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**Evaluating SUD/ODU Treatment Outcomes Related to Vocational Success for Previously
Incarcerated Persons: A Review**

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Abstract

The United States criminal justice system's (CJS) primary purpose is for the rehabilitation of the individuals within it, which calls for a comprehensive evaluation and critique of its effectiveness. Though there are many variables of the CJS that can be evaluated, for those who are battling a substance or opioid use disorder, accessing treatment is particularly difficult. Further, upon release from the jail/prison system, such persons are often expected to maintain certain parameters such as holding a job. The complex interaction between all three of these variables (incarceration history, substance use history, and employment status) have not yet been evaluated together. A review of the extant literature on vocational outcomes as they relate to substance use treatments in prison clearly shows the limited success of these treatments for participants post-release. Such findings create curiosity about what might be missing in these substance use treatments, especially as they relate to employment.

The purpose of the present manuscript is to investigate how these ideas have been historically documented and measured and subsequently to suggest a way in which to enhance the limited success of substance use treatments in the CJS. Vocational success is an outcome measure that takes into account, not only, traditional objective standards such as whether or not a person is employed, hours worked, etc., but also more subjective standards such as meaning-making in work which has not previously been included in prison-based substance use treatments. Such inclusion may increase vocational success and may lead to overall more positive recovery for individuals post-release. Future research recommendations are discussed.

Keywords: Substance use disorder, opioid use disorder, previously incarcerated, SUD/ODU treatment, meaning-making, vocational success, marginalized groups

There is a critical need to evaluate substance use and opioid use disorders (SUD/OD) treatment for previously incarcerated persons and how the resources within these treatments affect their life outside of prison, especially with regard to issues of employment. Historically, these groups have been disproportionately negatively affected by the criminal justice system of the United States (Welty et al., 2016) and may not be receiving an appropriate level of treatment while incarcerated. Chamberlain and colleagues (2019) conducted a vast cross-sectional study on substance use after release from prison with approximately 41% of respondents who met criteria for a SUD/OD prior to criminal conviction also reported some form of substance or alcohol use post-release. This high percentage potentially suggests the presence of a systemic failure of the prison substance use treatments which currently exist and have long existed with little reform success. Additionally, the effects of these treatments and simply having an incarceration history, more broadly, may influence various critical areas of daily functioning such as post-release employment.

Beyond successful completion of a treatment program, individuals with SUD/OD with a history of incarceration are typically expected to find and maintain employment immediately upon their release (Wiggins et al., 2021). Though there are numerous barriers at the individual and systemic level to attaining work for persons in this population, the way in which these persons are stigmatized is a glaring and persistent issue. Past research indicates previously incarcerated persons who experience self-stigma are more likely to have mental health concerns (More et al., 2017), which perpetuates the cycle of stigma for previously incarcerated/reintegrating community. The body of research related to this issue suggests there is more complexity to substance use recovery and reintegration post-prison release than just being able to find and maintain employment. Sheppard and Ricciardelli (2020) described the

experiences of several previously incarcerated persons who reported high frequency of low-wage employment and low frequency of gratifying work as perpetuated by stigma in the workforce. Such descriptions of the lived experiences of previously incarcerated persons attempting to find and maintain employment highlight how simply getting a job may not be sufficient for overall well-being. Substance use treatments within the criminal justice system which might include some vocational intervention, may need to go beyond basic skills-based content. Extant research demonstrates the importance of subjective elements of employment such as meaning-making for higher levels of employment retention, employee engagement, and employee satisfaction (Geldenhuys et al., 2014; Rothman, 2017; Scroggins, 2008). Thus, the purpose of this manuscript is to 1) describe the current ways in which employment is addressed in substance abuse treatment programs with incarcerated individuals and highlight the strengths and limitations of these approaches and 2) present an argument for the inclusion of a meaning-making construct in prison-based SUD/OD treatment as a path for vocational success and overall positive recovery outcomes.

Previously Incarcerated Persons and Substance Use

Prevalence

According to the National Institute of Drug Abuse, approximately 65% of the US prison population has experienced or is actively experiencing a substance use or opioid use disorder (National Institute, 2022). Among the various classes of substances, Cepeda and Springer (2014) report stimulant (cocaine and methamphetamines) “abuse” and “dependence” are particularly high in the prison population with about one-half of all persons with a substance use history reporting stimulant use. Additionally, regarding alcohol use disorders (AUDs), they report prevalence rates are ten times higher than the general population. About half of all state jail

inmates meet the criteria for AUD. Opioid use disorder has also been reported to significantly affect the prison population with approximately 11% of male inmates and 20% of female inmates indicating daily opioid consumption for at least 6 months before being arrested.

It is important to clearly emphasize that there is a disproportionate rate of racial minorities affected by systemic oppression in the United States. This oppression is easily observable in demographic breakdowns. The vast majority of persons arrested and criminally charged with drug offenses are either Black or Hispanic with 39% of drug offenses brought against Black persons and 37% brought against Hispanic persons (Taxy et al., 2015). More specifically, Taxy and colleagues (2015) described based on drug type, those accused of using crack cocaine were overwhelmingly Black, and over half of persons incarcerated for powder cocaine identified as Hispanic. Those charged with marijuana or heroin use were also largely Hispanic (59% and 48% respectively). These statistics demonstrate that racial minorities make up a significantly disproportionate rate of criminal drug charges. Racial disparity within our criminal justice system is an example of systemic oppression and further stigmatizes folks post-release from prison or jail facilitated by deeply embedded stigma which affects employment opportunities (Braveman et al., 2022). While these statistics were the most current available at the federal level, it is important to note that it is possible these numbers have changed since their publication. The larger concern around these demographics is how deeply pervasive oppressive tactics are in U.S. policing and governmental practices. Working towards de-stigmatization by using more holistic treatments (which are being done in other SUD/OD treatment settings) in the criminal justice system would at least begin to address equating standards of treatment across treatment settings.

Drug-related deaths are also extremely prevalent in persons who have been recently released from prison, which is often referred to as prison post-release mortality. One meta-analysis evaluated the number of substance-use-related deaths of individuals who had recently been released from prison. Merrall and colleagues (2010) found approximately 59% of reported deaths in relevant studies were related to substance use. Moreover, the rate of post-release mortality due to substance abuse speaks to the ineffective nature of the treatment these individuals receive (if any) for their substance/opioid use (Moller et al., 2010).

Treatment

Substance use treatments in the criminal justice system vary from evidenced-based practices such as group-based cognitive behavioral treatment (CBT) to, more commonly, non-evidenced-based options like alcoholics anonymous. For example, at the federal level, 70 federal prisons out of 122 implement a residential drug abuse program (RDAP) which is a modified CBT model. It is important to note that information regarding details of substance use treatments in the jail and prison systems is relatively vague due to the monetized nature of the treatments. However, Yanez (2005) describes the three-phase system of RDAP where phase one, which is the focus of the present discussion, emphasizes skill building, phase two focuses on transitional services, and phase three is based on the post-release ‘aftercare’ component which lasts about 6 months. One of the final skill-building components in phase one teaches participants about community living skills such as how to find employment, among many others. It seems as though evidenced-based treatments being used, at least at the federal level, include some skill-building in attaining employment. However, there seems to be a glaring lack of psychoeducation/intervention related to maintaining employment. According to Ellis and Bussert (2016), RDAP completion showed male participants to be only approximately 15% less likely to

begin using substances again and female participants to be only approximately 18% less likely to begin using substances again. These statistics, being the most current we were able to find, demonstrate the few criminal justice institutions implementing evidenced-based SUD treatments, are not widely successful.

Another example of the severely limited success of prison-based substance use treatment, between the years 2007-2009, only 26% of inmates diagnosed with a SUD/ODU participated in any form of substance use treatment within the prison system and only 5% received counseling by a professional (Bureau, 2017). Importantly, these rates only include participation rates, not treatment outcomes for which neither success nor relapse rates were reported. Such data only further support that beyond participation rate, whether substance use treatments in prisons are actually successful for those upon post-release is an important consideration.

Not only does it appear that there seems to be very low participation in prison-based treatments given the large proportion of substance use issues that are reported, but there is a critical need for research on effective interventions within the system. Despite this need, there seems to be a significant gap in research around previously incarcerated people who also have substance or opioid use-related concerns. Specifically, Peters and colleagues (2017) conducted a review of the last 20 years of research around evidence-based treatments (EBTs) for previously incarcerated persons with co-occurring substance use disorders. Their analysis identified several evidence-based treatments that have been used across the criminal justice system. Despite the increase in EBTs, the proportion of persons in the prison system who are receiving these treatments is significantly low. For example, only approximately 27% of those with a criminal record who also qualify for a SUD/ODU have any substance use treatment history (Hunt et al., 2015). Additionally, outcome research specifically in the criminal justice system is severely

limited when compared to similar research in other mental healthcare settings (Morgan et al., 2012). However, for the treatment being implemented, there seem to be significant factors not being considered with the retention of such a high SUD/OD rate among previously incarcerated persons.

In addition to the general lack of sufficient treatment availability for previously incarcerated persons with a substance use or opioid use disorder, these individuals are often required to maintain a series of conditions upon their release from the prison system. Although such conditions vary from state to state, many require at least some form of employment. According to the United States Department of Justice, the purpose of parole is, partially, to establish former inmates as productive members of society which often includes attaining and maintaining employment to some degree and preventing recidivism (Frequently, 2015). Combining the rate of SUD/OD within the prison population and the demand for parolees to be productive members of society post-release, only strengthens the need for effective SUD/OD services. In actuality, reports of employment outcomes or employment status for previously incarcerated individuals with a SUD/OD are not well outlined despite employment being a common requirement for parole/probation in the United States. In the following sections, we will begin to see how the structure of prison-based substance use treatment has historically had only limited success especially related to vocational outcomes. The major literature disparity also becomes clearer, highlighting the traditional focus on objective content in treatment with little consideration of the individual themselves in what they may consider valuable in working. This evaluation creates space for consideration of additional, though not necessarily new, vocational-based content that may be worth future research for prison-based substance use treatments.

Issues of Current Vocational Outcomes for SUD/OD Population

In substance use research, vocational/employment outcomes are often defined and measured by certain objective requirements such as competitive employment attainment and maintenance, hours worked, and income (Akinola et al., 2021). However, the hyper-attention to objectivity in this operationalization takes focus away from other potentially important and more subjective components in vocational outcome research such as personal satisfaction, motivation, or meaning-making as it relates to employment. In using the aforementioned definition of ‘vocational outcomes’ for substance use research of the previously incarcerated, the current literature shows a clear pattern of limited success. We must review the prior research on vocational outcomes in order to see this pattern which will then inform the present argument on how to address these issues.

Traditional Vocational Outcomes Associations with SUD/OD.

The limited extant literature related to employment outcomes from SUD/OD treatment is mixed and shows limited success for previously incarcerated persons. It is important to note that while much of the existing research on SUD treatments looks at employment attainment and maintenance as outcome variables, whether these treatments always include vocational content/employment interventions is not clear. However, some researchers do specifically utilize substance use interventions focusing on vocational content (Holtyn et al., 2021; Walton & Hall, 2016). For example, Holtyn and colleagues (2021) evaluated the effectiveness of the ‘therapeutic workplace’ for vocational outcomes. This program requires an incentivized, abstinence-based approach in order to participate. The therapeutic workplace was designed for individuals to participate in employment-seeking activities such as internet job searches, resume improvement, and job fair attendance, among others. The investigators looked at employment patterns related to the number of weeks employment was maintained and the number of hours worked over the

course of one year. Results indicated that approximately 27% of participants (12 out of 44) maintained employment for the entire duration of the study. One issue from this study is that the outcomes were solely focused on objective benchmarks such as job attainment rather than including work satisfaction and well-being as outcomes. There is also a discrepancy in the association between whether substance and/or opioid use is connected to employment status using these same objective standards for vocational outcomes (Dejoures, 2006; Deranty & MacMillan, 2012; Fearn et al., 2016).

The authors would like to briefly highlight that we utilize neutral drug-use language as much as possible. In order to attempt to combat the stigmatization of substance use in the mental health and academia fields, the DSM-V no longer recognizes terms such as “abuse,” or “dependence” rather simply referring to all types of “abuse” or “dependence” as “substance use” on a spectrum of mild to severe.

Fearn and colleagues (2016) used a public-access data source to analyze prevalence rates of various substance use categories and various correlate variables such as basic demographic information (i.e., education, income, employment, etc.) among persons who were actively either on probation or parole between the years 2002-2014. The authors separated participants into two categories: substance abusers and substance dependents. Although the DSM-V no longer recognizes the term “abuse” in the substance use category, the authors utilized DSM-IV criteria. Among several results reported, the authors found that for the participants in the substance abuse category, employment status (i.e., whether or not the participant was employed) was not significantly associated with any substance abuse categories. Conversely, participants in the substance dependence group demonstrated a significant negative association between employment status and three out of four substance dependence categories (Fearn et al., 2016).

The result that employment status was correlated to substance “dependence” but not substance “abuse” indicates mixed vocational outcomes within this population. Although the authors do not explicitly infer anything about this distinction, understanding how different levels of use interact with vocational outcomes is of interest. Such understanding would allow substance use treatments to better tailor their programs to the individual.

More specifically, these types of mixed results may reveal issues regarding the use of employment status as a proxy for the well-being or work satisfaction of individuals. Achieving and maintaining an employed status is not synonymous with clear access to decent work (Dejours, 2006; Deranty & MacMillan, 2012; International, 2022) or other indicators that would contribute to positive treatment outcomes. Decent work is defined as access to employment with secure wages and safe environmental conditions and often previously incarcerated individuals are relegated to working low-wage hourly jobs that provide few benefits or opportunities for advancement (Halushka, 2020).

Previously Incarcerated Persons

Not only do treatment programs for substance use treatments demonstrate limited success related to employment outcomes, but this issue is also even more prominent among the previously incarcerated community. There is a substantial amount of literature indicating the importance of research focusing on improving work outcomes for people who have been imprisoned and who are living with a SUD/OD (Varghese & Cummings, 2013). One potential reason why these programs may not be successful with the criminal justice population may be related to the employment content incorporated into substance use treatments. Jails and prisons tend to focus on education and skills-based content in their vocational interventions (Shivy et al., 2007; Varghese, 2012). In other words, there is a strong focus on objective constructs in these

interventions with a serious lack of attention to psychosocial aspects of working such as value-based or meaning-making constructs. Duwe and Clark (2017) outline this issue well in their analysis of predictors of employment post-release from prison. They describe how a person's cognition (i.e., the way inmates think about work) may be one of several predictors of post-release employment.

There are a few unique approaches to expanding beyond strictly objective measures of vocational outcomes. For example, Snodgrass and colleagues (2017) conducted a qualitative analysis of the 'It's More Than a Job Club, Sister' which is a faith-based employment intervention focusing on the integration of skills-based and values-based educational approaches for previously incarcerated women. In part, they aimed to understand how this small group of eight Black women, re-integrating into society, understand their own skills and life values as they relate to finding and attaining work. Their qualitative analysis noted four broad themes. The first theme suggested "It *Was* More Than a Job Club" (Snodgrass et al., 2017, p. 35), which focused on increased self-understanding, interpersonal skills, and overall job fit. The second theme was "God Gave Me a Second Chance-The Impact of Faith on Recovery and Employment" (Snodgrass et al., 2017, p. 36) which identified participants' connection and reconnection to their faith. The third theme was "Barriers to Employment" (Snodgrass et al., 2017, p. 37) which named having a criminal background, lack of qualifications, physical limitations, and negative thought patterns. The fourth theme was "Looking Ahead" (Snodgrass et al., 2017, p. 38) which identified self-determination, being open to transitional employment, having higher education goals, and needing patience. Of the many reported practice implications, the authors address a striking need for career counselors to have a better understanding of substance use behaviors and how to integrate those, not only with recovery but also with their broader vocational goals. For

these women, life outside of prison, especially as their life relates to employment, goes beyond basic learned job-attainment skills. The results of this study suggest an interesting and understudied concept about how previously incarcerated people who are also in substance use recovery find meaning, not only in life but with employment specifically. This study further highlights a need to expand on the objective measures of vocational outcomes. Including psychosocial factors such as values and meaning-based vocational content that complement substance use treatments may be beneficial. Further, including these factors in prison-based substance use treatments may address the gaps in the existing literature and ideally, improve vocational outcomes altogether.

Though we cannot say with certainty how substance use treatment adjustments in prisons may or may not affect vocational outcomes post-release, researchers have investigated how access to SUD treatment may affect vocational outcomes. Ramakers and colleagues (2014) found an interesting discrepancy between time spent in prison and success in finding employment. Those who were imprisoned for less than six months had more difficulty finding success in their job search compared to those with longer prison sentences. One explanation for this may be that longer prison sentences allow more time for participation in interventions with vocational content. This further highlights the need for revised prison-based treatments, especially for SUD/OD. Another potential factor for vocational outcomes is related to the typically desired qualifications of any given job. Varghese and colleagues (2009) found that those with a history of substance use-related incarceration and a lack of qualifications faced more difficulty securing job offers compared to those with no drug charges and similar qualifications. The differentiating factor between these two groups is the history of drug charges on their legal record. However, if persons with a drug use history are no longer using any substances, this

history should be unimportant. As a way of partially addressing this phenomenon, Varghese and Cummings (2013) outline a call for counseling psychologists in the vocational field to become more involved with services for the prison population. They argue for more targeted vocational interventions and outline the ways in which this idea is already supported in existing vocational theory. Their discussion of strengths and limitations of various frameworks such as Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) and Psychology of Working Theory (PWT) both highlight a lack of focus on values-based content such as meaning-making in work for this population. An absence of subjective elements of vocational outcomes such as meaning-making in SUD/OD treatment in the prison system may be an important factor.

Limitations of Traditional Vocational Outcomes

The research that focuses on traditional vocational outcomes fails to clearly identify pathways to vocational success for those with both SUD/OD and incarceration history (Dejoures, 2006; Deranty & MacMillan, 2012; Ramakers et al., 2014; Shivy et al., 2017; Varghese & Cummings, 2013). Although these researchers tend to agree that there may be significant vocational content missing from substance use treatments, these ideas have not yet been empirically tested. What is clear from the research on traditional vocational outcomes for the previously incarcerated population is that only measuring employment attainment and maintenance is not sufficient. One potential direction would be to combine the three core themes (incarceration and substance use disorder histories, and vocational outcomes) which have historically not been investigated together, through an intersectional psychological framework such as the Psychology of Working Theory.

Intersection Between SUD/OD, Incarceration, and Vocational Success

Though there is evidence of successful outcomes for SUD/OD treatment models within the criminal justice system, which includes some vocational content, actual implementation is low (Belenko, et al., 2013). Additionally, it is the expectation that those accused of drug-related crimes need to be contributing members of society through maintenance of work post-release yet little emphasis, both in practice and research, has been placed on vocational resources in SUD/OD treatment regardless of population or criminal history. Bono and colleagues (2016) conducted a twin-based analysis to look at the association between occupational risks and substance use. Results indicated after controlling for genetic and environmental factors, only decreased tobacco use was significantly associated with higher occupational status. These data indicate that while attaining and maintaining employment may be useful when it comes to influencing substance use recovery, these objective standards (attaining and maintaining employment) may not be sufficient. There may be other equally necessary considerations related to vocational outcomes.

In order to discover these additional constructs, more research regarding vocational outcomes from SUD/OD treatment for previously incarcerated persons is needed. Recent research continues to emphasize that objective standards of employment are not enough to help with SUD/OD vocational outcomes. For example, Miguel and colleagues (2019) discuss the importance of employment status at the end of treatment as being significant predictors of SUD/OD treatment outcomes. Specifically, for those who enter treatment unemployed, gaining employment before exiting treatment is a significant factor in their substance use recovery. The authors call for a more in-depth investigation into the role employment plays in successful recovery. In particular, there is a need to better understand vocational status, as it relates to both objective status and subjective components such as including more values-based ideas like

finding meaning in one's work. For individuals who are members of vulnerable groups, it is critical to define and collect data on objective and subjective vocational status. This type of research is becoming more essential as substance use concerns become more widely scrutinized in the United States. The research reviewed suggests that understanding objective employment status is necessary, but not sufficient. The subsequent discussion outlines vocational success, specifically meaning-making, as a theoretical construct that should be considered in this body of research.

A New Way of Conceptualizing Vocational Success

While there is no standard definition of 'vocation', from a psychological perspective, vocation is usually not only related to one's job choices but also encompasses a holistic view of that person and how aspects of one's whole self-intertwine with their occupational pathways (Gelso et al., 2014). Extant literature demonstrates that broadly, meaning-making in one's work experience tends to mediate employment retention (Oprea et al., 2022; Sánchez-Cardona et al., 2021). This should be considered for SUD/OD treatment as many programs do include content related to finding work, but not a discussion on how this work may contribute to one's sense of purpose or meaning. Due to the high percentage of subsequent substance use post-prison release for those who qualified for a SUD/OD (Chamberlain et al., 2019) including meaning-making in substance use treatment programs might help individuals re-entering society from the prison system to connect employment to a stronger sense of purpose and thus, may have a higher likelihood of employment retention. More specifically, using an intersectionality lens (Cooper, 2016) may also aid those who design SUD/OD treatments in understanding how a person's identities may be either advantageous or disadvantageous in their vocational success. Not only does vocation play into one's self-perception and future opportunities, but it also has a strong

effect on one's social connections. Ali and colleagues (2013) discuss the implications of social integration as the result of job loss. They suggest the effects of job loss which can lead to both internal effects such as personal shame related to not being able to meet societal expectations and external factors such as one's status in their social circle. It is clear that vocation plays an interdisciplinary and holistic role in any individual's life. Some extant literature refers to this holistic idea as 'vocational success' (Blickle & Genau, 2019; Braun et al., 2011). Much of the existing literature investigating 'vocational success' does not utilize synonymous definitions of vocational success as a construct. Emphasizing a definition of vocational success is important for increased interest in understanding barriers to attaining meaningful work in our current social and political climate. Especially when expanding vocational research to more marginalized groups, definitional precedent on any type of outcome variable is crucial.

To emphasize a more holistic approach to vocational success, we argue that the definition must go beyond the objective constructs. Vocational success should be defined as a hierarchical structure composed of both objective and subjective measures. Objective constructs include job maintenance, compensation, and opportunity for advancement and subjective constructs include job satisfaction, meaning-making, and the individual's perception of their work.

At the most basic level, vocational success should meet objective standards. Based on more recent literature in vocational psychology, the term 'vocational success' is loosely defined as a multilevel construct that first considers objective terms such as job maintenance, salary, and opportunity for added benefits such as promotions or raises (Blickle & Genau, 2019; Braun et al., 2011). Objective criteria make sense as a natural foundation of vocational success. Some researchers choose to define vocational success more specifically. One study looked at factors that related to vocational success in individuals recovering from psychosis. They defined

vocational success as being employed at a paying job for at least eight weeks while not in active psychosis (Woodside et al., 2006). This definition is specific and maintains pure objective factors. Although this definition, arguably, may not encompass a holistic view of what success is on a broader level, for a population of participants with psychosis, it seemed to be more than sufficient. Other definitions are less specific. One study defined vocational success from an objective perspective as simply the amount of time spent on a job (Tang & O'Brien, 1990). What these definitions have in common, despite not completely agreeing on exact terminology, are the impartial implications that do not allow for flexibility. The obvious missing component in the aforementioned definitions is the perspective of the working individual.

Defining vocational success on a subjective level is challenging as success in one's occupation could include a variety of factors ranging from simple satisfaction to being passionate and motivated by the vocation. It is this subjective level that makes it harder for researchers to find agreement. This problem is well summarized in an early study on vocational success among refugees. The authors argue that vocational success is more than just an evaluation of work performance and extends beyond whether or not a person stays in their job (Krau, 1983). Further, this complexity is accounted for based on the varying definitions that are used. Spurk and colleagues (2018) were interested in evaluating the connection between fearless dominance and vocational success and defined the term as a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic factors. Intrinsic factors were classified as personal satisfaction with one's job and extrinsic factors were classified as pay and status within the job (Blickle, & Genau, 2019). This concept of extrinsic versus intrinsic seems unique to this study as there were no others that used this same language. Objective versus subjective language seems to be more commonly used hence those being the focus of the present investigation. Specifically, one study defined the subjective component as

the compatibility between one's specific preferences and how one views the characteristics of the job. In other words, how well a person's job matched with the job criteria that were important and valued by them (Braun et al., 2011). While there are similarities between Braun and colleagues' subjective definition of vocational success, there is still a great deal of variety in the literature. Themes of both objective and subjective components can be found throughout these usages of vocational success, which is why explicitly combining them together would be most beneficial for future research on vocational success. This would be especially important as it relates to research investigating substance and opioid use disorders.

Vocational Success Versus Decent Work

Decent work as defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO) describes the construct as:

Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men. (2022).

First declared in 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations outlined the major tenets of decent work which generally state that all people have the right to work and free choice of employment, without discrimination, fair compensation, and the formulation of unions (United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). While the concept of decent work is theoretically beneficial, many critiques of the subject have been proposed in recent years. Bluestein and colleagues (2016) summarize these critiques with the first and foremost concern

related to how vocational and career psychology have treated the concept of work. Overall, they suggest that research into work-related issues neglected psychological health components specifically related to a person's emotional/mental connection to their work. Specifically, they constructed a compelling argument that decent work needs to include the perspectives of working people themselves which is missing in the original foundations of decent work as previously described. They proposed that decent work also needs to be meaningful work, which is a position that parallels many existing formulations in psychology about meaning at work (Blustein et al., 2016). For example, "meaning-making" within one's occupation is a central theme in the field of career counseling (Dalene, 2022; Dik et al., 2009). The historical background of career counseling, rooted in the late 19th century, indicates that meaning-making in one's work is anything but a new construct. In fact, researchers have been refining the tenets of career counseling and subsequently meaning-making for over 100 years. Yet, despite the rich knowledge that exists around career counseling and all of its benefits, these ideas have been largely omitted or ignored in some marginalized groups such as persons with substance or opioid use disorders who have been imprisoned.

Current standards of SUD/ODU treatment in the CJS (i.e., primarily objective employment status) are shown to be insufficient for maintaining substance use recovery (Bono et al., 2019) which can be reflected in low vocational success outcomes. Meaningful work for previously incarcerated persons with a SUD/ODU may be an element that improves vocational success. This idea is important for communities that have historically been disenfranchised and stigmatized. They deserve access to holistic career psychoeducation and decent work that 1) already exists for those who can afford it and 2) may aid in maintaining SUD/ODU recovery overall. Blustein and colleagues (2016) highlight an important critique of decent work as a

concept namely, the lack of inclusion of meaningful work as a major tenant of decent work. Meaningfulness can exist in many forms. With respect to work, meaningfulness is related to how valued a work-related goal is compared to how said value is held in the individual's own self-principles (May et al., 2004). Since meaning-making in the workplace is linked with higher employment retention (Oprea et al., 2022; Sánchez-Cardona et al., 2021), it may also be a possible missing link for individuals in marginalized communities that struggle to maintain employment and overall well-being. The inclusion of meaning-making in substance use treatments may help to facilitate a more holistic approach for previously incarcerated persons with a substance or opioid use disorder. A new way of conceptualizing how people with SUD/OD attain and maintain success in their work as facilitated by substance use treatment would not only be useful but also essential for future research.

Research Recommendations

Future research on vocational success for persons with SUD/OD who have been previously incarcerated should focus on including and emphasizing a structured definition of 'vocational success.' Further, evaluating how the inclusion of a meaning-making component in substance use treatment may moderate treatment outcomes, could significantly advance SUD/OD treatments, especially in populations that may struggle with employment retainment. There may be other potential subjective mediators related to meaning at work or life satisfaction broadly that may be of interest for inclusion in SUD/OD treatment. However, focusing future research on meaning-making in the workplace as a mediator for vocational success is a step towards evaluating Blustein and colleagues' (2016) critique of decent work which is a popular research topic and is only growing.

In order to operationalize meaning-making, this concept first needs to be broken down into specific constructs. Heuvel and colleagues (2009) outline existing ideas about meaning-making frameworks and suggest that meaning-making is largely a construct that integrates vague and/or difficult situations with personal value-based expression. There are both cognitive and behavioral elements that must be intentionally incorporated together to create meaning-making. These researchers were able to take these ideas and prior work with the meaning of life and health psychology measures to develop and validate a quantitative 7-item measure of meaning-making as it relates to personal values of activities. Having access to validated measures of meaning-making will allow future researchers to use such measures or make appropriate adaptations in order to evaluate whether previously incarcerated persons with SUD/ODU are able to find vocational success. Ideally, these outcomes measured at post-release would show significant moderating effects on one's vocational success and substance use recovery maintenance.

Future research should look to theory to understand how incorporating meaning-making elements in SUD/ODU treatments in the prison system affects vocational success. While the inclusion of this theory here is beyond the scope of the present discussion, the Psychology of Working Theory would provide an excellent framework to guide future studies investigating the importance of work-related meaning-making for those who were previously incarcerated and diagnosed with a SUD/ODU. The Psychology of Working Theory as described by Duffy and colleagues (2016) argues for the intersectionality of both individual and systemic elements that predict and moderate a person's ability to access decent work. This theory has been upheld throughout rapidly developing research as a strong theoretical framework for which issues among marginalized groups are present (Blustein et al., 2018; Mahatmya et al., 2022; Smith et

al., 2020). Importantly, PWT asserts that access to decent work may lead to several important outcomes such as overall well-being. Such outcomes would align with the present discussion.

Meaning-making can be incorporated into prison-based substance use disorder treatment by simply adding self-awareness exercises in order to identify personal values that can create meaningful connections with work. These exercises may be a combination of psychoeducation around how finding meaning in work can be beneficial and contemplating introspective questions such as, “What core ideas do I hold about work?” The goal of these exercises is to help the individual develop awareness around what is important to them and for the clinician to help reinforce that the individual’s thoughts and beliefs are valuable in their recovery. Such exercises can be paired with the skill-building exercises that often already exist in these treatments.

What is even more glaring in the extant research on vocational success and SUD/OD treatments is an extreme lack of qualitative inquiry. Giving participants a voice in academic research provides a unique level of insight that would not otherwise be possible with only quantitative methodology. Qualitative investigations of this topic would be able to highlight the lived experiences of people who have a history of substance use and incarceration and their experiences with job attainment and maintenance. Further, a qualitative approach could be used to explore how privileged and/or oppressed identities affect vocational success for previously incarcerated persons with a history of substance use. Acknowledging and highlighting how vocational success for various identity groups such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and sexual orientation, among many others, are affected by substance use treatments within the criminal justice system would almost certainly be of value. This methodology could also provide an opportunity to inquire about how people in these communities find or make

meaning in their work which could influence subsequent research on meaning-making in SUD/ODD treatments.

Conclusions

People who struggle with substance use disorders have numerous barriers to not only vocational success, but also to successful interpersonal relationships, physical health, and broadly a better relationship with systems of power that are continuously oppressive. The goal of the prison system is, theoretically, reform. Considering that the vast majority of the prison population is accused of drug-related crimes, treatment programs within these systems need to include additional constructs like meaning-making in one's work as one way of attempting to improve life outcomes for these individuals. Even further, the implications of such research go beyond psychology or psychological interventions. Helping previously incarcerated people with SUD/ODD would have broader implications for how we continue to adjust and improve the way in which we think about persons with SUD/ODD and further, how we humanize them as being just as deserving as anyone else of meaningful work.

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