Two sides of the working alliance: A qualitative study from the perspective of both probationers and probation officers

Annelies Sturm and Vivienne de Vogel
HU University of Applied Sciences, Utrecht, The Netherlands

Marcus JH Huibers
Department of Clinical Psychology, VU Amsterdam, Utrecht, The Netherlands

Abstract
The probationer–probation officer working alliance plays an important role in the outcome of probation supervision. This study explored the development of the working alliance between probationers and probation officers in the Netherlands, from the perspective of both probationers and probation officers. More specifically, we explored the significance of different aspects of the working alliance at the start of probation supervision and after a three-month period, as well as the role played by critical incidents during the supervisory process and their subsequent effect on the working alliance. Overall, the study showed that clarity over goals and restrictions was initially the most salient issue for both parties, and that after a three-month period the working alliance evolved into a trusting relationship. Several incidents were identified, probationers identified more positive moments and less negative moments than their PO counterparts. If these types of incidents are managed accordingly by the probation officer, then they can ultimately serve to strengthen the relationship.

Keywords
working alliance, critical incidents, probation supervision, qualitative research

Corresponding author:
Annelies Sturm, HU University of Applied Sciences, Padualaan 101, Utrecht 3508 AJ, The Netherlands.
Email: annelies.sturm@hu.nl

Introduction

Within the mandated context, a good quality of the working alliance between a probationer and their probation officer (PO) has come to be regarded as a critically important factor in securing positive outcomes. Indeed, the effectiveness of a working alliance is already well-established within other domains, such as voluntary psychotherapy, where it comprises a strong bond, as well as clear goals and tasks (Bordin, 1975; Flückiger et al., 2018; Horvath et al., 2011). There are key differences between the working alliance in the mandated context and the voluntary context; namely, alongside a strong bond, mutual trust, clarity regarding the imposed goals and restrictions, and a negative factor pertaining to friction or reactance[1], are also of critical importance (Skeem et al., 2007; Sturm et al., 2021b). Although there is an emergent body of empirical knowledge investigating the alliance-outcome association within the mandated context, studies that included risk factors for recidivism in their research design have hitherto produced mixed results concerning whether the working alliance is predictive of positive outcomes (Blasko et al., 2015; Brocato and Wagner, 2008; Calhoun, 2018; Green et al., 2013; Kennealy et al., 2012; Skeem et al., 2007; Sturm et al., 2021a). Of these studies, only one found a significantly large positive association between the working alliance and positive outcomes of probation supervision amongst a sample of 109 parolees (Kennealy et al., 2012). The other studies showed only a small effect, an effect for a subscale, an effect for merely a subsample of female parolees, or no effect at all. These outcomes suggest that its direct effectiveness in the context of mandatory treatment has as yet not been convincingly demonstrated.

Although quantitative studies provide important statistical information at the aggregated level, they fail to address the specific dynamics of the working alliance over the course of probation supervision. Hence, further insight into the dynamics of the working alliance is required. Indeed, mandated treatment places additional challenges upon the working alliance compared to voluntary treatment, because the client receives the treatment because of a court order and experiences the service as intrusive (Trotter, 2015). In particular, the imposed nature of the treatment may hinder the formation of a relationship, insofar as the pre-determined goals may not align with the goals the clients are interested in pursuing. The purpose of the supervision is to reduce the risk of recidivism by controlling and monitoring and, as such, the needs of the clients must correspond to this aim. Furthermore, uncertainty over which information will be shared with the official ordering party, such as the court, can also impede upon the establishment of a trusting relationship (Ross et al., 2008). Probationers are expected to develop trusting and self-disclosing relationships with POs, without necessarily having the foresight of whether it will lead to adverse consequences. On top of that, the necessary restrictions that are placed upon clients' autonomy may also provoke forms of reactance, such as denial, anger, or even aggression (Rooney, 2018).

Qualitative research that has examined the working alliance in voluntary psycho-therapy has provided more in-depth insights into the underlying mechanisms of the working alliance within the therapeutic context. For example, Noyse and Simpson (2018) meta-analysis included 13 qualitative studies investigating the formation of a therapeutic

relationship. Specific themes that were reported as being important to clients were the client-therapist match, reciprocal trust, emotional bonding, and an egalitarian relationship. With respect to the mandated context, Trotter (2015) extensively studied the effective correctional interventions and emphasized that the client–worker relationship is the main factor in the effectivity of probation supervision. Only a handful of qualitative studies have explored the development of the working alliance with involuntary clients. Two studies, one with a sample of 27 court-mandated batterers and one with a sample of six clients who were mandated to attend counseling services, identified similar themes: the client–counselor match, level of trust, providing them with hope, being non-judgmental, listening, comforting and respecting them, and their level of problem-solving skills (Boira et al., 2013; Razzhavaikina, 2007). A study with a sample of 25 in patients undergoing involuntary treatment showed that the most important factor was that therapists had to work in partnership with their clients, by collaboratively developing care plans or helping them to take responsibility for themselves. These inpatients wanted knowledge about rules and conditions to feel in control (Wyder et al., 2015). Research conducted in the context of substance abuse treatment showed that a non-judgmental stance, being a good listener, client-driven, and building trust were important aspects of a working relationship (Redko et al., 2007). The results of these qualitative studies within the mandated context are in accordance with the qualitative research conducted within the psychotherapeutic domain, according to which trust, respect and partnership are strongly associated with positive outcomes.

Although similar themes emerged in these aforementioned studies, there were several additional themes that emerged in the mandated context: clients in the mandated context expressed a strong desire to feel in control of their lives and their goals, alongside wanting the professional to be clear about the rules and conditions they were subject to. These themes are perhaps unsurprising given that mandated treatment inherently restricts clients' autonomy. Indeed, restrictions and imposed goals invariably serve as the basis for the underlying friction between the professional and the client. Typically, the client will engage in some form of reactance, while the professional will sense that the client is not being open or honest with them.

The dynamics in the interaction between the probationer and the PO, subsequent to such friction and forms of reactance, are poorly understood and hitherto have not been empirically investigated. However, a strand of research originating from the voluntary context is expedient for shedding some light on these dynamics. For instance, ruptures in the working alliance were extensively studied by Safran and Muran (2000). Specifically, they posit that the working alliance is dynamic and characterized by fluctuations involving tension or breakdowns in the alliance even in the voluntary context (Safran et al., 2002). Such ruptures in the working alliance between the therapist and client are relatively commonplace (Coutinho et al., 2011). In order to prevent clients dropping out, it seems crucial to recognize and address negative events and to change ruptures into meaningful events over the course of the therapeutic process (Safran et al., 2009). By addressing a rupture in the working alliance, clients are able to gain insights into maladaptive conduct, which, in turn, can help them find adaptive ways to manage relationship-based strains (Critchfield and Benjamin, 2006). In the mandated context, which is invariably

characterized by friction, ruptures, and dropout, it is vital to gain knowledge about the ruptures in the working alliance that can occur during a probation supervision. However, a clear understanding of how the working alliance contributes to positive outcomes is still sorely lacking. Moreover, the dynamics of the interactions between probationers and POs, including friction stemming from tension or forms of reactance to imposed conditions, have yet to be described.

The present study

The primary goal of the present qualitative study is to gain a greater understanding into the dynamics of the working alliance, from the perspective of both POs and probationers. We examined each of their experiences of the same supervision to discern differences in their respective accounts. Moreover, we explored whether friction arose in the working alliance during the probation supervision. We formulated the following research questions. Firstly, what factors do probationers and POs deem to be important for the development and maintenance of a working alliance in a mandated context? Secondly, do probationers and POs identify moments of frictions in their working alliance and how do they describe these specific instances of friction? Thirdly, in case of frictions, how do probationers and POs react to this friction? Finally, we sought to explore the impact of such friction on the supervision process, as well as probationers themselves.

Methods

Procedure

Thirteen probationer–PO dyads participated in this study. All probationers were mandated by court to probation supervision. The participating POs were employed by the Dutch Probation service, the Institute for Social Rehabilitation of Addicted Offenders (Stichting Verslavingsreclassering GGZ, SVG) and the Salvation Army Probation Service. The respondents were recruited from both urban (Amsterdam, The Hague) and rural areas (the provinces of North-Holland and Limburg) in the Netherlands. To select the probationer–PO dyads, the pattern of the quality of the working alliance was assessed via the use of two assessments from the Working Alliance of Mandated Clients Inventory (WAMCI; Sturm et al., 2021b). The WAMCI captures key aspects of the PO–probation relationship: trust, goals-restrictions, bond, and reactance. For a more detailed description of this validated tool, see Sturm et al. (2021b).

To select dyads of probationers–POs with different change patterns of the working alliance, we first collected a larger group of dyads and assessed the working alliance twice. During the period May 2019 to July 2019, all POs who had a new probationer to supervise were asked to participate *via* email by the researcher (first author). In the event that they agreed to participate, they subsequently asked the probationers if they were willing to take part either by telephone or during the first or second session. The probationers received a written explanation of the study, and, when necessary, the POs also verbally explained the aim of the research. Upon agreeing to participate, the probationers were then asked to fill

in the WAMCI offender version on two separate occasions. They first completed the inventory prior to their fifth supervision session, either independently or together with the independent research assistant who read out the questions. After a three-month period had passed, the probationers then proceeded to complete the inventory again. The POs who worked with these probationers completed the WAMCI worker version, which they did online at the same aforementioned two intervals. In this way 80 dyads completed the WAMCI twice.

To select the dyads for the interviews, three groups of probationers were formed, each of which represented a different pattern of working alliance scores. Firstly, 16 probationers were selected who had shown improving, deteriorating and stable patterns of working alliance during their supervision. Five probationers who had demonstrated improving patterns of working alliance factors were selected, along with four probationers who had shown deteriorating patterns. The remaining probationers who had shown stable patterns were overrepresented in the sample (71); hence, seven probationers from this group were selected on the basis of the organizations to which they belong, degree of urbanization and sex. Two probationers refused to participate: one who showed a deteriorating pattern and one who displayed a stable pattern. Furthermore, one probationer who showed a stable pattern was subsequently incarcerated, and thus an interview proved not to be possible. These probationers and the corresponding POs were asked and subsequently agreed to participate in the interviews, resulting in 13 dyads the interviews were done with.

We conducted semi-structured interviews in which we encouraged probationers and POs to reflect on their relationship with the PO or probationer, respectively. The first author conducted the interviews face-to-face at the probation office, and they lasted, on average, 45 min. During the introductory section of the interview, the interviewer outlined the aim of the interview and the independent role of the interviewer. Furthermore, the interviewer made it clear that the information provided by the probationer was confidential and would not be passed on to the PO, or vice versa. In accordance with ethical guidelines, information was also provided about storage and the later use of the interview data. Each participant was asked to sign an informed consent form, which included authorization to use the anonymized data for research purposes.

Interview guide

When formulating the key interview questions, we adopted a deductive qualitative approach, using the key components of a working alliance as a theoretical framework: trust, bond, goals-restrictions, and reactance. The semi-structured interviews comprised three sequential steps. First, we showed the respondents four cards with the icons of the dimensions of the working alliance and briefly explained the dimensions of the working alliance and asked the respondents to retrospectively consider the probation supervision and to highlight what they deemed to be the most important dimensions of the working alliance, with the use of the cards. As part of this, we asked them to reflect upon two specific moments, (1) the beginning of the supervision, (2) the time of the interview. Second, we asked them to comment on the different elements

that they considered to be the most important. Third, we asked the participants to reflect on any friction that arose during supervision. To capture these moments, we used the critical incidents technique. Critical incidents research is an approach that aims to capture moments in the therapeutic processes that substantially influence both the process and outcome of therapy (Fitzpatrick et al., 2009). In the context of the present study, these incidents could refer to, among other things, a PO giving an official warning or a moment when the PO and probationer came to a helpful agreement. A key criterion for determining whether an event constitutes a critical incident is whether it is perceived by the individual as having had an impact on their therapy/supervision (Bedi et al., 2005; Flanagan, 1954).

Data analysis

The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Qualitative analysis of the data was performed using ATLAS.ti. The data-analysis involved the use of deductive content analysis techniques, in which theoretical constructs and categories were used as a basis for categorization (Boeije and Bleijenbergh, 2019). Specifically, the theoretical framework comprising the key components of the working alliance provided the basis for subsequent categorization. The researchers set out with a "start list" of broadly defined aspects of the working alliance. These were subsequently supplemented with "critical incidents" and "reactions to the critical incidents." The initial elements included trust, bond, goals-restrictions and reactance, at both the onset of probation supervision and the time of the interview, as well as description of the critical incident, the impact of the incident on the working alliance and the outcome of the incident.

The first author read all transcripts to obtain an understanding of the respondent's perspective. Then, AS and VdV coded the first three interview dyads separately using the predefined domains as initial coding categories. Subsequently, they discussed the codes, and based on these discussions some of the codes were reorganized and changed to different categories. After coming to a consensus over the categories, the coding frame was identified. Thereafter, the first author coded the next ten interview dyads using the coding frame. These codes were discussed once again by AS and VdV, with no major differences in interpretation found. Both the coding categories and codes were visually represented, which allowed the data to be inspected as a whole for coherent patterns (see Figures 1 and 2).

Results

Participants

The characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1. During the interviews, some of the probationers provided information about their criminal history: their criminal careers ranged from being first-time probationers to career criminals.
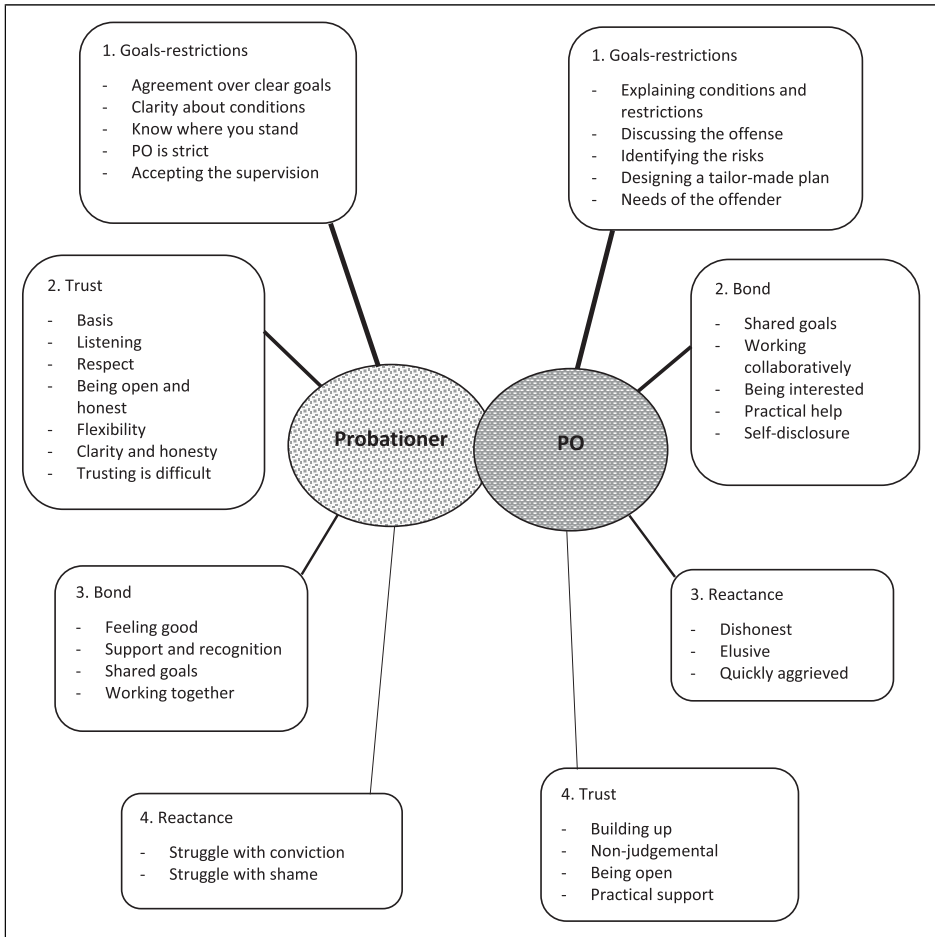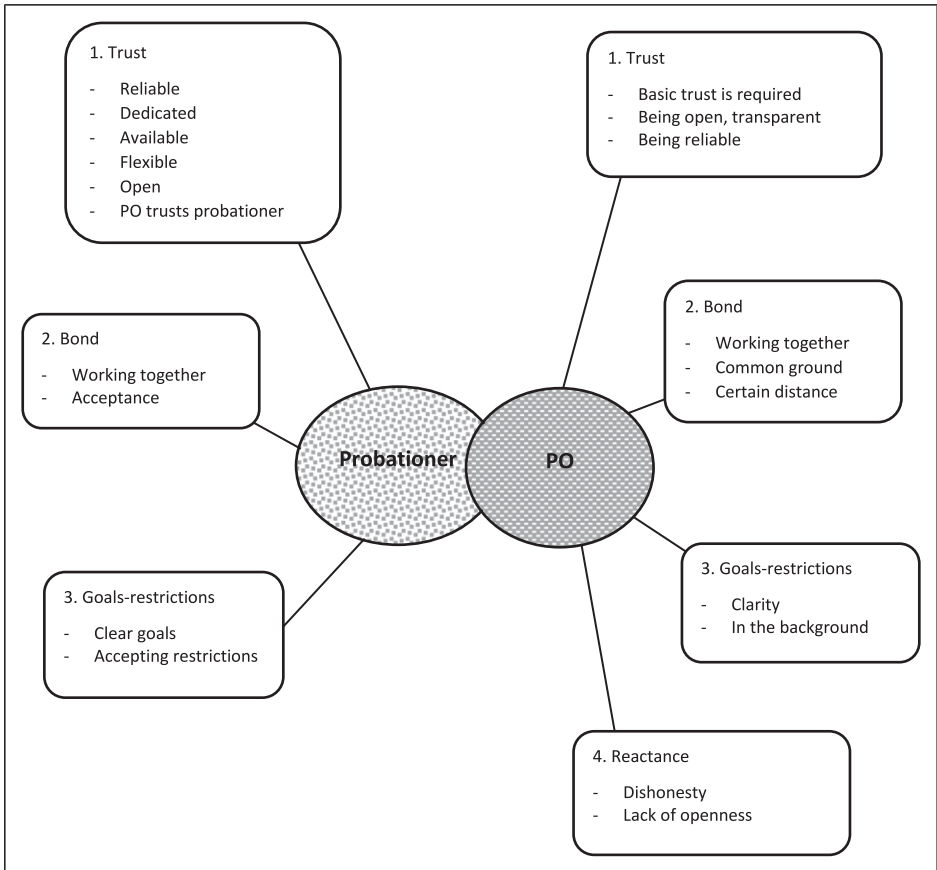
Figure 1. What factors are important at the beginning of the supervision?

Forming of the working alliance

A map depicting the codes of the working alliance at the start of the supervision is shown in Figure 1.

At the start of the supervision, both the probationers and POs mentioned goals-restrictions as the most important aspect of the working alliance. Overall, eight probationers and ten POs of which six belonged to the same dyad explicitly cited this dimension. For probationers, this pertained to agreeing to clear goals, clarity over conditions and restrictions, knowing where you stand, and accepting the restrictions. As one respondent with a long history of convictions said: "*you have to let criminals know where they stand or they'rere gonna freak out.*" For some probationers, this meant that they perceived their PO to be strict, which they did not

Figure 2. What factors are important after 3 months of supervision?

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample.

	Probationers (*n* = 13)	POs (*n* = 13)
	M (SD)	M (SD)
Sex		
Male	12	4
Female	1	9
Age (years)	46.7 (14.40)	44.13 (13.08)
Cultural background		
Dutch	6	11
Other	7	2
Working experience (years)		9.50 (11)

necessarily view as negative, due to the fact that it was the clarity of the aim of the supervision itself that was deemed to be most helpful.

For POs, goals–restrictions implied explaining the rules and conditions clearly, discussing the risks and designing a supervision plan that aims to reduce risks and account for probationer's capabilities, wishes, and preferences. Some POs indicated that they regarded the first sessions as an opportunity to evaluate what is possible, what is achievable and what is necessary. As one PO stated:

> And in the first interview, I don't really talk about the offense, but more about the conditions of supervision and what to expect. And then I also try to make it clear that we're pretty reasonable, but that we do expect things from each other.

One PO added that she tries to be neutral, and that explaining the conditions to a probationer was not tantamount to condemnation, but rather could offer possibilities for the probationer.

The next important factor highlighted by the probationers was trust, while for the POs it was bond. Overall, seven probationers mentioned trust (two of their POs did the same) and seven POs mentioned bond (four of their probationers did the same) as an important factor. The probationers emphasized that trust formed the cornerstone of the supervision, but they acknowledged that it can often take time to be able to trust their PO. They explained that they trust POs who listen, show respect, do not condemn, and who are flexible, transparent, and honest. One probationer put it clearly:

> You have to be straight-to-the-point and not underhanded. If you made a mistake, you made a mistake. So, now if I need to talk, if there's been another incident, I can just give him a call.

Some probationers found it difficult to explain what trust means to them, often noting: "*it is either there, or it is not.*" Five probationers mentioned that they found it difficult to trust anyone, for a variety of reasons, including, among other things, prior experiences with probation services or the criminal justice system as a whole. For some probationers, their level of distrust appeared to be symptomatic of an underlying mental disorder; for example, paranoid personality disorder. For the POs, the second important factor cited was the bond, which was predicated on working collaboratively towards a shared goal and being interested in the life, drive and goals of the probationer, as well as providing them with recognition for their attempts to change. They noted that one of the ways through which to create a bond with probationers was to provide them with practical support, such as by accompanying them to social services. Furthermore, some POs reported that they find it expedient to also disclose something about themselves, insofar as sharing experiences can make the relationship more balanced. One PO noted that they carefully select suitable topics to discuss:

> We talked about going on vacation. I don't like vacations, so I can talk to him about that.

Interestingly, the corresponding probationer referred to this very same moment as an example of the bond that he has with his PO:

> I know she is married and has two children and she doesn't like to go on vacation, but instead prefers daytime activities and sitting at home. […] So, I know that and I tell him about how I'm doing and ask how she is doing and if everything is going okay.

Next, five probationers mentioned bond as an important factor, (four of their POs mentioned bond too) while six POs reported that reactance is an important factor (one corresponding probationer mentioned reactance too). The probationers explained that a bond entails having both a connection with and a good feeling about the PO. Moreover, it also involved being able to work things out together. The probationers also noted that if they receive support and understanding from their POs, they find it easier to be open and transparent with them. Six POs cited reactance as an important component of the working alliance. They experienced reactance when they felt that probationers were being dishonest about their behavior or were being elusive and/or unmotivated:

> He comes and he does open up in conversation, but it seems like he may be holding back. So, I kind of have to figure things out.

Some POs mentioned that probationers can become quickly aggrieved when they attempt to discuss the restrictions or the probation policy in general. For the probationers, reactance was found to be the least important factor as only two probationers mentioned it. For these probationers, reactance was associated with difficulties and feelings of shame towards the conditions, or other circumstances, such as misunderstanding comments made by their PO. For example, one probationer was annoyed by the approach of a PO:

> R: And he just kept at it (...) rooting me out.
>
> I: it seems he crossed a line with you
>
> R: he crossed a line a little, just a little bit. So, yes, after the first time I really couldn't stand him.

For the POs, trust was found to be the least important factor, with only two POs mentioning it as being central at the start of a supervision (also mentioned by their corresponding probationers). These particular POs considered it to be important to their efforts to establish a close contact from the outset with the probationers they were supervising. Other POs reported that trust cannot be established from the outset, but rather is something that must be built up over time, as a result of being open-minded, non-judgmental, transparent and reliable. As one PO stated: "*it's a little... Yeah... You need to entice them a little to... to get them to think... Yeah, I'll be back next time.*" Another way through which a trusting relationship can be built, according to most POs, is by showing that probation is helpful and reliable. Or, as one PO noted: "*that he [probationer] can see that the probation service is really there for him.*"

Development of the working alliance

After a three-month period of probation supervision, it was found that not only had the working alliance developed further, but the degree of importance placed on the different components of the working alliance had also changed. Remarkably, when comparing the order of importance of the different elements of the working alliance by both POs and probationers after a three-month period, we found that they were now in full agreement with each other. For a map of these codes, see Figure 2.

After a three-month period, both POs and probationers now cited trust as the most important component of the working alliance, with 11 probationers and 12 POs considering, of which ten were dyads, it to be of paramount importance. For these probationers, this trust was understood as their PO being reliable, dedicated and trusting towards them. In fact, several probationers stated that they would be honest with their PO about violating restrictions. One probationer, with a long criminal career, mused:

> I'm not really sure, but most of the time if she asked me something I would tell the truth as much as possible; maybe I would hold back a little here and there, but most of the time I would tell her.

Twelve POs stated that trust is the most important dimension, and, in fact, that there must be a modicum of trust between POs and probationers to be able to collaborate at all. Here, these POs described trust in much the same way as they did at the beginning of the supervision: being reliable, open-minded and transparent. Although most POs trusted their clients, some did express that there were limits to their trust:

> I always find trust to be a very complicated matter, so I think, yes, to a certain extent. She has not betrayed trust so far. But to say I trust him blindly, no, I don't.

The dimension bond was considered to be important by seven probationers and seven POs of which five were dyads after 3 months of supervision. For probationers, a bond is about a having cooperative relationship, in which one feels accepted, understood and having clear goals. As one probationer stated: "*it flows*." The POs described bond in an analogous fashion to probationers, namely in terms of working together on shared goals and being in a state of alignment with one another. However, some POs described bond in a different way, including a certain degree of distance towards the probationer: "*but bond, how do I explain (...) I don't know, it's some kind of distance*."

Goals–restrictions were considered important by five probationers and five POs, of which one dyad. First and foremost, probationers appreciated when conditions were clearly articulated, and wholly accepted that POs would need to reiterate these from time to time. According to the POs, at this particular moment in the supervision, both the mandated context and conditions took on a largely background role, but nevertheless required some attention. Some POs explained that reiterating the conditions is needed to prevent becoming too close to probationers. One PO explained that agreements are still important:

The restrictions are more something in the background, but as far as the appointments are concerned, we've turned those into goals, because I think it's also important to come to appointments on time.

With respect to reactance, all probationers were of the opinion that reactance was no longer present at this time. Conversely, some POs noted occasionally still experiencing reactance, based on the perceived unreliability or lack of openness of probationers:

The difficulty is that I don't think he's being completely open. Not completely honest...

Critical moments

Critical moments are episodes in the supervision that make a "significant" contribution, either positively or negatively, towards the goal of the supervision (Flanagan, 1954). We asked the respondents if a critical moment had occurred during supervision, either a positive or negative one, and, if so, whether they could describe the incident and its subsequent impact. Overall, the probationers described nine incidents, five negatives and four positives, which transpired within eight different supervisions. The POs described ten incidents, seven negatives and three positives, which occurred during nine supervisions. In only three instances did the probationer–PO dyad recount exactly the same incident and share their respective views on these incidents, two of which were negative and one of which was positive. On two occasions, POs described the incidents as being related to warnings, while the probationers' descriptions were about these warnings. The third occasion was described by the PO as an instance in which he supported the probationer during an extremely difficult situation, while the probationer described it in terms of receiving much needed support. The moments that were mentioned by both parties as being critically important were also deemed by both to not have any detrimental impact on their relationship. In fact, these were moments in which the POs overtly discussed issues with their probationers. These moments may have had a positive impact on the working alliance.

The probationers mentioned six other incidents: three positives and three negatives. The positive incidents centered on the support probationers received from POs, which although deemed to be important moments for the probationers, were not identified by the corresponding POs as critical moments. Two negative moments centered on a perceived lack of respect from the PO. An older probationer explained the negative incident as follows:

Then we talked about it and then she said that, and I was shocked but I kept it to myself, and at the next session I talked to him and told him, boy I am not happy when you look at me like that and judge or condemn me.

However, each of the probationers in the three negative incidents elucidated that the PO properly repaired the negative events, and that they subsequently considered this incident to have had a positive impact on their relationship. Another negative incident for one probationer centered on the fear of being recognized in the office where the

supervision took place, which continued to negatively affect the supervision. All these three negative events were not cited by the corresponding PO as a critical moment.

The POs mentioned seven other incidents, two of which were positive and five of which were negative. The two positive events concerned a positive change in the situation or attitude of the probationer, while the negative incidents concerned warnings, discussions of their antisocial behavior or an assumed disagreement of opinion. However, these incidents did not appear to have negatively impacted on the relationships between these probationers and POs, as supported by one PO's description of the probationer's reaction to receiving a warning:

> So, I showed him my strict side, then he says at one point, you're my big sister, that's the way he feels about it, that he can talk to me and get things off his chest, but he also knows that I can be strict, which apparently is a characteristic of a big sister.

Overall, all positive incidents were deemed to have had a positive impact on the relationship, according to both those probationers and POs who were involved in them. According to the probationers themselves, the impact of the negative incidents was largely positive, or, at the very least not substantially negative; in fact, only one negative incident remained unsolved and continued to have a negative impact. Similarly, with respect to the negative incidents highlighted by the POs, their impact was also deemed to be either largely positive or no longer discernable.

The probationers identified more positive moments and less negative moments than their PO counterparts. Specifically, they mainly recounted moments in which they received support from their corresponding PO. The negative incidents tended to be moments in which the PO confronted them about their behavior, which although described as negative critical moments, did not appear to have any negative impact upon the relationship. The POs primarily reported positive moments centered on the improvement that probationers had made over the course of supervision, while warnings to probationers were typically presented as negative moments.

Repairing the working alliance after negative incidents

The probationers indicated that they did not recognize that they were actively involved in repairing negative incidents after they had occurred. In contrast, the POs spoke of their determination to repair any such disruptions in an effort to extend the relationship. Examples of such repair activities cited by the POs include thoroughly explaining the conditions and restrictions, alongside allowing room for both the display of emotions and the probationer's perspective to be heard. Furthermore, the POs noted how they explored with their clients the different alternatives to comply with the conditions, alongside supporting them to change their pro-criminal behavior into pro-social behavior. The probationers did not appear to be affected by the disruptions. Rather, they emphasized the positive attitude of POs and appreciated clarity regarding the conditions and restrictions, which was important for them to know where they stood.

Discussion

The present study explored the perspectives of both probationers and their POs on their working alliance at two separate points of their probation supervision. In so doing, we aimed to gain in-depth insight into the mechanisms of the working alliance. With respect to the first research question, which concerned how the working alliance developed over the course of probation supervision, the results showed that although there were initially substantial differences between probationers and POs' perspectives, eventually the two parties came to place exactly the same degree of importance on the different components of the working alliance. At the outset of supervision, the probationers emphasized that they wanted to know what their position was and to what extent they could rely on their PO. Therefore, clarity over goals and restrictions and establishing a relationship with their PO based on trust was of paramount importance for probationers. From POs' perspective, the establishment of a relationship characterized by clear conditions and restrictions was fundamental, closely followed by working together on shared goals and making a firm connection. Alongside this, they indicated that a trusting relationship takes time, so that the first step in supervision is to develop a 'close-enough' bond. These findings are in accordance with view of Trotter (2015), who similarly emphasized the importance of role clarification by the PO in the initial stage of supervision. Clarity over the role of the PO gives probationers information about what they can expect, what is negotiable and what the limits of confidentiality are (Trotter, 2015). It also corresponds to the finding of Beijersbergen et al. (2015) that if POs or other professionals within the criminal justice system treat people with procedural justice, by which is meant fairness, respect, and dignity, then these people are more willing to comply and cooperate. In the present study, both POs and probationers underscored the importance of respect and transparency when delineating goals and conditions. Furthermore, the probationers also cited trust as an important factor in the working alliance. This finding is corroborated by De Cremer and Tyler (2007) experimental study with undergraduate students, which found that the combination of procedural justice and a high level of trust increased cooperation. The POs stated that a way to build a trusting relationship is to make use of self-disclosure. There are already several authors who suggest the importance of self-disclosure, Phillips et al. (2018) has made an initial inventory and their study showed that this technique is regularly used to build a working alliance.

The results of this study show that the key elements of the working alliance developed after 3 months of probation supervision, to the extent that the relative importance placed on these elements of the working alliance by both probationers and POs became more aligned. Specifically, after a three-month period, both the probationers and POs stressed that the development of a trusting relationship was of paramount importance, and, in fact, was a prerequisite for good cooperation. Having a "close-enough" bond was found to be the next important factor, while goals–restrictions moved to the background and reactance completely disappeared from the scene. These differences in importance testify to the dynamic nature of working alliance: trust changed from an initial exploratory form of shallow trust into a deeper bidirectional form of trust (Sturm et al., 2021c). The establishment of a trusting relationship potentially derives from the work that has been done in the first few months of

supervision, in which the conditions were agreed, respect was gained and goals were negotiated. This is in accordance with previous findings from Shaw et al. (2019), who found that collaboratively discussing probationers' problems, while, simultaneously, linking their problematic behavior to their developmental backgrounds, positively impacted on the level of trust between probationers and POs. Furthermore, these results support evidence from other qualitative and quantitative studies, which have shown that building a trusting relationship is crucial for changing the attitudes and criminal behavior of clients (Redko et al., 2007). In addition, Rowe and Scoppitt (2014) reported that service users attributed attitudinal and behavioral changes to the contact they had with trustworthy social workers. More specifically, their qualitative study showed that service users believed that their desistance from crime was based on their meaningful, trust-based relationships with staff. Trust is well-established as a key component of professionals' practices within the domain of healthcare (Charon, 2001), insofar as patients' trust in doctors or nurses is regarded as fundamental to receiving effective treatment (Croker et al., 2013). Birkhäuer et al. (2017) meta-analysis, which includes 47 studies, showed that people who had a higher level of trust in healthcare professionals reported better health outcomes.

The second research question of this study concerned how POs and probationers described critical incidents during probation supervision. These descriptions were found to differ substantially between POs and probationers. More specifically, POs recounted more negative critical moments, whereas probationers cited more positive moments. Some of the important moments that were cited by probationers included; for example, being anxious about being recognized in the waiting room, or experiencing a perceived lack of respect from a PO. Conversely, POs regarded other moments as being important, such as, the behavioral change undergone by a probationer or having to warn probationers about violations of conditions. One explanation for this disparity between their accounts may be that probationers and POs simply value different moments. Indeed, when one takes a closer look at the start of supervision, probationers tended to indicate incidents concerning a desire to be granted more respect from their PO. According to Behnia (2008), respect is essential if a probationer is to build a trusting relationship. As our study showed, the development of a trusting relationship appears to be crucial for probationers. Therefore, it seems plausible that probationers placed great value on POs being respectful and adopting a non-judgmental stance towards them, especially at the beginning of supervision. Conversely, the critical incidents cited by POs took place in a later phase of supervision and concerned warnings and confrontations. The reason that these incidents were selected by POs might stem from the fact that they considered it their professional duty and responsibility to control supervision, whereas probationers failed to mention these moments because they experienced sufficient trust at that moment, and, hence, did not regard the warnings as a threat to the alliance. An alternative explanation may be that probationers considered these types of incidents to be shameful to remember and discuss with the interviewer.

Limitations

The results of this study should be interpreted with certain limitations in mind, most importantly, the retrospective nature of respondents' accounts. What this study captures is

not the moment-to-moment, or even session-by-session, shifts in participants' per-spectives vis-à-vis the working alliance, but rather their retrospective evaluations of their overall experience. We sought to guard against recall bias by inquiring about both the positive and negative aspects of their experience. Furthermore, as is the case with any qualitative study, the coding frame represents the unique perspectives of the researchers conducting the study, and, as such, preconceived understandings about the importance of the working alliance may play a role. To prevent this, the two researchers coded the transcripts separately, before then proceeding to repeatedly discuss the results. Other aspects of the study design should also be considered when interpreting the results of this study. For example, probationers may not be able or willing to fully reflect on their experiences of the working alliance or critical incidents in probation supervision. In this study, a relatively large number female PO's and large number non-Dutch probationers participated, and although it is important to study the role of sex and ethnicity (See, e.g.,Walling et al., 2012), the study is too small to draw conclusions. Finally, the decision to conduct the interviews at the probation services also inadvertently produced an un-known bias. To increase the perceived trustworthiness of the interviewer, she had to emphasize the confidentiality, which means that they were assured that their answers would not be shared with their PO. However, despite all these efforts, the results must be interpreted with some caution.

Implications

This study has demonstrated that probationers were more focused on the support or respect that they received from POs, whereas POs were more focused on the controlling aspects of the supervision than the positive changes that occurred in the lives of the probationers. Of course, it is a key part of POs' jobs to be focused on the risks and, consequently, on the negative moments of supervision; however, too much focus on these moments can prevent them from adopting a broader perspective and lead to them overlooking positive moments. This lends support to calls to adopt a more strengths-based approach, which is specifically geared towards valuing the abilities and inner resources of clients (Brun and Rapp, 2001).

This study showed that this sample of probationer-PO dyads had divergent views of the working alliance. These differences could be reduced if both parties were to regularly discuss their respective experiences of the working alliance during supervision. Indeed, within the domain of psychotherapy; for example, the benefits of formal and regular feedback are well-established (Lambert and Shimokawa, 2011). Similarly, within the mandated context, such feedback could serve to bring relationship-based incidents into focus, alongside increasing the possibility of repairing disruptions and sharing positive moments, which, in turn, can pave the way for working collaboratively towards rehabilitation.

Notwithstanding their implications for training and practice, the results of this study also highlight several important avenues for future research. Collaboratively reflecting on the relationship and focusing on positive evaluations of probationers' progress are two potentially important mechanisms for understanding how the working alliance can be

developed further, and, as such, warrant further investigation. Moreover, further research is needed to examine both the importance and development of a trusting relationship as part of the working alliance. As this study has demonstrated, the two partners in this relationship have their own distinct perspectives and experiences, and, hence, future research needs to account for both these perspectives.

Conclusion

This study afforded an opportunity to explore the development of the working alliance during probation supervision, from the perspective of both probationers and POs. It has become abundantly clear that building a trusting relationship takes time and effort. Specifically, this study shows that clarity over the role of both partners in the process is an essential starting point for future collaboration, and, moreover, that a trusting relationship can only be built on the basis of respect, a non-judgmental attitude and a strong sense of procedural justice. In the case of a negative incident, POs must strive to restore the potential rupture to the working alliance. Once the relationship has sufficiently recovered, it is then possible to further enhance the trusting relationship.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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ORCID iD

Annelies Sturm ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5463-7232

Notes

1. Reactance is a unpleasant motivational arousal, which is a natural reaction of people whose autonomy is threatened (Rooney, 2018).

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Author Biographies

Annelies Sturm is a PhD candidate, lecturer and researcher at the HU, University of Applied Sciences, Utrecht. She worked as a social worker and her research concerns the quality of forensic social work.

Vivienne de Vogel is professor at the HU, University of Applied Sciences, Utrecht, Research Group Working with Mandated Clients, professor Forensic Care, Maastricht University and researcher at De Forensische Zorgspecialisten in Utrecht, the Netherlands.

Marcus JH Huibers is professor of Clinical Psychology and Experimental Psychotherapy at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, with a cross-appointment as Adjunct Professor at the University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, United States).