

The Ecological Validity of Common Risk Assessment Measures for Offenders with ID

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ASSID conference
November 24, 2008
The University of Melbourne

Outline of Talk

- What is “ecological validity”?
- Does EV apply to risk assessment?
- How can EV be compromised?
- How can EV be improved?
- How can EV be operationalized in a risk assessment measure for ID offenders (the ARMIDILO).

Ecological Validity of Tests

- EV is the degree to which a test assesses (or estimates) via a proxy task someone’s ability to do a “real-life” task.
- For example, a test that measures executive functioning in children with ADHD, ought to have a positive correlation between test results and a child’s ability to do simple routine “real-life” tasks, but this is commonly not the case.
- Other tasks, however, such as the information subtest of the WAIS or the arithmetic section of the WRAT, do give an a good approximation of the person’s social knowledge or mathematical abilities.

Our \$5 words for the day

- Verisimilitude and veridicality have been proposed as two factors that are linked to the EV of assessment procedures.
- Verisimilitude is described as the degree to which the demands of any particular test and its corresponding test conditions resemble the demands in the everyday world of the subject.
- Veridicality is simply the degree to which test performance predicts some aspect of a subject’s everyday functioning.

Does EV apply to Risk Assessment?

- Theoretically it ought to, but is rarely discussed.
- By analogy, the EV of a risk assessment test would be that the score or risk level or risk concerns would be of some utility in the evaluation of an offender and how he would fare in the community.
- Of course, the irony is that offenders are assessed in a highly structured context (prison) where he won’t be “at risk”, and then, if found of a suitably low risk level, he is released into the community which is relatively unstructured by comparison to prison.

How can EV be compromised?

- Focusing on decontextualized variables
 - Many risk assessment tests are actuarial or statistical in nature – focusing on numbers as opposed to anything about the offender himself: e.g., # of charges or offences, # of times sentenced, # of victims, # of types of offences.
- Stretching time frames to the maximum
 - Longer time frames means that the number of potentially intervening variables also increases that may impact on the offender, including age, and other life circumstances.

STATIC 99: items

- Prior sex offences
 - Prior sentencing dates (excluding current offence)
 - Any convictions for non-contact sexual offences
 - Index non-sexual violence
 - Prior non-sexual violence
 - Any unrelated victims
 - Any stranger victims
 - Any male victims
 - Age
 - Marital history
- The test provides % likelihood for sexual reoffending over 5, 10, and 15 years periods.

SVR-20 General Violence Factors

- Past non-violent offences
- Past violent offences
- Past supervision failure
- Victim of child abuse
- Personality disorder/psychopathy
- Major mental illness
- Substance abuse
- Suicidal/homicidal ideation
- Recent relationship problems
- Recent employment problems

SVR-20 Sexual Violence Risk Factors

- Sexual Deviation
- High density sex offences
- Multiple sex offence types
- Physical harm to victim in sex offences
- Uses weapons or threats of death in sex offences
- Escalation in frequency or severity
- Minimisation/denial
- Attitudes that support or condone sex offences
- Lacks realistic plans
- Negative attitude toward intervention

How can EV be improved?

- **Decrease time frames** – the longer the time frame for a risk assessment, the less accurate it becomes. Base-rates of offending are dropping, so lower recidivism rates are not necessarily due to decrements in age (but are probably due to age to some degree), or better policing (but may be), or better interventions (but may be), but perhaps some combination. Regardless, shorter time frames are more accurate and less contaminated by other possible variables other than the offender's risk propensities.

How can EV be improved?

- **Get rid of percentage risk likelihoods** – these are misleading (often based on only a few offenders at the highest and lowest risk levels) and have little to do with the offender you are assessing. The best thing that actuarial tests do is often ignored as a result – they produce a risk profile – almost all pedophiles rank as high risk, almost all incest offenders rank as low risk, with the rapists somewhere in the middle. Percentage risk likelihoods completely ignores EV in order to allow the comparison of offenders to each other. There are other sources of invalidity for these approaches as well (sample scatter, CIs).

How can EV be improved?

- **Include environmental factors in the risk appraisal** – the EV of a risk assessment can only increase if relevant ecological variables are included in the assessment.
- **What are some potential environmental risk factors related to risk that would increase the EV of a risk assessment measure for ID clients?**
 - Housing, support persons, programmes, well-trained staff, what else?

Rationale for EV improvements for RA

- If our number one task is to manage risk and the theory is that we need to assess risk in order to do so, it makes sense to contextualize risk.
- If our concern is not to “predict” what a person may do in 5 or 10 or 15 years because he has a certain constellation of variables, but to ascertain what our client may do upon release, given certain situations and supports, we are asking very different questions.

Rationale for EV improvements for RA

- Given that we cannot sufficiently accurately “predict” the factors in a person’s environment which may impact on a person, directly or indirectly, and given that we are interested in our client (not a group of clients that produced a score that resulted in a recidivism rate), then we need to focus on ecological variables to help us manage our client.
- However, the inclusion of EV variables complicates the construction of a risk assessment test.

ARMIDILO

- Is a structured clinical guideline instrument designed for all ID offenders and those ID clients who have not been charged, but show violent (including sexually violent) challenging behavior.
- Almost one half of the items on the test are environmental, including supervisory and professional staff, and the living situation of the client.
- Preliminary data has shown that the ARMIDILO has better predictive validity – in the short term – than relevant actuarial tests.

Stable Dynamic Items (Environmental Factors)	Presence -2 to +2	Recent Change (+, 0, -)	Critical Item?
1. Attitude towards intellectually disabled individuals			
2. Communication among supervisory staff			
3. Client specific knowledge by supervisory staff			
4. Consistency of supervision			
5. Situational consistency			
6. Unique considerations			
TOTAL SUB-SECTION SCORE:			

Stable Dynamic Items (environment)

- 1. Attitude toward ID clients.
 - This item is assessed by interviewing the members of the ID person’s treatment team and supervisory team and assessing the overall attitude – supportive, problematic, informed, knowledgeable, optimistic, or opposite traits.
- 2. Communication among supervisory staff.
 - This item examines the quality and nature of communication amongst the supervisory staff and looks at whether critical information is shared well or if there are gaps in the sharing process.

Stable Dynamic Items (environment)

- 3. Client-specific knowledge by supervisors.
 - To what degree does the supervisory staff know the client’s crime cycle (if present), risk factors, and RP plan? To what degree do staff monitor the client’s risk factors or are aware of elevations?
- 4. Consistency of supervision.
 - ID individual’s are remarkably good at exploiting staff inconsistencies and react remarkably poorly to changes in supervision style or personnel. Getting ID clients used to the idea of change as a constant is a challenge, but necessary as things do change.

Stable Dynamic Items (environment)

- 5. Situational consistency.
 - The greater the level of ID, the more important this issue is for the client being assessed.
 - The greater the level of environmental consistency the greater the predictability of the client's behavior and the better awareness that staff have of the client.
 - Also, the more therapeutic (and consistently therapeutic) the environment, the greater the risk reducing effect of the environment.
- 6. Unique considerations.
 - Such as supportive parents, staff, or group home.

Acute Dynamic Items (Environmental Factors)	Presence -2 to +2	Recent Change (+, 0, -)	Critical Item?
1. Changes in social relationships			
2. Personnel or monitoring changes			
3. Situational changes			
4. Changes in victim access			
5. Changes in access to intoxicants			
6. Unique considerations			
TOTAL SUB-SECTION SCORE:			
TOTAL SECTION SCORE:			

Acute Dynamic Items (environment)

- 1. Changes in social relationships.
 - This item looks at major life changes such as the death of a parent, transfer of an important staff person, or departure of a close friend. Negative changes could instigate an emotional change related to self/other harm. Positive changes can increase risk manageability.
- 2. Personnel or monitoring changes
 - How well have staff noted changes in routine or changes in risk factors? How soon after changes are noted are interventions applied? New personnel also may result in monitoring changes or other behavioural changes.

Acute Dynamic Items (environment)

- 3. Situational changes.
 - Relocation to new group homes, prisons, hospitals are stressful times for ID clients and their ability to manage risk may decrease markedly and uniquely at such times. External structure is important, and acclimation visits to new facilities is recommended.
- 4. Changes in victim access.
 - ID clients have excellent ability to find victims and often, by chance, find that victims find them. Visitors to a group home or treatment center may bring photos of children or actual children to see other offenders and expose the latter to risk.

Acute Dynamic Items (environment)

- 5. Changes in access to intoxicants
 - Many ID clients have problems with various sorts of intoxicants including petrol-sniffing, glue-sniffing, along with alcohol and drugs.
 - Access to intoxicants often (if not always) involves involvement with other users and often the ID person becomes a "mule" or gets in trouble as a scapegoat.
- 6. Unique considerations


Results of EV in the ARMIDILO

- Ecologically valid variables reveal problems in the client's environment.
- The risk of individual clients is more complex than a number. It is the interplay of client factors and environmental factors.
- There is no doubt that some "high risk" individuals are being managed extremely well in the community, but, unfortunately, the opposite has been found to be true as well.



Implications

- Many actuarial tests and SCGs have good predictive validity, but this seems to have come at the expense of ecological validity.
- The problem is, of course, that offenders don't live on SPSS spreadsheets, but in the community and more ecologically valid variables may lose predictive validity by being more contextually relevant.
- However, given that we don't manage the "average" offender, and ID clients are never the "average" case, we hope that the focus on EV variables in the ARMIDILO is seen as valid.



Conclusions

- The ARMIDILO rocks!
- Well, the preliminary data rocks at least.
- We look forward to doing more research and hope that anyone interested gets in touch.
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