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The role of spirituality/religiosity in preventing recidivism in the US

Il ruolo della spiritualità/religiosità nella prevenzione del recidivismo negli USA

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Keywords: Spirituality • Religiosity • Prevention • Recidivism.

Abstract

Only more recently, spirituality and religiosity have been hypothesized to be influential for preventing recidivism among re- turning prisoners (Meckler, 2005). As a result, an increasing cross-party interest has risen to fund initiatives that study how faith-based programming might be influential to reduce recidivism (Lane, 2009; Chaves, 2004; Hodge & Pittman, 2003; O' Connor & Pallone, 2002). In this paper, the author explores the influence of literature on spirituality, religiosity and recidivism in the US identifying areas for research improvement.

Parole chiave: Spiritualità • Religiosità • Prevenzione • Recidiva.

Riassunto

Soltanto recentemente si è ipotizzato che la spiritualità e la religiosità possano avere una certa influenza su come prevenire la recidiva. Di conseguenza, nutre un ravvivato interesse nei confronti di studi e ricerche che possano dirci in che modo programmi basati sulla fede religiosa influiscano sulla prevenzione e riduzione della recidiva. In questo lavoro l'autore esplora la letteratura su spiritualità, religiosità e recidiva negli Stati Uniti, evidenziando le aree di possibile evoluzione e perfezionamento della ricerca nel campo.

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The role of spirituality/religiosity in preventing recidivism in the US¹

1. Life after prison, the challenges of prisoner reentry and the risk of recidivism in the US

Prisoner reentry in the US has become one of the most important issues in the criminal justice system because of the large number of inmates released each year and because of the impact of such processes on the inmates themselves, on the communities where they are released, and on society at large (Petersilia, 2003). Indeed, over the last three decades, both the prison population and the incarceration rate have risen in the US. From an incarceration rate of 110 per 100,000 people in 1973, the country reached an unfortunate record of 732 in 2010, with about 1.5 million people in prison (Glaze, 2011; Glaze & Bonczar, 2007; Hughes & Wilson, 2003). As a result, large waves of individuals are being progressively released from prison – either because they have already served their sentences or have obtained parole – and thus, it is just a matter of time until the vast majority of them (except for those being executed or dying in prison) will return to free society (Travis, 2005). Indeed, some estimates indicate that more than 600,000 individuals are being released from prison in the US each year, most of them under parole (National Research Council 2007; Petersilia, 2003).

Once released, former inmates must continue their lives facing a variety of challenges, including obtaining and maintaining an employment, accessing public services (i.e. driver license) and healthcare, securing a stable place to live, and refraining from associating with deviant pairs and getting involved in criminal activities. Nevertheless, they have to confront these challenges from their own disadvantaged position regarding a lack of job skills, work experience, substance abuse education, mental health problems, and substance use (Haney, 2006; Petersilia, 2003; Travis, 2005; Shivy, Wu, Moon, Mann, Holland, & Eacho, 2007; James & Glaze, 2006). In addition, whereas many prisoners leave custody with few community or family networks and support, they also have to carry the stigma of having been in prison (Anderson-Facile, 2009; Pager, 2003). Put together, all of these barriers threaten former prisoners' chances of a successful reentry, increasing, at the same time, their chances of recidivating.

From the point of view of the communities where they are released, the rising number of prisoners released each year generates an impact on the areas and neighborhoods to which they return, especially among those poorer and

more disadvantaged communities (Harrison & Beck, 2005; Kubrin & Stewart, 2006). A study conducted in Chicago by Visher and Farrel (2005) summarily describes different impacts of the reentry process on local communities:

Residents and stakeholders in the communities to which these former prisoners return experience various concerns, from fear of increased criminal activity to the challenges of providing sufficient jobs, housing, and other support for this population [...] families may experience diverse reactions when a family member returns from incarceration. Further, high rates of incarceration of residents in a neighborhood coupled with high concentrations of former prisoners may weaken the ability of the community to perform traditional social functions. Ultimately, community members must often manage a delicate balance between feeling fearful and mistrustful of returning prisoners and providing social support and services for them. (Visher & Farrel, 2005, p.1).

The phenomenon of prisoner reentry is, indeed, impacting communities and neighborhoods nationwide. One of the criteria for evaluating the success of reentry initiatives has to do with public safety (Langhan & Levin, 2002; Petersilia, 2003; Travis, 2005). However, as there is substantial failure in reentry processes,² skepticism about reentry issues and requests for more punitive measures rise from time to time (Gendreau, Goggin, French, & Smith, 2006). In Maruna's terms, "the reintegration of the former outcast back into society represents a challenge to the moral order, a delicate transition fraught with danger and possibility" (Maruna, 2011, p. 3). The transition, then, from prison to the outside world becomes very difficult for the inmates themselves (Haney, 2001) and for their families (Martinez & Christian, 2009), as well as for communities and the greater society (Visher & Travis 2003). When post-release prisoners do not successfully reintegrate, they often return to prison and the cycle of incarceration begins (Jacobson, 2006; Pager, 2003; Solomon, Johnson, Travis, & McBride 2004; Visher & Travis 2003).

There is a certain degree of consensus among scholars regarding the idea that "the main components for successful reentry include proper housing, viable employment, and family and community support" (Anderson-Facile, 2009, p.183). However, although prisoner reintegration has been conceptualized and measured in different ways, recidivism has been considered one of the most important failures of a successful reentry. Since former inmates face a variety of overlapping disadvantages while reentering, these barriers pose important lim-

1 His areas of research have been related to the role of spirituality and religiosity in preventing recidivism, theories of criminal desistance and factors reducing recidivism, Human Rights in prisons, and substance abuse among adolescents

2 For example, Langhan and Levin (2002) found that the chances of returning to prison for former inmates are between 50 and 75% within three years after release.

itations on their reintegration and thus increase their chances of recidivating (Petersilia, 2003; Travis, 2005).

In this paper, by recognizing that those variables are, indeed, important in preventing recidivism, the author presents an introductory analysis of the specific contributions of spirituality and religiosity in preventing and/or reducing recidivism, based on my review of the literature on prisoner reentry in the US. In this regard, initial answers to some auxiliary questions are introduced: what are the main differences between spirituality and religiosity? What is a faith-based program? What is its logic? Are these initiatives effective? What are the main characteristics of spirituality and religiosity for minority groups? And, finally, what are the limitations in the current literature on spirituality and religiosity regarding the prevention of recidivism?

2. What is the influence of spirituality and religiosity in prisoner reentry in the US?

2.1. *The diverse and dynamic religious landscape in the US*

Nowadays, the religious landscape in the United States offers a diverse, dynamic and a very competitive portrait, yet overall a significant portion of the population – about an 83% of all adult Americans – has self-reported to have a religious affiliation³ (Pew Forum, 2007). First of all, despite the fact that the vast majority of the country is Christian, there are different traditions within such a tradition; whereas Protestants, overall, account for a 51% of the population, Catholics constitute a bit less than a quarter of all the adults (23.9%); finally, there is about a 5% of the population who identify themselves with other religions such as Jewish, Buddhist, Mormon, and Muslim, among others. Secondly, in terms of religious fluidity, given the wide range and diversity of the “religious marketplace”, in the US it is somewhat common to be born in a certain religious tradition and, while growing up, to switch to a different religion, which could even take place more than once. Indeed, according to estimates, about a 28% of Americans have left the faith on which they were initially raised (Pew Forum, 2007, p.1). In addition, in the US all the religious traditions are constantly losing and gaining members and the net difference between both is what determines which religion grows faster than others. Finally, those who do not identify with any religious tradition or denomination have become the group with the fastest growth and nowadays, reaching a 16.1% of the adult population; however, when variations by age are considered, those between 18–29 years are even more inclined to have no religious affiliation (25%). In sum, despite the growing percentage of individuals who identify themselves with no religious affiliation, religious beliefs – through various alternatives – continues to be explicitly recognized as important and influential for Americans (Pew Forum, 2007).

3 Which does not necessarily imply that the respondents regularly practice or participate in religious-based activities.

2.2. *Spirituality and religiosity in US prisons*

Despite the historical ties between religious organizations, faith-based groups and the US prison system (Kerley et al., 2005; Clear & Sumter, 2002; Dix-Richardson & Close, 2002), spirituality and religiosity have only recently been hypothesized to be influential for preventing and reducing recidivism among returning prisoners (Meckler, 2005). As a result, the literature on recidivism has started to show a growing interest in faith-based programming, and the idea of faith-based program has also started to gain political, cross-party support (Lane, 2009; Chaves, 2004; Hodge & Pittman, 2003; O'Connor & Pallone, 2002). Nevertheless, the relationship between religious/spiritual programs and recidivism remains relatively understudied (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Clear & Sumter, 2002; Kerley et al., 2005; O'Connor & Perreyclear, 2002; Johnson, 2004). Indeed, “most rehabilitative programs or processes neglect the realm of human experience as it relates to the role of spiritual or religious beliefs in the transformation of the lives of those in bondage, focusing on ‘the use of psychological tools of behavior modification’” (Woody, 2000, p.1). Thus, religion “has been the ‘forgotten factor’ among many researchers and research initiatives” (Johnson, 2012, p.432).

Both spirituality and religiosity have been defined as multidimensional concepts (Fernander, Wilson, Staton & Leukefeld, 2005; Amey, Albretch & Miller, 1996). Nevertheless, scholars have pointed out the importance of considering them as related but separate constructs. For example, the Fetzer working group (1999; 2003) has identified religious participation as a social experience that “involves a system of worship and doctrine that is shared within a group” (p. 2). In other words, religiosity includes i) a belief-related dimension which could be expressed as the affiliation to a specific church denomination, ii) a salience dimension, which has to do with to what extent the person’s belief influences his/her behavior and iii) a behavioral dimension, like attending services, for example (Hill et al., 2000; Pargament, 1997; Zinnbauer et al., 1997; Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999).

Spirituality, on the other hand, is more personal and experiential, “concerned with the transcendent, addressing ultimate questions about life’s meaning, with the assumption that there is more to life than what we see or fully understand” (Fetzer, 2003, p. 2). In other words, whereas spirituality is a relatively transcendent, personal process, religiosity denotes an involvement with an organized religion, which often requires a higher level of commitment and social integration (Fetzer Institute, 1999; 2003). Spirituality has usually been more difficult to define than religiosity (Fisher, 2009). Whereas Piedmont (2001), for example, uses the terms spirituality and religiosity to mean the same thing, Hill and colleagues (2000) argue that religiosity and spirituality have some commonalities but some differences, too; others, like Nolan and Crawford (1997) see religiosity as one dimension of spirituality. However, some of the common elements that different definitions of spirituality provide is a sense of a more personal relationship with transcendence (Koenig, McCullough & Larson, 2001) and a sort of personal connection with the divine (Seaward, 2001); thus, spirituality would focus more on a relational

and intimacy component than on rules and behaviors, as religiosity does (Horsburgh, 1997).

Despite the vast conceptual and psychometric developments in spirituality and religiosity that have taken place in recent years (Francis, 2009), and the considerable amount of literature that has studied the links between religiosity and crime, the field's knowledge of the influence of spirituality on crime is in its infancy (Fernander et al., 2005). The measures mainly employ only a few indicators of religiosity and dismiss spirituality (Mears et al., 2006). Moreover, prisoner reentry studies that consider the influence of spirituality and religiosity are scarce (Mears et al., 2006), which could be a reflection of scholarly biases against studying religiosity and spirituality (Camp, Dagget, Kwon & Kleinn-Saffran, 2008), despite the fact that religion and religious organizations have been present in prisons since their origin in the US.

2.3. What is a faith-based program and what is its logic?

Now, several questions come together when one attempts to understand the possible influence of faith-based programs on the desistance process. First of all, what constitutes a faith-based program? Secondly, how do faith-based programs differ from their secular counterparts? In addition, how is religion or spirituality incorporated into faith-based programs and in what manner? And, finally, are faith-based programs better positioned to serve disadvantaged populations – including offenders – and are they more effective in doing so, as proponents contend?

Scholars have pointed out the enormous definitional and operational ambiguity of faith-based programs (Mears et al., 2006; Lane, 2009; Faith-based programming, 2003) and have noticed that the lack of data imposes an additional difficulty for assessing the importance of faith-based programs on reentry, perhaps as a result of the same lack of conceptual clarity (Mears et al., 2006; O'Connor, 2005; Clear & Sumter, 2002; McGarrel, Brinker & Etindi, 1999). Thus, in order to solve the puzzle about the effectiveness of faith-based programs, a previous conceptual clarification is necessary.

Recently, the Urban Institute (2010) conducted an exploratory study among a sample of 48 faith-based in-prison and reentry programs in order to identify “key program characteristics and explore the extent and manner in which faith or spirituality infuses program content and activities” (Buck-Willison, Brazzel & Kim, 2010, p.5). The main goals of this project were to add clarity and precision to the field regarding what a faith-based program is and how faith “works” in faith-based programs from different traditions in order to “advance a platform for future research on the effectiveness of faith-based reentry and corrections programs (...) as researchers first must identify, with some level of specificity, those critical elements contributing to successful program outcomes in order to know what to replicate” (p.5).

The researchers reported a great deal of differentiation among programs – even within the same tradition – that were preliminarily clustered according to four criteria: program identity; religious activities; staff and volunteers; and

key outcomes. In short, faith-based programs were found to vary meaningfully with regard to a number of combinations for how faith or spirituality intersects with key program dimensions (p.6). Typically, however, spiritual or faith-based programs tend to work with small groups of inmates, have a qualitative interpersonal approach and seek to develop character-building, spirituality, and faith in inmates (La Vigne, Brazzell, & Small 2007; Anderson-Facile, 2009). In addition, most of them have some sort of mentoring support, which has also been identified as a component that might help former offenders to desist from crime.

How do faith-based programs work? To disentangle how faith-based programs would work, it is important to recall – along with Duwe and King (2012) – the so-called “need principle” for treating offenders. This principle states that interventions should target the dynamic predictors of recidivism, which include criminogenic needs (e.g., attitudes supportive of an antisocial lifestyle, substance abuse, and companions), sources of personal distress (e.g., anxiety, depression), and social achievement (e.g., marital status, level of education, and employment). These factors can be modified throughout the course of one's life – even in adulthood – in contrast to static predictors (e.g., gender, race, and criminal history), which cannot be changed (Gendreau, Little, & Goggin, 1996).

Then, the logic is that spirituality, religiosity and faith-based programs would enable individuals to be prepared, in advance, for modifying one or more of those dynamic predictors. In other words, “to get along with family, keep a job, support children, or form strong, positive ties with other institutions, the person must change in cognitive reasoning, attitude toward drug use, anti-social attitudes, reading level, or vocation skills. A focus on individual change is critical to our understanding of what works in corrections” (MacKenzie, 2008, p.12).

For other scholars like Giordano et al. (2002), a sustained change implies a previous kind of change, namely a “cognitive transformation.” This transformation must happen *before* a person is believed to be able to sustain a new, out-of-crime lifestyle. Here, religion and spirituality can be visualized not merely as social, external controls, but rather as catalysts for a cognitive blueprint process and as a “companion” during such a progression (Giordano et al., 2008). As a result of that cognitive transformation, religiosity and spirituality may ignite in inmates a different narrative about themselves, which in turn can promote sustained behavioral change (Maruna 2001; Terry 2003). Indeed, by rewriting one's own narrative – a sort of redemptive script – former prisoners can achieve the purpose and motivation they need to start over, adopting a new, pro-social life (Maruna, 2001).

Thus, spirituality and religiosity may also stimulate the desistance process by promoting changes in a person's sense of identity and/or a new sense of belonging (Clear et al., 2000; Mears et al., 2006). These changes have also been identified as important, dynamic factors in the process of desistance (Laub & Sampson, 2003). Indeed, as a new, pro-social identity comes to replace the former, deviant one, there is no place in this new individual for failure, violence, abuse, addiction, heartbreak, or guilt (Heimer & Matsueda, 1997; Maruna, 2001; Terry, 2003).

Data mainly obtained from qualitative studies have

shown how prisoners could be experiencing spirituality and religiosity in their lives (Johnson, 2012; Schroeder & Frana, 2009). Some of the topics that have emerged are:

- “*I’m not who I used to be*,” which carries a recognition by the offender that his previous behavior was unacceptable to society.
- “*Spiritual growth*”: the person understands he is very much a work-in-progress.
- *God versus the prison code*: a change in the penitentiary mentality or “prison code.”
- “*A positive outlook on life*”: a paradigm shift for many in criminal life to a lead a life full of hope and purpose.
- “*The need to give back to society*”: inmates have reported feeling compelled to give back to society, to make a contribution in a way that improves the situation of others.

2.4. The effectiveness of faith-based programs

Can faith-based programs, then, promote spiritual transformation that serve as significant turning points in the course of one’s life? (Johnson, 2012). If so, then, observable behavioral improvements among incarcerated persons should be expected to occur with the expansion of faith-based programs (Rioux, 2007).

Scholars have noticed that only a handful of studies have examined the effectiveness of faith-based efforts to improve prisoner reentry and reduce recidivism (Mears et al. 2006; Leventhal & Mears, 2002; Johnson & Larson, 2003). Even fewer studies have attempted to identify the distinguishing characteristics of “faith-related” programs (Sider & Unruh, 2004). Nevertheless, current preliminary findings on spirituality, religiosity and desistance are promising in their support of the positive contributions of faith-based programs for preventing recidivism.

For example, after controlling for the level of involvement in Prison-Fellowship (PF) sponsored programs, those inmates who were most active in Bible studies were significantly less likely to be rearrested during the follow-up period (Johnson, Larson & Pitts, 1997). In addition, findings from the InnerChange Program – an initiative that attempted to connect spiritual development with educational, vocational, and life-skills training (Johnson & Larson, 2003) – have revealed that participants significantly reduced reoffending (re-arrest, reconviction, and new offense re-incarceration), while re-incarceration for a technical violation revocation was not found to be significant. Sumter (1999) and O’Connor (2004) found that inmates who were frequently involved in prison religious activities were significantly less likely to be rearrested than those with little or no involvement while incarcerated. Farrel (2009) found that former inmates who experienced an increase in religiosity from prison to the community were less likely to be re-incarcerated and that pre-release religiosity moderated the effect of post-release social stressors on re-incarceration.

At the same time, spirituality and religiosity have been found to be negatively associated with proxies of recidivism, such as prison misconduct and infractions against prison

norms (Turner, 2008; O’Connor & Perryclear, 2002). Additionally, spirituality/religiosity have also been linked to inmates finding meaning in prison life, coming to a sense of reconciliation with themselves, having fewer infractions against prison norms, reducing their involvement in verbal and physical conflicts, and a doing a reevaluation of their lives (Kerley et al. 2005); these inmates also show improved psychological states, more pro-social behavior and less self-reported solitary confinement (Clear & Sumter, 2002; Kerley et al. 2005). From the point of view of prison staff, some evidence has suggested that corrections staff and non-religious inmates generally see inmates participating in faith-based programs as sincere and perceive religion as a “good thing” that can increase self-control, peace of mind, and a concern for others (Clear et al. 2000; Dammer, 2002).

One critical factor for the effectiveness of faith-based programs has to do with program completion. Indeed, Johnson and Larson (2003) reported that offenders who graduated from faith-based programs had lower recidivism rates than their counterparts that did not. Based on their work, some recent studies have examined the variables predicting program completion. In this vein, Roman, Wolff, Correa, and Buck (2007) found that an increased sense of “a higher power” increased the probability of completing the program, as well as of having a marital status. On the other hand, unmet service needs were positively associated with program failure. Daggett, Camp, Kwon, Rosenmerkel, and Klein-Saffran (2008), while evaluating the Life Connections Program (LCP), found that scripture reading, perception of self-worth, and a degree of desire for community integration significantly increased the odds that participants completed LCP.

The effectiveness of involvement in religious programming in preventing recidivism may have differential effects. Indeed, it has also been reported that the meaning of spirituality and religiosity differ for women and men, as well as for ethnic/racial groups (Mattis, 2000; Newlin, Knafl & Melkus, 2002; Stringer, 2009). In addition, faith-based programs sometimes have been found to have significant effects only for those more actively engaged in them (Johnson, Larson & Pitts, 1997; Johnson, 2004). Finally, it is important to remember that most of the relatively few studies that address spirituality and religiosity on recidivism do so by privileging classic indicators of religiosity, such as church attendance, as opposed to accounts of spirituality (Benda & Corwyn, 2001; Clear & Sumter, 2002; Idler et al., 2003; Mears et al., 2006).

The evaluation of the effectiveness of faith-based programs can also be affected by the way such initiatives are understood and “treated” by evaluators. Indeed, it could happen that faith-based programs are treated by evaluators like any other programs, with little focus on how client-level spiritual/religious beliefs, or other aspects of the client’s faith, may influence outcomes (Roman, Wolff, Correa & Buck, 2007, p.202). In this regard, some authors have argued that, in the context of prisons, inmates may become religious for either intrinsic or extrinsic reasons or both. Whereas intrinsic motivation is guided by religious tenants such as love, forgiveness and acceptance by God and the faith community—providing inmates with a new sense of self-worth, hope and identity (Clear et al. 2000; Dammer,

2002) – religion could also be adopted by extrinsic motives such as pragmatism and perceived benefits; indeed, the incarcerated may become involved in religious programs to obtain special resources such as favors, books, food items or potential connections that may help them once they're on the outside (Clear et al. 2000; Dammer, 2002). Thus, questions regarding the evaluation of faith-based programs may also have to do with how well both motivations are controlled for by evaluators in order to know how the program influences the outcomes.

It seems that the evidence for whether involvement in religious programs is associated with reduced recidivism is not conclusive (Duwe & King, 2012). Indeed, one of the most recent studies in the field, conducted by researchers at the Urban Institute, recognizes that questions about the effectiveness of faith-based programs or the isolated effect of faith-based initiatives are still pending as conceptual clarity emerges (Buck-Willison, Brazzel & Kim, 2010). There is a consensus, however, that a critical pre-requisite for the effectiveness of faith-based programs is the application of evidence-based practices that can focus on providing a behavioral intervention that will also address the criminogenic needs of participants and deliver a continuum of care from the institution to the community (Duwe & King, 2012).

2.5. Particularities of spirituality and religiosity for minority groups

Spirituality and religiosity have been found to be meaningful and influential for African Americans at both individual and collective levels. Indeed, research has shown that spirituality and religiosity have influenced virtually every domain of African American life. For example, spirituality and religiosity have been critical in shaping African Americans' social obligations, their choices of romantic partners, how they conduct their interpersonal relationships and their definitions of community (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991; Boykin & Ellison, 1995).

Spirituality is one key cultural characteristic for African-Americans that pervade almost every aspect of their lives. (Mattis, 2000; Mattis et al., 2000). Historically, spirituality has played an important role as a source of personal and communal liberation, as well as of hope and meaning, particularly in contexts characterized by social, political, and economic injustices (Dash, Jackson & Rason, 1997). In addition, spirituality has promoted political mobilization, action, and participation (Calhoun-Brown, 1996, 1999; Harris, 1994; Mattis, 2001), and it also shapes individual, family, and communal relationships by promoting altruism and unity (McAdoo, 1995; Mattis & Jagers, 2001; Mattis et al., 2000). Spirituality has also been influential in aesthetic expressions of black communities through music, art, and literature (Mattis, 2000; Douglas, 1993).

Some evidence seems to suggest that African Americans experience more emotional distress (Mirowski & Ross 1986; Sampson & Lauritsen 1997) and are significantly more spiritual than whites in the US (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). There is also evidence that spirituality and religiousness have been influential on the physical and psychological well-being of the black community (Blaine & Crocker, 1995; McAdoo, 1995), on their folk healing practices (Jack-

son, 1997), and on their struggles to cope with adversity (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Taylor & Chatters, 1991).

Despite regional differences between Latin American countries, there are some cultural values among Latinos that Campesino and Schwartz (2006) have identified as closely related to the Latino culture. Indeed, they have suggested that in order to understand the spirituality and religiosity of this group, one could "translate" their core cultural characteristics because the faith experiences of Latino have been so embedded in their culture.

Thus, *personalismo* for example, which has to do with warmth, closeness, and empathy in one's relationship with others, when translated to spiritual experiences becomes a direct and intimate relationship with a universal being, which usually includes Christian concepts of God, Jesus, the Virgin Mary and/or various saints.

Familismo, which is based on loyalty and commitment to immediate and extended family members, when translated into faith, becomes a close relationship with the family, with the members of the church community, and women occupy a central, linking role. As a result of the cultural characteristics of *machismo* and *marianismo* combined, it is expected that women express their faith and/or religious beliefs more openly than Latino men. Since "*ser macho*" (assuming a "male role") means not to express suffering or struggle, it is expected that women will assume a nurturing, self-sacrificing and pious role (Galanti, 2003). Finally, regarding *popular religiosity*, Latinos tend to strongly manifest their faith or spiritual beliefs through pseudo-religious rites – in what has been called "religious syncretism," a result of indigenous people being forced to adopt the Roman-Catholic faith during European conquests. Thus, Latinos tend to have an active, intimate relationship with their conception of God, and popular religiosity is a prevalent value.

3. Limitations of current studies on spirituality, religiosity and desistance

Previous research has examined and identified a variety of predictors of recidivism located within different domains (National Research Council 2007; Petersilia 2003; Visher & Travis 2003). Despite the fact that "much remains unknown about the factors that contribute to a successful transition from prison to society" (Bales & Mears, 2008, p.287), many studies have lent preliminary support to the idea that religion can be an important factor promoting rehabilitation and desistance (O'Connor & Perryclear, 2002). For example, religion and spirituality have the potential to promote desistance among former offenders by connecting returning prisoners to networks that can facilitate and support spiritual transformation (Johnson, 2012).

Despite these promising results and the historical ties that exist between spirituality, religion and the prison system, there is nevertheless a scarcity of quantitative research on religion, spirituality and the process of desisting from crime (Clear & Sumter, 2002; Farabee, 2005; Johnson, Larson & Pitts, 1997; O'Connor, 2005) and a variety of conceptual and methodological limitations need to be addressed if "society is to benefit from the enormous potential that faith-based services, lives, and interventions have

to offer the correctional systems” (O’Connor, 2005, p.524).

O’Connor has noticed, for example, the lack of consistency between studies: “as a result of the differences in measurement, research design, data collection, sampling, and data analysis interpretation [...] it is difficult to make definite conclusions about the relative value of religion as a method of correctional rehabilitation” (2005:524). The lack of operational consistency across definitions of religiosity, which vary greatly among studies, constitutes another issue. In addition, another problem has to do with the fact that the distinction between spirituality and religiosity has not been well captured by research in this area. Indeed, most of the studies employ limited indicators of religiosity – such as program attendance or participation in religious education – mostly ignoring spirituality (Clear et al. 2000; Clear and Sumter 2002; Rioux 2007). Further, existent studies fail to tap into the multiple aspects of religiousness beyond mere participation in services; moreover, research tends to exclude persons who do not participate in faith-based programs (Stringer, 2009).

Regarding issues of validity, one of the weaknesses has to do the fact that most studies rely strongly on self-reported data, which limits the scope of the conclusions of research in this area. In addition, with few exceptions, most studies have focused on Christian-based programs for, correspondingly, Christian prisoners and have thus excluded other religious traditions (Buck-Willison, Brazzel & Kim, 2010).

Research on spirituality and religiosity and their influence on recidivism have also shown important methodological limitations (Mears et al., 2006; Clear & Sumter, 2002; Johnson & Larson, 2003) that compromise the scope of the conclusions (O’Connor, 2005; Mears et al., 2006). O’Connor (2005) has summarized some methodological problems that have been preventing successful assessments of the effectiveness of faith-based programs:

- Studies rarely use random sampling and tend to rely mostly on quasi-experimental or convenience-type designs (i.e. snowball samples), which become non-representative.
- Most studies also do not adequately control for other possible relevant variables and fail to establish control groups; or, alternatively, many of them have problems of self-selection bias.
- Many of the studies also employ limited statistical analyses and rarely examine causality, relying on bivariate analysis. Most of them also are cross-sectional.

Despite the fact that prominent theories of desistance have mentioned spirituality and religiosity, many of the mechanisms by which spirituality may influence behavioral change remain empirically unknown (Schroeder & Frana, 2009). For example, Laub and Sampson (2003) mention religion but only as a peripheral component in the desistance process; Maruna (2001) sees in religion a pathway to “make good” on previous deviant life, but only for a reduced proportion of offenders; and Giordano et al. (2002) observe

that religion and spirituality are helpful in the process of desisting from crime, but for only a reduced segment of ex-prisoners.

Most studies have also failed to incorporate race and ethnicity in accounting for religion, spirituality and recidivism (Stringer, 2009, p.326). Of course, this is not to say that there are no studies on spirituality and religiosity for minority groups, but they tend to be centered on topics like health, healthcare, and healing, and they mostly come from fields like psychology, nursing and medicine (Reyes-Ortiz, Rodriguez & Markides, 2009; Campesino & Schwartz, 2006). Still, some work has been done on juvenile offenders, particularly African Americans (Entner Wright & Younts, 2009).

Thus, despite an overwhelming and disproportionate presence of African Americans and Latinos in US prisons, there are virtually no specific studies addressing the effects of spirituality and religiosity on these two groups. The literature on spirituality and religiosity suggests that these constructs assume specific characteristics for minority groups, which may mean the effects of religion and spirituality on racial minorities could have a very different effect in desistance processes for these groups. Due to the lack of specific research, these questions remain unanswered.

Another unanswered question has to do with the appropriate “dose” of exposure to faith-based programs. Indeed, although it is already known that program completion facilitates the reentry process, much remains unclear with regard to what the minimum/optimal length of exposure to the program is for achieving which outcomes. This question is also linked to scarcity of quantitative research on religion and desistance, as well as on understanding the *mechanisms* by which spirituality may be influential for behavioral change (Schroeder & Frana, 2009).

Finally, there is an enormous lack of systematic research from developing countries on the topics of spirituality, religiosity and prisoner reentry outcomes. The few existent studies are more qualitative in nature, mostly centered on proxies of reentry (such as misconduct); also, they have predominantly focused on women rather than men, despite the fact that men are far more present in the prison system everywhere in the world.

Turner (2008) has proposed a variety of recommendations for advancing the quality of our knowledge about the influence of spirituality and religiosity on recidivism in his recent dissertation. Some of them have to do with using factor analysis for the questions measuring religiousness/spirituality; employing qualitative methodology and/or independent sources to verify self-reported survey data; incorporating longitudinal designs; and employing control groups. Future research project should assume at least one of the challenges above presented if we want to enhance our understanding on the influence of spirituality and religiosity on recidivism, as our current knowledge yet promising, has much space for improvement.

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