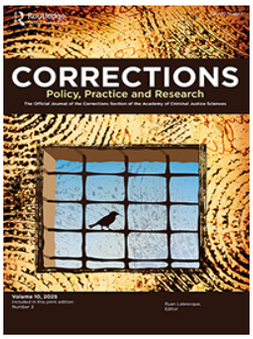

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"You Have to Have the Right People . . . ": Considerations for Men Probation Officers with Gender-Responsive Caseloads

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ABSTRACT

Gender-responsive supervision tailors the evidence-based principles of effective intervention to women by emphasizing their gendered experiences, strengths, and needs. Because of this, a common question when working with agencies to implement gender-responsive practices is: Can men work with justice-involved women utilizing a gender-responsive approach? This question brings up some critical and under-researched considerations surrounding the gendered dynamics of probation officers (POs) who engage in gender-responsive practices. The current study is the first to explore the gendered implications of men POs engaging in gender-responsive supervision with an all-women caseload. Interviews with staff and clients at a gender-responsive probation unit in a Western state provide first-hand accounts of client and staff perceptions and experiences surrounding men POs engaging in gender-responsive probation. Themes indicated that men POs positively impacted women on their caseload when they utilized gender-responsive and trauma-informed approaches – suggesting that it is more about one's skills and capabilities to engage in gender-responsive practices than their gender. Nevertheless, interviews highlighted gender-specific nuances among POs, revealing strengths and challenges associated with gendered experiences of holding a gender-responsive caseload. This study addresses practical implications, acknowledges limitations, and recommends future research directions to explore this understudied area and advance the literature on gender-responsive practices.

KEYWORDS

Gender-responsive; gender; probation; community-supervision

Introduction

Over the past few decades, feminist scholars have demonstrated that some women have uniquely gendered pathways into the justice system – which led to an ideological shift in best practices for engaging and working with justice-involved women (Bloom et al., 2003; Brennan et al., 2012; Daly, 1992; D. D. DeHart, 2018; D. DeHart et al., 2014; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009; Van Voorhis, 2022). Bloom et al. (2003) seminal piece outlined six guiding principles for gender-responsive practices. These principles provide a framework for gender-responsive correctional practice: (1) acknowledge that gender matters, (2) create environments that ensure the safety, respect, and dignity of a person,

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(3) be relational in nature, (4) utilize comprehensive, integrated, and culturally relevant wraparound services to address needs, (5) provide ways to address and improve socio-economic status, and (6) reentry/community supervision should be comprehensive, collaborative, and community-integrated (Bloom et al., 2003). The accumulation of this work established the foundation for gender-responsive strategies, which now guide best practices when working with women in correctional settings (Wattanaporn & Holtfreter, 2014), who, on average, make up about one-quarter of the ~ 4.4 million adults under community supervision in the United States over the past decade (Carson & Kluckow, 2023).

A gender-responsive approach encapsulates an ideological shift of supervising justice-involved women based on the six gender-responsive principles (Bloom et al., 2003). Examples of these principles applied in the field of community corrections include the use of gender-responsive assessments and evaluative tools (e.g., the Women's Risk Need Assessment[WRNA]; see Van Voorhis, 2022; Van Voorhis et al., 2010), gender-responsive case management (e.g., Collaborative Case Work With Women [CCW-W]; Orbis Partners, Inc, 2006), and gender-responsive programs/curriculums (e.g., Beyond Trauma; Covington, 2016; Covington, 2013). While these are examples of how gender-responsive practices have been applied to supervision practices, it is essential to note that these same principles can guide the values and policies within an agency. At a systemic level, implementation requires buy-in, adoption, training, and resource allocation from an agency or institution, not simply individual officers tasked with direct implementation (Bloom et al., 2003; Buell & Abbate, 2020; Van Voorhis, 2022).

Recognizing that being gender-responsive is more than just changes in practice – it is an ideological shift in how agencies work with women – the current study explores how men in PO roles fit within a gender-responsive probation agency, given there is little research that has examined this within a gender-responsive framework. The inspiration for this study came from a question the authors commonly get asked when training agencies on gender-responsive practices: *Can men work effectively with justice-involved women utilizing a gender-responsive approach*? While gender does not determine success in a profession – and of course, men *can* work in these positions – societal gendered norms affect how individuals experience the workplace (e.g., Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). The field of corrections has also seen a shift in its workforce, with a relatively even proportion of men and women community supervision officers; in 2021, it was estimated that 52% of adult parole officers and 56% of adult probation officers were women (see Zippia, Inc., 2024a, 2024b). Therefore, it is pertinent to consider this question within the realm of gender-responsive corrections. To our knowledge, the current study is the first to explore the gendered implications of men[1] probation officers (POs) engaging in gender-responsive supervision with an all-women caseload.

Interviews with staff and clients at a gender-responsive probation unit in a Western state provide first-hand accounts of client and staff perceptions and experiences surrounding men supervision officers engaging in gender-responsive probation. These qualitative accounts offer insight into how men in PO roles can impact women clients when utilizing gender-responsive and trauma-informed approaches. Additionally, the interviews uncovered gendered differences across officers, highlighting some of the strengths and challenges associated with these distinctly gendered experiences. The findings provide valuable insights for gender-responsive scholars and have practical implications for community

supervision agencies and practitioners committed to serving women through investment in gender-responsive policies and practices.

Cross-gender supervision and gender-responsive practices

Cross-gender supervision in the community is an understudied area; the authors could not locate any research on this topic. However, two relevant literature areas indirectly related to cross-gender supervision were identified and provided some background literature related to the current study – starting with literature on the characteristics of community supervision officers.

Characteristics of community supervision officers

The characteristics of community supervision officers implementing gender-responsive practices is a relatively new area of consideration. Evaluations of gender-responsive programs have focused on correctional personnel's personality or perceived characteristics (e.g., trustworthiness, relatability, and supportiveness) and how justice-involved women respond to them. For example, research found women greatly value rapport and trust with their supervising officers (Bui & Morash, 2009; Sturm et al., 2022). Officers using more authoritarian or punishing supervision styles have less success with women in reducing high-risk behaviors (Morash et al., 2015; Roddy et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2020). In comparison, positive reinforcement and supportive behaviors reduce high-risk behaviors and recidivism (Clark, 2021; Cornacchione et al., 2016; Holmstrom et al., 2017; Johnson, 2015; Roddy et al., 2019). Although not specific to women, some research has considered the role of "social distance" in building relationships between officers and supervisees (Helfgott & Gunnison, 2008). Social distance refers to the amount of trust or mistrust between groups perceived as having similar or different life and social experiences (Schnittker, 2004). Helfgott and Gunnison (2008) did not find social distance affected officers' ability to identify and address the needs of those they supervise.

In general, research emphasizes the importance of officers understanding client needs and strengths through the use of validated assessments, use of positive reinforcement and communication, and supportiveness (Clark, 2021; Johnson, 2015; Kennealy et al., 2012; Lovins et al., 2018; Roddy et al., 2019; Salisbury, 2015; Van Voorhis, 2022). These findings align with the principles of gender-responsive practice, indicating that justice-involved women require safe and respectful environments that promote healthy relationship practices (Bloom et al., 2003). An important consideration in creating safe and respectful environments for clients is addressing the disproportionate trauma histories that system-involved women experience (DeHart & Lynch 2021). The majority of justice-involved women have experienced physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse, primarily at the hands of men (DeHart, 2018). This raises the question of whether having men as POs can affect justice-involved women's ability to feel safe in that environment or to create trust with the officer? While the available evidence suggests that various characteristics of supervision officers are influential as it relates to establishing trust and rapport with women on supervision, as well as supporting women's overall success on supervision, there is limited research that has explored the implications of supervision officers' gender-identity as it relates to holding a gender-responsive caseload in the community.

Gender dynamics in therapeutic relationships

Cross-gender therapeutic relationships have been examined in the behavioral health field (see Bhati, 2014). Unethical relationships between client and therapist have been a cause of concern and focus of research on cross-gender therapeutic relationships (see Gilbert, 1987 for more detail). When considering overall success in establishing therapeutic relationships, research suggests that female/women[2] therapists are generally more successful than male/men therapists at building therapeutic alliances and retaining clients, regardless of client sex/gender (Bhati, 2014; Jones & Zoppel, 1982; Shiner et al., 2017). However, same-sex/gender pairings did not necessarily result in improvement of the therapeutic relationship or client outcomes (Jones & Zoppel, 1982; Shiner et al., 2017).

In alignment with Bloom et al. (2003), researchers stress that gender is experienced and witnessed by clients in therapy (Gehart & Lyle, 2001), and therapists of any gender identity cannot treat gender as neutral when being matched with clients (Budge & Moradi, 2018). Gender as a system of power in society introduces complexities such as assumptions, biases, or gender-stereotyped behaviors into the therapeutic relationship (Budge & Moradi, 2018; Gehart & Lyle, 2001). While the research on cross-gender or cross-sex relationships is not new in therapeutic settings, this has not been applied to understanding the working relationships and therapeutic alliance between women on community supervision and their supervising officers. The current study is the first to explore how men in PO roles fit within a gender-responsive probation agency through qualitative interviews with men in PO roles, staff, and women on community supervision.

Current study

The current study focuses on a subset of qualitative findings from a multi-year evaluation funded by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance (Salisbury et al., 2023). The randomized controlled trial utilized a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the impact of a new gender-responsive model of probation supervision called Women's Reentry Assessment and Programing Services (WRAPS; for more details, see Salisbury et al., 2023). The study was conducted as a partnership between Univeristy of Utah and a community corrections agency with a gender-responsive probation unit in a large metropolitan county in the Western United States. Via semi-structured interviews with a subsample of staff and clients, the current study aims to provide insight and experiences related to the research question: *What are the perceptions and experiences surrounding men POs engaging in gender-responsive probation*?

Methods

The sample for the current study is a subsample from a larger study (Salisbury et al., 2023). The larger study included 93 adult women who met the following criteria: (1) serving a probation sentence at the gender-responsive unit, (2) scored medium to high risk on the Women's Risk Needs Assessment (WRNA; UCJC, 2024; Van Voorhis et al., 2010) within the past year, and (3) and were either previously released from jail and serving a felony sentence of less than 12 months, at risk of revocation, or were chronically absconding. Participants enrolled in the program from October 2018 through December 2022. The current study reports the findings from interviews with nine unit staff and a subsample of eight clients.

Context of research site

The unique nature of the agency where this research was conducted is vital to note within the context of this research; the agency involved in this study is a highly progressive unit within a strong rehabilitative-focused county community corrections agency. Over the past decade, this unit has set the standard for gender-responsive probation. They are committed to a culture that truly encapsulates what it means to be gender-responsive (e.g., evidence-based, trauma-informed, relational, etc.; Bloom et al., 2003) and have invested the time and resources to create this cultural expectation in the office. The leadership's commitment and the staff's ongoing engagement in training and implementing gender-responsive approaches are part of this. To our knowledge, all staff participated in a variety of evidence-based training courses as a routine part of their employment. For example, staff in this unit have been utilizing the Women's Risk Needs Assessment (Van Voorhis et al., 2010) since 2014 and were trained on the following: gender-responsive and trauma informed practices, motivational interviewing/effective communication (see CR/2; Core Associates, 2017), effective practices in community supervision (EPICS; University of Cincinati, 2024), and core correctional practices (Dowden & Andrews, 2004).

Sample

In the summer of 2021, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine unit staff (six POs and three non-PO staff personnel). The POs reported four to five years of experience in gender-responsive supervision. All POs identified as White, four as women, and two as men. The other three non-PO staff members were women; two identified as White, and one as Black. Two of these non-PO staff members had less than two years' experience in gender-responsive probation, while the third had over 20 years of experience.

Interviews were also conducted with eight clients, all women actively engaged in supervision and a part of the larger study sample. To collect a purposive sample for the current study, the research team requested that staff assist in scheduling interviews with (1) women who represented diverse experiences while on probation and (2) women who had men as their POs. Among the eight women interviewed, 75% identified as White ($n = 6$; Native American; $n = 1$, Hispanic; $n = 1$). Three women, or 37.5%, reported previously ($n = 1$) or currently ($n = 2$) having a PO who was a man. Given the small sample size, additional demographic information was not collected to increase women's sense of safety and conceal their identity.

Interviews

Two research team members conducted the interviews, both of whom are well-versed in gender-responsive corrections and conducting interviews. Scripted interview guides[3] were developed for the different participant roles (e.g., POs, staff, clients) and utilized open-ended/probing questions to gather in-depth responses to participants' experiences (see Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; McIntosh & Morse, 2015). For the current study, clients were asked if they currently or previously have had a man PO. If they answered "yes," additional questions were asked about their experiences and thoughts of having a PO who is a man. Women staff were asked questions about their views of men in PO roles, probing for strengths, challenges, and/or gendered differences. Finally, the two men POs were asked additional questions about their experiences of being a man supervising women. While the

interview guides had particular questions related to this topic, it is noteworthy to mention that sometimes, this topic came up naturally, and the researchers asked additional probing questions to garner more in-depth information. The interviews with staff lasted ~90 minutes and were conducted via Zoom. Client interviews lasted ~ 30 to 40 minutes and were conducted in various modalities based on the client's preference (e.g., in-person, Zoom, phone). All interviews were voluntary, and participants could skip any questions or stop the interview at any time. Clients received a gift card for participation. All interviews were recorded and transcribed via a transcription service. Transcripts were uploaded and analyzed using the qualitative management software ATLAS.ti.

A trained qualitative specialist team member conducted the analytic coding process. This decision to utilize a team member who did not conduct the interviews was intentional, given their specialization in qualitative coding and ability to provide a more neutral perspective to the coding as they were not involved in the data collection. The coder utilized a thematic analysis framework because of its applicability across disciplines and common use in qualitative research. Thematic analysis is used to identify naturally occurring themes, defined as a "patterned response or meaning" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). The coder followed the first five steps of thematic analysis: (1) data familiarization, (2) code generation, (3) theme identification, (4) review of themes, and (5) naming/labeling themes (for more on this, see Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kinger & Varpio, 2020). More specifically, the coder reviewed the transcripts and listened to the interview recordings. After this step, they created latent and semantic codes (e.g., descriptive labels that inform the nature or interpretation of the data; see Bryne, 2022) and took notes on their initial insights into the responses. These codes were further combined based on related ideas or common themes related to the research question. These themes provide a comprehensive narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82) that aids in understanding the data related to the research question. The coder subsequently shared the identified themes with the research team for further discussion and review. The themes were then labeled (e.g., "Creating Safe Spaces"), guiding the manuscript's results section. The final step, writing up findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006), was done via a collaborative effort by the research team. The themes from this process are outlined and discussed below.

Results

The current study focused on themes from questions exploring clients' current or past experiences with men in PO roles, how men in PO roles navigate and view holding a gender-responsive caseload, and general perceptions of men POs holding gender-responsive caseloads. Based on the interviews, an overarching theme was that when men POs proficiently engage in gender-responsive and trauma-informed practices, they positively impacted women clients' experiences on supervision. The two clients actively working with a man PO stated they did not view having a man PO as a negative experience and genuinely appreciated their professional relationship with them – the staff's perspectives further supported this. Additionally, interviews uncovered gendered differences across POs, highlighting some of the strengths and challenges of navigating gender-responsive caseloads. These thematic findings are outlined below.

Appropriate boundary setting and working relationships: "... entering into a relationship with a male who does not want anything from them."

Best practices suggest that POs should actively model prosocial behaviors for their clients (Labrecque & Smith, 2017). This helps teach pro-social skills and reinforces wanted behaviors. For example, boundary setting within interpersonal relationships is a crucial component of trauma-informed practices in supervision settings (see Levenson & Willis, 2019) and an important element for women to learn and practice (Bloom et al., 2003; Ramirez, 2016). A major theme in the data was how men POs could demonstrate appropriate boundary setting and maintain a strictly professional cross-gender relationship with their women clients.

Both interviews with the men POs emphasized the importance of establishing healthy relationships with their clients. When describing this, one of the men POs said, "*..because women are so relational, there needs to be a little extra care to develop that relational piece where they feel as though they can trust you and they can trust what your decisions might be*." This PO provided an example of how they go about establish a healthy relationship while maintaining appropriate boundaries; they are very mindful of the details they share or discuss with their women clients. For example, "*We're not going to cross lines or nothing. You [client] don't need to know too much about my life. I'll share some things that might be applicable, but I don't need to know all the details, certain details*." This PO's client corroborated this by explaining that she feels he truly cares about her and her success. Still, she described their relationship as "very respectful, very professional," suggesting that the PO's approach was successful at establishing a good working relationship with appropriate boundaries.

For many women on probation at this agency, having a professional working relationship with healthy boundaries with a man was a new experience. For example, one of the women POs mentioned, " *... sometimes sitting down with a male PO is the first time this woman has ever experienced a pro-social working relationship with a male. You know, they don't know how to have this type of interaction*." A client corroborated this statement, discussing how she had previously tried to sleep with her counselors or other men in authority roles because that is what she thought she was supposed to do: "*...going through counseling when I was in my addiction, I always tried to sleep with my counselor ... It was just in my head that that was the thing to do*." This client explained that on their current probation sentence, they had been assigned a man PO, and this was the first time where they stated, " *... it never even went there*," meaning that they did not try to sleep with him, as the PO ensured that the relationship was strictly professional. This story also highlights the incredible vulnerability of women clients working with men POs. When training men POs to engage in gender-responsive practices, it is crucial to discuss this vulnerability in the context of gendered experiences and how some of their women clients might come to this expectation (e.g., sexual relationships) based on previous experiences.

The opportunity to establish and maintain a pro-social, healthy relationship between men POs and women clients is crucial, given the extremely high rates of gendered violence women experience from men (see D. D. DeHart & S, 2021). One of the POs, who was a man, emphasized this point by stating,

> . . . I think this is huge, and I don't think it gets talked about enough is the importance of [women clients] entering into a relationship with a male who doesn't want anything from them . . . I don't want sex, I don't want inappropriateness, like any of that. And for them to be able to develop a professional relationship with a male who wants none of that stuff, that has an importance.

When a man PO utilizes gender-responsive approaches, there is the opportunity for them to serve as a model for women's future relationships with men and sometimes as the client's first experience of having an appropriate, prosocial relationship with a man. This is an essential argument for having men engage in gender-responsive work as POs.

Creating safe spaces: "As a victim of sexual assault . . . it was hard to trust him . . . "

In addition to setting boundaries, given women's high rates of trauma and victimization (see D. D. DeHart & S, 2021), it is crucial to consider how having a man PO might affect women clients' ability to feel safe. This is especially important given the power differentials between supervising officers and clients. Interviews with participants suggested the men POs intentionally used trauma-informed practices to ensure women felt safe. Both men POs included in the study were conscientious of how women might feel unsure or unsafe with them, especially at first. One of them talked about how they are conscious of "*baggage connected with men who have been there in their [client's] past*." Being mindful of this, he explained that he is continuously aware of his physical and loud presence when working with women: "*I'm big and hairy and loud and all that kind of stuff, it's [sic] not necessarily the least intimidating person on earth."* The other man PO role talked about how he was very aware of his gender in certain situations and took extra precautions to ensure he was never alone with a client. This was to ensure both the client's safety as well as his own and not put himself in a situation where he could be accused of inappropriate behavior, "*I don't do anything by myself. I don't do the Zoom thing with my female clients . . . I just do it over the phone . . . I don't do arrests by myself. I don't do transports by myself."* In these examples, the POs recognized how their physical presence might make their women clients feel unsafe and proactively addressed these concerns – for their own safety as well.

The intentional acts by the men POs positively impacted their women clients, who reported feeling safe with their men POs, but this was not always immediate. When speaking with a client, she quickly brought this up as a concern when she first started working with her man PO, "*As a victim of sexual assault . . . It was hard to trust him and to talk to him sometimes because he was a male and not a female . . .* " The client continued talking about how she built her trust and now has a good working relationship with him (her PO). She even credits him with helping her trust men in positions of authority. In this example, while the client did not initially trust her PO, they established a healthy working relationship that she found beneficial during her time on supervision. Other clients talked about how they felt respected and comfortable working with their POs and did not report any sense of uncomfortableness or safety concerns, even with him being a man. The men POs in the study exemplified their awareness of women's past traumas and utilized trauma-informed practices to help create a sense of safety for women on their caseload.

As demonstrated in these two themes, it is evident that men in PO roles can proficiently engage in gender-responsive and trauma-informed practices. When they do, they can positively impact their women clients' supervision success. When reflecting on men in these roles, one of the women POs stated, "*I think the more important thing is*

getting the right people in the right positions." They were referencing that it is less about the gender of the PO and more about their overall fit of the staff with the goals and expectations of the position, as well as how well they work with the clientele to promote their clients' success and well-being via gender-responsive practices. While the interviews suggest that participants had a positive perception and experience with men POs, the interviews also uncovered some gendered differences, highlighting some of the strengths and challenges men POs might face when navigating gender-responsive caseloads.

Relatability: " . . . women tend to see women as an instant ally to a degree . . . "

One challenge that emerged for men POs was their ability to relate to their women clients in some aspects of their lives. Clients often talked about how their women POs could relate to their situation, as they were also women and had many shared experiences. For example, when one client thought about a previous time on supervision where she had a man PO (not trained in gender-responsive practices), she said, "*Now that I've had a female probation officer, I would say . . . it's hard for me to relate [to a male PO].*" While this particular client did not have a man PO at the current agency, purely based on gender, they felt as if it was more difficult to relate to a man PO in previous experiences. This concept of relatability wasn't highlighted by women with men POs as an initial barrier, it was more the trust aspect that was previously discussed (see previous section).

Firmly aligning with this concept, one of the men POs mentioned this perceived alliance women have with each other where " . . . *women tend to see women as an instant ally to a degree . . . .*" This PO went on to discuss how they viewed this allyship as beneficial, given that women would generally be more willing to get into the "nitty gritty" of their challenges/life experiences with another woman. A woman staff member recognized this as a potential challenge for men POs when trying to relate with women clients, "*I think it's a little bit tougher, I think for them [man POs] . . . Because I can say things that some of them they can't*" – especially concerning gender-specific medical issues. While recognizing this as a potential challenge men POs may face, that does not mean they cannot relate to their women clients. One of the men POs explained that they did not perceive their ability to connect and relate to their women clients as a challenge they could not overcome:

> I don't know if it's because I've always been very comfortable around women, so that helps me in that way. I've been around women my whole life . . . I don't see much of a struggle for me, as far as how my gender reflects on how my relatability is with female clients.

While this is a generalization, it is common for women to be more comfortable talking with other women purely based on shared experiences. However, as demonstrated in the interviews, that does not mean men cannot relate and establish a trusting and healthy working relationship with women clients. A woman PO re-iterated this by stating, "*I think it [trust] could be an extra barrier for men to be supervising women. That can be really tough. The trust piece is huge. We just got some really remarkable men [POs] here that have been able to overcome that . . . .*" In this case, it might be more on the training and skills of the POs to utilize gender-responsive, evidence-based practices that impact the client-officer relationship than gender differences.

Gender differences among POs: "He doesn't put the energy into it the way that I do . . . "

The POs identified some gender differences among themselves and their approach to working with clients – many of which were grounded in stereotypical gendered norms. For example, when thinking about their colleagues who are men, a woman PO talked about how she perceived herself as becoming more emotionally invested in her clients. She implied that this was partly because she is a woman and has that innate sense of connection with clients: "*He [man PO] doesn't put the energy into it the way that I do, because I'm a female working with a female*." She went on to explain that the men POs might go about working with a client by saying, "*Hey, I care, but it's really up to you to work this out . . . .*" In comparison, she stated that they (women POs) would look at the same situation and say, "*Hey, I care. How can I help you work through this better?*" Interestingly, the woman PO saw her men colleagues' ability to be less emotionally invested as a way to prevent burnout and emotional exhaustion.

Another woman PO talked about how she felt there is a higher level of compassion when women work with other women. This does not indicate that the men POs do not care about their clients – in fact, we found the opposite; clients with men POs strongly believed their POs cared about them. For example, women clients talked about how their men POs demonstrated that they truly cared about them: *"He [man PO] hasn't quite given up on me yet where I feel like most people would have . . . "* and *"He [man PO] always tells me when we do our check-ins that he's proud of me . . . "* While it was clear that the men POs did care about their clients, the women POs tended to view themselves as more emotionally invested and engaged in different communication styles with their clients (e.g., how can I help you vs. this is up to you) than their men colleagues. These findings suggest some gendered differences among the POs regarding their approach to client work, including communication styles and emotional boundaries. While these are generalizations and do not apply to all supervision officers, the interview responses supported stereotypically gendered traits (e.g., women being more relational) playing out among officers, serving as strengths and challenges.

Discussion

For decades, feminist scholars and practitioners have pushed for gender-responsive policies and practices to better meet the needs of women in the criminal legal system. While gender-responsive practices have gained traction among correctional agencies (Opsal & Luxton, 2023; Stuart & McCoy, 2023), very little attention has been given to researching the gendered dynamics of community supervision officers engaging in gender-responsive correctional practices. The current study contributes to research by providing the first examination of perceptions and experiences surrounding men probation officers engaging in gender-responsive probation. First-hand experiences from probation staff (men and women) and women sentenced to probation provide important considerations and implications surrounding gendered considerations for individuals engaging in gender-responsive correctional practices.

Importance of gender-responsive skills & approaches

A key finding of the current study was that being gender-responsive was seemingly more important to the client/officer relationship than the officer's gender. While some gendered dynamics were at play – which will be discussed below – the skills of the PO to engage with clients in ways that aligned with the principles of gender-responsive approaches mitigated any concern surrounding different gender identities between women on supervision and their POs.

However, the question remains whether the men POs' success in engaging in gender-responsive approaches was a unique feature of these particular men or something established from training. While this question was outside the scope of the study, and we can only speak to the POs' skills, it was apparent that these men wanted to work in this particular unit. This was echoed in the one in one of the staff interviews:

The staff all choose to be here. So everybody in this unit has chosen to come work with women and families . . . They don't all have the same skill sets and they go about things a little bit differently, but they all have the same goals to work with women and children and try and stop that intergenerational involvement in the criminal justice system. And they're all open to ideas and they're all open to trainings.

While we don't know if there was something personally unique about these particular men POs, our findings suggest that they chose to work there and they have obtained the skills to engage in gender-responsive supervision practices effectively. For example, the men POs in the sample made intentional and substantial efforts to build rapport with their women clients.

Building healthy and professional relational practices is essential for any therapeutic relationship, but it is especially valuable for working with justice-involved women (Bui & Morash, 2009; Sturm et al., 2022). This importance of rapport also ties to the role orientation of officers where more authoritarian supervision types of been less successful in working with women on supervision (Morash et al., 2015; Roddy et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2020), whereas positive reinforcement and supportive behaviors can improve women's success on supervision (Clark, 2021; Cornacchione et al., 2016; Holmstrom et al., 2017; Johnson, 2015; Roddy et al., 2019). This also aligns with Skeem et al. (2007) work demonstrating the importance of supervision officers blending care with control; in other words, being firm, fair, and caring to promote the best outcomes with clients (see also Kennealy et al., 2012). The cumulation of literature fits well within the importance of being relational in nature – one of the core principles of gender-responsive approaches (Bloom et al., 2003) – when working with women. This is not to say that gender did not matter; in various instances, the gender dynamic between the man PO and woman client was apparent and noteworthy, such as the concept of social distance.

Gendered dynamics among POs engaging in gender-responsive work

Social distance

Social distance is the general amount of trust or mistrust based on shared or differing lived experiences (see Schnittker, 2004). This concept is not unique to corrections; for example,

research in physical and behavioral health fields has found that demographic factors like race/ethnicity, age and religion can impact trust between providers and patients (Hsu et al., 2014; Malat & Hamilton, 2006; Schnittker, 2004). In the current study, women clients saw women POs as "instant allies" in the sense that they were both women and therefore had some overlap in lived experiences. There were also instances where women POs said they could relate with their clients over personal experiences of being a woman, particularly related to medical issues. In this case, the social distance of gender meant that men POs were not always considered relatable at first – however, as demonstrated in the interviews, men POs were able to establish good rapport and relationships and find other ways to relate to women outside of gender. However, this sense of instant allyship may have greater implications for women POs' emotional investment in women clients.

Emotional investment

In the current study, women POs considered themselves more emotionally invested in their clients than the men POs. While emotional investment can positively impact one's career, it can also pose challenges related to emotional exhaustion and burnout – a phenomenon not limited to correctional professions. A recent article in the Harvard Business Review explained it as such:

> . . . being emotionally invested in your work is like a double-edged sword. Your drive and passion propel you to perform. Caring deeply about your performance provides satisfaction and meaning. But being too emotionally tied to your job can become a huge drain and a heavy burden (Wilding, 2022).

With this in mind, this gender difference of women seeing themselves as more emotionally invested than men POs brings up possible concerns surrounding burnout and high turnover rates.Emotional exhaustion is one of the most commonly and consistently used predictors and dimensions in measuring burnout (Anthony McMann et al., 2016; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). A review of workplace burnout reported that emotional exhaustion and low professional fulfillment were more common for women, whereas men were more likely to experience depersonalization (Edu-Valsania et al., 2022). While burnout is not a new phenomenon and is well documented in various professions (e.g., healthcare, education; De Hert, 2020; Kariou et al., 2021), it has more recently become a significant topic of concern in criminal justice; in 2023, the National Institute of Justice prioritized initiatives to confront the prevalence of correctional officer stressors associated with burnout and high staff turnover. Despite a solid literature base on burnout among correctional staff (see Costa et al., 2024, Forman-Dolan et al., 2022; Lambert, Barton-Bellessa, et al., 2015), gender-specific analyses are scarce, particularly regarding burnout among women in correctional professions (da Silva Venâncio et al., 2020; Dial et al., 2010; Gladfelter & Haggis, 2024). While the current study did not directly measure burnout, the self-identified tendency for women POs to be more emotionally engaged with their clients than men[4] POs is an important consideration for future research, as well as for developing gender-responsive policies aimed at reducing burnout and turnover (Lambert, Barton-Bellessa, et al., 2015).

A unique opportunity to model a professional cross-gender relationship

Another central theme that emerged surrounding gendered dynamics was the importance of women establishing a prosocial, professional relationship with men POs. This was a very influential experience for many women, who often have never established such a relationship.

The ability of men in PO roles to model a prosocial, professional relationship with appropriate boundaries is a valuable tool for gender-responsive correctional practices. For example, an essential aspect of core correctional practices is modeling pro-social behavior (Dowden & Andrews, 2004). This concept is firmly rooted in social learning theories (see Bandura & McClelland, 1977) – we learn behaviors by observing others. Therefore, the opportunity to model boundary setting and professional relationships in this opposite-gender client-officer relationship provides a unique dynamic that allows men POs to consistently model and reinforce these boundaries with women clients. This is particularly important for women, given that dysfunctional relationships are a gender-responsive criminogenic need (Fleming et al., 2021; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009; Van Voorhis et al., 2010).

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that women's justice involvement is often tied to unhealthy, abusive, and dysfunctional romantic relationships, primarily with men (for example, see Bloom et al., 2003; Brennan et al., 2012; D. D. DeHart & S, 2021). Similarly, as the interviews suggested, women clients working with men can be incredibly vulnerable to unhealthy boundaries (e.g., intimate or sexual relationships) because that is what they think is expected from them. This is an essential component for any man engaging in gender-responsive practices working with women clients to understand, be aware of, and navigate – for both the client's and PO's safety. Men in these roles should receive training on how to navigate this type of situation to teach and enforce healthy boundaries and demonstrate what non-sexual/intimate relationships look like between men and women. With this being said, it is vital that there is agency oversight to ensure inappropriate relationships between clients and POs do not exist – especially for women caseloads.

Importance of being trauma-informed

Justice-involved women experience high rates of domestic violence, abuse, and trauma, usually perpetrated by men (D. D. DeHart, 2018; D. D. DeHart & S, 2021). In the interviews, women expressed initial reluctance to trust their men POs due to past victimization and trauma. The men POs were well aware of this, given their in-depth training and knowledge surrounding gender-responsive approaches. The men POs in the study emphasized the importance of engaging in trauma-informed practices and being very intentional to establish a sense of safety for women. This is an important distinction given that "gender-neutral" correctional practices, which do not always emphasize trauma-informed practices, can re-traumatize women and hinder treatment (Auty et al., 2022; S. Covington, 2002, 2008). Staff trained in how trauma impacts women's daily experiences can implement policies and practices that "minimize damage and maximize opportunities for healthy growth and development" and create "an environment for healing and recovery" (S. Covington, 2022, p. 173). By effectively utilizing trauma-informed and gender-responsive practices, men POs were able to establish a sense of safety among their women clients, which is an essential component to engaging in gender-responsive work and creating a space where effective correctional interventions can be conducted (i.e., work on criminogenic needs; see Bloom et al., 2003).

Implications and considerations

The current study's findings bring about various implications for practice. First, it emphasizes the importance of interpersonal skills, communication, and overall abilities to engage

in gender-responsive practices – all of which were considered more important in establishing good rapport and relationships with justice-involved women than POs' gender. However, as demonstrated in the interviews, men POs holding a gender-responsive caseload may navigate various aspects of gender-responsive practices a little differently (e.g., having to work a little harder to establish trust and a safe environment, being extremely conscientious in enforcing boundaries, taking various precautions to not put themselves in positions where they are alone with clients, etc.), which required well established interpersonal and communication skills as well as a solid working knowledge of the principles of gender-responsive practices.

Therefore, agencies might consider screening for the skills identified as influential to the PO client relationship, interpersonal characteristics, and overall fit when staffing specialized caseloads (e.g., gender-responsive, mental health, etc.). As the interviews highlighted, it was less about the gender of the PO and more about the PO's overall fit of the staff with the goals and expectations of the position, as well as how well they work with the clientele to promote their clients' success and well-being via gender-responsive practices. These skills, as well as fit with the overall goals of the agency, should be the focus when staffing caseloads with unique needs and characteristics to ensure the staff has the skills and abilities to engage in a meaningful and productive manner.

Another consideration is to engage in "best-fit" staffing, where clients have some say in who they would be most comfortable working with. For example, it might be helpful to ask justice-involved women questions that might help place them with a PO that is a good fit for them (e.g., communication style, motivation styles, learning preferences, etc.). One of those questions might ask if they have a preference for their PO's gender – especially in light of the woman's history of victimization or abuse. As mentioned in more detail in the next section, there is a need for more research to explore women's experiences with having men as POs to understand their experiences better – including what went well and areas to improve upon – from their perspective. While the current study included some clients' perspectives, it was a relatively small sample from a single agency. Given this limitation, exploring this topic among a larger, more diverse sample of justice-involved women would greatly benefit the literature. This would help guide future research and the training available to agencies to assist POs in navigating the needs of women on their caseloads and any gendered dynamics they may encounter.

Building gender-responsive skills: Training and mentorship

It would be unrealistic to make staffing suggestions without recognizing the staffing shortages many community corrections agencies currently face (see Celi et al., 2024; Russo, 2019); the addition of screening for these types of skills and abilities or engaging in "best-fit" staffing might create further challenges for staffing these vacancies. Being mindful that this approach might not be feasible for some agencies, providing training, mentorship, and ongoing skill development might be another way to ensure their POs have the additional skills required to hold gender-responsive or other specialized caseloads. As mentioned in the methods section, all POs in the current study, regardless of gender, received extensive training surrounding gender-responsive and trauma-informed practices (e.g., all completed the WRNA [UCJC, 2024] and Creating Regulation and Resilience [CR/2; Core Associates, 2017] trainings), which might help explain the overwhelmingly positive findings. The provision of gender-responsive training, regardless of the POs' gender, is

critical to ensure they have the skills and abilities to engage in gender-responsive supervision practices to ultimately produce the best possible outcomes for justice-involved women (Bloom et al., 2003).

Other hiring considerations

Concerning hiring and staffing, the results of this study preliminarily caution against the pursuit of a bona fide occupational qualification (BFOQ[5]) by community corrections agencies for positions supervising gender-responsive caseloads (e.g., agencies to only hire women POs to oversee gender-responsive, all-woman caseloads). While it might seem intuitively appealing only to hire women POs to oversee all-women caseloads in an attempt to be more gender-responsive, the findings of this study suggest that it is more about hiring individuals – regardless of gender – that have the skills and desire to engage in gender-responsive practices that align with the principles of gender-responsive and trauma-informed care. However, this is not to suggest that men and women POs will have the same experiences in engaging in gender-responsive practices (e.g., social distance, previous trauma). Instead of considering BFOQs, gender-responsive community correctional agencies may consider providing additional training or workshops for all POs so that they can navigate some of the gender dynamics between them and their clients in ways that best align with gender-responsive and trauma-informed approaches. In short, more data are necessary in this area of inquiry before supporting BFOQs for job codes specific to gender-responsive caseloads. Nevertheless, these results may manifest differently among caseloads serving women on more specific caseloads (e.g., survivors of domestic violence).

Limitations

The generalizability of the current study is a considerable limitation. Given the small sample size, limited diversity, and the purposive sampling methods, these findings do not include all persons' experiences as a PO or woman on community supervision. The field would benefit from future research that expands on this work to explore these experiences among a more diverse sample of women on supervision and POs, as well as accounting for the intersection of gender, race/ethnicity, and other identities (e.g., sexuality, class, religion, etc.) with respect to client PO relationships within a gender-responsive framework. The unique nature of the agency is also an important consideration; as discussed previously, the agency is unique in that it is a highly progressive agency committed to a culture that truly encapsulates what it means to be gender-responsive and has invested considerable time and resources to create this cultural expectation in the office. Therefore, it is important to consider how the agency norms impacted the findings of this study and how they might have looked different elsewhere.

Another limitation of the study was the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic concerning data collection. First, conducting client interviews during this time was challenging, with numerous barriers to accessing transportation, social distancing, etc. While the research team worked alongside the staff to arrange the interview meetings with clients, numerous clients did not attend their scheduled interview times. Additionally, interviews were conducted with clients at their preferred locations and/or modalities (phone, in person). However, the use of tele-interviews comes with both pros and cons. Virtual interviewing is generally supported for qualitative research as it provides increased flexibility, can help reduce costs, and improves participant

comfortability (Archibald et al., 2019; Jenner & Myers, 2019). However, this mode of interviewing might result in barriers to observing body language and introduce distractions not usually present in face-to-face interviews, including technical issues (Oliffe et al., 2021). There is also the concern of safety for women in their homes while interviewing if in an unhealthy relationship. Overall, while the study is not without its limitations, findings directly address the gap in the literature and serve as a starting point for future research to explore the gender dynamics of men engaging in gender-responsive supervision with all women caseloads.

Conclusion

To close, we want to return to the original question that prompted this work: *Can men work effectively with justice-involved women utilizing a gender-responsive approach*? We know that men *can* serve in this role; however, the frequency in which this question arises among trainings delivered by the authors highlighted the need to explore the gendered implications of men engaging in gender-responsive practices and document experiences and perceptions surrounding men officers engaging in gender-responsive probation. The first-hand accounts from POs, staff, and women clients suggest that there are some gendered implications surrounding men and women POs holding gender-responsive caseloads. However, the skills of the POs to engage in gender-responsive supervision stood out as being a more important factor than their gender. All in all, this suggests that while gender does continue to matter concerning how people experience the world and navigate various interpersonal interactions, it also indicates that the principles of engaging in gender-responsive supervision are at the core of gender-responsive practice. We hope the findings of this study prompt further empirical investigations to garner a more in-depth understanding surrounding the implication of POs' gender when engaging in gender-responsive supervision.

Notes

1. The term gender is used in the study purposely and with distinction from sex. Sex refers solely to biological differences where gender signifies social and personal constructions of identity (Haig, 2004; Nicholson, 1994). In the current study, this is signified by using the terms man and woman rather than male or female – with the exception of participant quotes. However, it is important to note that gender identity is not limited to a simple binary but rather reflects a diversity of experiences and identities (Butler, 2006). The use of binary language reflects the limitations of discussing gender expression within the criminal justice system, which designates and separates individuals based on binary sex.
2. These studies explored sex role socialization and gendered effects and used both sex and gendered terms – which are reflected in the manuscript (see Bhati, 2014; Jones & Zoppel, 1982; Shiner et al., 2017).
3. Interview guides are available upon request from the first author.
4. This study did not measure actual emotional investment by POs, so we cannot determine whether women invested more emotionally in their clients than men POs – the findings were based on themes identified by the interviews and data analysis process.
5. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made it illegal for employers to engage in discriminatory practices when making employment decisions. However, a BFOQ is an exception to this and "recognizes that in some extremely rare instances a person's sex, religion, or national

origin may be reasonably necessary to carrying out a particular job function in the normal operation of an employer's business or enterprise" (1982). BFOQs have a relatively complex history in corrections (Manley, 2009; see also Bloom et al., 2003).

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