

Title: Looking at self-esteem and locus of control in male juvenile offenders, comparing Koories and non-Koories.

SECTION A - GENERAL INFORMATION

1. Give a succinct but comprehensive statement of the aims, hypotheses and potential significance of the project.

This project aims to look at the relationship between self-concept and locus of control in male incarcerated juvenile offenders, specifically comparing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders.

Aborigines are vastly over-represented at every stage of the criminal justice system, the greatest disproportion being found in longterm institutions (Gale, 1986). This is also the case with juvenile offenders, with many young Aborigines currently serving sentences in Youth Training Centres (YTCs). Acknowledging the alarmingly high number of adult prisoners who have previously spent time in YTCs, it seems crucial that intervention programs for youth within institutions are constantly being developed and assessed. In particular, we have a responsibility to respond to the special needs and interests of Aborigines. The questions being addressed in this project are -

- Do Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal juvenile offenders differ on certain personality attributes?
- If so, are these differences relevant to the development of intervention programs within institutions?

Two personality attributes which have long been associated with delinquency are self-esteem and locus of control. An important objective of many intervention programs has been to raise self-esteem, as much research has found offenders to be low in this attribute (eg Jurich & Andrews, 1984; Busch, 1979; Cole et.al., 1989). This study seeks firstly to explore self-esteem, within the wider context of self-concept, comparing offenders (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) with a control group of non-offenders. The offender group will comprise two subsamples, incarcerated offenders and those who have received non-custodial sentences for their offences. This is necessary as institutionalization itself has often been found to lower self-esteem (Jacques & Chason, 1977; see Power & Beveridge, 1988).

Within Western populations, some research has shown high self-esteem to be correlated with a more internal locus of control, although the evidence is not unequivocal. This study will examine the relationship between these two personality traits within an incarcerated juvenile population, looking specifically at the variable of race.

No specific hypotheses are put forward, as the lack of Australian research in this area deems that this study can only be an exploratory one.

2. Give a succinct but comprehensive statement of the academic background to the project and project plan.

Self-concept is a construct that has long been associated with delinquency, but their relationship has proved to be very complex. Definitional difficulties have besieged much of the research and it is necessary to distinguish between self-concept and self-esteem. Blyth & Traeger (1983) make a general distinction between the cognitive/non-judgemental aspect of the self (ie self-concept) and the affective/evaluative aspect of the self, which reflects the degree of satisfaction with the 'self-image' (ie self-esteem). In reality, this distinction is murkier than it sounds. Emphasizing the difficulty involved in making non-judgemental about oneself, Shavelson et.al.(1976) state that self-concept has both a descriptive and an evaluative aspect.

The model in this study is Shavelson's (1976) hypothesized factor hierarchy for some dimensions of self-esteem. He proposes emotional, social, physical and academic components of self-esteem. A second-order factor analysis yields a single superordinate factor of global self-esteem, supporting the hierarchical interpretation of this model. The measure to be used in the study - the Self-Description Questionnaire (Marsh, 1986)- is derived from this model and measures what we have defined as self-concept but also includes a measure of global self-esteem. This allows comparisons to be made not simply using self-esteem but also other dimensions of self-concept.

Locus of control is defined as a generalized expectancy, operating across a wide variety of situations, regarding the degree to which a person believes he or she possesses or lacks the power to control the occurrence of reinforcing events (Rotter, 1954). McJamerson (1991) has suggested that a major factor underlying self-esteem might be a constellation of such personal causation perceptions. Perceiving oneself as having little opportunity to succeed by conventional means has been shown to undermine one's self-esteem. Indeed, several studies have shown internal locus of control - perceiving oneself to be in control of events - to be correlated with interpersonal maturity and self-esteem (Platt et.al., 1970; Burbuck & Bridgeman, 1976; Coopersmith, 1967).

However, the results of two American studies comparing Afro-Americans and whites conflicted with the traditional findings. While the pattern with whites was consistent with earlier research, Black subjects produced an entirely different pattern. Gurin & Epps (1975) found that Blacks who perceived discriminating obstacles and placed blame on system barriers (rather than attributing their lack of success to their own personal inadequacies) tended to be more motivated than those who

categorically denied the existence of racial discrimination. Similarly, Cross & Tracy (1970) found interpersonally mature Blacks to be more external while interpersonally mature whites were more-internal. Thus it may be that if one can attribute the cause of failure or lack of personal goal attainment to bias in the social system - particularly in the form of racial discrimination - this may in fact be a positive way of adapting to an unjust world.

Consequently, it seems that, among minority groups, an external locus of control may in some circumstances be an appropriate, useful defense mechanism. It may even lead to raised levels of self-esteem, producing an inverse relationship to what has been found among whites.

Aborigines have experienced discrimination at least as severe as Afro-Americans but their history, culture and belief systems differ enormously. The subjects in the above studies were not young nor were they offenders. Nevertheless, it may be interesting to examine the situation in Australia. This research is a first step to see if Aborigines as a group reflect the same locus of control variations between offenders and non-offenders as whites. Kearney et.al.(1976) suggest that, like the Navajo native American, the Aborigine has the attitude that human success and achievement are beyond the control of the individual. However, little evidence has been produced either supporting or contradicting this rather general assertion. The research will also look at self-concept differences between offenders and non-offenders. Finally, it will examine the relationship between locus of control and self-concept in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal juvenile offenders. This relationship holds particular significance within an offender population with its possible implications for treatment programs.

INFORMED CONSENT

13. Who will explain the project to the potential participant?

The researcher, as this may involve less apparent coercion than explanations by CSV staff.

14. Is there a special relationship between the person explaining the project, or any of the investigators, and a participant?

No

15. When will the explanation be given?

Depending on the preference of the individual facilities, this could be done either a day or two prior to testing, or on the same day.

16. Will the participants be capable of giving consent themselves?

As minors, they are not technically able to give consent themselves. However, with respect to the incarcerated offenders, it is likely to prove almost impossible to contact their parents or legal guardians (many are likely to be Wards anyway). The situation may well be similar with community-based offenders.

17. Will written consent be obtained from all participants?

Obtaining written consent from offenders may be seen as jeopardizing their anonymity, therefore may not be appropriate. Written consent will be obtained from the institutions.

SECTION B - ETHICAL QUESTIONS

19. How will information be handled to safeguard confidentiality both during and after the completion of the research project?

Subjects will receive guarantees that no CSV employees will see individual results. Information will be kept privately and destroyed following completion of the project.

20. What demands, inconvenience or discomfort will be involved? Explain the possible dangers, risks or ill effects of these procedures and the precautions to be taken to prevent or minimise them.

The administration of the scales is unlikely to cause distress to subjects, as their content is unlikely to be seen as threatening. As previously outlined, support staff would be available if necessary.

21. Are there any other ethical issues raised by the proposed project? What is your response to them? In many research projects involving humans there is a trade-off to be made between the cost of the interventions to those participating in them and the value to be achieved by carrying out the research.

1. There is an ethical issue raised when using incarcerated subjects, on the grounds that they may perceive themselves to have less choice about being involved. Emphasis needs to be placed on voluntary participation.

2. Certain ethical issues are raised when doing research with Aborigines.

a. Often the relative merits of research as they are perceived by scientists differ from the merits perceived from the Aboriginal point of view. In this case, contact with the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service confirms that the issue of juvenile offending is of great concern to the Aboriginal community. This research proposal will be put before the Board of Directors of the Aboriginal Health Service for their approval.

b. Consultation is also being carried out with professionals working within the Aboriginal mental health field regarding difficulties arising in cross-cultural research, in particular the appropriateness of using scales which have only been normed on white populations.