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Exploring the criminal lifestyle: a grounded theory study of Maltese male habitual offenders

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Abstract

Exploring the lifestyles of habitual criminals throws light on the processes of becoming and remaining a criminal, the development of criminal careers and on possible interventions geared towards reversing those careers. This paper draws on narratives of habitual criminals discussing their life stories and shows how the criminal lifestyle is characterised by distinctive behavioural patterns and sustained by a particular 'habitus'. The lifestyle offers advantages to those who choose to pursue it. The development of commitment to the criminal lifestyle is put forward as an important defining factor of whether young men stop offending as they approach adulthood and the assumption of adult roles, or whether they continue to offend, often with increasing severity, well into their adult years. As a result of commitment, the actor comes to reject alternatives and defines himself according to the behaviour he is consistently engaging in. Once a social identity has been established, rejection of that identity becomes even more difficult. The criminal lifestyle is not only maintained by penalties when the offender attempts to return to conventional living but is also supported by rewards associated with the criminal lifestyle and supported by role identification, specific attitudes, cognitions.

Introduction

Exploring the lifestyles of habitual criminals throws light on the development of criminal careers and on possible interventions geared towards reversing those careers. It is difficult to comprehend what it is like to be a habitual offender whose central life interest is crime and whose daily activities revolve around offending. Studying lifestyles is an obvious preliminary to detailed specification of how the behaviour patterns constituting these lifestyles are acquired by individuals (Cressey 1993), an investigation at the heart of the criminological enterprise for nearly two centuries. It contributes to an understanding of the processes of becoming and remaining a criminal. This paper addresses a number of research questions: Is the criminal lifestyle significantly different from conventional lifestyles, which can also be very diverse? If this is the case, what makes it distinctive? What are the advantages of a criminal lifestyle that make it attractive and contribute to commitment to criminality? What are the implications for the construction of identity? Since Sobel (1981) emphasises that the term 'lifestyle' has been used too casually, this paper will initially review theoretical developments on lifestyle within the disciplines of sociology and psychology and furthermore apply these to understanding the role lifestyles play in criminal career trajectories. To this effect it will draw on narratives of habitual criminals discussing their life stories.

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Unpacking the lifestyle concept

While in sociology lifestyles are generally viewed as 'lived, identity forming, and most often consumer based entities' (Miles 2000:15), in psychology the interpersonal orientation is emphasised and lifestyle is viewed as 'a characteristic way in which individuals learn in their families of origin to pursue social significance in interpersonal relationships' (Schwartz and Waldo 2003: p 1). In criminology the concept of lifestyle has been utilised successfully by Hindelang et al (1978) to explain criminal victimisation and more recently by Walters (1990: 50) who claims that crime can be conceptualised in lifestyle terms. This results in a fruitful array of applications of the concept.

It has been proposed that in late modernity lifestyles can provide an alternative conceptual focus to the concept of subculture, the declining value of which has been argued by various authors including Miles (2000), Muggleton (1997), Widdicombe and Woofitt (1995) and McRobbie (1991). Lifestyles have become more individualistic than sub cultural (Muggleton, 1997). Chaney (1996:11) describes lifestyles as 'functional responses to modernity'. Miles (2000) discusses how lifestyles are an expression of the relationship between the person and society and provide that much needed conceptual bridge between the study of societal structures and human agency and consequently between the classical and positivist schools of criminology.. Both Marx and Weber link lifestyle or 'style of life' to location within the social structure, the former in terms of one's position in relation to the process of production and the latter in terms of status groups. However, recently sociologists have discussed how class is no longer considered to be as determining of people's lifestyles as it used to be (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). The study of lifestyles has expanded to include leisure and consumption especially in relation to the construction of identity (Moorhouse 1983). Giddens (1991) argues that in modern society everyone 'chooses' a lifestyle. However, while individuals apply meanings to events in the social world such meanings are influenced by their power to access social resources. Giddens' concept of 'legitimation' (1986) indicates that societal norms influence which lifestyles are considered to be legitimate. It is in this context that personal identities are negotiated. In Giddens conceptualisation, 'lifestyle' is not only about wealth and consumption. Rather, the concept is used to understand a range of choices including attitudes and beliefs

The notion of lifestyle sounds somewhat trivial because it is so often thought of in terms of superficial consumerism: lifestyles as suggested by glossy magazines and images. But there is something much more fundamental going on than such a conception suggests: in conditions of high modernity, we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense we are forced to do so – we have no choice but to choose. A lifestyle can be defined as a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self identity. (1991: 81)

Lifestyle is intrinsically tied up with identity construction and the developing trajectory of selfhood. Personal decisions contribute to routine practices and according to Giddens (1991) such choices constitute the decision not only of how to act but who to be: the reflexive project of the self. This conceptualisation of lifestyle as overtly related to identity construction will be adopted in this paper. Gauntlett (2002) likens a lifestyle to a genre of film. Humans, as 'directors' of their own life narratives choose amongst a variety of lifestyles. A lifestyle implies unity of behaviours, habits or orientation and gives a sense of self to the individual – a sense of 'ontological security' (Giddens 1991: 82). Thus the habitual offender committed to a criminal lifestyle sees conventional options (such as regular employment) as jarring with their conception of self and are unlikely to pursue it. A lifestyle requires commitment, best defined as a refutation of alternative courses of action (Author 2006) and is influenced by group pressures, location in the social structure and role models.

Bourdieu's (1979) concept of 'habitus' also helps elucidate the understanding of lifestyles. Habitus is adopted through upbringing and education. On the individual level, the concept refers to "a

system of acquired dispositions functioning on the practical level as categories of perception and assessment... as well as being the organizing principles of action" (1990:13). Habitus has several components the most notable of which are ways of thinking and consequently ways of acting and tastes. Habitus involves a set of dispositions, which may be likened to schemata. Schemata are socially, acquired templates for the perception of the social world that consequently impact thought and action (Markus 1977). Individuals are socialised, through primary and secondary socialisation processes, into particular ways of thinking and acting and come to experience habitus as natural, a condition Bourdieu calls *doxa* (Bourdieu 1990). Thus habitual offenders come to develop a group distinctive mental framework in order to make sense of their world. According to Bourdieu, lifestyles are contingent on habitus. However habitus interacts with social conditions which influences the degree of capital at any one individual's disposal and consequently the expression of lifestyle. Lifestyles are not entirely individual but are constructed through 'the active integration of the individual and society' (Miles 2000: 24). The assumption of lifestyles has implications for identity construction. Bellah et al (1985) discuss how lifestyles are constituted by people who have certain aspects of everyday life in common and that lifestyles serve to express identity and to differentiate groups of people with similar looks, leisure patterns and habits. Lifestyles are about setting people apart and fostering a social identity. Stebbins (1997:350) emphasises how shared 'attitudes, values and orientation' characterise lifestyles and foster the development of a social identity. Johansson and Miegall (1992) however argue that identity may be of three types – personal, social and cultural and that it is cultural identity that is mainly implicated in lifestyle. Plummer (1981), on the other hand asserts that people are concerned with establishing a sense of who they are not only as part of society but also as individuals and lifestyles may therefore be seen as 'the outward expression of an identity' (Miles, 2000: 26). Giddens (1991:81) believes that while lifestyles 'fulfil utilitarian needs' they also 'give material form to a particular form of self identity' and on the individual level reflect choice. Binkley (2007:111) for example defines a lifestyle as 'patterns of unconstrained daily choice individuals make'. The concept of choice is central to Walters' theory of lifestyle criminality (Walters, 1990). He argues that individuals must be responsible for the choices that they make within the constraints of biology and society and contends that

Even though the choice process itself may be influenced by certain factors, to include cognitive maturity, sphere of information, and one's reinforcement history, the individual still chooses to engage in particular actions. In the final analysis, our options may be limited by certain personal and situational factors but these factors or conditions do not determine our choices. (Walters, 1990 : 51)

The main postulate in his theory is that the trademarks of the criminal lifestyle are irresponsibility in various aspects of one's life, self indulgence, interpersonal intrusiveness and norm violation that reflect 'an enduring pattern of violation' (Walters, 1990: 71). Walters maintains that while most individuals act irresponsibly at times, the lifestyle criminal acts irresponsibly in all spheres of life including work, relationships, leisure and family. Walters also contends that through faulty socialisation the lifestyle criminal does not learn to effectively delay gratification and remains self indulgent. While one is born indulgent (Freud 1901) according to Walters one is not born to be intrusive and offenders learn 'to encroach upon the feelings and rights of others' (Walters 1990:76). The last characteristic, norm violation, involves a 'blatant disregard for societal norms, laws and mores' (1990:78). The criminal lifestyle is supported by several thinking errors which have been elaborated by the author in another paper (Author 2011). Other psychologists have also effectively used the term lifestyle. It was in fact Alfred Adler (1924), the founder of Individual Psychology, who coined the term. It is a recurrent theme in all of Adler's later writings and the most distinctive feature of his psychology. In Adler's work, lifestyle is the unity of the personality and one's attitude towards oneself, others and the world generally. Being a psychodynamic theorist Adler believed that the style of life is developed early in one's life trajectory and is manifested in the individual's efforts to

transcend universal feelings of inferiority. Adler postulated four basic life styles that reflect one's interpersonal stance. The well-adjusted individual does not strive for personal superiority over others and solves his problems in ways that are useful to self and other. The second type attempts to prove his personal superiority by ruling others and is willing to manipulate situations and people. The third type is the getting type. These individuals want to get everything through others without any effort or struggle of their own and tend to be antisocial. The fourth tries to avoid every decision. They are the avoiding type. The second and third types are most likely to adopt a criminal lifestyle. Like Walters, Adler believed that early experiences influence the adoption of a lifestyle but that lifestyles can be changed and that individuals are masters of their own actions (Adler 1924). One may conclude therefore that lifestyles serve two primary functions. They serve to locate the individual within the broader framework of a social structure and by distinguishing self from others serve as a platform for the negotiation of a unique sense of self and identity. In relation to criminality the concept of lifestyle is able to create a bridge between the classical school and the positivist orientation in criminology and proves to be a valuable conceptual tool.

Method

The data presented was collected as part of the author's doctoral dissertation which explored the development of criminal careers among incarcerated Maltese male repeat offenders. The study adopted a grounded theory approach where research questions emerged from the initial interview data collected. Interviewees were asked to "tell me the story of your life" following Wengraf (2001). Qualitative interviewing emphasises the active participation of the interviewer and giving the interviewee a voice. It gives importance to how people understand their worlds and create and share meanings about their lifestyles (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). According to Maruna and Copes (2004: 2)

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). This qualitative methodology explored the progress of the criminal career by identifying contingencies that made movement in that career more or less possible. The study explored how the young inmates started to engage in delinquent behaviour, how that behaviour escalated to more sustained criminal activity and the development of commitment to crime. The gradual commitment to a distinctive criminal lifestyle was an emergent conceptual category in most of the interviews. Through the use of narrative within an interview context, the criminal careers of 41 male inmates were mapped, focusing on the career contingencies the inmates deemed to be important. Based on remembered history, a biographical narrative describes what happened in the interviewee's life and presents the stages of a social process. What qualitative interviews lose in terms of accuracy of data is usually balanced by the insight that is gained into the person's lifestyle (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1993). The goal was the development of a grounded theory. While the research agenda did not specifically set out to explore the criminal lifestyle, it emerged as a key conceptual category during analysis. The data indicates how behaviour patterns, cognition and attitudes and identity negotiation contribute to the development of a distinctive lifestyle and highlights how social contexts such as the prison interact with structural constraints and role demands to encourage commitment to a way of life.

The research took place at the Corradino Correctional Facility in Paola, Malta's only correctional institution and commenced with an examination of inmate files to establish a sample. The inmate file contains a record of the inmate's convictions and time spent in institutions, as well as personal details. The inmates chosen for participation were between the age of 18 and 30, constituting

the younger members of the prison population. Participation was on a voluntary basis. Of the 44 inmates chosen to participate 3 refused to be recorded and were excluded. A final sample of 41 inmates 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 2 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 the criminal lifestyle may be found in Appendix 1.

Data Analysis

Commitment to the criminal lifestyle emerged as a key conceptual category. Interviewees described distinctive behaviour patterns namely action seeking, extensive substance use, deviant associations, particular leisure pursuits, independence, short term and negative employment experiences and conspicuous consumption that are incongruent with a law abiding lifestyle and make the criminal lifestyle attractive. The inmates inhabit a particular 'habitus', entertaining attitudes and utilising thinking errors that sustain their lifestyle. Social contexts, such as the prison, interact with role demands (eg secondary deviation) to encourage commitment to a way of life. The implications of the above for identity construction are discussed.

Behaviour Patterns

West (1982) documents how the lifestyles of repeat offenders are distinctive from those of conventional people even when they are not engaging in criminal offences, showing antisocial behaviour other than illegal behaviour. In the Cambridge Study, interviews at age 18 showed extensive differences between the lifestyles and attitudes of delinquent and non delinquent youth. Certain characteristics were found to be more common among those with a criminal record, including being tattooed, scoring high on self reported aggression, having an unstable job record, spending free time hanging about, being involved in antisocial groups, drinking and driving, gambling, being sexually experienced at a young age, smoking heavily, using prohibited drugs and holding anti-establishment attitudes. Similar findings emerged among the Maltese sample.

Substance Use

The inmates reported heavy use of both illicit and licit drugs. While many adolescents experiment with substances (Plant & Plant, 1992), interviewees reported very early use:

When I was about 9 I started to smoke dope (cannabis) and then when I was about 11 I started to burn heroin.

When I was about 12 I used to smoke a couple of joints every now and again.....And then when I was about 15 or 16 I started to use coke.

I was about 14 or 15 when I first started to use smack. I was about 12 when I started to use smoke (cannabis).

There were however differences among the inmates in this regard. While the addicts made extensive use of substances, the non addicted offenders claimed controlled use and looked down on the ‘junkies’ in prison. Drug use served as an important career contingency for the addicts in the sample² whose lives centred on the acquisition and consumption of their drug of choice. The need for money to support the habit was a main motivator for crime among these men. However, many of them claimed involvement in crime as a leisure pursuit before they were addicted to drugs. Criminal involvement often precedes addiction and offenders may become involved with substances because their use is an intrinsic part of the criminal lifestyle (Hammersly 2008; Author 2010. Even among the non-addicts there was a strong use of psychoactive substances for recreation. Interviewees reported drinking and smoking extensively and spending their money on drugs, alcohol and gambling.

I smoke dope (cannabis) every single day from Monday to Sunday.

We used to use drugs and skip school and hang around in bars and gamble on the machines..... I was not a junkie, but I have used all sorts of drugs.

I used to swallow loads (pills) at a time. Once I took about 40 in the space of a couple of hours.

High rate lawlessness is often accompanied by a history of substance abuse.³ Entertainment involved getting ‘out of one’s mind’, partying and gambling:

Cocaine, heroin, anything that came into my hands - pills.

Drug use emerges as an important part of the lifestyle of these young men.

Action Seeking and Leisure

Criminals consider themselves ‘men of action’ (Akerstrom 1993:90) and are likely to perceive their lifestyle as being more exciting than conventional people’s (Irwin 1980). This perception that the ‘square john’ leads a dull life contributes to commitment to the criminal lifestyle.

I liked that lifestyle. I like the excitement and the hassle of the life.

It was exciting. I always liked excitement and I find that the life normal people lead is boring.

I liked the excitement of this life, running away from the police, the excitement of scoring. You don’t work but steal and you’re always stoned never aware..... I did not want to get out of it.

Criminologists have cited the search for thrills as an important motivating factor for juvenile delinquency (Thrasher 1927; Matza 1964; Prus and Irini 1980; Katz 1988; Nestor 2007). The same may be said for adult criminals (Shover 1985). Lofland (1969:107) writes that the sense of adventure probably derives, in part, from the knowledge, that others define the act as wrong, not from unequivocally believing so oneself.

When they were children the interviewees looked down on the recreational pursuits of their age mates such as playing football in the village square. These activities were considered boring and adult style entertainment was sought out.

2 Addicts formed about half of the sample.

3 See Author (2010) for an extensive review of the relationship between drugs and crime.

I used to go to the Casino with them (his older peers). They had a lot of money and women and I loved that life.

Most kids used to stay playing football and other games but that used to bore me. I used to like to play the slot machines.

But normal kids at 12 years they are going to private lessons, doing their homework and going to Dutrina (religious instruction). My life was very different; I never did these things that other children do. I was very different to them. I can say that I was never a child and that I never did any of these things. I grew up much too early. I saw a lot of life very early.

No I was only into gambling on the machines and cards, poker.

A connection exists between the recreational interests of criminals and their deviant behaviour (Lemert, 1951). Public and supervised recreation comes to symbolise values in direct opposition to those of the habitual or professional criminal. Thrasher (1927) has noted that one can become accustomed to adventure and therefore the need for it is not only peculiar to youngsters. Courting danger was a common theme.

I was never afraid of anything, I remember that we used to go fishing on a boat and if it was rough weather I would still go out. I was always looking for excitement. Many things that I have done were for excitement and not for money.

This craving for excitement continued to influence STC's adult life and interfered with his attempts to go straight.

I mean for example they (new straight acquaintances) used to meet in a flat and stay playing board games..... I had seen what life is all about the hard way and was not happy to stay in a flat and play games!

Another inmate recounts:

There are times in my life when I said that I wanted to go straight and not break the law anymore and settle down. I did for a while but I used to find that life very boring..... I like excitement.

While in prison they nostalgically looked back to the time when they were living 'life on the edge':

My mind was always zooming..... I was scared of nothing at the time and would not even have been scared of dying. I did not care about anything, I was wild.

I have however really lived it up in the time that I have been outside.....have experienced more things than a man of fifty would have experienced in all the time that he lived.

Interpersonal Relations

Independence has been identified as one of the characteristics of the criminal lifestyle (Akerstrom 1993). With regards to relationships with women and family, many of the men expressed their dislike of being tied down, claiming to be sexually promiscuous. Those who had tied the knot found difficulty in remaining faithful and fulfilling their family duties.

I have kids from different women. And then I settled down with one woman..... I have two kids from this woman..... On Saturday and Sunday I used to want to go out on my own..... In the beginning I just used to go out with my friends, but they always used to pick up women and then not to look

stupid with my friends I used to go with the women as well. And so I started to sleep with other women so my wife and me, we split up.

The married inmates claimed to have had problems in their marriage as a result of the inability to stick to one partner. Many failed to support their wives and children because the money that they acquired went towards their expensive recreational pursuits. Some of the men claimed that they wished to settle down with a woman but felt that they might not be able to handle being tied down.

I do not want to be tied down with a wife telling me not to go out, not to drink or grumbling because I smoke dope. Maltese girls are like that. They want to trap you into marriage. Not me!

I had a serious girlfriend once and I liked her very much, but she wanted to get married.

This craving for independence may be a reason for not wanting to become 'an ordinary John' (Akerstrom 1993). If one is not tied to a woman or employment then one may come and go as one pleases. Criminals are seldom tied down to a family even though they claim they would like to have one. Employment was another context where the men resisted any sort of commitment.

Employment Experiences

Work structures the day, creates regularity and defines identity. Offenders are often found in low status occupations and change their jobs frequently (West 1982; Boe 2005; Gillis and Nafekh 2005; Shinkfield and Graffam 2009). Strongly valuing independence, work was perceived as imposing many restrictions. In Sutherland's *The Professional Thief* (1937), Chic Conwell finds that he cannot be independent when he tries to stop stealing. For many of the interviewees an ordinary job implied loss of freedom.

No I never wanted to work - I never wanted to have a hard life - everyone telling you what to do. I always hated being bossed around.....but then I will not have any time for my friends.

Coupled with other characteristics of the criminal lifestyle such as excessive use of psychoactive substances, this attitude often left the young men unemployed. Working was seen as interfering with a good time.

I did loads of jobs but I never used to stay at any one job very long. I do not like the restrictions that come with having a job. A job ties you down. And after an evening drinking as if you feel like going to work the next day.

Getting accustomed to the regime required of a working life is difficult.

I will find it very difficult to go back to work if I had to.....I would find it very difficult to start working again. I was living an easy life.

Employment normally necessitates some form of subordination.

I will never work in my life. No way. Even if somebody wanted to give me a 100 Maltese pounds a day I would not, even if the work was real simple and easy. Even if he told me 'just sit down' and he would pay me for that.

Parker and Allerton (1962) in their biography of a thief make the same point as MS. Working is even worse than prison.

The alternative - the prospect of vegetating the rest of my life in a steady job, catching the 8.13 to work in the morning, and the 5.50 back again at night, all for ten or fifteen quid a week - now that really terrifies me, far more than the thought of a few years in the nick (Parker & Allerton 1962:88).

Giving up crime would mean little spending power.

And then when you get used to living that sort of lifestyle then it is very difficult to stop. Because you will miss those things that you were used to.....I mean you get used to having a lot of money and then it is difficult to live on a wage. I have worked but when you get your wage on Friday then by the weekend you have spent it all.

Able criminals are likely to make more money than they would in employment (Mack 1972). This, added to their exceptionally high expenditures, makes continued criminal involvement increasingly attractive. The interviewees had few work skills and poor educational backgrounds. They experienced low paying, boring jobs convincing them that giving up crime was a bad idea. Having had access to large sums of money as a result of successful criminal endeavours, they rejected the possibility of living off a salary.

And the fact that I was earning so much money and not really working because you suffer to work, there is no suffering in selling coke and there is big money. I mean now that I have seen such big money there is no way that I am going to work.

Drug money is easy money. However easy come easy go! In this lifestyle you might make a lot of money but you also spend a lot of money.

Glaser (1964) and recently Ezell and Cohen (2005) show how prisoners' careers often follow a zigzag pattern. They often try a legitimate job and if this fails after some time or is not congruent with the lifestyle, they resort to crime.

Through crime I would make more money. I would not hold down a regular job..... When you are in this life and you see so much money changing hands then it is difficult to be content with a wage. A wage might last me the weekend.

Well at work you may earn 50 lira a week and then you are not going to work for a week to spend them in a day. It is not worth it to work..... I never stayed in a job for a long time. I would work, get my pay and then not turn up again the next week. Maybe the longest time that I stayed in a job was a couple of months.

According to Stebbins (1971) negative attitudes to work are common amongst professional criminals. Foster (1990) found that having a job is not enough to end to a criminal career. It is not only employment that matters but the quality of jobs also (Donnison 1998). Akerstrom (1993) argues that criminals are not lazy; rather they have learnt the spirit of capitalism too well. They will not work for a pittance and be excluded from consumption when crime can provide them with so much.

Habitus: world view, attitudes and thinking styles

Concern with Masculinity

Traditionally Malta is a patriarchal society where competition for prestige and honour within the community becomes a concern as boys grow older (O'Reilly Mizzi 1994). In urban working class communities all men are in competition for access to jobs that are limited. For those who lack the skills to get into well paid jobs and earn the recognition of others, crime is a solution. Strong identification with traditional masculine values makes men vulnerable to offending (Coote 1994). The

concern with masculine reputation and status dominated the interviews. Some of the men claimed that they felt proud being sent to prison. The prison culture reifies hypermasculinity (Karp 2010).

I had even been to prison and that proved that I am real tough.

It made me tough, it gave me an image and made me feel like a real heavy guy. I remember feeling proud in a way with the other guys when I came out of prison the first time.

Criminogenic qualities associated with masculinities become entrenched and aggravated by prison, where the threat to one's masculinity is ever present. (Karp 2010: Sabo et al 2001). The inmates claimed that they must resist the prison wardens or lose face.

I have one bad thing in me. I am not capable of bending my head down and letting things pass me by. I want to have the last word.

You have to be a man in here and stand up for yourself.

The prison culture does little to reduce the negative consequences of the culture of masculinity. According to Sabo et al (2001:3) 'prison is an ultramasculine world where nobody talks about masculinity'.

I will not let a warden have the last word. I have had much trouble with the wardens in here.

If someone needles me bad enough I'll insult him back, otherwise it is easy to become a mat which everyone tramples upon.

But then people like me we are true men and we are very proud. We don't not want to be made a fool of.

The justice system provides young offenders with the opportunity to prove themselves in the eyes of their peers. Young men may relish the dramatic opportunities for notoriety presented by the theatre of the courtroom: their starring roles in the adversarial system and their peer group as witnesses to the spectacle. The adherence to the culture of masculinity also emerged in the inmates' attitude towards women

You should always keep a woman in her place and never let her get the upper hand.

It was also evident in the inmates reported hatred of authority and a need for autonomy.

I don't like staying to rules imposed on me by people. I get fed up and leave.

Consumption

The respondents reported expensive lifestyles with an 'easy come, easy go' attitude towards money. One inmate, a thief and pimp, claimed that he would go into a shop flaunting wads of money and buying the most expensive items, enjoying the attention such spending power gave him.

I felt good because I would go into a shop and spend 400 pounds like they were nothing. Everyone looks at you with all that money. If a normal person is able to spend 25 pounds then I could spend 100.

Another inmate recounted:

If I went into a bar and bought a drink then I would buy a drink for all the people that are in the bar. I always used to run around in taxis..... And living became very expensive.....Everyone depended on me. I was the purse.

According to Akerstrom (1993) thieves have difficulty handle restrictions of money in the same way as straight people. Their illegal behaviour allows them to adjust 'income to expenses rather than the reverse, since the cost of acquiring money for them is quite low' (Akerstrom 1993:115). Spending is an important way of communicating success money being one of the few measures of status in the criminal world (Akerstrom 1993). According to Adler and Adler, criminals place value on spending as opposed to worrying about the future. Whatever (money or drugs) become available are consumed in a conscious rejection of the normative middle class value of saving. They live for the moment and let tomorrow worry about paying the tab. (1980:461)

Cognitions

Cognitive distortions in the form of crime supportive attitudes, cognitive processing during the commission of crime and post offence neutralisations or 'excuses' for illegal behaviour, sustain the criminal lifestyle.⁴ According to Walters (1990) a cognitive system develops in the individual, dedicating to supporting 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. Walters' shows how techniques used in everyday life become stabilised (Walters, 1990) and automatic. The deterrent influence of moral sanctions can be 'suspended' through cognitive mechanisms (Matza, 1964) which support a lifestyle characterised by self indulgence, irresponsibility, interpersonal intrusiveness and rule violation (Walters, 1990). Inmates utilised a variety of cognitive techniques that support self enhancement (Maruna and Copes 2005). The victim stance or denial of responsibility was commonest among the addicts allowing them to adopt a 'getting' parasitic lifestyle by attributing the cause of their crime to a chronic relapsing condition of addiction.

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 It's all because of drugs.

Blaming the environment was a common rationalisation.

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.

Denial of injury was more likely to be used by the professional offenders:

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.

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

4 See Author (2011) for a detailed discussion of the role of social cognition in offending.

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!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.

This justifies engagement in norm violating, interpersonally intrusive behaviour. Condemnation of the condemners allows one to deflect blame. It develops out of a sense of unfairness (Matza, 1964).

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.

The utilisation of cognitions allows the criminal to maintain a favourable conception of self. One such cognitive pattern Walters calls 'sentimentality' and involves claiming positive qualities. Because some of the actions of these young men 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.

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.

Social Contexts and Role Demands: prison and 'master status'

Prison was viewed as an occupational hazard, the down side of the criminal lifestyle.

I know that I was working to come to prison..... you expect it, it's part of the game and you accept it!

The idea that prisons are training grounds for a life of criminality is not new (see Schrag 1961; Tannenbaum 1938; Clemmer, 1958 and Author 1999). The inmates commented that placing young offenders with criminally experienced inmates has important consequences for criminal career development.

Because in here all you hear them talk about is drugs, robbery, murder. But one learns a lot just by listening. Everybody relates their crime and a silent observer like me notices where they went wrong, what led them to be caught. So I would say 'Aha, if I were them, next time I would avoid this and that' until you learn to become a professional criminal.

In this study, consideration of the costs and benefits of crime emerged as an important aspect of commitment to the criminal lifestyle.

When a young person is put in here for stealing a stereo and he has to do 3 years, the other prisoners are telling him that he is stupid, as for stealing a stereo you have a sentence of 3 years and for doing a hold-up you can only get 4 or 5 years in jail. It's more worth it - it's like they're telling you what to do cause when you see someone who has done a hold-up and he gets 4 or 5 years in jail and he had acquired Lm30,000 and the one who had stolen a stereo has 3 years imprisonment and had gained only Lm20. So one says it's better if I do like him.

Criminal contacts are not easily acquired (Akerstrom 1993) and prison provides the opportunity for them to be made.

Then in prison I had met a guy. He told me that when we got out he would give me heroin. He said that he would give me heroin if I sold it for him..... So when we got out that is what I did.

‘Master status’ and commitment to a criminal lifestyle

I have tried various times but I was not given the chance. I wanted to become a bus driver and they would not give me the licence, then I bought a minibus and they would not let me work either. I used to sell cars and I tried to import cars from the UK and they took away my permits. They were determined to not let me succeed. When you say "they" who do you mean? The authorities involved and the police.

The labelling perspective (Becker 1963; Lemert 1951; Schur 1971) suggests that labelling reduces the offender’s opportunities by assigning him to the ‘master status’ of criminal and fostering a criminal identity. While research evidence of escalation of criminal activity after contact with the justice system has been mixed (Siegal & Senna 1994), these inmates’ histories represent a failure of the criminal justice system to influence their behaviour positively. Perceptions of differential treatment resulted in bitterness, a sense of injustice and a belief that the police are corrupt, justifications that support a criminal lifestyle

And even the police they no longer continue to treat you right.....They exaggerate matters completely and try and incriminate you when you are not guilty..... And you think ‘Who the hell are they to tell me what is right and wrong’And you will remain a criminal, you are tainted. It is like when you crash with a car and you dent it, it will remain with the dent and even if you fix it.

Official labelling resulted in a process of social exclusion by placing them in an outcast status with regard to other members of the community consequently encouraging association with other offenders with similarly tarnished reputations. Commitment to the criminal lifestyle is achieved by default (Author 2006).

I started to do jobs again when they did not let me 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.

According to Becker ‘one of the most crucial steps in the process of building a stable pattern of deviant behaviour is likely to be the experience of being caught and publicly labelled as deviant’(Becker, 1963:31). Being labelled has important consequences for one’s self image and position in the community. The individual is accorded new status making association with other offenders more likely. Inmates described how they felt labelled, rejected and avoided by members of conventional society.

The fact that I have had trouble with the police makes people want to avoid me. You know how it is.....I found that on the whole people started to avoid me. I think that they are afraid of you once you have been to prison.

It is often considered too much effort to try and pass as ‘normal’ (Goffman, 1963). Association with other criminals resolves this dilemma. The master status of ‘criminal’ results in further commitment to the criminal lifestyle because it lessens the individual’s social bond to society. Failure to develop an approved role in society may lead the young person to suppose that he has nothing to lose from antisocial behaviour (Author, 2006)

Identity

Authors from an interactionist tradition (e.g. Lemert 1951; Schur 1971; and others) discuss how involvement in a criminal lifestyle contributes to a symbolic reorganisation of the self. Lifestyle has important implications for identity. The self is being conceptualised as all the ideas, perceptions and values that characterise the 'I' or the 'me'. (Rogers 1942). It is the organised set of characteristics that the individual perceives as peculiar to himself or herself, a social product acquired through social interaction. Increased participation in the criminal lifestyle leads to self definition as criminal.

Of course you become different, you become tough and people see you as tough.....I knew that I was a criminal.

A large proportion of the sample reported experiencing feelings of 'differentness' which developed both through their relationships with conventional people and offenders and self reflection. Many of the inmates espoused a criminal identity

How can I say that I am not a criminal? You cannot deny reality. I have done criminal things, the court has said that I am a criminal and sent me to prison. Once I am in prison I am a criminal.

Those who saw that their life roles consistently revolving around deviance gradually came to see themselves differently.

You start to change but it's not from one day to another..... My whole life was centred around it.

The offender is aware that others in the conventional world play a variety of conventional roles. They go to work, raise families and pay taxes while they were not playing any of these roles

You look around you and while you are looking around to see what you are going to steal the other people they are going to work. It is clear to you that you are different.

Sustained involvement in crime and the accompanying advantages of the lifestyle had important effects on the offender's identity. Offenders expressed pride in their spending power and did not reject the criminal identity attributed to them. Negotiated in interpersonal relationships, social identity is a way of setting oneself apart from others

They call me 'Jailbird' I actually used to feel proud that they called me in this manner..... Between 9 in the morning and night I would make about 250 lira from the women who were with me. I felt good at the time, actually better than other people. I felt good because I would go into a shop and spend 400 pounds like they were nothing....If a normal person is able to spend 25 pounds then I could spend 100. I liked the life and I was into those films of the gangsters and the Mafia and they live well. I felt like I was doing like them.

It made me feel good, I used to feel tough... I remember that we would enjoy seeing ourselves on the paper...like an outlaw in the westerns.

The development of this view of themselves as successful, self willed criminals was an important contingency for the way their criminal career developed

I felt tough like I was someone. I think I felt like those people who are like me because with that sort of people I hang out. I had 29 cases with the police.

Assuming a deviant identity is not an automatic process but is facilitated by an effective audience of deviant others. This provides the perspective for examining one's credentials as a bona fide deviant

I would do my best at stealing to show them that I was as capable as they were. I learnt a lot of things from them because they were more experienced than I was. I learnt how to be more professional and where the real money is.

Entry into prison confirmed a burgeoning criminal identity. Within this prototypical total institution there occurs a regular sequence of changes in the person's self and in the way he judges himself and others (Goffman, 1968). The young criminal finds himself in the midst of more hardened professionals and interacts with them for long periods of time. With the loss of conventional contacts these become his reference group.

If you ask me who I am I will answer you 'I am a prisoner'

If there are 50 prisoners in Malta, I am one of them.

Since I am in prison, I am a criminal. I think. It is in here that I learnt what it means to be a criminal.....I am a criminal, I must be if I am in prison.

With the solidification of a criminal identity commitment to the lifestyle is strengthened (Lemert, 1951).

Conclusion

The study of the criminal lifestyle, while being a worthy sociological enterprise in itself, also throws light on the development of habitual offending and on the more practical task of intervening to halt criminal careers or prevent further progression. This paper has shown how the criminal lifestyle is characterised by distinctive behavioural patterns and sustained by a particular 'habitus'. The lifestyle offers advantages to those who choose to pursue it and abandoning it is accompanied by several penalties. The development of commitment to the criminal lifestyle is being put forward as an important defining factor of whether young men stop offending as they approach adulthood and the assumption of adult roles, or whether they continue to offend, often with increasing severity, well into their adult years. Commitment develops through a variety of processes and explains why people remain in certain life-paths. As a result of commitment, the actor comes to reject alternatives and defines himself according to the behaviour he is consistently engaging in. Once a social identity has been established, rejection of that identity becomes even more difficult. The criminal lifestyle is not only maintained by penalties when the offender attempts to return to conventional living but is also supported by rewards associated with the criminal lifestyle and supported by role identification, specific attitudes, cognitions. If we want young men, like these in the Maltese sample, to give up a lifestyle which provides them with excitement and adventure, easy money, respect from their friends, and material objects promoted by our increasingly materialistic society, then the system must do more than simply punish them. Maltese society needs to learn to deal with offenders as people in their communities, people who think, feel and act. In order to do this we need to understand their experiences, their lives and their perspectives. This study has hopefully contributed to a move in this direction.

Appendix 1

CATEGORY 9 - LIFESTYLE - L

THEME A - HEAVY INVOLVEMENT WITH ILLICIT DRUGS, ALCOHOL AND GAMBLING - L1

Sub themes

1. Illicit drugs - many of the sample used illicit drugs regularly. Some of the sample claimed to be addicted while others used them for recreational purposes - drug crime connection. L1.1
2. Alcohol also featured significantly in the lifestyle of the inmates interviewed in this study.L1.2
3. Gambling L1.3

THEME B - RUNNING AROUND AIMLESSLY WITH NOTHING TO DO - L2

No sub themes - no structure in their lives - much time on their hands

THEME C - 'LIVING ON THE EDGE' SEARCH FOR EXCITEMENT AND DANGER - L3

Subthemes

1. Excitement of the criminal lifestyle L3.1
2. Lifestyle involved a certain amount of danger L3.2
3. Engaging in deviant behaviour for the fun of it L3.3
4. ImpulsivityL3.4

THEME D - MACHISMO L4

Sub themes

1. Having the last word L4.1
2. Male domination over women L4.2
3. Being a man signified never being weak or at the mercy of anything - junkies were seen as weak since they were at the mercy of their addiction. L4.3

THEME E - ADULT RECREATION AS CHILDREN - L5

No sub themes - looked down upon children's games and recreation when they were young - having fun involved drinking, getting stoned, going to bars, gambling and driving around in cars.

THEME F - WORKING AT AN ILLEGAL AGE - TWILIGHT ECONOMY - L6

No sub themes

THEME G - PROMISCUITY AND LACK OF PROTECTIVE SEX - L7

No sub themes

THEME H - TOUGH GUY IMAGE L8

Sub themes

1. Physical adornment such as tattoos and long hair L2.1
2. Passing as older than they were L2.2

THEME I - HANGING AROUND IN AREAS OF ILL REPUTE - L 9

No sub themes - Valetta , Straight Street and Gzira Testaferrata Street

THEME J - LIVING BEYOND THEIR MEANS - L10

Sub themes

1. expensive lifestyle - partying and paying the way for others L10.1
2. Heroin addiction L10.2
3. Getting into debt L10.3
4. Gambling L10.4

THEME K - FEAR OF BEING TIED DOWN - L 11

Sub themes

1. Work L11.1
2. Marriage or relationships L11.2

THEME L – HABITUS – L12

Sub themes

1. Consumption – L12.1
2. Cognitions – L12.2

THEME M – SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND ROLE DEMANDS – L 13

1. Prison L13.1
2. Master status L13.2

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