

# THE ROLE OF SOCIAL COGNITION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CRIMINAL CAREER

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## Abstract

*Through an exploration of their narratives, this paper examines how social information processing styles among young Maltese men may fail to protect offenders from pressures to offend and consequently contribute to criminal career progression and increased commitment to criminality. The paper concludes that social cognitive distortions in the form of crime supportive attitudes, cognitive processing during the commission of illegal behavior and post offence neutralizations, or 'excuses' for illegal behavior, have an important role to play in the pursuit of a criminal career. This exploration of the role of interpersonal cognition throws light on the development of criminality to reveal important avenues for intervention.*

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## Introduction

This paper explores the role of social cognition in the development of the criminal career. The concept of the criminal career has been used by several authors (Hughes, 1945; Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967, Clark, 2006) as an explanatory framework for the development of commitment to criminal behaviour. The career approach explores how criminal behaviour progresses, not necessarily in a linear manner, from tentative flirtations with rule breaking, to more sustained involvement in crime and finally to a criminal role and identity (Clark 2006). This paper argues that social cognitive distortions in the form of crime supportive attitudes, cognitive processing during the commission of illegal behaviour and post offence neutralisations or 'excuses' for illegal behaviour, have an important role to play in the pursuit of a criminal career. The refinement of these cognitive distortions facilitates offending behaviour and hence serves as an important contingency in the career trajectory. While cognition is actually a very imprecise term (Hollin, 1989), it is often taken to be referring to concepts such as memory, imagery and intelligence. Social cognition however focuses more on how people understand the social world, that is, other people and their actions, including oneself. Social cognitive theorists study the way in which cognition is affected by wider and more immediate social contexts and how cognition affects our social behaviour (Augoustinos and Walker, 1995). In terms of criminal career development, as early as 1939, Sutherland wrote that, while criminal behaviour is learnt in intimate personal groups, more important than the learning of techniques for crime, is the learning of motives and rationalisations that support criminal behaviour and that result in an excess of definitions favourable to law breaking versus definitions that prohibit law breaking.

Through the narratives of 41 young offenders in Malta, who were interviewed for the purpose of the author's doctoral dissertation on criminal careers, the role of something distinctive about their thinking patterns – that which allows them to suspend the social controls most people have to limit their behaviour - is explored.

Social cognitive theorists (e.g. Correll et al 2005; Cummins and Nistico 2002; Moskowitz, 2005) propose that everybody uses cognitive heuristics and biased cognitions in order to make sense of the world and maintain a positive sense of self. This paper does not argue that offenders are cognitive tacticians to a greater extent than non-offenders since the absence of a control group in the study does not allow such a conclusion. This avoids suggestions of neo Lombrosianism (Ross and Fabiano, 1985) that had been levied against Yochelson and Samenow when they claimed that the criminal 'has revealed the working of his mind to us' (1976:251). Rather, it explores how cognitive distortions 'facilitate' offending in the course of the criminal career.

Techniques used in everyday life become stabilised because they are reinforced (because they work!) (Walters, 1990) and hence come to be used increasingly automatically in order to engage in a behaviour that is known to be deviant. Like Matza (1964), I suggest that offenders are not immune to the conforming effect of norms of society. It is argued that while criminals are not exempt from the deterrent influence of moral sanctions, these can be 'suspended' through cognitive mechanisms and hence serve as an important contingency in commitment to a criminal lifestyle. It is also argued that although these cognitive techniques become ingrained and automatic, they can still be effectively addressed in interventions with offenders and therefore may serve as an important mechanism for crime control (Walters, 1990).

Cognitions are learnt and can, therefore, be changed. It is not suggested that erroneous cognitions cause crime, only that they facilitate it by failing to protect the individual from personal, social, environmental or situational pressures towards criminal behaviour.

The cognitive movement in psychology initially portrayed the human subject as a 'scientist' who is motivated to make sense of the social world through attribution (Jones and Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967) but these same authors later emphasised the naïve approach that humans take, limiting their ability to process social information accurately due to a lack of information and bias. They proposed the idea of a motivated tactician who, influenced by factors other than accuracy (primarily self enhancement) consequently distorts information. The work of Fiske and Neuberg (1990), Molden & Higgins, (2005) and others, has led to the recognition of the importance of motivational thinking. The most serious of self serving cognitive biases are motivated by the basic human need to perceive oneself in a positive light. Consequently cognition is not always rational and accurate.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical framework for this paper draws on the diverse but linked criminological theories proposed by Matza (1964), Yochelson and Samenow (1976) and Walters (1990) and from the social cognitive tradition in social psychology characterised by the work of Baumeister (1998), Fiske and Neuberg (1990), Miller (1996), Higgins, (2000), Weiner (1986) Ross and Fabiano (1985), Bandura (1990) and more recently Augustinos, Walker and Donaghue (2006).

A robust correlation exists between offending and excuse and justification making (Maruna and Mann, 2006). Sykes and Matza hypothesised that neutralisations would operate before an act. However, clinical observations indicate that neutralisations could be used prior, during, or after criminal involvement (Andrews and Bonta, 1998). What remains debatable therefore is the direction of this relationship.

Most offenders, excluding perhaps psychopaths (Hare, 1993) are not immune to the moral constraints on behaviour that influence all socialized beings. Sykes and Matza, (1957) argued that offenders experience remorse, show respect for law abiding citizens, limit who they victimize and are often susceptible to pressures for conformity. Maruna and Copes (2005) in their review of neutralisation theory write:

'if delinquents maintain at least minimal commitments to the dominant social order, as Sykes and Matza claim, how are they then able to violate its norms? If people are committed to the social order, they typically experience guilt or shame for violating, or even contemplating violating, social norms. This guilt, and its potential for producing a negative self-image, helps dissuade us from engaging in criminal or deviant acts most of the time. Therefore, in order to participate in deviant behaviour under such conditions, we must find ways to rationalize the actions or neutralize the guilt associated with it.'

Through techniques of neutralization, offenders are able to reduce social controls allowing them to justify or rationalize acts that go against their 'moral code'. In Sykes and Matza's (1957) conceptualisation, neutralisations facilitate offending because they occur prior to the offence and neutralise the effect of moral deterrents. In this

formulation, excuse making allows offending to occur. Neutralisations function much the same as defence mechanisms postulated by psychoanalytic theory. In Sykes and Matza's conceptualisation (1957), five main techniques serve to neutralise guilt allowing the offender to engage in behaviour he would otherwise find morally reprehensible. These are: '*denial of injury*', '*denial of victim*', '*condemnation of the condemners*', '*appeal to higher loyalties*' and '*denial of responsibility*'. All are hypothesised to operate **before** the commission of an offence.

More recently, Bandura's model of moral disengagement is an in-depth examination of the processes involved in the rationalization and justification of offending behaviour (Bandura, 1990; Bandura et al, 1996). While people generally tend to refrain from engaging in behavior that goes against their moral standards (which act as behaviour regulators) because such actions would lead to self-condemnation (Bandura et al., 1996), the self-regulatory system may be temporarily shut down (Bandura, 1990). Social cognitive theory refers to this as moral disengagement (Bandura, 1990; Bandura et al., 1996). Bandura writes:

'In the course of socialization, moral standards are adopted that serve as guides and deterrents for conduct. Once internalized control has developed, people regulate their actions by the sanctions they apply to themselves. They do things that give them self-satisfaction and a sense of self worth. They refrain from behaving in ways that violate their moral standards because it will bring self-condemnation. Self-sanctions thus keep conduct in line with internal standards. But moral standards do not function as fixed internal regulators of conduct. Self regulatory mechanisms do not operate unless they are activated, and there are many psychological processes by which moral reactions can be disengaged from inhumane conduct (Bandura, 1986). Selective activation and disengagement of internal control permits different types of conduct with the same moral standards.' (1990:162)

According to Bandura, four mechanisms of moral disengagement are commonly in place. The first involves re-construing the conduct so that it is acceptable; the second minimising the role of personal agency in relation to the behaviour; the third ignoring the negative consequences of the action; and the fourth, devaluing the victim (Bandura et al., 1996; Bandura, 1990).

Yochelson and Samenow (1976) identified fifty two thinking styles that they believed characterised the criminal. They wrote that: "It is the direction of this pattern toward specific ends and in combination with other thought patterns that constitutes the very essence of the criminal mind" (1976:252). Something distinctive in their thinking patterns causes them to suspend the social controls most people have to limit their behaviour. The violator does not consider his belief system flawed and in dire need of revision. Gibbs et al (1995), inspired by the work of Yochelson and Samenow, developed a more coherent and rigorously tested theory of attributional styles associated with offending. These influential authors also informed Sharp's ideas set forth in his *Changing Criminal Thinking* where crime is described as being 'the result of erroneous thinking' (2005:2).

According to Walters (1990), a cognitive system develops in the individual, which is dedicating to supporting, buttressing and perpetuating the irresponsibility and self

indulgence of adolescence. With increased success in the use of such a system, learning eventually permits the thinking style to crystallize so that it becomes automatic allowing the offender to engage in behaviours he/she has been socialized to believe are wrong. Walters' criminal lifestyle theory thus proposes that the presence of distorted cognitions among offenders can be traced back to earlier stages in the life of a person. It is a developmental process that unfolds in three distinct phases – initiation, where the thinking styles are constructed; transitional, where they are reinforced; and maintenance where they become solidified (Walters, 1994). He identifies eight cognitive styles that sustain, reinforce and supplement an entrenched criminal lifestyle. These are '*mollification*', '*cutoff*', '*entitlement*', '*power orientation*', '*sentimentality*', '*superoptimism*', '*cognitive indolence*' and '*discontinuity*'. The offender actively suspends moral constraints to his or her advantage.

Ross and Fabiano (1985) have identified several social cognitive variables that characterise offenders, most notably locus of control, attribution, social perception and social decision making skills. From a social cognitive framework, thinking errors may be viewed as cognitive schemata which have been shown to be empirically linked to re-offending (Maruna and Mann, 2006). Schemata are simple and holistic cognitive representations of the social world which act as relatively enduring templates for interpretation of stimuli. They include self schemata (such as, that one has been mistreated and is now entitled to compensation - or that one is an addict), role schemata (such as that the police are all corrupt) and schemata for processing information or attributional processes. According to Debuyst (1985), all crimes involve an attribution process. Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale (1978:50) defined attributional style as "the habitual way in which people explain positive or negative events in their lives". An offender's personal attributional style will be imposed upon their perception of the events occurring in their lives and the lives of others. Causal attributions vary along several dimensions. They may be: internal/external, intentional/unintentional, stable/unstable and controllable/uncontrollable (Maruna and Mann, 2006).

Excuses, according to Weiner (1986), attribute the cause of behaviour to factors that are external, uncontrollable and unintentional. Attribution theory arranges three types of attributions in a hierarchical order from cause to responsibility to blame (Calhoun and Townsley, 1991). In terms of criminal behaviour, attributions of cause are explanations for the occurrence of a specific crime. Attributions of responsibility examine an individual's behavior within the social context the offender finds him/herself in and concern an individual's accountability for the crime. Attributions of blame presuppose both a causal attribution and an attribution of accountability and allow for the perception of fault on the part of an individual (Bradbury and Fincham, 1990). Whether or not this chain of presuppositions is complete determines one's ability to find fault within themselves or others. (Calhoun and Townsley, 1991). It is clear how attributions serve a self enhancing function that can allow offenders to maintain a positive sense of self whilst engaging in behaviour they know is reprehensible. According to Snyder and Higgins (1988:23) excuse making is: '...the process of shifting causal attributions for negative personal outcomes from sources that are relatively more central to the person's sense of self to sources that are relatively less central.' And there is ample scientific evidence that criminal perpetrators invoke excuses and justifications when accounting for their criminal behaviour (Stewart and Byrne, 2000; Miller and Schwartz, 1995; Byers and Crider, 2002).

Clearly then, the notion of 'cognitive distortion' has become enshrined in the offender treatment literature over the last 20 years. And yet the concept still suffers from a lack of definitional clarity (Maruna and Mann, 2006).

Locus of control (Rotter, 1966) is one of the most researched constructs in the field of personality and is also relevant to this discussion. Locus of control is a personality construct referring to an individual's perception of the locus of events as determined internally by his/her own behavior versus fate, luck, or external circumstances. The construct has proven to lend itself to a wide variety of applications in both interpersonal phenomena – such as seeking information and taking political action – and intrapsychic phenomena – such as; defense externality and attribution (Strickland, 1989).

People with an internal locus of control believe they control the events and therefore the consequences in their lives. In contrast, people who possess an external locus of control believe that outside events are the driving force in their lives. Consequently, an internal person sees his/herself as responsible for their actions and deserving of appropriate punishment. While an external person finds blame in sources outside his/herself. Research indicates that criminals tend to external control (Hollin, 1989)

### **Method**

The data presented in this paper were collected as part of a doctoral dissertation, undertaken by the author, attempting to explore the development of criminal careers among Maltese male youth. The study took a grounded theory approach where research questions emerged from the initial interview data collected. Incarcerated offenders were simply asked to "tell me the story of your life" following Wengraf (2001). According to Maruna and Copes (2004: 2)

'The question "Why did they do it?" is central to the criminologist's quest, and posing it to offenders themselves has been a part of criminology since its origins..... The interest in life narratives among many contemporary social scientists is not so much in the substantive events these stories depict but the meanings the person attaches to such facts. How people choose to frame the events of their lives says as much about the psychology of the individual—his or her personality, identity, or self— as it does about the events and structural conditions experienced'.

This approach has been advanced by others such as McAdams (1993) and Bruner (1990). In constructing their narratives, the young offenders attempted to make sense of their lives and to find reason for why they did what they did – they engaged in a series of causal attributions. These were not prompted by the researcher but emerged as an attempt at 'meaning making' that happens when people are asked to talk about their behaviour (Jarvinen, 2003). This qualitative methodology was used to explore the progress of the criminal career by identifying contingencies that make movement in that career more or less possible. The study explored how the young inmates started to engage in delinquent behaviour and how that behaviour escalated to more sustained criminal activity. It sought to understand the development of commitment to crime.

Qualitative interviewing emphasises the active participation of the interviewer and the importance of giving the interviewee a voice. A qualitative methodology gives importance to how people understand their worlds and how they create and share meanings about their lives. The complexity of human life is emphasised (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Through the use of narrative within an interview context, the criminal careers of 41 young male prison inmates were mapped, concentrating on the career contingencies that the inmates deemed to be important, rather than on offence frequency and distribution. Based on remembered history, a biographical narrative describes what happened in the interviewee's life and presents the stages of a social process. Hammersley and Atkinson (1993) claim that what qualitative interviews lose in terms of accuracy of data is usually balanced by the insight that is gained into the person's lifestyle. The goal was the development of a grounded theory. While the research agenda did not originally set out to discover the role of interpersonal cognition in the development of criminality, a key emergent theme was the utilisation of cognitive distortions by repeat incarcerated offenders. The data analysis indicated that specific social information processing facilitates continued involvement in criminality and supported Maruna and Copes argument: '...that neutralization techniques may play an important role in maintaining persistence in crime' (2005:7)

The research took place at the Corradino Correctional Facility in Paola, the only correctional institution on the Maltese Islands. The research commenced with an examination of inmate files to establish a sample of inmates eligible for the study. The inmate file contains a record of the inmate's previous convictions and the time spent in institutions, as well as personal details such as age, employment history, marital status and place of residence. The inmates chosen for participation in the study were between the age of 18 and 30, constituting the younger members of the prison population. Participation in the study was on a voluntary basis.

Of the 44 inmates chosen to participate in the study three refused to be interviewed or to be recorded. Since the aim of the interview was to reconstruct the biography of the offenders and a recorder was felt to be necessary in order to capture the complexity of their lives, it was decided to exclude these inmates from the study. A sample of 41 inmates was finally established and was considered sufficient in light of the qualitative, in depth nature of the research. The average age of the sample was 24 and there were two between 17 and 20, 23 between 21 and 25 and 16 between 26 and 30.

Most of the inmates had extensive criminal histories with a predominance of acquisitive crime such as theft and burglary. There were also a large number of cases of drug offences and assault on police officers and resisting arrests.

The interviews were audio recorded and the transcribed material subjected to rigorous open, axial and core coding following Strauss and Corbin (1990). A summary of the categories and themes relating to the topic of cognitive distortions may be found in appendix 1.

### **Data Analysis**

The theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957) is perhaps one of the most extensively researched perspectives in social psychology. It proposes that an uncomfortable feeling is caused by holding two or more conflicting ideas or conflicting

ideas and actions simultaneously. People have a motivational drive to reduce dissonance. They do this by changing their attitudes, beliefs, and actions. Hazani states that cognitive distortions are “universal modes of response to inconsistency” that reveal widely shared “modes of reduction of disequilibrium” (Hazani 1991b, p. 146).

In any career, conventional or unconventional, conflict between role demands and values can make commitment difficult. For instance a Catholic doctor has difficulty becoming committed to his career in an abortion clinic. He/she requires a good justification in order to continue in that line of work. Similarly, an offender may need to justify breaking the laws he may have been brought up to believe are right. Later versions of cognitive dissonance theory (e.g., Wicklund and Brehm, 1976 cited in Maruna and Copes 2005) focus specifically on the conflict between one’s self-concept as a moral person and one’s morally questionable behaviours. In the present research with Maltese offenders, justifications for engaging in crime emerged consistently.

Sykes and Matza (1957, cited in Sharp & Hancock, 1995: 122) write

‘Thus the delinquent represents not a radical opposition to law abiding society but something more like an apologetic failure, often more sinned against than sinning in his own eyes ..... It is by learning these techniques that the juvenile becomes delinquent, rather than by learning moral imperatives, values or attitudes standing in direct contradiction to those of the dominant society.’

Older, more committed criminals often rationalise their criminal behaviour but their cognitive distortions have been conceptualised as being rooted in the egocentricity of adolescence (Walters, 1994). The data provided support for the idea that repeat offenders utilise particular thinking styles which become entrenched because they are reinforced by protecting the offender from the moral restraints that stop people from breaking the law (Cechaviciute and Kenny 2007). Maruna and Copes (2004) argued that cognitive distortions may not be relevant to criminal onset but may contribute to the maintenance of offending behaviour and is well suited to explain criminal persistence or secondary deviance. According to Maruna and Copes (2004) neutralization theory has “universal applicability” (Hazani 1991b, p. 135) as it can be applied to any context where there is a discrepancy between one’s actions and one’s beliefs.

### ***Victim stance – denial of responsibility***

Cognitive distortions are tied up with identity (Gibbs 1993). In their attempts to negotiate a stigmatised identity, the offenders in the sample attempted to deny responsibility for their actions by adopting a ‘victim stance’. Sykes and Matza (1957) stated that as long as the offender can define himself as lacking responsibility for his behaviour, disapproval for their actions is less likely to function as a restraining influence. In the present study, this was most prevalent among the addict group<sup>2</sup> who justified their criminality by stating that they were victims of drugs.

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<sup>2</sup> During data analysis three ‘criminal’ groups were identified: the addict group; the semi professional group; and the aspiring young professional group. This typology was informed by Gibbons(1973) role career perspective and young men were assigned to one of the three groups by reflecting on their career history and their self identifications.

“But I was not a criminal, you cannot call these people who steal stereos criminals. I was a victim of drugs.

You know you are doing wrong but the pain tells you to do so - the craving and sickness.....I couldn't stop. If I didn't take any drugs I wouldn't have all these cases ..... drugs were the main problem..... It's all because of drugs.”

In the field of corrections, the recognition that rationalisations often have a basis in reality and serve an important function is crucial. For example, it is difficult to support a heroin habit without resorting to illegal means (Hammersly, 2008; Clark, 2009) and the development of the victim stance may be an important contingency in the careers of drug abusing offenders, more so than with other categories of the offending population (Clark, 2005). The physical and psychological penalties present in attempting to kick the habit and the dominant medical model interpretation of addiction as a chronic relapsing medical condition (Davies 1992) may be a factor contributing to drug users viewing themselves as more constrained to remain in the criminal career than non users. The capacity of heroin to ensnare its victims, propagated by the media (Carnwath and Smith, 2002) was emphasised by those in the sample who were addicted to it.

“Dope controls your whole life. I know that I am doing the wrong thing but dope gets the better of me..... I have always stolen for dope..... Dope becomes your partner, you think of dope as if she were your woman.”

Many of the addicts in the sample saw themselves as ‘more sinned against than sinning’ (Sykes and Matza, 1957). They viewed themselves as the ones who were being taken advantage of by pushers.

“I see myself as the victim. The criminal is that guy who brings in the dope and who has made money off me. I used to sell dope but I never made money off it and always did it to buy myself. The criminal is that guy who sells and does not use. I mean, I have hurt people and do not try to persuade myself that I have not but in the long run I cannot do otherwise.”

The addicts emphasised the fact that they have different motivation (when compared to other offenders) for engaging in crime and that, at the end of the day, they do not prosper from their careers:

“If I stole I always stole because of dope. I always make a distinction between people like me and people who have stolen to become rich. I never stole to live a luxurious life. It is not that I didn't want to work. The thing is I developed a habit and then I used to have to steal. I had no choice since I could not afford my habit. I could not cope otherwise. I used to use one gram a day and even if you work you cannot afford that.”

The perceived inability to desist from heroin use exempts this offender from any blame that others might choose to place on him. By engaging in downward comparison (Affleck, Tennen, Urrows, Higgins, and Abeles, (2001) and portraying other inmates

as greedy and motivated by money, self esteem is enhanced. 'The pusher' is seen as the one to blame and the one who should therefore be punished.

"I feel that what I have done is not because I was greedy but out of need....a pusher who is not on drugs and sees only money and who has a lovely villa, yacht and more money than he knows what to do with, that type of pusher I would send to prison for twenty years."

The pusher, on the other hand also justifies his position, by the fact that he himself uses drugs and is equally constrained:

"And so I started to buy and sell..... Otherwise I would not have enough money to buy dope for my wife and I....The thing is you have to do something. You have no choice.....I mean people take that very badly 'he used to sell drugs'. That's very bad in their eyes. They will not understand that I used to sell drugs because I had a habit. They will have heard that I am in prison because I sold drugs."

From whatever perspective one views it, there is always a rationale for continuing in the behaviour. This data indicates that neutralisations are intrinsically tied up with self-identity in that by attributing their criminal involvement to their addiction, addicts considered themselves to be less criminal than the other men in the sample.

However, it was not only the addict category of the sample that denied responsibility, although they tended to do so more often. Criminal behaviour may be successfully attributed to a 'condition'. One of the older inmates says:

"I have a problem of stealing and has anyone tried to help me with this problem? The junkies they are helped with their drug problem, here are programmes for them and also people who suffer from alcohol addiction. But is there any help for thieves..... I think it is an illness, I do not steal because I enjoy stealing, I steal because I have reached this point in my life, this extreme. I feel that I cannot be cured from this illness and no one is helping me to get better."

This particular individual is stating that society has contributed to his criminal career because it has not rehabilitated him. He claims he cannot help being this way and that society should recognise this deficiency on his part. In this way he exempts himself from blame and can carry on with his activities. Sykes and Matza (in Sharp and Hancock, (eds) 1995:119) write: 'in effect the offender approaches a "billiard ball" conception of himself in which he sees himself as helplessly propelled into new situations'. The offender comes to view himself as more acted upon than acting.

'It is the fault of the environment' emerged as a common attribution. According to Maruna and Copes (2005) many offenders see themselves as victims of circumstance or as products of their environment. Many of the interviewees discussed how they were brought up in an environment where crime was the norm. Several sociological perspectives on crime as well as lay peoples' understanding of why people turn to crime is rooted in such reasoning. This may also be interpreted as an external locus of

control, which facilitates fatalistic thinking, where one's fate is felt to be outside one's control (Ross and Fabiano 1985)

“I think that a lot of the blame is the environment that I was brought up in. I never had anyone to guide me or to show me that I was doing wrong and then it was too late.”

Another inmate, born and bred in the back streets of Valletta, a noted slum area, claims that since he was a young boy, all the people around him, including his mother, were involved in deviant behaviour and that he naturally picked this up as the accepted behaviour.

“Anybody would get messed up living like I was with all that hassle going on around me.”

Another interviewee echoed the same theme:

“We used to live in Valetta, and I was brought up in Straight Street. And as you can imagine what I saw. And what I saw I believed to be good in the sense that bad things were good for me..... It was different had I been brought up in Sliema than in Straight Street. I was brought up in place where at night many bad things happen and I was always seeing these things..... Yes, I think the fact that I grew up where I did had a lot to do with the fact that I got into this lifestyle.” (M10)

“I was in an environment where everybody was into crime.” (M11)

It is however hard to imagine that these young men, in their boyhood, were completely insulated from conventional values. Regarding this matter, Sykes and Matza (cited in Sharp and Hancock, 1995:120) write that it is doubtful that many juvenile delinquents are ‘totally immune from the demands for conformity made by the dominant social order’ and maintain at least minimal commitments to the dominant social order.

A small number of the young men interviewed at CCF placed the blame for their offending on bad parenting. One young man who claimed to have been severely abused by his father states:

“I look at them today and say to myself ‘I am in here because of them’ (his parents).” (M12)

This young man claims that his father's attempts at disciplining him consisted of beating him with a chain. He spent the greater part of his childhood in and out of children's homes. In his eyes (and possibly a notion entertained by some criminologists and psychologists) he never stood a chance at a conventional life. According to Cohen (2001 p.61) the neutralisation of denial of responsibility is the ‘master account’. Ross and Fabiano (1985) have developed intervention models where fatalistic thinking can be reduced by teaching offenders metacognitive skills that enhance their ability to evaluate the influence of their thinking on their actions.

### ***Denial of injury***

Another important rationalisation documented in this study is ‘denial of injury’ which centres on the injury or harm involved in the delinquent act. The criminal law distinguishes between crimes which are *mala in se* and *mala prohibita* - that is between acts that are wrong in themselves and acts that are illegal but not immoral - and the offender makes this same distinction in evaluating his behaviour. Evaluation may turn on the question of whether or not anyone has clearly been hurt, and this matter is open to a variety of interpretations (Sykes and Matza 1957). ‘The wrongfulness of one’s behavior is determined by the amount of harm done and by the intentions of the actor. Offenders can excuse their behavior if they believe no one is “really” harmed’ (Maruna and Copes 2004p 12). In the interviews, a common theme was that, although offenders are aware that their behaviour must have resulted in some loss to somebody, such losses were viewed to be minimal. One inmate who was convicted for wrecking a police station and seriously injuring a policeman stated:

“I had not done any real damage because everything in the station is made of three ply, there is not anything made of mahogany there. I remember that I had broken a telephone and that there were some papers and I had thrown them on the floor.”

Another inmate, a successful thief, claimed that whenever he broke into people’s houses he was very careful to take only those things that could be disposed of and, in the process, made sure the house was left in good order and did not cause unnecessary damage. He criticised burglars who turned the place upside down:

“Also where I would enter I would not make any damage. I would only take that which is useful to me and nothing more. There are some thieves that mess a place up after they take what they need. I never did that. I would go into a place, take what I need and leave.”

This same inmate also claimed that people are insured for the things that they own and therefore he was not really causing them any injury since they could claim their losses from their insurers. This rationalisation was very popular.

“I will break into a house that if the owner has LM 20,000 at home then he has about three times as much in the bank. And let us face it, today everybody is insured.

And then many people are insured for what they have and they can even claim more on the insurance.”

Through such reasoning the thief denies the psychological distress that he may cause people by breaking into their homes. He refuses to accept that some objects are simply irreplaceable because of their sentimental value. By believing that he is not really taking anything away from the owner of the house that he has broken into, he neutralises the guilt that is likely to emerge when he engages in behaviour that goes contrary to what he has been brought up to believe is right. Thus the inmates did not claim that stealing is OK, but that stealing under certain conditions and with certain reservations is not so bad. Another favourite excuse was that they only stole from the rich, who could well afford it.

“When a thief breaks into a house he breaks into the rich man’s house. You are probably saying: “*Well hasn’t he worked for them also?*” Yes, in fact. But I would not break into someone’s house if they are not well off. For example a newly wed couple and they have just moved in.”

Often a variety of neutralisations were utilised in conjunction. Thus in the following narrative we see this young man justifying his behaviour by claiming that the losses the victim incurred were minimal, that they were certainly insured, that he would never steal from anyone who could not afford it and condemnation of the condemners:

“I only ripped the rich off and they have loads to spare. I knew that I was doing no harm to them. I would go into houses of millionaires, not just rich people. Especially when I robbed the factories those are of rich people. And what’s more they are all insured, if you rip them off 10,000 then they will claim 15,000 off the insurance. You see I don’t really hurt anyone in this way. I never ripped off the poor that would be bad! Actually they are the ones who are stealing because they claim more on the insurance. ....I was a real thief but I had certain principles and would not rip just anybody off. For example I never stole from a church.”

Many of the inmates emphasised that when they engage in crime they make sure that their victims are not physically injured. Certain behaviour, such as hurting women, children and old people, was considered out of bounds.

“I have never beat up people or raped women.” (M8)

“It is different if I steal ten pounds than if I steal a great amount and if I steal to get well (from withdrawals) than if I steal for fun. Also it is different if I steal from an old lady. If I steal from my father I know that one day he will forgive me. I think if I saw an old lady in the street and attacked her because I know that she is helpless then that would really make me a criminal.”

It is easier to deny injury when one cannot identify with the injured party as in the case of an institution. Credit card fraud is easily justified in the following manner:

“No damage was inflicted because apparently the system works like this: the bank pays the shopkeeper and the bank gets it back from the Insurance. I did not steal the credit card. I bought it from people who stole it.....I knew for certain that the shopkeeper and the bank get paid - a guaranteed fact.....I get my purchase and he gets paid. The bank in its turn is covered by the insurance. It is the insurance that gets to pay.”

Walters refers to all of these cognitive techniques as ‘mollification’ conveyed in statements that justify illicit behaviour. He argues that mollification is similar to Sykes and Matza’s neutralisations but is viewed as a cognitive strategy that follows rather than precedes the behaviour it is intended to justify (Walters 1994).

Mollifications used to justify a crime after it has been committed can also serve to excuse future episodes. According to Walters (1994:54): ‘truths, half truths and

utter falsehoods are woven into the fabric of a mollification, thereby shielding it from the light of objective scrutiny’.

### ***Condemnation of the Condemners and a Sense of Injustice***

Rather than focusing on their own behaviour, offenders may choose to attend to the motives of those who are condemning the behaviour. Sykes and Matza discussed how offenders might claim that their critics: ‘...are hypocrites, deviants in disguise, or impelled by personal spite.’ (1957, p.668) and consequently have no right to judge them. This has been found to happen with rule breakers other than young offenders. Eliason and Dodder (1999) report how deer poachers often argue that game wardens frequently hunt illegally and should not be given the authority to make arrests or issue citations. Also Jesilow, Pontell, and Geis (1993) document how fraudulent medical professionals point to irrationality in the health care system.

In the present study the interviewees often saw their own condemners as hypocrites who were impelled by personal spite. This amounts to an insistence that certain people, especially the justice system officials, have no right to condemn them because they are corrupt themselves. This belief, coupled with an acute sense of injustice, helped the inmates deflect the blame from themselves onto others. The inmates were aware that the courts, the church and people on the outside condemned them for their actions and so all three were in turn criticised. Sykes and Matza (1957), in Sharp and Hancock, 1995: 121) write that the delinquent feels that his condemners are ‘hypocrites, deviants in disguise.’ Many of the young men expressed anger at society for rejecting them. Some claimed even that society had forced them into crime because all other conventional options were closed:

“In society, those individuals who do not forgive the criminal, I hate them a lot. There are many people in society that I cannot stand. I feel much anger towards them. All they are concerned about is to send you to prison. Not to help you surely.

And then it occurred to me that this must be the life for me because I did not have a chance in working in a conventional job. I realised that there was no chance of me going straight and at that time I started to engage in more criminal activities till all my life was crime.....I started to do jobs again when they did not let me work (here interviewee is referring to the fact that the police often turned up at his place of work), can you understand, they did not let me work. So what can you do, one has to eat and drink. What could I do, go and beg for money, you have to do something.

But there are not many people who will employ an ex-prisoner. You might find one in a hundred. But people like me unless you find somebody to trust you and give you a job then you are bound to end up in here again.”

Much of the anger is directed towards those in official control: the police, the court and prison officials. The police are often singled out as the most corrupt. There was a general view among the interviewees that the police are profoundly unfair and treat them unjustly. They often failed to associate their own behaviour with this treatment:

“It would be better if they spent their time trying to catch the big drug dealers and criminals rather than picking on people like me.....The police they used to show off with me they would tell me. ‘Now we got you where we want you’ and this would make me very angry.

In Malta the police they are all corrupt.

And then you start to hate them, the police and the court and everything that has to do with them, because I really believe that I was treated unjustly..... I got into this mess with them because I know that they have not treated me right in the first place.....I feel that they have been unjust with me.”

Habitual offenders become well known to the police. When a crime is reported the police regularly round up suspects (Foster 1990). According to Graef (1992), this sense of being unfairly victimised does not allow young offenders to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. The courts too are seen to be corrupt because not all people are treated in the same way:

“At court there is sheer corruption. If you are rich you are free.....The way I see it (the court) is that it is blind to any crime as long as her scales are weighed down with money.”

According to Sykes and Matza (1957, in Sharp and Hancock, 1995:121), ‘by attacking others, the wrongfulness of his own behaviour is more easily repressed or lost to view’. Many of the inmates claimed that although previously the courts may have been lenient, they have now been treated far too harshly. They seem to be saying ‘We deserve to be punished but this is too much’. Through conversations with other inmates, the young men become aware that sentences are not meted out equally and a sense of injustice develops.

“I think the system is not fair and you get more time than you deserve..... and they made me angry and then I start to think. ‘What the hell’. And when you come to prison you really toughen up.” (M17)

“The system here in Malta is ridiculous. Do you know why I got 2 years? For stealing 20 lira you know! And because I have broken the suspended sentence. I get angry because there are people in here who are here for 20,000 and not for 20 lira. It makes you reason that when I do something next time it is going to be a big one.” (M11)

The inmates recognised that power in Malta is not distributed equally and those with the most power are at an advantage in terms of being able to break the law without suffering the consequences. Social conflict theorists (e.g., Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 1974) have hypothesised to this effect.

“We are not criminals; I will tell you who are the real criminals. For example people say that prison is a warehouse of drugs but the drugs is coming through the airport and customs and the authorities there are the criminals. In my opinion the parliamentarians and the people of the church and the police they

are the criminals. They are the ones who will never be in prison because they have power. So if a policeman goes to testify against someone and he is lying and the person gets 6 years in jail. Is that not criminal? He breaks up a family and all the lives of the people in it.” (M8)

The prison and the wardens are not exempt from criticism. Many of the inmates complained that wardens acted unjustly towards them. According to Matza (1964) the moral bind of law is loosened whenever a sense of injustice prevails. The young offender is often very legalistic in his judgements of right and wrong. Not being caught engaging in criminal activity exempts them, in their mind, from any punishment.

“And one thing’s for sure I don’t feel that they have been just with me. I have come to prison on seven cases and it is true that I have opened those seven cases and committed those crimes but they never had the proof. They never caught me in the act.....I felt that really I was brought here innocent.....Well I admit because I am in here now because before I always denied it. And anyway even if I had admitted I feel that the court would still have been unjust with me because they never found any stuff on me or caught me in the act. So really I am innocent. .... I came here for nothing cause they never had any proof.” (M14)

Matza (1964:106) writes that a sense of injustice is engendered because the delinquent believes that

“(D)t is only fair that some steps be taken to ascertain whether I was really the wrongdoer (cognizance); it is only fair that I be treated according to the same principles as others of my status (consistency). It is only fair that you who pass judgement on me sustain the right to do so (competence); it is only fair that some relationship obtain between the magnitude of what I have done and what you propose to do to me (commensurability); it is only fair that differences between the treatment of my status and others be reasonable and tenable (comparison).”

This sense of injustice increases commitment to criminality and facilitates progression in the criminal career

### ***Sentimentality***

Walters (1994) hypothesises that the criminal lifestyle is supported by the utilisation of cognitive techniques that allow the criminal to justify his behaviour in the light of criticisms of others. One such cognitive pattern Walters calls ‘sentimentality’. This was evident in the interviews. Many of the young men claimed that they were essentially good people who made ‘mistakes’. Because most of the actions in which these young men engaged were incompatible with the positive images they may have fashioned of themselves, they found ways to reconcile the discrepancy between their behaviour and their self image as essentially ‘good’ guys. According to Walters (1994) most people will occasionally engage in sentimentality but criminals have the need to do so more often because transgressions are usually more extreme and the consequences ostensibly more far reaching than those of the average citizen. Some quotations from the interviews will illustrate the use of sentimentality.

“I have a bad reputation but those people who know me well they know that I am kind hearted.....those people who really know me they respect me.

I am not bad. I am only a human being who can make mistakes just like anybody else.”

They recognise that they have done wrong by engaging in theft but claim that whenever they have had the opportunity to help others they have always done so willingly:

“I even used to lend people money without charging them interest. You see I was well off and others did not have as much as me.

When I get out of here I wish to give a helping hand to those who are poorer than me.”

Sentimentality serves to promote a positive self image by focusing on the offender's positive actions towards women, children, animals and the aged (Walters, 1994). It is often difficult to distinguish sentimentality from genuine care and concern.

### **Downward Comparison**

Some of the young men insisted that there are different types of criminals and that they were ‘not that bad’ when compared to others. While people generally compare themselves with others who are similar or slightly superior, there are times when people engage in downward comparison (Hakmiller 1966). Downward comparison is defensive. It makes us feel better about ourselves because it allows us to feel that even if we have negative traits, there are others who have them to a far greater degree. Trying to show that we are as good as people who are superior, or different from people who are inferior are examples of self validating social comparisons. Such comparisons reflect our desire to evaluate ourselves positively. The young men in the present study sought to maintain a favourable conception of themselves by comparing themselves to inmates whom they deemed more criminal. They claimed that some of the men that they had contact with in their division had been involved in heinous crimes like murder or mugging old people and that they could never do such things. The motive underling all comparisons, according to Festinger, is the desire for accurate self evaluation. However plenty of evidence has amassed since the 1950's that this is not the case. Rather people appear to engage in social comparisons mainly for purposes of self enhancement (Augoustinos & Walker 1995).

“And one thing that really bothers me is that they have placed me with people that are not the same as me, we do not belong to the same category. I hear things in here that I come to tell myself ‘I must be an angel next to them’.

But there are criminals and there are criminals.

I'm a criminal, I break the law and I am a thief but I have not done some of the things that you hear about in here..... They compare me with Fusellu. I am nothing like him. They say that I am Fusellu <sup>3</sup>. No way. I have never done

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<sup>3</sup> Fussellu was a well known Maltese criminal of ‘folk devil’ status. He is reputed to have done more or less as he pleased and was murdered in 1989.

the things that he used to do..... I have never gone into a bar to drink and put my gun on the counter and said "I am ....., give me a drink or I will break the place up." You cannot compare me to him at all." (M8)

### **Denial of Victim**

Many of the young men in the 'addict' group claimed that they were only hurting themselves by their drug use and that they should be free to do so. This is a clear indication of how self serving these rationalisations really are, since most of the addicts claimed that they had to resort to illegal behaviour. Many of the pushers asserted that they were providing a service and if they did not sell drugs somebody else would.

"I do not feel guilty for what I did.....I only supplied dope to people who wanted it....Selling drugs is against the law. I sold it but if I would not have sold it you might. In other words there is a demand and if I do not sell it then someone else will. Since there is the demand.

I do not feel that I have done anything wrong, not at all. I mean I never saw you in the street and tried to sell you coke at all. People used to come to me. I never forced anybody to have coke..... I never had to hustle anyone they used to come to me. I had good stuff and when you have good stuff it is no problem to get rid of it. If I didn't do it somebody else will. I mean if people want coke there is somebody who is going to take advantage of it and sell it to them. That is what I did."

Bandura referred to this as ignoring the negative consequences of one's actions and serves as a form of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1990).

### **Conclusions**

This paper has examined how social information processing styles may fail to protect offenders from pressures to offend and consequently contribute to progression in the criminal career and increased commitment to criminality. The way young men justify their illegal behaviour, in order to come to terms with their lifestyle and continue to break the law, was explored through narratives.

The Maltese young men participating in this study utilised a wide variety of cognitive techniques that allowed them to rationalise their position, and therefore, to progress in their criminal careers. The development and use of these justifications is being put forward as an important contingency in the pursuit of the criminal career and one that is often learnt in close association with others. The research data indicates that the justifications for criminal behaviour utilised by the offender are tied up with his self-evaluations and the construction of identity. Those young men who utilised a variety of justifications were able to maintain a favourable conception of themselves in the face of condemnation by others. The different criminal groups, who espoused differential identities, also tended to make use of different types of justifications for criminal behaviour. Among the addict group a 'denial of responsibility' and a sense of victimisation were very common. On the other hand, among the semi-professional criminals and the aspiring thieves, a 'denial of injury' emerged as the most common form of justification for crime.

This exploration into the role of interpersonal cognition throws light on the development of criminality and also holds important avenues for intervention.

According to Maruna and Mann, (2006) therapy has mainly focused on getting offenders to claim responsibility for their crimes. They suggest, as does the data from this paper that while that is an important task, efforts should also be made to make them take responsibility for their future actions by addressing offence supporting attitudes and cognitive schemata that continue to support the criminal career and commitment to crime. Thus, therapeutic interventions, rather than simply exploring past criminal acts and attempting to make offenders claim responsibility for them, should also attempt to change the criminal thinking styles and schemata that are supporting the criminal career. People make changes in their actions by changing how they think, what they believe and consequently how they feel. The focus however should not only be on past experiences but on schemata which will influence future behavior (Wanberg and Milkman, 1998). According to Fabiano, Porporino and Robinson (1990) programs should target thinking, not behavior reflecting the fundamental assumption of the cognitive model of offender rehabilitation.

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## **APPENDIX 1**

### **CATEGORY 6 - NEUTRALISATIONS AND COGNITIVE PATTERNS - N'S**

**THEME A - NEUTRALISATIONS TIED UP WITH IDENTITY - ALLOWS THE OFFENDER TO MAINTAIN A FAVOURABLE CONCEPTION OF SELF - N1**

Sub themes

1. Victim stance - more specifically, victim of drugs N1.1
2. Feelings of being less criminal than others who the inmate is in prison with - criminal identity is reduced in intensity N1.2
3. Provision of a service N1.3
4. Not rich therefore not a real criminal N1.4

**THEME B - DENIAL OF RESPONSIBILITY - VICTIM STANCE - N2**

Sub themes

1. Victim of drugs N2.1
2. Victim of a disease - sick N2.2
3. Victim of the environment N2.3
4. Victim of bad parenting N2.4
5. Victim of circumstance and reputation N2.5

**THEME C - CONDEMNATION OF THE CONTEMNERS - SENSE OF INJUSTICE - N3**

Sub themes

1. Anger towards society for rejecting the criminal - blaming society in general for their predicament N3.1
2. Condemnation of the official condemners - the courts N3.2
3. Condemnation of the police N3.3
4. The rich get away with it - 'small fish' syndrome N3.4
5. Condemnation of the prison N3.5
6. Condemnation of the prison N3.6

**THEME D - EXTERNAL LOCUS OF CONTROL - N 4**

Sub themes

1. Destiny N4.1
2. Perception of no control over events N4.2

**THEME E - SENTIMENTALITY - N5**

Sub themes

1. People do not know the 'real' them N5.1
2. Robin Hood Syndrome N5.2
3. Belief in God N5.3

**THEME F - DENIAL OF INJURY - N6**

Sub themes

1. Losses incurred were minimal N6.1
2. People are insured N6.2
3. Stealing only from the rich and they can afford it N6.3
4. Stealing only from foreigners N6.4
5. Never used physical violence N6.5
- 6 Stealing from an institution rather than a person - no identification N6.6

**THEME G - LACK OF PERCEPTION OF TIME - N7**

No sub themes

**THEME H - GENERALIZATION / RATIONALIZATION - EVERYBODY IS DOING IT - N8**

No sub themes

**THEME I - CUTOFF THROUGH DRUGS AND ALCOHOL - N9**

No sub themes