ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

There and back again:

The role of rehabilitation within California’s correctional system and its impact on parole

By

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In 2005, California restructured its correctional system to place a greater emphasis on rehabilitation. For the correctional system as a whole, and the parole system specifically, the turn to rehabilitation appears to be a (re)emergence of policy that dominated California penal law before the 1970s. It is unclear, however, whether what is meant by “rehabilitation” after 2005 is a rehashing of the policies relied upon before 1977, or if it is something different. Either way, this raises critical questions about how rehabilitation today is being translated to, through, and by state officials across the spectrum of California’s complex correctional system, from legislators and regulators in Sacramento down to the field agents operating on the front lines of parole supervision.

Using qualitative interviews and archival analysis, this project asks the following questions: 1) What is meant by rehabilitation as a goal of California’s correctional system as expressed in the 2005 reorganization of the system? How does the current version compare to prior meanings of rehabilitation? 2) How did the current version of rehabilitation come about?
3) How does the legislative intent of rehabilitation impact the practice of parole? I argue that rehabilitation has two meanings. First, it is used as a form of punishment. Second, rehabilitation seems to be a process that shifts over time. Furthermore, the process seems to be greatly influenced by the role of rehabilitation within the correctional system and the current version is impacted by prior versions. Additionally, rehabilitation in California has never been a goal of the correctional system for its own sake. Rather, rehabilitation is a way of achieving the goal of public protection and how it achieves this goal is reframed at different moments in time. Finally, I argue that the two tools of parole have also been reframed over time. Specifically, I argue that in the 1940s to mid-1970s, supervision was a tool for rehabilitation; in the late 1970s to 1990s, rehabilitation was a tool for supervision; in the 2000s, rehabilitation and supervision are tools of each other, forming a feedback loop that creates an ever-expanding system of control in the community.