

Review of: "Does Anger Management Among Prisoners Work? — A Review of Recent Meta-Analyses"

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Meena (2024) examines five “recent” meta-analyses that investigate the extent to which anger management programmes address anger-related issues and reduce recidivism rates. The accessible, five-page review discusses the limitations and challenges associated with the existing literature on the subject, including challenges related to study design, measurement tools, lack of specification, generalisability of findings, and the timeliness and cultural relevance of studies surveyed. The article also provides recommendations for future research in this area by suggesting improvements in study methodologies, identifying existing literature gaps, and proposing further investigation directions. It draws on desk research to synthesise and critically evaluate available meta-analyses to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the efficacy of anger management correctional programmes.

To some extent, the review shows that effective anger management correctional programmes can play a crucial role in reducing recidivism by addressing underlying issues, providing inmates with tools to manage their anger, and ultimately contributing to their rehabilitation. The review also touches on the nexus between anger and recidivism, being part of a complex web of factors that can contribute to criminal behaviour. Despite this complexity, there is consensus in the literature that if individuals struggle to manage their anger, this ‘strain’ can result in impulsive actions, conflict with others, and an increased likelihood of engaging in criminal behaviour if left unaddressed. These observations are not surprising, as it is widely known that some correctional approaches work for some individuals while others only show promise (National Academic Press, 2006; Leslie et al., 2023).

Conceptual considerations

The article does an excellent job of drawing the reader’s attention to some key distinctions, namely state versus trait anger and innate aggression versus anger. Indeed, anger is a specific emotion that individuals experience in response to particular situations. At the same time, innate aggression refers to a more general predisposition toward aggressive behaviours that may be hardwired into human biology for survival reasons. Innate aggression also encompasses a broader range of behaviours that may be instinctual rather than emotionally driven. As such, anger can lead to aggression, but not all aggression arises from anger. The article makes this clear.

By drawing on positivist criminology, the author also makes it clear that individuals with high-trait anger may be more prone to aggressive behaviour, hostility, or maladaptive coping mechanisms when faced with challenging situations. Indeed, “trait anger” can influence how a person interprets and responds to stressors, and it is often associated with

adverse outcomes. But, if effectively managed and expressed, moderate levels of anger can be adaptive and motivate individuals to address injustices or take assertive actions. As such, the learning environment also has a critical role to play.

The article also defines recidivism as re-offending but overlooks the challenges associated with its operationalisation (see Leslie, 2023). While recidivism is a widely used measurement in all aspects of the criminal justice system, definitional inconsistencies exist among studies. These known inconsistencies limit the comparison of findings and, between programme, agency, and country comparisons. The implication of this oversight is two-fold. It downplays the complex and multidimensional relationship between anger and recidivism. It also raises important questions about the comparability of the five meta-analyses included in the review.

Methodological approach

A review of “recent” meta-analyses is an opportunity to employ a systematic approach to select, justify, and determine the scope and number of meta-analyses (see, for example, Siddaway, Wood, & Hedges, 2019). Except for the aim and timing of the selected meta-analyses, the basis for comparison is unclear. As such, the criteria for selection require further definition. Why only five meta-analyses? Was the point of saturation reached? To what extent is 2015 considered “recent,” since, based on the opening statement, the focus of the review seems to be on the COVID-19 pandemic era?

When seeking to determine “what works,” numerous factors must be considered, including pacing and sequencing of reform efforts, fidelity of implementation, design appropriateness, the attitudes of programme implementers, and individual differences (Leslie et al., 2023). Individual differences such as personality, mental health, and personal coping strategies can influence how anger contributes to criminal behaviour and whether it leads to a higher risk of recidivism. To what extent did the meta-analyses vary in methodology, participants (e.g., type and gender), programme characteristics, and how they operationalised recidivism? The article should provide evidence of analysing these moderating factors, ideally with the support of visuals.

Recommendations for future research

The article provides recommendations for future research, including “the need to examine this issue through quantitative methods such as the RADaR technique” (Meena, 2024, p.3). However, adopting a more systematic and rigorous methodology may require a less manual and time-consuming approach to data reduction and analysis involving Atlas.ti, NVivo, or MAXQDA. “RADaR technique simplifies the qualitative data analysis process because it does not require analysts to learn complicated and potentially intimidating QDAS, [but] it also means that analysts will need to do many of the automated copying, cutting, pasting, highlighting, and sorting features manually” (Watkins, 2017, p.8). The article should, therefore, acknowledge these limitations while offering the RADaR technique as a future direction. It should also engage more closely with the extant literature to deepen the discussion on the practical implications of the review findings for policymakers, administrators, and professionals involved in implementing anger management programmes in correctional settings.

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