

Running head: NEUTRALIZATIONS, DELINQUENT LABELING AND CRIMINAL
HISTORY OF YOUNG OFFENDERS

The relationship between neutralizations and perceived delinquent labeling on
criminal history in young offenders serving community orders

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Abstract

This study examined the associations between young offenders' justifications for delinquent behavior, their perceptions of being labeled "delinquent," and criminal history. Participants were 153 young offenders (aged 14 to 19 years) serving community orders with the New South Wales Department of Juvenile Justice, Australia. They completed a questionnaire that assessed their use of justifications for offending (neutralizations) and their perceptions of being delinquent. More than half of young offenders (53.6%) did not believe that others labeled them as "delinquent". Those who did believe that others labeled them as "delinquent" (28.8%) self-reported more delinquency and other problem behaviors, but did not have more serious official criminal history than 'unlabeled' offenders. Factor analysis revealed a two-factor structure (minimization and rationalization) for the neutralization items. Neutralization factors were weak predictors of official criminal history, but stronger predictors of self-reported delinquency and other problem behaviors. Age at first court appearance and rationalizations successfully discriminated 66.7% of the young offenders who thought others labeled them as "delinquents". Findings are discussed with reference to the implications for risk and responsivity principles in the treatment of young offenders.

Key words: juvenile offenders, delinquent label, labeling theory, neutralization

Perceived Delinquent Label and Neutralizations Among Young Offenders on Community Orders

The scholarly literature has made few attempts to understand young offenders as individuals (Hine & France, 2005), and more importantly, what they think of themselves and their behavior. Young offenders serving community orders, as opposed to those serving custodial sentences, have also received relatively little attention in the research literature, although they constitute the majority (over 80%) of all juvenile delinquents in most jurisdictions, including New South Wales (NSW), Australia (Department of Juvenile Justice, 2005). This study investigated whether young offenders share community perceptions of themselves as delinquents and explores their justifications for offending behavior.

Perceived Delinquent Label and Behavior

Symbolic interactionism theory proposes that labels assigned to people by others are incorporated into their self-concepts, influencing how they perceive and define themselves and, consequently, how they behave (Cooley, 1902; Marsh & Hattie, 1996; Matsueda, 1992; Mead, 1934). With respect to young offenders, the stigma of delinquency imposed on them by society is thought to have a significant impact on their own perceptions of being labeled delinquent and on their subsequent delinquent behavior (Al-Talib & Griffin, 1994; Bartusch & Matsueda, 1996; Matsueda, 1992).

Labeling theory extends the principles of symbolic interactionism theory to explain the development of delinquent labeling in young offenders (Adams, Robertson, Gray-Ray & Ray, 2003). According to this perspective, initial deviance arises from a variety of social, cultural, psychological and other factors, and is not perceived as deviance by juveniles, but rather as “adventure,” “mischief” or “fun” (Lemert, 1967; Tannenbaum, 1938). These so-called primary

deviants do not yet view themselves as “delinquent” (Burke, 2001). Labeling theory further argues that when society starts labeling these young offenders’ behavior as negative, a cognitive dissonance may arise between their pro-social self-concept and their anti-social behavior (Barriga & Gibbs, 1996; Burke, 2001; Vold, Bernard & Snipes, 2002). In order to resolve this dissonance, some youths accept the delinquent label and, consequently, increase their involvement in criminal activities to conform to others’ expectations of them as “delinquent” (Burke, 2001; Burns, 1979; Ericson, 1975; Lemert, 1967; Vold et al., 2002). According to this theory, it is at this stage that young offenders become secondary deviants: their criminal behavior is no longer generated by various social, psychological and other factors, but directly by the acceptance of the delinquent label (Burke, 2001; Vold et al., 2002). Thus, the key assumption of the labeling perspective is that societal reaction to people as “criminal” may unintentionally deepen their criminality by increasing the likelihood that they will perceive themselves to be criminal and hence behave as “criminals” (Adams et al., 2003; Burke, 2001; Chassin, Presson, Young & Light, 1981; Heimer & Matsueda, 1994).

Some research indicates that after being labeled by others, adolescents do tend to internalise the “deviant” label and increase their involvement in delinquency (Chassin & Young, 1981). For example, young offenders who believed that others labeled them as “rule-violators” were found more likely to engage in self-reported delinquent behavior than those who did not view themselves as such (Adams et al., 2003; Heimer & Matsueda, 1994; Matsueda, 1992). However, negative informal labeling by family and peers appears to be more influential to young offenders’ self-perceptions than formal labeling by the legal system (Adams et al., 2003; Heimer & Matsueda, 1994; Matsueda, 1992).

Community service has been regarded as a less stigmatising form of official labeling

(Evans, Levy, Sullenberger, & Vyas, 1991; Geudens, 1996, as cited in Welzenis, 1997). Kolstad, Gabrielsen and Veisetaune (1995), for example, found that, over a period of one year, offenders on community orders showed a significant reduction in their criminal self-image compared to incarcerated offenders. The authors speculated that these offenders no longer perceived themselves as “criminals” because others did not, perhaps because they reduced their association with criminal others and started to identify with non-criminal groups while on community orders. (Kolstad et al., 1995). Similarly, Erickson (n.d.) reported that only offenders who were charged repeatedly or those charged with more serious offences were more likely to develop a criminal identity. Therefore, young offenders who occasionally “dabble” in delinquent behavior do not necessarily need to accept their delinquent label because they are seldom labeled as such (Quinney, 1970).

Labeling theory is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, the delinquent label is not a necessary outcome of the labeling process (Chassin & Young, 1981; Chassin, Eason & Young, 1981; Erickson, n.d.). A delinquent label may be actively sought or resisted, or formed without the young person ever having been formally labeled by the legal system (Al-Talib & Griffin, 1994; Chassin, Eason, & Young, 1981; Chassin, Presson et al., 1981; Vold et al., 2002). According to Geiger and Fischer (2005), the deviant label will only “stick” to the extent that it “cannot be neutralized, resisted, and cast off as alien to the self” (p. 195). Significantly, the majority of juvenile delinquents do not accept the delinquent label (Chassin & Young, 1981; Chassin, Eason, & Young, 1981; Chassin, Presson, et al., 1981; Erickson, n.d.). Even those adolescents who appear to accept the delinquent label could be distorting its stereotypical meaning and identifying with the more positive aspects of the label, although which positive aspects were not specified (Chassin, Presson, et al., 1981). Therefore, formal contact with the

legal system may be neither necessary nor sufficient for the acceptance of the delinquent label by young offenders.

The second objection to labeling theory centres on the assumption that the delinquent label, once internalised, overrides all other self-concepts and becomes the primary influence on delinquent behavior (Burke, 2001; Quinney, 1970; Wells, 1978). Labeling effects, however, could vary with the centrality of the adopted delinquent label within the self-concept hierarchy (Chassin & Stager, 1984). Arguably, the more salient the particular internalised self-concept is to the individual, the more likely it is to influence behavior (Burke & Tully, 1977; Chassin, Presson, et al., 1981; Hattie, 1992; Oyserman & Markus, 1990). Therefore, the possibility exists that, although adopted, the delinquent label might be unimportant to young offenders and have little effect on their behavior (Byrd, O'Connor, Thackrey, & Sacks, 1993; Chassin, Eason, & Young, 1981; Chassin, Presson, et al., 1981). Further, even if the delinquent label becomes salient to the individual, it can be switched “on” or “off” depending on the situation (Turner, 1982).

Third, the largely correlational nature of the research evidence challenges labeling theory's assumption of a causal relationship between labeling, the acceptance of delinquent label and behavior (Blackburn, 1993). For example, longitudinal studies show that no causal relationship exists between formal labeling and the adoption of a “drug-user” label among drug-using adolescents (Ray & Downs, 1986). Additionally, Ray and Downs found that, contrary to the predictions of labeling theory, formal labeling had no causal effect on the substance use behaviors of drug-using adolescent females.

Delinquent Label and Neutralizations

Neutralization refers to the process whereby young offenders justify their criminal

behavior by reducing the criminality of the offence or their degree of personal responsibility for the commission of the offence (Khoo & Oakes, 2000; Sykes & Matza, 1957). Neutralizations are thought to minimize the inner conflict between young offenders' existing self-concept and their delinquent behavior (Barriga & Gibbs, 1996; Barriga, Landau, Stinson, Liau & Gibbs, 2000; Festinger, 1957; Gibbs, 1993; Mitchell, Dodder & Norris, 1990). Consequently, neutralizations (or self-serving cognitive distortions) may allow young offenders to freely engage in delinquency without ever needing to change their existing self-concept (Barriga & Gibbs, 1996; Byrd et al., 1993; Mitchell et al., 1990; Sykes & Matza, 1957; Vold et al., 2002).

Arguably, not everyone who commits a crime needs to neutralize (Minor, 1980, 1981). Neutralization theory is thought to be more applicable to low-involvement offenders rather than those committed to delinquency, as the former are more likely to have stronger moral inhibitions against certain antisocial behaviors (McCarthy & Stewart, 1998; Minor, 1981). Indeed, more serious offenders were found to endorse significantly fewer neutralizations than less serious offenders or high school students (McCarthy & Stewart, 1998; Slaby & Guerra, 1988). With continued involvement in delinquency, these young offenders may no longer feel the need to neutralize as their actions are no longer inconsistent with their perceptions of themselves as "delinquents" (McCarthy & Stewart, 1998; Minor, 1981; 1984). Neutralizations for recidivist young offenders may only become necessary to justify their behavior to others, rather than to themselves, and only when they get caught (Lillyquist, 1980; Wortley, 1986). However, the literature is inconsistent on this point, with some researchers reporting the reverse relationship, i.e. neutralizations may be *more* likely among those young offenders who self-report more delinquency or other externalising problem behaviors (Austin, 1977; Barriga & Gibbs, 1996; Barriga et al., 2000; Liau, Barriga, & Gibbs, 1998; Mitchell et al., 1990).

Given the inconsistent findings and a general lack of research exploring what young offenders on community orders think of themselves and their delinquent behavior, the present study examines their perceptions of being labeled delinquent, their endorsement of neutralizations, and explores how these factors are related to their offending behavior. Based on the literature review, a positive relationship was expected between the perception of being labeled delinquent and the severity of their criminal history. In accordance with neutralization theory, low-involvement young offenders were expected to endorse more neutralizations for their behavior, while those perceiving themselves to be labeled “delinquent” were expected to endorse fewer neutralizations.

Method

Participants

One hundred and fifty three (153) young offenders, currently serving a period of community-based supervision with the NSW Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), Australia, participated in the study. They were drawn from seven DJJ centres (four metropolitan and three rural) in NSW, Australia. The respondents ranged in age from 14 to 19 years ($M = 16.7$, $SD = 1.3$); 86% of the participants were males, 46% were from rural areas of NSW and 12.5% were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (i.e. identified with a culture that is not English speaking, or Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander). The median number of offences for which the young offenders received a community order was 3.0 (range 1 to 20). The majority of participants were on probation (37.9%) or bond (37.1%), with the remainder on community service orders (12.9%), suspended sentences (8.3%) or other orders (3.8%) at the time of testing.

Instruments

Neutralization and perception of being delinquent questionnaire. Theoretical and

empirical literature on delinquent self-concept and neutralizations was thoroughly examined and served as the basis for the initial conceptualisation of the questionnaire. Some of the items were developed specifically for this study, others were drawn from such measures as the *Self-Acceptance Scale* (Purdie & McCrindle, 2004) and the *Criminal Sentiments Scale* (Simourd & Olver, 2002), or modified from existing measures to suit the questionnaire style and the population under study (e.g., *Tennessee Self Concept Scale*, Fitts, 1965; the *Neutralization Scale*, Minor, 1980; *Social Identity as a Criminal Questionnaire*, Walters, 2003). Each item in the questionnaire was rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Eight of the 45 items were scored in the reverse direction to avoid a response set. Higher scores indicated stronger item endorsement.

A separate analysis of the “perception of being delinquent” items yielded a three-factor solution. These factors, however, failed to reach the minimum acceptable level of internal consistency and, therefore, were not used in any of the subsequent statistical analyses. Instead, participants’ responses to the item “Most people think I am a delinquent” were used as a measure of whether young offenders perceived themselves being labeled “delinquent” by others.

Adolescent psychopathology scale – short form (APS-SF) (Reynolds, 2000). The APS-SF was administered to the participants as a measure of their self-reported delinquency and problem behaviors. The scale is a brief self-report measure of psychopathology and psychosocial problem behaviors in adolescents that has been extensively standardised on a USA population. It consists of 115 items that comprise 12 clinical scales and 2 validity scales. Each scale produces a mean *T* score of 50 and a standard deviation of 10, with higher *T* scores indicating higher levels of psychopathology. The APS-SF demonstrates acceptable levels of internal consistency (*Mdn* $r_{\alpha} = .84$), test-retest reliability (*Mdn* $r_{tt} = .84$) and validity (Reynolds, 2000). The APS-SF Conduct

Disorder scale, which evaluates a wide constellation of antisocial behaviours, served as a measure of self-reported delinquency. The scales measuring Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Substance Abuse Disorder and Anger/Violence Proneness were used as additional measures of other problem behaviors.

Criminal history. Participants' criminal history was collected through the Client Information Management Service, a computerised database operated by the Department of Juvenile Justice of NSW, Australia. The database contains detailed case file information about the offences with which young offenders were charged and the nature of the sentences they received. The respondents were differentiated on the basis of age at first court appearance, total number of criminal convictions and court appearances, and total number of violent and non-violent offences. Violent offences were coded based on the most serious offence, the severity of which was classified using the recommended violence classification system developed by Kenny and Press (2006). Criminal history data were not available for 19 (12.4%) young offenders.

Procedure

Participants were a sub-group of the population of young offenders in the community undertaking the *Young People on Community Orders Health Survey* (YPoCOHS), which included cognitive, educational and psychological testing, as well as health screening and serology testing (Kenny, Nelson, Butler, Lennings, Allerton, & Champion, 2006). Participants completed the additional questionnaire that assessed their perceptions of being delinquent and neutralization endorsement during data collection for the YPoCOHS. All sections of the survey required separate informed consent.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Seventy five percent (75%) of the participants had a conviction for at least one previous offence, with a median of 3.5 (range 1 to 32) offences. The majority (77.6%) of young offenders had convictions for violent offences, with a median of 1.0 (range 1 to 14) violent offences, 76.9% also had a conviction for non-violent offences, with a median of 3.0 (range 1 to 23) offences. Violent offences included common assault (20.2%), assault occasioning actual bodily harm (16.3%), robbery (11.5%), robbery with a weapon (10.6%), aggravated robbery (9.6%), and other violent offences (31.8%). Among the young offenders with a non-violent offence history the majority (90%) had committed property offences. Four (2.6%) of the young offenders had convictions for a sexual offence, and 14.2% had at least one prior control order (incarceration). The age at the time of first court appearance ranged from 11 to 18 years ($M = 15.2$, $SD = 1.5$)

The power of the various statistical tests to detect a medium effect size ranged between .71 for t -tests and .97 for correlations. Thirteen (13) participants, who scored in the moderate or severe ranges of the APS-SF validity scales, differed significantly in their Conduct Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder and Anger/Violence Proneness scale scores from the rest of the sample. These respondents were excluded from the statistical analyses involving the APS-SF scales.

Table 1 contains the response frequency analyses for the selected questionnaire items for young offenders who endorsed or did not endorse the item “Most people think I am a delinquent” (28.8% and 53.6% respectively, $\chi^2(1, N = 126) = 11.46$, $p < .01$). Young offenders who endorsed this item (the *labeled* group) responded significantly differently to 13 questionnaire items compared to those who did not endorse this item (the *unlabeled* group). For example, young offenders from the *labeled* group were more than nine times more likely to disagree that other

people think of them as “good” people. Similarly, they were more than four times more likely to report that they do many bad things and that they like to hang out with friends who break the law. The remaining 17.6% of participants, who responded “Not Sure” to this item, were excluded from the analysis.

Table 1

t-Tests revealed that young offenders who perceived that others labeled them as delinquent were more likely to be younger and to have first appeared before court at an earlier age (see Table 2). They also showed significant (more than half a standard deviation) elevations in their Conduct Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder and Anger/Violence Proneness scale scores compared to the *unlabeled* group. There were no significant differences between the *labeled* and *unlabeled* young offenders on the number of court dates, number of violent or non-violent offences, severity of violent offences, $\chi^2 (1, N = 134) = .952, p > .05$, or in the reported frequency of the presence or absence of relatives in prison, $\chi^2 (1, N = 117) = .308, p > .05$.

Table 2

Factor Analysis

The 20 questionnaire items measuring neutralizations were subjected to exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring. The scree test and the meaningfulness of the various alternative factor structures were considered in determining the number of factors to extract. Where appropriate, the number of extracted factors was reduced to achieve the highest

factor reliability possible. Varimax (orthogonal) and promax (oblique) rotations were also performed until each factor appeared homogeneous in content and was readily interpretable. The promax solution was preferred over the other rotation methods because oblique rotations in general, and promax in particular, appear to provide more simple and robust solutions and have been regarded as more appropriate for the modelling of psychological phenomena (Browne, 2001; Loehlin, 1992; Reise, Waller & Comrey, 2000).

Analysis of the neutralization items yielded a two-factor solution (see Table 3). The first factor mostly contained neutralizations that were rationalizing or justifying the offending behavior, i.e., the ‘condemn the condemners’ and ‘appeal to higher loyalties’ neutralizations. The second factor, on the other hand, mostly contained neutralizations that minimized the personal blame and the impact of offending, i.e., ‘the denial of responsibility’, ‘denial of victims’ and ‘denial of injury’ neutralizations. Accordingly, the two factors were named Rationalizations and Minimizations. The correlation between the two factors was moderate, $r = .48, p < .01$ and they accounted for 34% of the total variance. There was an acceptable level of internal consistency for both neutralization factors.

Table 3

Regression Analysis

To examine the relative contributions of the two neutralization factors to the prediction of official criminal history and self-reported problem behaviors, a series of multiple regressions was performed with various criminal history outcomes and the APS-SF scales as criterion variables. As Table 4 shows, the neutralization factors were less than satisfactory predictors of detected

criminal behavior, explaining from 2% to 7% of the variability in the official criminal history measures. These factors were, however, better predictors of self-reported delinquency and other problem behaviors, explaining from 15% to 24% of the variability in the selected APS-SF scales.

Table 4

Discriminant Analysis

A stepwise discriminant analysis was performed with the membership in the *labeled* and *unlabeled* groups as the criterion variable and the neutralization factors, age, various criminal history variables and the selected APS-SF scales as predictor variables. A total of 128 cases were used for prediction.

The correlations between predictor variables and the discriminant function suggested that the Rationalizations factor and the age at first court appearance were the best predictors of the membership in the *labeled* group of young offenders. Rationalizations were positively correlated with group membership, $r_{pb}(126) = .42, p < .01, d = .97$, suggesting that those who perceived being labeled as delinquents showed approximately one standard deviation elevations in their mean rationalization scores. On the other hand, age at first court appearance was negatively correlated with group membership, $r_{pb}(117) = -.30, p < .01, d = .64$, suggesting that those who perceived being labeled as delinquents showed more than half the standard deviation reduction in their mean age at first court appearance, i.e. they were more likely to start dealing with the criminal justice system earlier in their lives. Rationalizations and the age at first court appearance accounted for 17.5% and 9.1% of the variability in the group membership respectively. Overall, the discriminant function was significant ($\chi^2 = 22.011, df = 2, p < .01$) and successfully predicted

the outcome for 71.4% of cases, with accurate predictions being made for 66.7% of the *labeled* young offenders and 73.9% of the *unlabeled* young offenders.

Discussion

The individuality of young offenders, especially with respect to their “lived experience of criminality” (Katz, 1988, p. 3), has rarely been the focus of scholarly research. The present study aimed to shed some light on what young offenders think of themselves and their behavior by exploring their perceptions of being labeled “delinquent”, the endorsement of neutralizations and how these variables relate to their offending behavior.

Nearly 54% of our sample did not endorse the item “Most people think I am a delinquent”, supporting the views expressed by Byrd et al. (1993), and Chassin, Eason and Young (1981) that the delinquent label is not an unavoidable result of dealing with the criminal justice system and can be successfully resisted. Young offenders may not derive their identity from their delinquent behavior, as it could be a relatively minor part of their lives (Hine & France, 2005). On the other hand, it is also possible that these young offenders may not believe that they are delinquent because they do not have enough contact with mainstream society and are mainly involved with a culture where delinquency is acceptable (Becker, 1963). In fact, one of the most interesting, and somewhat unexpected, features of our data was the anecdotal observation that many young offenders in the sample did not know what the term “delinquent” meant.

Nearly a third of the young offenders, however, thought that others labeled them delinquents. They were much more likely to report that other people do not think of them as “good” people, that they do many bad things and that they like to associate with friends who break the law. It is unclear how much of the negative social labeling experienced by young

offenders actually corresponds with their negative self-labeling (Chassin & Stager, 1984). It is quite possible that although these young offenders perceived *being labeled* delinquent by others, they may not have necessarily perceived themselves as delinquent.

It is also not clear whether the labeling reported by the young offenders in our study came from formal or informal sources, with some researchers reporting that family and peers, rather than criminal justice workers, could be the primary “labelers” (Adams et al., 2003; Heimer & Matsueda, 1994; Matsueda, 1992). We found no differences in the reported familial history of imprisonment between the *labeled* and *unlabeled* young offenders in this study. It could be speculated, therefore, that labeling from family may not be as relevant as the literature suggested, possibly due to young offenders not having secure attachments to primary caregivers or not identifying with the “criminal” relative or family member. Conversely, important sources of labeling could come from outside the family, for example, from peer groups or criminal justice workers.

In line with labeling theories’ predictions, the *labeled* young offenders reported more severe delinquency, defiant behavior, and generalized anger and violence against others, compared to the *unlabeled* young offenders. These results are consistent with Heimer and Matsueda (1994), and Matsueda (1992), who found that the perception of being labeled delinquent is strongly associated with self-reported delinquent behavior. There were, however, no significant differences between these two groups of young offenders in the severity of their official criminal history. A weaker relationship between delinquent self-image and official delinquency, than between delinquent self-image and self-reported delinquency, has also been reported elsewhere (Jensen, 1980). This finding could be due to the fact that the official criminal record may not necessarily represent the extent of young offenders’ actual criminal behavior

(Emler & Reicher, 1995). It is also possible that the level of formal or informal labeling experienced by young offenders on community orders may not reach the levels of intensity and hostility necessary for the negative effects of labeling to become apparent through their official criminal histories (Burke, 2001).

Our exploratory factor analysis revealed the presence of two neutralization factors that were very similar in content to the “minimizing/mislabeling” and “blaming others” types of cognitive distortions described by Gibbs (1993). It has been suggested that such cognitive distortions neutralize the cognitive dissonance and the empathy-based guilt following antisocial behavior thereby preventing damage to the self-concept of the offender (Barriga & Gibbs, 1996; Gibbs, 1993). Contrary to neutralization theory’s prediction that low-involvement young offenders should endorse more neutralizations for their behavior (Sykes & Matza, 1957), our results show mostly positive associations (with two exceptions) between the severity of delinquent behavior and the level of neutralization endorsement. However, compared to self-reported delinquency, the official criminal history of young offenders was only weakly predicted by neutralization factors, accounting for only between 2% and 7% of variance. Both neutralization factors were better predictors of self-reported delinquency and other problem behaviors, accounting for between 15% and 24% of the variance in the externalizing APS-SF scales, which was consistent with findings of Barriga and Gibbs (1996), and Barriga et al. (2000). Thus, although young offenders with certain behavior problems may endorse more neutralizations for delinquent behavior, they do not seem to substantially affect their involvement in serious delinquency (as evidenced by their detected offending).

The Rationalization factor and the age at first court appearance successfully discriminated two thirds of the *labeled* young offenders. It appears that the *labeled* young

offenders started dealing with the criminal justice system earlier in their life and employed more rationalizations for offending behavior. Again, our findings were in the opposite direction to that predicted by neutralization theory, as those who perceived being labeled as “delinquent” were found to endorse more, rather than fewer rationalizations. This result could indicate that the *labeled* young offenders, who are presumably more familiar with this label, may still experience cognitive dissonance and use certain neutralizations to justify delinquent behavior.

Given that the age at first court appearance was a significant predictor of the membership in the *labeled* group, it appears that the length of exposure to the criminal justice system and not the severity of offending behavior is of more importance to young offenders’ perceptions of being labeled “delinquents”. Conversely, Blackburn (1993) speculated that the manner in which young offenders present themselves to criminal justice workers could be particularly relevant to the reactions of the criminal justice system towards them. It is possible, therefore, that law enforcement and criminal justice workers could be unintentionally “selecting” young offenders who appear to be acting as more “delinquent” (e.g., with more disdain towards law enforcement, using more rationalizations to justify their offending, or showing less remorse or respect for the legal process) for earlier adjudication.

Our finding that perceived delinquent label and neutralizations were only weakly associated with young offenders’ official criminal history could have practical implications for the use of these constructs when assessing their risk of re-offending. Rather than being potent dynamic risk factors for predicting risk of reconviction, the perceived delinquent label and neutralizations appear to be more important factors in accounting for self-reported delinquency and other problem behaviours, that may not necessarily be detected by the criminal justice system. These constructs may also reflect young offenders’ responsivity to rehabilitative efforts.

Andrews and Bonta (1998) noted that highly structured and confronting interventions “may have no impact (or a negative impact) on a client who does not *think* there is a problem or does not *care* [italics in original] about the impact of his or her behavior to others” (p. 340). Similarly, Barriga et al. (2000) argued that young offenders who routinely blame others or minimize the consequences of their behavior experience inadequate empathy-based guilt or remorse for their victims, which could hinder their progress in rehabilitation programs. Thus, it would be reasonable to expect that young offenders who perceive being labeled delinquent and who are satisfied with themselves, or who employ neutralizations that do not allow them to come to terms with the negative consequences of their behaviour, could be resistant to rehabilitation. Simourd and Olver (2002) noted that, according to the responsivity principle, interventions failing to take these factors into account would produce substandard results.

Several shortcomings of the current study suggest possibilities for future research. First, caution must be observed in interpreting the findings of this correlational study to consider the matter of the indeterminacy of causal directions that it entails. For example, it is quite possible that prior delinquent behaviour could facilitate the development of perceived delinquent label, rather than vice versa (Matsueda, 1992). Second, due to our unsuccessful attempt to develop a more reliable measure, this study used a one-item measure of young offenders’ perceptions of labeling. It is reasonable to expect that the pattern of our results may have changed if more reliable measures of delinquent self-labeling were used, assuming that a reliable scale could be developed. Third, the use of neutralizations by offenders is likely to be more offence and situation specific than our questionnaire items suggested (Ashkar & Kenny, in press; Liau et al., 1998; McCarthy & Stewart, 1998; Wortley, 1986). An important next step, therefore, would be to explore in more depth the neutralizations that young offenders use to justify their behavior to

themselves, rather than to others. Finally, it could also be speculated that the features of the *labeled* and *unlabeled* young offender groups could reflect some of the features of Moffitt's (1993) identified adolescence-limited and life-course-persistent types of offenders. The possibility that the acceptance of the delinquent label could be one of the factors indicative of a young offender more likely to engage in a life-course-persistent pattern of offending warrants further attention.

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Table 1

Chi-Square Analyses for the Selected Questionnaire Items for “Labeled” and “Unlabeled” Young Offenders

Questionnaire item	<i>Unlabeled</i>		<i>Labeled</i>		χ^2 ^a	Cramér's <i>V</i>	Odds ratio ^b
	% DA	% A	% DA	% A			
Neutralization items							
If somebody does you wrong, you should be able to get revenge.	59.8	25.6	25.0	59.1	15.90**	.36	5.52
Some police are crooked and they get away with it, so why can't I?	43.9	39.0	15.9	70.5	12.45**	.31	4.99
If people mess with me, they deserve what they get.	46.3	40.2	20.5	65.9	8.98*	.27	3.70
If your intentions are good when you break the law, then it's not really an offence.	64.6	9.8	54.5	27.3	6.70*	.23	3.30
The law is rotten, so why should I obey it?	81.7	8.5	52.3	25.0	12.28**	.31	4.60
It's OK to steal from rich people. They are so well off, they wouldn't even notice.	80.5	11.0	61.4	29.5	7.08*	.24	3.52
It's OK to break the law to help a mate.	61.0	15.9	34.1	47.7	15.13**	.35	5.37
Perception of being delinquent items							
Most people think I am a good person.	2.4	80.5	15.9	56.8	10.94**	.30	9.39
I am a good person because I never intended to hurt anyone with my offending.	30.5	52.4	54.5	29.5	7.66*	.25	3.17

Questionnaire item	<i>Unlabeled</i>		<i>Labeled</i>		χ^{2a}	Cramér's <i>V</i>	Odds ratio ^b
	%DA	%A	%DA	%A			
Loyalty to my mates is more important than any laws.	35.4	51.2	13.6	68.2	6.74*	.23	3.47
I do many bad things.	67.1	19.5	36.4	50.0	13.62**	.33	4.73
I have a lot in common with my friends who offend.	57.3	32.9	29.5	56.8	8.99*	.27	3.35
I like to hang out with friends who offend or break the law.	84.1	6.1	59.1	18.2	9.81**	.28	4.24

Note. Table contains only the items that (a) first showed significantly different *disagree/strongly disagree* (DA), *not sure/don't know* (DK) and *agree/strongly agree* (A) response frequencies and (b) showed significantly different DA and A response frequencies with the DK category excluded. Response frequencies do not add up to 100% as the DK response frequencies are excluded from the table. Bonferroni correction was not performed as suggested by Perneger (1998). ^a $df = 2$. ^b Odds ratio represents the differences between the item frequencies in bold.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2

Mean Differences in Criminal History and Selected APS-SF Scales' T-Scores for "Labeled" and "Unlabeled" Young Offenders

Variable	Unlabeled ^a		Labeled ^b		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Age	16.94	1.18	16.46	1.24	2.12*	124	.38
Criminal history variables							
Age at first court	15.51	1.42	14.58	1.33	3.39**	115	.64
No. of court dates	3.36	2.41	4.72	4.33	-1.82	50.1 ^c	
No. of recorded offences	5.10	4.61	6.56	7.63	-1.10	52.3 ^c	
No. of violent offences	1.59	1.57	2.36	3.28	-1.34	42.8 ^c	
No. of non-violent offences	3.64	4.53	4.75	5.35	-1.14	110	
Externalising APS-SF scales ^d							
Conduct Disorder	61.12	12.98	70.92	15.88	-3.52**	110	.64
Oppositional Defiant Disorder	53.89	9.84	60.13	9.77	-3.23**	111	.62
Substance Abuse Disorder	66.12	15.88	71.44	22.02	-1.47	110	
Anger/violence proneness	56.99	11.58	63.18	11.63	-2.71**	111	.51

Note. Bonferroni correction was not performed as suggested by Perneger (1998). ^a $n_1 = 82$. ^b $n_2 = 44$. ^c Corrected *df* after adjusting for heterogeneity of variance. ^d $n_1 = 73$; $n_2 = 40$.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 3

Pattern Matrix Following Principal Axis Factoring and Promax Rotation of Neutralization Items

Neutralization items	Factor	
	Rationalizations	Minimizations
It's OK to break the law to help a mate.	.899	
If somebody does you wrong, you should be able to get revenge.	.669	
If people mess with me, they deserve what they get.	.669	
It's OK to commit offences to protect your pride or to get justice.	.583	
Some police are crooked and they get away with it, so why can't I?	.543	
It's OK to steal from rich people. They are so well off, they wouldn't even notice.	.533	
The law is rotten, so why should I obey it?	.444	
What I did was not that bad, you couldn't really say it was a crime.		.713
Nothing bad happened when I broke the law. People just make a fuss about nothing.		.666
I am too young to be held responsible for breaking the law.		.654
Nothing really bad happened to anyone because of my offending.		.574
When I offended, it didn't really hurt anyone.		.546
If the offence wasn't my idea, then I am not to blame.		.438
Breaking the law is no big deal if those affected recover quickly.		.415
Everybody breaks the law at some time, so it is OK for me to do it.		.380
Eigenvalues	4.38	4.08
Cronbach's α	.81	.81

Table 4

Summary of Multiple Regression Analyses (β values) for Neutralization Factors Predicting Official Criminal History and Self-Report Problem Behaviors

	Rationalizations	Minimizations	F^a	Adj. R^2
Official Criminal History Variables				
Age at first court	-.17	-.07	3.29*	.03
No. of court dates	.25*	-.01	4.27*	.05
No. of recorded offences	.18	.11	4.62*	.05
No. of violent offences	-.20*	-.17	2.42	.02
No. of non-violent offences	.13	.21*	5.95**	.07
Externalising APS-SF Scales				
Conduct Disorder	.54**	-.08	22.69**	.24
Oppositional Defiant Disorder	.45**	-.12	13.42**	.15
Substance Abuse Disorder	.53**	-.31**	18.49**	.20
Anger/violence proneness	.54**	-.08	23.47**	.24

Note. ^a $df = 2$.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.