

Editorial

Risk–need assessment: Bridging disciplinary and regional boundaries

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The understanding and prevention of criminal and/or dangerous behaviours, together with the rehabilitation of people who have actually offended, have been the focus for a variety of professional disciplines. Psychiatry, psychology and social work have each established areas of specialisation within mental health services and in the criminal justice arena, with mental health services, in turn, comprising general adult and/or child and adolescent work and specialist forensic mental health services. These varying specialty areas have, however, also been characterised by a number of differences – disciplinary, regional and conceptual – that have resulted in parallel rather than integrated knowledge acquisition.

We offer observations and analysis of ‘risk–need assessment’ (RNA) as an important bridge across a number of different approaches and disciplines. RNA can provide common ground between *mental health services* provided to those not involved in the criminal justice system; *forensic mental health services*, which, in the USA, have traditionally focused largely on legal decision-making at trial; and *correctional* domains that encompass the assessment, rehabilitation and reentry of sentenced offenders. In so doing, RNA provides a common language that crosses the disciplinary boundaries of psychology, psychiatry, social work and criminal justice professionals. It also offers the potential for a more uniform core of assessments and interventions with criminal defendants and convicted offenders that may transcend regional and national differences as well.

We begin with a review of the research and scholarship published in *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health* (CBMH) during the years 2008–2010 on the topic of RNA. This is next integrated with additional research and scholarship published in North America [in *Criminal Justice and Behavior* (CJB)] during this same period. Taken together, these reviews underscore the broad international support

for RNA as an approach that has substantially influenced disparate aspects of the broad area of mental health and criminal behaviour. It is timely also to observe that RNA offers the potential for stimulating additional research that is interdisciplinary and cross-jurisdictional. In an era of increasing emphasis on empirically supported practice, such an integrated research agenda has considerable potential for strengthening the scientific foundations of practice. We conclude our discussion with recommendations for such integrated research, linking scientific evidence with specific aspects of practice.

RNA research and scholarship: CBMH 2008–2010

The genesis of RNA can be traced to the late 1980s. Andrews et al. (1990) described risk, need and responsivity (RNR) as important considerations in the assessment and rehabilitation of offenders. Risk here refers to the likelihood of committing future offences; the ‘risk principle’ of RNR indicates that those at highest risk should receive the most intensive interventions. Needs are the deficits (such as substance abuse, family problems, educational problems and pro-criminal attitudes) that, if unchanged, increase the risk of reoffending. Responsivity involves the likelihood of a favourable response to interventions in such identified areas of need and the influences (e.g. gender, IQ) that may affect such responding. RNR has exerted a substantial influence on the field, directly influencing the development of well-validated risk–need measures such as the Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (Andrews et al., 2004), the HCR-20 (Webster et al., 1997), the Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (Hoge and Andrews, 2002) and the Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth (Borum et al., 2006). Such measures, and the underlying RNA approach, have significantly enhanced the empirical foundation of assessing and rehabilitating offenders (Heilbrun, 2009; Hoge and Andrews, 2010).

To what extent has CBMH, a leading UK-based international interdisciplinary journal, published research and scholarship that is consistent with a risk–need approach to the assessment, rehabilitation and risk management of offenders? A review of the published articles in volumes 18 (2008), 19 (2009) and 20 (2010) reflects the presence of a variety of studies focused on relevant areas within the RNA domain: protective factors in risk assessment (Rennie and Dolan, 2010), in-patient risk assessment (Brown and Lloyd, 2008), criminal thinking among individuals in civil psychiatric hospitals (Carr et al., 2009), treatment engagement as a predictor of recidivism (McCarthy and Duggan, 2010), gender-specific needs assessment in jail (Drapalski et al., 2009), risk factors in young female prisoners in Norway (Kjelsberg et al., 2009), residential community-based rehabilitation for high-risk offenders (Blumenthal et al., 2009), risk factors for Greek youth (Maniadaki and Kakouros, 2008), psychopathy and offense severity in sexually aggressive youth (Fougere et al., 2009), the relationship between risk factors and

recidivism in serious juvenile offenders (Mulder et al., 2010) and broader risk analysis (Carson, 2008). There are, of course, important differences in the respective methodologies used in these studies, and they are conducted in different countries with different legal and criminal justice systems. Yet these differences underscore the larger point: each of these studies has sought to identify personal or situational variables related to risk of recidivism, with the related assumption that these reflect needs that can serve as targets for interventions delivered in an empirically supported fashion. This is the essential message that has been conveyed by those who have developed RNR (Andrews et al., 1990, 2006; Andrews and Bonta, 2006). It has been markedly influential in shaping the work of those publishing in CBMH, as this brief review suggests.

RNA research and scholarship: CJB 2008–2010

RNA has also played a strong role in shaping the developments in risk assessment that have emerged more specifically in Canada and the USA during the last decade (see Otto and Douglas, 2010). Articles published in CJB during the same period of 2008–2010 also reflect strong interest in RNA-influenced specialised measures applied to adults (Fass et al., 2008; Kelly and Welsh, 2008; Brennan et al., 2009; Ferguson et al., 2009; Manchak et al., 2009) and juveniles (Lodewuiks et al., 2008; Meyers and Schmidt, 2008; Onifade et al., 2008; Viljoen et al., 2008, 2009). There has been sufficient research in specialised risk–need tools to justify the publication of meta-analyses during this period as well; these have included one meta-analysis for adults (Campbell et al., 2009), a second for juveniles (Olver et al., 2009) and a third for juveniles divided by gender (Schwalbe, 2008).

There has been additional research on the gender specificity of applying RNA (Rettinger and Andrews, 2010; Van Voorhis et al., 2010). Work in this area has also been applied to finding and strengthening protective factors (Salekin and Lochman, 2008) as well as designing interventions that are consistent with RNR principles (Hollin et al., 2008; Viera et al., 2009).

Like CBMH, CJB has published a substantial amount of risk assessment research during recent years that has been strongly influenced by RNA. Assuming this represents a broader trend, what are the implications of such a trend?

RNA as a bridge to better integration of science and practice

RNA, and the RNR theory from which it emerged, has already exercised considerable influence on the fields of mental health and criminal justice. It is theoretically sound, it calls for the application of measurement and critical thinking skills integral to the mental health professions and it applies the measured constructs towards planning rehabilitation. Yet for a theory that has been articulated for two decades, the supporting research is inconsistent.

A large portion of the research investigating RNR as a theory has been in the form of meta-analyses, which have tested the model on a number of populations, including general and youth offenders (Andrews et al., 1990), violent offenders (Dowden and Andrews, 2000) and female offenders (Dowden and Andrews, 1999). One quantitative review (Andrews and Dowden, 2006) specifically examined the effectiveness of the risk principle; it noted that while studies have found moderate effect sizes for the RNR principles, there have been inconsistencies. For instance, the risk principle was supported among female offenders (Dowden and Andrews, 1999), but did not yield significant effects among violent offenders (Dowden and Andrews, 2000). For general and youthful offenders, it appears that programmes implementing all three RNR principles are significantly more effective in reducing criminal justice outcomes, but the individual effect of each component is less discernible (Andrews et al., 1990). It is unclear whether these inconsistent results reflect weaknesses in the RNR model, differential applicability across populations, or may be an artifact of the coding procedure used in these studies (e.g. attempting to code 'risk' in studies that did not classify the risk level of participants).

Other researchers have examined the RNR model within specific correctional interventions. Most of these studies have focused on the risk principle (Bonta et al., 2000; Bourgon and Armstrong, 2005; Lowenkamp et al., 2006; Taxman and Thanner, 2006). Though the risk principle was supported in some of these investigations, other results have been discrepant. For instance, one multi-site investigation found support for the risk principle at one of the sites, with high-risk offenders receiving the intervention performing better than high-risk controls, but found the opposite results at the second site (higher-risk offenders who received the intervention had worse outcomes than high-risk offenders who did not) (Taxman and Thanner, 2006). In addition, there have been no efforts to isolate the effects of the need or responsivity principles in the same manner as has been done with the risk principle. As may be seen, then, RNR is indeed promising – but inconsistencies and gaps underscore the need for additional research.

Accordingly, a focus on RNA as a common theory underlying research with diverse populations, systems and countries over the next decade could yield several benefits. First, it could help fill the gaps in the current empirical support for RNR. Additional research will also facilitate the performance of meta-analyses, always good indicators of overall robustness and effect size. Second, it could also illustrate the limitations of this approach. There may be circumstances in which RNR is *not* the approach of choice, either for empirical or legal/social reasons – but that will become clearer as more work is done using this approach as a foundation. Third, it can promote the development of specialised risk-needs measures that are (1) developed and validated in empirically sound fashion, (2) specific to culture and population and (3) available for use by any mental health or behavioural health professional with appropriate training in the measurement

approach. In this fashion, we may learn much more about the common ground between empirically supported practice in assessing and treating offenders around the world.

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