ASCEND LIFE SKILLS: A QUALITATIVE PROGRAM EVALUATION EXAMINING

PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCES IN A SACRAMENTO COUNTY REHABILITATION

PROGRAM

A Thesis

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Rebecca S. Ferrell

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Department of Psychology

Abstract

of

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In response to an increasing crime rate after WWII, the United States began developing programs which were designed to assist in improving the lives of those living in poor and deprived conditions. In order to maintain accountability of these programs and reduce fraudulent funding, program evaluations were introduced. The present evaluation focuses on a program called Ascend Life Skills. Upon completion of the program, Ascend participants were asked if they would be willing to participate in an interview with Dr. Jennie Singer regarding the challenges and support offenders face in the community. A group of comparison subjects recruited through Sacramento County Probation Department and Sacramento Sheriffs Department were also interviewed and asked the same questions. Results suggested that the Ascend life skills program had helped participants learn new skills, find employment, maintain prosocial networks, and increase their self-esteem.

_____, Committee Chair
Dr. Lawrence Meyers
_____
Date

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Last, but most certainly not least, I would like to thank my incredible husband. You have been there for me through the laughs, the tears, the sweat, the fears, and everything in between. You were there when I wanted to quit because I felt like the combination of graduate school and life had become too much. You were there (and quiet) during the countless hours I spent working on my thesis. Your love and support mean more to me than I can even say, and I love you more and more every day. Thank you for being you.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Crime is a problem that has existed in the United States since it became an

independent nation in 1776. Throughout history, people have tried to come up with

different ways to intervene, proposing punishments such as slavery, lashings, the pillory

(aka "stretch-neck"), public executions, and incarceration (Cox, 2003). However, these

punishments, as horrendous as some might be, did not deter people from committing

crime. Although there is not empirical evidence explaining why the crime rate has

continued to increase, some speculate that growing tensions following World War II

surrounding "civil rights and other issues" might have aided in the escalation of crime in

the United States during the 1950's and 1960's (National Research Council, 2014).

In response to this increasing crime rate, the federal government decided to adopt

a different approach in the mid-1960s. In an attempt to improve the quality of life for

those living in poor and deprived conditions, the federal government introduced programs

like the War on Poverty, the Neighborhood Youths Corp, Head Start, and Opportunity for

Youth (Theobald, 1985). These programs focused on the needs of the people, providing

jobs, education, and health care services. It did not take long for the states to follow the

federal government's lead, and within a few short years a number of states and cities

began developing their own programs aimed at reducing the crime rates within their

communities (Theobald, 1985).

Unfortunately, the federal government made one major oversight when

developing these human services programs; they failed to devise a way to ensure that

these programs were actually achieving their intended goals and objectives (Theobald, 1985). While some of the proponents of the programs believed that the programs had been effective in helping people improve their lives, the programs had not been formally evaluated. Due to the fact that most programs did not have a way to prove their effectiveness, funding to many of the humans service programs were either reduced or eliminated in the 1970s. From that moment forward, the federal government required that all programs must be held accountable for effectiveness and legitimacy in order to be granted federal or state funding (Theobald, 1985). As an example, if a director claimed that the goal of his or her program were to help ex-offenders find employment, the program had to provide evidence that the program's curriculum focused on strategies to find employment, and that the individuals who completed the program were able to find and sustain employment, more so than if they had not been enrolled in the program. In other words, a program evaluation had to show that participants experienced improved circumstances, because of their experiences in the program.

As a way to increase the accountability of these programs and reduce fraudulent funding, evaluations were introduced. Designed to determine the effectiveness of a program, the fiscal cost of the program, and whether or not the program was worthwhile, program evaluations became a necessary part of human service. In fact, the program evaluations were so important that funds were allocated specifically for them (Theobald, 1985). Today, evaluations continue to be very important to the integrity and legitimacy of a program, and federal or state funding often requires proof of positive evaluations, in order to distribute funding.

The Nature of Program Evaluation

As stated previously, program evaluations were initially introduced as a way to determine the effectiveness of human service programs. However, over the years, evaluations were proven to be useful when examining a number of factors related to programs. For instance, in addition to telling an evaluator how effective a program is, the evaluation can help to determine the reasons why the program is successful or ineffective (Theobald, 1985). If the program is failing or doing poorly in certain areas, the evaluation can help program staff figure out which areas need improvement. On the other hand, if the program is successful, the evaluation could reveal the reasons for the program's success, which could then be used as a template for the creation of future human service programs.

In addition to determining the successes and failures of a program, evaluations can be used to examine the "cost-to-benefit ratio" of a program which could be used as support for funding applications (Theobald, 1985). The "cost-to-benefit ratio" refers to the costs of the program compared to the benefits received from the program. Most human service programs rely on funding, either from the county, state, federal government, or sometimes from all of the above. In order to apply for and be granted funding, programs must detail how much it will cost to run the program, and provide evidence supporting its effectiveness. Evaluations can help to accomplish both of these objectives. As an example, the evaluation could reveal that the cost of running the human services program is less than the cost of housing someone in jail should they recidivate. If the evaluation finds the program to be effective, this could potentially save

the county, state, and federal governments money over time. Today, many of the program evaluations conducted are used for this purpose specifically.

For the present study, however, the program evaluation will focus primarily on the changes in individuals who have completed the Ascend Life Skills Program. While the results may be used by Ascend for funding in the future, this evaluation will not examine the cost-to-benefit ratio specifically. Rather, the evaluation will examine changes in criminal thinking styles, self-esteem, and self-appraisal to determine if the program is achieving its intended goals.

Chapter 2

TYPES OF EVALUATION

Program evaluations can be used to achieve several different goals; however, it is important to choose the appropriate type of evaluation before one begins the process. The five most common types of evaluation designs include formative, summative, process, outcomes, and impact. While one type of evaluation is no more important than the other, they each provide the evaluator with different information.

Formative and Process Evaluation

The formative and process evaluations accomplish two different yet similar goals. Focusing on the design and implementation of a program, respectively, these types of evaluations help the evaluator determine how effective the program was at meeting its intended goals (University of Minnesota, 2018). A formative evaluation tends to be used during the early stages of a program's development or not long after the program has been operating. The results of the evaluation can be very valuable for the developers of the program, as it provides insight into how well the program is being delivered to participants and any possible changes that should be implemented moving forward (University of Minnesota, 2018). The process evaluation also provides valuable information, but specifically examines how the program is implemented and if the program is doing what it planned to do. In other words, this type of evaluation focuses on process of the program: are goals on being met? Are participants doing what they program claimed they would be doing. The process evaluation helps evaluators,

developers, instructors, and those from the outside looking in to better understand the process and effectiveness of the program.

Summative Evaluations

A summative evaluation, on the other hand, strictly evaluates programs after they have already begun and examines how effective the program was overall. Summative evaluations can be a very important tool when trying to decide whether a program should be used in other locations, or if it should be continued all together (University of Minnesota, 2018). It can also be used when programs are applying for funding, which is an incredibly important aspect of operating the program. Programs usually need to demonstrate that they are effective and succeeding in what they have intended to accomplish in order for funding to be granted, and summative evaluations provide others outside of the program with evidence that the program has or has not met the intended goals.

Outcome and Impact Evaluations

Last, but certainly not least, are the Outcome and Impact Evaluations. These two types of evaluations are also similar, but rather than focusing on design and implementation, these types of evaluation examine "changes in comprehension, attitudes, behaviors, and practice that result from program activities" (University of Minnesota, 2018). The benefit of using an outcome evaluation over an impact evaluation is that outcome evaluations can examine both short- and long-term effects of the program whereas impact evaluations only provide information regarding the long-term effects of the program. Both types of evaluation are incredibly useful, yet they each provide

slightly different information. Understanding the short-term effects of the program can be useful in determining how long the program is effective before participants begin reverting to old thinking patterns and behavior. The long-term effects are also important to understand so that program developers know which aspects of the program provide the longest lasting results and why.

Furthermore, impact evaluations can and are used to influence policy decisions (University of Minnesota, 2018). In order to influence policy, the program must provide policy makers with evidence that the program is effective, not just for short periods of time, but in the long-term as well. Impact evaluations help accomplish this goal by examining changes in individuals as a result of the program and how it would impact people if the program was not available (University of Minnesota, 2018). Depending on the situation, this type of evaluation could arguably be one of the most important types of evaluation because of its power to influence policy decisions. For the purpose of this program evaluation, an outcome evaluation will be conducted in order to better understand the impact the program had on participants who completed the Ascend Life Skills Program.

Chapter 3

EVALUATION DESIGNS

The type of design used when conducting a program evaluation is also important. There are three major types of designs that are most commonly used, and they are referred to as exploratory, descriptive, and experimental/quasi-experimental designs. Although all three of the designs help evaluators better understand the inner workings and outcomes of a program, each design is used to view the program from a different and unique angle.

Exploratory Designs

The exploratory designs, for instance, are most commonly used during the early stages of a program's development. Assisting in demonstrating the need for the program, exploratory studies generally cite current literature surrounding the specific topic, examine existing data or information, and in some cases conduct interviews with certain members of the target population to better understand the needs of the population (Pennsylvania Mental Health & Justice Center of Excellence, 2006). These types of studies are incredibly important during the early stages of developing a program, as it aids in the creation of a program that is tailored to the needs of the population being helped. The formative evaluation is an example of an exploratory design, and it is most commonly used to examine the beginning stages of program development or in the early stages of the program's operation. Using an exploratory design early in the development stage provides the program developers a better gauge of the needs of the population and

may even shed some light on reasons why certain variables may or may not be working within the program.

Descriptive Designs

Descriptive designs are another commonly used design. No surprise by its name, descriptive designs are used to describe the way a program is operating (i.e. is the program operating the way it was designed to operate?) and the outcomes of the program (Pennsylvania Mental Health & Justice Center of Excellence, 2006). Perhaps one of the most popular types of descriptive designs, correlational studies examine the relationship between two variables to determine if the two are associated. The study is not stating that one causes the other, but rather the presence of one increases or decreases the change in the other. Outcome evaluations could also be categorized as a type of descriptive design. Once participants complete a program, the outcome evaluation is used to reveal changes that may have occurred in the individual who participated in the program. The evaluation is not stating that the program is the sole cause of the change, but rather demonstrates the association between participation in the program and changes in the individual. This study will be implementing a descriptive design, as the program evaluation will consist of examining participants' responses to interview questions asked upon completion of the program.

Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs

The experimental and quasi-experimental designs, on the other hand, are different from the aforementioned designs. Although the experimental and quasi-experimental designs also examine correlational changes, these types of designs are generally

concerned with determining causality. In other words, did the presence of A cause the

presence of B (Pennsylvania Mental Health & Justice Center of Excellence, 2006). In

order to determine causality, experimental designs utilize pre- and post- tests to compare

experimental groups (i.e. individuals receiving treatment) to control groups (i.e.

individuals who are not receiving treatment). The pre-tests examine participants before

treatment or the program has begun. The post-test is usually the same as the pre-test but

is administered after treatment or the program has ended. The two tests are administered

to the experimental and control groups, and then are compared. The differences between

the two groups allow researchers to better understand the effect the treatment or program

had on the individuals. However, because group participation is randomly assigned in

experimental design, experimental designs are not always "ideal or feasible" when it

comes to working with human populations (Pennsylvania Mental Health & Justice Center

of Excellence, 2006). It could be deemed unethical to withhold treatment that is believed

to be beneficial from individuals who may also benefit from the treatment, even if the

reason for withholding is to determine if the treatment works as intended.

Quasi-experimental designs seem to provide a solution to the problem faced by

experimental design, since randomization is not required in experimental designs

(Pennsylvania Mental Health & Justice Center of Excellence, 2006). For instance, an

evaluator using a quasi-experimental design to determine treatment effectiveness could

compare a group of individuals who have already been receiving treatment with a group

of individuals who have not received any treatment. The evaluator is not placing these

individuals into these two separate categories; these individuals either were or were not receiving treatment, and the evaluator is simply comparing the two different outcomes.

An alternative to pre- and post-tests in quasi-experimental design is a time-series or interrupted time-series test. This type of test is used at different intervals before the treatment or program has begun and different intervals after the treatment or program has ended (Pennsylvania Mental Health & Justice Center of Excellence, 2006). Only one group is used for this type of quasi-experimental design, allowing researchers to learn more information about groups that may not have a comparison group. However, it is important to be aware that quasi-experimental designs are also criticized for selection bias.

Chapter 4

QUALITATIVE PROGRAM EVALUATION

When it comes to gathering data, researchers must first begin by determining the goal of the program evaluation. For instance, if the goal of the evaluation is to generalize the results to a larger population, then a quantitative approach might be the best choice. On the other hand, if the goal is not to generalize, but rather examine how participants in the program feel, think, and apply the program to their own lives, a qualitative approach might be more appropriate.

In addition, in some cases quantitative measures are not appropriate or the best tool for certain populations. For example, some tribal communities are more comfortable with storytelling and narrative methods of communicating information (Office of Data, Analysis, Research & Evaluation: Administration on Children, Youth, & Families, 2016). In these scenarios, a qualitative method could potentially gather more valuable information than a quantitative method. Although researchers tend to choose one approach or the other, the two are not mutually exclusive and the inclusion of both often provides a more in-depth evaluation.

Chapter 5

QUALITATIVE METHODS

Evaluators who interested in using qualitative methods are usually doing so to gain a deeper understanding of the effect the program had on its participants. Why did the program have an effect on the participants? How did the program effect the participants? These types of questions are often answered by using qualitative methods such as in-depth interview questions, direct observation, and document review. In turn, these methods allow for the formulation or modification of a program's theory of change and the development of a logic model (Office of Data, Analysis, Research & Evaluation: Administration on Children, Youth, & Families, 2016). Logic models are important in program evaluations because they demonstrate the program's "inputs, activities, and short-, medium-, and long-range outcomes" (Office of Data, Analysis, Research & Evaluation: Administration on Children, Youth, & Families, 2016). If the program has been evaluated and deemed to be successful in its goals, the program's theory of change and logic model could be replicated for use in other programs.

In-Depth Interviews

One of the most common forms of qualitative evaluation is an in-depth interview. Generally structured in one of three ways, the interviews can be conducted one-on-one or in a group setting. However, researchers should carefully consider the best type of interview before beginning, as each type has its own strengths and weaknesses.

One of the most common types of interviews are the structured or standardized, open-ended interviews. As the name suggests, these interview questions are prepared and

structured before the interview process has begun. Each participant is asked the same questions, in the same order, every time. The benefit of using this type of interview is that it makes it easier for the analyst(s) to organize and analyze the data (Office of Data, Analysis, Research & Evaluation: Administration on Children, Youth, & Families, 2016). However, a drawback to using this approach is that it does not allow the interviewer the freedom to explore topics that could be important to the respondent (Office of Data, Analysis, Research & Evaluation: Administration on Children, Youth, & Families, 2016). Since the goal of most qualitative studies is to gather as much valuable information as possible, structured or standardized, open-ended interviews can sometimes be more restrictive than the other two common types of interviews.

In contrast to structured interviews, unstructured or informal interviews do not require the evaluator to prepare a list of questions in advance. In unstructured interviews, each of the participants are asked questions spontaneously based on the direction of the conversation or something that was noted in observation (Office of Data, Analysis, Research & Evaluation: Administration on Children, Youth, & Families, 2016). Although this type of interview allows evaluators the most freedom to explore potentially important topics, it is not time sensitive and could become too complicated to synthesize and analyze (Office of Data, Analysis, Research & Evaluation: Administration on Children, Youth, & Families, 2016). Bearing in mind the length of time it takes to conduct the interviews is important because once the interviews have been completed they must still be transcribed, coded, and analyzed. The longer the interview, the longer and harder it will be to transcribe, code, and analyze the participants responses.

Semi-structured interviews are yet another type of interview, and they combine the best of both the structured and unstructured interviews. In semi-structured interviews, interviewers prepare an interview guide but do not abide by specific wording when interviewing the participants. The strength of this type of interview is that helps the interviewer maintain their focus, while simultaneously allowing some freedom to explore topics that might be important (Office of Data, Analysis, Research & Evaluation: Administration on Children, Youth, & Families, 2016). The only potential problem to using this type of interview would be the experience of the interviewer. If an inexperienced interviewer is conducting the interview, it could be difficult, if not impossible, to identify when and how to probe into potentially important topics brought up during the course of the interview (Office of Data, Analysis, Research & Evaluation: Administration on Children, Youth, & Families, 2016). However, if an experienced interviewer is available, the semi-structured interview could provide the greatest quantity of valuable information.

Direct Observation

Qualitative data can also be gathered for a program evaluation by analyzing the detailed notes of the evaluator (Office of Data, Analysis, Research & Evaluation: Administration on Children, Youth, & Families, 2016). For instance, the program evaluation conducted in 2016 by K. Harrison and her colleagues involved following military medical residents during a one-week community hospice and palliative medicine (HPM) rotation. During this one-week rotation, evaluators followed medical residents in order to understand what it was like for students to work in the homes and with the

families of those receiving hospice and palliative care (Harrison, Boyden, Kalish, Muir,

Richardson, and Connor, 2016).

While this type of evaluation is useful in understanding what the participants are

doing in the program and how participants work with one another, it does have its

limitations. For instance, evaluators must spend time in the program and any notes taken

must be prepared and analyzed (Office of Data, Analysis, Research & Evaluation:

Administration on Children, Youth, & Families, 2016). This can become very costly if

one or more evaluators have been hired. In addition, the mere presence of the evaluator

in the program could have an effect on the participants. For these reasons, direct

observations in program evaluations are not as common as interviews.

Document Review

Document review is one of the least commonly used qualitative methods, but it

does have the potential to provide a good deal of valuable information. Often utilized

during the early stages of program development, document review can be used to develop

a new program or even stimulate new questions to be asked during interviews or

observations (Office of Data, Analysis, Research & Evaluation: Administration on

Children, Youth, & Families, 2016). Document reviews are also useful when the topic of

interest cannot be manipulated. For example, Notley and her colleagues were interested

in the reasons why women return to smoking after giving birth. Rather than collecting

new data, Notley and her colleagues analyzed and completed a systematic review

qualitative data that had already been published surrounding the topic of postpartum

smoking relapse (Notley, Blyth, Craig, Edwards, & Holland, 2015). Doing so allowed

researchers to identify common factors that led women to smoking relapse after giving birth, including stress and partner support (Notley, Blyth, Craig, Edwards, & Holland, 2015). Even though these researchers did not evaluate a specific program, the example is relevant because it provides evidence of the valuable information that can be gathered by analyzing qualitative data.

Chapter 6

THE ASCEND LIFE SKILLS PROGRAM

The program being evaluated in the present study is called Ascend Life skills. After working in the criminal justice system for years, two criminal defense attorneys, Christine Morse Fitch and Toni White, came to recognize that many of their clients lacked the skills required to be productive members of society. For instance, many did not know how to find employment, budget money, or avoid antisocial networks (Fitch, personal communication, 2017). As a result, many of these individuals would in turn engage in antisocial behaviors and activity, landing them back in jail or prison. In order to reduce the rate of recidivism, as well as provide these individuals with essential life skills, Fitch and White created the Ascend Life Skills Program (Fitch, personal communication, 2017).

Following the Risk Needs Responsivity Model (Bonta & Andrews, 2007), while combining certain aspects of Glenn Walters' 'Criminal Lifestyle Theory' (Walters, 2002) with parts of the 'Thinking for Change' program, the two criminal defense attorneys developed the curriculum which is currently being used in the Ascend Program (Singer, personal communication, 2017). Formally introduced in 1990, the Risk Needs Responsivity Model is described as a tool which could be used to "assess and rehabilitate criminals in Canada and around the world" (Bonta & Andrews, 2007). The model focuses on three key principles: risk, need, and responsivity. According to the risk principle, criminal behaviors can be predicted, and treatment should be focused on those with the highest risk of offending (Bonta & Andrews, 2007). The need principle, on the

other hand, focuses on individual criminogenic needs, such as lack of problem solving skills. Lastly, the responsivity principle is concerned with the type of treatment provided (Bonta & Andrews, 2007). In an attempt to addressing the risks, needs, and responsivity of the individuals in the program, Fitch and White utilized the Risk-Needs-Responsivity Model when developing the Ascend program.

Fitch and White also used the Glenn Walters' 'Criminal Lifestyle Theory' (2002) when creating Ascend. According to Walters, people who engage in criminal behaviors tend to experience eight types of thinking styles: Cutoff, cognitive indolence, discontinuity, entitlement, mollification, power orientation, sentimentality, and super-optimism (Walters, 2002; Singer et al., 2013). By focusing on these specific criminal thinking styles, Walters argues that it is possible to promote prosocial thinking and networking, thereby reducing criminal behavior and activity. Following Walter's lead, Fitch and White (2017) have incorporated Walter's theory into the Ascend Life Skills curriculum, reminding the participants how important it is to begin changing the way that he or she thinks.

The 'Thinking for Change' program (Walters, 2002; Singer, personal communication, 2017) also utilizes cognitive behavioral techniques to facilitate this change. Originally developed by Bush, Glick, and Taymans (1997), the 'Thinking for Change' program is based on cognitive restructuring theory (Bush, Glick, Taymans, 1997). A part of Cognitive Behavioral Theory, cognitive restructuring theory posits that it is possible to change the way in which a person thinks (Fitch, personal communication, 2017)). For instance, rather than thinking that "I always answer incorrectly", cognitive

restructuring therapy helps to change this line of thinking to something like "I may not always answer correctly, but sometimes I do think of the right answer" (Boyes, 2013). Concentrating on improving social and problem solving skills, the Ascend program focuses on changing thinking styles and incorporates the learning of these skills into the curriculum.

Across a total of four months, the Ascend program focuses on mental and physical health, restorative justice, access to higher education, establishing careers, creating prosocial contacts, social adjustment, time and money management, identifying criminal thinking styles, and avoiding new charges or violations. By focusing on these areas, the goal is to help individuals reduce their criminal thinking styles, avoid antisocial networks and behavior, increase prosocial networks and behavior, and increase their self-esteem and sense of agency. If these goals are achieved, the hope is that there will be a lower rate of recidivism among participants, who will be more likely to become contributing members in society.

Chapter 7

METHOD

Participants

For the present evaluation, a total of 29 participants were interviewed. Thirteen

of the 29 participants completed the Ascend Life Skills Program between November

2012 and January 2015. Enrolled based on their criminogenic needs (i.e. criminal

thinking styles and behavior, poor employment history, lack of financial planning, and

poor relationship skills), participants were referred to the Ascend program through the

Sacramento County Court, Sacramento County Sheriff's Department, or Sacramento

County Probation. Individuals who were active substance abusers and/or too mentally ill

to benefit from the program were excluded from participation in the Ascend program

(Singer, personal communication, 2018). Upon completion of the program, graduates

were asked by their program directors if they would like to volunteer for an interview

with Dr. Jennie Singer. Out of the thirteen participants who completed the program and

volunteered to be interviewed, nine were male and four were female.

For evaluation purposes, a comparison group was also examined. The

comparison group consisted of sixteen individuals who were not enrolled in the Ascend

program but were referred by Sacramento County Probation to complete the Ascend

evaluation study. Participants in the comparison group were recruited through flyers

placed in the Sacramento County Sheriff's Department and by letters sent by the

Sacramento County Probation Department. However, only individuals who matched the

Ascend Program graduates on demographic variables, such as gender, age, and ethnicity,

were selected to participate in the interview process. Within the comparison group, there were ten males and six females.

For comparison purposes, the target and comparison groups were asked the same interview questions. The responses of the participants in the comparison group were then compared with the responses of the graduates of the Ascend Life Skills Program. Participation in the interviews were entirely voluntary, and no names or other personal identifying information were collected for the purpose of the evaluation. For compensation, each interviewee received a $25 Target gift card which was funded by the College of Health and Human Services (Singer, personal communication, 2018).

Evaluation Approach

Since the purpose of this evaluation was to determine if the Ascend program achieved its intended goals, an outcome evaluation was conducted after participants had completed the program. The outcome evaluation was chosen because it could be particularly helpful when trying to gain a better understanding of any changes in the participants' behaviors and attitudes. Categorized as a type of descriptive design, the outcome evaluation demonstrates the association between participation in the program and changes in the individual.

Structured Interview

Based on Sampson and Laub's age-graded life course theory of crime, Dr. Singer developed a structured interview consisting of eight questions. The Ascend and comparison group participants were asked the same eight questions, and their responses were compared. Participants were asked questions such as "how are you feeling about

your future" and "what would you say most contributed to how you feel" (Singer, 2018).

A full list of the interview questions can be found on pages 43 – 44. Responses were

then coded and grouped according to the Risk-Needs Responsivity Model, Criminal

Lifestyle Theory, Restructuring Theory, and self-esteem. For instance, participants were

asked "could you describe a typical day in your life?" If the participant answered that

they were actively searching for employment or currently employed, the answer was

coded and grouped under the Risk-Needs Responsivity Model. If the participant

answered that they chose to engage in positive activities, such as reading, exercise, and

spending time with family, then the response was coded and grouped under the Criminal

Lifestyle Theory. If the participant stated that he or she felt optimistic about their future,

the response was coded and grouped under the Cognitive Restructuring Theory. Each of

the questions and participants' responses were analyzed, coded, and grouped the same

way.

Procedure

Between the Ascend and comparison groups, a total of twenty-nine individual

interviews were conducted. Ascend participants were asked by the directors of the

program if they felt comfortable participating in an interview with Dr. Jennie Singer.

Upon volunteering to be interviewed, Dr. Singer provided each participant a consent

form, provided a brief description of the reason for the research, and explained that they

could withdrawal from participation at any time. Participants were also informed that

they would receive the $25 gift card regardless of completing the interview process.

Furthermore, participants were assured that the full interviews would remain anonymous,

confidential, and no real names or identifying information would be used for the purpose of the study. Since no names or any other identifying information were collected, and the interview questions were provided from a secondary source, this project did not require University IRB approval.

Those who volunteered were interviewed at Sacramento County Probation Department, with the exception of three interviews which took place at the Center for Justice and Policy Research at University of California, Sacramento. Half of the interviews at Sacramento County Probation were conducted in a large, open room. The other half of the interviews at Sacramento County Probation Department were conducted in smaller, interview rooms. During each interview, only the interviewee, Dr. Singer, a note taker, computer, a table, three chairs, and an audio-recorder were present in the room. Dr. Yvette Farmer also conducted several of the interviews, accompanied by a note taker. Dr. Farmer first shadowed Dr. Singer in a few of the interviews, in order to learn the process, and then moved on to interviewing the participants alone. Dr. Singer and Dr. Farmer have both had extensive experience with in-depth interviews.

A little over half of the comparison group participants learned about the interviews with Dr. Singer through letters from their probation officers. Probation officers sent letters to individuals with a similar criminal risk level to those in the Ascend program, and asked if they would like to volunteer for an interview with Dr. Jennie Singer. In exchange, a $25 gift card would be provided for compensation of their time. Of the comparison group participants who volunteered, approximately half were on house arrest or work-release. These individuals were chosen because approximately half of the

Ascend group participants were also on house arrest or work-release. As with the Ascend participants, the comparison group participants were provided a consent form, a brief description of the reason for the research, and told that they could withdraw from participation at any time. The $25 gift card was provided regardless of completing the interview process. Due to the fact that approximately half of the participants in the comparison group were on house arrest, about half of the interviews took place at the interviewee's home. For in-home interviews, Dr. Jennie Singer or Dr. Farmer and a note taker would meet at the participant's home and conduct the interview.

The remaining comparison group participants were asked in person by a probation officer if they would like to volunteer for an interview with Dr. Singer. Standing outside the Sacramento County Probation building, a probation officer asked people who were entering the building and not part of Ascend if they were interested in participating in a study. If they said they would like to volunteer, they were referred to Dr. Singer where she provided a consent form and described the reason for the study. It was also explained that a $25 gift card would be provided regardless of completing the interview process. All participants interviewed at Sacramento County Probation Department were interviewed individually in an interview room. In the interview room, only the interviewee, Dr. Singer and/or Dr. Farmer, the note taker, a table, 3 chairs, a computer, and an audio recorder were present.

For the Ascend and comparison groups, each of the interviews lasted between 15 minutes and 65 minutes. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and hand written, in

case the audio-recording failed. The interviews were then later transcribed and coded by a hired qualitative analyst.

Data Transcription and Analysis

In order to transcribe the interviews, Dr. Singer chose to use a transcription service called 'Transcribe Me' which was highly recommended by California State University, Sacramento. Using a grant through the Research and Creative Activities Sub-Committee, Dr. Singer was able to upload the audio files into Transcribe Me and have them written down. Approximately a week later, the transcription service returned IBM and Mac formats of the transcribed interviews. Those interviews were then passed along to a qualitative data analyst to be coded and analyzed. Once the data has been analyzed and coded by the qualitative analyst, the data was analyzed a second time by Rebecca Ferrell to confirm the results. Once all data has been analyzed by both parties, the results were examined closely and reported.

Chapter 8

RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative evaluation was to help determine if the Ascend

program was achieving its intended goals. Some of these goals include learning new skill

sets, finding employment, enrolling in college, an optimistic outlook on the future,

maintaining a prosocial environment, and increased self-esteem. Based on these goals,

the Ascend and comparison group participants' responses were closely examined and

coded according to the Risk Needs Responsivity Model (Bonta & Andrews, 2007), Glenn

Walters' Criminal Lifestyle Theory (Walters, 2009), Cognitive Restructuring Theory

(Boyes, 2013), and statements related to self-esteem. Overall, many of the Ascend

participants discussed the importance of maintaining prosocial environments and

relationships in order to remain sober and avoid recidivating.

Outcomes

Skills Acquired. Focusing on the needs of and risks faced by ex-offenders, the

participants in the Ascend group were asked questions such as "did a rehabilitation

program or programs play a role in your outlook?" and "can you describe the program or

programs for me?" In response to these questions, participants described how much they

learned from the program ($n = 6$) and how important the program was in maintaining a

prosocial environment ($n = 4$):

> I took the DUI class, it was pointless in my opinion. The Ascend program did
>
> more for me than the DUI class did. DUI class is the same routine. With the
>
> Ascend program, I learned a lot. I looked forward to being in class – I don't even

have to come. It's a really good program, they really care and they really want

you to succeed. It's not just talked about this is what you have to do, it your

choice. They are willing to help you (Ascend Participant #4)

Facing similar risks and needs as the Ascend participants, the comparison

participants were also asked "did a rehabilitation program or programs play a role in your

outlook?" and "can you describe the program or programs for me?" In response to these

questions, the comparison participants started that they had learned new tools from the

program(s) ($n = 7$) and were maintaining a prosocial environment ($n = 1$):

The methadone program has really helped. The counseling program also. They

go over goals with us… short term and long term. We discuss each single goal,

whether or not I've made progress. Some of the long-term goals we don't talk

about every time (Comparison Participant #5).

According to the responses provided by the Ascend participants and comparison

participants, both groups seem to have learned new tools from the programs they have

attended. However, compared to the comparison participants, more of the Ascend

participants appear to have maintained prosocial environments since being released from

jail.

Employment. Employment is another important need faced by many ex-

offenders. When the Ascend participants were asked to describe a typical day in their

life, a number of interviewees stated that they were either currently employed and/or

actively looking for employment ($n = 7$):

I wake up around 5:00 am, get dressed, go to work. I work for AT&T, helping

people with their problems. Watch my son, put him to sleep, then go to bed by

about 10:00. Then get up and do it all over again (Ascend Participant #9).

Asking the comparison participants the same questions, the interviewees were

asked to describe a typical day in their life. In response to "describe a typical day in your

life", several participants responded that they were currently employed and/or actively

looking for employment ($n = 5$):

Usually just get up with my son. My job is a brand retailer, food distribution job.

Two of our big companies are Peets' and Caribou. We do the displays at the

stores. My brother is the director of operations at a large company and I'm trying

to get on full time (Comparison Participant #5).

In terms of employment, there does not seem to be a large difference in the

number of Ascend and comparison participants who responded that they were actively

searching for or currently employed. Although there were a more Ascend participants

who stated they were employed compared to comparison participants, both groups

described their current employment situation and/or their plans for future employment.

College Attendance. Individuals described the importance of obtaining a college

education in their future. When the Ascend participants were asked "how are you feeling

about your future?", participants described the importance of employment ($n = 3$),

education, and their plans to attend college ($n = 2$). Although some were unsure of the

field of study they would like to pursue, others described their plans in more detail:

I like to cook. I'm not super good at it, but I've been told I make some things

good. I would rather do zoology, but there's not really any work available for

that. Culinary teaches you to cook plus the business side. Also, it's a little short

time in school. I don't really like school, but I know it's necessary (Ascend

Participant #5).

The importance of employment and obtaining college education was also

discussed by some of the comparison participants. When asked and "how are you feeling

about your future?", participants described being employed or looking for employment (*n*

= 2) and seeking further education (*n* = 2):

Good. I will go back to ARC for funeral services education. It is an introduction

to it. I did this back in 2008, then I started back drinking and doing drugs and I

stopped going to school. When I was going to school my self-esteem went really

high. It made me feel really good (Comparison Participant #6).

Based on the participant's responses to the question "how are you feeling about

your future" it seems as though both groups understand and appreciate the importance of

employment and furthering their education to obtain better employment opportunities.

Participants in both groups described why they believed education was important and the

field of study they planned to pursue in the future.

Engaging in Positive Activities. Finding new, positive activities can be

challenging, but the Ascend participants described the new activities they have taken on

since enrolling in the program. When asked to describe a typical day in their life,

participants expressed interest in activities such as reading, spending more time with family, and exercising (*n = 4*):

> I work out now, [I'm] healthy, I learned how to eat good through this program. I read labels at the store. This program changed how I eat. Having the right information and having leaders like this is breath of fresh air. My days coming here are very good (Ascend Participant #11).

Comparison participants were also asked to describe a typical day in their life. In response to this question, a number of participants described participating in positive activities such as meditation and engaging with supportive family members and friends (*n = 7*):

> Wake up, coffee, cigarette, meditate, read my bible, chores, meetings, phone calls, testing, checking in with probation, just taking it slow, and using support that I have (Comparison Participant #9).

Based on the responses provided by the Ascend and comparison group participants, it seems that the comparison group participants were more likely to engage in positive activities such as reading, exercising, and spending time with family. Although the Ascend participants also stated that they chose to engage in similar positive activities, it appears that a larger number of comparison group participants described engaging in positive activities. However, it should be mentioned that it is possible this result could be explained by the difference in number of women who were interviewed in the Ascend and comparison groups. For instance, there were 4 women interviewed from the Ascend group and there were 6 women interviewed from the comparison group.

Among these participants, more of the women compared to men made reference to

spending time with family as a way to maintain prosocial networks. Therefore, it is

possible that this difference in the two groups could be related to gender differences.

      Program Attendance. In an attempt to assess any changes in prosocial thinking

and networks, Ascend interviewees were asked "did a rehabilitation program or programs

play a role in your outlook?" Some participants stated that they chose to continue

attending the program ($n = 5$). In addition to the program providing a means to stay on

track and maintain a positive environment, the participants explain that the directors of

the program impart care and love that the participants may not have experienced in the

past:

> At first when I got out of jail, it kinda sucked. I was going to the stupid classes in
>
> jail, they didn't do anything. Coming here, it [is] understandable to me. Coming
>
> to these classes really opened my mind. I didn't think I was gonna learn anything,
>
> I thought it was gonna be like those classes in jail, but I was willing. I could've
>
> left this class, only had to do four months of it, but I keep coming". (Ascend
>
> Participant #11)

      In reference to the question "did a rehabilitation program or programs play a role

in your out?", no comparison participants stated that they had chosen to continue

attending a program ($n = 0$). However, in response to the question, "can you describe a

typical day in your life", interviewees did state that they were currently attending

programs or classes ($n = 3$):

Thursday is my parenting class, Saturday is group counseling. Batter's class is on

Mondays. On Monday morning at 7:00 I go to home detention and pay and [do a]

drug test (Comparison Participant #2).

In terms of continued program attendance, it appears that more of the Ascend

participants have chosen to continue attending the Ascend program after their court or

state mandated requirements had been fulfilled. Comparison participants also stated that

they had attended program(s), but their attendance was not by choice. Instead,

comparison participants' program attendance was required by the court or state. Based

on these responses, it seems that the Ascend program has created a prosocial environment

in which the participants have felt they could return to, regardless of court mandates.

Increased Optimism. Examining an individual's perception of the future and

their ability to cognitively restructure their thoughts, cognitive restructuring theory posits

that it is possible to change an individual's line of thinking to be more positive and

optimistic. During the interview, Ascend participants were asked "how do you feel about

your life in general?" In response to this question, a number of participants described

feeling optimistic about their future despite their previous circumstances ($n = 5$). In

addition, when asked "how are you feeling about about your future?", six participants

described feeling optimistic about their future ($n = 6$). The skills they learned after being

released, opportunities they have been afforded through the program, and the care they

have been shown has provided a sense of optimism they did not have previously:

I like it, better now than I have in a long time. Before I got locked up, I had no

sense of direction. Before I got locked up, I had no sense. I'm in a happier place

now. I'm in a better place now. (Ascend Participant #4)

In an attempt to determine how the comparison participants cognitively structure

their thoughts about their current and future situations, interviewees were asked "how do

you feel about your life in general?" Participants responded that they felt optimistic

about their current situation ($n = 5$). In addition, when asked "how are you feeling about

your future?", participants stated that they felt optimistic about their future as well ($n =$

5):

I feel good about the future. I'm gonna be a father again. I have a six year old

and my girlfriend is pregnant with my second baby. I want to get a new

environment. Before I would do illegal stuff to save up money, but it didn't really

work out. Now I'm doing it a different way. I get social security. I try to save

money (Comparison Participant #1).

Based on the responses provided by the Ascend and comparison participants,

there does not appear to be a large difference in the optimism the participants feel

towards their future. Participants responses seem to suggest that they are fairly hopeful

and optimistic about their future, despite their past or current situations.

Increased Self-Esteem. Throughout the interview process, participants were also

asked questions in order to gain a better understanding of any changes in their self-

esteem. Ascend participants expressed that the program helped them increase their self-

esteem ($n = 3$) and confidence in their abilities to be successful in accomplishing their

goals. Accomplishing their goals in turn provides greater self-esteem and confidence.

When asked "how a rehabilitation program or programs play a role in your outlook?",

one of the participants responded:

> Without Ascend I would've been gone. I wouldn't be here. They helped me
>
> understand who I was and why I was thinking the way I was and why I was doing
>
> the things I was doing. I never understood and I thought I was screwed up so I
>
> was just self-medicating and high all the time and not really understanding. I just
>
> thought I was really screwed up. Now I'm inserting rational thought. It's like
>
> someone turned on a light. They teach you so much about the law and the risks
>
> you take. Yeah it was guaranteed I was going to jail. They help you understand
>
> that's not the way of life you should be living. They don't spank you forever for
>
> making a mistake. They still say you have value as a person. Christine, Tony,
>
> Roxy, and Faith treat you like a normal person. You're not below them. They
>
> still have faith you can overcome your obstacles. (Ascend Participant #12)

The comparison participants were also asked how a rehabilitation program or

programs have played a role in their outlook. In response to this question, none of the

comparison participants expressed that the program helped increase their self-esteem or

confidence in their abilities ($n = 0$).

According to the responses provided by the Ascend participants, a number of

participants seem to have increased self-esteem since completing the Ascend program.

Participants appear to feel good about themselves and understand that they have worth

and value that they did not believe they had before attending Ascend. Sadly, when

comparison participants were asked how programs have played a role in their outlook, none of the comparison participants described feeling as though the program had helped increase their self-esteem or confidence in their abilities. Based on these responses, it seems that the Ascend program makes it a point to help people increase their self-esteem and confidence in their abilities.

Chapter 9

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the current qualitative evaluation was to examine whether the

Ascend Life Skills program achieved its goals, including helping individuals learn new

skill sets, find employment, enroll in college, maintain prosocial networks, and increase

their self-esteem and optimism for the future. Ascend participants expressed that they

had learned new skills from the program, and that they felt that the program had helped

increase their self-esteem and confidence in their abilities. The changes described by the

Ascend participants seem to suggest that the goals of the program were consistent with

the Risk Needs Responsivity Model (Bonta & Andrews, 2007), Criminal Lifestyle

Theory (Walters, 2009), and Cognitive Restructuring Theory (Boyes, 2013).

Risk Needs Responsivity Model

Focusing on the risks and needs of the offender, the Ascend program utilized the

Risk Needs Responsivity Model (Bota & Andrews, 2007) to help ex-offenders implement

new skill sets, find employment, and maintain prosocial networks. Ascend participants

described learning new skills from the classes they attended during the program and how

they plan to use those skills in their everyday lives. Participants discussed their current

employment and future employment goals, describing how busy their jobs kept them and

how being employed provided a greater sense of purpose and objectivity. The

participants also discussed how they have stayed away from negative influences and

maintained prosocial environments. They expressed how much they looked forward to

coming to the program, and how attending the program did not feel like an obligation.

The responses provided by the Ascend participants suggest that the program was effective in helping the participants address their specific risks and needs, such as learning new skill sets, employment, and maintaining prosocial networks.

The comparison participants also described the new tools they had learned from program(s) they had attended. Comparison participants discussed methadone and counseling programs, specifically, and described the types of goals the program help them to set. Current employment and future employment goals were also discussed by the comparison subjects. Participants described working part-time positions and their desires to find full-time employment. However, with regard to prosocial environments, only one comparison participant expressed that they had maintained a prosocial environment since being incarcerated. None of the comparison participants described the program(s) as being a something they looked forward to attending or wanted to continue to attend.

Criminal Lifestyle Theory

Designed around Glenn Walters' Criminal Lifestyle Theory, one of the goals of the Ascend program was to change a criminal's thinking style in order to promote prosocial thinking and networks. Walters (Walters, 2009) theorized that the change in thinking style could reduce criminal behavior and activity, thereby reducing recidivism. Participants discussed the importance of obtaining a college education and their plans for attending college. Although most were not precisely sure which field of study they would like to pursue, the participants described their change in thought process with regard to college attendance. For instance, some expressed how attending college gave

them a sense of worth and pride. The participants also discussed the new, positive activities they had become engaged in since enrolling in the program. Activities such as reading, spending more time with family, and exercising were described by Ascend participants as part of their daily routine. Furthermore, participants who graduated from the Ascend program expressed how much they enjoyed attending the program, and how they continued attending even after they had completed the requirements from the court or probation department. The program had created a safe, prosocial environment which participants felt they could return to and rely upon.

When asked to describe how they felt about their future, comparison participants also discussed the importance of a college education and their plans to return to college. Participants described the type of major they would like to pursue and how that education would help them in the future. Participants described how attending college in the past has made them feel good about themselves. However, none of the comparison participants stated that they were actively enrolled in any college courses. In addition, in terms of continued program attendance, none of the comparison participants stated that they had chosen to continue attending a program. In other words, once program requirements had been met to satisfy the court or probation department, comparison participants did not choose to continue attending a program like the Ascend participants had stated they had.

Cognitive Restructuring Theory

The Ascend program also utilized cognitive restructuring theory when developing the program in an attempt to change the ex-offender's way of thinking. During the

interview, Ascend participants described feeling optimistic about their current situation as well as their future. Participants expressed how they felt as though they had no sense of direction or purpose while they were incarcerated, but feel like they've moved into a happier place in their life since completing the program. The participants also described the opportunities they had been afforded since attending the program, and how those opportunities had helped provide a sense of optimism about their future that they did not have previously. The changes in optimism and regard for the future described by the Ascend participants provided support for the program's use of cognitive restructuring theory when developing and implementing the program.

When the comparison participants were asked how they felt about their future, participants stated that they felt good and were optimistic about what was yet to come. participants described their desire to enter new environments where they could make legitimate money. They also expressed their desire for security and stability, and how they are doing things differently than they had previously. However, a specific program or program attendance were not credited as sources for their optimism for the future.

Increased Self-Esteem

With regard to changes in self-esteem, participants described how their self-esteem had increased since enrolling in the Ascend program. Participants credited the changes in their self-esteem to the new tools they had learned from the program, the access to prosocial environments, and the support received from those within the program. The participants stated that their increased self-esteem in turn provided them the confidence to accomplish their goals and aspirations.

Unfortunately, when asked how a rehabilitation program or programs had played a role in their outlook, none of the comparison participants stated that the program had helped to increase their self-esteem or confidence in their abilities. This was unfortunate for the comparison participants, particularly after hearing the Ascend participants discuss how influential the program had been in their lives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, participants who completed the Ascend program described the importance of removing themselves from anti-social environments and relationships. They expressed how removing themselves from these environments and relationships were vital in maintaining their sobriety and avoiding recidivating. In addition, the Ascend participants discussed how the program provided the skills to re-enter society after incarceration and become a contributing member of society. These skills and the support received from the program helped to increase the participants' self-esteem and optimism towards the future.

Comparison participants also described being impacted by the program(s) they attended and the importance of engaging in positive activities such as reading, exercising, and spending time with family. However, with regard to maintaining prosocial environments, the comparison participants stated that they were still engaging in anti-social behaviors such as drinking and not going to support groups. In addition, comparison participants described maintaining a sense of resentment about their past and felt that their current state was not hopeful.

Critique of Methods. Although the interview participants in the Ascend and comparison groups were matched according to demographic variables such as gender, age, and ethnicity, information on the number and type of groups(s) attended by the comparison participants was not analyzed. It is unclear how many programs the comparison participants have attended or completed. Therefore, it is not possible for the current evaluation to determine how much the comparison participants learned from the programs they may have attended. However, qualitative data collected by Getty, Singer, Farmer, Royal, & Ramm (manuscript in submission process) did collect information on the number of groups attended and should be used for future studies. If qualitative data has not been collected, future studies should make it a point to also record the type and number of programs attended by comparison participants.

In addition, the Ascend participants were not interviewed before and after completing the program. For this reason, it is unclear whether the value placed on certain subjects, such as maintaining employment and prosocial environments, were influenced by the Ascend program. Although some of the participants did credit the Ascend program directly for the changes they had experienced since being released from jail, not all of the participants stated that the Ascend program was the reason for that change. If possible, future studies should interview participants before they have entered and after they have completed the program in order to better gauge any changes that may have been influenced by the program.

Implications for Future Rehabilitation Programs. The participants who graduated from the Ascend Life Skills Program developed by Fitch and White reported

changes in the environments they chose to maintain, employment, hope for the future,

and self-esteem. By focusing on the risks faced by and needs of the offender, as well

utilizing aspects of Bush, Glick, and Taymans' Thinking for Change program, Fitch and

White have developed a program that has provided graduates of the program with the

tools necessary to make the right choices in their life. Rehabilitation programs developed

in the future could benefit from adopting some of the strategies used by Fitch and White

when developing the Ascend program, as it has demonstrated its effectiveness in helping

to increase self-esteem, hope, and pro-social networks.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Ascend___   Comp 8C   Subject#: Keisha M. Date: 9/26/14   Start time: 10:14
End time: _____   Interviewer: Dr. Singer

Hello, my name is (Dr. Farmer/Dr. Singer), and I'm conducting research about the
challenges and supports that offenders face in the community. I understand you agreed to
be interviewed (and if also signed to be audiotaped) and to be tape recorded as we talk
(Get confirmation). This is (Jessie/Faith/Albert), and s/he is going to just sit quietly back
here and take notes while we talk. Everything you say is going to be confidential, which
means that only our research team will ever hear the audiotape, and see the notes that
(Jessie/Faith/Albert) will take. No one will ever know your name or other information
about you. Nothing you say here will get you into any trouble at all. If I ask you
something that makes you feel uncomfortable, you can just tell me that you feel
uncomfortable, and I will skip to the next question. If at any time you want to stop the
interview, just say that you would like to stop and the interview will be over. You'll still
get your gift card, and I will thank you for participating. Do you have any questions?

1. What name would you like to be called?

2. How are you doing today?

3. Could you describe a typical day in your life?

4. How do you feel about your life in general?

5. How are you feeling about your future?

6. Did a rehabilitation program or programs play a role in your outlook? Can you describe
    the program or programs for me?

7. What would you say most contributed to how you feel? Can you be specific? (Ask for
    examples).

8. What has been the biggest challenge for you while you have been out in the community
    this latest time? Has anything been different this time?

9. Has anything in your life now made you feel more confident about your ability to avoid
    re-offending?

10. Is there anything you can identify that has continued your involvement in the criminal
    justice system? Can you tell me about what that is?

11. How does the situation you're in now compare to the last time you were out in the community? Is there anything that's different now?

12. Do you feel like this is the time you might stay out of jail for good? Why or why not?

13. If not, what do you think would help you take that step? If yes, what is helping you break the cycle?

14. Thinking about your experience with the criminal justice system, if you could change the system in one major way, what would you change, and why?

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