



Does substance misuse moderate the relationship between criminal thinking and recidivism?



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Some differential intervention frameworks contend that substance use is less robustly related to recidivism outcomes than other criminogenic needs such as criminal thinking. The current study tested the hypothesis that substance use disorder severity moderates the relationship between criminal thinking and recidivism.

Methods: The study utilized two independent criminal justice samples. Study 1 included 226 drug-involved probationers. Study 2 included 337 jail inmates with varying levels of substance use disorder severity. Logistic regression was employed to test the main and interactive effects of criminal thinking and substance use on multiple dichotomous indicators of recidivism.

Results: Bivariate analyses revealed a significant correlation between criminal thinking and recidivism in the jail sample ($r = .18, p < .05$) but no significant relationship in the probation sample. Logistic regressions revealed that SUD symptoms moderated the relationship between criminal thinking and recidivism in the jail-based sample ($B = -.58, p < .05$). A significant moderation effect was not observed in the probation sample.

Conclusions: Study findings indicate that substance use disorder symptoms moderate the strength of the association between criminal thinking and recidivism. These findings demonstrate the need for further research into the interaction between various dynamic risk factors.

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Introduction

Contemporary correctional approaches suggest that tailoring interventions to target the specific criminogenic needs of offenders will yield greater declines in offending than a one-size-fits-all approach that has served as the predominate correctional treatment paradigm over the past several decades (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Andrews, Bonta, & Hoge, 1990). Although this targeted approach is theoretically sound and practically appealing, it can be difficult to implement due to the reality that most offenders have multiple criminogenic needs and many have complex behavioral health problems (Taxman & Caudy, forthcoming). Other than the work of Andrews and Bonta (e.g., Andrews & Bonta, 2010), little empirical literature exists on how different criminogenic needs interact with each other and what specific criminogenic needs should be targeted during interventions when offenders have multiple needs that may all relate to their offending (Wooditch, Tang, & Taxman, 2014).

One criminogenic need that has emerged as a primary target of correctional interventions in recent years is antisocial or criminal cognitions (Lipsey, Landenberger, & Wilson, 2007). Criminal cognitions are the means by which people rationalize their deviant behavior, exhibit distorted thinking, or neutralize the negative consequences resulting from offending. These cognitions are the “attitudes, beliefs, and rationalizations that offenders use to justify and support their criminal behavior” (Walters, 2012a, p. 272). Antisocial cognitions are a “big four” criminogenic need identified by Andrews and Bonta (2010) as one of the most robust predictors of recidivism among dynamic risk factors. Several correctional interventions specifically target these cognitive processes (e.g., Thinking for a Change, Moral Reconation Therapy, Reasoning and Rehabilitation), and these and other cognitive-behavioral programs that target criminal thinking are increasingly relied upon as recidivism risk reduction strategies in the justice system (Hollin & Palmer, 2009; Lipsey et al., 2007; Polaschek, 2011; Travers, Mann, & Hollin, 2014).

Despite the prominence of criminal cognitions in correctional discourse and practice, extant empirical research finds that the strength of the relationship between criminal thinking/cognitions² and offending varies considerably across samples. A moderately robust relationship between criminal thinking and recidivism has been found in some

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studies utilizing offender populations (see Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Walters, 2012a for meta-analytic support), but not in other similar samples (Mills & Kroner, 1997; Simourd & Van De Ven, 1999; Taxman, Rhodes, & Dumenci, 2011). Given these mixed findings, researchers have begun to explore subgroup differences in levels of criminal thinking and potential moderators (e.g., race, education level) of the relationship between criminal thinking and recidivism. Mandracchia and Morgan (2012) found that younger offenders, less educated offenders, and minority offenders generally endorsed higher levels of criminal thinking relative to older, more educated, and white offenders. A recent study by Walters (2014) found that education level and to a lesser extent, race and ethnicity moderate the relationship between criminal thinking and recidivism. Walters found that for those who had completed 12 or more years of school, criminal thinking was effective in predicting recidivism, whereas it was not for those with fewer than 12 years of education. A clear need exists to further explore how the strength of the association between criminal thinking and recidivism may vary depending on sample composition (Walters, 2011; 2014). This raises the question, is the relationship between criminal thinking and offending stronger for certain types of individuals than it is for others? Is criminal thinking less important – or even irrelevant – in predicting re-offense among some types of offenders? The answers to these questions have important practical implications.

The current study is based on the assumption that not all crimes are committed due directly to criminal thinking (e.g., negative attitudes towards authority, a sense of entitlement). Prior research suggests that among individuals with severe substance use disorders (i.e., addicts), a great deal of crime is fundamentally driven by substance dependence/addiction – the physical and psychological need for the illicit substance in question (Goldstein, 1985; Nurco, Hanlon, Kinlock, & Duszynski, 1988; Nurco, Shaffer, Ball, & Kinlock, 1984; Vaughn, 2011; White & Gorman, 2000). Dependence-driven crime can include the possession of illegal substances, as well as any crime committed to obtain resources necessary to obtain drugs. Consistent with this literature, the current study hypothesizes that among individuals with more severe substance use disorders, the need for the substances is the fundamental motivation for most criminal activity. Among non-dependent individuals, alternative motivating factors may take precedence. Other factors such as the cognitive distortions involved in criminal thinking³ are more apt to be predictive of criminal activity among individuals with less severe substance use disorders. Teasing out the role that substance use disorders and criminal thinking play in predicting recidivism among offenders is important to advance the development of risk reduction interventions.

The current study

The current study extends the existing criminal thinking literature by testing the main and interactive effects of criminal thinking and substance use disorder (SUD) symptom severity on recidivism in two samples of justice-involved individuals. The study findings have implications for both theory and practice. Given the limited availability of treatment resources in correctional settings, targeting treatment services to offender needs and providing rehabilitative services that are capable of addressing multiple criminogenic needs is essential (Taxman, Caudy, & Pattavina, 2013). Many offenders, however, have a complex array of behavioral health treatment needs and there is a lack of convincing research informing which specific needs should be targeted, for what types of offenders to maximize reductions in recidivism. Although the risk-need-responsivity (RNR) framework (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Andrews et al., 1990) identifies eight dynamic need factors related to recidivism, the framework provides less guidance on how to address the potentially complex interactions between these dynamic needs during programming. To foster theoretical elaboration and inform the development and testing of rehabilitative interventions, the current study attempts to answer the question, does substance use disorder severity moderate the relationship between criminal thinking

and future criminal behavior? It is hypothesized that the severity of individuals' SUD symptoms will significantly moderate the relationship between criminal thinking and recidivism. Specifically, it is predicted that the strength of the association between criminal thinking and recidivism will be attenuated for individuals who report higher levels of recent SUD symptoms relative to individuals who report lower levels of SUD symptoms or no SUD symptoms. For individuals with lower levels of SUD symptoms, it is hypothesized that criminal thinking will be a moderately strong predictor of recidivism. For individuals with more severe SUD symptoms, it is hypothesized that criminal thinking will not be significantly related to recidivism.

Two independent criminal justice samples and two existing measures of criminal thinking were used to test these hypotheses. Different levels of criminal justice risk, substance involvement, and penetration into the justice system characterized the two study samples. This provided the opportunity to investigate the extent to which sample composition may condition study findings. It also allowed for replication to test the robustness of findings across samples and different measures of criminal thinking. Study 1 utilized a sample of drug-involved probationers who participated in a randomized clinical trial (RCT) that tested the efficacy of a seamless model of substance abuse treatment during probation. Data on substance use and offending behavior were tracked over a 12-month follow-up period using both self-report and official measures. Study 2 utilized a sample of general population (felony) jail inmates assessed during incarceration and followed for 12 months post-release.

Data and measures

Study 1 participants

Participants were 226 drug-involved probationers who participated in a randomized clinical trial of a correctional intervention (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). The RCT tested the efficacy of a seamless model of substance abuse treatment for probationers. The treatment group received substance abuse counseling during their regular visits to the probation office while the control group received referrals to community-based substance abuse counseling only. Study recruitment began in March of 2007 through referrals by probation officers at three sites in Maryland. To be eligible, individuals had to be on probation and required to complete a substance abuse treatment program

Table 1
Participant Demographic Characteristics

Characteristics	Study 1 (n = 226)		Study 2 (n = 337)	
	M (SD)/%	Range	M (SD)/%	Range
Age (years)	36.83 (11.54)	18-64	33.22 (10.16)	18-69
Sex (% Male)	73.5%		70.0%	
Race/Ethnicity				
African-American	68.1%		46.9%	
Caucasian	30.1%		35.3%	
Hispanic	0.4%		5.9%	
Other	1.3%		11.9%	
Marital Status				
Never Married	68.1%		55.4%	
Married	10.6%		15.2%	
Separated	7.1%		9.8%	
Divorced	12.8%		14.9%	
Widowed	1.3%		0.3%	
Other	-		4.4%	
Years of School	11.41 (1.61)	6-17	11.85 (2.21)	0-19
Annual Income	8,391.10 ^a (10,647.69)	0-48,000	20,767.94 (23,838.13)	0-116,000
Employment Status				
Unemployed	43.4%		13.0%	
Employed	56.6%		87.0%	

Note. All demographic characteristics were reported at baseline;

^a = Calculated based on self-reported income over the prior 30 days.

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