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Goodbye to a Worn-Out Dichotomy: Law Enforcement, Social Work, and a Balanced Approach (A Survey of Federal Probation Officer Attitudes)

Jay Whetzel¹

Mario Paparozzi²

Melissa Alexander³

Christopher T. Lowenkamp¹

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MUCH HAS BEEN LEARNED over the past three decades about how individual offender rehabilitation—"what works"—relates to reducing recidivism (Andrews, et al., 1990; Palmer, 1995; Gendreau, 1996; Gendreau, French, and Taylor, 2002; Andrews and Bonta, 2010). Far less has been learned about the impact of the professional orientation of probation officers (POs) on offender recidivism, although the significance of the professional orientation of probation and parole officers has been recognized by scholars and practitioners for well over 50 years (Ohlin, Piven and Pappenfort, 1956; Glaser, 1969; Fitzharris, 1979; Paparozzi and Gendreau, 2005).

In the context of probation supervision, applying evidence-based principles for effective intervention is at all times colored by the professional orientation of POs. If, for example, POs favor law enforcement functions, a tepid approach toward evidence-based policies, programs, and practices that support offender rehabilitation may result. Many in the field of corrections would agree that staff orientation can "make or break" a program or policy (Takagi, 1973; Gendreau, Goggin, and Smith, 1999; Paparozzi and DeMichele, 2008; Paparozzi and Schlager, 2009). Given this distinct possibility, it is essential for probation organizations to engage in rigorous self-analysis to determine how and to what extent the values and professional orientation of POs might interact with efforts to reduce offender recidivism.

A primary function of POs is to spur and nurture the pro-social reintegration of offenders. In so doing, two essential public safety functions of probation are fulfilled: a) short-term risk management of criminals conditionally supervised in the community; and b) long-term behavioral reform for the purpose of individual offender recidivism reduction (Paparozzi and

Hinzman, 2005). In the context of probation supervision, these public safety outcomes are generally accomplished through case management strategies involving some combination of law enforcement and social/casework activities. The importance of achieving a balance between law enforcement and social/casework activities and in achieving a proper temporal ordering of these activities in the context of probation supervision has yet to be addressed by the probation profession (Paparozzi and DeMichele, 2008). A law enforcement/social worker dichotomy has traditionally been invoked to describe officers' professional orientations, with many staff at all organizational levels being polarized at one extreme or the other. It is well-known among probation insiders that this dichotomy is a fact of professional life, and that emphasis on one or the other ebbs and flows with the shifting political and ideological cultures unique to a particular epoch.⁴

Research findings suggest that the "incompatibility of the control and assistance tasks," results in a "chasm" that impedes effective probation supervision (Fulton et al., 1997). Some probation professionals contend that this role conflict be resolved by abandoning the social work/assistance role entirely (Barkdull 1976). Others simply seem to accept that both orientations have a place in community corrections.

Researchers have suggested that PO role conflict negatively affects organizational effectiveness and service delivery to offenders. Blumberg (1974) noted that unresolved law enforcement and assistance roles contribute to an uncertain professional status and "civil service malaise." Whitehead and Lindquist (1985), in a study of probation officer burnout, found that 63 percent of respondents noted the role conflict between law enforcement and social casework functions and the general impersonal treatment of offenders as contributing to burnout.

Researchers and practitioners spend significant time and effort trying to understand how to reform offender behavior in correctional settings. Virtually no effort, however, is expended on the relationship between professional orientation of probation officers and recidivism. The significance of the failure to examine the relationship between PO orientation and the success or failure of probationers cannot be overstated (Studt, 1973; Paparozzi and DeMichele, 2008). The very foundation upon which the delivery of appropriate treatment services is based is flawed if the individuals operationalizing the delivery of services are inappropriate role models, inflexible in their response to probationer relapses, uncaring, cynical about their employing agency and the clients served, and the like (see Offender Survey article, this issue of *Federal Probation*).

Even the best evidence-based principles must be "washed through" the filters of staff values and professional orientation, and it is logical to assume that this filtering process may sometimes moderate or even negate the positive effects of evidence-based programs, policies, and practices that target offender rehabilitation. Frontline probation staff socially construct the realities of probation supervision in the context of their everyday perceptions and professional orientations towards their job and the offenders under supervision. It is this everyday construction of reality that determines the therapeutic integrity of the application of evidence-based principles. It is at least plausible that the efficacy of an evidence-based rehabilitation program or service may be diminished by probation officers who do not value offender rehabilitation and therefore implement such programs less than enthusiastically.

Examining, understanding, and modifying, when appropriate, the professional orientations and attitudes of federal probation officers is a critical step in the adoption of evidence-based practices. After a brief review of the relevant research literature, this study presents preliminary findings from two surveys of staff job orientation administered to federal probation officers in three districts. Future studies will seek to replicate the findings of previous research (Paparozzi and Gendreau, 2005) demonstrating that officers with a balanced professional approach realized lower rates of technical violations and rates of arrest than did officers with either law enforcement or social worker orientations.

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Previous Research

Officer Attitudes

In the past, probation and parole officer attitudes have typically been investigated as they relate

to role orientation (Glaser, 1969; Klockars, 1972; Ohlin, Piven, and Papenfort 1956; O'Leary and Duffee, 1971; and Rowan, 1956), role conflict (Clear and Latessa, 1993; Erwin and Bennett, 1987; Hardyman, 1988; and McCleary, 1978), goal orientation (Ross and Johnson, 1997), job stress (Whitehead and Lindquist, 1989), sources of role orientation (Clear and Latessa, 1993; Sluder and Reddington, 1993), and attitudes towards use and carrying of weapons (Sluder, Shearer, and Potts, 1991). Officers' attitudes toward their roles and their goal orientation have also been linked to officer behaviors to determine if an individual officer's preferences influence his or her treatment of clients (Clear and Latessa, 1993; Dembo, 1974; Stichman, Fulton, Latessa, and Travis, 1997a). There has been, however, a dearth of research exploring officer attitudes and behaviors and their effects on probationer/parolee outcomes. As Fulton et al. (1997) suggest, if further training may modulate an officer's attitudes towards a more balanced approach or towards greater orientation towards treatment, the question of what effect these attitudes may contribute to officer and offender behavior becomes increasingly important.

Officer Attitudes and Performance

Although there have been numerous studies on different types of probation officer attitudes and behaviors, research on how attitudes and role preferences translate into correctional practice is limited. Wright (1998) found that officers may tend to hold more views supportive of offender reform than offender control. These views may be important to probation and parole because they may affect how an officer reacts to offender behaviors, including violations of supervision. Clear and O'Leary (1983) found that attitudes of authority and assistance were significantly related to both the type and the number of supervision objectives that officers set for clients. Research by Katz (1982) and Duffee (1975) shows that attitudes may be related to certain behaviors, particularly an officer's decision to recommend revocation. Dembo's (1972) findings supported this link—officers with a low reintegrative score, representing a greater punishment orientation, were more likely to take formal action on violations and to recommend return to prison. Dembo concluded that officer orientations not only affect job behavior, but they may affect case outcomes as well. This finding is particularly important given the degree of agreement between officer recommendations at sentencing and actual case disposition (Hagan, 1975; Walsh, 1985).

In contrast to the notion that individual attitudes impact behaviors, research conducted by Erwin and Bennett (1987), Clear and Latessa (1993), and Stichman et al. (1997b) demonstrates that despite clear role preferences, officers are able to perform tasks of both assistance and control. Clear and Latessa (1993) attempted to clarify the relationship between role attitude and role performance through measuring probation officers' attitudes toward role performances and by giving the officers case scenarios for which they selected the supervision tasks they considered to be important for their clients. Stichman et al. (1997b) similarly found that although officers in intensive supervision programs (ISP) may have different attitudes from regular officers, these attitudes were only somewhat related to their behaviors. These studies suggest that officers, regardless of their personal role orientation, could perform control or treatment tasks according to the policies of the program.

Officer Attitudes and Outcomes

Conspicuously missing from the literature on officer role orientations in probation and parole is a discussion about the influence of various orientations on client recidivism. Perhaps the most relevant and recent research on philosophical groundings and effectiveness in probation and parole comes from the interest in intermediate sanction programs (ISPs). Research on ISPs in the past has shown that surveillance-oriented approaches are not effective in reducing recidivism. Many ISP policies either explicitly or implicitly encourage authoritative supervision strategies. Although there is often an increase in supervision activities for offenders on ISP, there is rarely a coinciding increase in intensity of services. Harris (1987:21) notes that this emphasis on control has caused field agents to "become avowed enemies of their charges, operating...to incarcerate, and as urine takers, money collectors, compliance monitors, electronic surveillance gadget readers, and law enforcers."

Although intervention and services are included in their programs, most ISPs emphasize surveillance and enforcement. Many ISP evaluations demonstrate an increase in technical violations for ISP offenders as compared to offenders placed in other sentencing options, but

there are no significant differences between the groups in new arrest rates (Erwin, 1987; Petersilia and Turner, 1993; Wagner and Baird, 1993). As stated previously, Dembo (1972) found that officers who had a greater punishment orientation were more likely to take formal action on violations and to recommend return to prison. As ISP policies encourage more authoritative supervision strategies, it is possible that these officers could have more surveillance-oriented attitudes, which in turn may lead to higher technical violation and revocation rates.

An evaluation of an ISP operated by the New Jersey State Parole Board is particularly instructive concerning a link between officer attitudes, roles, and ISP outcomes (Paparozzi, 1994). As further evidence of a relationship between treatment and recidivism reduction, Paparozzi found that ISP subjects received twice as many treatment referrals as a matched group of offenders on traditional parole supervision and had a 20 percent lower recidivism rate. Paparozzi also examined the relationship between officer attitudes, roles, and parole outcomes. Based on a survey of officer attitudes, Paparozzi categorized the ISP officers as social work officers, balanced approach officers, and law enforcement officers. Recidivism data for each category revealed that the social work officers had significantly higher rates of new arrests and lower rates of technical violations, the law enforcement officers had significantly higher rates of technical violations and lower rates of new arrests, and the balanced approach officers had lower rates of both technical violations and new arrests.

Paparozzi concluded that a balanced approach to supervision that utilizes the full range of potential probation and parole activities—intervention, surveillance, and enforcement—is essential to meeting both the short-term objectives of behavioral change and long-term objectives of reduced recidivism. Additional support favoring the balanced approach as the most effective in terms of recidivism was found by Stichman et al. (1997b).

Changing Officer Attitudes

If officer attitude ends up being related to offender outcomes and recommendations for prison, the policy implications are significant, particularly for efforts to change officer attitudes. However, if officer attitudes are fixed, the utility of the findings linking officer attitude to offender performance becomes somewhat limited. Research by Fulton et al. (1997) indicates that officer attitudes can be changed by training sessions. In this research, Fulton et al. (1997) measured the attitudes of officers who underwent comprehensive training and development activities and compared them to officers who did not participate in such activities. The training and development activities focused on effective interventions, objectives-based case management, and risk/needs assessment. The officers who underwent the training and development were more likely to have attitudinal scores more supportive of the rehabilitative function of probation and were more likely to support activities that promote behavioral change rather than just surveillance.

The current study provides the preliminary results of a study in the federal system that links the responses of officers on two surveys to client outcomes. This study covers the methodology employed in administering the surveys and the results of those surveys. Investigations regarding the relationship between officer responses and caseload outcomes will be forthcoming.

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Method

The researchers asked three districts (Massachusetts, the Eastern District of Michigan, and the Middle District of North Carolina) to participate in the officer survey. All three districts have been involved in implementing EBP in their districts, have shown interest in understanding the impact of officer orientation on supervision, and have a history of surveying officers for various purposes. All officers, probation officer assistants, supervisory probation officers, deputy chiefs, and chiefs were asked to complete two surveys, the Officer Orientation Questionnaire (see Paparozzi & Gendreau, 2005) and the Staff Attitude Survey (see Fulton et al., 1997).

The researchers used a modified Dillman method (Dillman, 2000) to conduct the surveys. Each chief, through a detailed email, advised his or her staff that the district was participating in the research. The staff was informed of the nature of the research and the importance of their

participation. A week later, the chief sent an email to all officers asking them to complete the two surveys with survey links. Reminder emails were sent after one week, and then again after an additional three weeks. Two respondents never completed the survey. Six others initiated the Officer Orientation Questionnaire but failed to completely fill in all items. This led to 152 usable surveys (out of 160) or a 95 percent completion rate for the officer orientation questionnaire. Only two respondents failed to complete the Staff Attitude Survey; thus, 156 out of 158 officers completed the questionnaire, for a 98 percent completion rate.

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Results

As indicated in [Table 1](#), most respondents were from Michigan Eastern (the largest district of the three), followed by North Carolina Middle, and then Massachusetts (the smallest district). [Table 2](#) indicates the percentage and number of respondents by position. Clearly, the majority of respondents were probation officers (61 percent), followed by probation officer specialists (18 percent). Smaller percentages are noted in the probation officer assistant category and the administrative groups.

The Officer Orientation Questionnaire

The officer orientation questionnaire (OOQ) was developed by Dembo (1972). The survey comprises 24 items rated on a scale of 1 to 7, indicating the officer's agreement with statements that represent two extremes of a continuum. For example, one item has the extremes of "the causes of crime are located in factors internal to the offender" and "the causes of crime are to be found in factors external to the offender." Officers must rate where their belief falls on the continuum. The possible range of scores is 24 to 168. The OOQ was used by Paparozzi & Gendreau (2005) and they provided the following scoring cutoffs: 24–71 law enforcement oriented officers, 72–120 balanced officers, and 121–168 social work oriented officers. The average score on the OOQ for those that completed the survey was 112.75, with a standard deviation of 13.55. The range was 61 to 142. There was very little variation in the average scores by district. An F-test confirmed that the differences from one district to another were not statistically significant.

[Table 4](#) contains the distribution of officer orientation categories based on their overall scores and cutoffs used by Paparozzi and Gendreau (2005). As can be seen from [Table 4](#), one respondent was categorized as law enforcement oriented, 105 were identified as balanced and 46 were identified as social work oriented (1 percent, 69 percent, and 30 percent respectively). Federal officers in this sample are apparently balanced; almost 70 percent are scored as balanced; only one percent score as law enforcement. In contrast, in a study by Paparozzi and Gendreau (2005), officers were equally distributed across three groups.

Additional analysis revealed that scores differ significantly by position (see [Table 5](#)). Post hoc analysis indicated that probation officers differed significantly from chiefs. It is unclear why there is a difference between the upper management and line staff. One hypothesis may be that all three districts are heavily involved in EBP efforts, which tend to fall in the social work category, and this may be the emphasis for the leadership at this time.

Staff Attitude Survey

The Staff Attitude Survey (SAS) includes 33 semantic differentials that are intended to measure officer attitudes. The items are designed to measure attitudes about the goals of supervision, officer roles, and supervision strategies. For example, one item states "your primary concern as a probation officer is to monitor offender compliance" (a score of 1) versus "rehabilitate the offender" (a score of 7). Respondents are instructed to circle the number on the scale that best describes them. The scale was modified from a range of 1 to 6, to a range of 1 to 7, to allow respondents the option to choose a neutral score within the middle of the range. The SAS includes two scales. The first, the Subjective Role Scale, has items that focus on what officers do. The second scale, the Strategy Scale, evaluates *how* officers perform their functions (Fulton et al., 1997).

[Table 6](#) provides the descriptive statistics for the scale9 scores and the average response across the 33 items. All scales were coded so that higher numbers indicate a social work or

intervention perspective rather than law enforcement. The scale scores were slightly higher than those reported by Fulton et al.; however, that could be because we lengthened the possible responses on our survey from 1 through 6 to 1 through 7. The overall average for the 33 items is 4.57, which is close to the middle of the scale (4.6 out of a possible 7). Again, as with the Officer Orientation Questionnaire, the SAS data indicate that these officers are balanced. The averages for all respondents are presented, as there were no differences by district.

There are variations on the SAS by position (see [Table 7](#)). Specialists and supervisors have a slightly greater social work orientation than probation officer assistants or probation officers. Additionally, deputy chiefs and chiefs score a bit higher on the survey than do the other respondents, indicating more of a social work orientation.

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Discussion

The results from this preliminary analysis are encouraging. These data indicate that the federal officers who completed these surveys are balanced in their approach to their work. Such a balanced approach has been shown to yield lower rates of technical violations and lower rates of rearrests in prior studies (Paparozzi, 1994), and bodes well for the federal probation system as these are two primary outcome measures that are considered critical. This finding is also consistent with recent data that have shown that the rearrest rates of federal offenders are comparatively low, ranging from 12 percent at year one, 18 percent at year two, and 24 percent after year three (Baber, 2010), outcomes that are generally lower than those seen in state systems. Finally, these results are consistent with recent survey data from offenders (see Offender Survey article, this issue of *Federal Probation*), in which offenders had very favorable impressions of their officers, with 94 percent describing their officers as "firm but fair." Taken together, they present a positive impression of federal supervision.

Limitations

A significant limitation to this study is that it only included three of the 94 districts in the system. The small number of districts certainly precludes generalizations beyond the three districts. In addition, these districts have been involved in implementing evidence-based practices and decision making for many years, which calls into question the degree to which they represent the typical district in the federal system. The second major limitation is the fact that we have yet to link the officer responses to caseload outcomes. As it now stands, this study is merely one of many that seek to understand the orientation of probation officers, albeit with a unique sample of federal officers. However, the linking of officer responses on these surveys to officer caseload outcomes will be completed within the next six months.

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Conclusion

As discussed earlier, even the best evidence-based principles must be "washed through" the filters of staff values and professional orientation. Arguably, balanced officers create relationships with offenders that are neither indulgent of anti-social attitudes and noncompliance nor authoritative and heavy-handed. Balanced officers utilize both ends of the extreme, likely responding most appropriately to offender behavior and providing a pro-social role model for offenders. As offenders generally have more contact with officers than with any referral agent over the course of three to five years of supervision, it is critical that agencies tap into the potential effectiveness of these interactions. Combining the balanced approach with the evidence-based programs and principles that continue to emerge (i.e., Bonta et al., 2008) will likely result in significant increases in positive outcomes. As community corrections increasingly recognizes the critical role of officers as interventionists, rather than simply brokers of services, it is important that we fully understand the impact that officer attitudes and orientation may have on the supervision process.

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Tables

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Table 1.		
<i>Distribution of Respondents Across District</i>		
District	N	%
Massachusetts ¹	46	27
Michigan-Eastern ²	65	38
North Carolina-Middle ³	59	35

¹ 3 respondents did not complete the OOQ and 1 did not complete the SAS

² 2 respondents did not complete the OOQ and 1 did not complete the SAS

³ 1 respondent did not complete the SAS

Table 2.
Distribution of Respondents Across Position

Position	N	%
Probation Officer Assistant	6	4
Probation Officer ⁵	97	61
Probation Officer Specialist ⁶	28	18
SUSPO	20	13
Deputy Chief ⁷	5	3
Chief ⁸	2	1

⁵ Two respondents did not complete the OOQ and one did not complete the SAS. One officer, not represented in these numbers, did not initiate either survey.

⁶ Three respondents did not complete the OOQ.

⁷ One respondent did not complete the OOQ and one respondent did not complete the SAS.

⁸ One chief, not represented in these numbers, did not initiate either survey.

Table 3.
Descriptive Statistics for the OOQ for All Respondents and by District

District	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
All	152	113.00	13.57	61	142
MA	43	114.19	11.56	85	140
MI-E	63	112.68	15.20	61	142
NC-M	46	112.33	13.15	83	141

$F(149,2) = 0.236$; $p = 0.790$

Table 4.
Distribution of Officer Orientation Categories for All Respondents and by District

District	Law Enforcement		Balanced		Social Work	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
All	1	1	105	69	46	30
MA	0	0	31	72	12	28
MI-E	1	2	41	65	21	33
NC-M	0	0	33	72	3	28

$\chi^2(4) = 2.602$; $p = 0.627$

Table 5.
Descriptive Statistics for the OOQ by Position

District	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Probation Officer Assistant	6	116.83	16.388	95	140
Probation Officer	95	110.15	13.299	61	138
Probation Officer Specialist	25	116.32	9.503	93	131
SUSPO	20	116.90	15.242	94	142
Deputy Chief	4	125.00	12.728	110	137
Chief	2	132.50	0.707	132	133

F(150,5) = 3.240; p = 0.008

Table 6.
Descriptive Statistics on Subjective Role Scale, the Strategies Scale, and the Average Item Response for All Respondents

Scale	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Subjective	168	29.64	4.84	15	42
Strategies	168	19.64	3.15	12	27
Average Item Rating	168	4.56	0.58	3.36	6.33

Table 7.
Descriptive Statistics for the Average Item Response on the SAS by Position

District	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Probation Officer Assistant	6	4.62	0.46	4.03	5.15
Probation Officer	96	4.41	0.52	3.36	6.00
Probation Officer Specialist	28	4.87	0.64	4.00	6.33
SUSPO	20	4.76	0.57	3.73	5.76
Deputy Chief	4	4.97	0.50	4.55	5.67
Chief	2	5.23	0.11	5.15	5.30

F(150,5) = 4.738; p = 0.000

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7. Harold B. Wooten, *Federal Probation*, "It's OK, Supervision Enthusiasts: You Can Come Home Now!" December 1985.
8. *Guide to Judiciary Policy*, Volume 8, Part E, "The Supervision of Federal Offenders" (formerly Monograph 109). J-Net (federal judiciary intranet), § 150(a)(b) (last revised 12-10-10).
9. Community observation is fieldwork that does not involve a direct contact with the offender or collateral sources. It may be the preferred way to unobtrusively monitor compliance with specific conditions in a way that does not intrude on the activity itself. For example, an officer might drive by an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting to see if the offender's car is parked there or go to an offender's work site or residence during the start or end time of his or her reported work schedule, which may be appropriate if the offender is suspected of falsely reporting employment. *Guide to Judiciary Policy*, Volume 8, Part E, §450.30, op.cit.
10. The Judicial Conference Committee on Criminal Law set forth guidance for search and seizure in Search and Seizure Guidelines for Probation Officers in the Supervision of Offenders on Supervised Release, which was approved by the Judicial Conference at its September 2010 session (JCUS-SEP 2010).
11. *Guide to Judiciary Policy*, op. cit.
12. See Johnson et al. in this edition of *Federal Probation*, and Lowenkamp and Whetzel, 2010.
13. See Robinson et al. in this edition of *Federal Probation*.
14. See Hughes, *Federal Probation*, September 2008, "Results-based Management in *Federal Probation* and Pretrial Services"; and Baber, *Federal Probation*, December 2010, "Results-based Framework for Post-conviction Supervision Recidivism Analysis."

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1. Probation Administrator, Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, Office of Probation and Pretrial Services.
2. Chair and Professor, Department of Sociology & Criminal Justice, University of North Carolina, Pembroke.
3. Chief Probation Officer, U.S. Probation, Middle District of North Carolina.
4. This observation is based on the authors' extensive experience as practitioners, consultants, and trainers for 40 years at the national and local levels.
5. Two respondents did not complete the OOQ and one did not complete the SAS. One officer, not represented in these numbers, did not initiate either survey.
6. Three respondents did not complete the OOQ.
7. One respondent did not complete the OOQ and one respondent did not complete the SAS.
8. One chief, not represented in these numbers, did not initiate either survey.
9. As a note, the alpha reliability coefficients generated with these data were somewhat smaller than those generated by Fulton et al. (1997). The alpha reliability scores for these data were .83 and .69 for the subjective role and strategies scales respectively, while the alpha reliabilities generated by Fulton et al.'s data were .88 and .78 respectively.

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