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## Lifelong learning programs in prison: influence of social networks on participation

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the relationships between social contacts of prisoners and participation in lifelong learning activities. Literature on factors related to the decision to participate mainly concentrate on personal or on organizational level. Factors affecting the relational level are seldom taken into consideration. Based on a literature review and analysis of focus groups, the findings demonstrate the positive as well as the negative relationships on a wide range of social networks. The discussion highlights the need to acknowledge the importance of social networks and demonstrates how these findings may be implemented in order to optimize lifelong learning programs in prison.

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### Introduction

In this paper, lifelong learning in prison is defined as participation to education, vocational education, wellbeing and health courses, cultural and sport activities. Research has documented the positive association between participation in prison activities and improvement of basic skills (Vacca, 2004), contribution of self-worth (Coyle, 2009) and reduction of recidivism (Petersilia, 2003). Although these positive associations are recognized, little is known about factors that lead to greater participation (Hall & Killackey, 2008; Johnsen, 2001; Rose, 2004). Research about motivators and barriers to participate in correctional programs mainly concentrate on personal (micro-level) or organizational level (exo-level). The relationship between factors on relational level (meso-level) and participation is seldom taken into consideration (Brosens, 2012). In response to this, we examined the role that social contacts play in the decision of prisoners to engage in lifelong learning activities. Both the motivators and barriers that prisoners face are considered, in relation with their social contacts inside and outside the prison.

The literature on social networks and participation is related to the social capital literature. Although different authors use the same concept, they use different basic assumptions and stress other aspects in defining social capital (e.g. Bourdieu, 1986; Coyle, 2009; Putnam, 2001). Nevertheless, a consensus exists that social capital refers to the

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possibility of individuals to benefit from membership in a social network or other social structures (Portes, 1998). Some academics view civic engagement/participation and social networks as core concepts (e.g. Abbott, 2010; Baum & Ziersch, 2003; Guillen, Coromina, & Saris, 2011), both theoretically as well as in the operationalization of social capital (Lindström, 2005). In the following sections, we describe some aspects of social networks that are inherent to participation: social support, being dependent on others to carry out an activity, perceptions by others, and the size of a social network.

Social support (1), one of the most important functions of a social network (Heaney & Israel, 2008), can be instrumental or emotional. The first refers to getting information, guidance, material resources and practical services from others; while emotional social support encompasses getting care, having feelings of trust and confidence and the encouragement of personal values (Lindström, Hanson, & Östergren, 2001). The positive relationship between getting social support and participation is frequently demonstrated in research in social sciences (e.g. Wang & Eccles, 2012; Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009). However, in prison one study was conducted on this theme and found an adverse relationship. Prisoners who did not receive emotional support from other inmates did not go to group activities because they are resisted against talking in group and reveal personal things or problems (Baerten, 2010).

Another concept interwoven with participation is being dependent on others to carry out an activity (2). For instance, people with disabilities and older people experience this as a social barrier for the reason that they depend on someone else to participate (Badia, Orgaz, Verdugo, Ullán, & Martínez, 2011; Blomqvist & Edberg, 2002).

How an individual thinks being perceived by others, in other words the perceptions of the social network (3), can also have an influence on lifelong learning participation. In a prison setting, the desire to reconnect with and to satisfy family members showed to be an important motivator for participation. Some prisoners wanted to give something back to their children or other family members by following a vocational training and by doing so acting as a role model. Also human treatment by activity providers gave prisoners the feeling of being a human and not a prisoners (Spark & Harris, 2005). However, the way an individual is perceived by others does not always have a positive relationship with participation. For instance, disabled people expressed that they are afraid of being mocked during their participation (Badia et al., 2011).

A last concept interrelated with participation is the possibility to enlarge a social network, conceptualized as the size of the social network (4). This was for instance, for women in poverty who participated to adult educational activities an important goal (Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009). The possibility to meet others during the activities is considered as one of the main reasons why prisoners participate (Condon, Hek & Harris, 2008; Schlesinger, 2005).

Currently, the available research on the role of different social networks for participation to prison programs is limited. However, we have found a few studies that focused on this topic and revealed that some groups are positively and/or negatively related to participation: fellow inmates, family and friends, and activity providers (e.g. Baerten, 2010; Condon, Hek, & Harris, 2008; Lee, 1996; Schlesinger, 2005; Spark & Harris, 2005). This article attempts to provide deeper insights into the networks that are related to prisoners' decision to participate in lifelong learning activities. The research undertaken as a part of this study addressed 2 research questions: (1) Which social networks of prisoners are related in the decision to participate in prison programs that foster lifelong learning? (2) What are the positive and negative outcomes of these social networks?

## 1. Methods

The data for the present research were derived from a qualitative study in a prison in Flanders (Belgium). The aim of this study was to explore the factors that influence peoples' decision to become engaged in prison activities. The prison is a remand prison but due to the contemporary overcrowding in all the Belgian prisons, also prisoners who serve their sentence are locked up in this prison.

13 focus groups were conducted with activity providers, prison staff and prisoners. The participating activity providers and prison staff were selected in close cooperation with the coordinator of the Flemish community in the local prison. Six focus groups were organized with activity providers (e.g. education, vocational education, culture, wellbeing, health and sports) (N=33). One focus group with prison guards (N=2) and one with religious personnel (N=4) took place. The participating prisoners were selected by distributing flyers and personal contact of professionals. By doing so, the professionals could give more information about the goals of the research. 2 focus groups were performed with Dutch-speaking male prisoners (N=12), 1 with Dutch-speaking female prisoners and internees (N=10), 1 with Dutch-speaking male internees (N=15) and 1 with male foreigners who did not speak Dutch (N=8). The prisoners were aged between 18 and 62.

A similar topic-list was used for all respondent groups, including issues as the reasons why prisoners participate to activities, positive and negative experiences related to participation, barriers why prisoners do not take part, etc. All interviews lasted about 2 hours and were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. They were coded and analyzed by thematic content analysis using a qualitative analyzing program: MAX.QDA 2007. Themes and subthemes were coded in order to capture the broad variety of social networks that could have an influence on prisoners in deciding to participate to correctional programs. The aim was to identify similarities and differences in perception of the different respondent groups and by doing so, getting deeper insights into the role of social networks in participation to lifelong learning activities.

## 2. Findings

The findings of our study demonstrated the relationships between participation and a wide range of social networks: fellow prisoners, activity providers, family and friends outside the prison, and prison guards. The literature already pointed towards the role of the first 3, not of the last one. The study provided evidence for positive as well as adverse effects. Key factors related with participation are getting instrumental or emotional support, being dependent on others, how being perceived by others, expanding social network and factors related to make life in prison more bearable.

**Instrumental support** received in prison exists mainly out of information on activities. The majority of the prisoners were informed through other inmates. As a prisoner said: *“He told me, I told someone else and so it goes on and on”*. Conversely, activity providers indicated prison guards as having a negative influence on the information process. The guards were responsible for the distribution of the folders about the activities. If they refused to do it, activity providers experienced difficulties in the announcement of their offer. The reviewed literature revealed no information about this topic.

Beside instrumental support, prisoners also received **emotional support**. Especially fellow inmates provided this support because the positive atmosphere during group activities was relaxed and encouraged sharing experiences. However, some inmates lacked emotional support and did not participate because they did not want to share personal experiences and problems. This is in line with previous research (Baerten, 2010). Other prisoners emphasized that memories about their offence came back when they talked about particular subjects and that they tried to avoid that. Furthermore, sometimes prisoners stopped attending courses due to the presence of other inmates. For instance, prisoners who are not been mastered enough in the language of the course or prisoners who complained about prison life of their punishment were reasons why prisoners stop their participation.

Activity providers formed a second group who provided emotional support. Some professionals already experienced that a personal request to participate in activities was more effective than for instance the posters and flyers they always used. This personal contact resulted in a greater trust by prisoners. Some psychologists furthermore reported that prisoners came to see them because of their duty of professional confidentiality. Despite their perception of having a motivating power, some prisoners indicated they not dare to go to some activity

providers because they thought the providers had the obligation to report information about them to the judge or the prison director. This indicated a communication problem between prisoners and providers. Furthermore, some prisoners already went to professionals but felt themselves forgotten by them. This feeling arose when prisoners have not seen a provider for a while or when activity providers not immediately reacted on report notes. A prisoner brought that into perspective by referring to the workload of the activity providers due to the temporary overcrowding.

Prison guards were also indicated as a supporting group. As the following activity provider emphasized, prison guards can encourage prisoners to participate in activities: *“there are guards who say to prisoners: hey man do you know that there are lessons here? Would that be nothing for you?”*. According to the providers, such a positive attitude towards activities was already realized for education and vocational training. The other sectors (e.g. culture, wellbeing, health and sport) gained less approval.

Regarding **being dependent on others** to carry out activities, the respondents only indicated one influencing group: prison guards. Prisoners mainly emphasized their negative influence. They were dependent on guards to go to activities. Some prisoners also reported that they did not go to activities because they did not want to be a burden to the guards. Both relationships are not discovered in previous researches.

In with findings on participation of disabled and older people (Badia et al., 2011; Blomqvist & Edberg, 2002), prisoners' participation is related to **how others perceive them**. First, some prisoners indicated they participated in educational courses because they got recognition from their cellmates. However, fellow inmates could also have a negative influence. Some prisoners did not go to activities because they wanted to prevent the formation of a negative image of 'being a soft person'. Also activity providers indicated this by referring to the macho culture of a prison. Soft individuals had a big chance to being teased, laughed, threatened or belittled. Activity providers emphasized that for instance sexual delinquents do not dare to come out of their cell once it was known which offences they committed. Also dealers wanting to quit with dealing were often being threatened.

Also the way how activity providers handle prisoners influenced prisoners' participation. Both prisoners and providers indicated human treatment during activities and recognition of prisoners as human beings as an important reason to take part. A prisoner says: *“I go to the psychiatric because he makes time for me when I ask it and write a report note”*. This finding is in line with previous research focussing on motivators to participate in correctional education (Schlesinger, 2005).

A third influencing group (only indicated by activity providers and prison staff, not by prisoners themselves) was family and friends outside the prison. If prisoners felt guilty, it occurred sometimes that they participated to educational or other courses to make good the damage that they have caused or tried to make amends with family and friends outside.

A following social reason to participate to prison activities was to **enlarge the social network**. The possibility to meet and interact during the activities was by most respondents perceived as an important motivating factor. This was also expressed by women in poverty to participate in adult education (Prins et al., 2009) and is confirmed by other research in prison (Condon et al., 2008; Lee, 1996; Schlesinger, 2005). However, some prisoners felt no need to meet and interact with others: *“During the activities you see other guys. Sometimes you don't get on very well and then there will be a quarrel. That is what I try to avoid.”*

This study revealed that some relationships could **make prison life more bearable**. A few inmates indicated they followed a language course in order to communicate with cellmates from other origins. Some foreign prisoners added that they followed Dutch courses because they wanted to be in the possibility to communicate with the guards. A last reason indicated by some prisoners why they did not enrol for activities was because they want to give the possibility to others and by doing so shorten the waiting lists.

### 3. Conclusion

This study reveals that beside motivators and barriers on micro- and macro-level to which frequently is referred in the literature (Brosens, 2012), there are also important factors on meso-level. Results have shown which and how different social networks of prisoners are related to the decision to become engaged in one or more prison activities that foster lifelong learning. A wide range of social networks is positively and negatively related with participation: fellow inmates, prison guards and activity providers. Between participation and contact with family and friends outside prison, we only found a positive relationship. The majority of literature about the relationship between participation and social contacts focuses on positive motivating factors, however this study also reveals the opposite effect: a negative relationship between social contacts and participation.

The findings may prove insight for activity providers into the social motivators and barriers that prisoners face in deciding to participate in lifelong learning programs. They may incite activity providers to strive to meet the needs of prisoners and for this purpose adapt the offer of prison programs. By doing so, motivating factors like having more personal contact, the possibility to enlarge social network, human treatment,... need to be taken into account.

Further research is needed to explore the influences in a quantitative way and also investigate the influence of other social networks like for instance a director of a penitentiary setting, a judge, a lawyer, religious personnel,...

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