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A Diagnostic Study of the Criminal Alias

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ABSTRACT: The author found that 64 (30.9%) of 207 incarcerated male offenders had been officially recognized as having changed their names at some time. The most common ways in which their names were modified included changing the middle name or initial, changing the spelling of one name, or completely changing all three names. These alias users were older property offenders who had more prior arrests, less education, more tattoos, more prior psychiatric contact, and were more often alcoholics than alias nonusers. While these findings are consistent with intentional deception, they also suggest that criminal alias users may have a pathological self concept.

KEYWORDS: psychiatry, criminal aliases, surveys

Aliases seem to be commonly associated with criminality. This alteration in identity may signify a conscious attempt at deception, but on another level may also reflect an unstable acceptance of the self.

Despite these implications, those who use criminal aliases have been infrequently studied. Glueck and Glueck [1] followed over 10 years 454 men released from Massachusetts prisons. They found that 39.9% of those about whom the information could be obtained had used an alias. They also studied the subjects' "mental abnormalities" such as "psychosis, psychopathy, alcoholism, sex perversion, drug addiction, great emotional instability, and the like." While 23.8% of their normal subjects used aliases, 41.9% of the mentally abnormal used aliases. Unfortunately, the Gluecks did not discriminate among different diagnoses and did not explore psychiatric or family histories of these men.

Sutherland and Van Vechten [2] reviewed the institutional records of 507 adult male offenders in Illinois for consistency in the recording of information regarding the subjects' names, among several variables. They found that 17% of their study subjects had "at some time or other used fictitious names evidently for the purpose of deception." They also found that 39.3% of their subjects' names had at least some recorded inconsistency, including variations in spelling. It is unclear if these name inconsistencies could also have been used for other purposes.

Hartman [3] compared 100 alias users with 100 alias nonusers received at the diagnostic center of a single penitentiary in Illinois. All his subjects were white men. He found that a greater proportion of the nonusers were serving sentences for sex offenses than were the alias users. He also found that the alias group contained more members with "psychopathic personalities," and the alias group had a "slightly higher median IQ than the nonalias group."

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He speculated that the use of a criminal alias implied conflict between the desire for anonymity and the need to retain personal identity, sometimes by rejecting parental figures. Unfortunately, Hartman did not test his hypothesis nor did he give quantitative data on the distribution of his diagnostic groups.

Finally, Boshier [4] reviewed the institutional records of 262 male prisoners serving sentences of at least 3 months duration in one Australian prison. He found that 120 (45.8%) of his subjects had an alias noted in their file. He found by stepwise discriminant function analysis that increasing age, less education, more prior offenses, and a shorter current sentence successfully classified 63.36% of the inmates into the "alias" group. Unfortunately, he did not report diagnoses, nor did he investigate aspects of family pathology.

While all these studies alluded to the psychological significance of using a criminal alias, none compared specific psychiatric diagnoses, or aspects of psychiatric or family histories, of alias users with those of alias nonusers. The present investigation is an attempt to begin looking at individual and family pathology of criminal alias users by examining several traditional criminological variables and certain factors of more direct psychiatric relevance. It is hoped this paper will add to our psychiatric understanding of those criminals who use different names.

Methods

The author evaluated 207 men consecutively referred for psychiatric evaluations by the State Board of Probation and Parole. He first extensively reviewed their respective institutional files and then conducted individual semistructured interviews of the inmates. The author is the only psychiatrist who conducts such evaluations for the Board.

The variables studied included age at commitment, race, marital status, educational level, and employment status. Each offender's history of juvenile and adult arrests, and the plea they entered at trial, were examined. The types of present offense(s), the use of weapons in the present offense(s), and sentence length were also noted.

Other factors studied included histories of abuse/neglect, or loss of any parent by abandonment, death, separation, or divorce. Also, any history of criminality or psychiatric disorder among any first-degree relatives was noted. Each offender's number of prior psychiatric contacts was noted. Diagnoses were made according to *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders* (DSM) III criteria, and multiple diagnoses were permitted. The author also noted the numbers of tattoos and body scars on each offender.

After the foregoing data were collected, the author searched the institution's comprehensive records to determine whether each offender was officially documented to have ever used some variation in his name. The author then recorded how each offender's changed name was different from that offender's true name. This method identified a group of alias users that was statistically compared to the group of alias nonusers. All tests were two-tailed, and a value of $p < 0.05$ was used for significance.

Results

Of the 207 inmates referred for evaluation, 64 (30.9%) had used a criminal alias. Table 1 shows the ways in which names were recorded as changed. Most alias users commonly had several changes in their name, and several offenders used at least two completely different names.

The mean age of those who used an alias was 27.7 years (S.D. = 78.99), while the mean age of alias nonusers was 25.7 years (S.D. = 53.65). This was a significant difference ($t = 2.596$, d.f. = 205, $p < 0.02$). The mean educational level of alias users was 9.35 years (S.D. = 5.99), while the mean education of nonusers was 9.99 years (S.D. = 4.49), also a significant difference ($t = -2.926$, d.f. = 200, $p < 0.005$). There were no significant differences in the racial or marital compositions, or employment statuses, of the two groups.

TABLE 1—*Frequencies of ways 64 alias users changed their names.*

Type of Name Change	Number
Changing middle name or middle initial	26
Different spelling of same name	21
First, middle, and last names completely changed	19
First name completely changed	13
Adding or deleting "Jr." from name	8
Any two of their first, middle, or last names completely changed	3
Transposition of name order	3

Although there was no significant difference in the presence of a juvenile record between the alias users and nonusers, the alias users had a history of a significantly greater mean number of prior arrests (users: 6.77 arrests, S.D. = 36.54; nonusers: 4.83 arrests, S.D. = 23.98; $t = 3.79$; d.f. = 205; $p < 0.001$).

There were no significant differences in whether alias users or nonusers used weapons in their present offenses. Likewise, there were no significant differences in their pleas at trial. However, the alias users had a greater proportion of property-related offenses for which they were serving their sentences (users: 47.9%; nonusers: 36.8%; $\chi^2 = 4.53$; d.f. = 1; $p < 0.05$), while the alias nonusers had a greater proportion of sex crimes for which they were serving their sentences (users: 9.2%; nonusers: 22.2%; $\chi^2 = 12.00$; d.f. = 1; $p < 0.001$). Table 2 shows all charges for which these men were serving sentences.

Alias users had a mean number of body scars the same as those on nonusers (users: 1.4, S.D. = 1.70; nonusers: 1.42, S.D. = 1.69; $t = -0.0156$; d.f. = 205; $p > 0.05$). However, those who used a criminal alias had a significantly greater mean number of tattoos (users: 1.37, S.D. = 4.67; nonusers: 0.79, S.D. = 2.47; $t = 3.34$; d.f. = 205, $p < 0.001$).

There were no significant differences in the family histories of criminality or psychiatric disorder among first-degree relatives of those who did or did not use a criminal alias. Likewise, the family histories of parental absence or loss, or of the offender being subject to abuse or neglect, were not significantly different between alias users and nonusers.

TABLE 2—*Number (and percentage) of all present charges of alias users and nonusers.*

Charges	Alias Users (N = 64)	Alias Nonusers (N = 143)
TOTAL CHARGES	142	302
Violent crimes (homicide, assault, child abuse)	25 (17.6)	53 (17.3)
Potentially violent crimes (robbery, weapons, arson, kidnapping)	34 (23.9)	57 (18.9)
Sex crimes (rape, sodomy, other) ^a	13 (9.2)	67 (22.2)
Drug/alcohol crimes	1 (0.7)	5 (1.7)
Property-related crimes (burglary, larceny, fraud, bad checks, other) ^b	68 (47.9)	111 (36.8)
Other crimes	1 (0.7)	9 (3.0)

^a $\chi^2 = 12.00$, d.f. = 1, $p < 0.001$.^b $\chi^2 = 4.53$, d.f. = 1, $p < 0.05$.

Those who used a criminal alias had a greater mean number of prior psychiatric contacts (users: 3.44, S.D. = 25.45; nonusers: 1.73, S.D. = 3.99; $t = 5.35$; d.f. = 205; $p < 0.001$). While those who used an alias were more often alcoholics (users: 75%; nonusers: 60%; $\chi^2 = 4.51$, d.f. = 1, $p < 0.05$), alias nonusers had a greater proportion of psychosexual disorders among all of their diagnoses (users: 2.9%; nonusers: 6.7%; $\chi^2 = 4.12$, d.f. = 1, $p < 0.05$). Tables 3 and 4 show the diagnostic distributions of all subjects and diagnoses, respectively.

Discussion

This study has found that approximately 31% of a select group of incarcerated male offenders have changed their name at some time during their respective criminal careers. This is within the range of 17 [2] to 45.8% [4] previously reported in the literature. Many of the name changes were found to be relatively minor. While these may reflect "administrative

TABLE 3—Number (and percentages) of subjects with DSM III diagnoses in certain categories.

Disorders	Alias Users (N = 64)	Alias Nonusers (N = 143)
Alcohol use ^a	48 (75)	86 (60.1)
Drug use	30 (46.9)	71 (49.7)
Personality	36 (56.3)	83 (58.0)
Psychotic	22 (34.4)	43 (30.1)
Affective	8 (12.5)	17 (9.8)
Anxiety	1 (1.6)	3 (2.1)
Psychosexual	5 (7.8)	21 (14.7)
Intellectual	7 (10.9)	8 (5.6)
Organic mental	5 (7.8)	8 (5.6)
Impulse control	4 (4.9)	6 (4.2)
Other disorders	5 (7.8)	3 (2.1)
No mental disorder	1 (1.6)	4 (2.8)

^a $\chi^2 = 4.51$, d.f. = 1, $p < 0.05$.

TABLE 4—Number (and percentage) of all DSM III diagnoses in certain categories.

Disorders	Alias Users (N = 64)	Alias Nonusers (N = 143)
All diagnoses	173	356
Alcohol use	48 (27.7)	86 (24.2)
Substance use	30 (17.3)	71 (19.9)
Personality	38 (21.9)	86 (24.2)
Psychotic	22 (12.7)	43 (12.1)
Affective	8 (4.6)	17 (4.8)
Anxiety	1 (0.6)	3 (0.8)
Psychosexual ^a	5 (2.9)	24 (6.7)
Intellectual impairment	7 (4.0)	8 (2.2)
Organic mental	5 (2.9)	9 (2.5)
Impulse control	4 (2.3)	6 (1.7)
Other disorders	5 (2.9)	3 (0.8)
No mental disorder	1 (0.6)	4 (1.1)

^a $\chi^2 = 4.12$, d.f. = 1, $p < 0.05$.

errors," they may also represent comparatively unimaginative attempts by certain offenders to change their identities in some, albeit minor, way. Unfortunately, this study did not permit an analysis of the circumstances or reasons under which these men changed their names.

The present study has also found that alias users tend to be older, have less formal education, and more prior arrests than nonusers. The offenses for which the alias users were serving their present sentences were more often property-related crimes, while the nonusers were serving their present sentences for a greater proportion of sex crimes. These findings are generally in agreement with those from earlier studies.

Unlike previous investigations, this one examined certain variables relevant to the psychiatric statuses of these men. There were no significant differences between the family histories of criminality, mental disorder, abuse or neglect, or parental loss among alias users and nonusers. However, alias users had a history of more prior psychiatric contacts. This suggests that these alias users were possibly identified as being more mentally disturbed before their index commitments.

Alias nonusers had a greater proportion of psychosexual disorders among all their diagnoses, perhaps reflecting their respectively greater proportion of sex offense charges. A greater proportion of alias users were alcoholics. Denial is a common defense mechanism of alcoholics that may be determined by cultural, social, and intrapsychic forces [5]. The author speculates that similar factors may lead to the use of a criminal alias.

One study of petitioners for legal name changes suggested that self-perceived cultural assimilation, role, social rank, interpersonal relations, and disassociation from prior family units were important factors in the decision to alter one's name [6]. Those authors suggested that the prospective name changer attempted to strike a balance between conscious self-definition and group identification. While the present study does not conclusively address the above or Hartman's [3] hypotheses, certain findings suggestive of family pathology were not significantly different among the families of alias users and nonusers.

Additionally, alias users had significantly more tattoos but the same number of scars as alias nonusers. Tattoos are almost always intentionally applied, while body scars are only sometimes so applied. Perhaps criminal alias use represents another aspect of the alterations of self concept reflected by tattoo application. Grumet [7] reviewed some of the psychological motives behind tattooing. He noted that tattoos are an artificial modification of the body boundary and may be "a prosthetic attempt to strengthen one's sense of ego definition." Tattoos may be a visual representation of the person's search for self-identification and may reflect a sense of belonging, antisociality, protection from danger, ambivalence, sexuality, and exhibitionism. Mosher et al [8] used the Holtzman Inkblot Test to investigate aspects of body image among tattooed and nontattooed federal prisoners. They concluded that those having tattoos felt more positively about their bodies than those not having tattoos. Some of these observations may also apply to the criminal alias users in the present study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, alias use is apparently common among incarcerated male offenders. Although it can be explained partly by efforts at conscious deception, it is also associated with indicia of increasing and particular psychopathology, especially that reflecting variations in self-concept or identity. It may be less indicative of select family pathology. Future research is needed to further define the relationship between alias use and such phenomena as personality and body image. This will hopefully give greater insight into the way in which some criminals see themselves in relation to the rest of the world.

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