

3

The Goal of Correctional Counseling

The goal of correctional counseling is usually based on two positions.

■ The Two Positions

The first position argues that correctional counseling aims to reduce **recidivism**. There seems to be considerable agreement among the general public and a substantial number of criminal-justice policymakers about the goal of correctional counseling, which is public protection. Every correction-counseling activity is designed to have a desirable impact on recidivism, either eliminating or at least reducing it, through targeting malleable criminogenic offender characteristics. Therefore, the success of correctional counseling or treatment is defined by reducing reoffending; failure is defined by the clients' recidivism, as measured by the criteria of the official record (Gendreau, Goggin, French, & Smith, 2006; Latessa, Cullen, & Gendreau, 2002).

Although successful correctional counseling will eventually enable offenders to improve their many relations (including conflicts with the legal system) and to eradicate their chances of reoffending, the proposition of using recidivism as the measurement of effective correctional counseling is problematic. This is because crime prevention and control are the mission and responsibility of the *whole* correctional system and the *whole* criminal-justice system, or more broadly, the *whole* society. As discussed previously, many factors influence

criminal behavior—ranging from the operation of the criminal justice system to family, school, and childhood experiences, from employment, education, media violence, and subculture issues to cognitive structures and processes, values, and belief systems. Given that correctional counselors are typically assigned a heavy caseload (it is not unusual for correctional counselors to have 100 or more clients; see Schrink & Hamm, 1989), it is unfair and inaccurate to evaluate the success or failure of correctional counseling on offenders' recidivism.

The second position maintains that correctional counseling is intended to help offenders balance their important relations, understand and overcome their internal and external conflicts through developing more accurate social cognitions and understanding about themselves and others as well as the patterns governing their interactions (Schrink & Hamm, 1989; Sun, 2005). This argument is supported by two primary reasons.

The first reason is the correctional clients' need for new cognitive abilities to understand and handle conflicts and dysfunctions in interpersonal, employment, education, mental health and other areas that keep them from functioning more effectively in the present environment, including living a crime-free life. Offenders are most likely to seek and accept counseling for difficulties relating to crises that arise in their daily lives in the correctional section (Schrink & Hamm, 1989). For example, offenders have many immediate conflicts to deal with, including a number of crises and issues that are unique to the prison environment. They include anger management, interpersonal conflict resolution, admission to an educational program, obtaining a prison job or transferring to a more suitable living unit, mental health concerns, homosexual panic and temptation, adjustment disorders and depression as a result of losing freedom of movement and being thrust into a threatening environment. In addition, inmates may suffer anxiety if their family members experience severe illness or other types of crises. Because clients' goals, expectations, and beliefs regarding their problems, the available services, and the results of counseling are likely to influence the helping process (Gambrill, 1997), the focus of correctional counseling is to assist the clients in dealing with their issues.

Two basic psychological needs consist of reaching mental peace and interpersonal harmony. It is important to see offenders as individuals who seek to understand and solve their problems, to balance their mental and interpersonal relationships. The issue of mental peace includes such topics as how to create and maintain inner tranquility, how to experience healing and joy, and how to unlearn past emotional hurts and extricate themselves from fear, anxiety, and depression. The issue of interpersonal harmony covers such issues as how to obtain and maintain love and good relationships, improve communication, increase cooperation, create a better future and achieve success, and avoid or overcome human discord, tribulation, and calamity.

The second reason is that offenders' crimes and criminal behavior are just symptoms of dysfunctions that are rooted in their distorted cognitions about themselves, others, the environment, and the patterns that regulate their conflict-ridden interactions. Although their criminal conviction is the official reason that they enter the correctional system, counseling efforts that focus only on their crimes miss the causal factors that led to their violation of the law. The most important causal factor among those variables that can be addressed by correctional counseling involves the client's distorted social cognition for evaluating, explaining, and adjusting personal experiences and actions. It is offenders' cognitions and interpretations that mediate how they understand and explain conflicts and whether they react in a pro-social or a criminal way (Sun, 2005). Offenders' antisocial behavior is regulated by their antisocial personality, which can be defined as a set of stable cognitive or knowledge structures that individuals use to interpret events in their social world and guide their behavior (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). There are three relevant subtypes of cognitive structures: (1) *perceptual schemas*, which are used to identify everyday objects (chair, person) or social events (positive or negative interpersonal communications); (2) *person schemas*, which include cognitions about a particular person or groups of people; and (3) *event scripts*, which hold information about how people act in varying situations.

The process of how the offenders' distorted cognitions regulate their antisocial activities is the central concern of correctional counseling. Their cognition of social reality includes mental representations of the thinking, feelings, and actions as well as the consequences of those actions for the self and others. It also includes higher-order cognitive processes (or perceived patterns and standards) that govern their internal and external relations (relations with others and with various systems, such as the justice apparatus, and social, educational, employment, and community agencies). Offenders use their knowledge structures to guide perception, interpretation, appraisals, attributions, decision making, action, and responses to the social (and physical) environment.

Offenders commit violent acts and other illegal activities because their perceived standards are based on a distorted reality that allows them to rationalize and justify their thinking and actions so that they are not in conflict with normal moral standards (Sun, 2006; Ward, 2000). For example, common justifications for violence include the excuse that the aggression is for the good of the self, others, or society. These justifications can be seen at work in various situations, from a parent's child abuse to war violence that kills innocent people. Dehumanizing the victim is another form of distorted cognition that emphasizes that a potential victim is a member of an out-group or is an enemy that has no human qualities and that the normal moral standard is inapplicable to him or her (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Other justifications include denials of injury

to the victim or responsibility. Although the justification methods of offenders were first examined in criminological research (Minor, 1981) as the offender's techniques of neutralization, these concepts have become a focus of social cognition research known as *attribution theories*.

Research in social cognition has shown that **self-serving bias** tends to characterize offenders' explanations for their actions (Bodenhausen, Macrae, & Hugenberg, 2003; Fiske & Taylor, 1991). This includes rationalizing their actions and making them desirable and reasonable from the agent's viewpoint (Davidson, 1990).

A good counseling model must explain two factors: (1) how the conflicts influence offenders' actions and behavior; and (2) how the mind and conflict interact to cause criminal behavior. Therefore, understanding offenders' cognitions (including how they evaluate and interpret social stimuli and react to them, and how they explain and understand their own experience, dysfunction, and need areas) is vital for assessing, evaluating, and performing interventions for the clients. In short, counselors should see offenders not only as criminals or patients who need to be corrected or treated but also as individuals who use their cognitions to understand and explain their crimes, mental disorders, and/or need areas. Their dysfunction shapes the limited or distorted social cognition that they use to make sense of their experience. Any counseling efforts that fail to help them understand their experiences cannot have lasting benefits on their functioning.

The next three chapters examine the relevant criminological and psychological models for correctional counseling. They provide readers with a solid theoretical foundation and a multicultural perspective.

SUMMARY

The goal of correctional counseling is usually based on two positions.

The first argues that correctional counseling aims to reduce recidivism. The success or failure of correctional counseling is defined by the recidivism that clients experience.

The second position maintains that correctional counseling is intended to help offenders understand and overcome their internal and external conflicts through developing more accurate social cognitions about themselves and others and the patterns governing their interactions.

KEY TERMS

Recidivism

Self-serving bias

Two basic psychological needs

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This chapter describes two positions regarding the purpose of correctional counseling. Which is your position? Why?
2. What are the two basic psychological needs for correctional clients?

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