

Classifying female offenders for effective intervention: Application of the case-based principles of risk and need

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The research evidence is conclusive: many types of correctional intervention reduce criminal recidivism. While the “average” correctional treatment results in a 10% reduction in recidivism for treated groups, research has shown that interventions attending to the principles of risk and need yield a much greater average treatment effect, an impressive 30 percent reduction in recidivism for treated groups.³ In brief, the risk principle stipulates that level of treatment should be matched to the level of risk of the offender, and intensive services should be provided to higher risk offenders, while lower risk offenders fare as well or better with minimal or no intervention. The need principle posits that correctional treatment should target those dynamic attributes of the offender that are related to criminal behaviour (such as criminogenic needs). These case-based principles for offender classification have been developed and are empirically supported by research on male offenders. The current review focuses on the applicability of risk and need principles to women offenders.

Case-based classification

Although there has recently been increased attention to women offender issues, some argue that still “little is known about the program elements [for women] that promote successful outcomes such as economic and social independence, family reunification, and reduced involvement in the criminal justice system”.⁴ Perhaps because the overwhelming majority of criminal offenders are male, the services offered to women inmates have traditionally been based on models derived from their male counterparts. Accordingly, past research examining the adequacy of programming to meet the needs of women offenders suggested that treatment for women was either inappropriate or unavailable.

Studies of gender specific correctional interventions are essential because the law in Canada mandates distinctive programming for women offenders. For instance, Section 77 of the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act (CCRA; 1992)* directs that the federal corrections:

a) provide programs designed particularly to address the needs of female offenders; and

b) consult regularly about programs for female offenders with

- (i) appropriate women’s groups, and
- (ii) other appropriate persons and groups with expertise on, and experience in working with, female offenders.

This is an arduous task for correctional administrators, as there is still no consensus on *who are* the “appropriate persons and groups with expertise on ... women offenders”. Dowden and Andrews⁵ have recently presented empirical support for the principles of risk and need in a meta-analysis on treatment for women offenders. Notwithstanding that, some feminist researchers⁶ suggest that risk-based classification is inappropriate for women and that women have different treatment needs than men. In brief, this body of literature emphasizes the importance of contextualizing women’s participation in crime by examining their “pathways” to criminal offending. In doing so, it is argued that women’s *individual* needs can be assessed and treated in a holistic approach. While these authors present compelling philosophical arguments and some anecdotal evidence in support of their position, substantiating empirical data are lacking.

Whether women offenders are classified according to the principles of risk and need or evaluated in terms of their “pathways” to crime, there is consensus on one point: *assessment* is the cornerstone to effective correctional intervention. Offender classification serves several purposes, ranging from security placement, to treatment planning, release decision-making, and supervision standards. Individualized assessment is necessary to establish risk (to safely manage offender populations) and to match women offenders’ needs to treatment resources.

The risk principle

There are two aspects to the *risk principle*. The first asserts that criminal behaviour can be predicted; the second suggests that, to reduce recidivism, level of treatment should be matched to the risk level of the

offender. More specifically, intensive services should be provided to higher risk offenders, while lower risk offenders fare better with minimal or no intervention. As previously mentioned, research has provided strong empirical support for the risk principle.

Notwithstanding the research support, some feminist scholars dispute the applicability of the risk principle to women on several grounds. The most basic criticism is that the concept of risk is “gendered” and “racialized” and should therefore not be applied to minority groups. This argument is predicated on the notion that some factors that predict risk for men are invalid for women. It is further argued that the use of “gender neutral” classification measures results in over-classification of women. Accordingly, Bloom and Covington⁷ maintain that “one of the gender dynamics found where sexism is prevalent is that when something is declared “genderless” or “gender-neutral”, it is male”. While it is clear that, relative to men, women are lower risk in terms of criminal offending, institutional security, reoffending and violent reoffending, there is no empirical evidence to support the over-classification argument. In fact, various studies applying a wide variety of risk assessment measures have shown that these tools consistently classify women at lower levels than their male counterparts.

A second argument regarding the applicability of the risk principle to women revolves around the concept of dynamic risk. Dynamic risk factors can be equated with criminogenic needs. They are a subset of an offender’s risk level, and are dynamic characteristics of the offender that, when changed, are associated with changes in the probability of recidivism. While both static and dynamic risk factors are associated with recidivism, it is the dynamic factors that are amenable to treatment. Thus, the primary purpose of assessing dynamic factors is for treatment planning. However, while static factors such as age, race, and criminal history have shown to be strong predictors of recidivism, dynamic factors such as antisocial attitudes, criminal associates, and substance abuse show even stronger predictive accuracy.

Critics of the risk principle suggest that there is “confusion in the literature and in practice between needs and risk”;⁸ it is further argued that this results in women offenders having their needs re-defined as risk factors. One implication is that women’s program needs are neglected because of the (alleged) focus on security and risk. Although critical of risk-based classification for women, some authors suggest that “a number of interconnected *risk* factors” should be considered in treatment for girls, including: family factors, school problems, associating with delinquent peers, and substance abuse.⁹ Interestingly, those risk

factors identified by Bloom and Covington are amongst the most commonly cited criminogenic needs that should be prioritized for treatment.¹⁰ Thus, there is consensus between mainstream psychology and the feminist researchers regarding which needs should be addressed in correctional treatment. Despite claims by critics that women’s needs are left unmet, women offenders in Canada have access to a wide range of programming opportunities, and the fact that dynamic factors are linked to recidivism provides even greater incentive for correctional agencies to offer services to address those needs.

The final line of opposition to the risk principle comes from the fact that the supporting research is derived, almost without exception, from samples of male offenders. Narrative and meta-analytic reviews supporting the risk principle have either excluded women offender samples, or have failed to disaggregate the data by gender. One exception is a recent meta-analysis by Craig Dowden and Don Andrews.¹¹ To examine the validity of the risk and need principles for women offenders, the authors included treatment studies that met the following criteria:

- a) the samples were composed predominantly (at least 51%) or entirely of women offenders;
- b) the study included a follow-up period;
- c) the study compared offenders who had received some form of intervention to a control group who did not receive the primary intervention; and
- d) the study included a measure of recidivism (reconviction, rearrest, parole failures).

Dowden and Andrews tested the risk principle by coding studies as treating “high risk” or “low risk” women. Specifically, treatment groups were categorized as high risk if “the majority of those [participants] in the study had penetrated the justice system at the time of the study or had a previous criminal offence”.¹² Alternatively, treatment groups comprised of individuals with no criminal history and/or of those who had been diverted from the justice system were coded as low risk.

Results revealed stronger treatment effects in programs targeting higher versus lower risk samples. Specifically, the data (45 effect sizes) generated a 19% reduction in recidivism for high risk groups, and no treatment effect for low risk groups. Moreover, when the authors narrowed the focus to include *exclusively* female treatment studies (24 effect sizes), this effect was even more pronounced, and a 24% reduction in recidivism was observed for the high risk group. The authors concluded that these data support the risk principle for effective intervention with women offenders.

While the study by Dowden and Andrews provides preliminary insight into the applicability of the risk principle for women, some important limitations to their research should be acknowledged. First, in comparison to the research on male offenders, there are relatively fewer studies on women offenders. Analyses by Dowden and Andrews included sixteen studies comprised of entirely female samples. As primary studies continue to accumulate, prospective meta-analytic research will garner larger samples to increase confidence in results.

The second limitation concerns the basic assertion of the risk principle that suggests matching level of service to level of risk of the offender. Dowden and Andrews' meta-analysis does not fully address this issue, as treatment "dosage"/intensity was not reported. Rather, the authors described reductions in recidivism for treated (versus untreated) groups. Moreover, there is a good possibility that "untreated" groups were lower risk at the outset.

Finally, the authors' method of partitioning treatment studies into "high" and "low" risk groups was questionable. Specifically, it can be argued that those with a current or past involvement in the criminal justice system (the high-risk groups) are much more likely to demonstrate reductions in recidivism than their low-risk counterparts because they have higher base rates of offending at the outset. While differential base rates at pretest is endemic to all meta-analytic research; it is particularly salient to the study by Dowden and Andrews because it appears that the "low-risk" groups were, in fact, non-offenders.

It is important to note, however, that classification of women offenders into "high" and "low" risk groups will continue to present more of a challenge than that for male offenders. Essentially this problem relates to the first tenet of the risk principle, which maintains that risk can be predicted. Although there is evidence that criminal history variables accurately predict reoffending for women, the incorporation of such static variables into mathematical prediction paradigms has been less reliable. In particular, most offender risk classification schemas, developed on samples of men, decline in predictive validity when applied to women.

The need principle

The *need principle* distinguishes between criminogenic and non-criminogenic needs. Criminogenic needs are a subset of an offender's risk level; they are dynamic attributes of the offender that, when changed, are associated with changes in the probability of recidivism. Non-criminogenic needs are also changeable, but changes are not usually associated

with changes in recidivism. Fundamentally, the need principle asserts that in order to reduce recidivism, treatment services should target criminogenic needs.

Promising targets for intervention have been identified as: antisocial attitudes and feelings, antisocial associates, poor self-control, self-management, and/or problem-solving skills, substance abuse problems, lack of education and/or vocation, lack of familial ties or dysfunctional family relationships, and poor use of recreational/leisure time. The general acceptance of these dynamic factors as *criminogenic* is based on a considerable body of research. However, the need principle's applicability to women has been disputed in the correctional literature. Again, the skepticism derives primarily from the fact that the supporting research is based on samples of male offenders.

Regarding women offenders, it is not the need principle per se that has been subject to scrutiny. Rather, the debate is focused on the specific nature of *which* needs are "criminogenic" for this particular group. There is some empirical evidence to suggest that the criminogenic factors associated with male offenders are also relevant to women offenders but their level of importance and the nature of association may differ. Several authors have suggested that women offenders have additional criminogenic needs, though more research is required to confirm the relationship of these variables to recidivism. Dynamic factors that are commonly cited as women-specific criminogenic needs can be generally subsumed in the "personal/emotional" domain, and include low self-esteem, childhood and adulthood personal victimization, and self-injury/attempted suicide.

Employment/Education

It is well established that offender populations have, on average, less education and fewer marketable skills than the general population. Almost half of inmates in federal facilities (46% of men, 48% of women) have less than grade 10 education; this is true for only 19% of adults in the general population in Canada. Employment problems are also prevalent in inmate populations, and they are more pronounced amongst women than men; about 80% of federally sentenced women are unemployed at the time of admission to a correctional facility. In comparison, only 10% of adults, both men and women, in the general population are unemployed. As such, treatment programs targeting education, vocation, and work programs are considered fundamental to correctional rehabilitation.

There are only a few studies examining the relationship between employment/education needs

and women offender recidivism. Results of these are inconsistent, with correlations between employment/education variables and recidivism ranging from $-.22$ to $+.43$. As such, the results are still equivocal in regards to whether this domain is truly criminogenic for women; clearly more research is warranted.

Family

The family is every individual's first avenue of socialization. Not surprisingly, it has been documented that criminal offenders are over represented amongst those with a history of significant familial disruption. About one third of women inmates are assessed as having considerable problems in this area. Some authors have suggested that family issues are important treatment targets for women offenders in particular. Empirical research has begun to offer some support for this contention, though there are also studies challenging it. Studies correlating marital/family problems to recidivism in women offenders have demonstrated associations ranging from $-.10$ to $+.51$.

Associates

The dynamic factor of antisocial associates is routinely hailed as among the most potent predictors of recidivism, and therefore is recommended as a priority treatment target. Approximately 20% of women inmates are assessed as having significant treatment needs in this area.

Although the majority of the evidence is based on samples of male offenders, research with women offenders has offered consistent results: antisocial/pro-criminal associates represents an important criminogenic need domain for women. Studies examining the association between antisocial associates and criminal recidivism for women have noted correlations between $+.11$ and $+.45$.

Attitude

Antisocial attitudes are also considered amongst the most valuable treatment targets to reduce recidivism in offender populations. Fortunately, ratings of "high need" in the attitude domain are relatively infrequent for women offenders. At the federal level, there is a marked difference in prevalence of antisocial attitudes between men and women (39% versus 7%).

Despite being recognized as one of the most promising treatment targets in correctional populations, there is relatively little research examining the relationship between antisocial attitudes and recidivism in women offenders. Results of prediction studies that provide correlational statistics, range from $+.10$ to $+.45$.

Substance abuse

The relationship between substance abuse and criminal activity is well documented: about two-thirds of offenders experience substance abuse problems to some extent, and about 40% of women offenders are rated as having significant substance abuse problems. Moreover, research shows that there is a consistent positive association between substance abuse and various forms of general and violent criminal activity. However, again, most of this research is based on samples of male offenders. Results of predictive investigations examining the relationship between substance abuse and recidivism for women offenders have demonstrated, for the most part, a significant positive relationship between various measures of substance abuse and recidivism. Correlations range between $+.07$ and $+.44$, with the majority of studies indicating a significant positive association between women's substance abuse and recidivism.

Community functioning

The assessment of an offender's "community functioning" is a composite of constructs that are used to evaluate his or her living situation outside of prison. Measures of community functioning include components such as leisure (such as, hobbies, community activities), accommodation, finance, support (for example, use of social services), deportment (such as, hygiene, self-presentation), and health. Less than 15% of women inmates are assessed as having significant problems in this area.

No published study has examined the association between the composite "community functioning" category and recidivism for women offenders. However, some have examined particular components of the domain in relation to women offender recidivism. Results of studies investigating the relation between community functioning and recidivism for women suggest that the predictive value of subcomponents varies considerably; correlations with new offences range from $-.03$ (poor health) to $+.41$ (financial problems).

Personal/emotional

The personal/emotional domain of offender assessment represents an aggregate of needs that cover a broad range of personal attributes that could be targeted for correctional intervention. Need areas that are commonly assessed in this domain include: self-concept, cognitive problems impulsivity, problem solving, empathy), behavioural problems (hostility, assertion, neuroticism), mental ability, and mental health. About 38% of federal women offenders demonstrate considerable needs in this area.

Similar to the variety of constructs assessed under the auspice of "community functioning", the research indicates varying levels of support for the "personal/emotional" domain as a recidivism predictor for offender populations, dependent on the specific need(s) assessed. As with other need areas, there is limited research examining the predictive accuracy of variables within the "personal/emotional" composite using women offender samples. Relevant studies on the impact of treatment-related change for women are even scarcer. It is therefore, at the present time, impossible to draw conclusions regarding the viability of the "personal/emotional" domain as a criminogenic need for women offenders.

Conclusions

It is noted that this review has perhaps produced more questions than solutions. In brief, the research suggests that the case-based principles of risk and need contribute to the provision of effective services

for women. There are several caveats, however. With respect to risk classification, the research has fallen somewhat short of identifying an empirically validated classification measure that could be applied to both federal and provincial women offenders. More importantly, there is no measure that has been developed specifically for women offenders.

The need principle's applicability to women offenders was supported in the current review. While there is some preliminary evidence that women and men have similar criminogenic needs (e.g., substance abuse, antisocial attitudes, antisocial associates), there is also a good possibility that women have additional criminogenic needs that cluster in the personal/emotional domain (such as self-harming behaviour or self-esteem problems). Thus, in discussing effective assessment for women offenders, it is necessary to consider elements common to evaluations of men, as well as deviations from, and supplements to the standard male model. ■

¹ Extract of Blanchette, K. B. (2001). *Classifying female offenders for effective intervention: Application of the case-based principles of risk and need*. Comprehensive paper submitted in partial fulfillment of Ph.D. (Psychology), Carleton University.

² 340 Laurier Ave West, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0P9.

³ Andrews, D. A., Zinger, I., Hoge, R. D., Bonta, J., Gendreau, P., and Cullen, F. T. (1990). Does correctional treatment work? A clinically relevant and psychologically informed meta-analysis. *Criminology*, 28, 369-404.

⁴ Koons, B. A., Burrow, J. D., Morash, M., and Bynum, T. (1997). Expert and offender perceptions of program elements linked to successful outcomes for incarcerated women. *Crime and Delinquency*, 43(4), 512-532.

⁵ Dowden, C., and Andrews, D. A. (1999). What works for female offenders: A meta-analytic review. *Crime and Delinquency*, 45, 438-452.

⁶ See the Comprehensive paper for complete list of references.

⁷ Bloom B., and Covington, S. (2000). *Gendered Justice: Programming for Women in Correctional Settings*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Society of Criminology, San Francisco, CA. (p. 2).

⁸ Bloom & Covington, 2000, p. 5.

⁹ Bloom & Covington, p. 9.

¹⁰ Andrews & Bonta, 1998.

¹¹ Dowden & Andrews, 1999.

¹² Dowden & Andrews, 1999, p. 441.

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