Prospectus

Searching for Positive Experiences Among DUI Offenders in Court-Mandated Substance Abuse Treatment

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Problem statement

Driving under the influence (DUI) of alcohol and other drugs continues to be a problem that puts public safety at risk (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2011). In 2011, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reported drivers with a blood alcohol content of .08 or higher were the primary cause of 9,878 deaths, constituting 31 percent of total traffic mortalities that year. Arrests for DUI result from excessive use of alcohol, use of illicit drugs, and/or some prescribed medications that cause cognitive impairment. It is commonly known that alcohol and other mood-altering substances contribute to an increase of risky behaviors due to psychoactive properties that reduce self-consciousness while intensifying irrational decision-making (Kasar, Gleichgerrcht, Keskinikilic, Tabo, & Manes, 2010).

Positive psychology emphasizes the role of positive emotions, engagement, meaning, resilience, optimism, self-esteem, and positive relationships in improving the overall well-being (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005; Seligman, 2011). The central belief is that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play. There is a gap in the literature regarding the understanding of how DUI programs affect the positive aspects of persons arrested for DUI including positive affect, hopefulness, optimism, emotional vitality, enjoyment of life, and other measures of psychological well-being.

The application of positive psychology constructs to the substance abuse treatment and recovery research appears to be minimal (Krentzman, 2013). However, there is emerging evidence that concepts of positive psychology had begun to be applied to theory, research, and
intervention of substance use disorders. Akhtar and Boniwell (2010) applied positive interventions that promoted positive emotions, savoring, gratitude, and optimism to substance abusing adolescents in the U.K. The findings revealed increase in happiness, optimism, and positive affect and decrease in alcohol consumption. Galanter (2007) highlighted the important role of positive experiences and achievements in spiritually grounded recovery. McCoy (2008) examined relationship between hope and positive sober experiences including flow, spiritual transcendence, social support and abstinence self-efficacy. Her findings suggest that positive psychology constructs may have a significant part in successful recovery for adult substance abusers. Mojs, Stanisławska-Kubiak, Skommer, and Wójciak (2009) emphasized the role of happiness and emotionality in addictions. They examined smokers, non-smokers and former smokers and their sense of happiness and positive and negative affect. The results show significantly higher levels of happiness and positive affect in former smokers comparing to other groups. The authors suggest that the sense of happiness in the group of people who quit smoking derives from the process of becoming non-smokers and meeting own goals and expectations.

The present study seeks to explore the significant gap in the literature, because there is no research to date examining ways in which mandated DUI programs might promote resilience, well-being, and positive change among DUI offenders. The result can be used in the formation of positive interventions that encourage active participation in treatment planning and will motivate DUI offenders to make necessary changes in drinking and driving behaviors.

**Purpose**

The aim of this qualitative study is to explore DUI offenders’ positive experiences and perceptions derived from DUI program and how they impacted well-being and commitment to positive change. A narrative analysis approach will be used (Larsson, Lilja, von Braun, &
Sjöblom, 2013; Riessman, 2008). Consistent with positive psychology concepts this research study attempts to examine the accounts of participants’ experience of substance use, from prior to DUI arrest to their current life circumstances, to gain an understanding of the meaning of possible positive consequences and outcomes resulted from DUI arrest including resilience, engagement in treatment, and well-being using the theoretical framework of positive psychology (McCoy, 2008; Seligman, 2011).

**Significance**

The court mandated clients are typically resistant to treatment, unmotivated to change, noncompliant with treatment recommendations, likely to terminate treatment prematurely, and unlikely to achieve positive outcomes (Snyder & Anderson, 2009). The findings of this study could be useful because addiction professionals might incorporate concepts related to positive psychology to the addiction treatment. The issues described by the participants, might enrich the quality of existing DUI interventions with the promotion of positive factors supporting health thus shifting existing negative focus on disease, weakness, and damage into positive interventions based on strengths and virtues (Seligman, 2002). Ultimately, this study has a potential to assist substance abuse professionals in adopting a different approach to treatment that focuses on human potential and moving away from the more traditional disease model of addictions.

The significance of this study is that it has a potential to stimulate additional research in areas of positive psychology, and possibly how DUI interventions are provided to DUI offenders with substance use disorder.
**Background**

Selected articles relating to current trends in substance abuse treatment and the phenomena of driving under influence of mood altering substances are described here:

1. Grey (2010), Linton, Flaim, Deuschle, and Larrier (2009), and Skinner (2009) provided information about current practices in substance abuse treatment field. The past discrepancy between substance abuse and mental health fields slowly close which promotes application of new theories and research findings. Currently, evidence –based practices call for coordinated and integrated substance abuse programs that address domestic violence, past traumas, mental health issues, shame and stigma, and other underlying conditions.

2. Carlson, Sexton, Hammar, and Reese (2011) focused specifically on repeat DUI offenders, their sociodemographic characteristics, patterns of substance abuse, treatment history, and attitudes toward behavioral change. They identified high degree of criminality, low socioeconomic status, and low parental involvement in the childhood experiences of those who are notorious in drinking and driving. With regards to substance abuse, most participants had high level of tolerance to alcohol, some experimented with other drugs; some reported extensive patterns of polysubstance abuse.

3. Curran, Fuertes, Alfonso, and Hennessy (2010) addressed personality, inherited disposition for risky behavior and psychosocial factors on driving under the influence. They found that DUI arrestees have higher levels of sensation seeking and impulsivity then those who do not drink and drive.
4. Fry (2008) gave an overview of drinking- drivers’ identity and values that stands behind motivation to drive under the influence. She found that motivation to drive while intoxicated was influenced by degree of entitlement (driving as a right not a privilege); and fear versus foreseeing negative consequences.

5. Kelch and Hall (2011) found that positive psychology interventions designed to acknowledge and practice individuals’ cardinal virtues would be more beneficial than standard group therapy alone for clients who are court mandated for substance abuse treatment.

6. Leadbeater, Foran, and Grove-White (2008) addressed the role of learned behaviors and environmental factors in driving under the influence. They found the connection between the modelling influences of parents, other adults, and peers who drive under the influence to decision to undertake the similar risky behaviors.

7. McCoy (2008) dissertation was an opening thought for the application of positive psychology principles to substance abuse treatment. The author examined the relationships between hope and positive sober experiences (e.g. flow, spiritual transcendence) and other variables related to relapse in empirical literature. Her findings suggest that positive psychology constructs may have significant part is successful recovery.

8. Quinn and Harden (2013) addressed the role of genetics in relation to drunk-driving. They found consistent evidence for drunk driving as a genetic manifestation of vulnerability toward substance abuse and other risky behaviors.

9. Rashid (2009) emphasized that the past therapeutic interventions for specific clinical problems including depression, anxiety, loss and grief were focused too much on
deficits, disorders, and weaknesses without realizing that strengths need to be discovered. He calls for new positive interventions developing positive emotions, gratitude, and optimism to accomplish goals of psychotherapy.

10. Webb, Hirsch and Toussaint (2015), found that the positive psychology principle of forgiveness can be a potentially a successful therapeutic technique for substance abuse clients and suicidal behaviors.

11. Akhtar and Boniwell, (2010), applied interventions consisted of positive psychology concepts of happiness, optimism, strengths, and gratitude to substance abuse treatment for adolescents. The findings revealed increase in well-being and decrease in alcohol consumption.

**Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study will be well-being theory, a construct of positive psychology. The goal of positive psychology is to stimulate human potential by focusing on strengths-based perspective (Seligman, 2013). The well-being theory has five basic elements: positive emotions, engagement, meaning, positive relationships and accomplishment (PERMA). Because this relatively new theory addresses ways to measure what people do to get well-being, Seligman’s theoretical work has been used in all aspects of human psychological and physical health albeit more frequently with general population then substance abusers. The approach provides details on what makes a good life for individuals and communities. Further, subsequent research and application of Seligman’s theory offer guidance of ways to facilitate well-being, thus allowing for insight into human strengths and positive experiences (Grant & Palmer, 2015; Lambert, Passmore, & Holder, 2015). The findings could be applied to promote sobriety and responsible driving.
Research Question

RQ1- What are DUI offenders’ experiences and personal views of mandated DUI program that might lead to enhanced well-being and positive change?

RQ2- How do participants describe their experiences and personal views in terms of whether DUI program fosters engagement in the process of change.

RQ3- What is the meaning of resilience to individuals in a DUI program?

These research questions will be explored using a narrative analysis approach (Larsson, von Braun, & Sjöblom, 2013; Riessman, 2008). Using the Positive Psychology model (Seligman, 2011), the researcher will examine how individuals in DUI program see the impact of the program on possible positive aspects of their lives, and what are their narratives about the core features of well-being theory. This will include an exploration of the Seligman’s few elements of well-being including positive emotion, engagement, and sense of accomplishment.

Nature of the Study

The court system penalizes drunken driving behaviors by placing DUI offenders in a variety of mandated interventions. Depending on the offenders’ potential severity of risky drinking and driving behaviors these interventions may vary in intensity, frequency, and duration, ranging from basic educational interventions to multicomponent programs that address alcohol abuse and other comorbid conditions frequently occurring among DUI offenders (Dill & Wells-Parker, 2006).

Research shows that effectiveness of DUI prevention programs is questionable with education focusing on increasing awareness of the effects of alcohol/drugs on driving ability as
being ineffective (Miller, Curtis, Sønderlund, Day, & Droste, 2014). The researcher plans to examine the accounts of participants’ experiences and personal views from the program designated to address moderate to severe alcohol use problems to gain insight about the possible positive aspects of DUI program that might lead to enhanced well-being and positive change.

The reported prevalence of alcohol problems among samples of offenders charged with DUI varies as much as between 4% and 87% in different investigations, depending on the definition of alcohol problems and the methods of assessment (Bergman, Hubicka, & Laurell, 2005; McCutcheon et al., 2011). There is a general opinion that the blood alcohol concentration (BAC) level indicates the severity of alcohol use disorder because it indicates a sign of an increased alcohol tolerance. Conversely, a low BAC in a driver might imply the absence or minimal alcohol use problems. DiStefano and Hohman (2010), reported that additionally to the various levels of the severity of substance use problems, DUI offenders have high rates of co-occurring psychiatric disorders, personality disorders, challenging social environment, and other situational stressors. However, little is known about positive aspects that can promote well-being in this population.

Interview data will be collected from participants at NICASA (Northern Illinois Council on Alcoholism and Substance Abuse) mandated DUI program. This is the abstinence oriented program combined with educational information in a group format and substance abuse counseling in a group format. To be eligible for the study participants have to be placed in high risk group which means that they have to meet moderate to severe substance use disorder criteria, and/or multiple DUI arrests. Additionally, participants will be screened for diagnosable DSM-V disorders. The inclusion criteria for the study comprises of participants between the ages
of 18 to 65, diagnosed with moderate to severe substance use disorder and other co-occurring disorders excluding participants actively psychotic.

The nature of the study will be qualitative. Qualitative research is conducted when the problem or issue needs to be explored (Creswell, 2007). The study intends to examine the strengths and positive experiences of DUI offenders in mandated treatment for substance abuse through narrative analysis. According to Larsson et al., (2013) narrative research strategies are applicable for developing knowledge regarding specific problems, for example, the continuum of use-misuse. In-depth interviews will be conducted to gather data through the collection of individual stories and chronically ordering the meaning of their experiences (Riessman, 2008).

The analysis will begin with a description of the researcher’s experiences with treating DUI offenders recognizing that the researcher cannot completely remove herself from the interpretation. Then, after reading through transcribed statements the researcher would locate specific quotes about participants’ meanings of experience. Finally, the formulated meanings will be clustered into themes allowing for the emergence of broader themes. If new relevant data emerge they will be included. As a final point, the results will be integrated into in-depth narrative description of how DUI offenders approach the “good life” concepts and the process of bouncing back from legal consequences of their behaviors. Keeping the focus on positive emotions, engagement, meaning, positive relationships and accomplishment (PERMA) should be consistent with well-being theory (Seligman, 2011).

Possible Types and Sources of Information or Data

Primary sources:
1. Interviews with the individuals arrested for DUI offenses who are currently participating in court-mandated treatment for substance abuse. Researcher will focus on those participants who are assessed with moderate to severe substance use disorder.

Secondary sources:

1. Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (especially National Center for Health Statistics)
2. Bureau of Justice Statistics: U.S. Department of Justice
References


Substance Abuse Treatment and the Stages of Change: Selecting and Planning Interventions


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