

# Goal-setting and reputation enhancement: Behavioural choices among delinquent, at-risk and not at-risk adolescents

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**Purpose.** The purpose of the present research was to investigate the relationships among goal-setting, reputation enhancement (striving to project a non-conforming, tough image) and delinquent behaviour in adolescents.

**Methods.** Participants were 80 incarcerated delinquent, 90 at-risk and 90 not at-risk adolescent males, ranging in age from 12 to 18 years, who completed four scales: the Adapted Self-Report Delinquency Scale, the Importance of Goals Scale, the Reputation Enhancement Scale, and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

**Results.** Four second-order factors (self-reported delinquency, self-presentation, conforming reputation, non-conforming reputation) were derived from the 31 first-order factors of the four scales. A series of multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) and univariate *F* tests were then performed on each of the four sets of dependent variables which revealed that the goals of delinquent and at-risk participants were more congruent with a non-conforming reputation, compared to those of the not at-risk participants who set goals which were more congruent with a conforming reputation.

**Conclusions.** The integration of goal-setting theory and reputation enhancement theory tested in this research provides an alternative analysis of delinquency using a social-psychological approach. Identification of the phenomenon of non-conforming reputation enhancement among delinquent and at-risk adolescents highlights the necessity to provide a differentiated intervention for working with these particular young people.

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Although much is known about the incidence and contexts of delinquent behaviour and its correlates, the motivations of delinquents themselves have been relatively neglected. Traditional theories which assume deficit or failure of socialization frameworks tend to place less emphasis on the purposes of the young person at risk than on the limitations of the individual or environment which are believed to have led to deviant behaviour (see Emler & Reicher, 1995, for review). Indeed, it is acknowledged that motivations, goals and behavioural choices are based on socialization experiences such as child abuse and neglect and family environment (Haapasalo & Pokela, 1999; Lewis, Mallouh, & Webb, 1989). However, Emler and Reicher's reputation enhancement theory has promoted recent interest in the behavioural choices that delinquent and at-risk youth make in order to establish and maintain a particular social identity. Accumulating evidence indicates that many adolescents find that successful execution of illegal acts is rewarding in terms of the status it affords in the eyes of their peers (Agnew, 1991; Carroll, Houghton, Hattie, & Durkin, 1999; Emler, 1984, 1990; Emler & Reicher, 1995; Houghton & Carroll, 1996; Oyserman & Saltz, 1993). This in turn suggests that, for some young people, delinquent activity is goal directed, and there is evidence that for some groups delinquent goals are consciously set and valued (Carroll, Durkin, Hattie, & Houghton, 1997). The purpose of the present report is to investigate the relationships among reputation, goal-setting and delinquent behaviour in adolescents.

Adolescence is the peak period for engagement in delinquent activities (see Emler & Reicher, 1995; Oyserman & Saltz, 1993). During this phase of the lifespan, individuals make important choices and commitments with long-term consequences for their lives (Durkin, 1995; Nurmi, 1991; Oyserman & Markus, 1990). Individuals determine how they relate to society, establish social and academic reputations, and set goals for their futures (Agnew, 1991; Emler & Reicher, 1995). According to Emler and Reicher's reputation enhancement theory (RET), the maintenance and enhancement of a reputation is essential to all adolescents. Reputations depend on the visibility to others of a person's attributes and actions. Certain audiences are particularly important—most prominently, peers. RET posits that individuals choose a particular self-image that they wish to promote before a peer audience, and this audience provides feedback. For people who have prospects of achievements within the prevailing social order, the criteria of a good reputation will be consonant with those of the system—such as success at school and career advancement. Other young people may perceive or experience these options as closed to them; their response is to seek to establish a self-enhancing reputation through other means and with reference to other criteria. For some, delinquent behaviours may be attractive because they offer a route to self-protection and standing among the peer community that would be otherwise denied (see also Agnew, 1991). In short, delinquency becomes a deliberate choice, selected in order to achieve a particular social identity (Oyserman & Saltz, 1993).

Striving to establish and maintain a particular reputation of any kind presents challenges. Young people have to decide which behaviours are appropriate to their goal, what levels of performance are desirable, and how to ensure that their achievements are visible to the preferred audience. Because delinquents have often

been regarded in terms of their deficiencies and personal limitations, relatively little is known of their goals and the relationships between goals and behavioural choices, although it is sometimes suggested that they have limited goals and lack a sense of direction (Kerr & Nelson, 1989; Thilagaraj, 1984). However, Carroll *et al.* (1997, 1999) have developed instruments to measure the goals and reputation enhancement of delinquent, at-risk and not at-risk youths, and found differences among these groups. Specifically, delinquent and at-risk adolescents attached significantly more importance to goals associated with developing a social image, in contrast to their non-delinquent peers who were more concerned with goals associated with an academic image (Carroll *et al.*, 1997). Delinquent and at-risk participants regarded themselves as non-conforming and wanted to be perceived by others in this way (e.g. they liked to be known for getting into trouble with the police, doing things against the law), while the non-delinquents had more conventional goals (e.g. being seen as a good person, as trustworthy and getting along well with others; Carroll *et al.*, 1999). Like their non-delinquent peers, then, delinquent adolescents had a commitment to building and maintaining a reputation: in this respect, they are goal oriented, although their goals are not endorsed by mainstream society.

Goal-setting theory, developed in organizational psychology (Locke & Latham, 1990), provides a basis for understanding the relationship between goals and behaviour. In this study, we propose an integration of goal-setting theory and RET to account for the interrelationship of goals, reputations and behavioural choices in delinquent and at-risk youth. Goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1984, 1990) is based on the proposition that conscious goals regulate human behaviour. The contents and specificity of a goal, the individual's commitment to it and the feedback he or she receives concerning progress are all held to influence outcome. For example, people tend to perform best when they have specific rather than diffuse goals, when they are committed to attaining them, and when they can obtain information about how they are faring (Locke & Latham, 1990). The theory predicts that the more specific the goals in any behavioural domain, the higher the probability of feedback (Locke, 1991; Locke & Latham, 1990; Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981). RET maintains that adolescents use various processes of self-regulation and display to preferred audiences to establish and maintain their reputations. Integrating these perspectives to account for the orientations and activities of delinquent and at-risk youth, we propose that many young people in these categories choose to build and maintain their reputations by selecting and accomplishing very specific and challenging goals (which for reasons discussed above happen to be non-conforming).

To test this account, this study examined the second-order factors underlying four different measures of adolescent behaviours, goals and reputations and compared three groups of young people: non-delinquent, at-risk youth and delinquents. Two other variables are also considered, namely family structure and ethnicity; these were included because the three groups differed from each other in these respects. Family background is very well established as one of the critical demographic variables related to delinquency (Farrington & West, 1990; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986), and in particular there is evidence that children in single

parent families are at greater risk of delinquency than children in two-parent families (Coleman & Ganong, 1990; Lawler & Lennings, 1992). Ethnicity is equally well established as an important factor, with some ethnic minority groups at significantly higher risk of involvement in or punishment for delinquency in Western societies (Ferrante, Loh, & Maller, 1998; Haney & Zimbardo, 1998; Harding & Maller, 1997; Johnston, 1991; Wilkie, 1991). The present study was conducted in Australia, where Aboriginal young people are at particular risk (Harding, 1993). Among Australian 10- to 17-year-olds, Aboriginals constitute only 4% of the population, yet 31.5% of juvenile convictions are of Aboriginal youth. Aboriginal youth are also more likely to be given a custodial sentence (33% of Aborigines processed by the juvenile justice system, compared to approximately 23% of non-Aborigines; Ferrante *et al.*, 1998). The explanation of ethnic differences in arrest and conviction rates is controversial (Hindelang, Hirschi, & Weis, 1981), but appears to involve biases in the justice system, cultural differences between majority and minority groups, and risk factors associated with economic disadvantage. Hence, Aboriginal young people would be expected to be more likely to respond to the context of disadvantage and prejudice by seeking to establish and maintain strong peer relations and tough, non-conforming reputations.

The following predictions were tested in the present study: (1) there would be significant differences in the goal and reputational orientations of delinquent, at-risk and not at-risk youths; (2) the goals and reputations of delinquent and at-risk youths would be those associated with enhancing and maintaining a non-conforming reputation while the goals and reputations of not at-risk youths would be associated with enhancing and maintaining a conforming reputation; and (3) delinquent and at-risk youths from single-parent families and those of Aboriginal descent would score significantly higher than delinquent and at-risk youths from intact families and of non-Aboriginal descent on self-reported delinquency, but would not differ significantly from other delinquent and at-risk youths on goal and reputational orientations.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants in this study were 260 adolescent males: 80 delinquent ( $M = 16.1$  years, range = 11.6–18.1 years), 90 at-risk ( $M = 14.4$  years, range = 12.2–17.2 years) and 90 not at-risk ( $M = 14.4$  years, range = 12.2–17.6 years) ranging in age from 11 to 18 years. Adolescent males were the primary focus because of the disproportionate number of males involved in crime compared with females (Wundersitz, 1993) and the higher proportion of male high school students identified as at-risk (Carroll, 1994, 1995; Houghton & Carroll, 1996). Delinquent participants were incarcerated in one of the two Western Australian detention centres located in the metropolitan area of Perth. High school students were assigned to either the at-risk or not at-risk categories according to the results obtained from behavioural and situational checklists established by the Western Australian Legislative Assembly (1992). The checklist comprises 12 behavioural indicators (e.g. truanting, disruptive behaviour) and 12 situational indicators (e.g. suspended, expelled, in time-out rooms) and was completed by the students' classroom teachers and/or school psychologists. If at least three of the 12 behavioural and at least three of the 12 situational indicators from the list of risk factors were checked for an individual student, then he was assigned to the at-risk category.

Of the incarcerated delinquent sample, 59% were of Aboriginal descent compared to 17% in the at-risk group and 6% in the not at-risk group. These proportions of Aborigines in the three groups were found to be significantly different ( $\chi^2(2) = 68.61, p < .001$ ) and necessitated that group differences be investigated according to ethnicity (Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal). Population figures show that of the Western Australian 10- to 17-year-old high school students, 4% are of Aboriginal descent (Ferrante *et al.*, 1998).

Of incarcerated delinquents, 30% were living in a two-parent family compared with 49% of the at-risk group, and 72% of the non-delinquent group. These proportions of participants from two-parent and non-two parent families in the three groups were significantly different ( $\chi^2(2) = 30.36, p < .001$ ), and necessitated that group differences be investigated according to family structure (two-parent, non two-parent).

The not at-risk group consisted of boys who did not meet the above criteria for at-risk status and did not have official records of juvenile offences. It is important to bear in mind that they are categorized, for present purposes, by default rather than by objective life history data which would confirm that they had never been involved in any risk-taking or delinquent activities. Like the other participants, they were requested to complete self-report measures of delinquent involvement.

### Settings

The study was conducted in two detention centres and four high schools. The furniture layout in the classroom was identical for all participants. Student enrolments at the participating schools ranged from 788 to 1375. All of the schools were in low to middle socio-economic status metropolitan regions characterized by high percentages of blue collar workers with low household incomes.

### Materials

The four scales administered were as follows.

The *Adapted Self-Report Delinquency Scale* (Carroll, Durkin, Houghton, & Hattie, 1996) comprises 38 items with seven subscales: theft and burglary, motor vehicle offences, drug-related offences, assault, vandalism, school-related offences, and public disorder. Reliabilities of the subscales ranged from .67 to .91. In addition, one item reporting police warnings and one item reporting court appearances were included in the scale to gain a measure of self-reported official delinquency status. A further four items were interspersed among the delinquency items in an effort to detect any tendency for an unusually high level of social desirability (Mak, 1993). The readability of the scale was at a year four level (approximately 9 years of age), making it accessible to most individuals intended for inclusion in the present research (Flesch, 1948). Participants were asked to respond to each of the items of the scale by placing a tick in the box labelled 'yes' if they had been involved in the delinquent activity during the past 12 months or to place a tick in the box labelled 'no' if they had not been involved in the activity during the past 12 months.

The *Importance of Goals Scale* (see Carroll *et al.*, 1997) consists of a list of 50 goals that can be classified into eight subscales: educational, career, interpersonal, freedom/autonomy, self-presentation, reputation, delinquency, and physical. Estimated reliabilities of the subscales range from .62 to .84. For each goal item, participants are asked to choose on a 3-point Likert scale (very important, sometimes important, not at all important) the response that best describes how important each goal is to them.

The *Reputation Enhancement Scale* (see Carroll *et al.*, 1999) comprises seven dimensions: *friendliness* (eight items determining the value participants place on friendships, group membership and loyalty and measured using a 3-point scale anchored with often, sometimes, never); *admiration* (30 items examining admiration of law-abiding and law-breaking activities and measured using a 2-point yes–no response format); *self-perception* (13 items measuring how participants think others view them and using a 4-point response format anchored with the words yes, often, sometimes, no); *ideal public self* (13 items identical to self-perception measuring how participants would ideally like others to view them); *self-description* (nine semantic differentials measuring how participants describe themselves in terms of power and activity attributes and participants are asked how they rate themselves now using a 4-point

Likert scale); *ideal private self* (nine items identical to self-description measuring how participants would ideally like to be described in terms of power and activity attributes); and *communication of events* (45 items measuring patterns of disclosure of events to adults and/or peers by adolescents and using a 3-point response format with the anchors of yes, perhaps, and no). Internal consistency for the subscales range from .59 to .92.

The *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* (Rosenberg, 1965, 1979), which has been described as a brief and thorough measure of global self-esteem with  $\alpha$  coefficients of .74 and .77 (McCarthy & Hoge, 1982) comprises 10 items. In line with McCarthy and Hoge's (1984, p. 398) suggestion that 'researchers should look elsewhere than self-esteem for a fuller understanding of delinquency', the present research incorporated a measure of self-esteem as an aspect of individuals' self-presentation.

In addition, demographic information (e.g. age, gender, nationality, socio-economic status and family constellation) was obtained from participants.

### *Procedure*

Consent forms were sent to the parents of all delinquent adolescents in the two detention centres at the time of the study and to all students in Grades 8–11 in each of the four schools. All delinquent participants who agreed to participate were included in the study. For the school sample, of the total number of consent forms distributed, 88% were completed and returned. Teachers and/or school psychologists were then asked to complete the behavioural and situational checklist (see description under 'Participants') for each of the individuals who had agreed to participate and individuals were assigned to the at-risk or non-delinquent category based on the outcomes of the checklists. A 10% random sample was then obtained from each of the categories (i.e. at-risk and non-delinquent) from each of the year groups in each of the schools.

On the basis of advice from juvenile justice and school personnel, the scales were administered to incarcerated delinquents and high school students in small groups of four to six students. This was to cater for anticipated literacy difficulties and problems with sustained attention. The scales took approximately 45 minutes to complete. The format for the presentation of the scales was identical for each of the participants.

## **Results**

Previous exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses derived 31 first-order factors from the scales (see Carroll *et al.*, 1996, 1997, 1999). The 31 first-order factors comprised seven factors from the Adapted Self-Report Delinquency Scale, 15 factors from the Reputation Enhancement Scale, eight factors from the Importance of Goals Scale, and one factor from Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale. A maximum-likelihood confirmatory factor analysis was undertaken using MICFA (Krakowski & Hattie, 1993) to confirm the second-order factor structure. The Tucker–Lewis index was found to be greater than .9, and the factor loadings were all statistically significant and all items loaded meaningfully on their appropriate factor.

The analysis confirmed the existence of the following four second-order factors: self-reported delinquency, self-presentation, conforming reputation, and non-conforming reputation, indicating that they were conceptually interrelated and meaningful subsets by which to interpret the data. Table 1 presents the average factor loadings and correlations among the four factors over the 31 first-order factors. Descriptive statistics for the three risk groups across each factor are also reported in the table. As noted in the correlation matrix in Table 1, self-reported delinquency and non-conforming reputation were highly correlated but were kept separate as they clearly loaded on separate factors. As anticipated, self-reported

delinquency and conforming reputation, and conforming and non-conforming reputation, loaded negatively. Given the opposing nature of the activities comprising the factors, this was to be expected.

A 3 (risk level)  $\times$  2 (ethnicity)  $\times$  2 (family structure) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed on each of the four sets of dependent variables (self-reported delinquency, self-presentation, conforming reputation, and non-conforming reputation). Independent variables were risk level (delinquent, at-risk, not at-risk), ethnicity (Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal), and family structure (two-parent, non two-parent). There were very small cell sizes for the three-way interaction term and, consequently, the three-way interaction was added to the residual.

### *Self-reported delinquency*

The results of the 3 (risk level)  $\times$  2 (ethnicity)  $\times$  2 (family structure) MANOVA based on the scores on the second-order factors showed a significant interaction between risk level and ethnicity, as reported in Table 2.

Subsequent univariate  $F$  tests confirmed a significant risk level  $\times$  ethnicity interaction for assault ( $F(2,248) = 7.78, p < .001$ ), and motor vehicle offences ( $F(2,248) = 4.72, p < .01$ ). The interaction effect for assault indicates that non-Aboriginal delinquents reported significantly more involvement in assault ( $M = 6.3$ ) when compared to all other groups (non-Aboriginal at-risk and not at-risk = 4.8 and 4.0, respectively, and Aboriginal delinquent, at-risk and not at-risk = 5.1, 4.6 and 4.0, respectively). The interaction effect for motor vehicle offences indicates that delinquents (non-Aboriginal delinquent = 12.7; Aboriginal delinquent = 12.1) reported significantly more involvement in motor vehicle offences than at-risk and not at-risk groups. The Aboriginal at-risk group ( $M = 10.4$ ) reported more motor vehicle offences than the non-Aboriginal at-risk group ( $M = 9.0$ ). The means for the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal not at-risk groups for motor vehicle offences were 7.6 and 7.4, respectively. The smaller sample sizes of the not at-risk and at-risk Aboriginal groups, when compared to the Aboriginal delinquent groups, should be borne in mind. No other interaction effect was found. The main effects for the other variables, therefore, are now interpreted.

There were significant main effects for risk level and ethnicity. While there were multivariate effects for ethnicity, univariate  $F$  tests revealed no significant differences on the self-reported delinquency variables. Any effects that occurred appear, then, to be accounted for in the interaction. Univariate  $F$  tests for risk level based on the first-order factors, shown in Table 3, revealed significant differences among the three risk level groups on each of the self-reported delinquency variables.

An examination of the means in Fig. 1, using the Scheffé multiple comparison procedure, revealed the differences between each of the three groups to be significant for six of the seven variables (motor vehicle offences, public disorder, theft, drug-related offences, assault, school-related offences). For each of these six variables, the delinquent group had significantly higher levels of self-reported delinquency than the at-risk and not at-risk groups with the exception of public disorder. For public disorder, the at-risk group scored significantly higher

**Table 1.** Factor loadings for the 31 first-order factors of the four subsets and means and standard deviations (in brackets) on each factor for the three risk level groups

Factor name	Factor loading				M (SD)		
	I	II	III	IV	Delinquent	At-risk	Not at-risk
Self-reported delinquency							
Theft and burglary (6)	.86	-	-	-	10.0 (1.5)	9.5 (2.0)	7.2 (0.90)
Motor vehicle offences (7)	.80	-	-	-	12.4 (1.7)	9.7 (2.4)	7.5 (0.93)
Drug-related offences (6)	.82	-	-	-	9.6 (1.6)	8.4 (2.1)	6.5 (0.96)
Assault (4)	.71	-	-	-	5.6 (1.3)	4.7 (0.85)	4.0 (0.23)
School-related offences (3)	.70	-	-	-	5.3 (0.94)	4.7 (1.3)	3.7 (1.1)
Vandalism (6)	.73	-	-	-	8.9 (1.9)	8.8 (1.6)	6.8 (1.1)
Public disorder (6)	.61	-	-	-	8.7 (1.5)	9.5 (1.7)	7.2 (1.0)
Self-presentation							
Self-presentation goals (6)	-	.68	-	-	10.5 (3.1)	11.2 (3.7)	9.9 (2.8)
Reputation goals (5)	-	.75	-	-	10.4 (3.1)	10.2 (2.9)	10.7 (2.3)
Freedom/autonomy goals (7)	-	.52	-	-	16.6 (2.7)	17.1 (3.2)	14.8 (2.7)
Physical goals (4)	-	.57	-	-	9.4 (2.5)	8.6 (2.8)	9.2 (2.3)
Interpersonal goals (7)	-	.29	-	-	18.1 (2.8)	17.5 (2.6)	18.7 (2.1)
Reputational self-perception (4)	-	.65	-	-	8.5 (2.1)	8.5 (2.1)	7.8 (1.6)
Power/eval self-description (6)	-	.49	-	-	31.7 (5.4)	31.4 (6.1)	30.4 (5.2)
Reputation ideal public self (4)	-	.69	-	-	7.8 (2.4)	8.4 (2.4)	8.3 (2.0)
Power/eval ideal private self (6)	-	.44	-	-	38.1 (6.7)	38.7 (7.3)	41.4 (5.2)
Self-esteem (10)	-	.28	-	-	27.6 (2.6)	27.1 (3.4)	29.4 (3.5)



Table 1. Continued

Factor name	Factor loading				M (SD)		
	I	II	III	IV	Delinquent	At-risk	Not at-risk
Conforming reputation							
Conforming ideal public self (3)	—	—	.58	—	8.0 (1.2)	7.5 (1.7)	8.2 (1.0)
Conforming self-perception (3)	—	—	.52	—	7.5 (1.5)	7.1 (1.3)	7.8 (1.2)
Friendliness (8)	—	—	.63	—	18.5 (3.1)	18.5 (2.7)	19.6 (2.1)
Educational goals (7)	—	—	.49	—	14.2 (3.7)	15.6 (3.1)	18.0 (2.1)
Career goals (3)	—	—	.34	—	7.1 (1.6)	7.3 (1.5)	7.3 (1.6)
Admiration of law-abiding act (12)	—	—	.58	—	25.8 (5.4)	24.3 (5.2)	26.2 (4.0)
Adult communication (18)	—	—	.25	—	42.9 (8.7)	41.8 (9.4)	43.5 (9.6)
Non-conforming reputation							
Activity ideal private self (3)	—	—	—	.64	7.5 (4.2)	9.2 (4.3)	4.9 (2.1)
Activity self-description (3)	—	—	—	.70	11.1 (3.9)	11.5 (3.7)	6.9 (3.3)
Non-conforming ideal public self (6)	—	—	—	.76	10.4 (3.9)	10.0 (4.0)	6.8 (1.4)
Delinquency goals (4)	—	—	—	.67	6.2 (2.2)	6.1 (2.4)	4.4 (0.8)
Admiration of law-breaking act (18)	—	—	—	.67	33.4 (8.2)	33.5 (9.1)	24.5 (4.8)
Non-conforming self-perception (6)	—	—	—	.82	14.2 (2.4)	12.0 (3.2)	8.2 (2.5)
Peer communication (18)	—	—	—	.29	36.3 (9.4)	37.8 (9.7)	33.7 (7.7)
Correlations							
Factor I	1.0						
Factor II	.11	1.0					
Factor III	-.24	.57	1.0				
Factor IV	.75	.23	-.42	1.0			

Note. Numbers in brackets after factor name equal number of items that comprise the factor. For Figures 1 and 2, the means are divided by the number of items so that comparisons across factors can be made.

**Table 2.** Multivariate *F* tests for self-reported delinquency, self-presentation, conforming reputation and non-conforming reputation ( $p < .05$ )

Effect	d.f.	Multivariate <i>F</i> value	<i>p</i> value
Self-report delinquency			
Ethnicity × family structure	7,242	0.44	.87
Risk level × family structure	14,484	0.97	.48
Risk level × ethnicity	14,484	2.13	< .01
Family structure	7,242	1.13	.34
Ethnicity	7,242	3.49	< .001
Risk level	14,484	13.70	< .001
Self-presentation			
Ethnicity × family structure	10,239	0.42	.94
Risk level × family structure	20,478	0.71	.82
Risk level × ethnicity	20,478	1.06	.39
Family structure	10,239	0.50	.89
Ethnicity	10,239	1.54	.13
Risk level	20,478	1.87	< .01
Conforming reputation			
Ethnicity × family structure	7,242	0.61	.75
Risk level × family structure	14,484	1.34	.18
Risk level × ethnicity	14,484	1.13	.33
Family structure	7,242	1.05	.39
Ethnicity	7,242	1.37	.22
Risk level	14,484	2.02	< .001
Non-conforming reputation			
Ethnicity × family structure	7,242	1.14	.34
Risk level × family structure	14,484	0.87	.59
Risk level × ethnicity	14,484	2.22	< .001
Family structure	7,242	2.19	.04
Ethnicity	7,242	0.69	.68
Risk level	14,484	6.67	< .001

compared to the not at-risk and delinquent groups. On vandalism, the delinquent and at-risk groups scored similarly (8.7 and 8.6, respectively), but differed significantly from the not at-risk group.

#### *Self-presentation*

The results of the MANOVA (see Table 2) revealed no significant interactions but a significant multivariate main effect for risk level. Follow-up univariate *F* tests indicated that the only variable that reached significance was self-esteem ( $F(2,248) = 3.31, p = .04$ ). An examination of the mean using the Scheffé multiple

**Table 3.** Univariate *F* tests for variables of self-reported delinquency and non-conforming reputation with independent variable of risk level  $\alpha (2, 248) = < .01$ 

Dependent variable	<i>M</i> squared	<i>F</i> value	<i>p</i> value	Effect sizes		
				Del-n <sup>c</sup>	Del-at <sup>d</sup>	At-not <sup>e</sup>
Self-reported delinquency						
Theft and burglary	67.91	29.35	< .0001	2.92	1.22	1.70
Motor vehicle	191.09	62.87	< .0001	3.67	2.27	1.40
Drug-related	72.14	28.28	< .0001	2.53	0.98	1.55
Assault	19.64	26.55	< .0001	1.86	1.05	0.81
School-related	9.12	10.13	< .0001	1.80	0.67	1.12
Vandalism	19.87	7.64	< .0001	1.30	0.66	1.24
Public disorder	22.38	10.04	< .0001	1.04	-0.60	1.60
Non-conforming reputation						
Activity self-description	42.30	3.10	.05	1.15	-0.11	1.26
Activity ideal private self	58.95	3.62	.03	0.73	-0.48	1.22
Non-conf <sup>a</sup> self-perception	216.03	30.93	< .0001	2.69	-0.99	1.70
Non-conf <sup>a</sup> ideal pub self	77.13	7.36	< .001	1.26	0.14	1.12
Admiration of l-b <sup>b</sup> activity	520.02	3.35	< .0001	1.32	-0.15	1.47
Delinquency goals	21.83	2.10	< .004	1.02	0.06	0.96
Peer communication	0.97	0.02	0.99	0.30	-0.17	0.43

<sup>a</sup>Non-conf = Non-conforming; <sup>b</sup>l-b = law-breaking; <sup>c</sup>Del-n = Delinquent-not at-risk; <sup>d</sup>Del-at = Delinquent-at-risk;

<sup>e</sup>At-not = At-risk-not at-risk.

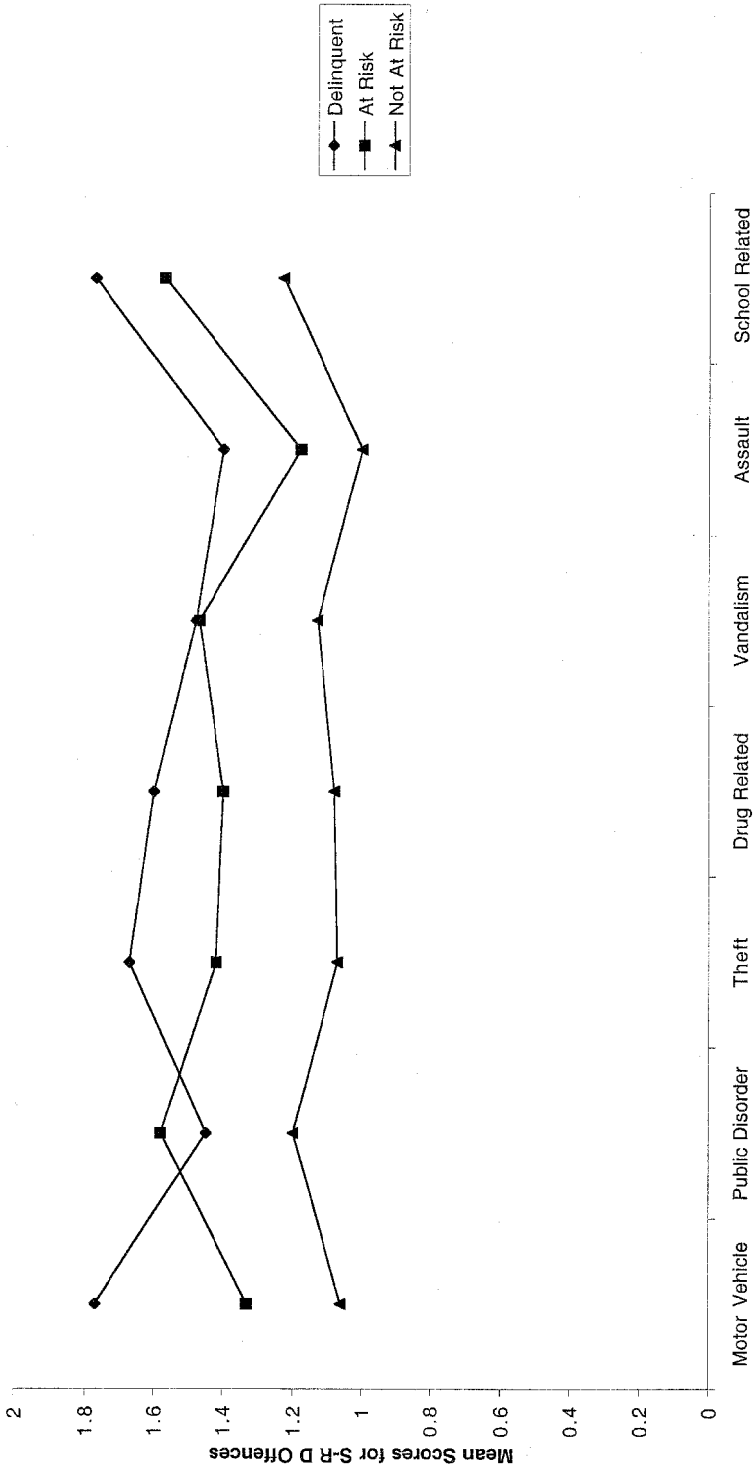
comparison procedure indicated that the not at-risk group ( $M = 29.39$ ) scored significantly higher than each of the at-risk ( $M = 27.11$ ) and delinquent ( $M = 27.65$ ) groups.

#### *Conforming reputation*

The results of the MANOVA (see Table 2), revealed no significant interactions, but a significant multivariate main effect for risk level. In follow-up univariate *F* tests, the only variable that reached significance was educational goals ( $F(2,248) = 5.56$ ,  $p < .005$ ). An examination of the means using the Scheffé multiple comparison procedure indicated that there were significant differences between the not at-risk ( $M = 18.0$ ) and at-risk ( $M = 15.6$ ) groups and between the not at-risk and delinquent group ( $M = 14.2$ ) for the dependent variable of educational goals ( $ps < .01$ ). The not at-risk group reported educational goals to be significantly more important than the other two groups.

#### *Non-conforming reputation*

The results of the MANOVA revealed a significant interaction between risk level and ethnicity (see Table 2). Subsequent univariate *F* tests confirmed a significant



Self-Reported Delinquency (S-R D) Offence Variables

Figure 1. Means for the self-report delinquency offence variables by risk level.

risk level by ethnicity interaction for admiration of law-breaking activities ( $F(2,248) = 3.35, p < .04$ ). The interaction effect for admiration of law-breaking activities reflects the findings that non-Aboriginal at-risk ( $M = 35.3$ ) and Aboriginal delinquent ( $M = 35.1$ ) participants reported the highest (almost identical) levels of admiration, while the Aboriginal not at-risk participants ( $M = 23.4$ ) reported the lowest levels of admiration. The mean scores for the non-Aboriginal delinquent and not at-risk groups and the Aboriginal at-risk group were 32.1, 25.2 and 31.3, respectively.

A significant multivariate main effect for risk level was identified. The results of the univariate  $F$  tests, shown in Table 3, revealed significant differences among the three risk level groups for the dependent variables of non-conforming self-perception, non-conforming ideal public self, admiration of law-breaking activities, and delinquency goals.

An examination of the means in Fig. 2 using the Scheffé multiple comparison procedure indicated significant differences between the means for each of the risk level groups for the variable of non-conforming self-perception. There were significant differences between the not at-risk and at-risk groups and between the not at-risk and delinquent groups for non-conforming ideal public self, delinquency goals, and admiration of law-breaking activities. There were no differences, however, for the at-risk vs. delinquent groups.

The results indicate that the delinquent and at-risk participants of this study have and wish to have a more non-conforming reputation than members of the not at-risk group. Delinquency goals are significantly more important to members of the delinquent and at-risk groups; they perceive and describe themselves as having more non-conforming reputations; they would like to be perceived (both in public and in private) as having more non-conforming reputations; and they have more admiration of law-breaking activities.

## Discussion

Three predictions were tested in the present study pertaining to the goal and reputational orientations of delinquent, at-risk and not at-risk youths, the types of goals and reputations of the three risk level groups, and the influence of single-parent families and Aboriginality on levels of self-reported delinquency.

Our first prediction was that there would be differences in the goal and reputational orientations of delinquent, at-risk and not at-risk youths. This prediction was supported. There were significant differences in goal orientations (e.g. educational, delinquency) and the types of reputations (conforming, non-conforming) that the three risk level groups wanted to achieve. The finding that educational goals were reported as significantly more important to the not at-risk group corresponds with results of Nicholls (Duda & Nicholls, 1992; Nicholls, 1984, 1989), who identified higher task orientation in young people who achieve at school. Similarly, Wentzel (1989) found that the goal-setting patterns of high achieving students were associated with knowledge and study skills, and were congruent with the goals held by their educational institutions. The present findings

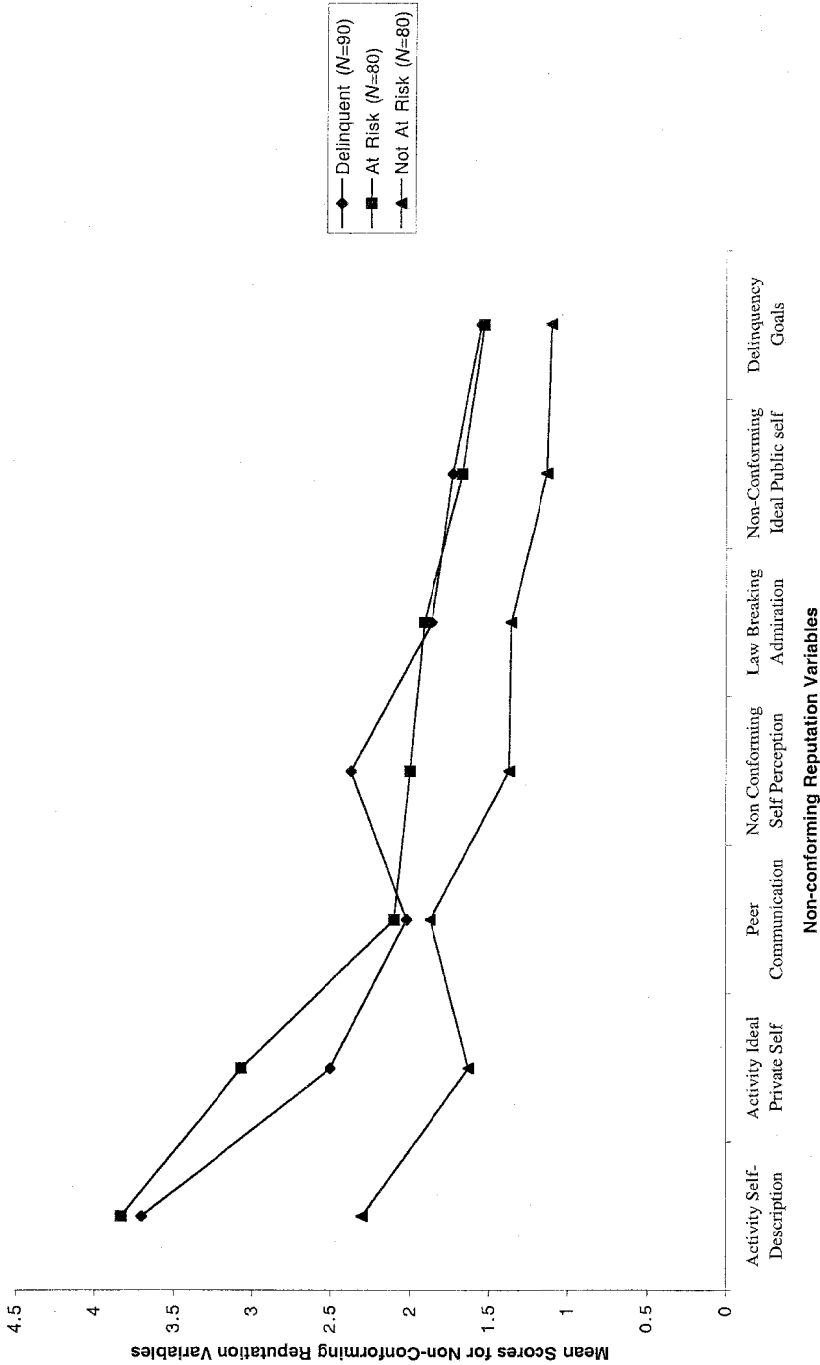


Figure 2. Means for the non-conforming reputation variables by risk level.

not only support previous research, but also highlight a different orientation to academic and school-related goals among at-risk adolescents. It may be that at-risk adolescents are in a state of transitory disaffection with school and organized school activities. At the same time, the findings that at-risk adolescents reported higher educational goal orientation than their delinquent counterparts, and that they are still attending school at least some of the time, point to the possibility that school may act as a protective factor for some young people at risk of making the transition to a delinquent lifestyle. The finding that delinquent youth showed a significantly greater commitment to developing delinquent reputations is important both as an indicator of the validity of the group categories used in this study and as a guide to the social motivations of young people at the early stages of potential criminal careers.

In the present study, members of the delinquent and at-risk groups reported themselves as non-conforming (e.g. one who breaks rules) and wanting to be perceived by others in this way (e.g. getting into trouble with the police, doing things against the law). They admired law-breaking activities (e.g. outracing police cars, drug dealing) and delinquency goals were significantly more important to them compared with the not at-risk group. The importance of peer status and delinquency relative to other, more conforming social and academic goals calls into question the amount of effort that these adolescents are prepared to contribute to achieve their desired delinquent outcomes (Oyserman *et al.*, 1998). Whether the goal-directed activities and energies exerted by adolescents through delinquent activities can be rechannelled into equally adrenalin-filled yet less costly burdens on society is an important task for professionals and service providers to undertake.

Our second prediction was that adolescents base their reputations on different types of activities according to the image they wish to portray and that they wish others to attribute to them. This prediction was derived from RET (Emler, 1984, 1990; Emler & Reicher, 1995). The present findings lend support to RET, demonstrating that not at-risk adolescents seek conforming type reputations and, in line with this desired reputation, their goals are based on educational aspirations and are conventional and law-abiding with respect to the family, school and wider society. Also consistent with RET, the delinquent and the at-risk participants seek non-conforming, delinquent reputations: they strive to be seen and valued by their peers as tough and law-breaking. The findings are also consistent with goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990) in that delinquent and at-risk adolescents professed goals that were congruent with their desire to achieve a public non-conforming reputation, substantiating the importance of the overt nature of delinquent and risk-taking activities. Carroll *et al.* (1997) established that for the not at-risk adolescents an academic image was deemed important, whereas for the delinquent and at-risk adolescents a social image was given priority.

The third prediction tested in the present study was that delinquent and at-risk youths from single-parent families and those of Aboriginal descent would score significantly higher than delinquent and at-risk youths from intact families and those of non-Aboriginal descent on self-reported delinquency, but would not differ significantly from other delinquent and at-risk youths on goal and reputational orientations. This prediction was not fully supported. In respect of family structure,

although there were significant differences in the family composition for each of the risk level groups, levels of self-reported delinquency, importance of goals and types of reputations of participants did not differ significantly as a function of family type. Regardless of whether individuals were from two-parent or non two-parent families, participants set goals which were congruent with the kinds of reputations they wished to achieve. It may be that other family-related variables aside from family structure are important in the development of delinquent motivation and goals. There is an association, for example, between child abuse and subsequent antisocial and aggressive behaviours (see Lewis *et al.*, 1989, for a review). Negative child-rearing practices involving traumatic and abusive childhood experiences have also been found to occur commonly in the lives of young people who commit crimes (Haapasalo & Pokela, 1999). Comparing backgrounds solely on the basis of family composition is not akin to measuring quality of parenting or exposure to domestic abuse. Future research is necessary that addresses these variables more directly.

In respect of ethnicity, significant differences pertaining to ethnic status and self-reported delinquency (assault and motor vehicle offences) and Aboriginality and reputation (admiration for law-breaking activities) were found, but these were not all in the directions consistent with expectations. Non-aboriginal delinquents reported significantly more involvement in assault than did each of the other groups. Hence, Aboriginal youth were in general no more likely to report physical aggression, contrary to the expectation that members of this relatively vulnerable minority group would find themselves forced to project a tough reputation for self-protective purposes. On the other hand, in terms of reputational orientations, admiration of law-breaking activities was higher among Aboriginal delinquents than Aboriginal at-risk youth, whereas for non-Aboriginal adolescents the opposite was true. It may be that for Aboriginal adolescents, a 'passage of rites' based on a hierarchy of law-breaking activities is in operation (Carroll, Houghton, & Odgers, 1998), but further research is necessary to confirm this interpretation and to explain why the pattern differs from that found among non-Aboriginal youth. We found also that the Aboriginal at-risk group reported more motor vehicle offences than the non-Aboriginal at-risk group. It may be that this offence has a particular significance among at-risk adolescents from this background: for example, there is anecdotal evidence that car stealing is regarded among the (at-risk) peer Aboriginal community as a valued skill, a means of demonstrating one's commitment to the group, and a pragmatic adaptation to the need for transport while having low incomes (Carroll *et al.*, 1996). It was stressed above, however, that small cell sizes in this analysis render our findings and interpretations tentative at this stage; additional research including larger proportions of this minority group would enable us to examine more extensively the possibility that reputational aspirations and delinquency goals do interact with ethnicity and/or general social status within the broader community.

Although not surprising, significant differences were found between the three groups for self-reported delinquency, with members of the delinquent group having higher levels of self-reported delinquency than the other two groups, and the at-risk group having higher levels of self-reported delinquency than the not at-risk group.



These findings do support the validity of the group categories employed in the study and confirm that we were testing groups of different levels of criminal involvement. An interesting exception to the straightforward ordinal difference among the groups is in respect of public disorder offences, where the at-risk group had the highest mean score (see Fig. 1). It is worth noting that the types of offences which make up the public disorder variable are relatively minor (e.g. wag school, gone to see an R-rated film) compared with offences within other variables. The higher incidence of this type of behaviour among this group relative to their incarcerated peers may reflect the fact that the at-risk adolescents are still in the community (imprisoned delinquents cannot commit truancy), but they are also high relative to their not at-risk peers, and this suggests that these minor offences are precursors to more serious transgressions.

This research draws upon an integration of two theories. Following RET, we propose that many adolescents deliberately choose delinquency in order to attain and maintain a particular social identity. Drawing on goal-setting theory, we propose that these young people organize their behaviour, including delinquent behaviour, purposefully to achieve the goals commensurate with their identity aspirations. Adolescents base their reputations on academic, conforming social and/or non-conforming social goals which often relate to the resources and opportunities that they have experienced or to which they have access. Peers who comprise the immediate audience provide essential feedback, which not only confirms the individual's choice of his or her own self-image, but also emphasizes to the individual the importance of visibility of actions. By making actions public, individuals commit themselves to achieving a certain reputation among peers. Inextricably linked to commitment is the degree of difficulty associated with the task in hand which in turn influences the reputation an individual acquires. In sum, the present findings, together with a growing body of evidence from earlier research (Emler, 1990; Goldsmith *et al.*, 1989; Oyserman *et al.*, 1998; Wentzel, 1989), support this integration, demonstrating the importance of a non-conforming reputation to delinquents and other at-risk adolescents and showing that behaviours and values are focused on the goal of maintaining this reputation.

The outcomes of this research have direct implications for psychologists working with young offenders. The Importance of Goals and Reputation Enhancement Scales have considerable potential in the identification of young people who may be at risk for delinquency. The scales provide psychologists with effective tools with which to gauge the orientation of goals and reputations from the perspective of adolescents themselves. Although there are well-established causes and correlates of delinquency (e.g. Farrington & West, 1990), the findings of the present research indicate that, regardless of these core factors, for at least some adolescents reputational status is a powerful motivational determinant in delinquent involvement. Identification of the phenomenon of non-conforming reputation enhancement among delinquent and at-risk adolescents highlights the necessity to provide a differentiated intervention for working with these particular young people. For example, intervention strategies may be more soundly based, and more effective, if they take into account the developmental social-psychological needs of such adolescents to achieve reputations and peer esteem. A major part of the challenge

of working with these young people may be to find ways to empower them to seek and to benefit from positive rather than antisocial identities.

In conclusion, the integration of goal-setting theory and RET tested in the present research provides an alternative analysis of delinquency using a social-psychological approach. The integration of the two theories is based on the premise that delinquency is a relatively common alternative chosen by adolescents because it serves to provide critical feedback about their own self-image and status and it assists adolescents to interpret the image and status of others. What is proposed is that some adolescents deliberately choose delinquency in order to pursue a delinquent reputation as an alternative identity.

Given the findings of the present research that have contributed to the rather neglected area of the motivations of delinquents, future studies might utilize longitudinal methods to document the paths of influence in the relationships between demographic, family and school variables, goal and reputational orientations, and delinquent behaviours. Further, by comparing how the goal orientations and reputational profiles of male and female at-risk and not at-risk individuals change over the primary and high school years, a greater understanding of significant motivational and social predictors of delinquent behaviours may be established.

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