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GRADUATE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES, INTERESTS, AND ATTITUDES TOWARD CORRECTIONAL/FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY*

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The past decade has witnessed unprecedented growth in the U.S. prison population. With the incarcerated population within the United States rapidly reaching 2 million (Fagan, 2003) and prisons expanding at an alarming rate (see Lawrence & Travis, 2004), resources within criminal justice systems have become taxed.

Combined with the disproportionate increase in the number of mentally ill and substance-abusing offenders, there is an increased need for mental health professionals, including correctional and forensic psychologists, at all levels of the criminal justice system. Although overlapping in many regards, a simplistic distinction can be drawn

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between correctional and forensic psychology specialties based on the populations served. For purposes of this study, correctional psychology is the application of psychological principles to individuals convicted of a crime and sentenced to serve time in a correctional setting (including community corrections), whereas forensic psychology (specifically, criminal forensic psychology for purposes of this article) is the application of psychological principles to individuals charged with a crime but who remain in the judicial process (i.e., have not been convicted of the crime with which they are charged).

Although there has been a rise in the total number of mental health professionals throughout corrections, increased staffing has not been proportionate to the rising prison population and lags behind current mental health service needs (Boothby & Clements, 2002; Magaletta & Boothby, 2003). In fact, mental health services are so direly needed that psychologists appear to have become integral components in the criminal justice system with their contributions now regarded as essential rather than optional (Turnbo & Murray, 1997). As a result, there is increased need for well-trained, motivated, and competent psychologists in correctional and forensic settings (Harowski, 2003). . . .

. . . (T)he purpose of the current study was to investigate current correctional and forensic training opportunities available to doctoral students in clinical and counseling psychology programs. More specifically, this study sought to identify the availability of practicum experiences in criminal justice settings, availability of academic coursework related to issues in correctional and forensic psychology, access to mentors and faculty with research interests in these areas, and students' interest in such training opportunities. Finally, this study sought to investigate graduate students' attitudes toward inmates as well as offender-based mental health services.

METHOD

Participants

Participants for this study were 175 advanced graduate student volunteers from APA accredited counseling and clinical psychology programs. Advanced students were defined as those graduate students within 2 years of applying for predoctoral internship. The counseling doctoral students were recruited from the 77 APA-accredited counseling doctoral programs. The clinical doctoral students were recruited from 77 randomly selected APA-accredited clinical psychology doctoral programs. Of the 77 clinical doctoral programs participating in this study, 65 (84%) offer the Ph.D. and 12 (16%) offer the Psy.D. degree. It should be noted that the percentage of Psy.D. programs in this study (i.e., 16%) is a slight underrepresentation of the total percentage of clinical doctoral programs offering the Psy.D. programs (25%; APA, n.d.).

There were 37 (21%) male participants and 136 (79%) female participants in this study (data were missing for 2 participants). It should be noted that this gender distribution is generally consistent with recent graduate school demographics, where approximately 71% of doctoral students are women (APA, 2005). The participants had a mean age of 29.1 ($SD = 5.4$) and were predominantly Caucasian ($n = 137, 79%$); however, other ethnic/racial groups were represented in this sample, including Hispanic/Latino(a) ($n = 10, 5.7%$), African American ($n = 8, 4.6%$), Asian/Asian American ($n = 8, 4.6%$), multi/biracial ($n = 8, 4.6%$), and American Indian/Native American ($n = 1, 0.6%$). Two (1.1%) individuals defined themselves as Other. There were 86 (49.7%) participants from clinical Ph.D. programs, 65 (37.1%) participants from counseling Ph.D. programs, and 22 (12.7%) participants from clinical Psy.D. programs. Approximately one third of the participants' training programs ($n = 121, 69.1%$) were within Departments of Psychology, 42 (24%) were within Departments of Education, and 12 (6.9%) departments were listed as other. The majority of participants reported a M.S./M.A. ($n = 139, 79.9%$) as

their highest degree earned, whereas 30 (17.2%) reported a B.S./B.A. as their highest degree earned, 2 (1.1%) participants reported a Ph.D./Psy.D. as their highest degree earned, and 3 (1.7%) listed their highest degree earned as other. The mean total months of graduate school completed for the participants was 47.06 ($SD = 17.94$), whereas the mean total months completed in the participants' current program was 36.64 ($SD = 14.95$).

Materials

A two-page survey was developed by the first two authors to assess what training experiences students have available to them through their program of study. The survey consisted of four sections. Section 1 inquired about demographic data (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, marital status, years in graduate school, years in program, highest degree earned, field of highest degree) and program characteristics (i.e., type of program, academic housing of department, average number of years for students to complete the program). Section 2 assessed previous practicum experiences, including correctional and forensic experiences, as well as client characteristics such as client history of juvenile delinquency, antisocial personality disorder, and/or time spent in secure facilities. Section 3 inquired about academic program and training opportunities in correctional and forensic psychology (e.g., "How many faculty at your program engage in research pertaining to forensic/correctional psychology?" "How many graduate-level courses at your program cover topics related to forensic/correctional psychology?"). Finally, section 4 implemented a Likert-type scale format (1 = *disagree strongly*, 3 = *undecided*, 5 = *agree strongly*) to assess graduate students' educational opportunities and potential interest in professional and career opportunities with offender and antisocial populations. Sample questions included the following: "I would like to receive training in forensic/correctional psychology," "I have been or plan to be involved in research pertaining to forensic/correctional psychology," "I will consider applying to

forensic/correctional psychology internship programs," "Working with an offender population would be professionally satisfying," and "I think working with offenders would be interesting and challenging work."

The Attitudes Toward Prisoners scale (ATP; Melvin, Gramling, & Gardner, 1985) was also used in this study to assess students' general attitudes toward offenders/prisoners. The ATP scale includes 36 items using a Likert-type format (1 = *disagree strongly*, 3 = *undecided*, 5 = *agree strongly*). Scores range from 36 to 180, with higher scores indicative of more favorable attitudes toward prisoners. Initial investigation of the ATP scale demonstrated moderate to high reliability (test-retest reliability of .82 and split-half reliability in two samples of .84 and .92) as well as adequate validity as evidenced by a contrasted groups method and the relationship between attitudes toward prisoners and dogmatism (Melvin et al., 1985). A subsequent investigation assessed the psychometric properties of the ATP scale and concluded the instrument has high reliability (test-retest and internal consistency) as well as adequate construct and criterion related validity (Ortet-Fabregat, Perez, & Lewis, 1993).

Procedure

Training directors from all 77 counseling psychology programs and from the random sample of 77 clinical psychology programs were contacted via e-mail requesting their participation in this project. The training directors were informed that their participation would involve providing the researchers with the number of advanced graduate students (i.e., previously defined as advanced graduate students within 2 years of applying for pre-doctoral internship) currently enrolled in their program, followed by the distribution of survey packets to these students at a later date. Training directors willing to assist with the distribution of research materials were asked to reply to the e-mail with the number of graduate students meeting the previously defined criteria.

RESULTS

Practicum Experiences and Opportunities

Graduate student participants, on average, completed 5.4 ($SD = 2.67$) semester hours of practicum, for an average of 546 (mode = 500, $SD = 453$) direct client contact hours. Students earned practicum credit in a variety of settings, including (mean number of semesters and percentage of participants in parentheses) in-house clinics (1.9, $SD = 2.8$; 53%), community mental health centers (0.7, $SD = 1.1$; 40%), university counseling centers (0.8, $SD = 1.4$; 40%), private outpatient clinics (0.2, $SD = 0.7$; 10%), state/county hospitals (0.3, $SD = 0.4$; 13%), private psychiatric hospitals (0.9, $SD = 0.4$; 6%), medical schools (0.2, $SD = 1.1$; 8%), armed forces medical centers and/or Veterans' Administrative hospitals (VAs; 0.2, $SD = 0.6$; 9%), school districts (0.2, $SD = 0.5$; 13%), prison/jail facilities (0.3, $SD = 0.9$; 15%), secure forensic hospitals (0.03, $SD = 0.2$; 2%), other secure facilities (0.03, $SD = 0.3$; 2%), and other facilities (0.5; $SD = 1.1$; 30%).

Forty-six participants (26% of sample) completed a practicum in a correctional or forensic setting. Of these participants, 9 (20%) worked with juveniles, 16 (35.6%) with adults, and 19 (42.2%) with a combination of juveniles and adults (these data were missing for two participants). In addition, the majority of these practicum experiences were with both male and female offenders ($n = 29$, 63%); however, some were limited to experience with male ($n = 13$, 28.3%) or female ($n = 3$, 6.5%) offenders.

Although only 26% of graduate students are receiving practicum experiences in correctional or forensic settings, the majority are receiving experience with clients with a history of juvenile delinquency, criminal behavior, antisocial personality disorder, or a history of confinement. Participants' responses regarding client characteristics and caseloads were prearranged to assess three primary categories: current or most

recent experience in a secure setting, current or most recent experience in all other settings, and accumulated practicum experiences in all settings. In regard to nonsecure settings, graduate students reported having one or more clients on their current (or most recent) practicum caseload with a history of juvenile delinquency (64% of participants), charged or convicted of a crime (48% of participants), who meet the diagnostic criteria for antisocial personality disorder (30% of participants), and/or confined for criminal behavior (57%). It should be noted that overlap exists between participants' responses regarding (a) clients who have a history of juvenile delinquency and/or adult charges or convictions and (b) responses regarding the issue of incarceration (i.e., the question of time spent in jail, prison, or other secure facilities was independent of the questions regarding percentage of client caseload with a history of juvenile delinquency or history of criminal behavior). See Table 1 for the percentage of graduate students' caseloads consisting of current and accumulated clients with a history of juvenile delinquency, charges or convictions for an offense, history of confinement, and meeting the diagnostic criteria for antisocial personality disorder.

Academic Program and Training

Graduate students were asked about the availability of research mentors and coursework in correctional and/or forensic psychology. Approximately one half ($n = 79$, 48%; data missing for 11 participants) of the participants have at least one faculty member conducting research in the area of correctional or forensic psychology. Overall, participants reported an average of approximately 1 ($M = 0.96$, $SD = 1.4$) faculty member in their programs who conducts research in these areas. In addition, 42% of students reported that at least one faculty member was involved in the delivery of mental health services to offenders.

Regarding academic coursework, 42% of graduate students reported the availability of

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Graduate Students' Practicum Caseloads

<i>Current or Most Recent Practicum Case Load Not Including Secure Facilities (e.g., Jail, Prison, Secure Forensic Mental Health Unit)</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Percentage of clients with a history of juvenile delinquency	20.63	8.0	29.3	161
Percentage of clients who have been charged or convicted of a crime as an adult	13.03	0.0	26.01	155
Percentage of clients diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder	4.4	0.0	11.61	156
Percentage of clients who have spent time in a jail, prison, or other secure facility	15.75	2.0	26.76	160
<i>Accumulated Practicum Caseload (Including Practica Completed in Secure Facilities)</i>	<i>M</i>		<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Percentage of clients with a history of juvenile delinquency	24.4	10.0	31.2	159
Percentage of clients who have been charged or convicted of a crime as an adult	18.68	5.0	29.05	155
Percentage of clients diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder	7.71	0.0	16.27	154
Percentage of clients who have spent time in a jail, prison, or other secure facility	20.63	5.0	30.34	160

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive, so overlap exists between participants' responses to the respective questions.

graduate courses covering topics related to correctional and/or forensic psychology in their programs, with an average of 1 ($M = 1.15$, $SD = 2.8$) course available. Twenty-five percent ($n = 42$, data missing from 5 participants) of the participants completed at least one academic class offering topics related to correctional and/or forensic psychology. In addition to academic coursework, students had attended an average of 1 ($M = 1.13$, $SD = 2.26$) symposium or workshop on topics related to correctional or forensic psychology, with a total of 68 (40%) participants seeking such opportunities.

Professional Interests and Career Plans

Table 2 [not included here] presents participants' perceptions, opportunities, and interests in correctional and forensic psychology. . . . graduate students are interested in receiving training in forensic and correctional psychology (52% of respondents reported they would like to receive training as well as have additional training opportunities in forensic and correctional psychology; 37% desired to complete a practicum in a correctional or forensic

setting). Also of interest, many students (i.e., approximately 28%) are interested in pursuing forensic or correctional psychology as a specialty area, and even more (44%) would like to complete a more generalized practicum that affords experience working with offenders.

Although the majority of students do not plan to apply to correctional or forensic internships (61%, 15% undecided), a sizable percentage of students plan to apply to such internships or will consider applying to such programs (24% and 32%, respectively). A career in correctional or forensic psychology is a consideration for 27% of participants and a career plan for 17% of graduate students participating in this study. It is not surprising that safety is an important consideration for a large percentage (71%) of students when considering working in a secure facility; however, approximately half (52%) of the graduate students would not be concerned about having a therapy caseload that included offenders or clients with antisocial personality disorder. Lastly, it is noted . . . that graduate students harbor generally positive attitudes toward offenders and inmates as they see such work as interesting and challenging (77% of participants), provision of services to this population as meaningful (87% of participants), and inmates as a population in need of social advocacy efforts (70% of participants).

Graduate Students Attitudes Toward Prisoners

Graduate students, on average, maintain positive attitudes toward prisoners, as measured by the ATP scale ($M = 130.88$, $SD = 17.55$). This total score is impressive when compared to scores reported by the developers of the instrument (Melvin et al., 1985) obtained from groups of reform/rehabilitation counselors ($M = 108.3$, $SD = 15.31$), prisoners ($M = 109.5$, $SD = 12.41$), undergraduate students ($M = 90.5$, $SD = 16.33$), community sample ($M = 87.4$, $SD = 18.47$), correctional officers

($M = 90.7$, $SD = 15.55$), and law enforcement officers ($M = 67$, $SD = 16.6$).

Hierarchical regression analysis was used to assess the influence of participants' training opportunities and experiences in predicting attitudes toward prisoners, as measured by the ATP. Specifically, we were interested in training experiences specific to forensic/correctional populations. Hierarchical analysis was used for two primary reasons: (a) We wanted to use sets of variables to represent proposed constructs, and (b) we wanted to control for the potential impact of general training or experience in predicting participants' attitudes toward prisoners. The construct of general training or experience was represented by number of months in graduate school and total client contact hours. The construct of specific applied training with forensic/correctional populations was represented by four items assessing percentage of clients (accumulated) presenting histories or current issues relevant to forensics/corrections (i.e., juvenile delinquency, charges or convictions of a crime, antisocial personality disorder, jail or prison time). Educational training was defined by responses to two items: "How many courses have you taken focusing on topics related to forensic/correctional psychology?" and "How many symposia/workshops focused on forensic/correctional psychology or working with offenders have you attended?"

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted, entering general training experience in the first step, educational training in forensics/corrections in the second step, and specific applied training or experience in forensics/corrections in the third step. Scores on the ATP scale served as the dependent variable. Results of the analyses revealed that none of the three sets of variables accounted for a significant amount of variance in ATP scores: $R^2 = .05$, $F(2, 100) = 2.48$, $p > .05$ for general training; $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $\Delta F(2, 98) = .61$, $p > .05$ for educational training in forensics/corrections, and $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $\Delta F(4, 94) = .33$, $p > .05$, for specific applied training with forensic/correction populations. According to the current study, neither amount of general training/experience, nor

specific training/experience in corrections/forensics was predictive of students' attitudes toward prisoners.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the correctional and forensic training opportunities available to graduate students in clinical and counseling psychology, their experiences in related coursework and practica, and graduate students' attitudes toward offender populations. Results indicated that almost one half of the participants in this study have access to mentors with specialized skills and research interests in correctional and forensic psychology, as well as training opportunities, including practica, in correctional and/or forensic psychology. In fact, although in-house psychology clinics, community and mental health centers, and university counseling centers appear to provide the majority of practicum experiences, correctional and forensic psychology practicum experiences appear to be as common as other specialty practicums, such as private practice settings, medical centers and medical schools, VA settings, private psychiatric hospitals, and educational (school) settings.

Furthermore, although some students do not have such specialty experiences available, the majority of students have worked with clients with a history of juvenile delinquency, criminal behavior, history of confinement, or who meet the diagnostic criteria for antisocial personality disorder. This finding indicates that although students may not be afforded specific training opportunities in correctional or forensic psychology, they are nevertheless gaining experience with related clientele. Thus, they may be more likely to enter correctional and forensic settings with an appreciation and understanding of the clinical dynamics and issues presented by offender clients. Consistent with Morgan et al. (2004), this finding also highlights the likelihood that students in varied settings will encounter clients with a criminal history. Thus,

graduate students could benefit from specialty training in issues relevant to working with offenders. Furthermore, approximately one half of the participants indicated they would like additional training in correctional and/or forensic psychology, even though many of these students have no interest in pursuing correctional or forensic psychology specialties or careers.

Given concerns regarding staffing limitations (Boothby & Clements, 2002; Magaletta & Boothby, 2003), it was encouraging to find that approximately 17% of graduate students planned to pursue a career in correctional or forensic psychology and approximately 27% indicated they would consider such a career. Even more impressive, 24% of students indicated they plan to pursue predoctoral internships in correctional or forensic psychology, and approximately 32% indicate they will consider such internship possibilities. Given current estimates that only 6% of psychologists (in California) are employed in correctional settings (Pingitore, Scheffler, Haley, Sentell, & Schwalm, 2001), the student responses in this study may indicate greater willingness to pursue such careers. Additionally, the finding that approximately 32% of graduate students are open to consider correctional and/or forensic psychology predoctoral internships bodes well for recruiting efforts given that prior interns have been satisfied with their correctional experiences (Pietz et al., 1998).

Of particular relevance for criminal justice recruiting purposes, an important issue in corrections (Harowski, 2003), graduate students, regardless of previous experiences with offenders, generally have positive attitudes toward inmates. Furthermore, they generally perceive mental health work with offenders as interesting and challenging, believe such services are meaningful, and believe that inmates are disadvantaged and in need of social advocacy efforts. However, graduate students also appear to be concerned about safety issues in working with correctional and forensic populations. Although correctional and forensic institutions are dangerous environments in which to work (e.g., Magaletta & Boothby, 2003), it is possible that graduate students are overestimating

potential dangerousness. Recruiting efforts may be more effective if criminal justice administrators and academicians educate students about some of the societal myths about penal institutions and present data regarding the dangers of working in criminal justice settings compared to other settings (e.g., psychiatric hospitals, VA hospitals, private practice). As students already maintain positive attitudes toward work with inmates, it is possible that demystifying some safety issues purportedly inherent in correctional and forensic work will increase recruiting efforts.

Although results of this study are promising for the future of correctional and forensic psychology fields, this study is not without limitations. Although the response rate is acceptable, participants may consist of an overrepresentation of students with interests in correctional and/or forensic psychology. In other words, students who elected to participate may be more favorable toward correctional and/or forensic psychology than their nonparticipating peers. Although not all participants in this study indicated interests in these specialty areas (and a sizeable number indicated no such interests), it is nevertheless possible that the results of this study are somewhat inflated toward positive interests in correctional and/or forensic psychology. Another limitation of this study is the focus on correctional and/or forensic psychology training opportunities simultaneously rather than separately. Because we combined correctional and forensic psychology in the survey, information about the specific training opportunities in correctional psychology versus forensic psychology is not available. This is an issue of relevance given previous findings of disproportionate emphasis in forensic psychology when compared to correctional psychology training (Ax & Morgan, 2002). To account for these limitations, future research should investigate training opportunities in correctional and forensic psychology separately. This may be more efficiently accomplished via Internet surveys, which may increase the response rate and decrease possible response bias. Additionally, future research should contrast programs that

self-identify as having correctional and forensic specialty training with those that do not elucidate differences between specialty and generalist training as well as to further identify training in generalist programs.

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