



Changes in outcome expectancies and criminal thinking following a brief course of psychoeducation[☆]

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Abstract

The purpose of this investigation was to ascertain whether outcome expectancies and criminal thinking would change in offenders participating in a psychoeducational group and whether significant cross-lag (over time) correlations could be identified between outcome expectancies and criminal thinking. A sample of 121 US federal inmates completed the Psychological Inventory of Criminal Thinking Styles (PICTS) and a measure of outcome expectancies for crime (OEC) before and after participating in a 10-week psychoeducational class. As predicted, participants' positive outcome expectancies for crime (OEC-POS) and scores on the PICTS Current Criminal Thinking Scale fell significantly over the course of the intervention. Alternatively, participants' negative outcome expectancies for crime and scores on the PICTS Historical Criminal Thinking scale did not change appreciably from pre- to post-test. Structured equation modeling revealed that the "OEC-POS→Current" cross-lag correlation, but not the "Current→OEC-POS" cross-lag correlation, contributed significant variance beyond that supplied by the two contemporaneous correlations. This latter finding suggests that positive outcome expectancies for crime may be particularly important to address during the early stages of intervention with criminally involved clients.

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The apparent lack of progress in remedying the problem of serious crime cannot be reduced to any one factor, although our failure to consider interactive variables may be part of the problem. Of the various interactive concepts in the field of psychology, none is perhaps more relevant to the issue of crime than outcome expectancies. Outcome expectancies are the consequences people anticipate receiving from their participation in a particular behavior. The expected consequences

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of alcohol use have been found to contribute substantially to problem drinking (Walters, 1998a) and it is speculated that they may be just as important in promoting criminal behavior. Researchers have discovered that aggressive children and juvenile offenders anticipate more positive than negative outcomes from crime and are more apt to expect tangible rewards for violence than their non-aggressive peers (Perry, Perry, & Rasmussen, 1986). Delinquent youth likewise believe that criminal involvement will enhance their self-esteem and decrease other people's negative evaluations of them (Slaby & Guerra, 1988). Crane-Ross, Tisak, and Tisak (1998) discerned that both teenage aggression and rule breaking correlated with positive outcome expectancies but that the effects were specific in the sense that expectancies for aggression only predicted aggression and expectancies for rule breaking predicted only rule breaking.

Walters (2000) probed the relationship between existential fear, outcome expectancies for crime, and the actual consequences of past criminal conduct with structural equation modeling and determined that outcome expectancies for crime correlated more robustly with existential fear than with the consequences of past criminal conduct. On the basis of these findings, Walters concluded that outcome expectancies influence crime by way of their interaction with existential fear. A recent investigation on existential fear using the Fear Checklist notes that existential fear simulates both situational and dispositional phenomena to the extent that it correlates significantly with both state and trait anxiety (Walters, 2001b). With promises of relief from existential fear through satisfaction of a person's desire for affiliation, control, and status, outcome expectancies are instrumental in initiating and maintaining a criminal lifestyle. Accordingly, before desistance from crime can take place negative crime expectancies (anticipation of jail, death, loss of family) must exceed or replace positive crime expectancies (power, excitement, respect). Whereas research on alcohol misuse supports this supposition (Jones & McMahon, 1994), it has yet to be determined whether outcome expectancies play a leading role in people's desistance from crime.

Like outcome expectancies, criminal thinking styles are of cardinal significance in initiating and maintaining a pattern of criminal conduct. Walters (1990) describes eight such thinking styles in his lifestyle theory of crime. The first thinking style, mollification, means projecting blame for one's criminal actions onto someone or something outside oneself. The second thinking style, cutoff, entails the rapid elimination of common deterrents to crime by way of an image or phrase. Believing that one is entitled to violate the law because of past injustices or current conditions is an example of entitlement, a third thinking style in the criminal lifestyle system. A fourth thinking style, power orientation, is designed to gain a sense of power and control over the external environment. The fifth thinking style, sentimentality, is based on the conviction that one's criminal actions are justified by the good deeds one performs, while superoptimism conveys the belief that one will continue escaping the negative consequences that others engaged in a criminal lifestyle encounter on a regular basis. Cognitive indolence, a seventh thinking style, is marked by impulsiveness, lazy thinking, and habitual use of self-defeating short-cuts. The final thinking style, discontinuity, is manifest as a general lack of consistency in one's thoughts, plans, and actions.

Walters (1995) has developed an instrument designed to assess the eight thinking styles described earlier. Labeled the Psychological Inventory of Criminal Thinking Styles (PICTS), this instrument generates scores for each of the eight thinking styles as well as two global criminal thinking scales comprised of items initially selected on the basis of content, a Current Criminal Thinking scale and a Historical Criminal Thinking Scale (Walters, 2001a). Research indicates that the PICTS is sensitive to change in criminal thinking following client participation in a program of

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