ASSESSING PSYCHOLOGICAL MATURITY IN JUVENILE OFFENDERS

AUSTRALASIAN YOUTH JUSTICE CONFERENCE
CANBERRA
20-22 MAY 2013

Dr Sharon Casey & Dr Andrew Day
Clinical Forensic Research Group
Centre for Mental Health & Wellbeing
Background

- Two images of adolescent offenders
  - Wayward youths “gone wrong”; “lost their way”
    - Young person as victim: misguided, immature, but not inherently evil
  - Hostile predators
    - Product of environment & heredity; lacking in empathy or regard
- Dominant image one of young offender as criminal deserving of harsh punishment
- Has resulted in the “adultification” of young people
  - Ignores important developmental differences between adolescents and adults which are not being assessed
Background

- Separate justice systems for young people predicated on two fundamental assumptions:
  - They are less capable of mature judgment than adults and less culpable for any offenses they commit, and
  - They are more amenable to treatment than adults and thus more likely to benefit from rehabilitation efforts
Background

- As compared to adults, adolescents are:
  - More impulsive
  - Less risk averse
  - Have poorer problem solving skills
  - Engage in less consequential thinking
  - More easily influenced by peers

- Developmental trajectories:
  - Exhibit individual differences
  - Are continuous not staged
  - Can be subject to delays
Psychological Immaturity

- No legal or psychological of maturity
  - Legal assumptions based (generally) on cognitive capability (e.g., capacity for thinking, reasoning, understanding)
- Emphasis on cognitive capacity
- Utilizes informed consent model
  - Knowledge
  - Competence
- Narrowly focuses on capacities for
  - Thinking
  - Reasoning
  - Understanding
- Important non-cognitive, psychosocial variables also influence decision making process
Maturity of Judgment: A Working Definition (Steinberg & Cauffman, 1996)

Psychosocial factors in decision making

- Responsibility
  - Healthy autonomy, self-reliance, clarity of identity

- Temperance
  - Ability to limit impulsivity, avoid extremes in decision making, to thoroughly evaluate situations before acting, including seeking advice of others when appropriate

- Perspective
  - Being able to acknowledge the complexity of a situation and frame a specific decision within a larger context
Maturity of Judgment: A Working Definition (Steinberg & Cauffman, 1996)

- Demonstrations of responsibility, temperance, and perspective likely depend on:
  - Nature of situation and
  - Social context of decision

- Best conceived as dispositions to behave in a given way under particular conditions rather than fixed abilities or competencies that are displayed independently of context
Raised the boundary for capital punishment in the US from 16 to 18 years:

- Juveniles are more immature, less blameworthy and less responsible than adults; have greater difficulty controlling their impulses; are more likely to be influenced by external pressure including peer pressure; and are more vulnerable, which can be attributed in part to having less control over their environment than do adults. Also noted “… personality traits of the juvenile are more transitory, less fixed.”

- Note that while performance of adolescents and adults comparable on tests of cognitive ability (e.g., logical reasoning about moral, social, and interpersonal matters), are not equal in terms of their psychosocial capacities (i.e., impulse control, resistance to peer influence)
Adjudicative Competence

- Concerned with three primary elements
  - Basic comprehension of the purpose and nature of the trial process (i.e., understanding)
  - Capacity to provide relevant information to counsel and to process information (i.e., reasoning)
  - Ability to apply information to one’s own situation in a manner that is neither distorted nor irrational (i.e., appreciation)
Adjudicative Competence (Grisso, Steinberg, Woolard, Cauffman, Scott et al., 2003)

- MacArthur Competence Assessment Tool-Criminal Adjudication
  - Understanding
  - Reasoning
  - Appreciation

- Significant impairment in juveniles aged 15 and younger
  - Sufficient to compromise ability to serve as competent defendant

- Impairment in one third of 11-13 year-olds and one-fifth of 14-15-year olds comparable to seriously mentally ill adults
  - Based on established norms would be considered incompetent to stand trial

- Competence-relevant capacities of 16 and 17 year-olds not significantly different to young adults
While authors concluded few differences on M-CAT-CA subscales between 16–17yo direct files and 18–24yo juveniles …

**Understanding subscale**
- Sig diffs until scores reclassified (no/ mild/significant impairment) with direct file group slightly better than adult sample ($d = .38$)

**Reasoning subscale**
- Significantly smaller proportion of impaired in direct file group (2%) than in juvenile (8%) or adult groups (8%)
- “not impaired” greater for directly filed (90%) than juvenile (75%) or adult (74%) groups
Cognitive Capacity

- Executive function (digit span, verbal fluency, resistance to interference)
- Intellectual functioning
  - Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence (WASI)
- Develop index of general cognitive capacity (correlated with IQ: \( r = .46, p < .001 \)) to assess age-related differences
  - 10-11, 12–13, 14–15, 16–17, 18-21, 22-25, 26-30
MacArthur Juvenile Capacity Study
(Steinberg, Cauffman et al., 2009)

Significant differences noted only in first part of adolescence (i.e., no age differences after age 16)
MacArthur Juvenile Capacity Study
(Steinberg, Cauffman et al., 2009)

Assessment of psychosocial maturity

- Risk Perception
- Sensation Seeking
- Impulsivity
  - Motor Impulsivity, Inability to Delay Gratification, Lack of Perseverance
- Resistance to Peer Influence
- Future Orientation

Developed composite measure higher scores indicated greater maturity
No significant differences between first four age groups (10–11, 12–13, 14–15, and 16–17 years)

Significant differences between 16–17yo and 22 and older and between 18–21-26 and older
MacArthur Juvenile Capacity Study
(Steinberg, Cauffman et al., 2009)

Figure 3
Proportion of Individuals in Each Age Group Scoring at or Above the Mean for 26- to 30-Year-Olds on Indices of Cognitive Capacity and Psychosocial Maturity
Neurobiological Influences (Steinberg et al., 2009)

**Figure 1.** Age differences in self-reported impulsivity and sensation seeking. Impulsivity scores can range from 6 to 24. Sensation-seeking scores can range from 0 to 1. The linear trend for impulsivity is significant at $p < .001$; the linear and quadratic trends for sensation seeking are significant at $p < .001$ and $p < .005$, respectively. Error bars represent the standard errors.
Neurobiological Influences (Steinberg et al., 2009)

*Figure 3.* Age differences in time to first move (in seconds) on the Tower of London task as a function of problem difficulty. Means are adjusted for IQ and socioeconomic status. The Age × Problem Difficulty interaction is significant at $p < .001$. 
Neurobiological Influences (Steinberg et al., 2009)

Figure 4. Number of intersections with a safe stop in the Stoplight game as a function of age. A safe stop occurs when no attempt is made to drive through the yellow light, and the brakes are applied in sufficient time to avoid a crash. Means are adjusted for IQ and socioeconomic status. The main effect for age is significant at $p < .01$. Error bars represent the standard errors.
**MacArthur Juvenile Capacity Study**  
_(Steinberg, Cauffman et al, 2009)_

**Conclusions**

- Not useful to make sweeping statements about relative maturity of adolescents and adults
- Answer depends on aspects of maturity under consideration
- By 16 general cognitive abilities essentially indistinguishable from adults
- BUT psychosocial functioning, even at 18, is significantly less mature than individuals in mid-20s
Psychosocial Assessment Tools

- **Temperance:**
  - Impulse Control subscale (8 items): from Weinberg Adjustment Inventory (Weinberger & Schwartz, 1990)
  - Suppression of Aggression (7 items): from WAI

- **Perspective:**
  - Consideration of Others (7 items): from WAI
  - Future Orientation (8 items): from Future Outlook Inventory (Cauffman & Woolard, 1999)

- **Responsibility**
  - Personal Responsibility (30 items): from Psychosocial Maturity Inventory (Greenberger, Josselson, Knerr, & Knerr, 1974)
  - Resistance to Peer Influence (10 items): Steinberg & Monahan, 2007
References


