



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Advances in Life Course Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/alcr

Linking specialization and seriousness in criminal careers

John M. MacDonald^{a,*}, Amelia Haviland^b, Rajeev Ramchand^c,
Andrew R. Morral^c, Alex R. Piquero^d^a Department of Criminology, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, United States^b Carnegie Mellon University, United States^c RAND Corporation, Arlington, VA, United States^d Program in Criminology, EPPS, University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, TX, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 February 2013

Received in revised form 18 January 2014

Accepted 23 January 2014

Keywords:

Criminal specialization

Crime seriousness

Criminal careers

Longitudinal

ABSTRACT

Some research suggests that recidivistic criminal offending patterns typically progress in a stepping-stone manner from less to more serious forms of offending from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. Whether the progression into more serious types of offending reflects patterns of crime specialization are a matter of debate. Using data from 449 adolescent offenders who were interviewed at six time points between adolescence and adulthood, we present a new method for measuring crime specialization and apply it to an assessment of the link between specialization and offense seriousness. We measure specialization by constructing an empirical measure of how similar crimes are from each other based on the rate at which crimes co-occur within individual crime pathways over a given offender population. We then use these empirically-based population-specific offense similarities to assign a specialization score to each subject at each time period based on the set of crimes they self-report at that time. Finally, we examine how changes over time in specialization, within individuals, is correlated with changes in the seriousness of the offenses they report committing. Results suggest that the progression of crime into increasingly serious forms of offending does not reflect a general pattern of offense specialization. Implications for life course research are noted.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The life-course paradigm represents a way of thinking about the inter-related issues of development, timing, social context, human agency, and continuity and change in human behavior (Elder, 1994). Historically, it has been applied to many substantive problems in the fields of sociology and psychology (Mayer, 2009). In the past quarter of a century, the life course paradigm has made headway into the field of criminology (Sampson & Laub,

1993). Application of the life-course paradigm to the study of antisocial behavior represents a particularly useful and important way of thinking about the problem of crime—especially in how researchers assess the correlates of crime throughout the life-course and the impact that criminal involvement has across different life domains. In this regard, the types of crimes that an individual commits may reveal important insight into the etiology of criminal behavior. Prior research has resulted in general agreement that offending patterns often progress over time into more serious forms of criminal offenses (Le Blanc & Frechette, 1989; Loeber, Farrington, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Van Kammen, 1998). This insight has important consequences for explaining criminal careers and crafting social policy

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 215 746 3623; fax: +1 215 898 6891.
E-mail address: johmmm@sas.upenn.edu (J.M. MacDonald).

responses (Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, & Visser, 1986; Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003; Wolfgang, Figlio, & Sellin, 1972). While the majority of those who engage in criminal behavior in adolescence desist from crime in adulthood (Laub & Sampson, 2001), those who persist typically engage in more frequent and oftentimes more serious offenses over the life course (Le Blanc & Loeber, 1998; Moffitt, 1993).

Whether patterns toward the escalation into more serious forms of offending also reflect the development of offense preferences and resulting criminal specialization remains unclear. Alternatively, the pathway to serious offending may reflect a general propensity for crime that reflects a diverse array of offending behaviors, as several prominent life course and developmental perspectives on crime suggest (Moffitt, 1993; Sampson & Laub, 1993). While research on specialization is extensive, empirical investigations into its relationship with the longitudinal patterning of escalation in seriousness of offending have been less common (Blumstein, Cohen, Das, & Moitra, 1988; Piquero et al., 2003).

Attempts to disentangle the relationship between the seriousness of offending and crime specialization date back forty years (Rossi, Waite, Bose, & Berk, 1974; Wolfgang et al., 1972). Studies of crime specialization, alone or in relationship with crime seriousness, have encountered several methodological challenges. Primary among these is the difficulty inherent in both defining and measuring offense specialization (Nieuwebeerta, Blokland, Piquero, & Sweeten, 2011; Piquero et al., 2003; Sullivan, McGloin, Ray, & Caudy, 2009). While the seriousness of a crime may be a function of the calculated economic harms it poses to victims or society (Cohen, 1988; Cohen & Piquero, 2009) or the public's opinion on relative severity of offenses (Blumstein & Cohen, 1980; Rossi et al., 1974; Wolfgang, Figlio, Tracy, & Singer, 1985), criminal specialization is less tractable. Criminal specialization has been defined by preferences for a specific offense (e.g., burglary, robbery) (Blumstein et al., 1988; DeLisi et al., 2010; Lattimore, Visser, & Linster, 1994; Tracy & Kempf-Leonard, 1996) or specific categories of offenses grouped by researchers a priori, or what Cohen (1986) referred to as 'offense clusters' (e.g., property, violent, and drug crime) (Deane, Armstrong, & Felson, 2005; Farrington, 1986; Kempf, 1987; Osgood & Schreck, 2007; Piquero, Paternoster, Mazerolle, Brame, & Dean, 1999; Raudenbush, Christopher, & Sampson, 2003; Wolfgang et al., 1972). In addition to this fundamental definitional challenge, more serious offenses (especially violent) are most typically committed by chronic offenders (Blumstein et al., 1986; Farrington, 1998; Piquero, 2000a; Wolfgang et al., 1972), which means that measuring crime specialization is typically confounded with the rate of offending.

A recent generation of studies relying on new analytic approaches including: marginal logit models (Deane et al., 2005), item-response theory measurement (Osgood & Schreck, 2007), and random-effects regression (McGloin, Sullivan, Piquero, & Pratt, 2007) suggest that criminal specialization may occur for those who engage in more serious forms of offending. This line of research suggests that there are meaningful differences in the tendency for criminally active persons to repeat *violent* offenses compared

to other offense types (Deane et al., 2005; Lynam, Piquero, & Moffitt, 2004; Osgood & Schreck, 2007), and that the diversity of offenses is structured (at least partially) as a function of short-time spans and changes in local life circumstances (McGloin et al., 2007; McGloin, Sullivan, Piquero, Blokland, & Nieuwebeerta, 2011). These newer approaches help improve upon earlier efforts to assess specialization because they enable one to reconcile the low base rate of more serious offenses (e.g., violent offenses) (Deane et al., 2005; Osgood & Schreck, 2007) and allow one to assess within-individual change in offending (McGloin et al., 2007; Osgood & Schreck, 2007; Sullivan et al., 2006). In sum, these recent efforts suggest that criminal behavior is not simply a function of an individual's criminal propensity and that other considerations may be necessary.

These improvements notwithstanding, there still remain several under-researched and unanswered questions that emerged out of the National Academy of Sciences report on criminal careers (see Blumstein et al., 1986), such as whether the progression of more serious offenses reflects a pattern of criminal specialization. This is also an important question for the purpose of developing and evaluating theories that inform behavioral models of crime over the life course (see Moffitt, 1993; Sampson & Laub, 1993). However, answering this question requires addressing several remaining challenges to traditional and newer approaches to measuring criminal specialization and assessing its link to the development of serious offending behavior. In fact, only a few studies have sought to simultaneously and directly link different dimensions of offending over the course of the criminal career (Brame, Mulvey, & Piquero, 2001; Lammers, Bernasco, & Elffers, 2012; Monahan & Piquero, 2009).

Our objective in this study is to illustrate an alternative methodology for assessing crime specialization among self-reported offenses and its association with offense seriousness. We measure specialization in two steps. First, we design an algorithm for calculating how 'similar' crimes are to each other based on the rate at which crimes co-occur within individual crime pathways over a given offender population. This algorithm maps each pair of crimes to a 'similarity' value. We then use these empirical and population-specific offense similarities to assign a specialization score to each subject at each time period based on how similar or dissimilar the set of crimes they self-report at that time are. Finally, we examine how changes over time in this specialization measure, within individuals, is correlated with changes in the seriousness of the offenses they report committing. By relying on an empirically derived measure of crime specialization, we demonstrate that in the population studied here, the average progression toward more serious forms of offending is associated with a greater diversity of offending, a result consistent with expectations from Moffitt's (1994) hypothesis of a life-course-persistent style of offending.

In the next section, we provide some background motivation for this work and suggest that our approach for measuring crime specialization addresses a number of the noted limitations with prior methods, particularly when a range of criminal behaviors are present and the rates of offending are highly skewed as is often the case in

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/313673>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/313673>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)