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Predicting risk of violence through a self-appraisal questionnaire☆

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ABSTRACT

The Self-Appraisal Questionnaire (SAQ) is a self-report that predicts the risk of violence and recidivism and provides relevant information about treatment needs for incarcerated populations. The objective of the present study was to evaluate the concurrent and predictive validity of this self-report in Spanish offenders. The SAQ was administered to 276 offenders recruited from several prisons in Madrid (Spain). SAQ total scores presented high levels of internal consistency (alpha = .92). Correlations of the instrument with violence risk instruments were statistically significant and showed a moderate magnitude, indicating a reasonable degree of concurrent validity. The ROC analysis carried out on the SAQ total score revealed an AUC of .80, showing acceptable accuracy discriminating between violent and nonviolent recidivist groups. It is concluded that the SAQ total score is a reliable and valid measure to estimate violence and recidivism risk in Spanish offenders.

Predicción del riesgo de violencia mediante un cuestionario de auto-evaluación

RESUMEN

El cuestionario *Self-Appraisal Questionnaire* (SAQ) [cuestionario de autovaloración] es una medida de auto-informe que predice el riesgo de violencia y reincidencia, además de permitir evaluar las necesidades de tratamiento para poblaciones penitenciarias. El objetivo de este estudio fue evaluar su validez concurrente y predictiva en una muestra española de delincuentes. El cuestionario fue administrado a 276 delincuentes procedentes de varios centros penitenciarios de Madrid (España). El coeficiente alfa de Cronbach que se obtuvo para la puntuación total del SAQ fue elevado (alfa = .92). Las correlaciones obtenidas con otros instrumentos de riesgo de violencia fueron estadísticamente significativas y presentaron una magnitud moderada, indicando un razonable grado de validez concurrente del instrumento. El análisis de la curva ROC reveló un área bajo la curva de .80, mostrando una aceptable capacidad de precisión a la hora de discriminar entre grupos de reincidentes violentos y no violentos. Se concluye que la puntuación total del SAQ proporciona una medida suficientemente fiable y válida para estimar violencia y riesgo de reincidencia en población de delincuentes españoles.

The prediction of violent behavior is an important public safety aim for forensic and correction personnel, as they make decisions regarding release from prison (Kubiak, Kim, Bybee, & Eshelman, 2014). Offender risk assessment instruments are used by these professionals as a tool to assist in the prediction of recidivism and violent behavior. These instruments are based on advances in identifying factors that are facilitators of violence risk (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Douglas, Skeem, & Nicholson, 2011; Shepherd, Adams, McEntyre, & Walker, 2014; Wakeling, Freemantle, Beech, & Elliott, 2011; Yang, Wong, & Coid, 2010).

Given the necessity for a permanent assessment to identify whether the individual poses a risk to society and, if so, the nature

of this risk, the instruments used for this purpose must be reliable, with good predictive utility (Loza, Dhaliwhal, Kroner, & Loza-Fanous, 2000). On the one hand, the use of standardized tools has been instigated and continues to thrive because many studies have demonstrated that clinicians' judgments alone led to many erroneous decisions and unacceptably high false positives (Loza, 2005). On the other hand, the use of standardized tools improves the predictive accuracy of recidivism, violent behavior, sexual offense, and gender violence (Kroner & Yessine, 2013; Loza & Green, 2003; Loza & Loza-Fanous, 2000; Pérez, Martínez, & Redondo, 2009).

According to Kubiak et al. (2014), violence risk assessment has changed over the past 50 years from relying on clinical judgments of risk (first generation risk assessments) to the latest instruments that integrate different dimensions of risk management, selection of intervention, and assessment of change during the rehabilitation process (fourth generation risk assessments). Whereas the first generation of risk instruments only assessed static factors (e.g., factors unlikely to change, such as past criminal history), the more recently developed third/fourth generation tools incorporate dynamic factors (e.g., factors that can be changed) and are able to assess treatment needs (Andrade, O' Neill, & Diener, 2009; Gómez-Hermoso, 2009; Smith, Cullen, & Latessa, 2009). Morash (2009) summarized the different purposes of violence risk assessment instruments: a) prediction of prison misconduct, b) identifying the treatment needs of offenders, c) providing interventions to address those needs, d) identifying the needs that are most predictive of behavior problems and recidivism, e) identifying those individuals with high level of recidivism, and f) developing plans of intervention that will address these needs.

A recent meta-analysis of the outcomes attributable to various instruments and methods used to predict violence highlights a self-report risk instrument, the Self-Appraisal Questionnaire (SAQ; Loza, 2005). The SAQ measures the predominant, predictive aspects (dynamic and static factors) found in the literature and allows us to assess violence risk and recidivism in forensic and prison populations. The SAQ is a risk/need inventory designed to assist clinicians, forensic, and correctional professionals to predict violence risk but it can also be used as a measurement of pre- and post-treatment, an evaluation of offenders' evolution, a support instrument for assignment and changes in penitentiary grades, and even determining penitentiary permissions (Loza, 2005; Loza & Loza-Fanous, 2001, 2003; Prinsloo & Hesselink, 2011).

Loza (2005) maintains that this inventory has several important advantages over other violence risk measures: a) the SAQ can be completed approximately in only 20 minutes, b) the SAQ can be administered in groups, and c) interpreting the results requires minimal professional time, minimal training, and no special certification to obtain credible and reliable results. Despite that the use of self-report questionnaires can be vulnerable to self-presentation biases in forensic settings, different studies have also found evidence that self-report questionnaires can be as reliable and valid as observer rating instruments for violence risk assessment (Loza et al., 2004; Mills, Loza, & Kroner, 2003; Prinsloo, 2013).

From these considerations about the SAQ for predicting violence risk, the purpose of this study was to analyze the concurrent and predictive validity of this self-report measure in a sample of Spanish offenders. The psychometric evaluation was performed by determining the concurrent validity with other violence risk measures and examining the validity of the SAQ for predicting violent and nonviolent recidivism.

Method

Ethics Statement

The present study was reviewed and approved by the Committee of the Faculty of Psychology of the Complutense University of Madrid. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. All participants were informed of the purpose of the research, the estimated duration of the assessment, and the procedures that were followed for the completion of the research.

Participants

Two-hundred and seventy-six male offenders who were incarcerated in different prisons in the Community of Madrid (Spain) participated at the present study. The average age of the participants was 36.4 years (SD = 9.7, ranging from 19 to 66 years). Of them, 91.3% were Spanish, and 8.7% were of other nationalities. Table 1 displays the demographic characteristics of the offenders. Current sentence length ranged from 8 to 288 months (M = 7.39 years, SD = 6.47). Seventy-five percent of the participants presented violent offenses (i.e., an offense against a person such as murder, rape, and assault), and the nonviolent offenders were convicted of nonviolent crimes such as property offenses (i.e., robbery without violence, breaking and entering, and theft). See Table 2 for criminal characteristics of the offenders.

Measures

The Psychopathy Checklist–Revised (PCL-R; Hare, 1991, 2003). The PCL-R consists of 20 items and two factors assessing psychopathy in clinical and forensic populations. Several studies have

Table 1
Sample Sociodemographic Characteristics (N = 276).

	Frequency	%
Marital status		
Single	153	55.1%
Married	46	16.7%
Couple	21	7.5%
Widowed	1	0.4%
Divorced/separated	56	20.3%
Education		
No studies	26	9.4%
Ninth grade or less	111	40.2%
10th to 11th grade	82	29.7%
High school	28	10.2%
Vocational training	13	4.7%
More than high school	16	5.8%
Professional status		
Unemployed	47	17.0%
Unqualified employee	53	19.2%
Qualified employee	159	57.6%
Employee with specific qualification	10	3.6%
Employee with higher education	7	2.6%

Table 2
Criminal Characteristics of the Sample (N = 276).

Characteristics	Values
Current sentence length (months)	8-288
M	88.68
SD	77.64
Age at current incarceration (years)	31.73
SD	9.84
Minimum and maximum values	16-60
Age at first incarceration (years)	25.14
SD	10.10
Minimum and maximum values	10-60
Official prior arrests (years)	3.87
SD	3.99
Minimum and maximum values	1-23
Official prior convictions (years)	4.43
SD	4.79
Minimum and maximum values	1-50