Secondary Trauma Symptoms and Protective Personality Traits in Probation and Parole Agents

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Introduction
Probation and parole agents are relatively under-researched, yet they supervise millions of offenders in the community. Previous research suggests that agents who supervise sex offenders in particular experience trauma due to their work, with little support, and burnout rates among probation and parole agents is high (Severson & Petruso, 2013; see also Rhineberger-Dunn, Mack, & Baker, 2017).

While secondary trauma has been studied among social workers and counselors, it has rarely been studied in probation and parole agents or in corrections. Gil and Weinberg (2015) observed the coping strategies and internal resources used by social workers working with trauma clients and found that there was a relationship between internal resources such as optimism and secondary trauma symptoms. Specifically, social workers who had higher levels of dispositional optimism and a sense of mastery or control over their lives and abilities reported lower levels of secondary trauma symptoms. Probation and parole agents may be similarly protected by such personality factors that could serve as protective or risk factors for suffering secondary trauma symptoms.

The current research sought to assess the prevalence of secondary trauma symptoms among Wisconsin probation and parole agents, as well as assess personality factors that could serve as protective or risk factors for suffering secondary trauma symptoms.

Hypotheses
1) Probation and parole agents who have experienced greater distress through their work would report more symptoms of secondary trauma.
2) Probation and parole agents who have an external locus of control would report more symptoms of secondary trauma than those who have an internal locus of control.
3) Probation and parole agents whose personalities are more optimistic will present fewer symptoms of secondary trauma than those who are more pessimistic.
4) Probation and parole agents who felt that their supervision, training, and support in the workplace were adequate would report fewer symptoms of secondary trauma.

Participants
The Wisconsin Department of Corrections Central Office forwarded a link to an online survey inviting probation and parole agents to participate in a voluntary, basic, 1,151 agents received the invitation and 452 agents responded. However, not all respondents completed all elements of the survey: These included 41 agents (9 men, 32 women) ranging in age from 23-51 (M = 46, SD = 9.99) with years of service as agents ranging between 0.5 to 25 years (M = 8.79, SD = 8.35). This meant that a total of 441 agents completed the survey (111 men, 300 women) ranging in age from 22-59 (M = 38.03, SD = 8.9) with years of service as agents ranging between 0 and 29 years (M = 10.52, SD = 6.62), for an overall response rate of 30%.

More than half of participants were married (58%, or 238 agents), including 157 agents married with children, and 33 agents were single with children, while 98 agents reported being single and 27 were engaged (14 agents chose ‘other’). Additionally, most agents (73%) reporting working with a partner only in specific events such as home visits (299 agents), while 79% never worked with a partner (27 agents) and 20% reported more regularly working with a partner (84 agents).

Measures
The survey included questions regarding:
- The agents’ self-assessment of distress as a result of their job duties (assessed on a 1-7 Likert-type scale from ‘Strongly Disagree’ to ‘Strongly Agree’): “I have had to deal with traumatic events in a PST or discovered disturbing things during a home search.”
- “I felt emotional distress because of the nature of my work and/or casework.”
- Perceptions of support from their supervisors and co-workers (assessed on a 1-7 Likert-type scale from ‘Strongly Disagree’ to ‘Strongly Agree’): “After experiencing a traumatic event, I felt supported by co-workers, my supervisor, and regional staff.”
- Perceptions of training received through their workplace regarding trauma and secondary trauma.
- “Have you attended training with a focus on
  - Assisting supervising offenders who have experienced trauma?”
- “Helping you cope with secondary trauma, in other words, trauma you experience associated with supervising others?”

Participants also filled out the following scales:
- An inventory to measure the symptoms of secondary trauma called the PTSD Symptom Scale-Self Report (PSS-SR) (Cronbach’s a = .93; Foa, Riggs, Davis, & Rothbaum, 1990).
- An inventory to measure dispositional optimism called the Life Orientation Test (LOT-R) (Cronbach’s a = .83; Carver & Scheier, 1990).
- A final inventory to measure locus of control called the Locus of Control Scale (Rotter, 1966).

Results
Female agents reported slightly higher dispositional optimism than male agents (men’s M = 12.6; SD = 5.17; women’s M = 13.8; SD = 5.15; t(409) = 2.14, p = .03). However, men and women did not differ in locus of control (men’s M = 8.96; SD = 3.62; women’s M = 10.28; SD = 3.23; t(409) = 1.14, p = .26). For the inventory paper and pencil scale of dispositional optimism (M = 31.9, SD = 10.99; women’s M = 31.2; SD = 10.51, t(409) = .64, p = .52

A majority of agents reported emotional distress as a result of their work, with 88% indicating somewhat agree to strongly agree (see Figure 1). Agents’ level of agreement with the statement “I felt emotional distress because of the nature of my work and/or casework.” was significantly positively correlated with scores on the PSS-SR (r = .38, p < .01).

Personality characteristics were also associated with reported symptoms of secondary trauma; agents with higher dispositional optimism scored lower on the PSS-SR than agents with lower dispositional optimism (β = .46, p < .01 (see Figure 2), and agents with a more external locus of control scored higher on the PSS-SR than agents with a more internal locus of control (β = .24, p < .01. Lastly, agents’ level of agreement with the statement “After experiencing a traumatic event, I felt supported by my co-workers, my supervisor, and regional staff” was significantly negatively correlated with scores on the PSS-SR (β = -.30, p < .01).

A hierarchical regression analysis examined the research hypotheses with the scores on the PSS-SR entered as a dependent variable. Block 1 included questions relating to reported experiences with distress and block 2 added personal characteristics of support. Block 3 added the personality traits of dispositional optimism (LOT-R) and locus of control.

As shown in the Table, levels of secondary trauma symptoms were positively associated with reported feelings of distress and emotion, and negatively associated with feelings of support and with dispositional optimism. Overall, the model was found to explain 33 percent of the variance in level of secondary trauma symptoms.

70% of agents (N = 286) reported attending training with a focus on helping agents cope with secondary trauma, and this training resulted in significantly higher feelings of support following traumatic events (M = 4.78, SD = 1.58) than for those who did not attend training (M = 4.26, SD = 1.62) t(409) = 2.91, p = .004.

Conclusions
Consistent with Hypothesis 1, reports of emotional distress were significantly associated with reports of symptoms of secondary trauma, but interestingly, despite the high levels of reported emotional distress, agents largely reported feeling emotional distress as part of their work, which underscores the importance of continued research in this population and continued support from supervisors and agencies.

Regarding Hypotheses 2 and 3, the hierarchical regression model suggests that higher dispositional optimism is associated with lower levels of secondary trauma symptoms, but locus of control is not related to secondary trauma symptoms when controlling for other variables. Hypothesis 4 was similarly supported—trauma-specific training was associated with higher feelings of support, which in turn was associated with lower levels of reported secondary trauma symptoms.

This research highlights additional questions that could inform future agency decisions as well as a few limitations. Wisconsin has a relatively high parole supervision rate (7th highest in the nation) and Black and Native American people are supervised at higher rates than white people (Williams, Schraide, & Bradner, 2019); however, we did not include race as a demographic variable for our respondents nor did we include race as supervisors as part of this research. It is possible that racial stressors may play a significant factor in overall agent stress and decision-making, or that certain groups of agents may be uniquely susceptible to racial stressors.

It should be noted that the PSS-SR measures only self-reported symptoms related to secondary trauma, it is not a diagnosis of PTSD or secondary trauma and offers an estimate of symptoms.

Consistent with Gil & Weinberg (2015), dispositional optimism may similarly protect probation and parole agents as it does social workers. Trounson & Pfeiffer (2017) identified a number of response tendencies that corrective officers employ in the face of workplace adversity, including a number of skill-based strategies (such as effective conflict resolution and trauma processing skills). These skill-based strategies may be particularly transferable to probation and parole agents, and the current results suggest positive agent responses to training.

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References