CrossMark

Pro-criminal attitudes, intervention, and recidivism ☆

Rainer Banse [a,b,*], Judith Koppehele-Gossel [a,b], Lisa M. Kistemaker [a,b], Verena A. Werner [a,b], Alexander F. Schmidt [a]

[a] University of Bonn, Germany
[b] Bonner Institut für Rechts- und Verkehrspsychologie, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

We review the recent research literature on pro-criminal attitudes (PCAs) as a causal factor of recidivism with a focus on studies on the effectiveness of offender treatment programs targeting PCAs to prevent recidivism. The main conclusions that can be derived from the literature are: (1) the evidence supports the hypothesis that PCAs are related to reoffending; (2) most investigated offender treatment programs tend to reduce PCAs, although the general lack of adequate control group designs does not rule out alternative explanations for this reduction; and (3) there is no conclusive empirical evidence that intervention programs designed to reduce PCAs are effective in reducing recidivism. Empirical research in this area lacks the theoretical and methodological rigor to test causal models of the influence of treatment on reducing PCAs, and effects of PCAs on recidivism. Limitations of the empirical evidence are related to inadequate research designs and/or suboptimal data analysis strategies. Recommendations concerning optimized research designs and data analysis strategies that are likely to provide more conclusive evidence on the relation of PCAs, PCA treatment, and recidivism are given.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Contents

1. Introduction

Crime-supportive or pro-criminal attitudes (PCAs) figure prominently among the "Big Four" criminogenic needs in Andrews and Bonta's (2010) Risk–Need–Responsivity Model of offender rehabilitation. In meta-analyses, it has been consistently shown that general (Andrews & Bonta, 2010) or offence-specific (Helmus, Hanson, Babchishin, & Mann, 2013) PCAs are empirically related to recidivism

with small to moderate effect sizes. Theoretically, in criminology, Sykes and Matza's (1957) Neutralization Theory postulates that PCAs (i.e., rationalizations, justifications) precede and cause criminal behavior. To overcome the barriers erected by socialization and to violate the law it is a necessary condition to find reasons or excuses or to claim special circumstances that justify illegal behavior. From a psychological perspective, it seems more plausible that the need for PCAs arises as a consequence of and not as a cause for criminal behavior. From Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance, one can derive, accordingly, the prediction that contradictions between illegal behavior and the individuals' knowledge of, and adherence to, societal norms elicit an unpleasant state of cognitive dissonance that can be reduced by adding pro-criminal cognitions. However, this "hen-and-egg" question is mainly of academic relevance. From either perspective one would expect that PCAs, once established, lower the threshold to commit criminal offences in the future. A reduction of PCAs should therefore reduce the risk of criminal behavior. Moreover, attitudes are only moderately stable and can be changed by appropriate measures of education, training, or therapy. Consequently, PCAs are considered to be a dynamic risk factor that can be reduced or eliminated by dedicated modules in offender treatment programs. In the following sections we will review the empirical support for the assumptions that offender treatment programs can reduce PCAs, and that this reduction is conducive to offender rehabilitation.

Although these assumptions about PCAs are widely accepted in criminology and forensic psychology, they can be criticized. For example, the unpleasant contradiction between one's own criminal behavior and the knowledge of accepted societal norms is expected to be maximal in individuals who are involved in a criminal subculture and "normal" civil life at the same time. Offenders who are exclusively immersed in a criminal subculture, and have few ties to legal life, may not need to develop PCAs to justify their behavior. It seems, therefore, plausible that some of the most prolific offenders hold relatively little PCAs as compared to "average" offenders. Counter-intuitively, if offender treatment successfully induces a more positive evaluation of societal norms, the law, and law enforcement institutions, this change may increase cognitive dissonance, and in turn, amplify PCAs to reduce dissonance. In consequence, it is conceivable that successful offender treatment leads to a paradoxical increase of PCAs, at least in some offenders.

Another critical argument revolves around the question whether reducing PCAs is unconditionally helpful in preventing crime. In an extensive theoretical analysis, Maruna and Copes (2005) and Maruna and Mann (2006) have cogently argued that the common rationale and some of the corresponding interventions used in offender treatment programs may be counterproductive. For example, the aim that offenders take full and unconditional personal responsibility for their criminal acts (instead of minimizing their responsibility) implies the construction of a genuinely criminal self-concept, the belief to be a fundamentally bad and unworthy person who does bad things. This kind of self-concept may be realistic, but does not necessarily enhance adjustment. These partially realistic negative self-concepts are typical for people suffering from depression (Ware & Mann, 2012). Desistance research (Maruna, 2001) has revealed that criminals who desist from crime manage to maintain a positive self-concept while finding new ways to ascribe sense and meaning to their lives without committing crimes. These empirical findings suggest that any intervention to reduce PCAs should avoid creating a dysfunctional identity (i.e., condemnation script; Maruna, 2001) that undermines offenders' self-esteem and their ability to actively change their lifestyle.

2. Literature review

Even though it is widely accepted that PCAs increase the risk of criminal behavior (Andrews & Bonta, 2010) this relationship may vary across different types of offenders and different types of PCAs. Although a reduction of PCAs in offenders should be generally conducive to

prevent future crimes, interventions could also have unwanted iatrogenic side effects. It seems, therefore, premature to assume that any reduction of PCAs automatically reduces recidivism. For an evidence-based commissioning strategy of offender treatment programs it seems therefore critical to evaluate the empirical evidence on PCA-effects with regard to three questions: (1) How strong is the causal relationship between PCAs and subsequent criminal behavior? (2) What interventions have been shown to effectively reduce PCAs? and (3) How effective are those treatments to reduce recidivism?

A path model (Fig. 1) illustrates the presumed causal relationships between PCAs, intervention, and criminal behavior or recidivism. If there is substantial evidence that offending and PCAs are positively correlated, this correlation does not allow to distinguish between Path A (PCAs cause offending) and Path B (offending causes PCAs). However, both are not mutually exclusive and it is plausible that PCAs and offending do reinforce and maintain each other in a positive feedback loop. For the purposes of offender treatment and rehabilitation, it is critical whether PCAs predict future offending. In order to empirically confirm the effectiveness of PCA intervention programs it is necessary to show (1) that an intervention significantly reduces PCAs (Path D), and (2) that this change would not have occurred without the intervention (Path C). The second condition is not trivial: PCAs may be reduced by the conviction or detention as such or simply through aging of the offender during incarceration. In order to empirically demonstrate that an intervention has caused the effect, it is imperative to employ a control group design to test Path D against Path C.

Many intervention programs (e.g., Sex Offender Treatment Programme [SOTP]; Beech, Oliver, Fisher, & Beckett, 2005) use multiple modules targeting different criminogenic needs of offenders. The empirical demonstration that an intervention does reduce PCAs (as compared to no intervention) does not imply that the modules intended to reduce PCAs have caused the effect. In order to empirically establish the causal role of specific elements of a program, it is necessary to run the program with and without the dedicated PCA modules, contrasting Paths D and E. Finally, PCA intervention programs are only worthwhile if the reduction of PCAs also leads to a reduction in recidivism (Path G). It could well be that the program only teaches offenders to pretend reduced PCAs (because they want to be good program graduates, or expect imprisonment-related advantages such as more positive evaluations, earlier release, and/or positioning in less controlled settings). The finding that the participation in the program reduces recidivism may also be due to the effective reduction of other criminogenic needs that are unrelated to PCAs (Path E).

In summary, for a conclusive empirical demonstration of the effectiveness of a PCA intervention program, it is necessary to show that the program reduces PCAs (Path D) as compared to a relevant control condition (Path C), *and* that the reduction of PCAs mediates the reduction of recidivism (Path G) as compared to program effects on other criminogenic needs (Path E). The existing empirical evidence will be evaluated in light of this causal model.

2.1. Measures of pro-criminal attitudes and offending

In social psychology, attitudes are defined as "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p. 1). In more than 60 years of research on PCAs, a considerable number of measures have been developed. They range from qualitative structured or semi-structured interview approaches to quantitative standardized questionnaire measures. A detailed review of the construct domain is beyond the scope of this report. Given that the main focus of this review is on changing PCAs to reduce recidivism, we will only briefly introduce the measures that were actually used in intervention research of the last 15 years. Andrews and Bonta (2010) have proposed a classification of PCA measures to structure the construct domain. According to the authors most PCA measures belong to one of three classes: 1) techniques