

INTRODUCTION

The thematic issue of *Psychologica Belgica on Current Issues in Forensic Assessment* can be seen, somewhat cynically, as one of many practical consequences of two notorious pedophile murder cases coming to light in the second half of 1996.

The first case is a hallucinating sequence of police and judicial errors, which allowed Dutroux, an alleged pedophilic psychopath, to abduct at least six girls, only two of which were found back alive. Dutroux had already been convicted for sexual abuse, and been given conditional release. Public outrage following the arrest of Dutroux, and the suggestion that the abductions were part of an international pedophile ring, lead to an elaborate commission hearing, resulting in the disclosure of many investigation and judgment errors.

The other case concerned a mentally disturbed pedophile who was released into the community, and shortly afterwards abducted, abused and murdered a young girl. Although he lived close to the victim, he was never seriously questioned by the police, until as a consequence of the public outrage following the Dutroux murder case, investigation was reopened, and the body was found.

Both cases put the problem of dealing with sex offenders in the center of attention, and a number of laws and decrees that had already been voted, gained a second life. A number of prisons were labeled 'pilot projects for sex offenders', new staff was recruited and trained. Moreover, centers for specialized community treatment of sex offenders were funded.

As a result, a great need for knowledge was generated within the community of psychologists and social case workers working with both sexual and non-sexual offenders. This thematic issue is but one way of communicating existing forensic psychological research that can be used clinically. From the start, the goal of the thematic issue was not to restrict the contributions to purely theoretical issues, but to commission articles that link theory and clinical practice, especially with respect to forensic assessment.

When preparing the thematic issue, two guidelines were applied in the selection of topics. First of all, the topics included should address important assessment problems around which current forensic psychological research is crystallized. Second, as much as possible, contributions should present cutting-edge research with clear clinical implications.

The first guideline fairly quickly resulted in the following themes: Forensic use of the MMPI-2, assessment of psychopathy, predicting dangerousness, classifying and assessing sex offenders, and the assessment of offense-related attitudes. As detailed in the respective contributions, these topics are crucial research issues, both theoretically and clinically. For all six

topics, potential contributors were contacted who were immediately interested in communicating their research findings. In the end, only the contribution on forensic assessment with the MMPI-2 (and MCMI-3) failed to materialize.

Ronald Blackburn, one of a small number of internationally recognized authorities studying psychopathy, describes his recently constructed *Personal Reactions Questionnaire*, used to assess important personality variables of offenders, and resulting in a fourfold offender classification: primary and secondary psychopathy, controlled and inhibited offenders. The PRQ is one of the few general personality questionnaires explicitly constructed for use with offenders, and developed after extensive research. In specific, his contribution re-asserts the value of self-report measures of psychopathy. An experimental Dutch translation exists, and shows promise in screening important personality variables in offenders.

Anne Doucette-Gates, Robert Firestone, & Lisa Firestone describe a new self-report measure (the Firestone Assessment of Violent Thoughts) for assessing dangerousness. While still in its early stages of development, the measure merits attention in that it offers one aspect of the dynamic assessment of dangerousness, focussing on intrapsychic processes. It assesses internal negative thoughts (*the voice*) accompanied by angry affect, which are assumed to sustain an internal dynamics predisposing towards violence. The results presented in their article show the FAVT to have good psychometric properties including postdictive validity.

Raymond Knight, the leading researcher on sex offender classification presents with *David Cerce* an up-to-date review of the sex offender assessment procedure he developed in collaboration with Prentky. The *Multidimensional Assessment of Sex and Aggression* (MASA) has been recognized as the most comprehensive assessment procedure available, and was recently included in a research project funded by the Belgian Department of Penitentiary Institutions. Knight describes both the development of the taxonomy and current applications of the MASA, demonstrating its value with rapists, juvenile sex offenders, and (most recently with MASA:Version 5) extrafamilial sex offenders.

Vanhouche & Vertommen offer a review of the concept of cognitive distortions of sex offenders, and focus on eight measures assessing them. Their review highlights the psychometric properties (and weaknesses) of such measures including sensitivity to response bias, but also identifies focal points for further research. Especially, questions concerning discriminative validity, unclear internal structure, and susceptibility to social desirability bias are described as weaknesses of most available measures.

Finally, *Decoene* addresses the responsibility attribution process of offenders as an important assessment question given the current attention to res-

torative justice within the justice system. He reviews available empirical evidence concerning how offenders think and feel about their offense(s) and victim(s), and discusses available assessment procedures, pointing at both self-report and interview techniques.

The second guideline proved somewhat more difficult to realize within a fair balance of national and international researchers. When reading through the thematic issue, it will not escape notice that the three international contributors present results of active research lines, while the two national contributors review current research. This is no coincidence. Internationally, forensic psychology is an important research domain, both scientifically and clinically. In Belgium, however, this is not the case. Internationally recognized Belgian research in forensic psychology is scarce or non-existing, as are postgraduate courses preparing for working with offenders. However, publication of this thematic issue coincides with a growing interest in forensic psychology. Some universities are trying to start research in this domain, and within the penitentiary institutions psychologists are beginning to set up empirical research that can benefit and improve offender classification, treatment and prognosis. It can only be hoped that the thematic issue you are holding now will contribute to stimulating interest for forensic psychological research within the Belgian psychological community.

The thematic issue would not have been possible without the help of many people. Dr. M. Vandenbroucke, L. Kumps, K. Godefroid, G. Verschuere, and I. Storme, with the authorization of G. Van Belle, director-general of the department of penitentiary institutions, cleared some space for scientific research within the administrative structure of the Psychosocial Services of the Flemish Prisons, and supported finding solutions for practical problems of introducing scientific ideas in a sometimes unaccustomed environment. Josiane Baele and Johnny Fontaine kindly reviewed manuscripts. André Vandierendonck, editor of *Psychologica Belgica*, understood the value of a thematic issue linking theory and practice, and actively supported its realization. Finally, Betty Vanden Bavière offered continuously supporting editorial advice from start to finish. I thank them all.

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