

**Identifying and predicting the correctional orientation of Trinidad and Tobago's  
Correctional Officers: Implications for prison reform**

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Paper submitted for presentation at the SALISES *Crisis, Chaos, and Change: Caribbean Development Challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* conference.

Category: Crime and Violence

Key words: Correctional Orientation, Rehabilitation, Punishment, Correctional Officers, Restorative Justice

From as early as the 1970s, there has been an ongoing debate surrounding the notion of 'what works?' in corrections. Some have argued that 'nothing works' in corrections; advocating either that criminals are incapable of being rehabilitated or that proponents of correction and rehabilitation weren't effective in their task. Other authors have sought to defend the idea and efficacy of a rehabilitative approach. Since its inception, the motto of Trinidad and Tobago's prison system has been "to hold and to treat", thus indicating a belief in restraint and rehabilitation. However, with a recidivism rate of greater than 50%, the extent that such an organizational motto has been adopted warrants some enquiry. The adoption of an organization's ethos by its staff is fundamental for optimum performance. Correctional staff are often identified as a crucial component of the

system's ethos. They are referred to as the 'front line' of the penal system, implementing the mandate of the system, whether be it to punish or rehabilitate. With the above in mind, this paper presents details of a study-in-progress that seeks to identify whether the nation's correctional officers hold primarily rehabilitative or punitive ideas about prisoners. The study also seeks to identify the personal and professional factors that predict these orientations. The findings from such a study will help to identify impediments to change in the correctional system, assist in the translation of the organizational ethos to the staff, while also having implications for the selection and training of correctional staff.

The purpose of this study is to identify and predict the correctional orientation of Trinidad and Tobago's prison officers. In the context of the 2002 proposal by the *Cabinet Appointed Task Force on Prison Reform and Transformation* for the acceptance of the restorative justice philosophy by the Trinidad and Tobago's Government, it is of great interest to ascertain the extent that prison officers believe in or hold the rehabilitative views that are needed to ensure the successful implementation of this philosophy. This study not only aims to measure the correctional orientation of these officers, but also to identify the factors that are predictive of their correctional orientation. The policy implications of research of this nature include assisting the government in making the transition from a punitive model to a rehabilitative one, and aiding the prison service in the selecting and training of correctional staff.

## **Background**

Since its inception in 1752, and throughout the nineteenth century, the guiding philosophy of the Trinidad and Tobago Prison System has been one where offenders sentenced to hard labour were to be employed in 'useful work.' It was believed to be 'crucial' that inmates be employed in "continuous and gainful work" (Abdulah, 1980, p. 12) during their prison sentence. However, in 1950, for the first time in the nation's history, an approach towards rehabilitation was made via the teaching of skills such as carpentry, mat making, masonry etc. to the inmates (Abdullah, 1980). This highlighted the first move towards a prison system with a more rehabilitative focus. This focus was

evidently limited to vocational skills, but it showed an initial move away from strict restraint and towards a consequentialist approach to corrections.

The Trinidad and Tobago Prison Service as it is conceptualized today functions according to the belief that the best way to protect society is to ensure the successful reintegration of prisoners into society, so they become law-abiding citizens (Baptiste, 2002). Its mission statement reveals that “the Trinidad and Tobago Prison Service as an arm of the Criminal Justice System is committed to the Protection of Society and crime prevention by facilitating the opportunities for habilitation/rehabilitation of Offenders while maintaining control under safe, secure and humane conditions.”<sup>1</sup> As a result, it has mandated itself to secure custody, treatment and training for offenders. Its rehabilitative efforts are founded on a model that incorporates correctional education, cognitive development and spiritual/religious restoration (Baptiste, 2002).

Despite these claims, the present penal system is operating primarily according to a retributive model of penology characterized by a “tense setting... which is the result of fragmentation, useless coercion, obsolete and outdated policies” (Baptiste, 2002, p.416). Therefore the philosophical conceptualization of the prison as a rehabilitative instrument has not been fully materialized.

### **Task Force on Prison Reform and Transformation**

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August 2001, the Cabinet of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago appointed a *Task Force on Prison Reform and Transformation*. In 2002, the final report

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<sup>1</sup><http://ttrisons.com/>

of the task force was published and it is plausible to assume that these findings are designed to pave the road for penal reform in Trinidad and Tobago's Prison Service.

The report is basically based on the Restorative Justice Philosophy which is hinged upon the principle that 'the offender as well as the society is in some way responsible for offending behaviours, however the offender is held accountable for their actions' (Baptiste, 2002). The *Report* makes a range of recommendations, some of which are related to the prison, prison officers and their orientations. This therefore will have many implications for the prison officer as s/he will be required to assume a new role, a role that will be founded upon a rehabilitative orientation towards corrections.

The *Report* advocates that a

“Cognitive Development Programme needs to be developed and expanded to encourage offenders to develop the power of thought and analysis which will enable them to make moral distinction among the kinds of basic premises upon which thought and action are based” (Baptiste, 2002, p.411).

It argues that the “primary needs of offenders seem to be linked to their ability to make appropriate decisions about their behaviour and to make the decision in an appropriate social and ethical manner” (Baptiste, 2002, p.268). The *Report*, then, takes into account the need to introduce cognitive programmes into the penal system to fuel the new rehabilitative focus.

The Report also emphasizes the role of the prison officer in the Restorative Justice Philosophy. It recommends that the “name of the institution should be changed from Prisons to Correctional Facilities thereby facilitating Prison Officers to become Correction Officers” (Baptiste, 2002, p.411). This recommended change will then open the door for staff re-educating and training. As a result their “strengths and weaknesses must be identified and appropriate measures introduced to ensure that gaps are satisfied between current attributes and required attributes to improve chances of objective fulfillment” (Baptiste, 2002, p. 417). The need for staff training and education is based on the belief that “involvement of employees is the fuel of the engine of change” (Baptiste, 2002, p. 418) within the penal system. Therefore, the proposed Restorative Justice Philosophy involves the introduction of a Cognitive Development Programme and a renewed focus on staff training. These recommendations are “anchored in the committee’s aspiration to effectively rehabilitate, reintegrate, retrain, re-socialize, and provide employment for the offender as well as restoring stability in the society” (Baptiste, 2002, p. 415).

A summary of the *Report’s* proposal can be found in the following quote:

“The Task Force proposes that the Prison Service of Trinidad and Tobago should commit itself to the effective rehabilitation and reintegration services by adopting a Reintegrative Penal Policy and utilizing a shared responsibility model of rehabilitation. These approaches features a correctional intervention process that ensures that inmates are methodically assessed in relation to their needs, personality, competences and risks, and assigned to habilitative activities in a

planned and coherent manner. This intervention strategy maps out a direction for the Trinidad and Tobago Prison Service development and transformation”

(Baptiste, 2002; p15).

However, the report by virtue of its ambition to introduce Restorative Justice into the nation’s penal system posed a problem that must be solved. This problem lies in the issue of whether prison officers support rehabilitation (Cullen, 1989). This problem is further heightened as the Report emphasizes and seeks to change the role of the prison officer (Baptiste, 2002, p.411).

### **The focus on correctional officers**

Internationally, the idea of transforming the role of the prison officer to that of a correctional officer who does more than simply contain and manage prisoners emerged in the 1970s (Arthur, 1994). This appearance was however accompanied by the emergence of the ‘nothing works’ argument and soon after the “What works?” debate. In 1974, Robert Martinson, an adjunct assistant professor at the City College of New York, published an article titled “What Works?—Questions and Answers About Prison Reform” (Martinson, 1974). Martinson conducted a study which “reviewed the effectiveness” of 231 offender rehabilitation programs (p.189). From his analysis, Martinson concluded that “the rehabilitative efforts” of these programs had “no appreciable effect on recidivism” (Martinson, 1974; p.25). In his article he posed a provocative question; “Do all of these studies lead irrevocably to the conclusion that *nothing works* [italics added], that we haven’t the faintest clue about how to rehabilitate

offenders and reduce recidivism?” (p. 48). This question, although not answered by Martinson in his article, gave rise to what is commonly referred to as the “What Works?” debate.

Proponents of the “nothing works” ideology argued that correctional rehabilitation was not producing the desired results and argued that the roots of crime were more structural than individual (Cullen, 2001). However, in response to this criticism, advocates of corrections argued that reductions in recidivism were best “accomplished by interventions that use treatment modalities that are capable of reducing the known predictors of recidivism” (Cullen, 2001; p.331). This debate challenged scholars and practitioners who expressed belief in corrections and rehabilitation. If forced them to investigate and therefore increase the effectiveness in which these rehabilitative programs were implemented; as one of Martinson’s criticism hinged on the “weaknesses in program implementation” (Farabee, 2002; p.190).

One of the measures employed to increase the effectiveness of treatment programs was to emphasize an organizational continuity in the messages that were delivered via correctional programs. One of the extensions of this idea was the transformation of the traditional role of the prison officer from “hack” and “turn-key” to a more human service-oriented professional. As a result, much attention was placed on the selection and training of prison officers during the mid 1970s and 1980s (Cullen, 1985; Hepburn & Knepper, 1993).



In spite of the above detailed governmental changes in Trinidad and Tobago, and the international impact of the “what works?” debate, no empirical studies have been conducted into Caribbean prison officers’ attitudes towards rehabilitation.

This present study is therefore timely, as it seeks to identify the correctional orientation of prison staff, with an acknowledgment of their crucial role in the functioning and reworking of the penal system. In 1991, the then Commissioner of Prisons in Trinidad and Tobago, George Hercules, noted in a paper titled the *Right Staff for the Job*<sup>2</sup> that prison officers are “the main ingredient in any formula for success in the preparation of offenders for a safe return to society” (Hercules, 1991, p. 142). He added that “the effectiveness of the implementation depends on the ability and co-operation of the officers on the front line” (Hercules, 1991, p. 142) According to Cullen (1989), the fabric of life within the correctional system is shaped intimately and daily by the system’s employees. Hence, understanding the correctional staff’s orientation is a prerequisite for identifying obstacles to the effective functioning of the penal system.

### **Review of factors that impact on prison staff’s correctional orientation**

#### *Correctional Orientation:*

The images of the prison guard as mentioned earlier have traditionally revolved around perceptions of him/her being a ‘hack’, a ‘villain’, ‘brutish creatures’ or a ‘turn-key.’ These negative conceptualizations of the prison officer were not only inaccurate (Moon & Maxwell, 2004), but they limited the role the prison officer could play in corrections (Klofas & Toch, 1982). As a result, “revisionist scholars argued for a more sympathetic

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<sup>2</sup> A paper presented at a conference entitled “Improving Prison Conditions in the Caribbean”

interpretation of the correctional officer” (Cullen, 1985; p. 506). This lobby fuelled studies that examined and challenged the traditional view of the prison guard. It gave rise to the prison officer as an “object of study” as academics now realized that he/she was not a brutish creature waiting to punish the offender for his sins against society (Cullen, 1985; p. 506). Researchers then began to examine the correctional orientation of the officers and the factors that contributed to it; whether officers came to the job with their orientations or if the prison structure transformed them (Cullen, 1985). The outcome of this line of enquiry is various studies that have: identified the orientation of various officer sub-groups; assessed the influence of individual and organizational factors on the correctional orientation of the prison officer, and/or highlighted the officer’s place in the treatment and rehabilitation of the offender.

A review of the literature on the correctional orientation of prison guards revealed that prison officers generally support rehabilitation (Moon & Maxwell, 2004). However, none of these studies have been conducted in the Caribbean. Instead, most of the research has focused on the USA. (Moon & Maxwell, 2004) The existing literature on the topic indicated that two broad categories appear to predict correctional orientation, individual and organizational factors (Moon & Maxwell, 2004). Many of the studies conducted thus far have operationally defined individual factors to include age, gender, race and educational level. Among the organizational variables researchers have focused on are: seniority, frequency of inmate contact, rank, role problem, job stress, job satisfaction, and the security level of institutions (Moon & Maxwell, 2004).

### *Individual Factors:*

The literature has revealed that a number of individual factors have influenced the correctional orientation of prison officers. These factors can be considered risk or protective factors that may influence one's rehabilitative orientation. For example, older officers tended to hold more rehabilitative attitudes towards inmates (Jurik, 1985; Klofas, 1986; Cullen, 1989; Farkas, 1999). This positive relationship between age and rehabilitation could be the result of maturity. That is to say older officers tend to view their job as a human service as opposed to strictly a custodial and punitive one. However, it could also be illustrating the effect that years of service and correctional experience within the prison system has on an officer; and not necessarily the age of the prison officer. Hence, further research on the relationship between the age of the officer, his/her years of service and their corresponding correctional orientation needs to be conducted.

The level of the officers' education and its relationship with rehabilitation has also been studied. However the results are ambiguous. Studies have shown that more educated officers tend to favor rehabilitation programs (Poole and Regoli, 1980; Burton et al, 1991), but evidence to the contrary is not insignificant either (Shamir & Drory, 1981; Jurik, 1985; Jurik, Halemba, Musheno & Boyle, 1987; Whitehead & Lindquist, 1989, Farkas, 1999; Moon & Maxwell, 2004). Therefore further research is needed to ascertain education's influence on prison officers' correctional orientation.

### *Organizational Factors*

Organizational Factors or work related factors have also been related to correctional orientation. For example, the correctional institute at which the prison officer is employed has been found to relate with his/her correctional orientation (Smith & Hepburn, 1979; Jurik, 1985; Cullen, 1989; Whitehead & Lindquist, 1989). The results thus far have indicated that those officers who work at higher security units tend to have a more punitive orientation (Smith & Hepburn, 1979; Jurik, 1985; Moon & Maxwell, 2004) than those who work in lower security units. Further research needs to be conducted in this area to ascertain whether type of institution is the influencing variable and not personal factors. That is to say, the relationship observed may in fact reveal a relationship between the attributes of the prison officer employed at the higher security units and punishment. Prison officers employed at higher security units may have received the job because of their punitive orientations and as a result the higher security unit did not influence their orientations.

Another organization variable that has been found to relate to the prison officers' correctional orientation is the level of job satisfaction he/she experiences. The results thus far are equivocal. A number of studies have illustrated a relationship between the two variables (Arthur, 1994; Farkas, 1999; Moon & Maxwell, 2004), while others have indicated no relationship between the level of satisfaction a prison officer receives from his job and his/her outlook on punishment and rehabilitation (Hepburn & Albonetti, 1980; Whitehead and Lindquist, 1989). To further complicate the ambiguity of this relationship, Farkas (1999) found a negative correlation between the two variables. That is to say, officers who were satisfied with their jobs were less likely to support

counseling/rehabilitation. This variable, although considered an organizational factor by most researchers (Moon & Maxwell, 2004), appears to be tapping into a psychological construct. A plausible explanation for the ambiguity can be found in the dissonance the officer experiences when his/her view of the job is contrasted with the organizational ethos. In other words, an officer may perceive his/her job as rehabilitative in nature but the organization may perceive it as punitive, as a result he/she may be dissatisfied with their job whilst holding a rehabilitative orientation. Another possible explanation could be that officers derive satisfaction from their orientation. Hence, further research needs to be conducted to understand if job satisfaction can be attributed to the organization and as a result whether it can influence correctional orientation and/or job satisfaction (Hepburn & Knepper, 1993).

Role conflict is another organizational variable that speaks about the occurrence of two or more role expectations (e.g. punishment and rehabilitation) (Toch & Klofas, 1982). The existing literature has illustrated a relationship between role conflict and the correctional orientation of prison officers (Hepburn & Albonetti, 1980; Cullen, et al. 1989; Moon & Maxwell, 2004). These studies have illustrated that officers who experience role conflict at their jobs tend to hold either punitive or custodial orientations. Therefore, the managerial and administrative arms of the prison service need to ensure that their expectations of their officers are clear; as ambiguity in roles seems to be related with the officers adopting either a punitive or custodial orientation.

In light of the Trinidad and Tobago's Prison Service vision of introducing Restorative Justice and a rehabilitative program for inmates (Baptiste, 2002) it is of great academic and practical interest to determine via empirical research the correctional orientation of the nation's prison officers. The success of these penal reforms predominantly rests on the shoulders of the correctional officers (Cullen, 1989; Hercules, 1991 & Arthur, 1994). Hence it is the purpose of this study not only to determine the correctional orientation of these officers but also identify the role of the above reviewed factors in predicting these orientations.

## **Methodology**

The data for this study will be collected via a self – administered questionnaire which will be distributed to the nation's prison officers. The completed questionnaire will comprise four sections. The sections are as follows:

- I. Demographics (which will include six questions on age, sex, marital status, ethnicity, education, religion)
- II. Professional factors
  - (a) Role conflict (five questions)
  - (b) Type of training (one question)
  - (c) Job Satisfaction (five questions)
  - (d) Years of service (one question)
  - (e) Institution (one question)

### III. Personal Factors

(a) Education (one question)

(b) Age (one question)

### IV. Correctional Orientation

(a) Rehabilitative (seven questions)

(b) Punitive (four questions)

(c) Custodial (seven questions)

### **Implications**

The results of such a study will assist the Trinidad and Tobago's Prison Service in their recruitment and training strategies of prison officers. It will offer empirical data about: (1) the correctional orientation of the nation's officers, and (2) the factors that predict the different correctional orientations. It will also assist the implementation of the Restorative Justice philosophy advocated by the Cabinet Appointed Task Force on Prison Reform and Transformation (Baptiste, 2002).

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