Ego Control and Criminal Behavior

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The personality assessment literature using deviant and antisocial subject populations contains an interesting anomaly—that persons representing major criminal offense categories can be only weakly distinguished from one another by using standard scales of the best conventional inventories (e.g., the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory and the California Psychological Inventory). This may reflect the fact that existing inventories are designed principally to predict maladjustment or social competence, and most criminal groups tested are found to be equally maladjusted and socially immature. The construct of ego control is not strongly related to adjustment or competence, but rather appears to underlie preference for different life-styles and occupations. This article demonstrates the ability of ego control to distinguish between the offense categories of murder and drug related crimes. A sample of 59 murderers was found to score significantly higher than a group of 56 drug offenders on a rudimentary measure of ego control.

Four distinct lines of research concerning personality and criminal behavior can be identified. The first has investigated differences in the personality structure of criminals and noncriminals. The evidence shows that adjudicated or incarcerated criminals are invariably more impulsive, hostile, self-centered, and immature than nondelinquent controls (Gough, 1966; Peterson, Quay, & Anderson, 1959; Richardson & Roebuck, 1965). This finding is consistent, replicated, and valid cross-culturally (cf. Gough, 1965; Gough, De Vos, & Mizushima, 1968; Ten- nenbaum, 1977; Waldo & Dinitz, 1967).

A second line of research has sought to predict future delinquent or antisocial behavior. Despite voluminous literature in this area using numerous devices—the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) and its experimental scales (Gearing, 1979), the California Psychological In-

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Numerous research efforts have inquired whether certain personality types are attracted to particular kinds of crimes: Are certain kinds of persons overrepresented within specific offense categories? The conventional wisdom among seasoned correctional workers is that there are modal personality types associated with offense categories (cf. Abrahamsen, 1975). The evidence bearing on this issue, however, is hard to evaluate. Most relevant studies either have small sample sizes or use broad, non-specific offense categories that overlook possibly important distinctions—categories such as violent versus nonviolent, assaultive versus nonassaultive (cf. Carroll & Fuller, 1971; Christensen & Le Unes, 1974; Kingsley, 1960; McCreary, 1976; Sutker, Allain, & Geyer, 1978). In a noteworthy and exceptional study, Panton (1958) administered the MMPI to 1313 inmates at a North Carolina prison and sorted the group into six offense categories: white collar, aggravated assault, robbery, property theft, aggravated sex, and sex perversive. He found no reliable differences in the MMPI scale scores of the prisoners in each of the offense categories. He remarked, “It appears evident from the data . . . that there is no marked difference between the various group profiles. However, all the group profiles, as well as the total sample profile, appear significantly different from the standard normative profile” (p. 307).

One reason that these studies have found no personality differences among offense categories may be that the standard scales of the major psychological inventories such as the MMPI and the CPI were constructed for specific measurement tasks (e.g., to assess psychiatric disability or interpersonal effectiveness) and are not suitable for detecting differences between criminal groups. In this study, the relationship between personality processes and criminal behavior is approached through the perspective of a particular viewpoint regarding the structure of personality (cf. Hogan & Johnson, Note 1). According to this view, personality can be conceptualized in terms of seven dimensions, five of which are related to individual differences in achievement, mastery, and competency. The remaining two reflect individual differences in interests and temperament and underlie the major type theories (cf. Allport, 1961; Eysenck, 1960; Holland, 1973). The first five (assertiveness, adjustment, prudence, likability, and intellectance) roughly parallel the five dimensions described by Norman (1963) as characterizing the structure of the universe of trait descriptive terms. It can be argued that existing personality inventories assess these five dimensions with varying degrees of efficiency. Since most criminals generally test either maladjusted or socially immature (cf. Gough, 1966), it is not expected that they would differ greatly in terms of dimensions reflecting adjustment and social competence.

The dimensions of temperament and interest orientation—ego control (Block & Block, 1979) and thing/person orientation (Hogan & Johnson, Note 1)—have little to do with neuroticism or social effectiveness. As Block & Block (1979) use the term, ego control refers to the degree to which people moderate impulse and admit primary process thought into consciousness. Low ego controllers are impulsive and stimulation seeking. They are characterized by fairly rapid alternations in attention, by a preference for novelty, complexity, change, and low inhibitions. As a group, artists, for example, can be characterized as low on ego control. High ego controllers are more careful, guarded, obsessive, and perseverative. They prefer predictability and order and dislike novelty and change. Such occupational groups as accountants and bookkeepers are characterized by high ego control.

Block & Block (1979) argue that ego con-
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trol is a dimension of personality equal in importance to the introversion–extraversion (thing/person orientation) dimension. This is consistent with our findings, although we are ambivalent about Block's psychoanalytic terminology. It should also be noted that ego control differs from Megargee's (1966) concept of over–undercontrol. Megargee's notion entails self-denial and neurotic repression, whereas ego control concerns preference for (or dislike of) novelty, ambiguity, change, and innovation.

Block (1965) has constructed an Ego Control (EC) scale from items on the MMPI. Due to the limited content of the MMPI item pool, however, the scale only weakly represents Block's concept. Some of the items on the EC scale relate directly to primary process activities (fantasy, acting impulsively), but others have to do with expressing hostility toward rules and regulations. Thus, ego control is not adequately assessed by the standard scales of any existing personality inventory.

This article tests two claims derived from our views regarding the structure of personality. The first is that few differences will be found among criminal offense categories using standard measures of social maturity and interpersonal effectiveness. The second is that major criminal offense categories should differ significantly in terms of ego control.

The offense categories chosen for study were drug related offenses and murder. These offenses are at the extremes of the universe of criminal behaviors as defined in terms of offense transitions (switching from one type of criminal activity to another—cf. Gottfredson, 1975). One would expect, therefore, to find important personality correlates of these behavioral differences. Specifically, it was hypothesized that ego control would distinguish drug offenders from murderers (i.e., drug offenders seem to be generally more impulsive and open to experimentation and change than murderers and therefore should score lower on a measure of ego control).

Indirect evidence supporting this claim is provided by Williams, Vaughn, & Sabia (1976), who tested a criminal population using the Survey of Ethical Attitudes (SEA; Hogan, 1970). They found that SEA scores strongly distinguished between drug offenders and assaultive criminals. The SEA was originally developed to determine the personality types associated with two kinds of moral judgment. Subsequent research has suggested that the SEA should be re-conceptualized in terms of ego control (cf. Hogan, Johnson, & Emler, 1978). Thus, to the degree that the SEA can be regarded as a surrogate measure of ego control, there is evidence that this dimension is a source of meaningful differences in criminal populations.

Method

Subjects

Two samples were used in this study. The first contained 56 white male heroin addicts, all previously convicted of drug related offenses. They were of working class background, 19–29 years old, and drawn from a larger and relatively heterogeneous population of addicts. This sample was administered the CPI while enrolled in a methadone treatment program in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1974.

The second sample contained 29 black and 30 white inmates at the Maryland State Penitentiary (Baltimore, Maryland) who were tested with the CPI in 1978. These subjects were all convicted murderers serving sentences in excess of 20 years. The majority were serving life sentences (in some cases multiple, concurrent life sentences). All were from working class backgrounds and were in the 20–50-year age range. Scores on the three CPI validity scales for all protocols in both samples were well within acceptable limits (cf. Megargee, 1972).

Procedure

Subjects from both samples were scored on the 18 standard scales of the CPI. In addition, each subject was assigned a score on two CPI-based regression equations. The first equation was Gough's (1966) index of social maturity $\{\text{Social Maturity} = 28.062 + .148 \text{Do} + .334 \text{Re} + .512 \text{So} - .317 \text{Gi} - .274 \text{Cm} + .227 \text{Fx}\}$. The second equation was used to predict SEA scores. This equation was developed by regressing the CPI scale scores for two fraternities and two psychology classes (cf. Hogan, 1970) on their SEA scores. This equation $\{\text{SEA} = 20.74 + .35 \text{So} + .07 \text{Sc} - .51 \text{Ai} - .46 \text{Fx}\}^2$ is

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- Do = Dominance, Re = Responsibility, So = Socialization, Gi = Good Impression, Cm = Communality, and Fx = Flexibility.

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a reasonable proxy for the SEA, as scores on the equation correlated .56 with the SEA in Hogan’s original sample (Hogan, 1970).

Results and Discussion

CPI scores of black and white murderers were compared using a scale-by-scale analysis of variance. The groups differed on only one scale, Femininity (Fe) ($p < .07$), with black murderers receiving higher scores.

Next, CPI scores of the murderers were compared with those of the drug offenders. The results, presented in Table 1, indicate that the two groups were quite similar in terms of their personality structure.

Both groups had unusually low scores for Socialization (So), Responsibility (Re), Sense of Well Being (Wb), and Tolerance (To). These scores characterize individuals who are irresponsible, deceitful, shallow, temperamental, and pleasure-seeking. The groups differed on Dominance (Do) and Good Impression (Gi), suggesting that the drug offenders were more passive and less concerned with social approval than the murderers.

Gough’s social maturity index provides a composite measure of social adjustment and maturity. As predicted, these two groups did not significantly differ, $F(1, 113) = 1.21, p < .5$. The mean scores (murderers: $M = 43.23$, drug offenders: $M = 43.21$) are comparable to the scores of previously tested criminal groups (cf. McGuire & Megargee, 1974).

Murderers and drug offenders did differ, however, on the surrogate measure of ego control, and these scores were unrelated to race. Murderers scored significantly higher than drug offenders, $t(113) = 1.99, p < .05$. This finding was replicated using a discriminant analysis comparing the two criminal groups.

Table 1

Means, Variances, and F Ratios for Murderers and Drug Offenders on Subscales of the California Psychological Inventory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Murderers</th>
<th>Drug Offenders</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>Variance</td>
<td>$M$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominance</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity for Status</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociability</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Presence</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>35.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Acceptance</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-Being</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>32.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialization</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Control</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerance</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Impression</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communality</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement via Conformance</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement via Independence</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Efficiency</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>33.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Mindedness</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Femininity</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. For murderers, $n = 59$; for drug offenders, $n = 56$.

*p < .05.
groups on the Flexibility (Fx), Achievement via Independence (Ai), Socialization (So), and Self-Control (Sc) scales of the CPI (i.e., those scales that make up the CPI regression equation for SEA scores). The discriminant function separated the groups with only modest efficiency, but in the predicted direction, $\chi^2(4) = 7.9, p < .10$.

Several cautions in interpreting these findings should be mentioned. First, the offense history of the criminals used in both samples was not controlled; thus, some murderers might have been convicted previously of a drug offense, although Gottfredson's (1975) findings suggest that this is unlikely. Second, the drug offenders' and murderers' ages, although similar, were not controlled for in the analysis of the data. And third, the CPI-based regression equation for the SEA scores is an indirect measure of the SEA (which is in itself an indirect measure of ego control).

Despite these limitations, the results support the notion that standard scales of such inventories as the MMPI and CPI will detect few differences between the offense types of criminal offenders. In this regard, these results replicate and extend those of Panton (1958). Second, it appears that the construct of ego control discriminates drug offenders from murderers. Drug offenders, as low ego controllers, appear to be characteristically impulsive, changeable, distractable, and stimulation seeking. Murderers, on the other hand, seem to be more controlled and conservative. These results suggest that they are more likely to prefer familiarity, structure, and order. Third, the finding that an indirect measure of ego control discriminates between murderers and drug offenders would seem to imply that a more efficient measure should perform significantly better.

Finally, it would appear that the construct of ego control as formulated by Block & Block (1979) has important behavioral consequences in criminal as well as normal populations. The construct can be operationalized with modest success using existing personality scales and regression techniques. Nonetheless, the construction of an explicit ego control scale would seem to be a worthwhile task.

Reference Note


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