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Risk, needs and responsivity in violence rehabilitation: Implications for programs with Indigenous offenders

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Abstract
As a group of forensic psychologists with a background in clinical practice and research with offenders, we share the perception that sensitivity to cultural issues is a neglected area in offender rehabilitation. Perhaps this should be stated more strongly: that cultural dimensions of offender rehabilitation programs require urgent attention. We are working to understand how rehabilitation programs can be most appropriately offered to Aboriginal offenders, with a particular interest in programs dealing with anger, aggression and violence (Howells et al, 1997). Our starting point in this area has been an interest in whether the rehabilitation of offenders works - in the sense of reducing recidivism (see Hollin, 1999; Howells and Day, 1999). Reading the literature gives us grounds for optimism. There is increasing evidence that rehabilitation programs can have a significant impact in reducing rates of reoffending. Rather than assessing whether rehabilitation programs work, our interest is increasingly focused on assessing the characteristics of the most effective programs. In the rehabilitation literature there are three main principles which have been widely endorsed as underlying more effective programs (reference here). In this paper we will explore whether and how these principles might inform our thinking about developing programs for offenders from Indigenous backgrounds. The Risk Principle (reference) suggests that the offenders who are most likely to reoffend should be targeted for rehabilitation programs. Research has suggested that higher risk offenders benefit the most from programs, while programs have a small or even a negative impact upon lower risk offenders. The second principle - the Needs Principle, suggests that programs should address the known needs of offenders. The cornerstone of the Needs Principle is that the contents and targets of programs should be factors which can be demonstrated to be significant causal influences for offending behaviour itself, in the population being addressed. We prefer the language of functional analysis in this context (Sturmey, 1996). We should direct our attention towards functionally important aspects of the environment and the person. The evidence suggests that rehabilitation programs often do not target areas of demonstrated need (reference). Finally the Responsivity Principle suggests that programs should be designed and delivered in such ways that participants are likely to respond. That is, programs should be adapted to the specific features of the group being offered the rehabilitation program. In this paper we will use these principles to develop an understanding of how anger management or other violence programs can be most appropriately offered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offenders.

Keywords
programs, needs, offenders, implications, indigenous, rehabilitation:, risk, violence, responsivity

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RISK, NEEDS AND RESPONSIVITIVITY IN VIOLENCE REHABILITATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS WITH INDIGENOUS OFFENDERS

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As a group of forensic psychologists with a background in clinical practice and research with offenders, we share the perception that sensitivity to cultural issues is a neglected area in offender rehabilitation. Perhaps this should be stated more strongly: that cultural dimensions of offender rehabilitation programs require urgent attention. We are working to understand how rehabilitation programs can be most appropriately offered to Aboriginal offenders, with a particular interest in programs dealing with anger, aggression and violence (Howells et al, 1997).

Our starting point in this area has been an interest in whether the rehabilitation of offenders works - in the sense of reducing recidivism (see Hollin, 1999; Howells and Day, 1999). Reading the literature gives us grounds for optimism. There is increasing evidence that rehabilitation programs can have a significant impact in reducing rates of reoffending. Rather than assessing whether rehabilitation programs work, our interest is increasingly focused on assessing the characteristics of the most effective programs. In the rehabilitation literature there are three main principles which have been widely endorsed as underlying more effective programs (reference here). In this paper we will explore whether and how these principles might inform our thinking about developing programs for offenders from Indigenous backgrounds.

The Risk Principle (reference) suggests that the offenders who are most likely to reoffend should be targeted for rehabilitation programs. Research has suggested that higher risk offenders benefit the most from programs, while programs have a small or even a negative impact upon lower risk offenders. The second principle - the Needs Principle, suggests that programs should address the known needs of offenders. The cornerstone of the Needs Principle is that the contents and targets of programs should be factors which can be demonstrated to be significant causal influences for offending behaviour itself, in the population being addressed. We prefer the language of functional analysis in this context (Sturmey, 1996). We should direct our attention towards functionally important aspects of the environment and the person. The evidence suggests that rehabilitation programs often do not target areas of demonstrated need (reference). Finally the Responsivity Principle suggests that programs should be designed and delivered in such ways that participants are likely to respond. That is, programs should be adapted to the specific features of the group being offered the rehabilitation program. In this paper we will use these principles to develop an understanding of how anger management or other violence programs can be most appropriately offered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offenders.

**Anger Management and Similar Programs for Offenders**

In recent years, anger management programs have become core rehabilitation programs for violent offenders in many parts of the world. The focus of many of these programs is the recognition and monitoring of anger, as well as finding ways to express anger appropriately. Programs such as the Skills Training for Aggression Control program offered in Western Australia and the Anger Management program in South Australia, teach relaxation techniques to deal with high levels of arousal, and focus in detail on the build-up to anger, looking at the cognitions and appraisals that increase aggression. Participants will often be asked to complete an anger diary, detailing instances where they felt angry, to help them learn to identify patterns and triggers to their anger. Later, they may be asked to reflect upon alternative ways of managing the situation. Self-control strategies are taught which combine cognitive self-control methods with ways of reducing physical tension. Often a relapse prevention component is included as a final component of the program.

At present, we know very little about how effective these programs are in reducing offending. Whilst there is reasonably strong evidence to suggest the programs work well in reducing anger problems in community health samples in Europe and North America (reference), there has been relatively little work carried out with violent offenders (Howells, 1998; Watt and Howells, 1999). We are currently involved in an evaluation of the programs offered in South Australia and Western Australia. We know even less about how suitable these programs are for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offenders.
The Risk Principle and Aboriginal Programs

Aboriginal offenders as a group are likely to be at high risk or re-offending (Ferrante et al, 1999). We might expect, therefore, that Aboriginal offenders would be well represented in current programs. We know of no data relevant to the question of whether Aboriginal offenders are offered programs to the extent we would predict from reoffending rates. This issue needs to be addressed in program planning and evaluation.

The Needs Principle and Aboriginal Programs

The Needs Principle has two clear implications for programs with Aboriginal offenders. Firstly, the rehabilitation programs need to be based on the identified needs of Aboriginal offenders. Secondly, we need to address the question whether the criminogenic needs of Aboriginal offenders differ from the needs of non-Aboriginal offenders. For offenders generally, there is a degree of consensus internationally as to common needs that need to be addressed (reference). It is likely, that Aboriginal offenders have important needs which differ from those of other offenders. When describing offender needs, it is important to distinguish between what are termed criminogenic and non-criminogenic needs. Criminogenic needs are factors that are directly related to offending behaviour. We would suggest that prior to developing programs, some assessment has to be made of the criminogenic needs of Aboriginal offenders, both at the population level (for example, what are the needs of Aboriginal offenders in this prison?) and at the individual level (what are the specific needs of this Aboriginal person?). Whilst the criminogenic needs of Aboriginal offenders are likely to overlap with those needs identified in other populations, it is possible that important differences exist. A small number of studies have suggested particular areas of criminogenic need in violent Aboriginal offenders. These include the following:

1. Unemployment
   Walker and McDonald’s study (1995) reported that amongst Aboriginal people the unemployed were imprisoned at 20 times the rate of the unemployed. Easteal (1993) in a study of homicide found that 79% of Aboriginal homicide perpetrators were unemployed.

2. Alcohol Misuse
   Limited research is available on alcohol - violence links in different cultural and ethnic groups. The National Symposium on Alcohol Misuse on Violence in 1994 made the point that the socio-economic position of minorities may be a better guide to alcohol use and alcohol-related violence than culture or ethnicity per se. In Strang’s (1993) study of homicides she found that 75% of homicide perpetrators overall were affected by alcohol at the time, but that the percentage for Aboriginal offenders was twice that for the non-Aboriginal. Easteal (1993) found the same pattern for homicides between intimate partners.

3. Domestic Violence
   Harding et al (1995) and Easteal (1993) and others have produced some evidence that seems to suggest Aboriginal over-representation is marked for crimes of violence, particularly homicide, to intimate partners.

If these are indeed areas of specific need for Aboriginal offenders, then there is a clear implication that these need areas should be specifically addressed in anger or violence programs. We need to audit our violence programs to see whether this occurs.
Another starting point in finding out about needs is to ask some people who might know. Peter Mals interviewed 14 human services workers in Western Australia all of whom had expertise or experience in working with Aboriginal offenders in correctional settings (Mals et al, 1999). Participants included members of the Aboriginal Policy and Services Division of the Ministry of Justice, an Aboriginal facilitator of Skills Training and Aggression Control Programs, a worker from the Aboriginal Alternative Dispute Resolution Service, an Aboriginal Coordinator of cross-cultural training for the Ministry of Justice, a community corrections officer from a remote rural area with a high proportion of Aboriginal offenders, the Superintendent of a rural prison and the former coordinator of the “Ending Violent Offending” program for Aboriginal offenders.

Each participant was asked for his/her views on how cultural factors might impact upon program content (that is, to identify areas of specific Aboriginal need). Informants identified several areas of difficulty, including:

1. **Low Self-esteem and Frustration**

   Aboriginal informants were in general agreement that Aboriginal male offenders, (especially younger-generation, urban-dwellers) suffered from low self-esteem and a pervasive sense of frustration, anger and powerlessness. A number of informants used the same turn of phrase when commenting on self-esteem: “they feel like they’re nothing”. It was noted that urban males directed their anger and resentment not only toward mainstream society but often also toward their parents, whom they saw as having failed them. Informants saw these emotional problems as arising directly from colonisation, disconnection from the land and a legacy of social and economic marginalisation. It was suggested that male self-esteem had been particularly badly affected because men were finding it increasingly difficult to fulfill the role of family breadwinner, whereas women still had available to them the valued roles of child-carer and homemaker. Some informants noted that the above problems were less marked in remote communities where the men typically had a more secure sense of identity.

2. **Attitudes to Violence**

   Only a few informants commented on the issue of Aboriginal men’s attitudes to violence. It was noted that the forms of violence which are now prevalent depart considerably from that of tradition: under traditional law, violence was subject to group decision-making and was carefully prescribed and regulated; by contrast, present-day violence is a largely spontaneous matter, taking place independent of, and without reference to, any form of group authorisation.

   Informants were divided in their views as to whether Aboriginal men were more likely than non-Aboriginal men to subscribe to an ideology of male dominance. Interestingly, Aboriginal commentators were more inclined than their non-Aboriginal counterparts to view Aboriginal men as chauvinistic. They saw this tendency as being, in part, an inheritance from traditional culture, in which men enjoyed higher overall status, even though women had a valued economic role and had considerable authority in circumscribed domains of spiritual life. The comment made by some informants was that, currently, men in remote communities sometimes regard women as property. It was suggested that even among urban and fringe-dwellers, the prevailing attitude among men was that they were entitled to be “in charge.” This attitude was not necessarily accepted by women, who were slowly becoming more influenced by feminist ideas. We need more research in these areas but it is not unreasonable to ask of anger and violence programs whether employment, self-esteem, frustration and attitudes to violence are specifically addressed.
Non-criminogenic Needs

Non-criminogenic needs refer to areas of need (such as mental health problems or housing problems), which, in themselves, may not be causes of offending, but which nevertheless require being addressed. In our work with Aboriginal offenders, we have been struck, as have many others, by the high level of non-criminogenic need in Aboriginal offender groups. Research has shown that mental health problems and distress are prevalent in samples of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) peoples. One study by McKendrick et al (1992) reported that over 50% of a sample of 112 randomly selected Aboriginal participants could be described as having a mental disorder, with a further 16% reporting at least 10 nonspecific psychiatric symptoms, including depression and substance abuse.

From the McKendrick sample, 49% had been separated from both parents by the age of 14, and a further 19% from one parent. Those who grew up in their Aboriginal families, learned their Aboriginal identity early in life, and regularly visited their traditional country were significantly less distressed. In another study, Clayer (1991), based on a sample of 530 Aboriginal people in South Australia, reported that 31% had been separated from parents before age 14, and that absence of father and absence of traditional Aboriginal teachings correlated significantly with attempted suicide and mental disorder. Hunter (1994) found that a history of childhood separation from parents is strongly correlated with subsequent problems, including high levels of depression in Aboriginal people seeking primary health services. Hunter comments particularly on the effects on males, whose histories are influenced by the loss of fathers. In these cases, models for, and initiation into, mature manhood are often lacking.

Raphael and Swan (1997) argue that high levels of loss, traumatic and premature mortality and family break-up contribute to the present high levels of stress experienced in ATSI populations. The extended family structures of Aboriginal peoples mean that individuals have more exposure to bereavements, trauma, and loss, than non-Indigenous peoples. It has been argued that these experiences are likely to lead to higher levels of mental health problems, in particular depression and symptoms of post-traumatic stress (Raphael et al 1998). Recent work has focused on both inter-generational (Danielli, 1998), and chronic personal (Herman, 1992) experiences of traumatisation that may cause anxiety disorders. Problems include a wide range of general psychological and somatic symptoms, impact on personality and identity, vulnerability to self-harm, suicide, re-victimization and further abuse (Raphael et al 1997).

We would argue that these major non-criminogenic needs are likely to be even higher in offender populations than in the community. For this reason, the rehabilitation of this group of offenders presents a significant challenge to correctional administrators. We agree substantially with the view of Raphael and Swan, who suggested that these problems cannot be adequately understood without taking into account the historical context and social and cultural frameworks in which Aboriginal people live (Raphael and Swan, 1998).

It may be argued by some that the distinction between criminogenic and non-criminogenic needs is invalid or impossible to make. Are factors such as distress, trauma and mental disorder genuinely non-criminogenic? In other countries it is likely such factors are seen as non-criminogenic, or as making only a very modest causal contribution to crime. In our view, a case can be made that some of these needs contribute to aggression and violence. Angry forms of violence are caused and triggered, in part, by exposure to negative life experiences and events and are more likely to occur when the individual is in a negative affective state. Major life stressors also have some role in eliciting angry and violent reactions (Howells, 1998).
A number of important questions arise for those providing rehabilitation programs. Should non-criminogenic needs be addressed in a **substantial** way? Should they be addressed **separately** from programs focusing on criminogenic needs or as a component within such programs? Should non-criminogenic needs be addressed **prior to** tackling criminogenic needs? Is it meaningful to “adapt” existing programs by including a separate component on trauma and history or should, trauma, the relationship with the land, cultural identity and associated issues be dealt with in a substantial way in their own right? We do not profess to know the answer to these questions, although we feel that solutions will emerge from the developing literature on program responsivity. The Black and White program described by David Branson at this conference is a fine example of the sort of program that, arguably, should precede any attempt to tackle specific criminogenic behaviours such as substance misuse.

**The Responsivity Principle and Aboriginal Programs**

The principle of responsivity has two aspects - firstly responsivity in program design (making programs more sensitive to the needs of participants), and, secondly, responsivity in program delivery (finding ways to overcome barriers to engagement in therapeutic programs). An obvious way to increase responsivity is for feedback on course content to be actively solicited from Aboriginal participants. This helps to identify parts of the program that need to be made more relevant or more compatible with Aboriginal values, norms and experiences. Mals reports a consensus that program staff should receive cultural awareness education, and be offered ongoing support and advice from experts on Aboriginal cultures.

In terms of selection for programs, attention should be paid to assessing an individual's readiness and motivation to attend, his/her ability to set goals, to reflect on behaviour and to work in a group setting. Mals reported (Mals et al, 1999) that the group he interviewed strongly endorsed the notion that literacy problems are common in Aboriginal offenders in rehabilitation settings. In remote areas illiteracy was said to be virtually universal; among urban-based offenders, gross literacy problems were estimated to occur in 20-25% of those involved in treatment programs. It has been suggested that Aboriginal offenders have a learning style which is different from that of non-Aboriginal Australians (Beresford and Omaji, 1995). It was felt to be vital that program material be presented in a way that does not depend heavily on written information or assignments. Favoured alternatives were videos, non-verbal symbols and role-plays.

Participants recommended that formal didactic input be kept to a minimum and that the bulk of session time should be given over to discussion by the group of how the issue raised by the facilitator applied in their own lives. Those who had worked in remote areas urged that abstract verbal concepts or principles expressed in English be minimised and that communication be couched in terms of concrete and personalised scenarios. It was also suggested that communication could be greatly assisted by use of occasional words in the group’s predominant Aboriginal language, where this was within the facilitator’s capabilities.

Mals’ respondents identified several key issues for adapting existing programs to make them more responsive to the needs of aboriginal offenders. The first issue raised was that of whether groups should be segregated (Aboriginal only) or mixed. Segregated groups were seen as having the advantage of allowing for greater specialisation, for discussion of Aboriginal identity issues, and in promoting a safer environment for self-disclosure. On the other hand, they were viewed as difficult to organise (finding homogenous groups who speak the same language from similar backgrounds eg. rural Vs remote), and concerns were expressed about singling out Aboriginal offenders, and difficulties of group members knowing each other (eg. family feuds or kinship connections).
A related issue was whether it was desirable for program facilitators to be Aboriginal. Aboriginal facilitators were felt to be better able to adapt program content, to be more readily accepted by participants and to be less likely to judge participants negatively. However, problems may arise if the facilitator were part of the same community as the offenders or their victims.

Those interviewed by Mals felt strongly that a prison-based program would not be effective on its own, divorced from the broader community. Informants were adamant that maintenance of behaviour change would depend on ongoing treatment/guidance as the offender attempted to reintegrate into his community. It was urged that post-release follow-up should actively involve key members of the offender’s extended family, in view of the importance of family ties among Aboriginal people. It was noted, for example, that in the typical domestic violence situation other members of the family would be directly involved and might therefore play key roles in the perpetuation or resolution of the conflict. In some remote communities a system of mentoring was still in place for younger men. Treatment-providers should therefore seek to link in with this traditional rehabilitative process at the release-planning stage.

Summary and Conclusions

In this paper we have explored whether the well recognised and familiar rehabilitation principles of Risk, Need and Responsivity are useful starting points for good practice in developing rehabilitation programs for Aboriginal offenders. It seems to us that the principles do suggest practical rehabilitation strategies. Adoption of these strategies is likely to improve rehabilitation outcomes.

Finally, the Risk/Needs/Responsivity framework also requires an empirical, research-based approach to rehabilitation. It is clear that we still lack basic knowledge and information about what the needs of this group of offenders are and how best they can be remedied.

References


