



Standardizing research methods on violent offenders: Perpetrator-motive research design and consensual qualitative research



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ABSTRACT

To date, there has been a modicum of research attention to offender populations, particularly where interviews of offenders have been conducted. Further, the literature in this area has been hampered by several limitations that make cross-study comparisons and replication difficult. The goals of this manuscript are to: (1) review offender-based interview research, focusing on data collection methods and data analytic strategies, (2) highlight limitations that exist, and (3) discuss the use of standardized and replicable procedures. From the examination conducted, the authors suggest that published articles representing this body of research frequently provide inadequate detail of the methodological and analytic procedures utilized. To move the science of offender-based research forward, the authors provide an example of standardized data collection procedures (perpetrator-motive research design; PMRD), and describe one example of an established qualitative research method for data analysis, consensual qualitative research (CQR). Using standardized methods and procedures will advance knowledge about offenders and ultimately lead to enhanced applications for practitioners. Moreover, the implementation of such practices will increase the ability to replicate methods and analyses, increasing the value and utility of the research, and enabling cross-study comparisons to be made.

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Contents

1. Introduction	126
2. Review of the literature	126
2.1. Sample	126
2.2. Methodology employed	127
2.2.1. Methodological details	127
2.3. Study strengths	127
2.4. Methodological limitations	128
3. Perpetrator-motive research design	129
3.1. Steps 1–6	129
3.2. Steps 7–10	129
3.3. Steps 11 & 12	129
4. Consensual qualitative research	130
4.1. Blocking	130
4.2. Domains	130
4.3. Core ideas	130
4.4. Cross-analysis	130
4.5. Auditing	131
4.6. Trustworthiness	131
5. Summary and recommendations	131
References	131

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1. Introduction

Research on violent offenders has been an important element of the fields of criminology, criminal justice, sociology and psychology. This research holds the promise retrieving information about thoughts and feelings directly from the source of violent criminal behavior. By coming to know the inner world of the offender, combined with the contextual environment, the expectation is that policies and procedures may be developed to prevent, mitigate, and respond to criminal activities, as well as investigate and prosecute criminals. Through the authors' research on the motives of violent offenders it has become evident that the extant research of offender populations suffers from often poorly-articulated methods and little to no standardization across studies. The lack of clear articulation of methods renders results dubious, minimizes the ability to generalize across studies, and drastically limits the capability to replicate study procedures.

There are two aspects of methodology that are in need of clarification. First are the data collection procedures, including the strategies used when developing interview protocols, the details of how participants were recruited, and the procedures related to the interviews. These topics all are germane when describing the chosen data collection methods. Second, especially when using qualitative methods, it is imperative that the data analysis methods are clearly described. While it is generally agreed that replication of results is not feasible in qualitative research (in qualitative research this is referred to transferability; Morrow, 2005), it is sound science to present enough detail so that the data collection and analysis procedures may be replicated.

The purposes of this article are to: (1) review the methods used in studies of violent offenders and then open a dialogue about the need of standardized research methods; (2) highlight the strengths and limitations of the data collection and data analysis methods and procedures of the available literature; (3) offer a starting place for offender motive research by providing an overview of a recently refined data collection strategy, perpetrator-motive research design (PMRD; Vecchi, Van Hasselt, & Angleman, 2013), a methodology that responds to the lack of standardization found in offender research; and (4) provide detail for a qualitative data analysis methodology, consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997) that can be readily applied to offender-based research, thus contributing to our ability to make comparisons across studies.

2. Review of the literature

For the literature review, searches were conducted of *Criminal Justice Abstracts with Full Text*, *PsycINFO* and *PsycARTICLES*, using the search strings "offender & interview" and "offender-based research & interview." Only articles in peer-reviewed journals were included; thus, dissertations and other studies were excluded. Because the interest was on research that studied offenders, articles were also excluded if they addressed police interviews, interrogations, or clinical interviews of offenders. This resulted in 26 articles. Next, the references of the 26 reviewed articles were searched, and any citations that did not emerge in the previous search were gathered. This resulted in 12 additional usable articles, bringing the total to 38.

Researchers of offenders are divided between those who believe that active offenders provide the richest data and those who conduct research in prisons (Sandberg, 2010). Active offenders are those who are currently offending and can speak to their crimes and criminal careers. Researchers carry out their studies in the field, needing to gain the confidence of offenders. This population has an advantage over those in prison, namely that incarcerated offenders are those that got caught – that were, in essence, unsuccessful (McCall, 1978). However, this population poses many difficulties. It may be challenging to access active offenders and gain their trust. There also may be legal or ethical considerations when crimes are reported to the researcher. Finally, the researcher, by engaging offenders in their environments,

may be at risk of harm. Research on prisoners has advantages, such as easier access and larger samples. There are also fewer risks to the researcher's safety and less ambiguous legal and ethical issues. For example, in the authors' research, participants are informed that the researchers wish to talk with them about the crime for which they were convicted and that they should not discuss in detail any other crime in which they were involved and not prosecuted. As mentioned, the primary limitation of studying convicted offenders is that they may not be the most successful at their trade (McCall, 1978). Therefore, information gleaned may not always pertain to the larger offender population.

For the purposes of this article, prison-based offender research is reviewed, and a critique of the methodological descriptions of these studies is offered. This review is organized into the topical areas of sample, methodology, methodological details, study strengths, and methodological limitations. Rather than include long lists of citations for each variable of interest, citations are included in Tables 1 and 2.

2.1. Sample

The first characteristic of the samples included in the 38 offender-based studies reviewed was participant sex. The majority of the studies sampled male offenders only ($n = 22$, 57.9%). Four studies (10.5%) included only female participants, and nine studies (23.7%) included both male and female offenders. Three studies (7.9%) did not specify the sex of the participants, which is of concern. If a study does not

Table 1
Participant demographics.

Reference	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Ashkar and Kenny (2009)					X			
Barnett and Barnett (1975)	X							
Beech, Fisher, and Ward (2005)	X							
Beech, Ward, and Fisher (2006)	X							
Beech, Parrett, Ward, and Fisher (2009)		X						
Beyer and Beasley (2003)	X							
Bonham (2011)					X			
Brookman, Mullins, Bennett, and Wright (2007)			X					
Cima, Smeets, and Jelcic (2008)	X							
Comack and Brickey (2007)		X						
Copes and Vieraitis (2009)			X					
Copes, Hochstetler, and Williams (2008)	X							
Davidson (2006)	X							
De Gregorio (2009)					X			
Hartwell et al. (2010)					X			
Henderson (1986)	X							
Hill and Nathan (2008)	X							
Hochstetler, Copes, and Williams (2010)			X					
Holt and Pamment (2011)								X
Howerton et al. (2007)	X							
Jacobs, Topalli, and Wright (2003)			X					
Jacobs and Wright (1999)			X					
Keown, Gannon, and Ward (2010)	X							
Kolla et al. (2014)				X				
LeClerc, Proulx, Lussier, and Allaire (2009)	X							
Lee et al. (2011)							X	
McCarty (1986)		X						
Miller (1998)			X					
Pogrebin, Stretesky, Unnithan, and Venor (2006)			X					
Polaschek and Gannon (2004)	X							
Presser (2004)	X							
Scully and Marolla (1984)	X							
Sheehan and Sullivan (2010)	X							
Sollund (2008)	X							
Swogger, Walsh, Houston, Cashman-Brown, and Conner (2010)				X				
Van Daele and Vander Beken (2011)	X							
Vandiver, Dial, and Worley (2008)		X						
Wood (2004)	X							

Note: 1 = adult males, 2 = adult females, 3 = adult, both sexes, 4 = adult, sex unspecified, 5 = juvenile males, 6 = juvenile females, 7 = juvenile, both sexes, and 8 = juvenile, sex unspecified.

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