

Female Drug Offenders Reflect on their Experiences with a County Drug Court Program

James C. Roberts and Loreen Wolfer
The University of Scranton, Scranton, Pennsylvania, USA

This paper examines the experiences of a group of female drug offenders who successfully completed a county drug court program in northeast Pennsylvania. Using the constant comparative method, we analyzed interviews with these women for thematic patterns in order to provide an evaluation of this program based on participants' subjective perceptions of its strengths and weaknesses. While other drug court evaluations identify rewards for good behavior and compassionate program staff as important contributing factors to participants' success, women in this study credited their recovery and successful completion of the program primarily to fear of punishment and program structure. Our analysis also revealed patterns of improved self-images, improved physical and mental health, improved coping mechanisms, and improved interpersonal relationships. We end the paper with a discussion of implications for future research. Key Words: Drug Court, Female Drug Offenders, Constant Comparative Method, and Appreciative Inquiry

The social concern over the prevalence of drug use and the cost of treating drug offenders continues. According to National Institute of Justice, more than half of all the people arrested in the United States test positive for illegal drugs (NIJ, 2007). Furthermore, while men are still more likely to use illegal drugs than are women, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that almost half (41.8%) of women aged 12 and older have reported use of an illicit drug at some point (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2008b). The number of women who are arrested for drug related crimes has also been increasing. In 2008, women accounted for 185,201 drug related arrests in the United States, a figure that is 19.3% higher than it was in 1999 (FBI, 2008).

Not surprisingly, as the correlation between drug use and crime became even more evident, government agencies looked for new ways to treat individuals with drug addictions; and, one of the most promising ways appeared to be drug courts. Operating in the United States since 1989, there are now over 2,140 active drug courts in the United States (Office of National Drug Control Policy, n.d.). Studies generally find drug courts to be an effective means of reducing recidivism (Fielding, Tye, Ogawa, Imam, & Long, 2002; Goldkamp, White, & Robinson, 2001; Peters & Murrin, 2000; Wolfe, Guydish, & Termondt, 2002); however, a recent report published by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (2008a) recognizes that drug courts still "faces challenges in developing outcome-oriented measures focusing on post-program recidivism" (p. 106).

Some researchers have commented on the problems and, in some views, limited scope of drug court evaluation studies (Belenko, 1998; Sanford & Arrigo, 2005). For example, Fischer, Geiger, and Hughes (2007) argue that the bulk of the drug court research is quantitative and focuses more on clients as a group as opposed to examining

whether the processes, benefits, and perceived “costs” vary by sub-groups, such as gender.

Drug court research is slowly moving in this direction (Fischer et al., 2007; Goldkamp et al., 2001; Hartman, Listwan, & Shaffer, 2007). Goldkamp et al. conducted qualitative research by studying focus groups of graduates from county drug court programs in Oakland, California, Portland, Oregon, Las Vegas, Nevada, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and Kalamazoo, Michigan and asked them their views about various aspects of their treatment experiences. While those interviewed in this study felt that drug courts were generally helpful, many felt that some individuals entering these programs are not initially serious about recovery and only participate to avoid going to jail. On the other hand, many graduates also stated that people generally become more committed to the program and to recovery as they progress through the program and that program structure, fear of sanctions (especially jail time), drug tests, court encouragement, and favorable interactions with their counselors are all key factors that contribute to the program effectiveness. Goldkamp and colleagues’ research treats the clients as a unit; they do not, however, examine whether there is any variation in experiences based on clients’ gender.

Fischer et al.’s (2007) study, on the other hand, does. These researchers examined 11 female drug court clients in a northern California drug court program regarding their views of the various drug court team members (most notably the judge), the court processes (like urine screens, reward and sanctions), their drug counseling, their lives before and during the program, and the various skills they acquired while in the program. Fischer and colleagues found that the program staff in general, and their level of caring towards the clients in particular, were key program components that made the program successful to female clients. However, like Goldkamp et al. (2001), these researchers found that in order for the program to succeed, the clients had to be truly willing to give up drugs, to be honest with themselves, and to stop being deceitful. The implication was that having drug court staff who made the clients feel positive about themselves and who cared about them as individuals and not just as addicts helped with the personal transformation that made these women ready, willing, and able to seriously work on overcoming their habit. In considering these findings, it is important to note that even though Fischer et al. use terms such as “successful” (p. 720) to evaluate their client’s experiences in the program, because the clients have not yet graduated, program success is an assumption, not an empirically supported claim. Furthermore, because the clients interviewed in the Fischer study were still in the program, they have not had the time or outside experience to fully reflect upon their views of the drug court program.

This study is a step towards bridging the gap between the research of Goldkamp et al. (2001) and Fischer et al. (2007) by giving female graduates of a county drug court program the opportunity to share their views of the program’s strengths and weaknesses and how it influenced their lives post-graduation. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trying to define and explain people’s realities and experiences is difficult unless the explanations are rooted in the meanings that individuals have constructed and attached to those experiences. Patton (2002) argues that giving those who directly experience programs the opportunity to voice their views is an important component of assessing program effectiveness. This paper combines those two sentiments and relies on the main tenets of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, 1990) to explore the meanings and

understandings of ten women who have graduated from a county drug court program in an attempt to learn how the program changed their lives and why.

Loreen Wolfer, the second author of this paper, was the statistical evaluator for the county drug court examined in this study for three years during the program's formation and early client admission. She has not been involved with the drug court for more than two years prior to the undertaking of this study. In that span, the initial clients have graduated from the program; and, the drug court was able to track long-term abstinence by examining arrest records for program graduates. However, this approach does not give any constructive feedback about the program itself regarding what may or may not have worked from a client's perspective.

Dr. Wolfer was interested in examining the experiences and perceptions of graduates now that they have achieved some distance from the program; and, the drug court had a small amount of funding available for further research, which they decided to award to her for the study. Even though this study ended up being funded, the funding is unlikely to affect the Dr. Wolfer's interpretation of the data for a number of reasons. First, even during her tenure as the drug court's formal evaluator, she frequently noted both positive and negative practices in the program in her formal reports. Second, she has been distanced from the drug court for a number of years; and, last, she approached them about the research prior to learning of the funding. The funding amount was small and offered more as a courtesy. The research would have occurred even without any funding.

James Roberts, the first author of this paper, was brought in to assist with the content analysis of the interviews described below and the write-up and presentation of the study's major findings. His primary research interests are in the areas of alcohol and aggression and drugs and crime. He and Dr. Wolfer have also collaborated on research examining the nature of restraining order withdrawal among female victims of intimate partner violence. The current study appealed to Dr. Roberts because of both his interest in drug and alcohol offenses, as well as his interest in the experiences of female victims and offenders within the American criminal justice system. He joined this research initiative with no agenda other than to explore female drug offenders' perceptions and reflections of a county drug court program. It is our hope that this paper and the finding presented within it positively influence the design and implementation of drug court programs and shed light on the unique experiences and treatment needs of female participants.

Methods

Description of Drug Court

The drug court discussed in this paper is located in a medium sized city in northeast Pennsylvania. In accordance with the confidentiality agreement entered into with this drug court, we will simply refer to it as the County Drug Court program from this point onward. This program has been operating for over seven years and defendants are eligible for the program if they are 18 years of age or older, are non-violent offenders whose offenses are associated with drug dependency, and do not have severe mental health problems, travel hardships, inadequate social support, or outstanding warrants. There is also a second group of defendants in the program who have violated their paroles with non-violent drug offenses. The County Drug Court program is designed to

last 12-18 months during which defendants progress through four phases before graduation and have a fifth “phase” where the original charges are expunged if the person is not re-arrested for a drug related offense one year after graduation. In each phase of the program, defendants experience individual and group treatment sessions, the nature and frequency of which are individually determined by drug and alcohol counselors who are part of the drug court team. A full description of the phases appears in one of Dr. Wolfer’s early outcome evaluation publications pertaining to the same county drug court (2006).

Participants

As of March 1, 2005, when we collected this data, 17 women had graduated from the County Drug Court program at least three months prior to that date. Of these 17 women, ten agreed to participate in the post-graduation interviews. Among the seven who did not participate, no one explicitly declined; however, two people did not return calls, three people had outdated phone numbers (and were unreachable), one was deceased (non-drug related) and one was missing. Because of the small population size, as well as sample size, for this group, statistical comparisons for demographic and program differences between the women who agreed to the interview and those who did not are suspect. Therefore, we will only provide a description of the ten women who agreed to participate in this study.

Of the women who agreed to participate in this study, six were heroin users and three were addicted to prescription drugs. Four of the ten women were arrested for drug related crimes (none of which involved drug dealing) and three were arrested for property crimes. All of the women interviewed in this study had graduated high school and six had at least some college education. The median length of time spent in the program was about 19 months (580 days) and the median length out of the program by the time of the interview was a little over two years (26 months). This was a relatively young sample as all but one of the women were under age 40, with a median sample age of 32 years. Perhaps not surprising given their relatively young age, six women had never been married. However, seven of the women lived with children (not necessarily their own) and half actually had children of their own.

Interviews and Data Gathering

Quantitative studies of the statistical effects of drug treatment programs abound in the literature. However, the research presented here focuses on the *subjective* evaluation of a drug court program from the participants as expressed in their own words. According to Denzin (1989), individual’s experiences cannot be understood without putting them into the gendered, situational, structural or practical context of the world. Presenting the phenomena, here the drug court experience, in the language, feeling, emotions, and actions of those involved is integral to understanding whether and how drug courts achieve their goals (Denzin; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As discussed in greater detail below, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of semi-structured and open-ended interviews that aimed to establish a dialogue with the respondents. These interviews were fairly fluid with questions sometimes being taken out of order in the natural progress of

the discussion or questions may not have been directly asked if they were already addressed in one of the respondents' previous answers (Denzin; Patton, 2002).

Questions included respondents' descriptions of their lives before and after program participation, how they handled stress before and after program involvement, what their experiences were like with individual drug court team members, why they thought was the most effective part of the drug court program, what they found to be the least effective, and what they would change if they were in a position to make any changes. Like Fischer et al. (2007) who conducted a similar study of female drug court clients, we relied on the main tenets of Appreciative Inquiry in developing our interview questions and exploring the experiences of female drug court clients. These tenets are "(a) the focus on positive and effective programs and (b) amplification of what participants want more of, even if what they want more of exists only in a small quantity" (Fischer et al., p. 704). Furthermore, researchers who subscribe to the theoretical underpinnings of Appreciate Inquiry believe that program participants have the ability to evaluate and create new and better programs by reflecting on and sharing their experiences (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Fischer et al.).

During the initial phone solicitation, Dr. Wolfer identified herself as a local professor who also served as the statistical evaluator for the County Drug Court program. After describing the goals of the research and ensuring graduates that participation in the study was completely voluntary and would in no way affect possible future dismissal of charges (for better or for worse), she asked graduates to arrange a meeting for an interview that would take approximately 30-60 minutes. When making these arrangements, she asked respondents about their preference for interview location: a private conference room at the County Drug Court office (where key team members would be absent so they would not see who respondents were) or a public place (such as a restaurant). All respondents chose to conduct the interview in the private conference room and agreed to have their conversations tape-recorded for later transcription. It is important to note that we received IRB approval for research of a protected class from our home university provided that (a) only pseudonyms appeared on any transcriptions and written reports; (b) the original audio tapes were destroyed after transcription. We made every effort to adhere to the conditions of this IRB approval throughout our research.

Analysis

We transcribed all of the interviews, as presented on the tape, and later re-organized along the respondents' answers to the semi-structured questions using a word processing program. As mentioned, we conducted a content analysis of completed interviews that followed the constant comparative method (Boeije, 2002; Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002). As such, we identified various themes in answers to specific questions and discussed the themes until we reached agreement regarding theme identification and support. While the discussion and agreement regarding themes improved reliability of the findings, we were not as concerned with establishing validity because of our interest in the subjective meanings that these women attached to their treatment experience and to their lives pre and post graduation (Cooperrider, 1990; Denzin, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton). Again, the purpose of this study was to understand these women's

perceptions and reflections of the County Drug Court program overall and how participation in the program influenced their lives now that they have been out of the program for between nine months and almost three years.

It is important to note that in conducting our analysis we utilized several “purposeful” steps of the constant comparative method of analyzing qualitative interviews outlined by Boeije (2002). For example, we conducted comparisons *within* individual interviews by labeling and examining responses to individual questions and comparing them to similar responses made at different points in each interview. For example, some respondents made comments about the County Drug Court judge when answering several of our interview questions, not just when we asked for their opinion about the judge. This required us to label, analyze, and compare every such comment to see what they had in common, how they differed, etc. We also conducted a comparison *between* interviews within our group of participants. This allowed us to separate out clusters of participants who shared similar experiences. In presenting our results in the next section, we were able to provide quotes from several different participants that spoke to the same overall theme. For example, the first grouping of interview excerpts regarding “participants’ overall impressions” of the County Drug Court program is from women who reported primarily positive feelings. Again, our careful labeling of common interview responses allowed for this type of comparison and analysis.

Results

Themes extracted from our interviews with female graduates of the County Drug Court program and presented below highlight three important aspects of the participants’ treatment experience: (a) overall impressions of the program and its key personnel; (b) insights into important program components and treatment options; and (c) insights into personal growth and change following program completion. In accordance with our IRB approval, the names of participants identified below are pseudonyms that we assigned to each in order to protect their identities.

Participants’ Overall Impressions

Initially, participants felt apprehensive about the program and its key personnel; however, as the following sub-sections illustrate, these feelings subsided as participants progressed through their treatment.

Overall impression of program. Participants had many wonderful things to say about the County Drug Court program. In the words of June, “I just think it’s an amazing, um, program and I believe that so many people need what the program is. I think the program’s wonderful.” Positive feelings about the program seemed to develop over time as participants became more comfortable with program rules and personnel.

I hated drug court in the beginning. I hated them. Like the guy (Judge) put me in jail, but you know what? They saved my life. And I grew to love every one of them. (Evelyn)

Jean and others cautioned that the County Drug Court program, while fair, is not the “easy alternative to prison” that some outsiders and prospective participants think it is.

A lot of the people that I know that are in the drug court now do it to get out of jail, and they don’t know how intense it is, it’s intense. It’s like a boot camp, but you’re just free. (Jean)

Overall impression of judge. The judge presiding over the County Drug Court was by far the most beloved figure associated with the program. When describing the judge and his behavior towards them, participants did not shy away from words like loving, caring, and compassionate.

Judge ___ is a wonderful man. He is. He has put me in jail a lot of times, but he cares about me and I know he does because I can see it. He wants to see me do good. He doesn’t want to see me do bad. And he could have gotten rid of me a long time ago, but obviously he, in the drug court, he sees something in me that I just don’t see. He really has worked hard with me. (Evelyn)

He always seemed concerned. He always knew exactly what was going on. He was always willing to offer whatever help they put for whatever situation was going down at the time. (Rachel)

As indicated by the following interview excerpts, relationships with the judge appeared to develop over time, much like participants’ acceptance of program rules and policies.

Um, well, it wasn’t very good for a while there. I would say I hated the man. I hated all of them. (Faye)

I love the man, I do. Um, in the beginning? It was just the complete opposite. I was so, I mean, intimidated. I was angry. I, I didn’t like him. I realized as I got healthier I saw him through different eyes and I mean, oh God, I respect that man and, I mean, words really can’t describe how I feel about Judge ___. (June)

One of the few criticisms of the judge was that he was too lenient with participants who had violated conditions of the County Drug Court program.

He (Judge) just gives you too many chances. And I know it might sound like that because I got clean and stayed clean almost five years now, but that’s what I would change. It’s too many chances for people. (Gwen)

Jean and others also stated that the judge was not selective enough in admitting individuals into the program in the first place.

Like a lot of the people I see in there, shouldn't be in there. They're still using every chance they get 'cuz they know how to beat or how to do it where they only have this many days. Yeah, yeah, I wouldn't give a lot of them, a lot of the women and the men in there (a second chance). I would have been like, out, out, you out. (Jean)

Overall impression of probation officer(s): In describing the probation officer assigned to her case, Faye comments, "I love him. He's a great guy. I could walk in there now and just talk to him." Jean and others made similar comments about the probation officers working with the County Drug Court program, describing them as accessible, caring, and compassionate.

Oh, I love ___, a fabulous man. He is, he is, fabulous. He came to my house plenty of times, met my parents, still sees me on the street. I mean always addresses me, always talks to me. To this day, loves me, hugs me, every time I go in the courtroom. I mean, I appreciate all of them. I appreciate all of them. They didn't have to do that. They didn't have to take their time and be in my life for that period of time and help me. They helped me. They really helped me. (Jean)

As was the case with the judge, relationships between these women and the probation staff appeared to develop over time.

I thought ___ was great. She was very concerned, very compassionate, but you had to build up to that. Like it wasn't like that in the beginning. Like she didn't give you, a lot rope in the beginning. And I think she does that with most clients. You build a good relationship with ___. She's very concerned. (Rachel)

Overall impression of nurse practitioner. Unlike the judge and probation staff, participants had a number of negative things to say about the program's sole nurse practitioner. In the words of Lori, "I sort of felt a little bit taken back by her harshness at times." Other participants expressed similar feelings:

I don't know what it is about her. She's abrasive. But no, never liked her. No. I just don't like her. I mean, I'm clean. I still don't like her. So, I mean, there's days I didn't like anybody, but they were all nice people, in general. Most, you see, they're just doing they're just doing their job. I mean, get on with your life. But she's just not one of those people. I don't know why. I don't like her. (Faye)

Um, she, I believe, makes a lot of things personal, which can be good and can be bad. You know what I mean? It can be good to know that someone really cares that much. But, um, then again, I mean even for her sake, it could be bad because sometimes she, you know, just gets a little too

involved. (June)

Evelyn and others suggested that the nurse's "over-involvement" might be the result of the loss of her son to a drug overdose and questioned whether this prevented her from performing her duties within the program in an effective and unbiased manner.

I still love her to death. She had a death in her family, of her son, and I think she just cares a real lot. She's just a little bit sick of it. (Evelyn)

It is important to note that not all of the participants reported negative relationships with the nurse practitioner. In the words of Rachael, "I love her. And I feel that I can call __ at any time and ask her for any help or her opinion."

Program Components and Treatment Options

Participants identified program structure, fear of punishment, rewards for progress, the cumulative effect of treatment services provided, and length of treatment required as important contributors to their recovery. These women also expressed concerns about specific treatment options and inconveniences associated with the timing and frequency of required meetings and appointments.

Program structure. We were struck by how often participants attributed their success in the County Drug Court program to its structure.

I think it's very structured. I really do. I thought it was the best thing that could have happened to me anyway. (Harriet)

Having mapped out right in front of me what I had to do, you know every day, every week, every month and the whole phase process is what I need. (Lori)

June and Gwen discussed the importance of structure in an addict's recovery, particularly during the early stages of the process when individuals have yet to acquire the skills needed to cope with everyday disappointments and stressors that might lead to their relapsing.

I just think it's an amazing program, what they do, in giving people a second chance and keeping people as structured as they do until they start to come along on their own. (June)

When you just have too much freedom it's just too easy. I mean they stay on you pretty good. The structure of it is good. (Gwen)

Fear of punishment. Fear of violating a condition of the County Drug Court program and ending up in prison was a strong motivator for participants to abide by program rules and regulations and attend all of their required meetings and treatments. In

the words of June, "If they caught you not doing something you were supposed to do, the consequences were, were horrifying." Fear of formal prosecution and possible incarceration also motivated other participants.

I had these charges hanging over my head. It gave me a real reason to want to do it and not to live like that anymore. (Rachel)

Just knowing that he (Judge) had the power to put me somewhere that I didn't want to be (in jail). Uh, I think that was the strongest thing. (Brenda)

While fear of punishment was a great motivator for these women, Faye and others were disturbed by the seemingly arbitrary distribution of punishments for rule violators.

I know what used to aggravate me was that there wasn't set punishments for certain things. I mean one person would get one set and one person would go to jail. (Faye)

Rewards for progress. To a lesser extent than fear, participants were motivated by the praise of the much beloved County Drug Court judge. While the judge was quick to make an example out of rule violators by scolding them in front of the entire group in open court, he also regularly commended participants for progress in their recovery and significant accomplishments like gaining employment.

He's friendly. He doesn't take any crap. But if you're doing good, he lets you know you're doing good. I had a good relationship with him because I was doing good in the treatment (drug) court. (Gwen)

The graduation ceremony that celebrates participants' successful completion of the program provides a more formal source of praise and recognition. Participants reported mixed reactions about this ceremony. While they appreciated the gesture, Lori and others had major concerns about the public nature of the event, fearing that a ceremony that is open to the public, including local media outlets, might jeopardize their standing in the community.

(Discussing graduation ceremony) It was an awesome time, but, um, going into the graduation I found out, about maybe a month prior, that it was going to be televised by local news stations, the newspaper, all the community leaders were going to be invited, and that's where I panicked because all of this time I had worked so hard to protect my privacy and protect my hard work, and with my job, and I found out that all these town officials, and I worked for the county at that time, were being invited. I discussed it with everybody. It was nerve racking. I was afraid of discrimination. I fought so hard to get to graduation day and I just didn't want somebody to discriminate against me. (Lori)

These women suggested that a better option might be a private ceremony that is open only to program personnel and guests of the graduates.

Cumulative effect of treatment services. Rather than focusing on specific treatment services provided by the County Drug Court program, participants tended to credit their recovery to the cumulative effect of the treatment services provided.

I mean, everything that the program has to offer has really, you know, piled together to help me. (Brenda)

I think everything we did, every part of everything that was involved in my recovery, helped me in one way or another. (Gwen)

Evelyn praised the program for recognizing and addressing her personal treatment needs, stating, “They didn’t give up on me. In every way I needed treatment they found someone to help me with the treatment I needed.” Compared to their previous treatment experiences, graduates of the County Drug Court program reported feeling more involved in decisions about their individual treatment plans.

Length of treatment. Participants also credited the length of treatment required by the County Drug Court program to their recovery. In the words of Gwen, “What helped me the most was the six months of treatment I had. That helped me the most. Definitely.” Similarly, Rachel and June credited their long-term success in maintaining their sobriety and staying out of trouble to the extended monitoring and supervision that follows participants’ graduation from the County Drug Court program.

There was no real follow-up because the rehab, whatever I went to, they were short term. And when I was done, I was not on my own. It was pretty much up to me to follow through with what they had told me, and I didn’t have anything hanging over my head and I didn’t have anyone checking up on me to make sure that I was doing those things. So, after a while I just stopped doing what I was supposed to. (Rachel)

The other rehabs, they let you go after twenty-eight days and then that’s it. You’re done. It (County Drug Court) kept it structured for a longer period of time. (June)

Treatment options. While there were few complaints about the County Drug Court’s treatment options, several participants did express concern about a meditation program that each was required to complete. When asked what she thought of this program, Jean simply stated, “I’d get rid of them.” Participants also suggested incorporating additional treatment options that might address the route causes and byproducts of addiction, such as marital and childrearing difficulties and personal issues like eating disorders.

I would also make other programs. Like, um, I would also want to get

involved with...children and families and marital. Um, I have an eating disorder and ... (the County Drug Court program) didn't do any help, didn't recognize it as kind of a secret that I kept with me all through the beginning. (June)

Inconveniences associated with participation. A common inconvenience for participants was maintaining employment, particularly full-time employment, during their treatment.

I thought that I needed to be working full time and thank God my job was understanding, but I've seen a lot of people struggling, trying to get off every Thursday to go to court. So I don't know, but maybe even having, like, a night session where people go to court at night. Having them not have to take that big chunk out of there day during the week. (Rachel)

In addition to feeling inconvenienced by scattered appointments and meetings required by the program, participants felt that there was an unfair double standard when it came to attendance and punctuality at these scheduled events.

They could start on time for Treatment (Drug) Court. That would be a plus. Yeah, 'cus, uh, that used to be my biggest complaint. I have to be on time for everything. How come I've got to sit here for an hour and wait for you? And if I was an hour late, I'd be going to jail. I was on a roll. And I still, I still say the same thing. I can't stand it. But I have to be on time. I have to be here at twelve-thirty. Why don't you have to be here 'til two? That's not right. (Faye)

Personal Growth and Change

Participants experienced significant and positive changes in self-image, physical and mental health, coping mechanisms for handling everyday problems, and relationships with friends and family following their completion of the County Drug Court program

Self-hate to self-love. Most of the participants suffered from extremely poor self-images prior to their treatment. During our interviews, several reported hating their lives and themselves.

I hated myself. I would pray at night that, that I wouldn't wake up the next day. (Evelyn)

I hated my life. I hated getting up in the morning. (June)

I had no self-esteem. Uh, a lot of self-pity, a lot of self-doubt. Um, I really didn't feel like I was worthy of anything. I had a hard time looking at myself in the mirror every morning. (Brenda)

Each of the women interviewed in this study reported improved self-images and outlooks for the future following their treatment.

I have a lot of self-esteem (now). I don't pity myself anymore. I could look at myself in the mirror and be proud of who I am. (Brenda)

I just started to feel better about myself. After I started doing those things and realizing that I could do them, and I could work, and get back to school and realize that I was capable of doing it. (Rachel)

I'm totally fulfilled. My life is really much more fulfilling today. (June)

Illness to wellness. In addition to suffering from poor self-images prior to treatment, participants reported physical and mental illness related to their drug use that negatively impacted their relationships and involvement in productive endeavors.

I was just flat, flat with everything, flat with people. It was just miserable actually, and, um, the effects are the narcotics long term was making me physically sick. I was nauseous. I had headaches and even though they were meant to take away the pain, I was still in pain from head to foot emotionally, you know? It was awful. (Lori)

I was going to die. I was going to die. I had nothing. I was dying inside. I didn't even realize I was hurting other people because I was hurting so much inside. (Evelyn)

June and others went to great lengths to hide their physical and mental health problems from friends and family.

I tried to make myself appear, um, to be healthy and, and ok. And, um, I was the furthest thing from it. Like, my house was immaculate and, and, um, I was, had my hair done and everything, like, I, I wanted to appear to be functioning properly when, in reality, inside I was a mess. (June)

Participants reported significant improvements in their physical and mental wellness following their treatment.

Life as a whole has gotten a whole lot better. I'm happy. I'm not depressed anymore. It's great. (Brenda)

I'm happy. I feel good from the inside out. (June)

Destructive to constructive coping mechanisms. In regaining control over their lives, participants reported utilizing constructive coping mechanisms acquired during their treatment when dealing with everyday disappointments and stressors in their personal and professional lives. As explained by Evelyn and June, prior to their

involvement in the County Drug Court program, these women typically resorted to drugs and alcohol when faced with problems that they did not want to deal with.

I didn't have any (stress) because I didn't feel anything. I blacked out all that stuff out of my life (with drugs). (Evelyn)

Before the program? Um, take a Soma. That's a muscle-relaxer. (June)

Following their treatment, participants reported utilizing constructive coping mechanisms, such as journaling and talking to sponsors, rather than resorting to drug or alcohol use when confronted with everyday problems.

If I'm having a bad day I can just walk in (to drug and alcohol counseling) at anytime. Just they...can just start helping me. So it's good. It's real good. (Evelyn)

If something's going wrong, I'm going to meetings and not turning to withdrawing from my contacts, my inner circle of people. (Rachel)

Isolation to inclusion. Rejection by family and friends and personal isolation were common experiences for most of the participants prior to their involvement with the County Drug Court program.

I was the outcast, you know, for a lot of years. (Jean)

I didn't have any relationships. Nobody trusted me, and nobody wanted me around. (Gwen)

My family didn't want anything to do with me. I didn't have relationships with anyone other than with people that used. So my family life was very strained. (Rachel)

June and others also reported gravitating towards drug using peers prior to their treatment, partly due to rejection by those who disapproved of their drug use and partly to feel better about themselves.

I tended to find friends that were like me, that also had a problem with pills or was (sic) on prescription medication. Um, they were, they were immoral. I was attracted to people that were worse than me, because they made me feel a little better about myself. (June)

Treatment brought women in this study closer to law-abiding friends and family and instilled in them a greater sense of belonging.

I have my whole family in my life. Um, I work, I take care of my kids. I just bought a house, like I said. My husband and I just bought a house. We

had a nine year old, an eleven year old and we just had a baby a year ago.
(Gwen)

I have a great relationship with my family now, they actually want me around. Which is nice, it's nice. (Rachel)

Discussion

While drug court effectiveness has been extensively studied, a recent report published by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (2008a) notes that drug court research still has difficulty designing adequate outcome-oriented measures. While some researchers have recognized that participants in social programs can provide insightful and useful information regarding program effectiveness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002), with a couple of exceptions (Fischer et al., 2007; Goldkamp et al., 2001), personalized client feedback about drug courts is largely absent from the current research. This study sought to add client perceptions of drug courts to the existing research by examining ten of 17 female nonviolent offenders who graduated from a county drug court program in Northeast Pennsylvania. Again, the main tenets of Appreciative Inquiry influenced the development of our interview questions, as well as our exploration of participants' experiences with the County Drug Court program.

As mentioned, these women initially resisted the program and the people involved. However, as time progressed, they developed favorable attitudes about the program and its key personnel. They also quickly come to the realization that the County Drug Court program was not an "easy" alternative to jail. Despite the many demands placed on these women, they credited the program and its staff for helping them overcome their addiction and put their lives back together. These findings mirror those of Goldkamp et al. (2001) who found that clients initially enter the program to avoid jail time and only become more committed to it as they progress through the stages.

With one exception, these women found the drug court team to be supportive. As mentioned, the nurse practitioner was the team member who received the most criticism. While some of these women had positive comments about her, many felt that she was too abrasive and had difficulty separating these clients' addictions from that of one of her family members. While the nurse practitioner's working personality may have been a turn off for a few participants, it may have also had the unintended effect of drawing these women closer to other program personnel, such as the judge. Regardless, at least in this drug court program, negative feelings about one key program personnel were not enough to taint the entire experience for participants. Furthermore, most of the women in this study, including those who openly complained about the nurse practitioner, displayed a surprising willingness to forgive her for her faults. Interactions between drug court participants and personnel both with and without personal connections to addiction may be an interesting area of exploration for future research.

Fischer et al. (2007) found that once clients made a real commitment to giving up drugs, having a caring staff was the key component to program success for female clients. The women in this study also recognized the need for one to be ready to give up drugs. However, when asked about their insights into the important components of the program, these women did not mention caring as the most important component to program

success. Instead, they credited their success in the program primarily to the program's structure and fear of punishment. Knowing what to do each day and having a concrete plan of action was particularly helpful for these women, as was fear of punishment, especially jail time, which served as an important motivator to do well in the program. While some argue that drug courts are coercive and fear that this coercion will infringe on people's rights and interfere with the recovery process (Nolan, 2003), these findings support the basic premise of drug court programming, that coerced court and community intervention can lead to reform in behavior (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992; Satel, 2000). These two components – structure and fear of punishment – seem to be more important to the women in this sample than in Fischer et al.'s study; and, these women do not mention these factors in a negative way. To the contrary, they found them beneficial. One explanation for this difference may be in the fundamental difference in the two samples. The women in Fischer et al.'s study were still in the program at the time of the study; hence they were still more actively fighting their addiction. Therefore, having emotional support at this challenging time may have been the especially important for these women. However, the women in our study had already graduated, with some being away from the program for many months and years by the time of our interviews; and from their distance and perspective, what sticks with them most may be concrete issues like structure and sanctions.

These women also felt that rewards for progress were important; however, they were mentioned less frequently than the fear of punishment, which is interesting. Praise from the judge helped these women see him as a well-meaning, caring individual. However, while some liked more public rewards like graduation ceremonies, not everyone shared this view. Some women feared that public ceremonies may jeopardize their standing in the community; and, while they appreciated the gesture, many felt that other, less public, rewards might be more appropriate.

Finally, a lot of quantitative research has been devoted to trying to identify individual components of drug courts that are the most effective to participants' recovery. However, women in this study suggested that their success in the County Drug Court program was not the result of any single program component but rather the cumulative effect of treatment services provided combined with their involvement in decisions about their individual treatment plans. Because individual treatment plans were mentioned as important, it may be informative for future research to explore whether what men and women say about their treatment plans differ.

The final goal of this study was to see how the drug court affected these women's lives. As mentioned, an examination of the interviews with program graduates revealed themes consistent with improved self-images, improved physical and mental health, improved coping mechanisms for handling everyday problems, and improved relationships with friends and family. While there are a number of possible interpretations of this finding, it may simply be that these women "bought into" the message presented by the County Drug Court program and its personnel and that is why they were successful in their rehabilitation. It is unlikely that anyone who would report that their lives are exactly as they were when they entered would have progressed through the program enough to graduate. This is undeniable. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that these women have still internalized the ideology of the drug court so long after graduation.

This raises the issue of the limitations of this research. Clearly this is a study of only one drug court and a small number of female graduates. Because this study is exploratory and meant as a start in seeing what women drug court graduates find important to their recovery, a larger qualitative study of both men and women may be useful to identifying various effective treatment themes that differ by gender. This would, in turn, help courts better tailor their program to individual needs. Furthermore, conducting studies in other geographical locations in order to supplement these findings and those of Goldkamp et al. (2001) may be useful. For example, client experiences may be colored by issues such as the geographical nature of the area (e.g., cultural attitudes, employment opportunities) and the organization of a particular drug court (e.g., criminal histories of eligible clients, phase organization, and treatment personnel).

Future research in this area may also benefit from examining the experiences of those who did *not* successfully complete the program to see how their views of the program differ from those who did. It may be that those who were terminated from the program were not truly ready to give up drugs, a prerequisite for program success according to many graduates, or it may be that there are some fundamental problems in drug courts for certain groups of people of which we are currently unaware. As it stands now, we simply do not know.

References

- Belenko, S. (1998). Research of drug courts: A critical review. *National Drug Court Institute Review*, 1, 1-58.
- Boeije, H. (2002). A purposeful approach to the constant comparative method in the analyses of qualitative interviews. *Quality & Quantity*, 36, 391-409.
- Cooperrider, D. L. (1990). Positive image, positive action: The affirmative basis of organizing. In S. Srivastva & D. L. Cooperrider (Eds.), *Appreciative management and leadership: The power of positive thought and action in organization* (pp. 91-125). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Cooperrider, D. L., & Srivastva, S. (1987). Appreciative inquiry in organizational life. In R. Woodman & W. Pasmore (Eds.), *Research in organizational change and development* (pp. 129-169). Greenwich, CT: JAI.
- Denzin, N. K. (1989). *Interpretive interactionism* (Applied social research methods series). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2008). *Crime in the United States*. Retrieved from http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2008/data/table_33.html
- Fielding, J. E., Tye, G., Ogawa, P. L., Imam, I. J., & Long, A. M. (2002). Los Angeles County drug court programs: Initial results. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, 23, 217-224.
- Fischer, M., Geiger, B., & Hughes, M. E. (2007). Female recidivists speak about their experience in drug court while engaging in appreciative inquiry. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 51, 703-722.
- Goldkamp, J. S., White, M. D., & Robinson, J. B. (2001). "An honest chance": *Perspectives of drug court participants: Findings from focus groups in Brooklyn, Miami, Seattle, Las Vegas, and San Bernardino*. Philadelphia, PA: Crime and Justice Research Institute.

- Hartman, J., Listwan, S. J., & Shaffer, D. K. (2007). Methamphetamine users in a community-based drug court: Does gender matter? *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 45(3/4), 109-130.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalist inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- National Institute of Justice. (2007). *Drugs and crime*. Retrieved from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/topics/drugs/welcome.htm>
- Nolan, J. L. (2003). *Reinventing justice: The American drug court movement*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Office of National Drug Control Policy. (2008a). *National drug control strategy: FY 2009 budget summary*. Retrieved from <http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/policy/09budget/index.html>
- Office of National Drug Control Policy. (2008b). *Women and drugs: Facts and figures*. Retrieved from http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/drugfact/women/women_ff.html
- Office of National Drug Control Policy. (n.d.). *Drug courts*. Retrieved from <http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/enforce/drugcourt.html>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Peters, R. H., & Murrin, M. R. (2000). Effectiveness of treatment-based drug courts in reducing criminal recidivism. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 27, 72-96.
- Prochaska, J. O., DeClemente, C. C., & Norcross, J. C. (1992). In search of how people change: Applications to addictive behaviors. *American Psychologist*, 47, 1102-1114.
- Sanford, J. S., & Arrigo, B. A. (2005). Lifting the cover on drug courts: Evaluation findings and policy concerns. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 49, 239-259.
- Satel, S. L. (2000). Drug treatment: The case for coercion. *National Drug Court Institute Review*, 3, 1-56.
- Wolfe, E., Guydish, J., & Termondt, J. (2002). A drug court outcome evaluation comparing arrests in a two year follow-up period. *Journal of Drug Issues*, 32, 1155-1171.
- Wolfer, L. (2006). Graduates speak: A qualitative exploration of drug court graduates' views of the strengths and weaknesses of the program. *Contemporary Drug Problems*, 33, 303-320.

Authors' Note

James C. Roberts is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology/Criminal Justice at The University of Scranton. His research interests include alcohol and aggression, drugs and crime, drug treatment, and domestic violence. He holds a doctorate in criminal justice from The Rutgers University School of Criminal Justice. Correspondences regarding this article can be addressed to: James C. Roberts, Ph.D., The University of Scranton, Department of Sociology/Criminal Justice, Scranton, PA 18510-4605; Telephone: (570) 941-7435; Fax: (570) 941-6485 ; E-mail: robertsj7@scranton.edu

Loreen Wolfer is a Professor in the Department of Sociology/Criminal Justice at The University of Scranton. She is the author of *Real Research* a research methods textbook and the co-author of *Brief History of Social Problems*. Her research interests are both qualitative and quantitative and primarily focus on the evaluation of local policies and programs. She holds a doctorate in sociology from Cornell University. E-mail: wolferl2@scranton.edu

Copyright 2010: James C. Roberts, Loreen Wolfer, and Nova Southeastern University

Article Citation

Roberts, J. C., & Wolfer, L. (2011). Female drug offenders reflect on their experiences with a county drug court program. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(1), 84-102. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR16-1/roberts.pdf>
