

Abstract

Mental state at the time of the offense (MSO; i.e., insanity) has garnered significant research attention over the years. While some variables predicting insanity outcomes are consistent, others are not. Study-level characteristics, such as sample selection, variability in the operational definition of insanity, or other unknown influences may explain discrepant findings. It is critical to consolidate these variables and systematically assess differences in methodology to understand the state of the literature and to guide future research. As such, I conducted the first meta-analysis and study space analysis (see Malpass et al., 2008) in this area. Only 16 studies met inclusion criteria for the meta-analysis. Summary effects indicated that older age, female sex, educational attainment, and unemployment were associated with insanity. Those classified insane more often had a psychiatric treatment history and psychotic disorder diagnosis. Finally, defendants opined or found insane were less likely to have a criminal history but more likely to have been opined incompetent to stand trial in the past. Notably, overall summary effects could mask important differences among studies, in that many effect sizes varied significantly according to study-level characteristics. Study space analyses ($N = 8$) revealed a dearth of literature that comprehensively addressed theoretically important variables in the context of various MSO outcomes (e.g., defendant opined insane by evaluator or court, MSO legal tests). Taken together, the project provides a comprehensive, empirical analysis of the MSO literature and a systematic call for future research.