Chapter 5

The Parole Interview

By Robert J. McGrath
McGrath Psychological Services
Middlebury, Vermont

Most parole boards interview offenders as part of their decisionmaking process. Some boards interview offenders face-to-face, while others have their staff conduct the interviews. In any case, that personal interaction with offenders is of great concern. New parole board members often are interested in guidance about generally accepted and effective interviewing methods.

Most experienced parole board members will advise that it is important to foster an atmosphere of appropriate, professional decorum in the interview setting as befits an official, quasi-judicial forum. Unfortunately, beyond this, there is no authoritative source of guidance regarding parole interview techniques. Boards have developed a wide variety of practice, and most policy and procedure speaks to the mechanics of a parole interview – who will be present, at what point during a sentence it will occur, whether the interview will be recorded, who will speak first, what official statement will be made at the beginning of the interview informing the offender of its purpose, etc. Policy does not typically speak to methods or protocols for interviews. Indeed, because this is not a court proceeding, the rules for examination and cross-examination of witnesses do not apply, and parole boards are typically given broad latitude in terms of the topics to be covered (see Chapter 6, following).

If one examines the literature on interviewing with offenders generally, however, there is some guidance for officials who are interested in supporting positive offender change. Whatever other interests parole board members may have regarding the parole interview, it is generally accepted that such interviews can serve at least two functions. First, interviews can be used to gather information about offenders for making release, supervision, and revocation decisions. Second, interviews can be used to motivate offenders. This chapter will examine the lessons and principles that emerge from the research on an approach known as "motivational interviewing." Where paroling authorities are interested in playing a part in the process of positive change for offenders, motivational interviewing offers techniques that have been demonstrated as effective in supporting change.

Before we proceed to a discussion of this approach, it is important to note that the goal of motivational interviewing is to support and encourage positive change in offenders. It is not a decisionmaking tool for parole board members. The genuine assessment of readiness for parole is best left to the types of empirically-based risk assessment instruments described earlier in this handbook.

Motivational Interviewing

Motivational interviews are designed to help offenders recognize and do something about their problems. This section of the handbook highlights several motivational interviewing strategies and principles that can be used by parole board members to help offenders change.

Motivational Interviewing Principles. Whether a parole board will want to use motivational interviewing approaches will depend on the boards' mission and philosophy as well as on workload. Motivational interviewing is best suited to parole boards who view offender rehabilitation as part of their mission and believe that offenders can change. Although there is no absolute "right way" to interview offenders, recent research about how offenders and other people change suggests several promising strategies.[1] Six principles are highlighted here for those interested in implementing motivational interviewing.

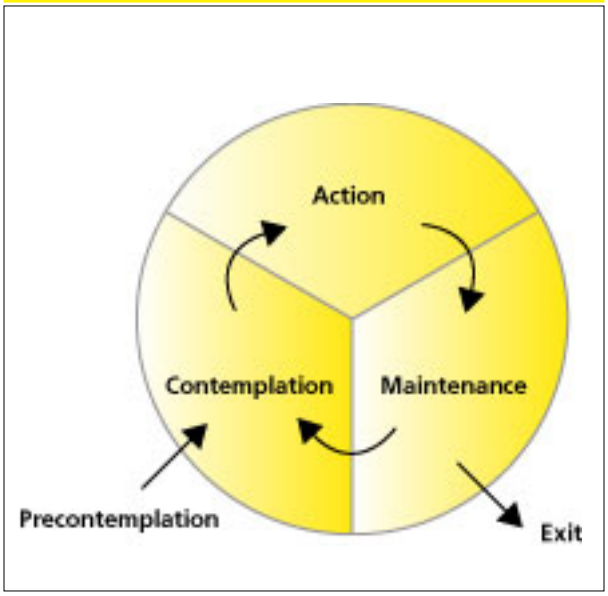
1. **Get information from several sources.** Information obtained from offender interviews has limitations. It is based on what the offenders say. Our greatest concern should be what offenders do. For this reason, information obtained from offenders should be corroborated with information from background records, caseworkers, treatment staff, and other reliable sources. It is also helpful for board members to convey to the offender that they have thoroughly reviewed available background information in the case. This communicates to the offender that his or her case is important. Additionally, by being well-informed and letting the offender know this, the board decreases the chances that an offender will attempt to distort the facts of the case during the interview.
2. **Be firm, fair, direct, and respectful.** There is considerable research indicating that offenders who are supervised and treated by staff in a respectful, direct, firm, and fair manner have lower rates of reoffense than those who are not.[2] Unfortunately, there is no research about how the interactional style of parole board members influences offender reoffense rates. However, it is arguably good practice for board members to model the way that they hope offenders will interact with others.
3. **Ask open-ended questions.** Avoid focusing on questions that an offender can answer with a "yes" or "no". It is best to ask open-ended questions. Open-ended questions help draw out and encourage the offender to become more engaged in the interview. This type of questioning is also more likely to provide parole board members with more information about what an offender is thinking about and doing to solve his or her problems.
4. **Avoid arguments.** Motivational interviewing should persuade offenders to examine their problems and do something about them, but not in an argumentative manner. When one person argues a position, the natural reaction of the other person is to argue the opposite position. This is generally counterproductive. The more an offender argues in favor of a counterproductive position, the more he or she will become committed to that position. Encourage offenders to present their own arguments for change. For example, help offenders examine the discrepancies between their current behavior and how this may be interfering with their goals.
5. **Reinforce positive behavior.** Offenders who appear before the parole board have broken the law and are being punished. Indeed, punishment can be a meaningful response to antisocial behavior. However, positive reinforcement is also a very powerful motivator.[3] Express approval about an offender's progress. Encourage involvement in and express support for quality treatment programs. Communicate your expectations that an offender can change.
6. **Be realistic.** Lastly, it is important to be realistic about the effectiveness of offender rehabilitation efforts. Different types of offenders have different levels of success in

living pro-social lives upon release from prison.[4] Low-risk offenders often do well with minimal or no correctional intervention. It is offenders in the broad moderate and high risk range for reoffense that, as a group, are most likely to positively respond to interventions by a parole board and other change agents. It is with these offenders that we can most often make an important difference. Of course, some offenders are difficult to change even with intensive intervention. Those most resistant to change are the relatively small percentage of offenders who are classified as extremely high risk.

Motivational Interviewing and Stages of Change. Offenders, as do other people who succeed in making changes in their lives, typically move through several distinct stages of change: precontemplation, contemplation, action, and maintenance. These stages are based on the work of psychologists Prochaska, DeClemente, and Norcross.[5] They make common sense and are supported by considerable research. Of most importance for this discussion is the fact that different types of interview strategies can be used to help offenders move through the different stages of change.

These stages of change are best illustrated in a wheel as shown in *Figure 11: Stages of Change Cycle*. ***Precontemplation*** is the earliest stage. It is outside the wheel - the entry point for the process of change. In this stage, offenders either deny their offending behavior and problems, don't recognize the problems, or are unwilling to change. Offenders in the second stage, the ***contemplation*** stage, recognize that they have a problem and are thinking about how to solve it. They are in the process of seeking information and considering options about how to address their problem. In the ***action*** stage, offenders are actively making changes. Changes in an offender's behavior should be obvious to others in this stage. Lastly, offenders in the ***maintenance*** stage are in the process of maintaining and solidifying the changes that they have made.

Figure 11 Stages of Change Cycle



The wheel is a useful way to think about the change process because most offenders are not successful the first time around. They may make some progress, slip back a bit, have a major relapse, make more progress, and repeat this process again. This pattern of change is not unlike how other people make changes in their lives. For example, smokers typically go around the wheel an average of four times before finally quitting for good. Periodic failure is part of the process of change. The ultimate goals, however, are to help offenders change and assess whether the changes offenders make reduce their risk to a tolerable level for community placement.

Even though parole boards typically meet with offenders on an infrequent basis, a board's influence can be very powerful. Obviously, parole boards have a big carrot and stick. They have broad discretion over release and return decisions. Most offenders know this and want to please the parole board. This desire to please can be used by the board to point offenders in the right direction. Ideally, offenders so directed will take advantage of available opportunities for personal improvement.

By identifying the offender's current stage of change, a parole board can use a variety of interviewing strategies to move him or her to the next stage of change. The use of this

model is ideally suited to situations in which change agents, in this case a parole board, see an individual for infrequent and brief interviews. This is because the purpose of the interview strategies described here are not "therapy" per se, but designed to simply push the offender in the right direction. The major goals of offender interviews at each state of change, along with a summary description of the stages, are outlined in *Figure 12: Stages of Change and Parole Board Interview Goals*.

risk of physical assault by other inmates if they admit to their offense.

Determining whether an offender is in the precontemplation stage is often a simple matter. If correctional caseworker reports are available, they often make it clear that the offender is in denial or refusing to enroll in rehabilitation programs. Many parole boards also ask the offender to briefly describe the offenses that are at issue. This should be done in a manner that does not make it easy for the

Figure 12 Stages of Change and Parole Board Interview Goals

Stage	Offender's Description	Motivational Goal of Interview*
Precontemplation	I didn't do it. I do not have any problems.	Raise consciousness about problem. Clarify board's expectations of offender.
Contemplation	I know I have a problem. I'm thinking about what to do.	Explore consequences of not changing. Help offender develop an initial plan.
Action	I'm active in treatment. I'm addressing my problems.	Support treatment involvement and other positive rehabilitation efforts.
Maintenance	I've completed treatment. My changes seem solid.	Reinforce efforts to stabilize change. Recognize offender's success.

*Parole interviews clearly have other goals as well, such as gathering information, formulating the basis for a parole decision, etc.

Precontemplation Stage. Some offenders admit that they are guilty but deny that they have a current problem or they are unwilling to change their problem. Some offenders outright deny that they have committed the offense for which they were convicted. Setting aside the rare individual who was unjustly convicted, an offender can express denial for a variety of other reasons. Prison culture does not support offenders being honest. Some offenders believe it is in their best interest to convince people, including parole board members, that they are not guilty. They may be appealing their case, hope to avoid being held accountable for their offending behavior, or believe that they are at

offender to deny his or her responsibility for the offenses.

The board interviewer can begin by stating something such as, "We have taken time to review your file and read about your offense. We are very interested in your willingness to be honest about your offense, so want to give you a chance to tell us in your own words, what you did." Asking an open-ended question in this or a similar manner communicates that the board knows about the offense, believes that the offender is guilty, and values offender honesty. All of these factors place pressure on the offender to be truthful about his offense behavior. Because some offenders will give

If the offender denies committing the offense, does not recognize evident problems, or expresses an unwillingness to change, then the person is likely in the precontemplation stage of change. The motivational goal of an interview with precontemplaters is to motivate them to move to the contemplation stage of change. This can be done by clearly stating the stake the offender has in accepting responsibility for his actions and working toward change in his life.

Of course, there are a number of key factors that parole boards will consider in determining how to deal with an offender whether or not he or she is in denial. For example, a common position taken by many parole boards at this stage of change is that violent offenders and those at high risk for reoffense who do not successfully address their problems are not considered good candidates for parole. Taking this position, the board interviewers may say something like this:

> We know that there may be understandable reasons why you say that you did not do it. However, we want you to be clear about the board's position. The court has already found you guilty. We are not going to retry your case. We accept the court's verdict that you are guilty. If you did not commit the offense, then this is a matter for you to take up with your lawyer, not us. As far as we are concerned, we want you to know that we consider individuals who we believe recognize and have successfully dealt with their problems as good candidates for parole. We also know that such individuals have a much greater chance at succeeding on parole. It is really up to you at this point to decide what you want to do about it. You can talk to your caseworker about your options. We wish you good luck in sorting out what you want to do.

With relatively low-risk and non-violent offenders, parole board members may encourage them to admit and address their problem, but not consider them non-parolable if they fail to do so. The research on "what works" in correctional treatment and the objective assessment instruments discussed in the previous chapters provide useful information for determining how high a bar to set in setting expectations concerning treatment readiness and completion for particular types of offenders.

In general, interviews with precontemplators can be relatively brief. The goal is simply to provide information to raise the offender's awareness of the problem and the board's position. This should be done in a direct, matter-of-fact, and respectful manner. Giving advice at this stage is usually counterproductive as it often elicits or magnifies offender resistance and resentment. Rather, this is a time to "plant a seed" and leave the door open for change.

Contemplation Stage. In the contemplation stage, the offender recognizes the problem and is considering change. It is a time that is marked by ambivalence. The offender may vacillate in his or her view about the seriousness of the problem. Similarly, the offender may understand the potential positive reasons for tackling the problem, but is conflicted about giving up benefits associated with the behavior. For example, a substance abuser may realize that abstinence will help keep him out of jail but focuses primarily on how drugs make him feel good.

The goal of interviews with offenders in the contemplation stage is to tip the balance in the direction of change. Questioning should help the offender weigh the risks of the status quo and the potential benefits of change. Perhaps the most important strategy with contemplators is to emphasize the positive. Because of their tendency to focus on their problems and the difficulties of change, contemplators often become overwhelmed at the thought of making movement. For this reason, this is a particularly important time for parole board members to communicate their belief that change is possible. Board members can encourage offenders to take one step at a time. To help tip the balance, parole board members can encourage offenders to meet with prison staff to get accurate information about available programs. They can ask offenders to undergo evaluations so that the offender can get an accurate assessment of his or her problem and recommended treatment options. Parole board members can draw on their experience with offenders who have been successful in various programs and boost

the offender's confidence that he or she can benefit from these programs as well. In short, parole board members can help offenders develop a concrete plan for change and put their seal of approval on it.

Action Stage. Offenders in the action stage are actively making changes in their lives. Interviewing efforts at this stage should focus on encouraging offenders to continue their good efforts. Parole board members can encourage an offender by positively reinforcing the progress they may have observed in the individual over the course of their meetings. Additionally, they may highlight an offender's progress that is noted in caseworker and treatment reports. Lastly, if an offender is making the type of progress that may eventually lead to the granting of parole, the board can provide further encouragement by letting the individual know that he or she is on the right path.

Maintenance Stage. Offenders who have reached this stage have made significant changes in their attitude and behavior. These changes should be obvious to others. This is a time for stabilizing new behaviors and preventing any type of relapse.

The offender may have made changes in part through successfully completing a formal rehabilitation program or, if programs were not available, through other methods. Ideally, the board will have access to official reports that detail the offender's progress. Regardless, some boards want to conduct their own assessment of the offender's progress. Several sample questions for this task, based on the work of Beckett and his associates[6] and Cumming and Buell,[7] are listed below. As an introduction to asking these questions, the board should tell the offender something like, "We are interested in finding out how aware you are of the factors that put you at risk to reoffend and what ways you have worked out for controlling them."

1. What feelings or moods (also ask about thoughts, situations, and behaviors) put you at risk for offending again?
2. How will you deal with such feelings and moods (also ask about thoughts, situations, and behaviors) in the future? Please give us some examples.
3. What impact do you think your offense has had on the victim? What have you done or what are you willing to do to make restitution to your victim?
4. What excuses or justifications did you use to give yourself permission to offend? Please give us some examples. How would you deal with such thoughts in the future?
5. What is your plan for work and housing when you return to the community?
6. Who will give you support when you return to the community? Do they know fully about your offending behavior?

Answers to these questions can be evaluated by determining how well the offender can identify relevant risk factors and describe a plan for addressing them in a well thought-out, realistic, and workable manner. Most offenders who have made significant positive changes in their lives will be able to do this. Offenders who have begun to stabilize changes can be congratulated on their successes.

Lastly, the path of change is not an unwavering and straightforward one. Even very motivated offenders slip up at some point, returning to a previous stage before renewing their efforts. Encouraging an offender to analyze and learn from his or her mistakes is an important intervention when backsliding occurs.

Video Supplement to Chapter 5

Video Segment #4: Challenges of Parole Decisionmaking, which was recommended for viewing with Chapter 4, provides a number of vignettes of different paroling authorities conducting interviews with offenders. You may want to view this segment again with your colleagues after reading this chapter and discuss the various approaches depicted in the tape. Do these vignettes provide examples of motivational interviewing? Why or why not?

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS WITH YOUR CHAIR

1. How does the board gather information about specific offenders? Is an interview involved? If so, what is the usual setting, format, and protocol for such an interview? Who will be present? How long do such interviews typically take?
2. If the board routinely interviews offenders, is there a prevailing philosophy about the tone or approach to adopt in an interview setting? If so, what is it? Are there disagreements among board members about this?
3. Are offenders allowed to be accompanied to an interview – by whom, under what circumstances?
4. What are procedures for providing feedback to the offenders – about your decision, about advice or guidance?

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS WITH YOUR COLLEAGUES ON THE BOARD

1. When each of you first came on to the board, how did you prepare yourselves to conduct interviews with offenders?
2. Now that you are experienced in doing interviews with inmates, what do you try to accomplish in the interview?
3. What do you find most difficult, interesting, frustrating, or important about the interview?
4. How do you prepare for an interview? What questions do you ask? Is the order important? Is it possible to verify an offender's response through other sources?

THINGS TO ASK FOR

1. Any written guidance or protocol for an interview.
2. The opportunity to observe fellow board members conduct parole interviews before you are expected to do so.
3. If parole interviews are conducted in correctional facilities, a map of where you are expected to be; any rules/regulations of specific institutions about access procedures, dress code, what you can and cannot bring into the facility with you.

References and Sources

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[2] D.A. Andrews and James Bonta, *The Psychology of Criminal Conduct*, Second Edition (Cincinnati, OH: Anderson, 1998).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] J.O. Prochaska, C.C. DiClimente, and J.C. Norcross, J. C., "In Search of How People Change: Applications to Addictive Behaviors, American Psychologist, (1992) 49, 1102-1114.

[6] R.C. Beckett, D.Fisher, R.E. Mann, and D.Thornton, *Relapse prevention questionnaire and interview* (Unpublished manuscript,1996).

[7] Georgia Cumming and Maureen Buell, *Supervision of the Sex Offender* (Brandon, VT: Safer Society, 1997).