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Robert J. Wicks
Cherry Hill Medical Center

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INDIGENOUS CORRECTIONAL PARAPROFESSIONALS:
"BOURGEOIS NIGGER OR EMPATHETIC WORKER?"
- A BRIEF POSITION PAPER -*

Robert J. Wicks, M.A.
Visiting Professor of Psychology
Institute for the Advancement of Medical Sciences
Cherry Hill Medical Center
Cherry Hill, New Jersey

Employment of paraprofessionals in correctional settings is no longer considered to be a controversial experiment. Their involvement in institutional and community-based programs is expected today. To utilize only professionals such as social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and penologists is considered to be an outdated waste of available personnel. A number of recent, comprehensive reports have borne this out (Gartner, 1971; Sobey, 1970; Arnhoff & Rubenstein, 1969; Grosser, Henry & Kelly, 1969).

Rationales for Use. There are several clear cut reasons for employing paraprofessionals in the mental health field in general, and the correctional field in particular. In addition to the savings afforded by using paraprofessionals to supplement and extend the work of professionals, minority nonprofessionals can:

1. Serve as mediators between the institution and the community.
2. Provide role models for minority clients.
3. Help bridge the communication gap between the system and the clients.

* Though, as author, I take full responsibility for the form and content of this paper, I wish to express my appreciation to Dr. C. Torres-Matruillo for her comments on the first draft.

Accordingly, it is no wonder then that paraprofessionals have long been employed in correctional settings.

Probation and Parole. Paraprofessionals (unsalaried) were utilized as early as 1850 in the United States by John Augustus, "the Father of Probation" (Carter, McGee & Nelson, 1975). Today, in Japan, salaried probation officers serve mainly as administrators of a force of paraprofessional volunteers. Kyoto alone boasts of having one thousand nonprofessional officers (Hogan, 1971). In doing casework under the supervision of the regular probation workers, they are able to: expand the quantity of clinical services available, conserve criminal justice funds, and (of possibly more importance) demonstrate community interest in the welfare of the probationers involved.

At Anderson College in Indiana, another study (Clear, 1971) involved students in work at state probation offices. The goal was to see if less distance - at least in terms of age - between paraprofessional workers and probationers would result in a better client relationship. Former offenders and indigenous nonprofessionals have been employed in probation activities as well (Beless, Pilcher & Ryan, 1972; Beless & Pilcher, 1972). The results were reportedly quite favorable in that they frequently supported the contention that less distance between client and counselor was an important variable, that is, if the probationer had more in common with the probation office's representative, he/she would often have less difficulty in relating to this official.

Correctional Institutions. Institutional settings have not been exempt from the presence of paraprofessionals either. In Denmark, for instance, extensive group work has been done by trained paraprofessionals (Feldman, 1970). Riker's Island, New York also has long used correctional aides as group leaders (Atlas, 1971) and in various social service roles.

In institutions, as in probation, ex-offenders have been employed. Project Re-Entry is an example of this (Buckley, 1972).

Project Re-Entry is a program through which ex-offenders who have "made it" on the outside voluntarily return to the prison on a regular basis. Their aim is to use their experience and insights to help men about to be released

to prepare themselves for a variety of problems they will meet on the outside (pp. 24, 25).

When inmates get the opportunity to see former prisoners as counselors, the impact can be quite dramatic. It is easier to believe that one can "make it" in the free community if one sees living evidence that others from the same background or situation have done it.

Developing a Program. Due to the reportedly positive results coming out of the studies cited earlier and numerous other ones done on utilization of paraprofessionals in the correctional setting, most penal systems have either initiated or accelerated existing paraprofessional programs. The savings in dollars reported by some researchers was obviously one of the key reasons for this quick move to employ nonprofessionals. In a progress report on the economic savings resulting from the use of legal paraprofessionals in Pennsylvania, it was estimated that the program had saved taxpayers an estimated \$300,000 during the first six months of 1972 (State Correctional Institution at Graterford, 1972).

In the same vein, some administrators in the field believe they can add numerous paraprofessionals at the same cost of hiring a few new professionals. Loughery (1969) says "We are less in need of extra probation officers than we are in need of a corps of auxiliary workers to spread the effect of the officers we already have." (p. 247)

However, once administrators began developing a program for the use of paraprofessionals, they found that a system was needed for keeping the ones they had. Many of those hired left after several months or a year, for a number of reasons, including low salary, poor training, resistance from professionals, and little chance for advancement or further academic training.

In response to this problem, many correctional planners looked to the mental health field for a model. Mental health clinics had more experience in utilizing paraprofessionals - particularly in the past decade. Of the steps the mental health field had found particularly helpful, the ones which seemed most effective dealt with the processes necessary to make para-

professional career plans more attractive and stable. The feeling by correctional administrators was that corrections then needed to follow the lead of the overall mental health field by improving the status of the paraprofessional career plan.

This could be done by taking a number of initial steps in reorganizing the paraprofessional career ladder so new nonprofessionals could look to a promising future in corrections. Another change would be to improve the training by exposing the new trainees to principles and jargon of psychopathology and psychodynamics, so they can understand and work better in tandem with the professionals. In other words, in general, offer new paraprofessionals a position where they can see that they will have opportunities for technical and professional advancement.

To a degree, this approach has been somewhat successful. Job turnover has decreased, at least correctional paraprofessionals stay for several years rather than only a few months. Professional supervisors have begun to report that the nonprofessionals, including indigenous personnel, are becoming "acclimated" to their positions as well (i.e. professionals are having less problems with nonprofessionals siding with the inmate population against staff on issues).

In summary, many correctional administrators had begun to feel that the steps they had taken to make the paraprofessional operation a more integral part of the system were quite successful. However, as time goes on, it appears that such steps are proving to be a "mixed blessing".

For in developing a career ladder to help Blacks and other minority group members to gain access to the correctional system as treatment agents, the stage has been set for increasing the distance between the indigenous worker and the inmate. In group therapy sessions one might hear the inmates refer to their Black group leader as a "Bourgeois Nigger". In social service contacts, the worker who lived in the neighborhood where he or she was required to make house visits, may now, three years hence, have moved to a higher rent district when a promotion and higher salary made it possible.

What is at issue then is that in giving paraprofessionals an opportunity to become part of the system, there seems also

to be a danger of changing them to a point where they will find it difficult to identify and empathize with the population they serve, thus obviating the very strength for which they were originally hired. Since this danger may only apply to certain minority groups and not others, further research will need to be done to determine to which group(s), if any, this concern applies.

However, if research does support the hypothesis that there is a problem when certain minority group members become too much a part of the system, what will be the solution? Certainly, it will not be to remove the career ladder for indigenous nonprofessionals. No one would deny that the correctional system needs more minority group members not only as treatment agents involved in direct service, but also in supervisory and teaching roles.

Possibly an answer is to reinstitute so-called terminal, short-term positions. They can be for six months to one year in length, part time or full time. The only requirement would be that the person not have worked in the field before. And that he or she appear in the eyes of the screening panel (which should have community representation) as someone who is still in close contact with the population to be served.

There is no doubt that these short-term workers will cause, and have, the same problems that the original indigenous paraprofessionals had before job advancement plans were introduced. However, now with a cadre of minority group paraprofessional supervisors and teachers present to guide them, the problems can be dealt with more expeditiously.

Just as the seasoned Black ex-offender who has been out of trouble for ten years has something unique to offer an inmate or probationer, so does the former offender who has been going "straight" for only a year. Just as the Puerto Rican who after six years in corrections has been promoted to principal mental health worker has much to offer the offenders he works with that is special, so too will the young Puerto Rican who has just graduated from high school and still lives in a ghetto area.

Consequently, to attract, hire and use only those indigenous paraprofessionals who are expected and encouraged

to become a part of the system on a long term basis may be a mistake...one that will cause much to be lost from the overall nonprofessional movement. Accordingly, it would appear useful to continue to attract young paraprofessionals and ex-offenders for short term positions so the correctional client can repeatedly find someone who speaks his language.

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