

Bruce Harry,¹ M.D.

Self- and Official Report of Name Variation Among Male Offenders

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ABSTRACT: The author studied one hundred incarcerated adult male felons referred consecutively for psychiatric evaluation, asking each if he had ever changed his name. He then compared each offender's self-report with official institutional records for the presence of recorded name variations. Fifteen men admitted to having changed their names, while twenty three had officially recorded name variations. These groups appeared to overlap to some extent and had no statistically significant differences among a range of descriptive variables. However, they had what seemed to have been a different pattern of changing their names. The author concludes that these different methods for identifying name changes among criminals may look at alias use from different perspectives and should be used to complement one another.

KEYWORDS: psychiatry, jurisprudence, criminal aliases, prisons

The rates with which criminals have been shown to use aliases vary widely, there being an almost threefold difference in their reported values. To illustrate, Sutherland and Van Vechten [1] found that 17% of their 507 study subjects had "at some time or other used fictitious names evidently for the purpose of deception." They also noted that 39.3% of their subjects had at least some recorded inconsistency in their respective names. Harry [2] reported that almost 31% of a sample of 207 men referred for psychiatric evaluation by a state parole board had been recognized officially as having used a criminal alias. Hartman [3] found frequencies of recorded aliases from 13 to 33% among 4 samples of prison records involving an unspecified number of inmates. The Gluecks [4] earlier observed that almost 40% of 454 men released from Massachusetts prisons had used an alias. Finally, Boshier [5] found that 45.8% of his 262 subjects had an alias noted in their respective files.

Several of the above studies have also attempted to understand why criminals use aliases at all. Most have found a positive association between the use of aliases and the number of prior arrests. Several investigators [1,3,5] have also attributed the occurrence of criminal aliases in part to various factors, including administrative errors and criminal opportunism. While these features suggest that alias use may be part of criminal acculturation, other qualities such as psychopathology seem to also be associated with alias use. For example, Hartman [3] found "more psychopathic personalities and relatively fewer classified as without gross personality defect" among 100 alias users when compared with 100 nonusers. The Gluecks [4] found an increased incidence of general psychopathology among their alias using subjects. Finally, Harry [2] reported a greater occurrence of alcoholism and tattoos

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¹Assistant professor, Department of Psychiatry, University of Missouri-Columbia, Columbia, MO.

among criminal alias users, further suggesting that changing one's name may be a form of denial or an analogue of greater plasticity in the body image or both.

Although these investigations into the rates of and reasons for alias use have been useful, it is unfortunate that all of them examined only official institutional or criminal justice records. Although several of the authors speculated on conscious or unconscious reasons or both for changing names, only Hartman [3] actually asked offenders whether they had ever used another name and if so, why. Unfortunately, he only reported anecdotal data and did not note the frequencies with which various reasons given for changing names occurred. This would be an important dimension in the study of alias users because it might reflect the degree to which an offender would acknowledge an aspect of his deviance; and would also begin to shed light on cognitive aspects of name changing among criminals. In addition, it would permit a comparison between "official" and subjective alias use, hopefully allowing us to arrive at perhaps a more realistic quantitative understanding of this aspect of some criminals' behavior. Thus, the author decided to question a sample of inmates directly about their alias use, ascertain whether or not each member had an officially recorded name variation, and attempt to determine if there were any differences associated with self-reported versus officially reported name changes.

Methods

The author interviewed 100 incarcerated men referred consecutively by the state parole board for a psychiatric evaluation. He is the only psychiatrist in the state who conducts such assessments. Each inmate was given a semistructured clinical interview after which Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, III (DSM III) diagnoses were made. Such evaluations have been described in detail previously [2].

At the end of each interview, the author asked each man if he had ever used a different or false name or had ever changed his name for any reason. Affirmative responses were followed by probing questions to determine the nature of and reasons for the acknowledged name change or changes. The different names were also recorded when revealed so that they might be compared with the respective inmate's present name. Following the entire series of interviews, the author then systematically searched the official Department of Corrections files for any recorded difference in each inmate's name. Similar to a previous investigation [2], any name differences were noted and recorded. Multiple changes and reasons were permitted in an effort to gain a greater understanding of this phenomenon.

The author then divided the population into four groups. Group 1 comprised those who denied using an alias and had no official record of using one ("deniers"/"nonusers"). Group 2 comprised those who admitted using an alias, but whose official record was negative for alias use ("admitters"/"nonusers"). Group 3 consisted of those who denied having used an alias, but whose official record showed they had used at least one ("deniers"/"users"). And, Group 4 consisted of those who admitted using an alias and who also had been recognized officially as having done so ("admitters"/"users"). Sociodemographic, criminological, and diagnostic variables for the four groups were then compared using the chi-square test for categorical variables and the mean's test for interval data. All tests were two-tailed, and a value of $p < 0.05$ was used for significance.

Results

Fifteen subjects reported having used a criminal alias; twenty three had been officially recorded as having some name variation. However, those who admitted using a criminal alias were not a subset of those who were officially recognized as having used a different name, nor were these groups mutually exclusive. Rather, they overlapped somewhat: Group 1 ("deniers"/"nonusers") had sixty-seven members; Group 2 ("admitters"/"nonusers") ten

members; Group 3 ("deniers"/"users") eighteen members; and Group 4 ("admitters"/"users") five members. Thus, one third of the subjects used an alias when the definition was broadened to include self-report.

Upon statistical comparison, there were no significant differences in any variables among the four groups. However, it appeared that the patterns of self- versus official description of the name changes *per se* may be different. Table 1 shows the ways in which self-reported versus officially reported name changes were made in Groups 2 through 4. While the sample sizes and distributions precluded statistical comparison, it seems that those who only admitted to alias use (Group 2) appeared to have had a tendency to change their surname or the spelling of one name, while those who only were officially noted to have used an alias (Group 3) seemed to have had some difference in middle name such as addition, deletion, middle name collapsed to a single initial, or middle initial expanded to a full middle name. Those who both admitted and were shown to have officially used an alias (Group 4) showed a trend toward changing all three names, or at least their first name, completely. However, none of the name changes admitted by the inmates appeared among the official records and vice versa.

Table 2 displays the reasons given why each admitted alias user changed his name. The most common explanation cited was to evade apprehension, although others included "no reason," "borrowed from a relative," religious identification, and enhanced criminal opportunity. Other reasons given included "to imitate television criminals," to modify sense of identity, to make himself more mature, to add variation to his name and life, and a name assumed during a presumed dissociative episode.

TABLE 1—*Self- and official report of name variation among male offenders.*

Name Change	Name Changing Group		
	Admitter/Nonuser	Denier/User	Admitter/User
Surname changed completely	4	0	1
Different spelling of same name	3	1	0
Does not remember type	3	0	0
All three names changed	2	2	5
Only first name changed	1	2	4
"Jr." added or deleted	1	2	1
Two names changed completely	1	0	0
Middle name changed	0	13	2

TABLE 2—*Criminals' reasons given for name change.*

Reason	Frequency
Evade apprehension	7
Borrowed from relative	3
No particular reason	3
Enhanced criminal opportunity	2
Adoption of religious name	2
Start over	1
Dissociative episode	1
Add variation	1
Enhance maturity	1
Enhance sense of identity	1
Imitate television criminals	1

The numbers and distribution of each reason were too small to permit meaningful statistical comparison between Groups 2 (admitters/nonusers) and 4 (admitters/users). Nevertheless, Table 3 shows the breakdown for reasons given by members of these groups. At most, there appears to be a slight tendency for those in Group 2 to use assumed names for more criminal purposes such as evading apprehension or enhancing criminal opportunity.

Discussion

The present investigation has found that its subject criminals tended to self-report alias use at a rate less than that noted in official records. These self-reporters and official users appeared to have been overlapping groups, thus suggesting that alias use may be a more complex phenomenon than recognized previously. However, an attempt to assess this observation showed no statistically significant differences in a range of sociodemographic, criminological, and psychiatric variables between various groups of self-reporters/nonreporters and official users/nonusers. While this finding suggests that the sample size may have been too small or anomalous in some way, it also might imply that incarcerated criminals who have used assumed names are different in some other way.

Upon closer scrutiny of the types of name changes noted, it appeared that there might be differences in the ways name changes were self-reported versus officially recorded. Self-reporters tended either to change the spelling of one of their names or to substitute a different surname, while officially documented name changes showed a trend toward alterations in the middle name. One possible explanation of this observation might be that those who acknowledged using aliases may have somehow assigned different significances to the names they modified than those who were only officially recorded as having used an alias. Another interpretation may be that those who reported name changes during a diagnostic interview may not have seen middle name changes as worth reporting.

Several authors have suggested that first, middle, and last names may have different emotional and cognitive values. Murphy [6] believed that the "given or first name is of primary importance and as a rule is recognized as a part of oneself long before the family name is known. It is the name most subject to abbreviation, condensation, or distortion as nicknames." He also noted that "a second given (middle) name may be discarded, adopted, or changed permanently to an initial." Under certain circumstances, the middle name "may be used to emphasize . . . individuality." He regarded family or surnames as having the greatest potential for evoking individual reactions. He cited examples in which some surnames were inferentially part of their respective analysts' initial complaints, accompanied by reaction formation, or suppression/repression of its associative implications. He concluded

TABLE 3—*Self-reported reasons for changing names among members of Groups 2 and 4 (see text for explanations of groups).*

Reasons	Group 2 (N = 10)	Group 4 (N = 5)
Evade apprehension	5	2
No particular reason	2	1
Enhanced criminal opportunity	2	0
Adoption of religious name	2	0
Borrowed from relative	1	2
Dissociative episode	1	0
Add variation	0	1
Enhance maturity	0	1
Enhance sense of identity	0	1
Imitate television criminals	0	1
Start over	0	1

by noting that “[f]irst names appear to be closely associated with the ego and become highly cathected during the preoedipal period. Family names develop importance during the formation of the superego, especially during the oedipal period.”

Other interpretations have been offered. For example, Hartman [7] described different name usage styles as indicative of various features such as narcissism, exhibitionism, individualism, formality, status, evasiveness, distance, or reactions to sex role. Several quantitative investigations of gender mixed groups have attempted to associate name style and attitudes such as conservatism [8] or attitudes toward the self [9]. In this latter study, middle names were found to be most disliked, and most correlated with “self concept” on one measure. However, an earlier study [10] found that first and middle names were disliked equally among women college students. Unfortunately, the research on the significance of first, middle, and last names has been very sparse and has examined highly selected or specific populations. Its results seem largely speculative and have at best limited implications for the present study. Conversely, the present findings are regarded as being so speculative that they do not permit inferences about ordinal name significance among offenders.

Another possibly important finding was that self-reported name differences and officially recorded name variations were never the same among those who both admitted to and had official indication of having used a different name. This finding must be interpreted with great caution because the number of subjects who both admitted to and were found to have recorded differences in their names was very small. Nevertheless, this at least raises questions about why such discrepancies occurred. One reason might be simple coincidence, while another might involve variations in reporting or recording name changes or both under different circumstances or times or both (for example, arrest versus prison intake versus diagnostic interview). Given the lack of any statistically significant differences among the various study groups, but the observed differences in the ordinal position of the names changed, the author is inclined to view this as suggesting the hypothesis of differential reporting/recording should be explored further.

Another way of looking at this may be that alias users are probably a more amorphous—and possibly larger—group than previously thought. Either method of detection likely misses significant numbers because of ways of both reporting and recording names. In addition, some changed names probably succeed, actually slipping through the official detection net used by the criminal justice system. The author recommends that future research should try to consider such diversity and slippage by aggregating self-reporters and official users together for some purposes, but maintaining group separateness for others.

While it appears that those criminals who admitted to changing their names claimed they did so for mostly criminally expedient reasons, a minority of them also reported reasons that this author is inclined to interpret as suggesting psychopathology. Attempts by individual offenders to alter their sense of self-identity, make themselves more mature, add variation to their lives by changing their name, to imitate television criminals, or to change their names during what appeared clinically to have been a dissociative episode seem to raise the possibility of psychological difficulties as being at least a contributing factor to some alias use among offenders.

Those who admitted to using assumed names also seemed to have different reasons for doing so, depending upon whether they were officially noted to have changed their name. Among those who admitted but were not officially found to have used an alias, the reasons given appeared to somewhat favor criminal expediency by evading apprehension or enhancing criminal opportunity. Among those who both acknowledged and were recorded as using an assumed name, the reasons seemed to be those other than criminal expediency. While there may be several explanations for this observation, the author is inclined to interpret it as suggesting that some criminals’ name changes succeed in going undetected by the criminal justice system precisely because their purpose is to advance their criminal careers by deception.

Conclusion

This modest investigation has not provided definitive answers to how many, why, or how criminals use aliases. It suggests that alias use may be a more complex process than demonstrated previously. Further, the study suggests that there may be some "invisible" alias users who were omitted from prior inquiries. It continues to support the notion that some criminals who change their names may have other agenda than simple criminal expediency. It also lends some support to the idea that some aliases actually succeed in passing undetected by the criminal justice system with the explicit purpose of advancing their users' criminal career by deception. All this diversity suggests that future research should rely both on self-report and official records rather than either one method alone in attempts to understand better this aspect of criminal related behavior.

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Address requests for reprints or additional information to
 Dr. Bruce Harry
 Department of Psychiatry
 University of Missouri-Columbia
 201 Mental Health Center Bldg.
 Columbia, MO 65212