1968

New Directions for Parole Prediction Research

Charles W. Dean

Recommended Citation

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR PAROLE PREDICTION RESEARCH*

CHARLES W. DEAN

The author received his Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Illinois in 1966. He was on the faculty of the University of Kentucky, Sociology Department from 1964–1967 and from 1964 to 1966 served as Director of Research for the Kentucky Department of Corrections. Presently he is on the faculty of the Department of Sociology, University of South Carolina and serves as a research consultant to the South Carolina Department of Corrections.

Attempts to relate parole prediction to theories of criminality have been rare. In this article, theoretically relevant variables are suggested and data are presented which support the contention that such variables can contribute significantly to parole prediction.

While there has been great interest in predicting parole outcome, a review of the literature indicates that this research seldom has been related to or guided by criminological theory. In this article hypotheses relating parole outcome to theoretically relevant variables are suggested. Then data on the relationship between two of these and parole outcome are presented. The findings indicate that such variables can contribute significantly to the effectiveness of parole prediction research.

Any research can be judged by three criteria. The first concerns the reliability and validity of the data, the second the acceptability of the analytical techniques and the third the significance of the research question. "Significance" is sometimes dichotomized into practical *or* theoretical significance. This unnecessary and unrealistic dichotomy often reduces the effectiveness of research on practical problems. Without theoretical guidelines, such studies are less likely to select the most relevant variables, to produce significant results and to contribute to the accumulation of a body of empirically supported knowledge. Parole prediction research is a case in point as indicated by the following review of this research.

Early efforts to predict parole outcome utilized a rather long list of variables which included almost all of the information that could be collected reliably from official prison records. The discriminating power of the variables was seriously limited due to the crude methods of scoring and

to the equal weighting of all variables.[1] These early attempts were followed by numerous other studies which added, revised or deleted specific variables.[2] With one or two exceptions, the selection of these variables was determined by the content of the prison files from which the data were collected. This common data source led several independent investigators to utilize approximately the same variables which gradually resulted in concensus as to a core of relevant predictor variables. During this early period there was little evidence of concern for developing analytical techniques more sophisticated than simple product-moment correlations and even less evidence of concern for relating the research to a body of theory.

With the advent of digital computers, the variables selected according to the above described procedures were subjected to more rigorous analytical techniques. By weighting the variables on the basis of multiple regression coefficients, it was demonstrated that the number of items could be reduced with only a slight loss of predictive power.[3] Then, by weighting the smaller number of

[1] The method used by most of these early researchers was developed by Burgess. See *Factors Determining Success and Failure on Parole*, in BRUCE, HARNO, BURGESS & LANDESCO, THE WORKINGS OF THE INDETERMINATE SENTENCE LAW AND THE PAROLE SYSTEM 205–249 (1928).

[2] For examples, see Tibbetts, *Success and Failure on Parole Can be Predicted*, 22 J. CRIM. L. & CRIMINOL. 11, 41–50 (1931). VOLD, PREDICTION METHODS AND PAROLE (1931), or Schnur, *The Validity of Parole Prediction in Wisconsin*, 29 SOCIAL FORCES 82–86 (1951).

[3] For an example of this kind of analysis see Gottfredson, *A Shorthand Formula for Base Expectancy Scoring*, Research Division, Department of Corrections, State of California, Sacramento, (1962).

variables according to their individual contribution to a multiple correlation, it was possible to construct parole prediction devices that were far less complicated, more easily understood, and thus, more easily utilized by those responsible for the parole decision. Currently, prediction devices, usually in the form of base expectancy scores, serve as guidelines for several of the more progressive paroling authorities. However, during this time, criminological theory has received no more attention than in the earlier period.

Within the last few years, the increased practical value of these instruments and the growing general concern with the crime problem has resulted in increased interest and investment in this type of research, although there has not been a corresponding increase in the effectiveness of prediction instruments. When parole prediction efforts are evaluated by the above basic research criteria some of the reasons for this discrepency are apparent. First, consider the quality of the data. The variables currently used in prediction devices are subject to the same criticisms leveled against those used in the Burgess system three decades ago. Ferris, in 1936, said that these variables were static and thus failed to account for variations in the parolee's release circumstances and were completely extrinsic to the individual.[4] Data are still collected from official prison files compiled for administrative purposes, usually without meeting the conditions requisite to reliable and valid research data. Second, it appears that a point of diminishing return has been reached in applying more rigorous analytical techniques to such data. Third, relative to the theoretical relevance of the research question, with one or two exceptions, there has been no effort to relate this research to the rather substantial body of criminological theory which has been developed. Partially responsible for this latter condition is the fact that early efforts to predict parole outcome were by academicians in university settings where theoretical considerations were paramount while more recent research has been conducted in correctional settings where practical concerns receive greater emphasis.

PROMISING DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE PAROLE PREDICTION RESEARCH

As the above historical sketch indicates, parole prediction research was first concerned with isolating relevant predictor variables and then with subjecting these variables to more powerful analytical techniques. While there were numerous efforts to add new classes of predictor variables, none of these significantly improved the method developed by Burgess. There has been no research which would demonstrate the predictive ability of variables derived, not because they are available in prison files, but because of their theoretical relevance. Below are some hypotheses which are suggested by generally accepted theories of criminality. Some of these have been tested in earlier research but most of them have received little attention and represent new directions for prediction research. The first three relate parole outcome to objective life conditions and the last five to social-psychological states of released offenders.

(1) According to Merton's theory of anomie, categories of people who are denied access to legitimate means of obtaining culturally acclaimed goals are likely to exhibit high rates of deviant behavior.[5] Parolees generally experience rather severe economic restrictions, particularly with regard to employment in responsible and rewarding occupations. Although the range of economic opportunities will not be nearly so great as the range found in the larger society, some differences are likely to be observed. HYPOTHESIS: *Parole success varies with access to legitimate economic opportunities.*

(2) Sutherland's theory of differential association suggests that an individual who has a preponderance of criminal associations is more likely to become a criminal than one who has a preponderance of anticriminal associations. Sutherland states, "In some societies an individual is surrounded by persons who invariably define the legal codes as rules to be observed, while in others he is surrounded by persons whose definitions are favorable to the violation of the codes."[6] Access to both criminal and anti-criminal associations is differentially distributed, and the position of released offenders in the social structure may influence the type of associations which are available. HYPOTHESIS: *Parole success varies with the proportion of anti-criminal associations.*

---

[4] LAUNE, *The Application of Attitude Test in the Field of Parole Prediction*, 1 AMER. SOC. REV. 781–796 (1936).

[5] MERTON, SOCIAL THEORY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE 132ff (1957).

[6] SUTHERLAND & CRESSEY, PRINCIPLES OF CRIMINALITY 78 (1955).

(3) Cloward and Ohlin claim that, not only access to legitimate opportunities, but also, access to illegitimate opportunities for goal attainment is differentially distributed.[7] HYPOTHESIS: *Parole success varies inversely with access to illegitimate opportunities.*

(4) Merton's theory of anomie assumes homogeneous acceptance of culturally acclaimed success goals and differentially distributed access to the means of achieving these goals. However, it may be argued that aspiration for success goals is a variable as well as is access to the means of achieving these goals.[8] If this is the case, limited access to means of attaining goals is less likely to be perceived as problematic by those with low aspirations. HYPOTHESIS: *Parole success varies inversely with aspiration for culturally acclaimed success goals.*

(5) Clemmer has suggested that individuals who become well adapted to prison life may not adjust in the free community after release from incarceration.[9] HYPOTHESIS: *Parole success varies inversely with prisonization.*

(6) Reckless has suggested that a boy will not become delinquent if he thinks of himself as a good boy and if this self definition is supported by parents and teachers.[10] A parolee who thinks of himself as non-criminal is likely to be a better parole risk than one who thinks of himself as criminal. HYPOTHESIS: *Parole success varies inversely with criminality of self concept.*

(7) Glaser contends that a person will become criminal to the extent that he identifies with real or imagined persons from whose perspective his criminal behavior seems acceptable.[11] The person who identifies more with criminal than non-criminal people is less likely to be a good parole risk. HYPOTHESIS: *Parole success varies inversely with identification with criminal others.*

(8) Sutherland states that "The situation is important to criminality largely to the extent that it provides an opportunity for a criminal act.... Some persons define a situation in which a fruit stand owner is out of sight as a 'crime-commiting' situation while others do not so

---

[7] CLOWARD & OHLIN, DELINQUENCY AND OPPORTUNITY 150ff (1966).
[8] MERTON, *op. cit.*, pp. 132ff.
[9] CLEMMER, THE PRISON COMMUNITY 298ff (1958).
[10] Reckless, Dinitz & Murray, *Self Concept as an Insulator Against Delinquency*, 21 AMER. SOC. REV. 744–746 (1956).
[11] Glaser, Criminality Theories and Behavioral Images, 61 AMER. SOC. REV. 433–434 (1956).

define it.... The situation is defined by the person in terms of the inclinations and abilities which the person has acquired up-to-date."[12] When faced with problematic situations, parolees may or may not consider criminal behavior as a possible solution. Those who do so seem less likely to succeed on parole. HYPOTHESIS: *Parole success varies inversely with orientation to criminal means of problem solving.*

The above hypotheses are examples of theoretically based questions which might contribute to the effectiveness of future parole prediction research. To support the contention that criminological theory can contribute significantly to parole prediction research, data were collected to test the relationship between parole outcome and a measure of the parolees' identification with criminal others and a measure of orientation to criminal means of problem solving (Hypotheses 7 and 8).[13]

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

The data of this research were obtained from two contrasting groups of former inmates at a medium security state penal institution. The first group consists of recidivists who had been returned to prison for committing new crimes, after having been released on parole. These will

---

[12] Sutherland and Cressey, *op. cit.*, p. 77.
[13] Both of these measures were developed by John R. Stratton. See Stratton, *The Measurement of Inmate Change During Imprisonment*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, (1963). Identification with Criminal Others was measured by checking strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree on the following:
1. People who have been in trouble with the law have about the same sort of ideas about life that I do.
2. I don't have much in common with people who never break the law.
3. I think more like inmates than like people on the outside.
4. People who have been in trouble with the law are more like me than people who don't have trouble with the law.
5. I am more like the people who can make a living outside the law than I am like those who can break the law occasionally.

Orientation to Criminal Means was measured by the following items:
1. A person should obey only those laws that seem reasonable.
2. A man should obey the law no matter how much it interferes with his personal ambition.
3. It is alright for a man to break the law occasionally if he doesn't get caught.
4. A hungry man has the right to steal.
5. It is alright to evade the law if you don't actually break it.

be referred to as the "failure" group. The second consists of individuals who had been paroled, but who had not experienced any further legal difficulty for a specified period of time. These will be called the "success" group.

These groups are not representative of all individuals routinely released from the penitentiary on parole or otherwise. They have been selected as *criterion groups* for the purpose of a statistical analysis of the predictive ability of the variables which will be described more completely in a later section of this paper.[14] The criteria used to establish these groups deserve further comment. The failure group consists of individuals who had been paroled, but who had been returned to the reformatory to serve new sentences. These recidivists in crime are clear failures, and this category does not include individuals returned to the institution for minor or technical violations of the conditions of their paroles. The success group was comprised of individuals who had been on parole for a period of at least one year with no known legal or adjustment problems as indicated by their parole officers.

The failures were interviewed after their return to the prison and the successes were interviewed in the community between nine and twelve months after release. Each subject also completed a questionnaire. After the various criteria had been applied, a total of 97 men were included in the failure group and 56 were included in the success group. To ensure that these two groups did not differ on significant variables other than those which are used in the analysis, they were compared on race, educational attainment, marital status, occupational skills, income and regularity of employment. In terms of education, income and level of skill, the recidivists scored more favorably than the successes although there are no statistically significant differences on any of these variables.

From these groups data were collected on 83 variables which included many of the items commonly used in prediction research as well as some previously untested social-psychological measures. These variables were correlated with parole outcome by an appropriate statistical

technique.[15] Because no probability or randomization techniques entered into the selection of the subjects, statistical tests of significance could not appropriately be applied to test the generalizability of these findings to a larger population. However, tests of significance were used to determine that of the 83 variables, only 15 were strongly related to the parole outcome.[16]

DISCUSSION

The relationship between parole success and criminal identification is implicit in Glaser's statement that a person will pursue criminal behavior to the extent that he identifies with real or imagined persons from whose perspective his criminal behavior seems acceptable. The relationship between these variables was .53 which strongly supports this hypothesis.

The hypothesized relationship between parole success and orientation to criminal means of goal attainment was based on the assumption that individuals who are oriented to criminal means will be more likely to recidivate in crime when released on parole. The correlation between these variables was .51 which strongly supports this hypothesis also.

In addition to supporting these hypotheses, these data have other implications for parole prediction research.

First, it should be noted that when the fifteen significant variables were ranked in order of the strength of their correlation with parole success, identification with criminal others and orientation to criminal means of goal attainment ranked second and third. Only length of criminal record was more closely related to parole outcome. This

---

[14] The technique of using known groups whose behavioral and attitudinal characteristics are relatively homogeneous is used to advantage in the validation of psychometric scales. The present research follows a modification of this procedure. See Green, *Attitude Measurement*, in LINDSEY, HANDBOOK OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, 340 (1954).

[15] Parole outcome is usually considered to be a continuous variable. However, since only the extreme successes and failures have been selected for this study, it is more appropriate to use point biserial correlations. Phi-coefficients were used to ascertain the relationship between parole outcome and dichotomous variables.

[16] The fifteen significant variables and the strength of their correlation with parole success were: 1. Total number of felony convictions—.53; 2. Identification with Criminal Others—.52; 3. Orientation to Criminal Means—.51; 4. Age at Release—.43; 5. Age at First Arrest—.39; 6. Months Served at Release—.37; 7. Type of Crime: (1) Monetary, (2) Non-monetary—.33*; 8. Length of Sentence—.31; 9. Respondent's Perception of his Status in the Reformatory—.26; 10. Type of Crime (1) Violent, (2) Non-violent—.25*; 11. Percent of Time Employed During Parole Period—.23; 12. Respondent's Perception of his Chances for Upward Mobility—.23; 13. Length of Time Worked on First Release Job—.20; 14. Criminality in Family, (1) Yes, (2) No—.20*; 15. Proportion of People in Residential Situation Who Knew of Prison Record—.18.
  * (Phi coefficient)

suggests that such measures could contribute significantly to parole prediction efforts.

Second, the intercorrelations between each of these variables and the other predictor variables were quite low. Only the intercorrelation between orientation to criminal means and age at first arrest was as high as .30. This suggests that the part of reality which is represented by each of these measures is not only significant in terms of strength of relationship, but is independent of and unaccounted for by the usual parole prediction variables. Thus such measures seem worthy of considerably more research attention.

Third, the intercorrelation between orientation to criminal means and identification with criminal others was .47. This is low enough to suggest that these measures are somewhat independent of each other. These and possibly others, such as measures of prisonization and aspiration levels might increase significantly the ability to predict parole outcome.

The data of this research must be interpreted with some caution since they were collected from two groups, one in prison and the other on parole. No information is provided concerning whether the pronounced differences which were observed existed at the time of parole. However, some evidence for the stability of such responses is provided by John Stratton, who developed the measures of this research to study inmate change during incarceration. He reported that over time, youthful inmates did not vary in their responses to these measures of criminal identifications and orientation to criminal means of goal attainment.[17]

[17] For a report of this research see GLASER, THE

Before it can be determined whether these differences result from the positive release experiences of the successes or the negative experiences of the successes or the recidivists, it will be necessary to collect the same data on all parolees at release and again at violation or after completing a successful parole. While the above qualifications are necessary at this point, it is apparent that these variables are strongly related to parole outcome, they appear to be independent of each other and of other predictor variables, and they do not appear to vary over time in prison.

These findings strongly support the contention that such data could contribute significantly to parole prediction research. Also, they illustrate that theory and empirical research are not opposed but are inextricably intertwined. Without the ordering of principles, or in other words, theory, research can yield no predictions, and to the extent that prediction is limited, control and manipulation of the environment is limited.[18] These data further suggest that the limited effectiveness of parole prediction research is, in part, due to a lack of adherence to basic principles of scientific research. On one hand, this has resulted in the failure to account for highly relevant variables and on the other hand, this research has not contributed to the development of more adequate theories of criminality and recidivism.

EFFECTIVENESS OF A PRISON AND PAROLE SYSTEM 564 (1964).
[18] GOOD & HATT, METHODS IN SOCIAL RESEARCH 8 (1952).