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Social Workers' Perspectives on Effective Practice in Criminal Justice Settings

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Social workers practicing within the field of criminal justice face significant challenges. Through individual interviews, 17 experienced social workers from diverse criminal justice settings share their perspectives about the attributes needed for effective social work practice. Participants describe how they define success in their work and what it takes to be successful. They highlight specific ways of behaving within criminal justice settings, relationship qualities for working with criminal justice clients, and personal traits believed to be critical to effective practice. The participants also reflect on the value of their education and offer a suggestion for prospective criminal justice social workers.

Social workers working within criminal justice comprise a small proportion of social workers overall (Whitaker & Arrington, 2008). Nonetheless, the work that they do affects many constituent groups: offenders, victims, family members of both, and law enforcement, court, and corrections personnel. When the criminal justice agency's focus is on working with persons in their communities, such as with victim advocacy, probation or treatment courts, then social workers interact with community treatment providers and members of the public as well. The question of what is needed for effective practice within criminal justice contexts and how this might differ from social work practice in other contexts has not been thoroughly explored.

The social work profession has historically been deeply involved in work with criminal justice populations and in criminal justice settings. Social workers were instrumental in creating the first juvenile court in 1899 (Gumz, 2004), advocates for better conditions of confinement (Brownell & Roberts, 2002), and employed in police departments as early as 1924 (Van Winkle,

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1924). In 1958, the Council on Social Work Education included in its published 13 volume report on the content of social work education a volume devoted exclusively to social work in corrections (Studt, 1959). This was a tangible demonstration of acknowledgement by the profession's educational leaders of the presence and importance of social workers within criminal justice settings.

As the social work profession continued to evolve and especially during the latter quarter of the 20th century, it moved away from the field of corrections and other justice settings (Gibelman, 1995; Gumz, 2004; Maschi & Killian, 2011). There are multiple reasons for this shift, but a predominant explanation has been the criminal justice system's move to a punitive correctional philosophy as opposed to one that values rehabilitation. The result has been a significant decrease in the influence of social workers and the social work profession on criminal justice practice and policy over the last several decades (Wilson, 2010). A 2007 National Association of Social Workers (NASW) membership survey found that only 1% indicated criminal justice as their primary area of practice (Whitaker & Arrington, 2008).

Over the past few decades, mounting dissatisfaction with high recidivism rates and the ever-expanding public costs for crime control may be helping to turn the tide. There is realization that the War on Drugs, begun in the 1970s, contributed to skyrocketing criminal justice costs (League of Women Voters of New York State, 1999) and has disproportionately negatively affected communities of color (Free, 1997; Johnson, 1995). The passage of the Second Chance Act in 2008 demonstrates the federal government's recognition that individuals returning to their communities after incarceration need supports and services to be successful. This Act authorizes federal grants to government agencies and nonprofit organizations for the provision of such services (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2013) and is one indication of this shift at the policy level. Greater recognition of the psychosocial services needed to prevent entry into criminal behavior and to reduce recidivism may provide an opportunity for the social work profession to engage more deeply within criminal justice systems (Wilson, 2010), although it is too soon to know how extensive the shift in correctional philosophy will be.

Even as fledgling new opportunities for social work influence emerge, social work students may not be adequately exposed to employment possibilities within criminal justice or prepared for work within these settings during their educational programs. Epperson, Roberts, Ivanoff, Tripodi, and Gilmer (2013) found that in 2009, 5% of MSW programs had a concentration or specialization in a criminal justice related field, and only 22% had at least one course specific to criminal justice related issues, excluding law courses that are often more broadly focused. Scheyett, Pettus-Davis, McCarter, and Brigham (2012) found in a 2009 survey of field education directors that on average, fewer than 8% of MSW field placements were in criminal justice settings. The most frequently mentioned barrier to the development of criminal justice field placements was the lack of MSW

supervisors in these settings. Specific educational preparation may be important to the consequent presence of social workers in criminal justice settings. Lowe and Bohon (2008) found that social work students who were exposed to criminal justice populations and settings through a specific course on offender social work or a field placement in a criminal justice setting were more likely to work within criminal justice settings later.

For the relatively small number of social workers who do enter this area of practice, one important and ongoing challenge of employment is the necessity of working within a host setting. Dane and Simon (1991) described *host settings* as "organizations whose mission and decision making are defined and dominated by people who are not social workers" (p. 208). Although employment in a host setting is not unique to the practice of social work within criminal justice, one is hard pressed to think of a criminal justice setting where social workers work that is not a host setting. A specific challenge associated with working within a host setting includes conflicts between the mission and values of the host setting and social work (Dane & Simon, 1991). Within criminal justice settings, safety and security are placed above individual client needs, and the allocation of organizational resources follows this prioritization. Because a correctional philosophy of punishment is more discrepant from social work values than a correctional philosophy of rehabilitation, it seems reasonable to assume that working within a host setting is more challenging when the criminal justice field's predominant approach is one of punishment as opposed to rehabilitation.

The organizational culture of a criminal justice system is imposed on its members through the process of occupational socialization. Criminal justice systems are relatively closed systems, regardless of the specific type of system, and this reality intensifies the occupational socialization that occurs. *Occupational socialization* has been defined as "the process by which a person acquires the values, attitudes, and behaviors of an ongoing occupational social system" (Stojkovic, Kalinich, & Klofas, 2003, p. 214). For social workers employed within criminal justice settings, the helping norms they bring to the work are often in stark contrast to the social control role expected, even required of employees. Conflict occurs because security and treatment professionals are each working on a different set of problems (Stojkovic, Kalinich, & Klofas), and treatment personnel are in the numerical minority. To adapt to the organizational culture, social workers must navigate environments that emphasize values, attitudes, and beliefs that are quite different from those clearly taught within social work educational programs.

If one considers the total array of possibilities for social work employment within the criminal justice field there is considerable variety. Roles are found in juvenile justice, law enforcement, courts, and corrections (Young, 2008). Because our decentralized American justice system is comprised of many systems with different funding sources and administrative structures, the actual presence of social work within any one system ranges from no

professional social work presence at all to a minority but notable presence. Given the lack of setting-specific educational preparation and the challenges that social workers working within criminal justice settings face, this study explored the question, "What attributes are needed for effective social work practice in criminal justice settings?" Understanding how social workers successfully navigate within criminal justice settings is beneficial to those interested in this field and those who want to yield greater influence within it.

METHOD

Sampling Procedure and Sample Characteristics

Seventeen social workers consented to share their experiences working within criminal justice systems through individual interviews. Participants are from a wide range of criminal justice settings from primarily the northwestern United States. Snowball sampling was used to identify individuals with an undergraduate or graduate degree in social work, currently employed to work in a criminal justice setting, and doing work that is considered social work, even if the job title is not "social worker." In many justice settings, social workers work under other titles, such as psychology associate, victim advocate, or counselor, and this was true for the participants in this study as well. Four individuals were known to the author and the others were known and recommended by these and subsequent participants. Snowball sampling is a useful approach, particularly in exploratory research when no sampling frame exists and participants may be difficult to locate (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). The study was approved by the Human Subjects Division of the author's university. No compensation was provided to participants.

Table 1 provides information on the types of settings as well as other characteristics of the sample. Five broad areas of practice are represented, and juvenile rehabilitation includes locked settings as well as community settings. Although there are significant differences between these varied criminal justice settings in scope of responsibility, client population, and specific purpose, it seemed worthwhile to examine whether the experience of providing social work within them might have common features applicable to criminal justice social workers regardless of setting. One setting that is visibly absent is law enforcement. In the area of the country where the study was conducted, social workers working directly with law enforcement agencies were not found either through direct queries to law enforcement personnel or via suggestions from the participants in the snowball sample.

The sample consists of an experienced group of social workers (see Table 1). No one had fewer than 2 years of social work experience in criminal justice and three have at least 20 years. Time in their current positions ranged from less than 1 year to 15 years, with one half in their current positions from 5 to 10 years. All participants had MSW degrees and five also had undergraduate

TABLE 1 Sample Characteristics

Characteristic	Interviewees ($N = 17$)
Field of practice in criminal justice	
Adult prison	6
Juvenile rehabilitation	4
Treatment court	4
Prosecution	2
Public defense	1
Level of responsibility	
Administrator/supervisor	5
Line level practitioner	11
Both	1
Experience in criminal justice	
1–5 years	4
6–10 years	5
11–15 years	3
More than 15 years	5
Social work degrees	
Bachelors	4
MSW	17
Ph.D.	1

or doctoral degrees in social work. Five of the participants are male, two are African American, and 14 are Caucasian (the race of one participant is unknown). Ten of the 17 participants could think of none or only one other social worker doing the same kind of work at their facility, and in some cases the entire region or state. No one could think of more than a few. This speaks to the relative isolation of forensic social workers in many criminal justice settings.

Study Design

All interviews were conducted by the author, with 14 done in-person and three over the telephone. The interviews were semistructured, consisting of predeveloped, open-ended questions, but allowing room for modification and exploration of related topics. Participants were asked questions such as how they define success in their work, what attributes are needed to be effective and what hinders effectiveness. Definitions of *success* and *effectiveness* were not imposed on participants; they were encouraged to provide examples and speak from their own perspectives and experiences. Interviews ranged from 47 to − 110 minutes, with a mean of 65 min. The study was concluded when the leads provided by interviewees for prospective participants tapered off significantly. In addition, several recurring themes suggested that saturation was achieved.

Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis is especially helpful when the perspectives of participants as insiders are sought on a topic and it is important to understand the contexts

that shape those perspectives (Padgett, 2008). Understanding the complexities of providing effective social work within criminal justice settings would not easily be captured through quantitative measurement. Interviews were taped and transcribed for analysis, with the exception of two interviews conducted with prison social workers on site. Security personnel did not allow the tape recorder, so extensive notes were taken during the interviews. To verify the accuracy of the notes, the author shared them with each social worker, asking them to make corrections or additions. Neither social worker made changes to his/her interview notes.

Given the preliminary nature of the exploration and the small sample size, description rather than theory building shaped the analysis approach. All results were analyzed manually. Using an analysis process described by Tutty, Rothery, and Grinnell (1996), the unit of analysis is the "idea." Coding categories were not determined a priori and applied to the text; rather they were gleaned from the text in relation to the general open-ended research questions: "How do you define success in your work?" and "What personal attributes are needed to be successful in your line of work?" The transcripts in their entirety were reviewed for emerging themes in relation to these two broad questions, not just the section of the interview that directly asked those questions. This resulted in a richer array of responses and consequently coding categories. For example, it was not unusual for participants to discuss attributes they perceive as essential to effective social work practice following a question about the experience of burnout or about barriers to effectiveness. Once all transcripts were coded, the list of initial codes was reviewed and placed into conceptual groupings of major themes and sub-themes. Once this was complete, another thorough review of the transcripts was done, applying the revised set of coding categories to the transcripts and double-checking that the final set of themes and subthemes captured the ideas of the participants.

All interviews were completed prior to formal analysis. Though this might be considered a drawback in qualitative analysis, it does mean that the findings presented, specifically the frequency with which participants raised certain ideas, is likely due more to their own thoughts and beliefs rather than to the author's probing. Throughout the interview process, a concerted effort was made to explore exceptions and variations of experiences, in part by trying to ensure that the sample consisted of social workers practicing within different fields of practice within criminal justice.

RESULTS

Participants had much to say as they reflected on social work practice within the criminal justice settings where they worked. Findings are presented according to two key research questions: What does success look like? What attributes are needed to be effective? Also, brief reflections about the value of social work

education for this work and advice for prospective criminal justice social workers are given. Quoted excerpts from the interviews are presented in participants' own words as examples and illustrations of the findings that emerged.

What Does Success Look like?

Participants were asked how they define success in their work and to provide examples of what success looks like. All participants except for one were readily able to give examples. They described two general kinds of successes: tangible and intangible.

Tangible indicators of success

Several tangible and easily measured or observed positive outcomes for clients were described, depending on the specific criminal justice setting and population. These included receiving needed services or treatment, remaining out of jail/prison after release or going longer periods without re-offending, behaving better in prison and staying in general population housing units, fewer suicide attempts, staying in school or getting a job, maintaining positive personal and family relationships, and satisfying court requirements or completing treatment. Social workers were able to describe observable indicators of success even while acknowledging that for some people positive outcomes are limited. For example, a public defense social worker spoke about arranging treatment services for a client with severe brain damage due to fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS).

> So you do what you can do, but there isn't a lot of treatment that is all that effective with FAS folks, right? But you can identify it in order to get a little bit of financial stability for them. Maybe a talented therapist that understands that baby steps are all you're ever going to get around certain things.

Although this connection to services may not appear much of a success, the potential alternative of continuous cycling in and out of court and jail systems would be far worse. Other tangible indicators of success feel bigger and are more satisfying. For example, the same social worker described another client who was so angry at the system that he initially refused any offer of help. He slept on buses and drifted around. She persisted in her attempts to help him and finally convinced him to take a job on a fishing boat in Alaska telling him, "Look, you have a place to stay, you're making money, they feed you." He has done so well that this former client is now a Captain.

Intangible indicators of success

Many examples of success described by participants include outcomes that are hoped for and not yet realized. They are harder to measure and thus

are considered intangible indicators of success. They are articulated by clients or social workers as beliefs in positive changes now or to come. Clients feel empowered to make changes or meet personal goals and social workers believe they are laying the groundwork for future change. One social worker in the field of juvenile rehabilitation described success as "establishing relationships with youth and families, and understanding them, and feeling like I'm able to provide support so that they have more hope, and see possibilities, and see alternatives, and feel empowered to act upon that." The one participant, working in an adult prison, who does not believe his current work is successful, described positive change statements he heard from female prisoners prior to service cuts at the facility a few years ago. Disheartened by the current environment and the lack of resources to effect positive client change, he nonetheless described a time when he perceived this intangible expression of success by some of his former clients.

Social workers frequently commented that they considered it a success if they were able to "plant seeds." They hoped that the information and assistance they provided would result in future positive outcomes. A victim advocate in a prosecutor's office commented:

> She [client] may not have wanted charges filed and charges were not filed, but we had an opportunity to talk about the dynamics of domestic violence and she may not have heard any of that but she didn't hang up on me and those seeds have been planted.

A prison social worker put it this way:

> I think it's always been throwing out life preservers or life lines, hoping somebody will grab it, and doing the best that you can in that environment. And so all I can do is ask myself am I still throwing out life lines? And am I still offering the best that I have to offer in that environment? And as long as I can say I am, then I think I'm doing the best I know how to do . . . I've always thought of it as sort of planting seeds, helping people along.

Interestingly, social workers described how they were able to maintain their own resolve not to give up on clients by firmly holding to the belief that the planting of seeds in and of itself is an indicator of success, however uncertain the future outcome.

Changes in client perspectives were identified as an example of success by more than half of the participants. Sometimes participants referred to changes in client thinking patterns. One treatment court outreach worker said,

> There's a time when . . . the lights come on and they actually see that they are getting better, that they're learning some things that are going to help them, not just to make it through the court, but to make it through their life.

A prison social worker described the impact of a psychoeducational group she conducts that deals with cognitive distortions and changing one's thinking. She stated it was rewarding to see "the guys that are going through that group, when they come back in to another group and actually explain and talk about their errors in thinking and kind of comprehend this was an error in thinking."

Sometimes the participants referred to new perspectives not in clients, but in other professionals working within criminal justice systems. A prison intervention coordinator expressed, "There's nothing more gratifying than sitting down with people who are and are not of like mind and coming to agreement on the potential for a really cutting edge program in your prison system." Social workers working within different treatment courts described the changes they saw in prosecutors, public defenders, judges, and jail officers as their perspectives about treatment court clients changed. A treatment court outreach worker said, "you can see when people are being treated differently and [court personnel are] asking questions about treatment rather than asking how long should this person be thrown in jail for." Participants viewed these changed perspectives by key stakeholders in criminal justice systems as powerful indicators of the effectiveness of their work.

What Attributes Are Needed to Be Effective?

Participants were asked what attributes are necessary to be successful in their work, what attributes hinder being successful, and to provide examples of those characteristics in action. From their answers emerged rich descriptions of several characteristics identified as important to be effective social workers in criminal justice settings. The attributes they identified are grouped according to three themes: ways of behaving within criminal justice systems, relationship qualities for working with criminal justice clients, and personal traits.

Ways of behaving within criminal justice systems

Participants identified ways of behaving or conducting oneself that they believe are essential to be effective when working within criminal justice systems. These included being confident, developing and maintaining credibility, having a tough skin, carefully picking your battles, and accepting the dark humor prevalent within criminal justice settings. More than half of the participants spoke of the importance of being confident in their knowledge and what they bring to the table as social workers. Prison social workers talked about not being fearful of clients, treatment court social workers spoke of confidence when speaking in court and in the context of working with clients who do not believe you can help, and administrators spoke of the importance of having confidence in the decisions they make. Although the participants who spoke about this did not all have that confidence when they

began working, they found it necessary to develop in order to have their contributions valued by others.

Being confident contributes to developing one's credibility, but to maintain credibility social workers must be truthful in their dealings with co-workers and clients. The public defense social worker explained it like this, "I have to be extremely diligent and honest. I cannot give a spin on something and then somehow it comes out and my credibility is gone." A social worker who had previously worked as a probation officer spoke of the importance of honesty with those under her supervision, even when it meant telling them they were going to jail. She found that clients appreciated knowing what was going to happen and that they could count on what she said. Some social workers spoke of the difficulty earning credibility; they were viewed as idealists and outsiders, staunch advocates for the "bad guys." Participants were able to earn credibility from court and prison officials by respecting the importance of safety protocols and fairly representing all sides of an issue when advocating for a client. Participants reported that earning this credibility takes time and is essential for long-term success in criminal justice environments.

Having a tough skin is a concept that reflects the raw nature of the work and the challenges of the client population regardless of specific criminal justice setting. Social workers in juvenile and adult institutions spoke of the things you hear and see that you must observe without flinching: kids being physically handled, self-mutilation, fights. Perhaps the importance of being able to stay steady when confronted with deeply disturbing human behavior is best expressed by a treatment court outreach worker who said,

> When it boils down to it, social work . . . very much focuses on human tragedy and suffering. The population I work with is on one of the more extreme ends of the spectrum with tragedy and suffering. If that is not something I can tolerate being around or looking at or sorting through, this isn't going to be a good fit for me, this work.

Picking your battles has to do with the challenge of deciding when to advocate on an issue or for a client and when to "roll with the punches." Social workers within criminal justice settings walk a fine line between accepting things as they are and advocating for change. Both are seen as essential behaviors, and the difficulty is in determining when to use each approach. There was general acknowledgement that you cannot advocate every issue, but must find a way to work within a system that is not always just in order to bring about beneficial outcomes overall. One victim advocate in a prosecutor's office explained this in a stark and painfully honest way:

> There are times in the criminal justice system where, as an advocate, you come right in between [*sic*] prosecutor and the victim . . . The prosecutor is gonna do something that's just really not a good move and you want to

> really strongly advocate for this victim. Then you're thinking, 'Who am I gonna see tomorrow, and the next day, and the next day, and the next day? It's not that victim; it's that prosecutor.' So you throw the victim right out the window. That is not good practice, but that is what happens . . . The way that you survive is by creating alliances with the people that you're working with every day . . . Overall, I can't think of a better way to do this system. I think the victims are better off because we are here.

Difficult decisions about when to forgo a particular client's needs or wishes for the possibility of achieving a greater victory later for more or other clients was described as an especially troubling aspect of social work within criminal justice settings.

Almost one third of the participants spoke about the importance of being willing to find humor in situations and be accepting of humor that ridicules clients, even if you do not engage in it yourself. Participants explained that this occurs behind closed doors and away from clients and others who do not work in the system. Sometimes it is about releasing stress or letting off steam. More often putting up with dark humor is about earning acceptance by others who work in the system so that you will have influence. One participant said, "You have to become one of them. And then, once you're one of them, and once they trust you enough that you're not an outsider, then you can start calling them on their stuff a little bit." Another social worker also expressed the difficulty of doing this:

> I think this is something that is really conflicting with social work values. If they [attorneys] need to blow off steam about a case or a victim, I think I need to be careful about how I correct them or call them out on some of the things they are saying that are somewhat offensive. Keeping a sense of humor about it is hard.

The ability and willingness to accept dark humor, pick your battles, have a tough skin, maintain credibility, and display confidence are described as essential ways of conducting oneself in order to operate effectively within criminal justice settings.

Relationship qualities for working with criminal justice clients

The attributes in the previous section describe essential qualities for working within criminal justice organizations. They describe ways of conducting oneself in the presence of not only clients but other employees within those systems and of interacting within the policies, procedures, and culture of criminal justice settings. This section focuses on relationship qualities that are needed for working individually with criminal justice clients. The first three relationship qualities described here are fundamental to good social work practice in all settings: respect for all persons and cultures, being nonjudgmental and

genuine. Even so, some of them, such as being nonjudgmental, can be especially difficult to do with offender-clients, given the gravity of the crimes encountered. The fourth relational quality, responding with discernment, was described as uniquely relevant to criminal justice clients.

Respect for all persons, including awareness and appreciation of cultural differences, was mentioned as necessary for effectiveness by about half of the participants. Capturing the views of other participants, being respectful was defined by one social worker as "not jangling the keys," or unnecessarily drawing attention to the power differential between worker and client. Respect for other cultures includes being open to learning about cultural practices and asking questions about the meaning of others' practices.

Being nonjudgmental is viewed as basic to successful work with individuals who are disregarded by society for the things they have done. A judgmental stance would interfere with proactively seeking to understand client motivation and behavior, essential for putting together an intervention plan to present in court and also for good therapy. One social worker in speaking about what attributes hinder being successful expressed it this way:

> If you have problems working with men who abused their wives or their girlfriends, this is gonna be too difficult unless you can set that aside and say, okay, something caused this . . . You've got to see 'how can I work with this person?' Because if I don't, it's not gonna get better, it's gonna get worse . . . If you hear their back story, it gives you ability to empathize. If there's a category of people that you can't get beyond looking at what they did rather than looking individually at them, then it really is not gonna go well.

A prison social worker expressed a similar sentiment:

> [You have to be] nonjudgmental and curious. You have to start out to some degree being accepting of your clients and knowing that they have a legitimate story to tell you about their lives. And it's their understanding of their lives. And you have to be able to listen to that.

The ability to deal with others from a nonjudgmental stance contributes to the ability to be genuine. Participants spoke about the importance of being genuine with clients. To them this means really being interested in a client, fully listening, and seeking to build relationship and connection. In general, having respect for all persons and being nonjudgmental and genuine are not congruent with the ways criminal justice settings deal with people. Social workers must function differently. A victim advocate expressed it this way:

> In the criminal justice system, especially in criminal cases, it's really easy to slip into 'here is the good guy, here is the bad guy.' As a social worker I think part of the goal, whether we like it or not, is to not fall into that trap

> and be able to keep the context in mind that we're not demonizing one human and lifting up the other one as a saint.

Dealing with others from a nonjudgmental stance and being genuine may seem at odds with the fourth relational quality of responding with discernment to criminal justice clients. Participants from juvenile rehabilitation, treatment court, and adult prison settings spoke of the importance of recognizing that clients will not always be honest with you and the need to be careful about what you believe and how you behave when working with an offending population. Sometimes this was described as having good judgment and sometimes as maintaining strong boundaries. There was recognition that some offenders are manipulative and you must be careful not to accept what you hear without fully checking things out. A prison social worker expressed it this way:

> Always be on your guard and alert . . . for wondering what's really going on. I mean, social work or mental health in prison is the only place where the starting point is having to mistrust your clients a little bit . . . You have to have this other little piece of wondering 'okay, am I being set up for something?' . . . I keep thinking maybe it's like being in the military or something where you're always paying attention, but you're not always getting shot at.

The ability to be nonjudgmental and genuine while also carefully considering the motivations and honesty of the client before you is a significant challenge of social work practice in some criminal justice settings.

Personal traits

When participants were asked what attributes were needed to be successful in their work, responses also included personal qualities of persistence, self-awareness, and passion for the work. Persistence is required because both clients and criminal justice systems do not change easily. One juvenile counselor discussed the importance of being

> relentless in the work we do. The families that we work with, they have many different interactions with systems, and this may be a youth's second or third time on parole . . . Being relentless in giving them a different experience, or trying to give them a different experience. Being able to validate their experience, their histories, and acknowledge those while building a different experience, hopefully a more positive experience.

Some participants described the importance of being self-aware to remain calm in a crisis or to have one's own issues under control, including emotions. It is even important to know when to leave the field. One administrator,

working in adult corrections and in the field of criminal justice for over 16 years said:

> If it is uncomfortable for you and feels stressful, get out, don't stay. I tell people right away, you'll know when you start working in this environment if it doesn't feel right to you, get out, don't make yourself stay for the benefits or the salary or whatever.

One question participants addressed was, "What advice would you give someone who wants to do what you do?" The answers to this question also shed light on an attribute viewed as important to effective work within criminal justice settings, passion for the work. One social worker said, "My first piece of advice would be, 'be really clear on why on earth you would wanna do this.'" Passion for the work provides motivation to continue on when the work is frustrating and resilience when social work contributions are devalued. One social work administrator doing domestic violence advocacy in a prosecutor's office explained,

> This work is really, really hard . . . I think this work is really important . . . The reason I do it, and the reason I believe in it is because we are reaching the victims who would never call a social service agency ever . . . Yet you can get in there, do a little work, and change their lives.

Reflections on Social Work Education and Advice for Prospective Social Workers

Several participants expressed that one firm advantage of the social work degree is the training one receives in understanding the person-in-environment framework and developing the ability to look for social and structural factors that impact clients. Related to this is the skill to evaluate situations from multiple perspectives. About one half of the participants commented that an understanding of the greater context is essential to their success in working with criminal justice clients or positively influencing other workers in their settings. One domestic violence advocate additionally credited this view with protecting her from the effects of secondary trauma.

> I am able to keep in context what is going on with her [the client], or what could be going on with her that she is not telling me . . . [When the prosecutor is saying] this person is behaving this way and how could they possibly behave this way or think this way and why are they saying this? To be able to go back to the prosecutor and say here are the reasons that people say that . . . I think [seeing the context] is one of the attributes that secondary trauma can eat away at. That's why I think it's so essential to be able to keep that. I have worked on my own ways of trying to keep it. If I lose it, I am not going to be effective anymore.

When participants were asked what advice they would give to prospective criminal justice social workers, the single most common piece of advice given by just over half the sample was to test the waters before entry into the criminal justice field through practicums, volunteering, or observation. The general view was that exposure to the setting is helpful because it is not for everyone. One participant succinctly summed it up this way, "Get your feet wet and see if it's really for you."

DISCUSSION

This study explored the perspectives of social workers in the field, doing criminal justice social work in a variety of settings and with different populations. With the exception of one participant who did not see success in his work in the current economic climate, all found the work to be rewarding and all considered the work critically important. The social workers in this study described what successful practice means to them and a set of attributes that, in their view, are necessary for effective practice. They described specific ways of behaving within criminal justice settings, relationship qualities for working individually with criminal justice clients, and personal traits.

The study's findings must be viewed within the contexts of its limitations especially as related to trustworthiness and applicability. The data were collected and analyzed solely by the author and strategies used to enhance trustworthiness were limited. Efforts were made to guard against undue influence by actively looking for alternate views throughout interviews, recording and transcribing interviews for analysis, and keeping an audit trail of coding notes and decisions. When taping was not possible, participants were asked to review the detailed notes for accuracy. In addition, the sample was drawn primarily from one geographic region of the country, is relatively small, and did not include social workers from all aspects of criminal justice. There is very limited racial diversity among the sample, although the lack of diversity is fairly representative of the social workers within this geographic region. The findings do provide a valuable opportunity to learn from the reflective insights of experienced social work practitioners about what they believe to be important for effective practice.

The diversity of settings within which the participants work lends richness to the findings and strengthens their applicability to other criminal justice social workers. The attributes considered important did not differ by setting; rather what was surprising was their similarity regardless of specific setting or client group. For example, two of the social workers who spoke the most candidly and painfully about making difficult decisions between advocating for clients or acquiescing to the plans of other officials, work on behalf of victims in a prosecutor's office. This difficulty could be expected if the clients were criminal offenders, but prosecutors and victims are typically viewed on the

same side of the law in the pursuit of justice. Social workers in victim advocacy might be assumed to have an easier path when advocating for their clients compared to social workers in other adult criminal justice settings, but not so for the participants in this sample. The challenges of being seen as credible and making a valuable contribution and thus being accepted were not unique to one or two particular criminal justice settings, but pervasive across them. This experience corresponds with the challenges of working within host settings described in the literature (Dane & Simon, 1991; Jansson & Simmons, 1986).

The need to carefully pick one's battles was similarly expressed across settings and is closely tied to the issues of credibility and value to the host organization. The participants expressed that they could not advocate every issue or even for every client if they wanted to be effective overall. They had to make trade-offs to gain trust which would give them credibility and a voice in decisions going forward. This situation creates an ethical dilemma for criminal justice social workers who have multiple clients at the same time: the individual client on their caseload, the criminal justice organization for which they work, and the public who rely on criminal justice settings to uphold public safety as paramount. Maschi and Killian (2011) in their extensive review of the evolution of forensic social work in the United States advocate a two-pronged approach to the work to provide clients with immediate services while also advocating for better macro-level solutions to systemic problems. This is certainly required and there are ample needs to pursue both. The question remains, is it possible to advocate in every situation and also remain influential in the setting for the purpose of working toward larger scale change? The participants in this sample suggest that it is not and that sometimes one approach must give way to allow the other to move ahead. Figuring out when to speak out and when to remain silent about a harmful agency policy, practice, or aspect of its culture, such as the expression of dark humor, is a recurring dilemma. Although these kinds of dilemmas are not absent from other fields of practice within the profession of social work, criminal justice social workers experience them regularly. This study's findings suggest that these kinds of dilemmas exist as a distinguishing feature of social work practice within criminal justice organizations.

Understanding what is needed to practice effectively within criminal justice settings benefits those who are currently doing the work, their clients, the organizations within which they practice, and ultimately the public. Perhaps because criminal justice social work is done by a small proportion of social workers, there has been little empirical evaluation of the ways criminal justice social work differs from social work in other settings and whether unique attributes or skills are needed to effect positive change. The preliminary findings from this study suggest that although attributes for effective practice within criminal justice are not totally unique from those needed in other settings, some may be more challenging to use within criminal justice

organizations or with criminal justice populations. A comparative empirical examination of the day-to-day practice concerns and dilemmas encountered in criminal justice settings with those in other settings would further illuminate this one possible area of difference. Also, research that examines resultant outcomes from various ways of addressing the dilemmas with a larger sample might especially be helpful to criminal justice social workers struggling with these issues. Future research with nonsocial work-criminal justice personnel and with criminal justice clientele about how they view the contributions of social workers would also add an important perspective to our understanding of effective social work in these host settings and allow for multiple perspectives on what comprises "effective" practice.

Although the participants could readily name many tangible successful client outcomes, they seemed to rely on intangible expressions of success to maintain their own resolve to keep doing the work. Concrete client successes, such as staying out of prison or getting a job are ultimately often unknown to the social worker who "planted the seeds." Participants in the sample described tactics they used to encourage themselves in the work and maintain hope that they were being effective. It is beyond the scope of this study to determine how effective the participants actually were in contributing to positive and lasting client and organizational changes, but the ability to maintain one's belief in the importance of the work and to nurture the resolve to continue seem critical to longevity in criminal justice.

The social workers in this sample did not know of many other social workers doing the work they do, but several spoke of supportive professional friends or colleagues with whom they could air concerns and share ideas. If members for this informal supportive network are cultivated who understand the NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 2008), they could serve as an accountability group as well, helping social workers think through the best course of action as ethical dilemmas arise. In addition, the logistical challenges that social workers face working within criminal justice settings are numerous. For example, within juvenile and adult correctional facilities, security always has priority over treatment. Lockdowns, movement restrictions, and disciplinary sanctions can interfere with client access to educational and individual or group treatment sessions. There is a severe lack of space and privacy for client reflection and openness, so essential to positive growth and change. Opportunities to meaningfully engage family and community supports as part of treatment efforts are extremely limited. Within court systems, conditions imposed on clients may impede rather than support success, such as requirements to hold down a job, while also participating in treatment sessions and being available to provide random urinalysis tests on short notice. The social worker must help the client manage these very real logistical challenges. It is best not to do this work in isolation, but to find mutually supportive colleagues for encouragement, consultation, assistance with reviewing priorities, and "letting off steam."

Social work students or practitioners interested in forensic social work can review the attributes described by participants and self-assess suitability for this area of practice. The difficulties participants describe, such as being willing to work nonjudgmentally with any client regardless of past deeds, choosing not to advocate in some circumstances so that headway can be gained in other areas, continuously practicing discernment while also being fully present with a client (genuine), and tirelessly maintaining credible behavior with multiple audiences should be soberly considered as to one's willingness to engage in these challenges. They were pervasive across criminal justice settings for this sample of participants. The advice to "test the waters" seems especially wise. Finally, the participants also paid a noteworthy compliment to social work education. Social work educational programs should continue to teach students how to look for the multiple biological, psychological, social, and structural factors that comprise the contexts of clients' lives; this ability is a significant contribution that social workers bring to criminal justice work.

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