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Adult offenders' perceptions of their underlying problems: findings from the OASys self-assessment questionnaire

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The Offender Assessment System (OASys) is the national risk/needs assessment tool for adult offenders in England and Wales. It was developed through three pilot studies between 1999 and 2001 and has since been rolled out in electronic form (eOASys) across the prison and probation services. Of the five main components to OASys, the self-assessment questionnaire (SAQ) covers a range of social and individual problems and an offender's perceived likelihood of further offending. These findings summarise the responses of over 100,000 offenders, as recorded in the SAQ, between January 2003 and May 2006. They illustrate how perceptions vary between different offender groups and between offenders and practitioners.

Key points

- 101,240 SAQ assessments were fully completed by 42 probation areas and 126 prison establishments between January 2003 and May 2006. These assessments corresponded to 454,059 practitioner-completed OASys assessments, all of which had been approved for data quality and consistency. A SAQ was thus completed in 22 per cent of these cases.
- Seventeen per cent of offenders in the SAQ sample believed they had no social or individual problems, and 47 per cent thought they had no problems which were linked to offending. Comparing the SAQ and the practitioner-completed core assessment revealed that offenders were less likely to report problems than practitioners.
- Those offenders who claimed that they had many problems were more likely than those with no perceived problems to be female, younger and White, with a greater number of previous convictions and higher OASys likelihood of reconviction scores.
- While 97 per cent of those offenders with a low OASys likelihood of reconviction score thought that they would *definitely not* or were *unlikely* to offend again, 65 per cent of those offenders with a high likelihood of reconviction score also thought that they would *definitely not* or were *unlikely* to offend again. Many offenders, therefore, were more optimistic regarding their future desistance than indicated by their OASys scores, or at least were keen to portray themselves as optimistic.
- Comparing those offenders who thought that they would *definitely not* reoffend with those who responded *very likely*, the latter tended to be younger and White with a greater number of previous convictions and higher OASys scores. While females were more inclined to perceive themselves as having a large number of problems, particularly in relation to emotional well-being, they were less inclined to respond that they were *very likely* to reoffend.
- Of those offenders who thought they were *very likely* to offend again, over half (56%) said that they had a problem with drugs and approximately a quarter (27%) referred to drugs when explaining their likelihood of further offending.

OASys was developed through three pilot studies between 1999 and 2001 (Howard, Clark and Garnham, 2006). The importance of accurate risk/needs assessments of offenders has since been highlighted by both the Halliday report (Home Office, 2001) and the Carter report (Carter, 2003), and OASys is now viewed as an integral part of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS). Within the structure of OASys, the SAQ gives offenders an opportunity to record their views. It is completed on paper and then entered into the electronic system. A new SAQ has to be completed during each subsequent review.

The value of self-assessment

The OASys SAQ is by no means unique (see, for example, Haslewood-Pócsik, 2001; Motiuk, Motiuk and Bonta, 1992; Baker *et al.*, 2002; Loza *et al.*, 2004). Such self-assessment tools have a number of potential benefits:

- They can assist in engaging offenders in the assessment process by providing them with an opportunity to express their views and by identifying important areas for discussion (Merrington, 2004).
- They tend to be easy and quick to administer and practitioners do not require extensive training to interpret the results (Loza *et al.*, 2000).
- They can be used to highlight offenders' thought processes and identify further needs, assisting with the targeting of interventions.
- They can be used to measure change (due to the emphasis upon dynamic risk factors) and assist with predicting reconviction. While concerns are sometimes raised about the vulnerability of self-assessment forms to 'lying, manipulation, and self-

presentation biases', there is evidence to suggest that they can be 'accurate and valid' and 'equivalent to traditional methods' in predicting violent recidivism and general recidivism (Loza *et al.*, 2004:1174-5).

The sample

The sample consisted of 101,240 SAQ assessments from 42 probation areas and 126 prison establishments for the period January 2003 to May 2006. The average age of the offenders in the SAQ sample was 31 years; 88 per cent were male; and 88 per cent were White. Their average weighted OASys score, on a scale from 0 to 168, was 64, which is towards the mid-point of the medium likelihood of reconviction score band.

As the sample was restricted to those offenders with a completed SAQ form, the findings should not be read as representative of the entire offender population and care should be taken in generalising the results. Importantly, OASys is not completed with all offenders and there is no national standard relating to completion of the SAQ. As the SAQ is initially completed on paper, it is also likely that some of the results have not been transferred to the electronic system. Analysis revealed that the SAQ sample corresponded to 454,059 practitioner-completed OASys assessments, all of which had been approved for data quality and consistency – a SAQ had been fully completed in 22% of these cases. Comparing those offenders with a completed SAQ to those offenders with a core OASys assessment but no SAQ, the former group had higher likelihood of reconviction scores (average of 64 compared to 60), with further statistically significant differences in relation to age, ethnicity and the number of previous convictions.

Findings

Offenders' perceptions

Questions 1 to 27 of the SAQ cover a range of social and individual problems, encompassing accommodation, employment and finances, relationships and lifestyle, as well as values, perceptions, reasoning, beliefs, attitudes and goals. All 27 questions are prefixed by the phrase 'Are any of these a problem for you?', and in addition to the yes/no response, offenders are asked to consider a further tick box asking 'Is this problem linked to your offending?'

As shown by Table 1, the percentage of offenders recognising each of the problems ranged from three per cent to 41 per cent, while the percentage who believed that

the problem was linked to their offending ranged from just one per cent to 23 per cent. Put simply, offenders were more likely to acknowledge problems in certain areas of their lives than view these problems as linked to their offending. When adding together the responses, while 17 per cent of offenders responded that they had no problems at all, 47 per cent thought that they had no problems which were linked to offending.

Worrying about things (41%), *doing things on the spur of the moment* (40%) and *feeling stressed* (39%) were the problems most frequently reported, and *doing things on the spur of the moment* (23%) and *repeating mistakes* (20%) were the items most commonly perceived to be linked to offending, both of which correspond to questions in the thinking and behaviour section of the core OASys assessment.

Table 1: Responses to SAQ questions 1 to 27

SAQ question	Are any of these a problem for you? (% yes)	Is this problem linked to your offending? (% ticked)
1. Finding a good place to live	25%	9%
2. Understanding other people's feelings	13%	5%
3. Keeping to my plans	25%	8%
4. Dealing with people in authority	14%	5%
5. Gambling	3%	1%
6. Mixing with bad company	29%	18%
7. Being bored	36%	13%
8. Being lonely	21%	6%
9. Going to places which cause me trouble	22%	12%
10. Taking drugs	24%	16%
11. Drinking too much alcohol	25%	19%
12. Losing my temper	25%	13%
13. Doing things on the spur of the moment	40%	23%
14. Repeating the same mistakes	36%	20%
15. Getting violent when annoyed	18%	9%
16. Reading, writing, spelling and numbers	16%	2%
17. Getting qualifications	24%	3%
18. Getting a job	31%	8%
19. Keeping a job	23%	5%
20. Managing money, dealing with debts	29%	9%
21. Getting on with my husband/ wife/ partner	12%	5%
22. Looking after my children	6%	2%
23. Worrying about things	41%	10%
24. Making good decisions	28%	11%
25. Feeling depressed	35%	12%
26. Feeling stressed	39%	13%
27. Not having a partner	9%	2%
Mean percentage (Questions 1–27)	24%	10%

The SAQ also includes a final question (Q28) asking offenders whether they think that they are likely to offend in the future, with a four-scale response ranging from *definitely not* to *very likely*. Over two-fifths (43%) of the offenders responded that they were *definitely not* likely to offend again, 42 per cent felt that they were *unlikely* to offend again, 13 per cent felt that they were *quite likely* to offend again and only one per cent felt that they were *very likely* to reoffend. These responses were significantly associated with the responses to all previous 27 questions,

but the strongest associations were with *taking drugs* and *repeating the same mistakes*. As shown by Table 2, of those who thought they were *very likely* to offend again, 70 per cent also said that they had a problem with repeating mistakes and 56 per cent said that they had a problem with drugs. In contrast, of those who said they were *definitely not* likely to offend again, only 25 per cent thought that they had a problem with repeating mistakes and only 13 per cent with taking drugs.

Table 2: Perceived problems against perceived likelihood of further offending

Likely to offend again?	n	Are any of these a problem for you?	
		Taking drugs (% yes)	Repeating the same mistakes (% yes)
Definitely not	43,550	13%	25%
Unlikely	42,899	27%	39%
Quite likely	13,584	46%	58%
Very likely	1,207	56%	70%
Total sample	101,240	24%	36%

Question 28 also asks 'Why do you think this is?', enabling offenders to elaborate on their views regarding their likelihood of further offending. When analysing the links between the most frequently cited concepts and the scaled responses to question 28, the strongest association was between the concept of *drugs* and the view that further offending was *very likely* – the concept was mentioned in 27 per cent of those cases in which the offender responded *very likely*.

Variations between offenders

As shown by Table 3, those offenders who claimed that they had many problems were more likely than those offenders with no perceived problems to be female, younger and White, with a greater number of previous

convictions and higher OASys scores. Further analysis revealed that females were more likely than males to say they had problems with emotional well-being such as *feeling stressed, feeling depressed, worrying about things or being lonely*, although these remained problematic issues for many males. *Getting violent when annoyed, losing my temper and drinking too much alcohol* were more commonly identified as problematic by the male sample. Asian offenders tended to report a lower frequency of problems than all other ethnic groups across 25 of the 27 questions, while those offenders with a high OASys likelihood of reconviction score were more likely than the medium and low likelihood groups to identify all 27 items as problematic.

Table 3: Offender variations by number of perceived problems (questions 1 to 27)

	Number of perceived problems (questions 1 to 27)				
	0 (max n= 17,068)	1-5 (max n= 33,938)	6-10 (max n= 25,771)	11-15 (max n= 16,432)	16-27 (max n= 7,994)
Gender (% male)	91%	89%	87%	86%	85%
Mean age	33	32	31	30	29
Ethnicity (% White)	83%	85%	89%	91%	93%
Mean previous convictions	5	7	9	10	12
Mean OASys score	42	53	70	84	97

Table 4 profiles the offenders according to their perceived likelihood of further offending. Comparing those who responded *definitely not* with those who responded *very likely*, offenders in the latter group tended to be younger and White, with a greater number of previous convictions and a higher OASys likelihood of reconviction score. They

also tended to admit to a greater number of problems across questions 1 to 27 of the SAQ. But while females were more inclined to perceive themselves as having a large number of problems, particularly in relation to emotional well-being, they were less inclined to respond that they were *very likely* to reoffend.

Table 4: Offender variations by perceived likelihood of further offending

	Do you think you are likely to offend in the future?			
	Definitely not (max n= 43,532)	Unlikely (max n= 42,885)	Quite likely (max n= 13,583)	Very likely (max n= 1,207)
Gender (% male)	84%	91%	93%	87%
Mean age	32	31	29	30
Ethnicity (% White)	89%	86%	88%	94%
Mean previous convictions	5	9	14	14
Mean OASys score	49	70	93	98
Mean no. of recognised problems (questions 1–27)	5	7	9	12

Comparing offender and practitioner perceptions

While the SAQ is not structured in the same way as the core practitioner-completed OASys assessment and there has been no formal validation of correspondence, 26 of the first 27 questions in the SAQ have similar items within the core assessment, although there are differences in wording. In the OASys pilot study, 21 of these 26 questions within the core assessment were found to be associated with reconviction (Howard, Clark and Garnham, 2006).

For analytical purposes, responses to the core assessment items were collapsed, so that *no problem* was equivalent to a 'no' response in the SAQ and *some problems* and *significant problems* were equivalent to a 'yes' response. When comparing these responses, it was found that there were no SAQ questions for which offenders reported more problems than the practitioners.

Looking at the proportion of practitioners who reported problems when the offenders had done so, the level of agreement ranged from 35 per cent for *dealing with people in authority* to 89 per cent for *keeping a job*, with an average agreement rate across the 26 comparable questions of 70 per cent. The proportion of offenders who had reported problems when the practitioners also

indicated a problem was lower across 25 of the questions. This agreement rate ranged from just six per cent for *gambling* to 66 per cent for *feeling depressed*, with an average agreement rate of 39 per cent. In other words, offenders were generally less likely to recognise a problem when the practitioners had done so than vice-versa. In 66 per cent of cases, the practitioner had indicated within the core assessment that the offender had *some problems* or *significant problems* in identifying areas of their life which were problematic (Q11.5).

With regard to question 28 of the SAQ, it was indicated in Table 4 that there was an association between the offenders' perceived likelihood of further offending and the OASys likelihood of reconviction score. However, Table 5 shows that while 97 per cent of those offenders with a low likelihood of reconviction score thought that they would *definitely not* or were *unlikely* to offend again, 65 per cent of those offenders with a high likelihood of reconviction score also thought that they would *definitely not* or were *unlikely* to offend again. The OASys pilot study found that 87 per cent of those offenders with a high likelihood of reconviction were in fact reconvicted. Many offenders, therefore, were more optimistic regarding their future desistance than indicated by their OASys scores, or at least were keen to portray themselves as optimistic.

Table 5: Perceived likelihood of further offending against OASys likelihood of reconviction score

Likely to offend again?	OASys likelihood of reconviction score			Total sample (n=101,203)
	Low (n=31,593)	Medium (n=49,654)	High (n=19,956)	
Definitely not	66%	39%	18%	43%
Unlikely	32%	47%	47%	42%
Quite likely	3%	13%	31%	13%
Very likely	0.3%	1%	3%	1%

Discussion

Recommendations

Based on the comparison of offender and practitioner perceptions, it would appear that attention should be paid to whether offenders have realistic perceptions of their own likelihood of reoffending and the link between particular criminogenic problems and offending. Revising the wording of the SAQ questions and the available responses to encourage greater disclosure of problems could be considered. Further consideration could be given to the merits of introducing a greater correspondence between the structure of the SAQ and the core OASys assessment to assist practitioners in comparing views, as well as implementing an SAQ scoring system (Merrington, 2004).

Further research

The ability of the core OASys assessment to predict proven reoffending is being further examined, and attention will be paid to the comparative predictive validity of the SAQ. With regard to construct validity, research will be conducted to examine whether offender and practitioner perceptions converge during the course of the offenders' sentences (Latendresse and Cortoni, 2005).

Methodological note

Data from the O-DEAT (OASys Data, Evaluation and Analysis Team) database were used to analyse completed SAQs, and to compare the SAQ sample to a wider OASys sample. When analysing the data, ordinal regression was used to account for relationships between independent variables, and these variables were combined through classification and regression trees. Linguistic-based text mining was used to analyse the qualitative data and to extract concepts.

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