Criminal Recidivism Predicted from Narratives of Violent Juvenile Delinquents

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ABSTRACT: Youth violence poses a major public health problem. It is important to find treatable predictors of recidivism. Our Subjects had committed offenses of physical and sexual assault. The personality dimensions of restraint and distress were rated by two independent and blind raters from narratives of offender’s committing offenses, which were obtained at baseline during incarceration. Inter and intrarater kappas for each narrative were significant. In a 10–13 year follow-up, subjects lowest in self-restraint had significantly higher recidivism and their reoffenses differed in quality. Restraint may be influenced by clinical intervention and constitutes a new target in the treatment of delinquents.

KEY WORDS: Juvenile Delinquency; Distress; Restraint; Narratives; Recidivism.

Introduction

In recent years, as many as 69% of young parolees were re-arrested for serious crimes within 6 years after their release; 49% were returned to prison. Recidivism rates have been linked with gender, race, educational levels, type of previous crimes committed, previous

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arrest records, age at first arrest and other descriptive variables. However, these predictors of re-offense are of limited relevance to clinicians because they are either immutable, such as gender, or tied inextricably to variables that cannot be influenced in treatment such as economic status. Any association between recidivism and traits that might be influenced by clinical treatment would be of much greater relevance.

Currently there are no universally accepted psychological measures that predict re-offenses in juvenile delinquents. In looking for a classification scheme to predict recidivism, we sought one that has measures with demonstrated stability over time, variables that are relevant to treatment, and results that are consistently obtained in a variety of settings. Fitting these criteria is the Weinberger's classification system. Weinberger's schema summarizes 4 of the five important factors of personality theory in two dimensions: the ability to restrain oneself and the perception of one's emotional distress. A typology can be created intersecting these axes at the normative means for adolescents. Individuals with High Distress and Low Restraint are labeled as "Reactive". They tend to show high levels of emotion and impulsivity during stressful situations. By contrast, Low Distress and Low Restraint would describe the unflappable, but also not particularly considerate and responsible youth, along the more classical profile of psychopaths. They are labeled "Low Anxious" in the Typology. High Distress and High Restraint are called "Impression Managers", i.e. individuals who experience high levels of emotions, but in contrast to the Reactives constrain themselves and do not let their emotions dictate their behavior. Low Distress and High Restraint are designated "Repressors", i.e. individuals who habitually under report emotions even under the most stressful circumstances, while exhibiting high levels of autonomic arousal. The resultant quadrants have been shown to predict psychiatric morbidity, and performance during stressful experimental tasks. The resulting adaptive categories seem to have no significant relationship to race—an important consideration when working in this population—and have been useful in differentiating juveniles who commit crimes from those who do not.

There is some evidence that personality traits can be assessed from a subject's verbal productions describing events or spontaneously speaking about random subjects. Paralinguistic elements, syntax and content are all relevant. Weintraub showed that psychiatric diagnoses and defense mechanisms can be rated from spontaneously produced speech samples. Steiner and Anders related such speech pro-