The professional experiences and training needs of probation officers in Turkey

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The professional experiences and training needs of probation officers in Turkey

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Abstract

• *Summary:* The current study uses a series of focus groups and participatory methodology to investigate the work experiences and needs of Turkish probation officers and their directors. All participants were employed at an office of Parole and Probation in Istanbul, Turkey. During the concurrent focus groups, officers ($n = 57$) discussed

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their daily work experiences and needs (Phase I). A follow-up focus group was conducted ($n = 25$) to discuss potential interpretations of the themes and generate solutions (Phase II), followed by a mini-focus group with the directors ($n = 5$) to explore their experiences with the probation system and officer training (Phase III).

● *Findings:* Officers identified needs for training, improvements of the work environment, professional support, and more thorough risk assessment tools. The follow-up focus group revealed that officers were highly motivated to improve their rehabilitative skills but felt constrained in supervising offenders in the punitive justice system. Several solutions generated through focus groups included mentoring programs to support novice officers, training programs to acquire interviewing skills, and team building activities and events to increase morale.

● *Application:* The current study bridges the gap between officers and directors in the probation system and generates solutions to the occupational needs of officers. Researchers communicated those needs to the directors, and the study initiated action toward implementing rehabilitative training programs for officers with a particular focus on risk assessment and basic clinical skills. The study has direct implications for the improvement of probation practice and supervision in Turkey.

Probation is defined as a correctional practice that supervises and rehabilitates convicted criminal defendants to serve their sentences in the community (Phelps, 2013). Contrary to incarceration and other traditional punitive and deterrent approaches, such community-based programs are designed to decrease recidivism rates by providing resources for offenders to promote positive behavioral change (Walters, Clark, Gingerich, & Meltzer, 2007). Probation has been implemented in the United Kingdom and the United States since the early 20th century (Mair & Burke, 2013), and those systems have gone through rigorous reforms and systematic evaluations (Walters et al., 2007). By comparison, the probation system was adopted by the Turkish criminal justice system only in 2005 (Kamer, 2008), and little research to date has been undertaken to explore the unique experiences and needs of probation officers (POs) while navigating the challenges of this relatively new system in Turkey. Furthermore, no research to date has examined how best to improve probation practices and the occupational well-being of the officers in the Turkish correctional system.

   As a developing country, Turkey poses unique challenges for the probation system to be implemented effectively, such as propunitive attitudes in the general public (Karakuş, McGarrell, & Başıbüyük, 2011; Kesteren, 2009), few

opportunities for rehabilitative services for the convicted offenders (Tuncer & Duru, 2013), and a lack of evidence-based training programs and risk assessment tools for POs (Altın, Pazarcıkçı, & Aldemir, 2015). The current study, therefore, aims to identify unique needs of POs in that context and address this gap in the literature using participatory methodology.

POs play an important role in the criminal justice system. They exercise direct supervision of offenders, compile investigative reports for defendants, and/or provide information to the courts to assist in sentencing (Phelps, 2013). Such tasks often require POs to fulfill multiple and often conflicting roles which create a tension between their responsibilities to offenders (helping, supervision, and rehabilitation functions) and their responsibilities to the courts and the public (monitoring functions and compliance with the order of court) (White, Gasperin, Nystrom, Ambrose, & Esarey, 2005). POs experience significant stress related to the demanding nature of their work with increasing caseloads, excessive paperwork, and deadlines (Wirkus, 2015). Furthermore, POs also face role ambiguity and role conflict as part of probation work (Stephens & O'Donnell, 2001; White et al., 2005). POs often report problems with organizational management factors, such as a lack of supervision, lack of promotional opportunities, low salaries, changing or conflicting policies and procedures, and a less empowering, nonparticipatory environment that also adds to their stress (Lee, Joo, & Johnson, 2009; Wirkus, 2015).

These task- and organizational-related stress factors are associated with high levels of job dissatisfaction and burnout (Salyers, Hood, Schwartz, Alexander, & Aalsma, 2015; White, Aalsma, Holloway, Adams, & Salyers, 2015; Wirkus, 2015). A lack of supervision and trust in supervisors can lead to mistrusting the organization, which can further increase job dissatisfaction and turnover (Lambert, Jiang, & Hogan, 2008). Burnout and job stress have also been seen to have adverse effects on POs' physical health (e.g. hypertension, heart disease, suppression of the immune system, upper respiratory problems, peptic ulcers, and migraines) and mental health issues (e.g. alcohol and substance abuse and major depressive disorder) (Gayman & Bradley, 2013; Maddock & Pariante, 2001; Thoits, 2010). POs may also face vicarious trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder-like symptoms while dealing with offenders of crimes (Catanese, 2010; Severson & Pettus-Davis, 2013).

POs often report cynical attitudes toward high-risk offenders especially when they devote a lot of time, resources, and efforts to rehabilitate such offenders (White et al., 2015). To address these problems, the POs require certain skills and additional training opportunities to improve their work efficiency and occupational well-being. Thus, there is a need for targeted programs tailored to meet the needs of the POs in their respective work environments.

Efficacy and effectiveness of PO training programs

Programs targeting POs have largely focused on teaching professional skills ranging from building rapport with offenders and effective interviewing to

intervention practices and strategies to change criminal behavior (Bonta & Andrews, 2007; Purvis, Ward, & Willis, 2011; Walters et al., 2007). Studies have documented several evidence-based interventions tailored to meet the needs of POs while working with offenders. Such programs include, but are not limited to, the Risk-Need-Response (RNR) model of rehabilitation (Bonta & Andrews, 2007; Bonta et al., 2010), the Good Lives Model of Offender Rehabilitation (Purvis et al., 2011), the Stress Inoculation Training (SIT; Novaco, 1980), and Motivational Interviewing (MI) training (Anstiss, Polaschek, & Wilson, 2011; Raynor, Ugwudike, & Vanstone, 2014). Those programs focus on teaching POs interviewing and professional skills in their work with offenders with the ultimate goal to decrease offender recidivism. However, only a few of those programs have focused on the work-related stress of POs or included components tailored to cope with stress, anger, and burnout. One exception is the SIT, which helps individuals to reconceptualize their stressful experiences and reactions as not being uncontrollable and removes feelings of hopelessness by helping them become aware of their own coping resources (Meichenbaum, 2007). Considering the lack of intervention programs that are tailored specifically for POs, there is a need for new programs to be developed and tested to better help the occupational well-being of POs.

Nevertheless, the majority of the empirical research on the probation system has been conducted in the contexts of North America and Western Europe, where the probation system has a longer history of implementation with available training practices and resources as well as solid empirical research practices. Turkish POs also report high levels of burnout, job-related stress, and role conflict, similar to their counterparts abroad (Altın, 2015; Kamer, 2008). Yet, Turkish POs face unique challenges related to cultural, organizational, and structural issues. For instance, POs experience immense problems in successfully implementing rehabilitative practices due to the societal stigma surrounding offenders, as well as few employment opportunities for young offenders due to the ongoing economic crisis and high youth unemployment rates in Turkey (Tuncer & Duru, 2013). Studies have shown that the general public has punitive attitudes toward offenders (Karakuş et al., 2011; Kesteren, 2009), and employers are resistant to hire probationers (Engin, 2012), despite the legal requirements. In addition, the probation system is so novel that there are no evidence-based training programs for POs, nor are there any established standard practices for professional development. Tuncer and Duru (2013) have shown that POs are usually overqualified for the job they do, as compared with other officers in the Turkish criminal justice system. Indeed, Altın (2015) reported that officers in the probation system usually have higher educational degrees (college or above) but have limited opportunities and resources to use their expertise in supervising offenders—and there is an urgent need for advanced trainings. As a developing country, Turkey appears to be a challenging context for the probation system. The current study addresses the unique needs of POs in this particular context.

The present study and participatory action research

The present study was designed to assess the professional experiences and training needs of Turkish POs and create a dialogue between officers and their directors. To that aim, the research design was adapted from Freire's (1970) Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology; POs were not only participants in the research project but were also actively involved in all phases of the research-action process. The participant-researchers collaborated with the researchers in the interpretation and discussion of the study findings (i.e., giving feedback on findings and analysis) and suggested further training opportunities and solutions to problems.

PAR is an alternative approach in social sciences with pioneers including Kurt Lewin (1946), William Whyte et al. (1989) as well as Paulo Freire (1970). Action researchers believe that the empirical inquiry is initiated by presenting a problem shared, owned, and influenced by group and/or community members (Glassman & Erdem, 2014). Researchers conduct empirical studies with the ultimate goal to solve a particular problem and meet a certain need in the community. The research process is *participatory* in the sense that researchers bring together the different players involved in the situation, collecting critical information from a number of parties, but especially from those who are actually facing the problems.

Another component of the research process is being *action-oriented* toward solutions. Researchers collaborate with the community to bring change; more specifically, to develop problem-solving strategies and solutions that can be applicable, acceptable, and sustainable. As presented in Figure 1, our research process unfolded in three cyclical stages with a series of separate focus groups involving both officers and their directors using the PAR theoretical and methodological approach. Details of the focus groups are outlined below.
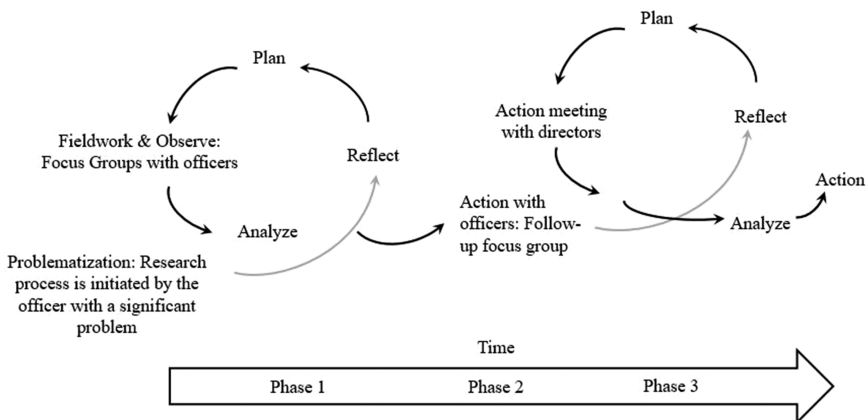
Figure 1. Study design and participatory action research process.

Method

Participants

The officers and their directors were recruited from the same probation bureau in Istanbul from April through June 2015. All staff, regardless of their rank, title, or assigned department, were invited to participate in the study. Those who agreed to participate both in the brief assessment and the series of focus groups were selected. Of 220 officers employed at the agency, 57 officers as well as all 5 directors were recruited for the study.[1]

Sample characteristics. The demographics of the focus group participants are presented in Table 1. Of the 62 participants, 57 (92%) were POs and 5 (8%) were directors. The mean age of the POs was 28.04 years ($SD = 4.65$) and 20 (35.1%) were female. Approximately, two thirds of the officers were single or never married (67.8%). All POs had completed a high school education, with 71.4% also having received a college degree.[2] The duration of work experience in probation varied

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample.

		$n = 57$ Officers	$n = 5$ Directors
Gender			
Female	f (%)	20 (35.1)	1 (20)
Male	f (%)	37 (64.9)	4 (80)
Age	M (SD)	28.04 (4.65)	40.2 (11.43)
Education status			
High school diploma	f (%)	13 (23.2)	0
College/university degree	f (%)	40 (71.4)	4 (80)
Graduate degree (MA or PhD)	f (%)	3 (5.4)	1 (20)
Marital status			
Single, not in a relationship	f (%)	26 (46.4)	1 (20)
Single, in a relationship	f (%)	12 (21.4)	0
Married	f (%)	15 (26.8)	4 (80)
Divorced	f (%)	3 (5.4)	0
Years of work experience in probation			
Less than a year	f (%)	4 (7.1)	0
1–2 years	f (%)	33 (58.9)	1 (20)
3–4 years	f (%)	10 (17.9)	1 (20)
5 years or more	f (%)	9 (16.1)	3 (60)
Prior work experience in the criminal justice system			
Yes	f (%)	10 (17.9)	4 (80)
No	f (%)	46 (82.1)	1 (20)
Number of cases currently supervised	M (SD)	207.39 (66.71)	NA
Received additional professional training on probation			
Yes	f (%)	42 (75%)	5 (100)
No	f (%)	14 (25%)	0

from 6 months to 10 years among the officers, with 66% reporting having worked in the probation system for 2 years or less. The average current caseload was 207.39 cases ($SD = 66.71$) for each officer. In addition, 10 (17.9%) POs had prior experience working in jails or prisons and 42 (75%) had previously received training related to the rehabilitation of offenders or legal procedures or compliance with court orders.

The majority of the directors was male and married (80%). The directors were highly educated, having either a college (80%) or a graduate degree (20%). In addition, 80% of the directors had been employed in the probation system since its initial implementation in 2005 and all were extensively trained in probation practices, the criminal justice system, and rehabilitation services. One director, in particular, reported having had site visits in European countries through his professional training.

Procedure

Consistent with the PAR methodology (Freire, 1970), the research process was initiated by the officers themselves who contacted the first author regarding their training needs, mainly in the areas of communicating with offenders (also termed *problematization*). Freire (1970) argues that the role of the researcher is to facilitate discussion, the act of knowing, authentic critical thinking and reflection on problems through the inclusion of all key players in the solution process. Therefore, throughout the research process, we conducted interviews with POs and directors who were currently affiliated with the Bureau of Probation and Parole. The research process was flexibly designed to understand the daily experiences of the officers, their attitudes toward and strategies in working with offenders, their available resources, and needs for further training.

During Phase I, the officers gave written consent to participate in the study and completed a brief survey. The assessment battery included a demographic questionnaire and a work experiences form which took 5 to 10 min to complete. After the assessment, the officers participated in a focus group interview at the first author's affiliated university campus.[3] The purpose of the initial focus group was to identify the daily work experiences, challenges, and resources of the POs and assess their needs for further professional training. Each group was balanced in terms of the participants' age, gender, and years of experience in the criminal justice system to ensure heterogeneity. This aspect of group heterogeneity was carefully planned to prevent a groupthink process (unipolarization of ideas throughout the interview) as well as to promote diversity of ideas (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009).

The interview protocol was semistructured with five main questions and related probes. As presented in Table 2, questions were designed to investigate a daily work script of the officers, the types of offenders they work with, potentially difficult cases they have handled so far, the ways in which officers have coped with challenging demands of their job, and professional training areas to meet those

Table 2. Focus group protocol and semistructured interview questions in Phase I.

Process: Cofacilitators and note-taker welcome participants, introduce themselves, and explain their roles and the group procedures.

Introduction protocol: "We have organized this meeting to get to know you and hear about your experiences as probation officers. I would like to remind you once again that all personal information you disclose here today will be kept strictly confidential and will not be shared with your agency or employers with any identifiers."

Questions:

1. Please describe your typical work day as a probation officer.
2. What kind of characteristics do you think are vital to become a probation officer? (*Probe*: Ideal probation officer)
3. How do you define the offenders you supervise currently? What are the strategies you use to engage with them? (*Probe*: Have you ever supervised a relatively more difficult case? When? Can you describe why and how it was challenging for you?)
4. Let us assume that there is a new probation officer who is just starting his/her position. What advice would you give this person? What kind of trainings do you think he/she should receive to get better prepared for the job?
5. Considering your experiences in working with offenders, what strategies have worked well for you? Which strategies were not effective?

needs. Three concurrent focus groups were conducted in early June 2015 and another three concurrent groups were completed during the last week of June 2015.

Each group included 8 to 10 officers. Group discussions were facilitated by two moderators and a note taker. In total, six clinicians (including the principal investigator) served as moderators. Three senior clinicians with extensive experience in running focus groups were paired with three trained clinical psychologists and counselors to moderate the discussions. Prior to the group meetings, all clinicians were informed about the study procedures and rationale of the focus groups. In an attempt to ensure standardization across groups, clinicians were also provided with a written script and notes (see Table 2 for a sample). Three senior undergraduate students served as note-takers. Students were trained in focus group methodology and participatory research through didactic training, readings, and handouts prior to the study. The primary responsibilities of the note takers were to document discussions verbatim, observe the group interaction processes, and ensure fidelity to the research protocol.

The facilitators welcomed the participants, introduced themselves and the note takers, and initiated light conversation with the officers while snacks and refreshments were being served. Following that introduction/warm-up phase, facilitators explained the focus group methodology, the importance of confidentiality, and the goals of the study. The interviews took approximately 1.5 hours to complete. Both note takers and moderators submitted reflection notes and memos to the principal investigator after completing the interviews. Consistent with the need for multiple informants in critical qualitative research (Lather, 1986), the moderator's memos

Table 3. Follow-up focus group protocol and semistructured interview questions in Phase II.

Process: The facilitator and a note-taker meet officers, explain officer's roles as participant-researchers, and discuss reflections on and interpretation of Phase I focus groups

Introduction protocol: "We scheduled this follow-up meeting to talk about your experiences in the focus groups last Summer. We believe there was a lot of fruitful discussion about your needs and experiences as probation officers. In that meeting, we would like to understand which themes you believe emerged from those meetings and what your take home message is for future solutions to those concerns. We will organize a meeting with the directors and stakeholders and we would like to see how we can resolve those issues. Before we start, I would like to remind you once again that all personal information you disclose in this research process will be kept strictly confidential and will not be shared with your agency or employers with any identifiers."

Questions:

6. What was it like for you to participate in the focus groups? How would you describe this experience?
7. Do you think the initial focus groups had an impact on your probation practices or daily needs as an officer? (Yes/No) (*Probe:* Potential negative or positive effects) How? Can you give examples?
8. Which topics do you think stood out most in the focus groups? What do you think appears to be the most important issue to consider for future solutions?
9. As facilitators, we observed several themes around training needs, work conditions, assessment tools, and desire to be acknowledged. What do you think about those themes? (Probe: Are they relevant? Do you have any suggestions on other topics and themes?)
10. Do you have any concerns or needs that you want your directors to know about and take action to solve? Why/why not?

were utilized not only to validate, but also enrich the note takers' observations (triangulation).

During Phase II of the study, the research team met to identify the themes across the focus groups and to summarize the findings (see analysis for further details; Table 3). Next, the principal investigator met with the POs, shared content analysis findings, and discussed with the officers interpretations and reflections. This second meeting included 25 participants from the initial focus groups which took place in a private room at the local probation agency. The meeting was accompanied by two note takers and participants were served lunch and refreshments. This meeting was pivotal not only to ensure the participation of the officers in the research process, but also to validate, discuss, and interpret the qualitative findings.

In the final phase (Phase III) of the study, the research team conducted an action meeting with five directors to facilitate dialogue on the experiences, attitudes, and training needs of the POs. The group was a very small focus group, consistent with Krueger's (2014) call for a "mini-focus group" of four to five participants, in which participants have specialized knowledge and/or experiences to discuss with the group. Given the PAR nature of the study, the process was tailored to be solution-focused and practical to address the major concerns of the

officers. Five directors, research team members, and note takers participated in the meeting. No identifying information about the focus group participants was shared with the directors. Several themes and suggestions for further training opportunities were discussed with the directors during Phase III only if the POs had given consent to do so.

Qualitative data analysis. All focus group notes, as well as facilitator reflections and memos, were gathered and condensed for qualitative content analysis. Research team members read the notes individually and met to discuss their reflections on the interviews. The initial analysis identified major themes and categories for the officers' experiences, attitudes, and needs for additional training. The main analysis was completed by the first author, and the process followed the Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) methodology which prioritized immersion of themes from the data without a priori hypotheses. Using the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), notes were read verbatim to derive meaning of units and concepts (*open coding*). Those units were placed together to form categories (*axial coding*). In the final step, related categories were conceptually organized to form overarching themes (*selective coding*). As noted earlier, the analysis continued in a cyclical manner with active participation by the POs discussing the categories and themes.

Results

Phase I: Themes and categories from concurrent focus groups with POs

Four major themes were revealed during the qualitative analysis of six focus groups during Phase I: (a) training needs to enhance basic clinical knowledge and interviewing skills, (b) needs to improve the physical work environment for rehabilitative services, (c) need for professional support, and (d) needs for more thorough risk assessment tools to plan for supervision of offenders.

Training needs. In the current sample, most POs had an educational background in Psychology, Sociology, Social Work, and Educational Sciences and none of the POs had a graduate degree in Forensic Clinical Psychology or Criminology. Understandably, POs reported an urgent need for more comprehensive and hands-on trainings in two domains: (a) basic clinical knowledge to provide psychological support for offenders (including clinical assessment, diagnosis, and psychopathology) and (b) interviewing skills and clinical techniques to work effectively with resistant offenders. POs stated that they received compulsory professional training in the first 6 months of their appointment through the Ministry of Justice, yet that training was mostly geared toward legal procedures, compliance with court orders, and education on hard drugs and their biopsychosocial effects.

Many POs reported that trainings about understanding psychological disorders and communicating with probationers were necessary to make appropriate

judgments about probation plans. Several POs believed deeply in their role as supervisors and were motivated to work with offenders toward rehabilitation. Some POs even self-identified as "mentors" and wanted to go above and beyond case management or follow-up on legal procedures and compliance with court orders. POs wanted to have hands-on training so that they could detect potential mental illness among offenders to make appropriate referrals for psychiatric treatment. One participant confirmed by saying "identifying mental problems, like schizophrenia or depression, is important for us, because probationers with such problems rarely benefit from standard procedures. They will not respond [well] to simple interventions."

On the other hand, POs acknowledged that there were several training opportunities for them before and after they were hired. Some of those trainings focused on implementation of a standardized substance abuse intervention program (aka *SAMBA Program* in Turkey), yet only a few selected officials were invited to attend those trainings. Officers in general complained about the train-the-trainer models because such programs limit their access to "real" experts in the field. One PO explained "trainings should be delivered by experts in other institutions. Our probation system is very young and we have not yet acquired that 'know-how' in our institutions" and emphasized her preference to be trained by professional clinicians or experts directly, rather than her own peers or colleagues.

The need for training in the psychological domain was also related with acquiring skills to overcome feelings of burnout and inadequacy. POs reported experiencing burnout due to the excessive number of assigned cases. One participant said "we are document oriented, not human oriented." While some of them questioned their actual role (law enforcement vs. rehabilitation), some were quite clear that compliance with the court order and following up on cases on the offenders' sentences were their prevailing role because of the paperwork and the bureaucratic requirements they were expected to carry out.

Interpersonal communication skills were also warranted to better know how to relate with probationers, set boundaries, and balance the POs' roles in supervising the offenders' sentence and its execution as well as referring the offender for further rehabilitation. POs reported their struggle with some offenders who were testing their boundaries or were too needy for services. Yet, POs also valued building a trusting relationship with the probationers; one officer stated "building an alliance with the probationer is rehabilitative by itself. If he/she feels listened to and valued, he/she sticks to the plan and is keener on working toward his/her well-being." As such, the officers demanded training tailored to their needs to relate to offenders, especially in working with resistant and difficult cases (interviewing skills, reframe skills, setting boundaries of the meetings, etc.).

Needs related to the physical work environment. Officers, especially those who stressed their responsibilities for rehabilitation, expressed a desire for private office space to ensure offender confidentiality. Shared office space in cubicles also appeared to be distracting for the probationers. POs reported that sometimes the probationers

listened to the conversation in the other cubicle. The location of the directorate was also reported as a major problem. The building was located on a highway side road with limited public transportation for the probationers. POs also felt isolated due to location of the building and there were no opportunities for leisure, lunch, or shopping in the area. POs had to spend the whole day in the building and eat in the basement which provided no opportunities for relaxation.

Desire for professional support. POs reported an imminent need for acknowledgment as well as guidance related to their job performance. Some officers noted that there were few experienced POs who were supportive and helpful to assist them in challenging times. But overall, supervision was available when required, usually informally, rather than in a structured manner using regular staff meetings. Officers reported that it would be very helpful if they could obtain some feedback from experienced personnel on their job performance from time to time.

POs also expressed a need for information on the effectiveness of probation practices. Some officers wanted to know the extent to which they initiated change in the offender's life. Officers noted that there was a need for follow-up assessment tools to screen the offender's progress over time. POs explained that lack of follow-up assessments also generated feelings of inadequacy and being lost, as one reported, "I sometimes feel like I am wasting my time." Another officer said "nothing will change no matter what I do."

Needs for a more thorough risk assessment tool. POs explained that they were using a standardized assessment tool to identify the risk level of each offender (referred to as *ARDEF*). The risk score obtained from using this method guides the probation practices for the offender (i.e., number of sessions, seminar requirements, additional referral for detox services, etc.). The POs reported several needs related to this assessment tool and its implementation. First, the risk assessment tool was designed to be completed in 20 to 25 minutes, but the POs reported that the items were very detailed, sometimes not even relevant with the offender, and could take up to 90 minutes. Given their busy work schedules, the POs realistically have only 15 to 20 minutes for the initial assessment session. There is a definite need for a more concise assessment tool.

Officers also raised serious concerns about the validity of the *ARDEF* risk assessment tool. They confirmed that some repeated offenders were familiar with the tool and they had learned how to respond to the items in a socially desirable manner. One officer explained

> the probationers learn how to answer the questions in order to have a light probation plan and [they also] teach others before they come for their first [probation] session. This way a probationer with a history of homicide may end up with fewer sessions and seminar requirements than someone who has come with a minor offense.

Among the solutions offered for this problem, the most significant recommendations were to totally remove the risk assessment tool or to administer it following a few sessions which would allow the PO to get to know the probationer better.

Phase II: Follow-up focus group meeting with the POs

Meeting with the participant-researchers to discuss and interpret the focus group findings was an essential component of the PAR research process. The follow-up focus group was scheduled in October 2015 at the POs' institution during working hours. The meeting place and time were conveniently scheduled for the officers especially because their workload had significantly increased in early fall (after the judicial term started).

The POs were very enthusiastic to participate in the meeting. The meeting started with a brief discussion of the officers' reflections on the prior focus groups. Overall, officers expressed gratitude over being heard and acknowledged for the hard work they do as POs. They felt free to voice their concerns and needs in an honest manner and they feared no repercussions or judgments. One officer emphasized that the focus groups increased morale among his colleagues and felt like it was time *off* from all that stress. Several officers highlighted the fact that the focus groups also enabled them get to know each other better and realize that they were not alone. Indeed, group cohesion was also observed by the note takers and some focus group facilitators during Phase I of the study.

Next, the officers were asked what themes they thought dominated the focus group meetings. Most of them identified their training needs as the top priority to be addressed urgently. They emphasized that regular and comprehensive training programs (i.e., motivational interviewing, clinical diagnosis) along with high-quality risk assessment tools would be extremely helpful to improve their probation practices. Some officers noted that improved training would enable them to grow both professionally and personally (i.e., interviewing skills with offenders also helps them to apply listening skills in their daily lives with significant others). Others added that training programs would be helpful to balance professional demands with better skills and competence.

The follow-up focus group also re-examined the same four major themes identified in the Phase I of the study. The first author discussed these themes with the officers (training needs, needs to improve work conditions, desire for acknowledgment and feedback, and needs for a revised risk assessment tool). The officers recommended that the action items for future meetings should be focused more on training programs and assessment tools, rather than more structural and organizational problems. In other words, they wanted to focus on what could be done and achieved in the short term, rather than what they ideally desire to achieve in the long term. One officer said there were many other needs they had as officers, but some problems were so ingrained in the system that there was no use in discussing them further. The meeting concluded with the officers' approval of action items (trainings and assessment tool) as well as suggestions for solutions.

The officers consented that their meeting conclusions and solution suggestions could be shared with the directors.

Phase III: Mini focus group with the directors

The meeting with the directors was organized in November 2015 to discuss major issues that officers were facing as well as potential solutions. First, facilitators presented the four major themes as action items (training needs, needs to improve work conditions, desire for acknowledgment and feedback, and needs for a revised risk assessment tool) and emphasized that the POs identified the need for basic clinical training and a more thorough risk assessment tool as top priorities for intervention. The facilitators shared their own and the POs' reflections on these issues along with potential solutions and suggestions. Overall, the directors agreed with the research team on study findings and stated that experiences outlined in the focus groups were consistent with their own professional experiences in the probation system as senior staff. Two participants in particular emphasized that the needs and concerns POs were raising were not new and they already knew it, but they believed there is a need for more structural solutions to address those issues. The directors' input on the POs' needs and ideas for solutions are outlined as follows.

Reflection and action toward training needs. The directors explained that train-the-trainer model was still preferable, given its efficiency and low cost for implementation. Yet, they were motivated for future collaboration with the facilitators to run training programs to improve the interviewing and assessment skills of the officers. The directors also offered to clarify the POs' job descriptions. Directors questioned whether probation should be classified as an institution for punishing the crime or rehabilitating the offender and emphasized that both the probationers and the POs need to know this clearly. This issue was especially important because the directors thought that some POs were going above and beyond their role and had unreal expectations for the probation system. Instead, the directors suggested collaborating with the other state institutions (i.e., psychiatry departments of state hospitals, substance abuse treatment centers), non-governmental organizations (i.e., agencies serving impoverished communities), and universities (i.e., professors conducting research and trainings) to create a network of judicial care and rehabilitation. Two different directors noted that they were currently working on minimizing bureaucracy during referrals. Yet, a well-established and organized network of collaborative rehabilitation of offenders would take a few years to develop and implement.

Reflection and action toward the risk assessment tool. The directors were well aware of the need to revise the assessment tool and acknowledged that they had already initiated a research study on improving the tool. One alternative solution was to adapt the available evidence-based risk assessment tools and tailor them for use in

the Turkish judicial system. The work on implementing this information system is proceeding. Some directors explained that the documentation of recidivism rates was not yet standardized in the system. The facilitators shared the utility of keeping recidivism records to examine the success rate of the probation system as well as the efficiency of the risk assessment tool. Another facilitator explained that recidivism rates and other institutional statistics were also important to give the POs some feedback on potential outcomes of their work with probationers (another need identified in the focus groups). Although they agreed with the suggestions, directors explained several bureaucratic problems to implement such structural changes.

Needs related to the physical work environment. The directors acknowledged several problems that were noted by the POs, including the disadvantages about the location of the directorate and the lack of privacy during sessions. They are planning to relocate in the near future to a more central building with individual session rooms.[4]

Needs for professional support. The facilitators also discussed the POs' needs for acknowledgement and feedback on their own job performance as well as the effectiveness of probation practices. One potential solution was to implement mentoring within the institution (a new PO being paired with a senior officer during the initial recruitment). The directors confirmed the POs' reports that supervision was given in an informal manner and a more structured mentoring system and continuous assessment of job performance would be helpful. The directors also acknowledged that the POs' needs for feedback and support may arise due to potential burnout and a lack of motivation. They suggested plans for social activities to provide the POs with a chance for relaxation. "This will also create a team environment and increase motivation," one director reported. "It [the social activity] should be a gender-neutral one. [For instance] we organized a football tournament, but female officers did not participate [in it]." The directors also discussed whether a mental health professional could be hired to refer POs to as needed. They acknowledged that the POs' confidentiality is crucial, and it would be more effective to refer POs, rather than hire an onsite clinician. The directors added that they would add this appointment to the budget for the upcoming year.

Discussion

Studies document that POs report high levels of job burn-out, role conflict, and work overload (Stephens & O'Donnell, 2001; White et al., 2005) which are associated with lower job performance and satisfaction as well as high turnover rates (Salyers et al., 2015; White et al., 2005, 2015; Wirkus, 2015). The unique characteristics of the newly established Turkish probation system add another dimension to the challenges POs experience in their work with offenders. The Turkish criminal justice system has traditionally been more inclined toward a punitive approach to

the offenders. Recently implemented "tough-on crime" incarceration policies have resulted in an acceleration of the prison population in Turkey with incarceration rates being one of the highest per capita in Europe (Walmsley, 2016). This is complemented with a general public opinion that appears to be firmly propunitive and antiprobation (Karakuş et al., 2011; Kesteren, 2009). Although the newly instituted probation system seems to ease pressure on the skyrocketing prison population in Turkey (as was the case in the United States earlier, Pontell & Welsh, 1994), the rehabilitation services offered in the probation system have been limited to be a true alternative to incarceration (Altın et al., 2015; Kamer, 2008).

This dilemma puts the probation system on an uncertain terrain and the POs in Turkey acutely feel the sense of ensuing role conflict. As such, POs in the current study reported being confused about their role in rehabilitation as opposed to law enforcement and felt overwhelmed with uncertainty. The role conflict of POs between helping the offenders and serving the public has been reported in other contexts as well (Stephens & O'Donnell, 2001; White et al., 2005). The Turkish POs in the current study also experienced problems with their physical work environment, increasing caseloads, and unmet training needs. Those needs are possibly due to the available funds being funneled into more punitive tasks in the criminal justice system (as consistent with other cases in the literature; Wirkus, 2015), as opposed to improving conditions and services of the probation system.

Within that context of role conflict and dilemma, the POs identified four major areas of needs for future intervention efforts: (a) training needs (mainly in clinical assessment, diagnosis, and interviewing skills); (b) needs to improve physical work environment to ensure safety and confidentiality of the offenders as well as accessibility of probation services; (c) needs for professional support (mainly in evaluation and supervision of job performance and effectiveness of probation practices); and (d) needs for a more thorough risk assessment tool. Among these needs, the officers requested urgent action on the needs for training programs and implementation of risk assessment tools. Action items were geared toward implementing regular training programs by expert clinicians and researchers in psychopathology and motivational interviewing, launching a mentoring system for new POs as a type of informal supervision, tracking recidivism rates in the organization to examine offender outcomes, and improvements in the risk assessment tool. Overall, the directors acknowledged the utility of these urgent needs and practical solutions and suggested that there is a need to build a larger referral network and organizational structure so that probation services could be implemented through collaboration with treatment services/hospitals, schools, community-agencies, and universities.

The needs and practical solutions identified in the current study appear to be more relevant to rehabilitation services in probation, rather than punitive approaches to criminal behavior. For instance, the officers need a more concise and a user-friendly assessment tool to identify offenders' levels of risk and identify their needs for rehabilitative services. Officers also need training in clinical

diagnostic skills, interviewing skills, and risk assessment tools to detect potential mental disorders among probationers and refer them to further mental health services. Furthermore, the directors are more focused on the solutions involving collaboration with other governmental and nongovernmental agencies for rehabilitative services such as job placement, psychiatric services, or substance abuse treatment. The findings of this study reveal that POs and directors experience these institutional struggles to a great extent. More significantly, the findings also indicate that they have prorehabilitation attitudes as documented in their needs for training, assessment, and practice, contrary to general public opinion.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research with POs regarding training needs (i.e., Haqanee, Peterson-Badali, & Skilling, 2015). We found that officers preferred brief training programs and assessment tools to incorporate in their daily probation practice and regular refresher courses or workshops along with ongoing supervision to improve their skills. Those needs appear to be a good fit with the Risk-Need-Responsivity model (RNR; Bonta & Andrews, 2007) and related risk assessment tools in the probation literature. The RNR model states that interventions and rehabilitative services should be (a) matched to the offender's level of risk (*risk*), (b) current needs (*need*); and (c) learning styles and the abilities (*responsivity*). Future research could examine the ways in which the RNR model (Bonta & Andrews, 2007) can be used in the Turkish criminal justice system to meet the training and assessment needs of the officers.

Furthermore, the POs in the current study seemed motivated to make an impact on the lives of offenders and be open to the idea of collaborating with other professionals and agencies. It also appeared that officers were optimistic about the utility of probation services, but needed support and encouragement. Implementing supportive mentoring programs for new officers and structured supervisory meetings may be helpful to boost morale among probation staff. Lambert, Altheimer, and Hogan (2010) identified that coworker support, management support, and supervisor support were effective strategies in reducing emotional exhaustion and the depersonalization aspects of job burnout among POs. Consistent with prior studies, another important dimension for officers appears to be a collegial work environment. The impact of simply participating in focus groups, although not intended, boosted group cohesion and connection among officers in the current study. Team building social activities that involve officers of all ranks would arguably be crucial to promote peer support for officers.

It should be noted that the officers and directors had different priorities for meeting intervention needs. While the officers demanded short term solutions (i.e., training programs and new risk assessment tools), the directors were more concerned about the "big picture"; they set long-term structural goals such as clarifying the job description of POs and building a network of providers for rehabilitative services. One explanation for this finding is the hierarchical nature of the probation system in Turkey (McFarlane & Canton, 2014). The low-ranking officers in the system are expected to follow the institutional rules and regulations,

report to the higher authorities, but do not have any power over implementing systemic changes. In that regard, the officers seem to have internalized their roles in following orders and feel powerless to exert any structural change. Therefore, they request solutions toward improving their daily work routines. Indeed, we believe that identifying the aim of the system as "rehabilitation" or "law enforcement" by policy makers is a crucial step to give way to other changes. Without this clarity, even the trainings to enhance rehabilitative attitudes of POs fail because of the incompatibility between the aim of these efforts and the expectations of the system (Tuncer, Erdem, & de Ruiter, 2018). It may also be the reason for the hierarchical nature of the probation system because the lack of clarity of expectations impedes POs' attempts to take the initiative and increase the likelihood of relying on their supervisors' decisions about their cases.

Our PAR study has revealed that the next steps to improve the quality of PO training and practice in Turkey should include a more in-depth evaluation of international best practices and exploring the ways in which they can be implemented in the Turkish probation system. Further collaboration with other governmental agencies and nongovernmental organizations to increase the variety of services that juveniles get is imperative for a community-based service to serve its purpose. Outdoor sports activities, arts, and vocational trainings can be implemented in the probation plans. Therefore, POs—among other needs they have specified—need interventions for attitudinal change, overcoming stigmatization and being informed about the practices in other countries.

Strengths and limitations of the study

One of the strengths of the current study is its participatory approach in its design, implementation, and process. In that manner, the current study indicates an innovative approach to an old problem, using Freire's (1970) participatory methodology. Rather than simply transferring US- and UK-based training modules, probation practices, or solutions to the Turkish probation system—as a mere reflection of one size fits all approach—we collaboratively worked with the POs in understanding their unique needs and building solutions within their immediate work context. The POs were considered as coresearchers with "expert" knowledge of their own professional lives and provided insights into their occupational needs from their own unique perspectives. The research process was initiated by the POs themselves and POs participated in problematization, reflection, and action phases of the research. The researchers attempted to build a communicative bridge between the directors and the officers through a series of focus groups and action meetings. The research findings, therefore, take into account the perspective from both sides about needs which may guide future efforts to develop evidence-based, culturally sensitive training and support programs as well as risk assessment tools that are useful for the Turkish POs.

Limitations

Several limitations of the study should be noted while interpreting the findings. One limitation is that the sample (both POs and directors) was recruited exclusively from only one probation office in Istanbul. Probation staff from other offices in Istanbul or other cities in Turkey may have reported different needs and experiences than those in the current study. In addition, we focused primarily on the perspectives of POs and directors, without also researching the perspectives of probationers and their experiences within the probation system in Turkey. Future research should engage all active agents within the probation system (probationers, lawyers, higher administrative personnel, and stakeholders) to examine the challenges of the system in a more holistic way.

In addition, the sampling process of the current study was as inclusive as possible; all staff in the probation office, regardless of the unit they were working in, were invited to participate in the study. The focus groups for both Phase I and Phase II were diverse with the inclusion of security personnel, administrative staff, archive workers, and case managers. Moderators ensured that all staff were engaged in group discussions and were encouraged to voice their opinions. For these reasons, even though the findings of the current study are not generalizable to other probation offices across Turkey, they are comprehensive enough to capture the organization structure, practices, and needs of the participating probation office in significant detail and depth.

Conclusions

The current study is the first PAR study ever conducted in the Turkish criminal justice system—a system known to be strictly hierarchical in nature. Throughout the three phases of this study, we observed that officers, even those with low-rank titles, limited power, and authority, questioned their role in the probation system. The focus groups stimulated discussions around recurring themes of role conflict and sense of powerlessness among the POs. Thus, the participatory nature of the study contributed to the *consciencization* of the POs.

Furthermore, POs actively participated in the discussions to create practical solutions to meet their occupational needs in the future. Actively working toward building solutions implied an action phase (praxis) in Freire's (1970) terms. Yet, action process was constrained with the hierarchical nature of the probation system in Turkey.

PAR appears to be a promising methodology for studying governmental organizations that are still undergoing changes and revisions. PAR research methodology facilitated a sense of *consciencization* among the low-ranked POs, but empowerment and praxis would need more structural changes at policy and institutional level. The present findings formulate strong practical recommendations for the probation system in Turkey, but a more persistent change is possible

through clarifying probation systems goals, defining PO roles, and implementing best practices in research and training.

Ethics

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Notes

1. In an attempt to test for self-selection bias, a brief survey was distributed to all officers; 117 officers agreed to participate. Focus group participants ($n = 57$) and nonparticipants ($n = 60$) were compared in their demographic characteristics prior to the study. Participants and nonparticipants did not differ in terms of their marital status, age, income level, number of active caseload, and years of experience at the criminal justice system. The only difference was gender, with female POs more likely to participate in the focus groups than males [$\chi^2 (1) = 5.2$, $p < .05$].
2. The POs in Turkey are appointed at two different ranks and each position has a different educational requirement. POs who conduct interviews with offenders, oversee their cases, and follow them through their probation period are mandated to have at least a bachelor degree in psychology, sociology, social work, or educational sciences. POs whose primarily responsibilities are conducting the initial assessment (e.g., ARDEF), treatment planning, archiving, and documenting the probation process, are required to have at least high school degree and their college degree can be in any major.
3. Several officers expressed interest in participating in the study if the initial interviews were conducted outside of their agency.
4. 4Indeed, a year after completion of the current study, the office was relocated in a different building with personalized spaces for the POs.

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