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### Recommended Citation

Whitehead, Chaundra L. (2015). "Incarcerated Women as Facilitators: A Preliminary Review of Motivations and Skill Development in Group Leadership Settings," *Adult Education Research Conference*.  
<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2015/roundtables/21>

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# **Incarcerated Women as Facilitators: A Preliminary Review of Motivations and Skill Development in Group Leadership Settings**

Chaundra L. Whitehead, Florida International University

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world with about 500 prisoners per 100,000 residents (Tsai & Scommegna, 2012). There are currently about 7 million offenders under the supervision of the adult correctional systems in the U.S. There are numerous statistics demonstrating the growth and scope of women in prison. The rate of increase has been about twice that of their male counterparts. The number of incarcerated woman has jumped a shocking 757 percent since 1977 (Talvi, 2007, p.3). As a result of these growing inmate populations there has been an increased focus on the topic of rehabilitative programming and impacting recidivism rates. Violence, violence prevention and conflict resolution skills in correctional facilities should be of concern considering prisons are simply microcosms concentrated with the troubles of society. Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) has been working to reduce violence in prisons since 1975 and has now spread to over 50 countries in prisons, schools, communities and business settings (avpusa.org). One aspect which makes AVP distinctive from other conflict resolution and anger programs is that is facilitated by non-professionals, trained inmates and community volunteers. Conflict resolution training, while limited, serves as a topic of great value in the process of developing skills that incarcerated individuals can use upon release.

The purpose of this round table is to discuss the reported motivations and skill development of 22 incarcerated women who serve as inside facilitators for AVP in a South Florida prison. This preliminary data will contribute to a phenomenological study which will examine the lived experiences of incarcerated facilitators of AVP and explore their experiences, feelings and beliefs of their roles, as well as views on their impact on those they train.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The context of this investigation is the AVP conflict resolution training program which is offered at a women's correctional facility in South Florida. There are about 25-30 inside facilitators at the women's correctional facility where this information was gathered. There were 22 facilitators present at the training where the data was gathered. They serve on teams of 4-6 facilitators to conduct workshops in English and some in Spanish. Each year there are at least 3 AVP weekends at the facility, with 60- 100 participants each weekend. This conflict resolution training program has a positive reputation in the correctional facilities and as result it experiences long waiting list of people who have indicated a desire to participate in workshops. Much of the research on AVP has been concerned with the outcome of the participants and not the benefits, impact or effect the program has on the incarcerated facilitators who administer the program. In an effort to address this deficit of information, this study seeks to explore the experiences of the incarcerated facilitators.

The facilitators participating in this study were mostly between ages 35-54 (35- 44 years,  $n = 10$ , 45-54 years,  $n = 6$ ). Violent offenses were the cause of incarceration for 17 participants. The race/ethnicity of the participants was as follows: Black,  $n = 11$ , Hispanic,  $n = 2$ , White,  $n = 7$ , Other  $n = 2$ . The majority of the participants had some college or above ( $n = 17$ ) listed as the highest level of education. Six of the participant have been AVP facilitators for more than 10 years.

## **Procedures**

The inside facilitators at the women's correctional facility had a scheduled facilitator training during which they were administered a questionnaire, with 20 items for them to answer. The questionnaire contained standard demographic questions. The program specific questions included: how many AVP workshops did you attend before becoming a facilitator, how many betterment programs have you participated in, what was your motivation for becoming an AVP facilitator, how many years have you been an AVP facilitator and list skills you have developed from being a facilitator. The participants were also asked for feedback on the clarity and types of the questions. The answers were entered into a database and some of the more prominent findings were noted.

## **Discussion**

The limited information from this initial survey provided some valuable insight. When asked "Why did you want to become a facilitator" the primary motivation listed was "Desire to help others" ( $n = 19$ ). Also listed by a high number of participants was "Encouragement/suggestion of friends or other incarcerated individuals" ( $n= 16$ ). In the open answer question related to motivation for becoming a facilitator some of the responses were:

"Allow me to use my past experiences to help someone heal."

"Desire to grow and learn different tools to deal with my anger issues."

"I wanted to step out and help others and just to better myself."

"Wanted to show others how I learned to let go."

This information on the facilitator's motivations can be used in the future for recruitment of new facilitators, retention and recognition of the assets they bring to the program. It is interesting to note that the prominent motivational factors are more intrinsic or often at the suggestion of a friend versus some type of perceived external privilege or notoriety. Leadership, speaking in front of groups, teamwork, and communication are some of the primary skills participants indicate developing as a result of being a facilitator.

## **Conclusion**

This roundtable dialogue will specifically highlight the facilitator's motivations and inspirations to train and serve as facilitators for the conflict resolution training program and how they have developed over the course of their time as facilitators. Discussion of the factors gleaned from the preliminary research can spotlight the role of facilitator motivations to participate in trainings and the development of skills which can subsequently result from leading in group setting. This information is shared in order to impact correctional education betterment program development and to promote the improvement of future research. Future research can include a comparisons between the two facilities, in order to determine if there are differences in the men's and women's response to the questions related to motivation and intentions. This research can also benefit from additional analysis with points of cross-tabulation, age & race, education & age, charge type & age, etc.

## **References**

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