

Religion and accountability for restorative offender rehabilitation

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Offender rehabilitation has different meanings for different people because we may have varying expectations about what rehabilitation actually looks like. Sung Joon Jang and Byron R. Johnson walk us through the role of religion and accountability in restorative rehabilitation

Rehabilitation may be determined to have been achieved based on the fact that an offender was not arrested for a new crime during a set period of time after completing a particular program or therapy. Another individual may conclude that an offender was rehabilitated when he or she was hired for a full-time job after completing an education or job training program and could retain employment for a certain period of time without getting into trouble at work.

These observed changes are important, but they are limited indicators of authentic offender rehabilitation because they may be a product of the fact that police obviously do not detect all crimes taking place in society. Although an offender's behavioral change is the anticipated ultimate outcome of rehabilitation, a key question concerns the cause of that change.

Stated differently, is rehabilitation attributable to foundational, sustained, internal changes? Alternatively, are changes in an offender due to situational, short-term, external factors that merely put the offender's criminality on hold temporarily? Rehabilitation, conceived as moral reform, focuses on the former, an offender's inner change.

Moral rehabilitation

In programs that focus on moral rehabilitation, offenders are taught virtues and encouraged to not only improve their moral capacities to resist criminal temptations, but to consider exhibiting virtuous behavior. Moral improvement, therefore, is a critical aspect of moral rehabilitation, but it would be incomplete without consideration of restoration.

Equally important is offering moral redress to the victim, the victim's family, and the community. Moral improvement and restoration are closely linked because improving an offender's moral capacities leads the offender to restore damaged relationships with those victims of crime and the crime-impacted community. An offender becoming virtuous is expected to recognize the harm caused by his or her crime and make amends to those who were hurt by it.

The virtue of accountability

Among various virtues related to restoration, a key virtue is accountability, as “accountable people are relationally responsive and responsible” (Witvliet et al., 2023, 661). Specifically, an offender exhibiting the virtue of accountability would prioritize the need to repair relationships with those affected by their crime and accept responsibility for their wrongdoing by endeavoring to make things right.

Thus, accountability is forward-looking, much like Braithwaite’s (2006, 42) active responsibility, which “means taking responsibility for putting something right into the future,” and as a virtue is the restorative justice ideal of responsibility. Other restoration-related virtues include forgiveness, self-control, and empathy.

Religion and restorative rehabilitation

Religion can help offenders develop accountability and other restoration-related virtues, given that all major religions promote them. Thus, involvement in those religions is expected to foster restorative virtues, and empirical research provides some evidence of the “virtuous effect” of religious involvement or religiosity among offenders in prison as well as in the general population (e.g., Desmond et al., 2013; Jang & Johnson, 2024).

A common theme among various religious traditions is teaching adherents accountability first to God or a transcendent guide (transcendent accountability), with accountability to other people (human accountability) being its outcome. Consequently, religiosity is likely to first foster transcendent accountability, which in turn enhances human accountability. A sense of being accountable to other people then leads to other restorative virtues, which is expected to improve attitudes, thoughts, emotions, and actions among offenders.

Religion and accountability: An empirical study

For a preliminary test of these relationships, we analyzed data from two cross-sectional surveys, one with females incarcerated in a prison within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) and another with males housed at two TDCJ units (Jang et al., 2023). The combined sample (n = 339) was 31.9% female and 68.1% male.

In addition to survey data, we obtained information from TDCJ about the participants’ demographic and justice-related backgrounds. Results from estimating a structural equation model were generally consistent with our expectations.

We found that prisoner religiosity was positively related to transcendent accountability, which in turn was positively associated with human accountability. Human accountability was then related positively to self-control and empathy and was inversely related to anger, depression, and anxiety (via self-control). As expected, anger was positively related to the risk of aggressive misconduct in prison.

In other words, religiously involved prisoners were found to be high on human accountability because they were high on transcendent accountability compared to non-religious prisoners.

Religiously involved prisoners were also found to be high on self-control (and empathy)

due to being high on human accountability. Moreover, the higher self-control exhibited by religious prisoners was associated with lower anger and reduced risk of interpersonal aggression.

Does religion contribute to restorative rehabilitation?

Despite its cross-sectionality and other limitations, this study provides preliminary evidence that prisoner involvement in religion may contribute to restorative rehabilitation, as prisoner religiosity was likely to promote transcendent and human accountability and other restorative virtues, which in turn enhanced emotional well-being and reduced the risk of prison misconduct.

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