effects from her personal project after finally finding work. "It's a great feeling because I worked all night and [when] my night's over, I've made money, I've been a productive member of society. . . [W]orking overall is a big step up for me." In addition, Lacy initially blamed herself for her inability to find work quickly before her arrest. She stated, "[W]hen I did get in trouble, you know, I didn't have a job so that was frustrating at that time. . . That was all because I was just stupid." Since being on probation, however, she found work, attended cosmetology school, and improved her outlook on her future. She expressed her feelings, "I followed through with what I wanted in life; my perspective is a lot brighter than it was in the past. . . I have goals that I'm meeting and continue to meet. So, I'm very positive of what's to come." Despite her setbacks and initial negative self-perception, she continued to improve her well-being through her work-related personal project. Francesca and Lacy's sentiments are consistent with past research, as goal progress and achievement during personal project pursuit is associated with increased well-being (Koestner et al., 2002).

Project community. Out of the 41 women that mentioned social support related to their personal project, 15 women (6.4%) explained how this support had positive effects on their well-being. A few women spoke about the ways in which organizations geared toward helping offenders find employment improved their lives. Women gained information about employment from Michigan Works and Flip the Script, job placement organizations, as well as The Resource Network. Vicky detailed support from an agency: "[It] helps me with job employment skills, job training skills, conflict resolution skills,

resume writing skills, computer skills—and. . . work ethics and attitude skills, job preservation skills.” Women also acknowledged social support from their families, who provided childcare during job searches or while they were working. For example, Ariana’s mother provided support for her employment-related project. Ariana recalled, “I was gone sixteen hours out the day [at my job]. . . I felt like I had no time for my child and that’s where my mom steps in and so she helps me out and I appreciate that.” In other cases, family members provided opportunities for employment, either through recommendations for open positions at their place of work or by starting joint business ventures. Tiara mentioned that her sister helped her find her current job. “My sister was working at Subway. . . she called me and said her boss was looking for somebody to work at Subway. . . and was I interested, and I said ‘yes.’” Lana mentioned her experience working with her father, who is an established carpenter:

[He] has taught me a lot of different things, like how to use the equipment . . . we’re looking into . . . entertaining the possibility of him and I doing a joint venture on our own . . . You can come from dismal, to this, you know. You don’t always have to work traditional jobs, so to speak.

For Lana, working with her father helped her avoid working at a “traditional” job for women. In fact, many women who reported working in the informal economy, or women who started their own businesses, pointed out that family members helped them to do this. In these cases, social support represented a way to circumvent job search procedures during which they might be turned down because of their criminal histories (Cantora, 2015), and led to jobs that gave women a chance for earning money through work that they found enjoyable.

In sum, many women identified the benefits of project meaningfulness in finding and maintaining work. Some felt capable of finding, keeping, or performing work and some felt supported in these projects, which produced positive effects. Few women spoke about lack of meaning, indication of personal deficits, or a lack of social support in descriptions of employment-related personal projects.

Unique Constraints and Outcomes for Justice-Involved Women

The fourth research question related to whether women in the sample mentioned additional facilitators, barriers, and types of well-being related to achieving their employment-related personal projects. Such features of personal project pursuit might occur because of the situations of women in the justice system. A unique feature was that multiple women ($n = 23$; 9.8%) noted that work was valuable because it filled otherwise idle time. They explained that their jobs helped keep them busy and out of trouble, and several of these women ($n = 14$; 60.9%) noted the specific positive effects. For example, Ariana valued a job she found through temporary services, “I don’t get paid much but it keeps me busy enough to where I don’t have a lot of time on my hands because time used to get me in trouble a lot. . .” Luciana similarly said, “I’ve had a

couple of jobs and that helps you know, keep me busy and it makes me feel good about myself too. . .” Christa echoed these sentiments, “Basically it’s only two things, you keep a job or you go to school to get a better job and that will keep you out of trouble. . . If you have a steady schedule of honest living, of taking care of the kids, going to work, you don’t have any time to get yourself in trouble.” These women viewed employment projects as means to achieve the goal of staying out of trouble by filling their time with legitimate activity.

The most common hindrance that women identified in the job search and maintenance process was structural barriers related to their status on probation and parole ($n = 25$; 10.6%). Nia’s violent felony conviction disqualified her from working in the healthcare field. She explained, “I took a CNA [certified nurse’s assistant] class . . . It didn’t [make my life better] because I have the assault on my records so I couldn’t get a job in the health care field.” Unaware of the state licensing rules which did not prohibit a person with prior convictions from becoming a licensed social worker, Martina stated,

I kept beating up myself because I could’ve had [my degree] but I went to prison for three years and then I came straight out of prison registering for school. . . I know with the field that I’m going in that I might have some struggles there . . . [if] I can get licensed [as a social worker] because I know they’re not gonna let me [work] for the state.

Alisha provided yet another example of how her criminal background interfered with her job search and left her feeling discouraged,

I went on a lot of job interviews and you go through the first phase and meeting the managers and then going through all the paperwork all the questions. . . Thinking that you have the job after all these call backs and then they actually do a background check and then they won’t hire you. . . It was very discouraging because you feel like you just made one mistake almost ten years now in February. . . and I’m still having to deal with it.

Jamie acknowledged the futility of attempting to find employment, and that futility affected her outlook on her future. She stated, “I’m trying to make a change but now it seems like it’s hard for me to make a change with this behind me.” In these examples, women felt blocked from actualizing their employment goals due to their criminal histories. For Nia and Alisha, these negative feelings emerged despite their efforts to increase their human capital and start on meaningful career paths. Further, some women faced structural barriers after finding employment. Chelsea explained her experience with an employer who discovered her criminal history. She recalled, “I had a violation of probation so that let my boss know that basically I was on papers and once they found out what I was on paper. . . I got walked off the line. So that was embarrassing.” Employers’ reactions to women’s criminal histories stood in the way of the steps they took to work and erased any sense of well-being that might come from their efforts.

A few women described how mental or physical health issues ($n = 9$; 3.8%) and transportation problems ($n = 9$; 3.8%) impeded their work-related personal projects. Brenna felt her need for mental health and drug treatment inhibited her job search. Her treatment schedule, along with her probation requirements, affected her availability, which made her a less desirable employee than other applicants. She stated, "When it comes between you know hiring you or hiring someone that doesn't have those kind of issues, I mean come on, you know . . . I gotta go to group therapy on Tuesday night so I'm gonna need that off." Not being able to find a job contributed to Joan's feeling bad about herself. As she put it, "I can't get a job . . . And for right now it's just like a limbo of what I'm going to do, a hard time staying off of drugs because I'm in such limbo." Talking about her use of public transportation during the job search, Molly stated, "You go by bus, it's like, well, I might be able to make it to a couple places [to look for work] and then come back. Because you can't just get off and get back on. . . You have to pay every time." Problems with mental health, including substance misuse, and transportation are well documented by research on women who have broken the law (DeHart et al., 2014; Northcutt-Bohmert, 2016). Thus, it is not surprising that these challenges undermine some women's employment efforts and leave them feeling incapable and discouraged in employment personal projects.

Discussion

A key objective of this research was to explore whether and how employment-related personal projects improved (or failed to improve) the lives of the women on probation and parole. In a sample of 401 women, more than half identified employment-related personal projects as means to improve their lives. The majority of them discussed psychological and tangible benefits of seeking, finding, and working at jobs, but a small number identified negative effects of employment-related personal projects. A theory that had not previously been used to guide research on justice-involved women directed attention to the positive outcomes for people who were engaged in projects that they considered to be meaningful, manageable, and supported by other people. A high proportion of women with employment-related personal projects felt that their projects had been meaningful and increased their well-being. They derived feelings of accomplishment not only from large successes (e.g., getting a job, receiving a promotion), but also from smaller achievements (e.g., attending an interview, completing a resume). Fewer women talked about their self-efficacy or other indicators of the manageability of their projects, or about the support they received in carrying out the projects.

Turning now to findings about personal projects that are unique to women with a history of illegal behavior, women felt that working improved their lives by keeping them busy and thus unavailable for substance use or other illegal behavior. This finding is highly consistent with the theory of age-graded informal social control (Laub & Sampson, 1993). According to this theory, individuals who have broken the law desist when they alter their routine activities to be more prosocial, and pinpointed

employment as a key reason to alter former antisocial routines. Further, work using narrative identity theory has identified that justice-involved women value opportunities to construct prosocial identities (Hoskins & Cobbina, 2020), and that life narratives that incorporate prosocial activities produce positive effects for women (Morash et al., 2020). Consistent with the sentiments of the women in our sample, the time demands of prosocial activities such as work can improve well-being by dissuading women motivated to avoid crime from breaking the law.

Also unique to women with criminal convictions, study participants identified structural barriers related to their criminal histories, and these barriers interfered with their pursuit of their career goals. In line with the statements of women in the sample, past literature has shown that women with histories of offending face substantial discrimination in the labor market (Berman, 2005; Decker et al., 2015; Ortiz, 2014). Women also had personal needs related to mental health and transportation that made it difficult to find and keep employment, and the projects then resulted in ill-being rather than well-being.

Finally, the present analysis was able to identify barriers that affect women's personal project outcomes that were unaddressed in past personality psychology research. Access to transportation, as well as balancing mental health services and drug and alcohol recovery, served as impediments to women's personal projects related to employment and produced negative effects. These barriers are consistent with feminist pathways theory, according to which women's unique pathways into criminal behavior lead women to have unique criminogenic needs (Daly, 1994).

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations of the present study should be considered. First, there were inconsistencies in the delivery of interview questions, for some interviewers failed to ask *how* each project a woman identified made her life better. This limited our ability to analyze the dimensions, nature, and effect of some of the personal projects. However, since these omissions occurred at random, it is unlikely that this limitation produced biased results.

Next, interviewers did not ask women theory-driven questions about the characteristics of their personal projects, specifically about the meaning of work to them, whether they felt they could manage to find and hold a job, and whether they needed and received support in achieving their goals. The more limited information that study participants provided about perceived manageability of and support for employment personal projects may result because interviewers did not specifically ask about these project dimensions. Also, it is possible that some women embarked on employment-related personal projects due to pressure from supervising agents and related requirements rather than because of personal goals. Goal congruence with a person's identity affects progress and outcomes in personal projects (McGregor & Little, 1998; Sheldon & Kasser, 1998). Further, this investigation did not consider women's traits or other individual characteristics, which must be congruent with personal projects if they are to go well (Little, 2014).

Although we used the personal project framework to identify relevant dimensions of projects (i.e., meaning, manageability, and community) and the well-being or lack thereof associated with the projects, we did not follow the steps of formal Personal Project Analysis (PPA) (Little, 2020). Similar to our initial question (“What have you done to make your life better?”) PPA begins by asking people to list several of their current projects. Different from our approach, PPA research participants then rate the projects on key dimensions that include negative and positive affect related to the project. The PPA also includes assessment of the effects of projects on each other, which we did not consider. This may however be an important area for future research, as it is possible that, for example, obtaining mental health or drug treatment, caring for children, and meeting requirements for employment conflict with each other. Similarly, we did not systematically ask women to identify positive outcomes of employment-related projects, which would have provided additional data for us to analyze beyond the responses that women spontaneously provided when describing their projects or answering questions about whether their actions improved their lives.

Policy Implications

The findings of this research have specific policy-relevant implications. First, the finding of barriers unique to women highlights the importance of gender-responsive supervision that addresses the realities of women’s lives (Duwe, 2015; Messina et al., 2010; Wright et al., 2012). Research provides considerable evidence of the effectiveness of gender-responsive treatment programs (for reviews see Fagan & Lindsey, 2014; Gobeil et al., 2016; Grella, 2008). Consistent with gender-responsive practice, women on probation and parole should be given appropriate resources to improve their job search and eventual job prospects. For example, given that women often had difficulties with transportation, providing women under supervision with bus passes or gas money would reduce the economic strain of the job search and promote well-being (for a discussion, see Walker et al., 2014). For women without family support, assistance with childcare during and after the job search process would also provide support for women undertaking employment-related projects.

Second, either directly or through referrals to other sources of help, agents should support workable projects and provide social support for those projects. It is unknown whether women infrequently mentioned project manageability and related self-efficacy as well as social support for their projects because of the research design or neglect of these issues in supervision. Regardless of the reason, it is important that once probation and parole agents discern that a client is pursuing a meaningful prosocial project, agents should assist their clients in developing workable plans, enacting those plans, and providing support. The sense of well-being that study participants felt about their capacity to find and engage in work and about the social support they received may be especially important for justice-involved women. Women described how employment-related projects left them feeling proud and capable of their persistence, their work ethic, and their willingness to learn new skills. The general

job-search literature has established that this type of self-efficacy is a key determinant of employment outcomes for men and women (Côté et al., 2006; Kanfer et al., 2001; Wanberg et al., 2005). Social support is also likely to be especially important to women seeking work, in part because women in the justice system have quite limited support networks (Reisig et al., 2002). Research has illustrated that in addition to promoting positive employment-related outcomes (Roddy & Morash, 2019), social support contributes to women's desistance from crime (Brown & Ross, 2010) and drug use (Holmstrom et al., 2015; Strauss & Falkin, 2001). Thus, practitioners can be most effective in promoting employment success if they foster clients' feelings of being supported and having self-efficacy.

Third, referrals and collaborations hold promise in helping women succeed in employment-related projects. Although some women identified multiple agencies that facilitated their efforts to find and maintain work, others were not aware of these resources. Providing women with comprehensive information regarding employment agencies that focus on offender job placement can improve women's employment outcomes, as social support from employment agencies produced positive effects for some women in our sample. Cooperation and collaboration of probation and parole departments with multiple agencies and potential employers have been shown to be helpful to offenders (Hodgson et al., 2019). Given that many women experienced structural barriers related to their offender status, building collaborative relationships between employers, employment agencies, parole and probation agents, and women under supervision can improve the efficacy of the job search process and mitigate the challenges that a criminal record presents. Public and employer education program about the actual risk and benefits of hiring individuals with criminal histories, including "ban the box" campaigns to eliminate questions about prior record, could benefit women.

Finally, consistent with research that has shown the importance of social networks for assisting people in finding work (Granovetter, 2005), creating a mentorship program of employed women who were formerly on probation and parole could facilitate the development of networks that include pro-social, employed members. Consistent with this idea, there is evidence of the effectiveness of peer mentoring for employment programs for individuals on parole (Harrod, 2019; Redcross et al., 2016). Connecting justice-involved women looking for work with women who have successfully navigated the process of finding and maintaining a job would allow for the transmission of helpful information regarding employment as it is unique to women with criminal histories. Such programs can also provide informal connections to employment opportunities at the mentors' places of work.

Conclusion

There are both theoretical and practical takeaways from the findings of the research described in this article. Future research in criminal justice should continue to examine the characteristics and content of women's personal projects and consider the role of

personal project characteristics in improved well-being. Probation and parole agents and other practitioners working in cooperation could assist women by aiding them in the choice of meaningful projects, helping them plan and carry them out, and connecting them to needed support. Increased attention to women's unique needs will help women be more successful in their employment-related project pursuits. Overall, the current research suggests that integrating the personal projects literature with research related to women's pathways to crime can contribute to improved supervision outcomes for women on probation and parole.

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Notes

1. Because some interviewers were inconsistent in asking questions regarding why women's personal projects improved their lives, the number of women whose effects were unclear was relatively high.
2. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant anonymity.

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