Research Assessment 11

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Analysis:

When researching, a researcher often comes upon words and phrases they do not know the definition of. With an entire new subject, it is sometimes hard to learn everything there is to learn. However, individuals like me can only learn step by step by looking into topics they do not fully comprehend. One topic that has constantly appeared throughout my time in ISM that I don't have much knowledge about are risk assessments. Knowing about what these are would undoubtedly help me understand things better when it pops up again in the future.

To lay a solid foundation, it is important to first define what risk assessments refer to. According to *'Forensic Risk Assessment: A Beginner's Guide* ', forensic risk assessment refers to the attempt to predict the likelihood of future offending in order to identify individuals in need of intervention. In other words, it is tasked with determining how likely antisocial or criminal behavior will occur. At first glance, risk assessments may not seem very significant or popular, but upon further inspection, it becomes clear that they are implemented in mental health and criminal justice settings around the world. To add to their significance, risk assessments prioritize risk reduction strategies for those who need help the most. Their purpose is to help legal and psychological professionals make decisions regarding what type of prison is appropriate for an offender , whether to release an offender, and/or what factors need to be targeted by interventions.

The history behind forensic risk assessments is fascinating and dates back to the 1970s. It starts when Alberta Lessard, a mentally ill woman who had been involuntarily committed to a psychiatric hospital, filed a class action suit on behalf of all individuals aged 18 and older who had been committed under the Wisconsin State Mental Health Act in 1972. Under this act, those with mental illnesses who were considered "gravely

disabled" were allowed to be forcefully hospitalized. This class action suit made it all the way up to the Federal Appeals Court, where the Court decided to overrule the law. They affirmed in Lessard vs. Schmidt, "that in order to be involuntarily hospitalized: "The risk of violence to self or others must be established, with such dangerousness being demonstrated by a recent overt act plus the substantial probability of recurrence." As a result, there was a need "to accurately establish the risk of future offending that gave birth to one of the largest fields in forensic mental health: forensic risk assessment."

Now on to how professionals conduct risk assessments. There are three types of risk assessments which are the following: actuarial, structured clinical judgement and unstructured clinical judgement. For each type of assessment, there are specific tools of research a professional will use. The following excerpt accurately describes the three types of tools:

e lists of factors that have been statistically
For example, because offenders who are
is often considered a statistically based risk
be administered by individuals with only
do. Unstructured clinical judgment, on the
etermine the risk of an individual based on
, structured clinical judgment is a
of empirically based items that are
epth. According to large literature
clinical judgment, which in turn
Unstructured clinical judgment (based
quated and potentially misleading
ended against. (EAPL)

The Violent Risk Appraisal Guide otherwise known as the VRAG and Sex Offender Risk Appraisal Guide also called the SORAG are two examples of commonly used actuarial tools. The Psychopathy Checklist – Revised (PCL-R), and the HCR-20 (Historical, Clinical, Risk-20) are both examples of popular structured clinical tools. Unstructured clinical assessments are usually unreliable when compared to the other two types. As a result, unstructured clinical judgement is not used often and is unrecommended.

Since 1972, much research has been devoted to the subject of forensic risk assessments and as a result, much information has been gleaned. Research has

discovered several universal risk factors some of which are crime specific. These are important because the more risk factors that are applicable to an individual the more likely they are to commit an offense. Here is a table to help illustrate the three different types of risk factors.

Type of Risk Factor	Explanation
Static Factors	Offender characteristics that are predictive of reoffending but cannot be changed are considered static Examples: Psychopathy, family criminality, adult criminal history
Dynamic Factors	Characteristics of an offender that can be changed are considered dynamic. These are factors that should be primarily addressed by interventions. Examples: Deviant Companions, criminogenic needs, low social achievements
Crime Specific Factors	In addition to their scores on risk assessment scales, adult, juvenile, sexual and mentally disordered offenders have uniquely important risk factors. The primary risk factors most highly correlated with re-offenders. Examples: Adult and young offenders, mentally disordered offenders, sexual offenders

As can be seen, forensic risk assessments are very beneficial to those with and without mental illnesses. Additionally, risk assessment will always be a predictive judgment with errors that will significantly aid in the rehabilitation of criminal offenders. I found this research helpful because forensic risk assessments are part of the duties a Forensic Psychiatrist usually performs. Knowing about it will hep me when I am reading other Forensic Psychology articles and/or when I speak with my mentor. Next time the phrase 'risk assessment' turns up, I will have a full understanding of it which will help me understand the rest of the discussion or writing.