

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Behind bars but above the bar: Prisoners consider themselves more prosocial than non-prisoners

Sedikides, C., R. Meek, et al. (2014). "Behind bars but above the bar: Prisoners consider themselves more prosocial than non-prisoners." British Journal of Social Psychology 53: 396 - 403.

Key Words: Better than average effect, self-perception, self-enhancement, prisoners

Problem with Self-perception

Summary/Conclusions

In this study, researchers examined the self-perception of incarcerated individuals. The researchers surveyed 85 convicted offenders in an English prison. The survey asked the offenders questions to rate their pro-social behaviors (e.g. honest, trustworthy, law abiding, moral, self-controlled, dependable) compared to their fellow peers and individuals in the community. The offenders rated themselves above average on all pro-social behaviors except for the law-abiding behavior compared to the community, which the prisoners rated themselves average.

Limitations of Information

The study contained a small adult sample that may not be representative of Colorado probation's population. Survey design factors (e.g. word choice, scale of rating) may have influenced the results of the survey. Anti-social attitudes and values could have impacted individuals' responses. A small number of prisoners did not rate themselves on all items.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Prior research has discovered that individuals tend to place themselves in higher regard compared to others. This tendency is known as the Better Than Average Effect (BTAE). Researchers were interested whether this effect still holds true for individuals in situations with evidence to the contrary.

The researchers recruited volunteers from a prison in the south of England. A sample of 85 prisoners between the ages of 18 and 34 participated in the study. Prisoners were asked to complete a survey with two sections. The first section asked prisoners to rate themselves on morality, kindness to others, trustworthiness, honesty, dependability, compassion, generosity, law abiding, and self-control compared to their fellow prisoners. The next section of the survey asked prisoners to rate themselves on the same traits, but instead of rating themselves against their prison peers, the survey asked individuals to rate themselves against the community. Responses from the survey were gathered and analyzed to determine if there were any significant findings.

Prisoners rated themselves significantly better than other prisoners on all traits (e.g. morality, kindness, trustworthiness). When prisoners compared themselves against the community, they rated themselves better than average with morality, kindness, self-control, compassion, generosity, dependability, trustworthiness, and honesty. The only trait that the prisoners did not rate themselves above average was law-abiding,

which they rated themselves as average. The results suggest that most individuals will continue to rate themselves better than average regardless the circumstances or environment.

Practical Applications:

- ✓ Be mindful that probationers may think their skills are better than average even when there is evidence to the contrary.
- ✓ Use a curious and supportive approach to uncover discrepancies regarding specific traits and skills.
- ✓ Reserve judgement about a probationer's truthfulness regarding skills. A probationer may not be consciously trying to mislead or exaggerate.
- ✓ Consider asking probationers what types of skills or activities were a challenge in the past.
- ✓ Develop short term goals that can shed light on the probationer's current skills and strengths.
- ✓ If a probationer states that they are "average" or "ok", consider asking additional questions to gather information as the area might identify a specific responsibility factor.
- ✓ Engage in regular conversations regarding action steps, goals, and homework. When probationers struggle, dig deeper to uncover barriers or issues getting in the way.
- ✓ Acknowledge, support, and reinforce pro-social behaviors that are difficult for the probationer to accomplish.