PATHWAYS PERSONNEL

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RESEARCH IN REVIEW

Desistance as a Developmental Process: A Comparison of Static and Dynamic Approaches

Bushway, S.D., Thornberry, T.P., Krohn, M.D. (2003)
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The study of desistance is important for both theoretical and policy matters. Yet, knowing when someone has desisted, or operationalizing desistance, has made study of this topic difficult. For example, some researchers consider individuals who have ceased offending for five years as 'desistors' while others consider individuals with very low (almost zero) rates of offending as 'desistors'. An interesting question is whether these two approaches identify the same set of people, called desistors. Recently, Bushway and his colleagues (2002) used data from the Rochester Youth Development Study (RYDS), a large scale longitudinal study that followed 846 adolescents from age 13-22, to study the desistance issue. These authors developed two distinct definitions of desistance. The first employed a 'static' definition of desistance which classifies as desistors those individuals who offended at least once before age 18, but did not afterwards (through age 22). Using this definition, 27.6% of the sample met the desistor definition. The second definition of desistance used a 'developmental' definition which is based on the trajectory methodology. This approach not only indicates which individuals approach a zero rate of offending, but it also tells researchers how long they have been there. Using this definition, 8.4% of the sample was classified as desistors. Interestingly, of the 291 individuals identified by the two methods as desistors, there was only agreement by the two methods in 4.8% of the cases. Thus, different proportions of the sample were classified as desistors and different people were classified as desistors.

DATA COLLECTION at-a-glance As of 7/04

- 1,355 Valid subject baseline interviews (90% with a collateral informant)
- 1,262 6-month interviews completed
- 1,264 12-month interviews completed
- 1,228 18-month interviews completed
- 1,141 24-month interviews completed
- 756 30-month interviews completed
- 390 36-month interviews
- 28 of the original 1,355 subjects have dropped out of the study (2%)
- 23 subjects have died since the beginning of the study (1.7%)
- Subject retention rates for each time point interview (6 thru 36 months) are averaging 93%
- Yearly collateral reports are present for about 85% of subjects

Talk is Cheap

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Given this state of affairs, self-report has become a staple for many researchers [6, 7, 8, 9, 10]. In addition to the simple fact that this approach is usually the most practical, it can also be argued that this method is the most appropriate for the question being addressed. Self-reported information has advantages over other data collection methods because of it's "potential to provide a more comprehensive overview of events and to allow the incorporation of pertinent contextual factors" [11]. More information about the situation surrounding the behavior can be obtained in an interview than is ever available in an arrest record or known to a collateral informant. Moreover, this method is often the only one that can get at certain questions, like the amount and frequency of substance use, criminal activity that does not result in arrest, or information regarding the quality of relationships with family or peers [9].

Ask a question, get an answer...how hard can it be?

Just because self report is used widely doesn't mean that obtaining this type of information is easy to do effectively. On the contrary, as Brown et al, 1992 [in 12] point out, "verbal self reporting is a complex behavior". Babor et al, 1990 [in 7] clearly lay out four major factors that interact to determine how valid a self report might be.

- Respondent characteristics exert an effect. These include "enduring qualities such as personality characteristics, attitudes, beliefs and intelligence as well as transitory conditions such as physical condition (e.g. fatigued, drunk) and psychological state (e.g. depressed, anxious)". These individual characteristics might contribute to a report that is more or less accurate.
- Task variables affect accuracy. These relate to the methods used to collect the information. They can range from macro-level issues (e.g., doing a personal interview versus using a computer-assisted assessment) to more specific issues such as the complexity of the questions, the clarity of instructions, or the sequencing of interview activities. The characteristics of the interviewers used might also affect the types of responses obtained.
- Motivation of the subject plays a part. Things like the degree of threat or embarrassment associated with the questions or the line of inquiry can affect how truthfully people report their activities. Two of the most obvious examples of motivational variables are social desirability and denial. For example, a participant may under-report engagement in crime if he/she has a wish to make him/herself appear more favorably to a researcher (social desirability) or an alcoholic may deny heavy drinking as a result of an inability to see him/herself as a problem drinker (denial).
- Cognitive processes required to respond to the interview items can also affect accuracy. Del Boca & Noll (7; citing Barbor, et al., 1990), note that "the respondent must attend to a request for information (attention), interpret the question (comprehension), recall their behavior from memory (retrieval), integrate information via comparative, inferential or attributional processes (integration) and then decide how to respond (response selection)."

Clearly, the seemingly simple exchange of questions and answers in the research setting is really a complicated set of mental operations that could be derailed at a number of points.

So what effects do these factors really have?

Many researchers have looked at the legitimacy of self-report information, focusing on some of the factors listed above. The results lead us to conclude that these factors matter, sometimes a great deal but oftentimes much less, or in a more limited way, than one might think.

Some researchers have looked at respondent characteristics of adolescents and young adults to find groups that provide more or less accurate self-reports of antisocial behavior. Gender and ethnicity have been examined most often. Some researchers [e.g., 13, 14, 15, 16] found variability in the accuracy of reports based on ethnicity. These researchers conclude that nonwhite (primarily African American) respondents were less likely to self-report known offenses than White respondents. However, more recent work [17, 18] did not find this pattern, instead showing similar prevalence rates of self reported serious violent offenses for African American and White respondents and a lack of racial differences when self-reports were compared to arrests. In an interesting study of racial differences that controlled for socioeconomic status, Jolliffe et. al, [19] found ethnic differences, but not between African Americans and Whites. Instead, the only ethnic difference that this researcher found was that Asian females provided the least accurate information compared to other ethnic/gender mixes. Finally, in our own data from the Pathways study, Brame, et al. [2] found that the correlation between arrests and self reported offending did not differ across different demographic groups.

"There is no gold standard for detecting these behaviors"
(Killen et al.)

Other researchers have looked at whether mental illness and substance use histories (other relevant respondent characteristics) seem to affect accuracy of reporting. Nieves, et al, [11] conclude that neither substance abuse nor mental illness factors affected the quality and accuracy of self-reported arrest history. Also, Landry, et al., [12] found that self report data was generally valid in a sample of individuals with both addiction problems and a criminal history. Finally, Knight et al. [9] found that age, race, education level, and risk of recidivism did not produce underreporting of cocaine use, but having a prior drug-related arrest did suppress reporting. Overall, it seems that there are small, if any, racial/ethnic differences in reporting, and that other respondent characteristics (even those like mental illness or substance use) only show sporadic effects on self reporting accuracy.

There is much less research on the effects of task variables on self report accuracy of antisocial behavior. O'Farrell et al., [20] found similar reports between subjects and collateral reporters using life event calendars and a drug use questionnaire, but also found that the type of drug being reported upon affected the congruence of the reports. Higher agreement was found when reporting more frequently used drugs (e.g., cannabis). Other researchers have also found high self reported agreement about drug and alcohol use for adolescents and family members or collateral reporters [10, 5]. Finally, Knight et al, [9] found that having a relationship with the research interviewer (as opposed to speaking to someone he/she has not previously met) increased reporting accuracy. In surveys with unfamiliar interviewers, other investigators [21] have found that a computerized format, compared to a paper-and-pencil questionnaire, yields higher reported rates among adolescents regarding some drug use, sexual behavior, and violent acts. In general, adolescents seem to respond more truthfully to interviewers whom they know and there are differential rates of accuracy depending on the domain of the questions.

Motivation appears to be a factor that can cut both ways (either inflating or deflating reporting), usually interacting with the respondent characteristics to affect accuracy. For example, Lapham at al. [22] compared self reported drug use within a group of individuals arrested for drunk driving, with the initial report of drug use gathered at a screening interview immediately following the index arrest. Five years later, these same individuals were asked about the accuracy of their initial reports, and a high proportion of this group admit to underreporting drug use. The authors believe that motivation played a role in this situation, with perceived threat at the time of the arrest lowering reporting. Maxfield et al [2] provide another example in a sample of youth with a history of abuse or neglect. These researchers compared self reported arrests with official arrests and self reports of neglect and abuse with official reports. They found considerable agreement overall, but the results varied by gender and subject matter. Females were less likely to report having been arrested than males whereas males were less willing to admit to history of victimization. The researchers suggest that social desirability probably plays a role. That is, it may be less embarrassing for males than females to admit to an arrest whereas females may find it less embarrassing to admit to being abused. As Darke [23] concludes after a critical review of this research, self reported data appears to be valid and reliable for drug use, criminal behavior and risk-taking behavior, but the possibility of negative consequences for reporting (e.g., getting kicked out of a program, arrested) can certainly exert an effect.

Variation in reports can also result from some specific cognitive factors. Killeen et al., [5] found that the saliency of the event increased the likelihood of recall while Yacoubian [1] reported that the recency of the event also matters. What this means is that the type of antisocial behavior or crime being recalled probably matters; dramatic recent events are going to be more easily recalled. Memories decay and memories of routine events decay most.

What does this all come to?

While not exhaustive, this research review does highlight a number of relevant considerations about self report in adolescents. First, it illustrates the complex nature of self report and the various frameworks that can be used to assess accuracy. Second, it illustrates that there is no clear answer about whether self report "works". There is marked variability in findings regarding the validity of self-reported information, depending on the samples used, the questions asked, and the way those questions are framed. Third, it suggests that research regarding deviant behavior would be smart to rely on more than one source of information. Sometimes official records can uncover under-reporting in self-reported information and other times having both sources can highlight the inaccuracies of official records [3]. Moreover, official records can serve other valuable purposes [outlined in 7]. First, other sources may enhance the accuracy of self report, with the participant possibly providing more accurate information because he/she believes that validation of their responses might be used. Second, information might be complementary, giving a more accurate picture than available from any single data source. Finally, when using repeated measurements over time, differences in the nature, or in the magnitude, of data discrepancies among independent data sources can help to determine whether systematic biases are occurring across different time points. Multiple data sources give you more complete information and "data about the data".

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Talk is Cheap

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The Pathways approach

The Pathways study is in the position of having to rely on self report data because many of the most interesting questions about factors related to desistance can only be answered by the adolescents themselves. We have also sought to maximize the accuracy of our data by taking a number of steps indicated by the research reviewed above. We employ research interviewers who are independent of the juvenile or treatment settings and adopt a "case load" model whereby interviewers and participant are paired for the duration of the study. In addition, we try to circumvent the perceived threat from revealing deviant behavior by providing a confidential interview setting, promising confidentiality and providing for the ability to answer without a verbal response via an answer keypad. We have adopted a life calendar approach for our interviews to augment recall, making this cognitive task as manageable as possible. In addition, we pilot tested the questions and the sequencing of the interview with a sample of juvenile offenders of a similar age prior to beginning the study to make sure that the wording and ideas presented made sense to our subjects. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we rely on three sources for our data: self report, collateral information, and official records.

In the end, there is no way to be absolutely be sure that the data collected reflect "the truth" about people's behaviors and ideas. The best we can do is to obtain a comprehensive, and well grounded, picture of how these adolescents' lives progress - through their own eyes and through the eyes of others. Careful consideration needs to be given to the validity and limitations of data, since this is the only way to provide sound information to both policy makers and practitioners.

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When I was a boy of fourteen,
my father was so ignorant I could hardly
stand to have the old man around.
But when I got to be twenty-one, I was
astonished at how much he had
learned in seven years.

Mark Twain
"Old Times on the Mississippi"
Atlantic Monthly, 1874

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An effective coordinating center requires a dedicated group of individuals with a diverse set of skills and a common committment to do a job well.

We're proud to introduce our team!

Front row from left to right: Mitch Besana, Graduate Student Researcher; Dimple Ho, Senior Administrative Assistant; Carol Schubert, Research Program Administrator and Pathways Study Coordinator.

Back row from left to right: Cindy Urbano, Research Data Coordinator; Sena Mills, Research Specialist; Bryan Mills, Data Coordinator and Analyst; Deb Murray, Research Associate.

SPOTLIGHT ON PITTSBURGH

As the Study Coordinator, Carol Schubert, must work closely with the Principal Investigator to both anticipate upcoming needs and directions for the study as well as to the monitor current progress. The role incorporates a wide spectrum of tasks which appear to be endless. Debra Murray conducts research interviews with youth from Philadelphia who are housed in Western Pennsylvania, makes regular updates to the study's internal accounting system and reviews interviewer comments included with the research data. Dimple Ho efficiently performs a variety of administrative tasks which are important for keeping the study on track. And, finally, Sena Mills is responsible for series of critical tasks related to moving the incoming data into analytic data sets.

Over the past six months, we have been fortunate to have the addition of three talented individuals. Mitch Besana, who is pursuing his doctoral degree, joined the team as a part-time analyst. He has already been quite busy establishing the psychometric properties of the measures used for the study. Cindy Urbano's task are also data-related as she has been charged with the task of learning the structure of our massive datasets and reviewing all of the SPSS syntax statements for accuracy. And, finally, Bryan Mills has done an incredible job learning the structure of our existing web-site, programming many of the data processing tasks and creating a new web-site on which we will house datasets and documentation for use by our multi-site team.

We are very appreciative of the dedication, efforts and skill of each of these individuals.

PATHWAYS

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Research on Pathways to Desistance

Talk is cheap!
The accuracy of self-reported information

Researchers who investigate deviant behavior, such as offending and use of illegal substances, routinely encounter a dilemma. Simply put, how do you get an accurate reading of these behaviors? On one hand, if they choose to rely on self-report, there is the possibility that subjects will inaccurately report their behavior. The alternative is to rely on information from sources other than the participant, such as record data or reports from a collateral informant. Using these methods, however, doesn't ensure accuracy. The Pathways study has wrestled with this quandary, and we think this is an interesting and complicated issue, central to research on antisocial behaviors. We briefly explore it in the following article.

Why does it matter?

Determining the most accurate means to capture information about deviant behavior is not a trivial matter. Indeed, it is a fundamental first step in reaching firm conclusions from any research of this type. If the information retrieved doesn't closely reflect the true level of the behavior then the correlations and findings from any analyses are suspect as well. To borrow an adage from the computer world, "garbage in, garbage out". Not having the behaviors measured well means that levels of criminal activity or substance use will be inaccurate or that group assignments (like substance users or non-substance users) behind many comparisons will be off to some degree.

What's the best method for obtaining accurate information?

The need for accurate data is pretty clear; the best way to obtain it is not. Regarding delinquent behavior, there really are only a few choices: participant report (self-report), chart review (e.g. arrest records) and collateral reports (someone who knows the subject reports on his/her behavior). Studies regarding substance use have the added ability to gather objective evidence (e.g. blood test, hair samples, urinalysis).

None of these methods is clearly superior, though. Self-report has been criticized for potential response bias [1], in which people wittingly or unwittingly give inaccurate answers. Arrest records, meanwhile, are limited because they can only capture a subset of the delinquent behavior committed by some youth (e.g. they miss crimes for which the youth wasn't caught and arrested) [2]. Police decide who to arrest and charge, and this filter affects what is detected as the behavior [3]. Collateral reports can yield inaccurate information simply because the collateral respondent might not be sufficiently aware of the participant's behavior [4]. Finally, objective evidence is costly to obtain and is usually so highly correlated with self-reported information that it is difficult to justify the expense, except maybe for just a random sample of cases [1]. There just is no gold standard for detecting these behaviors [5].

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