



RELIGION AND REHABILITATION IN COLOMBIAN PRISONS: NEW INSIGHTS FOR DESISTANCE¹

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Abstract

We examined how religion contributed to offender rehabilitation based on identity theories of desistance and the “Good Lives Model,” conducting a quasi-experiment assessing a faith-based program, “The Prisoner’s Journey” (TPJ). Pretest and posttest surveys were administered to 255 (97 in experimental group and 158 control group) male prisoners in Colombia. Results showed that participation in TPJ increased religiosity, which fostered motivation for identity change, the perception of meaning in life, and the virtues of forgiveness, empathy, gratitude, and self-control. We also found that increased virtues (forgiveness, empathy, and self-control) decreased the risk of aggression toward another inmate.

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Introduction

Studies conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that about two-thirds of prisoners released in 2005 across 30 states (67.8%) were rearrested for a new crime within three years (Alper et al., 2018; Durose et al., 2014). Despite these dismal statistics, a majority of Americans support rehabilitation as a goal of the correctional system (Cullen, 2013). Indeed, most American voters (85.0%) believe that incarceration without effective rehabilitation programs thwarts public safety (Clarke, 2018).

In a time of ever-tightening correctional budgets, it is important to note that religion, which has a long history within the American correctional system (Cullen, 2013), and religious volunteers have provided rehabilitation programs for prisoners without cost to correctional institutions. The notion that religion continues to be a relevant rehabilitative change agent is evident from the sheer number of religiously-oriented rehabilitative resources present within prisons. (Johnson, 2011). Moreover, several scholars have written about how and why religion might foster rehabilitation. For example, Hallett et al. (2017) and Maruna et al. (2006) provide evidence that religious conversions help prisoners rehabilitate by offering a narrative that creates a new identity to replace the label of criminal and gives a sense of meaning and purpose. Kerley and Copes (2009) found that religion aids prisoners in getting connected with positive others which enables them to keep being focused and inspired for rehabilitation.

To empirically examine the impact of religion on offender rehabilitation, we conducted a quasi-experiment on a faith-based program, called "The Prisoner's Journey," using a sample of 255 male inmates in Colombia, South America. By conceptualizing rehabilitation as prosocial changes in self-identity, existential belief, and character, we hypothesized that program-increased involvement in religion contributes to identity transformation, a new sense of meaning and purpose in life, and virtue development. We also hypothesized that the prosocial changes reduce the risk of aggression among program participants. We analyzed longitudinal data from pretest and posttest surveys to test these hypotheses.

Theoretical Overview

Ward and colleagues (Ward, 2002; Ward & Maruna, 2007) developed the "Good Lives Model" (GLM) of offender rehabilitation, suggesting that crime is a result of lacking internal capabilities (e.g., social skills) and external conditions (e.g., job opportunities) necessary for an individual to pursue primary human goods—"actions, states of affairs, characteristics, experiences, and states of mind that are intrinsically beneficial to human beings and therefore sought for their own sake" (Ward & Brown, 2004:246). GLM emphasizes human agency and self-reflection, the latter of which is triggered by events that create a sense of crisis, causing offenders to re-evaluate their lives and construct new identities (Ward, 2010). This emphasis is consistent with the identity theories of desistance from crime.

For example, the critical events are "hooks for change" (i.e., turning points) for cognitive identity transformations, which leads to the formation of a new identity (Giordano et al., 2002). Imprisonment commonly causes an existential crisis for offenders, as many realize that their lives have little meaning or purpose (Jang & Johnson, 2017). For Paternoster and Bushway (2009), the cognitive process of reevaluation is "crystallization of discontent" (Baumeister, 1994), where offenders attribute failure in life to their criminal identity and thus become motivated to engage in self-change. The GLM

process helps offenders locate the primary goods that are most important to construct new narrative identities. Offenders reinterpret their negative past experiences as offering a pathway to create a new identity that recovers a sense of agency and control in their life and leads to the discovery of a “true self” (Maruna, 2001)

Evidence suggests that religion can contribute to rehabilitation by providing a narrative for a new identity, and that it can promote human goods by offering a source of meaning and purpose in life and also fostering virtues. For example, in a two-year post-release study, Johnson and Larson (2003) found that offenders who participated in a faith-based prison program and made a successful transition back to society were characterized by a new identity, commitment to prosocial norms and virtues, a new sense of meaning in life, and finding a purpose in a generative goal. Similarly, based on 75 life story interviews with prisoner “converts,” Maruna et al. (2006:174) found religious conversion led prisoners to develop a self-narrative that: (1) “[c]reates a new social identity to replace the label of prisoner or criminal”; (2) “[i]mbues the experience of imprisonment with purpose and meaning”; (3) “[e]mpowers the largely powerless prisoner by turning him into an agent of God”; (4) “[p]rovides the prisoner with a language and framework for forgiveness”; and (5) “[a]llows a sense of control over an unknown future.”

Offender Rehabilitation: A Conceptualization

To contribute to the growing literature on religion and rehabilitation, we apply identity theories of desistance and the GLM, conceptualizing rehabilitation as a process of prosocial change in an offender’s three life domains: self-identity, existential belief, and character.

Identity Transformation

Upon entrance into prison, an offender’s sense of self-worth is threatened, which is likely to cause an identity crisis. For those who want to change, the crisis becomes “an opportunity for identity work,” a chance for them to rewrite their narrative (O’Donnell, 2014:258). Religion can help an individual write a narrative that allows a new start in life, which is built on a new self. Identity transformation via religion is partly a cognitive process involving a change in self-concept and worldview.

Giordano et al.’s (2002) symbolic interactionist theory posits that four types of “cognitive transformations” are necessary for desistance from crime: (1) one’s openness to change (a general cognitive readiness for change), (2) one’s exposure to a particular hook (or set of hooks) for change, (3) one’s construction of a conventional “replacement self,” or a new identity, and (4) one’s perception of crime to be negative, unviable, or personally irrelevant. For Giordano and colleagues (2007:1610), identity transformation also involves “emotional transformations” that lead to “an increased ability to regulate their emotions in socially acceptable ways,” thereby reducing the likelihood to identify oneself with negative emotions. Religion is a major hook for change among offenders, as it functions as a catalyst that provides a highly prosocial replacement self and positive emotions (Giordano et al., 2008).

Paternoster and Bushway’s (2009:1123) rational choice theory of desistance posits that offenders are fine with a criminal identity so long as it is perceived to be beneficial. However, it becomes problematic as offenders see “failures or dissatisfactions across many aspects of [their] life [being] *linked together* and attributed to the criminal identity itself.” This cognitive process, the “crystallization of

discontent" (Baumeister, 1994), weakens offenders' attachment to a criminal identity and motivates them to engage in a deliberate act of self-change toward a new, anti-criminal identity. The process of repentance and self-reflection involves this crystallization of discontent, as prisoners attribute failures in life to their old self and criminal identity.

Jang et al.'s (2018b) study provides evidence that religion contributed to cognitive and emotional transformations and crystallization of discontent (see also Hallett et al., 2017). Specifically, using survey data from 2,249 inmates at America's largest maximum-security prison, the Louisiana State Penitentiary (a.k.a., "Angola"), they found religious conversion was positively related to cognitive transformation and crystallization of discontent. They also reported that inmate religiosity was positively related to emotional transformation.

Meaning and Purpose in Life

Humans are existential beings in the sense that they have an innate need for meaning. Thus, offenders have the same need to live a meaningful life, even if they might feel they have failed to do so. Incarceration likely aggravates their lack of meaning in life, as prisons are places of exclusion and isolation that negatively affect a sense of meaning. Research shows a positive association between religiosity and a sense of meaning and purpose in life among prisoners as well as people in general populations (Costin & Vignoles, 2020; Jang, 2016; Routledge, 2020; Steger & Frazier, 2005). In a study of male inmates at three maximum-security prisons in Texas, Jang et al. (2018a) found that inmate religiosity was positively related to perceived meaning in life (see also Jang et al., 2018b). A recent study of South African prisoners also found that religious inmates were more likely to report a sense of meaning and purpose in life than their less or non-religious peers (Jang et al., 2021).

Virtue Development

Since most major religions value virtues like forgiveness, empathy, gratitude, and self-control (Rye et al., 2000), religious involvement is expected to increase personal virtues. Religion also provides contexts where narratives and orientation toward the divine are fostered. Prior research provides evidence that religion fosters virtues among individuals in the general population (Batson et al., 1999; Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; Krause, 2018; McCullough et al., 2000; Rye et al., 2000). While research on religiosity and virtues among prisoners is scant, Jang et al. (2018a) found that religious inmates reported higher levels of forgiveness, empathy, and gratitude than their less or non-religious counterparts.

Hypotheses

To examine whether religion contributes to prisoner rehabilitation, we conducted a quasi-experiment of a faith-based program, "The Prisoner's Journey" (TPJ), operating in Colombian prisons. This longitudinal study allowed us to examine relationships among *changes* in inmate religiosity, rehabilitation, and behavioral consequence associated with rehabilitation. First, since the program was expected to increase religious involvement, we hypothesize the following.

- Hypothesis 1: Participation in TPJ increases inmate religiosity.

Next, based on the literature reviewed above, we expect religion to contribute to prisoner rehabilitation. Since rehabilitation is a *process* of prosocial change in self-identity, existential belief, and moral character, it can be observed in terms of *degree*. Thus, offenders ahead of others in their

progress toward rehabilitation are more likely to show signs of prosocial change than those making less progress. Therefore, we hypothesize as follows:

- Hypothesis 2: A change in religiosity is positively related to a change in (a) identity transformation, (b) a sense of meaning and purpose in life, and (c) virtues.

Finally, religiously motivated rehabilitation is likely to have behavioral consequences, such as reducing prison misconduct and reoffending after release. For example, a prosocial change in identity and fostering virtues are expected to decrease the likelihood of an inmate engaging in aggression toward another inmate, which can be measured in terms of the inmate's behavioral intention for aggression—or, in short, intended aggression (Jang et al., 2018a; Jang et al., 2021). Also, a new sense of meaning and purpose in life is likely to reduce intended aggression, as the new existential belief leads the offender to strive for conventional life goals and to manage their behaviors accordingly (Jang, 2016; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Steger & Frazier, 2005; Vanhooren et al., 2017). Thus, we hypothesize the following:

- Hypothesis 3: A change in identity transformation, a sense of meaning and purpose in life, and virtues are inversely related to a change in intended aggression.

The Prisoner's Journey

"The Prisoner's Journey" (TPJ) is a faith-based program of Prison Fellowship International, an international prison ministry organization. TPJ is a small group Bible study that meets once a week for eight weeks and has been administered in more than 655 prisons in 38 countries at the time of writing this paper. It is facilitated by volunteers from local churches and inmates who have both completed the study and been trained to lead it. The curriculum consists of eight, two-hour sessions and intends to "transform the lives of prisoners, from the inside out" through a "restorative relationship with ... Jesus the Prisoner" (Prison Fellowship International, 1996).¹ TPJ teaches that offenders were created to live in a relationship with God, but many have instead rejected God. Thus, they need to accept God's gift of forgiveness offered through Jesus Christ, in order to enjoy this relationship. Through these teachings, the program not only promotes religion but seeks to rehabilitate offenders by encouraging them to adopt a new self-identity (e.g., a child and servant of God) in place of an old one (e.g., a criminal), believe in a new meaning and purpose in life (e.g., God's plan for life), and develop virtues (e.g., becoming more forgiving, compassionate, grateful, and self-controlled).

Prisons in Colombia

In Colombia, 132 prisons are managed by the National Penitentiary and Prison Institute (Instituto Nacional Penitenciario y Carcelario, INPEC). As of October 2021, despite their official capacity of 82,296, those prisons had a total population of 97,655 or an occupancy level of 118.7 percent (Institute for Crime & Justice Policy, 2021). Following more than 20 years of increase, the prison population finally began to decline after reaching a peak in 2018. However, Colombian prisons continued to be plagued by deficient infrastructure, overcrowding, and violence, which hindered rehabilitation. What made rehabilitation more difficult was the Colombian government's adoption of the United States' punitive penal policy as a part of "Plan Colombia" launched by the Clinton administration in 1999.

¹ The eight sessions are: (1) *What is Christianity?*; (2) *Identity: Who is Jesus?*; (3) *Mission: Why did Jesus come?*; (4) *Mission: Why did Jesus die?*; (5) *Mission: Why did Jesus rise from the dead?*; (6) *Call: Grace*; (7) *Call: So what?*; and (8) *Call: Listen carefully*.

Since then, inmates' access to rehabilitation programs has decreased for decades, as the portion of INPEC's budget for such programs remained small (De Dardel & Söderström, 2018; Iturralde, 2016).² As a result, for example, the percentage of prisoners not participating in either work or education programs increased from 26.5 to 38.7 percent between 2002 and 2012 (Iturralde, 2016). In light of this negative trend, religion has considerable potential for contributing to rehabilitation among prison inmates. However, little research has been conducted to assess the effectiveness of faith-based programs in Colombian prisons.

Methods

Research Design and Sample

We conducted a quasi-experimental study to assess the effectiveness of TPJ between February 2018 and June 2019.³ Colombia was chosen because the program had been administered longer than other countries (since 2015) except South Africa (since 2014). Two male prisons were selected, one (where TPJ was offered) for an experimental group, and the other (where TPJ was not provided) for a control group.⁴

Recruitment for TPJ began with inviting prisoners to a promotional event, where they watched a short video and then were asked to consider enrolling in the eight-session course. Offenders signing up for TPJ were also invited to participate in our study. If they agreed to participate, they signed an informed consent form and then completed a pretest survey. On average, about two weeks after program completion, inmates were asked to participate in a posttest survey. While each session was supposed to be covered weekly, it usually took longer than eight weeks due to schedule interruptions (e.g., security lockdowns). Like the experimental group, the control group was a convenience sample of inmates housed at a prison where TPJ was not offered.

We administered the pretest survey to a total of 424 inmates with 212 in each group. Almost half ($n = 97$, 45.8%) of the experimental group inmates and three quarters ($n = 158$, 74.5%) of the control group inmates completed the posttest survey with a total of the 255 (60.1%) inmates having participated in both surveys.⁵ Posttest participants and non-participants were not significantly different at the

² For example, in 2006 only 1.4 percent of INPEC's budget was allocated for rehabilitation programs (Iturralde, 2016).

³ Baylor University Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed our study and waived approval (IRB Reference #: 1164812).

⁴ The former was Bellavista Prison in Medellín, and the latter was Puerto Triunfo Prison in Puerto Triunfo. The Bellavista Prison was a maximum-security facility, whereas the Puerto Triunfo Prison was a medium-security. Although we had planned to select a comparable, maximum-security prison for control group, we could not find one (near the Bellavista Prison) that was open to our study.

⁵ The experimental group's response rate in the posttest was not surprising given that the survey was conducted in a developing-country prison three to four months after the pretest (during which we learned many pretest participants had been transferred out of the prison) with little internal support to minimize attrition. But the control group's unusually high response rate was rather unexpected. The relatively high rate is attributable to a prison psychologist (Dr. María Isabel Barrera Suárez) who volunteered to be an advocate for our research, helping us with mobilizing inmates so we could have a chance to ask them to participate in our study. Also, the control prison's rural location might have worked to our advantage as research must have been a novelty to inmates, who might have been intrigued when we asked them to participate in it. Consistent with this speculation, we remember much more inmates trying to interact with us at the control than experimental prison, which was located in a major city.

pretest in most indicators of rehabilitation as well as intended aggression, while they differed in some sociodemographic and other characteristics.⁶

Measurement

The key exogenous variable, participation in *TPJ*, is dichotomous (0 = not participated, 1 = participated and completed).⁷ Other exogenous variables are sociodemographic and offending backgrounds: *age*, *education* (1 = illiterate, 2 = primary school, 3 = secondary school, 4 = technical degree, 5 = higher education, 6 = postgraduate degree), marital status (*single* with the omitted category including married or in a common-law marriage, divorced, separated, and widowed), and religion (*no religion* with the omitted category consisting of being Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, and an adherent of other religion).⁸ The offense of the current incarceration was measured by a dummy variable (0 = non-violent offense, 1 = *violent offense*).

The first endogenous variable is an inmate's religious involvement or *religiosity*, which is measured by creating a scale summing standardized scores of five items (see Appendix A): two items of "subjective" religiosity (perceived closeness to God and importance of religion) and three items of "objective" religiosity (frequency of religious service attendance, praying outside of religious services, and reading the Bible or other sacred text in private).⁹

The next endogenous variables involve prisoner rehabilitation: identity transformation, a sense of meaning and purpose in life, and virtues. First, identity transformation was operationalized by *cognitive transformation*, *emotional transformation*, and *crystallization of discontent*. The first two were measured by three items, whereas two items were used to measure the last one (see Appendix A).¹⁰ Second, to measure an inmate's sense of meaning and purpose in life, we used Steger et al.'s (2006) two items of the *presence of meaning* (see Appendix A).¹¹ Third, we created four variables of virtue—three multi-item scales of *forgiveness* (3 items), *empathy* (2 items), and *self-control* (4 items) and a single-item measure of *gratitude* ("I am grateful to a wide variety of people."; 1 = strongly

6 While the posttest participants tended to be control group inmates, older, and less educated compared to the non-participants, we found they were not significantly different in marital status, current offense, religiosity, and the indicators of rehabilitation, and the risk of interpersonal aggression at the pretest with two exceptions, crystallization of discontent and self-control, on which the participants were higher than the non-participants (complete results from t-tests are available upon request). These differences need to be kept in mind when interpreting our results.

7 Program participation was operationalized in a binary manner because we could not collect data on the number of sessions attended, which would have allowed us to examine the *TPJ*'s "dosage effect."

8 Being single (43.4%) and married or in common law marriage (52.3%) were the two modal categories with others combined being a small minority (4.3%), so we dichotomized marital status. Similarly, a large majority (92.3%) of the sample had a religion with 88.5 percent being Christian, so it was dichotomized as well. When the minor categories of both variables were included as separate dummy variables in analysis, model estimation failed.

9 Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) of the five items generated a single-factor solution with moderate-to-high loadings, ranging from .463 to .688 at the pretest and from .545 to .796 at the posttest, and the items had good internal reliability with Cronbach's α being .728 and .773 at the pretest and posttest, respectively (see Appendix B).

10 Items of cognitive and emotional transformations loaded on a single factor with moderate-to-high factor loadings and had acceptable-to-good internal reliability at both tests with one exception at the pretest, whereas the two items of crystallization of discontent had marginally acceptable internal reliability at both tests (see Appendix B)

11 The items had acceptable-to-good inter-item reliability ($\alpha = .682$ and $.696$).

disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = slightly disagree, 4 = neutral, 5 = slightly agree, 6 = agree, 7 = strongly agree).¹²

The final endogenous variable, a likely behavioral outcome of prisoner rehabilitation, was measured in terms of behavioral intention: specifically, an inmate's self-reported probability of engaging in interpersonal aggression or, in short, *intended aggression*. To measure this, we used the vignette method, in which inmates were first asked to read the following scenario.

It's Sunday afternoon. Miguel is watching a World Cup soccer game on television with other inmates. During a halftime break, Miguel goes to the restroom. When Miguel comes back, David is in his seat. Miguel asks David to leave because it is his seat. David says he can sit anywhere he wants. Miguel asks David to leave one more time. This time David ignores Miguel. Feeling not only dissed but also that he is right, Miguel gets into an argument with David, yelling and screaming.

Then inmates were asked to indicate how likely it was that they would do the same as Miguel (1 = not likely at all [0%], 2 = very unlikely, 3 = unlikely, 4 = likely, 5 = very likely, 6 = certainly [100%]).¹³

Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics of variables measured before the TPJ program began. We found that there were only a few differences between the experimental and control group at the pretest although they were not created using random assignment. Specifically, the experimental group inmates were older (38.7 vs. 34.6), less educated (2.5 vs. 2.7), and more forgiving than their control group counterparts (3.4 vs. 3.2). Otherwise, the two groups were comparable at the pretest.

As expected (Hypothesis 1), the experimental group reported an increase in religiosity after completing TPJ (from .471 to .628), whereas religious involvement decreased in the control group between the two tests (from .230 to 0.383). This finding implies that the program effect on religiosity was double-edged: that is, TPJ not only increased inmate religiosity but also prevented its decline, which would have likely happened due to the hopeless situation in prison if no program like TPJ were made available to prisoners. As a result, inmates who completed TPJ reported increased involvement in religion after the program compared to those who did not participate in TPJ, and the group difference

¹² Three items of forgiveness were loaded on a single factor with moderate-to-high loadings and had acceptable-to-good internal reliability at pretest (from .482 to .800, $\alpha = .682$) and posttest (from .437 to .838, $\alpha = .702$), whereas two items of empathy had internal reliability lower than our minimum cutoff, .600, at both tests ($\alpha = .598$ and .550). To measure self-control, we used reverse-coded four items of Grasmick et al.'s (1993) Low Self-Control Scale, which had acceptable-to-good loadings on a single factor and acceptable internal reliability at both pretest (from .585 to .699, $\alpha = .754$) and posttest (from .542 to .676, $\alpha = .693$). (see Appendix B)

¹³ We acknowledge that intended aggression was not the same as actual aggression since it might have been a biased, specifically, socially desirable response. The vignette method, however, has been used in criminological research, and previous studies found a strong correlation between intended and actual behaviors when a scenario was created to reflect locally relevant details (Mazerolle et al., 2003; Nagin & Paternoster, 1993). We created a vignette of a specific situation likely to happen in Colombian prison and found reported probability was distributed across the six response options, though somewhat positively skewed—not likely at all (37.4%), very unlikely (17.5%), unlikely (11.9%), likely (11.7%), very likely (7.8%), and certainly (13.8%), implying that their responses were not completely biased.



Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Variables Used in Analysis

Variable	Control group (n = 158)				Treatment group (n = 97)					
	n	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.	n	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.
Age	157	34.550*	10.523	19	72	96	38.720*	11.175	21	67
Education	157	2.700*	.645	1	5	96	2.480*	.580	1	4
Single	157	.484	.501	0	1	96	.375	.487	0	1
No religion	134	.037	.190	0	1	89	.101	.303	0	1
Violent offense	157	.191	.394	0	1	96	.177	.384	0	1
Religiosity T1	147	.230	3.313	-11.150	4.530	94	.471	3.077	-9.700	4.530
Cognitive transformation T1	155	3.611	.513	1.330	4	95	3.632	.422	2.670	4
Emotional transformation T1	153	2.284	.862	1	4	97	2.407	.930	1	4
Crystallization of discontent T1	156	3.464	.587	1.670	4	95	3.472	.602	1.330	4
Presence of meaning T1	151	5.805	1.317	1	7	91	5.857	1.214	1	7
Forgiveness T1	155	3.165*	.728	1	4	97	3.349*	.700	1.330	4
Empathy T1	155	3.413	.625	1	4	95	3.458	.544	2	4
Gratitude T1	151	6.205	1.368	1	7	93	6.366	.942	2	7
Self-control T1	153	3.712	.848	1	5	93	3.605	.974	1	5
Intended aggression T1	144	3.222	1.956	1	6	88	2.966	1.932	1	6

was found to be significant.

To test whether the increase in religious involvement helped to rehabilitate prisoners, we examined relationships between the increased religiosity and changes in identity transformation, a sense of meaning and purpose in life, and virtues, while controlling for sociodemographic and offending backgrounds of inmates.¹⁴ We found an increase in religiosity was associated with an increase in crystallization of discontent (but not in cognitive and emotional transformations), a sense of meaning and purpose in life, and all four measures of virtue: forgiveness, empathy, gratitude, and self-control. These findings indicate that TPJ-increased religiosity contributed to inmates' motivation for identity change, perceived presence of meaning and purpose in life, and virtue development. That is, we found empirical support for Hypothesis 2, specifically, Hypotheses 2b and 2c and, to a lesser extent, Hypothesis 2a.

Finally, we found an increase in three virtues— forgiveness, empathy and self-control—were related to a decrease in intended aggression. It makes sense that forgiveness (which includes forgiving others for wrongdoing) and empathy (compassion toward others) reduced the likelihood of aggression toward another inmate. That self-control reduced the risk of interpersonal aggression is also consistent with Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) general theory of crime. In sum, Hypothesis 3 received partial support.

Discussion

Religion remains a valuable resource for prisons by enhancing rehabilitation and reducing recidivism (Hallett et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2021). Religiously motivated volunteers continue to provide prisoners with non-religious (e.g., adult basic education, anger management, and entrepreneurship) as well as religious programs. The work of faith-based groups and individuals comes at a time when prison administrators find it increasingly difficult to fund educational, vocational, and rehabilitative programs due to constricting budgets.

In this paper, we conceptualized rehabilitation as a prosocial change in self-identity, existential belief, and moral character, operationalizing it in terms of identity transformation, a new sense of meaning and purpose in life, and virtue development. Our conceptualization is also consistent with the Good Lives Model of offender rehabilitation (Ward & Stewart, 2003; Ward & Brown, 2004; Ward & Maruna, 2007). Furthermore, results from analyzing data from a quasi-experimental study assessing a faith-based program, "The Prisoner's Journey" (TPJ), showed TPJ-increased religiosity contributed to identity transformation via crystallization of discontent, enhanced the perception of meaning and purpose in life, and fostered the virtues of forgiveness, empathy, gratitude, and self-control among prisoners in Colombia. Some of these indicators of rehabilitation, in turn, were found to reduce the risk of interpersonal aggression. These findings are consistent with previous research in Western countries (e.g., Hallett et al., 2017; Jang et al., 2018a; Kerley & Copes, 2009; Maruna, 2001; but see Jang et al., 2019). Thus, the present study provides evidence of the cross-cultural effect of religion on prisoner rehabilitation.

¹⁴ We applied manifest-variable structural equation modeling (SEM) to analyze the data, using Mplus 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). SEM enabled us to model mediating relationships among the key exogenous variable (program participation) and the three sets of endogenous variables with religiosity, rehabilitation, and intended aggression being the primary, secondary, and ultimate endogenous variables. Complete results are available upon request.



A fundamental change in self-identity from a criminal to a conventional self is essential to rehabilitation, as identity theories of criminal desistance posit. Religion may provide prisoners with a narrative of repentance, responsibility-taking, and redemption, which gives them hope for a new start, enabling them to replace their old criminal identity with a new conventional one (Anderson et al., 2022). Offenders also need to understand how a lack of life goals or unmet human needs might have led them to live a life of crime. In this study, we found religion tended to help prisoners meet two intrinsic human needs, a sense of meaning and purpose and moral character, which in turn reduced the risk of interpersonal aggression, as is consistent with other research (Jang et al., 2018a; Jang et al., 2021; Jang et al., in press).

While this study provides empirical evidence of religion's influence on prisoner rehabilitation, it is necessary to acknowledge two fundamental limitations. The first limitation concerns selection bias due in part to a lack of random assignment.¹⁵ Since the equivalence of experimental and control groups could not be established, the observed effect of TPJ on religiosity may not be entirely attributed to the program. Another source of selection bias is the difference in security level between the experimental and control prisons, although this might have resulted in a conservative test of program effect. Specifically, inmates participating in TPJ were more serious offenders, and thus one might reasonably argue that they would be less inclined or amenable to religion than non-participating inmates, as religion might more readily be seen as a sign of weakness in such an environment. Although we found the two groups were not significantly different at the pretest, a potential selection bias should be kept in mind in interpreting our results.

A second limitation is nontrivial attrition. Approximately four out of 10 pretest participants did not return for the posttest. While older and more prosocial and religious inmates participating in the second survey is not surprising, TPJ's impact on religiosity or the effect of religiosity on rehabilitation might have been overestimated to the extent that the returning inmates were more motivated to change themselves than the dropouts, even if they had not overreported their progress in rehabilitation. However, the possible overestimation should be weighed alongside the possibility that the faith-based program was more likely to increase religiosity among less or non-religious than more religious inmates (e.g., Jang et al., in press).

Despite these limitations, we believe our study contributes to the literature on religion and corrections by testing whether inmate involvement in religion, increased by completing a faith-based program, leads to prisoner rehabilitation. We found empirical evidence of religion's rehabilitative effects on Colombian prisoners' self-identity, existential belief, and character. The present finding is also consistent with the Good Lives Model that rehabilitation efforts should promote human goods as well as manage risk factors for reoffending. In sum, our study suggests that it would be prudent for prison administrators to be open to religious programs like "The Prisoner's Journey," because they can both protect inmate's right to practice religion in prison, but also help them to flourish as humans and experience reform before returning to society.

¹⁵ Conducting a longitudinal study in a developing country's correctional system was a significant challenge, to say the least, and we faced many obstacles in the course of research. Random assignment was simply not possible.

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