

“That’s Not Who I Am:” How Offenders Commit Violent Acts and Reject Authentically Violent Selves

Andy Hochstetler, Heith Copes and J. Patrick Williams

Participation in contemporary street cultures often exposes individuals to a world characterized by violence. The participants in this study admitted to frequent experience with violence and regular use of it. Many viewed violence as an appropriate response to some situations, though they often worked to avoid negative connotations of such behavior, especially ascriptions of an “authentically” violent self. Using an interactionist framework, we explore the processes by which offenders who engage in violent crimes resist being labeled as authentically violent. Drawing from data from semi-structured interviews with 30 offenders who engaged in carjackings, we analyze contrastive statements they employed to resist a violent self-concept and label. Offenders differentiated their own violent behaviors, as situational and excusable, from behaviors that characterize authentically violent others. Understanding these processes sheds light on criminal identities and gives insights into attempts to change offender behavior by altering self-conceptions.

Andy Hochstetler is associate professor of sociology at Iowa State University. He writes on self-conception and the choice to offend with emphasis on identity and decision-making. With Neal Shover, he wrote *Choosing White-collar Crime* on Cambridge University Press. Heith Copes is an associate professor in the Department of Justice Sciences at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. His primary research combines symbolic interactionism and rational choice theory to better understand the criminal decision-making process. His recent publications appear in *British Journal of Criminology*, *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research*, *Criminology and Public Policy*, and *Social Problems* and he has been received funding from the National Institute of Justice. J. Patrick Williams is an assistant professor at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. For several years, his research has focused on the experiential and cultural implications of authenticity for subcultural and deviant young people. That research has been published in *Social Problems*, *Symbolic Interaction*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Deviant Behavior*, and elsewhere. He recently edited a book entitled, *Authenticity in Culture, Self and Society* (Ashgate, 2009) and is currently completing a book on subcultural theory for Polity Press. Correspondence to: Heith Copes, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Justice Sciences, 1201 University Blvd., Birmingham 35294, USA. E-mail: jhcopes@uab.edu

Keywords identity; authenticity; violence; cognitive rehabilitation; interactionism

The label *violent* often carries with it the assumption that violence and aggression are dominant, stable characteristics of those so labeled. As a virtual stigmatizing identity (Goffman, 1963), *violent* communicates presumptions that those assigned the label are essentially malicious, dangerous and harmful to the public, more deserving of punishment, and the most difficult offenders to manage and reform. This is manifested in lay usage of the word to describe people's character and in criminal justice distinctions for classification and processing of those who commit violent acts as opposed to other types of crimes. In a recent example of the latter, several states, including Indiana, Oklahoma, Montana, and Kansas, now register and publicly publish lists of known *violent* offenders. Doubtless, these measures are designed to warn and reduce the continuing hazard the violent pose.

Those who commit violent crimes are not isolated from such meanings and ascriptions, and they know what it means to be a violent offender, both in the virtual sense of an ascribed identity as well as in the more immediate, situated sense of enacted selfhood (Athens, 1997). In addition to the general cultural meaning of violent and the potentially stigmatizing position it fosters, there is a personal sense of being or not being violent that comes from participation in violent criminal acts and in the particular cultural and situational contexts from which they may spring (Athens, 1997). Exposure to violence and commission of violent crime often coincide with complex repertoires, scripts, and sense-making that prime further violent responses in situations deemed appropriate (Wilkinson & Carr, 2008). As we will suggest, among many who commit violent crime a sense of how violence is to be used and what is considered violent is intertwined with attempts to avoid assignment to a spoiled identity category (Sandberg, 2009a). This can be done by arguing that conventional violent typification confuses important distinctions between *doing* violence and *being* violent. Therefore, *violent* can have distinct qualitative meanings for those who commit and are punished for crimes that differ from conventional conceptions.

In this paper, we offer insight into how inmates convicted of violent crimes constructed their identity and managed stigma by distancing themselves from those they framed as "authentically" violent. Through an interpretive process, those who commit violent street crime simultaneously negotiate multiple reflected appraisals (Presser, 2008). On the one hand, they imagine and respond to generalized conventional others and the forms of condemnation of criminal actions, which they imagine these others hold. On the other hand, they draw upon subcultural endorsements of specific behaviors as a necessary and normal part of streetlife, arguing that in certain cultural and situational contexts one can *act* violently without *being* violent. In explaining their own violent actions, participants negotiated and balanced multiple sets of cultural norms, and were thus able to use different perspectives when interpreting their own behavior and self.

Our analysis, which is guided by an interactionist framework, focuses on one recurring device that inmates used to reconcile violent behavior with a positive self-conception: the creation of an illustrative out-group of “authentically” violent persons who abide by neither general nor subcultural restrictions on violence. This group serves as both foil and referent for social comparison, facilitating the rationalization of acceptable accounts of violent actions. Using elaborate schemes to explain why repeated violent actions do not establish an authentic violent identity, they crafted the meaning of their own violence to avoid shame, dodge perceived condemnation, and buttress the claims of being respectable in both criminal and straight worlds. Our goal is to shed light on the complexity of criminal selfhood. We think doing so has important implications for understanding how people choose to engage in violent crimes and for better designing rehabilitation programs that promote cognitive change.

Selfhood, Authenticity, and Street Violence

The study of self provides insight into the pragmatic links between structural conditions and individuals’ behaviors. Selves are comprised in situated identities, which in turn are “the character ... that an individual devises for himself ... [or] his imaginative view of himself *as he likes to think of himself as being and acting as an occupant*” of a social position (McCall & Simmons, 1978, p. 65). As such, a person’s construction of self plays a part in how that person evaluates situations and makes discrete choices. Theoretical application of identity-formation in criminology typically emphasizes the affirmative aspects of criminal identity by contrasting the belief systems of those embedded in streetlife from those of more conventional persons (e.g., Akerstrom, 1985; Katz, 1988; Shover, 1996). While clear and informative, this approach gives insufficient attention to efforts to avert the significant stigma of certain criminal identities and behaviors. As such these depictions capture only part of the complexity of how selves are formed and enacted by offenders.

Stigma management is an important component of constructing identity and carrying out deviant behaviors, and offenders’ efforts to create nuanced distinctions among types of criminal categories should be viewed with this in mind. Very often, for example, those engaged in criminal identity projects also have developed schemes for measuring themselves and their acts against those who better and more simplistically typify a virtual criminal identity in order to creatively differentiate themselves from qualities ascribed to those who are portrayed as prototypical members (Copes, Hochstetler, & Williams, 2008). This allows them to accept the positive traits of a social category and still resist those traits seen as negative. Thus, those who engage in violent acts can tell stories of their crimes in ways that makes them both streetwise and heroic (Presser, 2008).

Studying complexities of the internal conversations through which selfhood emerges highlights how personal decisions and self-concepts are socially formed

and acknowledges that not all the dimensions of who a person is are presented in a straightforward, easily studied way (Goffman, 1959). Some aspects of self and others may be viewed as unappealing, personally unsuitable, or grossly simplistic so that people use identities to explain both who they are and where they are exceptional. When this occurs, offenders are likely to refine virtual identities, often by embracing positive dimensions of the identity while refuting other, ignominious aspects. Their refinements tend to emphasize the "gaps" between stigmatized and desirable virtual identities (see Zerubavel, 1991). Often they point to identity-relevant actions that occur in interstices of competing subcultural and cultural imperatives, yielding potentially inaccurate judgments of character and mistaken identity assignment. This process for resisting identity ascription is well-known among researchers of alcoholics and other addicts. Alcoholics often emphasize the contrast between their own behavior and that of "disgusting alcoholics" to the point that it becomes a core belief supporting many other rationalizations (Wilcox, 1998). It also is found in heroin addicts' stylistic distinctions between righteous dope fiends and sick addicts (Sutter, 1966). Additionally, many of those who indulge in crack resist being labeled as crackheads and go to great lengths to show others that they do not properly fit the negative social identity (Copes et al., 2008; Furst, Johnson, Dunlap, & Curtis, 1999). Thus, those who consume alcohol, heroin, or crack can acknowledge certain behavioral tendencies but still distance themselves from the stigmatized.

When people identify with or reject membership in a social category they often do so by invoking a discourse of authenticity. Once measured objectively and assumed to be an inherent aspect of some persons and objects, authenticity is now increasingly conceptualized as a social construction: it "is not so much a state of being as it is the objectification of a process of representation, that is, it refers to a set of qualities that people in a particular time and place have come to agree represent an ideal or exemplar" (Vannini & Williams, 2009, p. 3). To the extent that feelings of self are commensurate with specific (sets of) qualities, people will invoke a claim of being authentic. All know that identities are idealized and match individual characteristics imperfectly, however. Therefore, denials and claims to a given identity necessarily require some evaluation.

There is a widespread belief that people have an authentic, real, or coherent self within the body that affects their social lives and their choices. When participants in street culture say they are "keeping it real," they are claiming to be true to their authentic self and are claiming authentic status within a subcultural group. Such articulations match one's own attributes against those of recognized social others to determine whether they are suitable categories for understanding the self. Assignment to identity categories are then deemed as either accurate representations, which generally are believed to come naturally, or inaccurate representations, which are believed to be unnatural, and therefore, inauthentic (Vannini & Franzese, 2008; Vannini & Williams, 2009).

Subcultural authenticity also can be hotly contested and creatively negotiated among participants and by those who might be categorized as participants

by outsiders. In the process, members may mount a defense against rigid and simplifying typifications that might arbitrarily disqualify persons who honestly claim desired identities but who fail to adequately match some criteria. Some claims will be dismissed as inauthentic posturing and others will be graded authentic. The criteria employed and the emergent cultural terrains where such evaluations occur form the foundations of social identities, which have constantly shifting and fuzzy boundaries (Williams, 2006; Williams & Copes, 2005). There usually is considerable room for negotiation of personal and social authenticity.

One realm within criminal justice where claims to authenticity are important is within the rehabilitative worlds of correctional facilities. Claims to authentic selves (whether good or bad) may be both barriers to and mechanisms for rehabilitative efforts. For example, cognitive restructuring programs that have been shown to be effective models for rehabilitation are premised on the contention that offender thinking matters and can be trained through reflection and critique to reduce offending (Sharp, 2000). These frameworks often imply that violent characters of some are formed in the absence of reflection by people who have yet to struggle with sophisticated attempts to reconcile self and action. Somewhat paradoxically, criminal behavior often is cast as simple miscalculation of the true costs of crime that occurs proximate to criminal decisions. Much of the emphasis in these programs is on acknowledgment and recognition of cognitive schemes and thinking errors that ease rationalization among offenders. Such programs are based on the reasonable premise that reformulated self-evaluations can reduce the likelihood of recidivism, yet questions surround the presentation of cognitive restructuring programs aimed at assisting in instilling new evaluative frameworks and how these mesh with offenders' own understandings. There is, for example, considerable criticism of approaches that ask offenders to take responsibility for their actions by decontextualizing crime and admitting guilt and/or fault retrospectively (Fox, 1999; Maruna & Mann, 2006; Presser, 2008). One reason is the belief that focusing on excuses for particular crimes and listening for *post hoc* excuse-making might neglect more enduring outlooks or schema that can contribute to crime.

In what follows, we analyze inmates' talk that focuses on the idea of authentic selfhood. We will emphasize how violent offenders mitigate some of their violent behaviors by constructing an authentically violent other and then showing how they are not like these people. The data that we present highlight inmates' talk as a means of reducing stigma and avoiding ascription to an identity category that presumably deserves shame and ire. Our research thus elaborates the methods through which the down-and-out attempt to "salvage the self" from stigma and thereby account for what they have done (Snow & Anderson, 1993, p. 229). Inmates refine characteristics of the violent identity for application to an ideal few, and maintain that they are excluded by subtle assignment criteria. We contend that this process has important implications for understanding criminal or deviant identities and has relevance for the design and implementation of cognitive based rehabilitation programs.

Data and Methods

The current study is based on the accounts of 30 violent street offenders gathered in semi-structured interviews in a prison setting. At the time of the interview, these individuals were serving sentences for various offenses in two Louisiana medium-security prisons. To locate participants within these prisons we used a purposive sampling strategy. Clerks in the prisons collected the names of individuals convicted of carjacking and we solicited these individuals. Due to a low number of convicted carjackers in the prison we also asked correctional officers if they knew inmates who had forcibly stolen vehicles. We interviewed those individuals who admitted to forcible auto theft even if they were convicted for other offenses. Respondents ranged in age from 21 to 40 (mean age = 25). Six participants were white and 24 were black. All but two of them were male. Most had long criminal records that reflected years of persistent offending. Crimes in offenders' adult records revealed offenses ranging in severity from low-level drug distribution to robbery and attempted murder, but all admitted to having committed violent crime. The bulk of the respondents were heavily engaged in and surrounded by the drug economy and streetlife in poor neighborhoods in mid-sized to large cities in Louisiana.

When we began interviewing inmates for this project our intent was not to explore the phenomenon of managing violent identities. Initially, the study was designed to explore the social world of those who engage in violent street crime and more specifically how participation in street culture constrained the criminal decision-making process. In each interview we asked study participants about their backgrounds, families, occupations, criminal histories, drug use, and lifestyles. As interviews progressed, it became clear that portraying themselves as basically good people, despite their violent acts, was important to these offenders. Upon recognizing this trend we adjusted the interview guide accordingly to collect more identity-related data (see Copes et al., 2008). Although the ideas about identity construction emerged from the interviews, we think that the sample is well-suited for a study of how inmates construct identities related to violence as carjacking is often seen as being "symbolic of contemporary urban violence" (Topalli & Wright, 2004, p. 150).

Among other questions, we asked participants if they viewed themselves as violent people.¹ Because, this question was posed in the context of an interview about violent crimes and often following admissions of extremely consequential violence, the question was inherently challenging. Sometimes this question was followed with one asking how they viewed their previous description of violent

1. Asking participants about how they see themselves and how others see them is a common interview technique in research using an interactionist and/or identity construction frameworks (e.g., Athens, 1997; Presser, 2008). We, like others, have found that the direct questions are useful in providing a starting point for participants to elaborate on their thoughts and perceptions. It is the explanation of their responses that provides valuable identity-related data and not simply their initial yes or no response, which is of little analytical value. Even those who openly admit to being *violent* almost inevitably explain in what senses of the word they can be considered so.

events (i.e., the carjacking). Another question asking offenders how others, including family and friends, viewed them elicited additional data on ascriptions of violence. Additionally, we asked offenders to describe characteristics of violent people, often by challenging more or less directly their claims of not being violent or by asking them to explain what a violent person is in their understanding. Participants were encouraged to describe their image of violent people and then identify aspects where they fit this image as well as those that differentiated them.

Questions about being or not being a violent person in interviews about violent crimes almost required that inmates reconcile views of self with the sometimes brutal offenses they had committed. Any potential damage to rapport was averted by allowing participants ample time in the interview to address notions concerning the self and their acts. Miller and Glassner (2004, p. 134) suggested that having rapport with interviewees means that they are willing to "talk back" or "label particular topics irrelevant, point out misinterpretations, and offer corrections." This talking back should go both ways. That is, interviewers should be willing to challenge inconsistencies and misrepresentations in the interviewees' stories. While we did sometimes challenge inconsistencies and other responses of participants, we worked to avoid doing so in a way that was threatening, adversarial, or antagonistic.

The interviews took place in private rooms in the facilities' administrative wings. Only the study participants and the interviewer were in the room during the interview. While correctional officers were nearby, they were unable to hear the conversations. The interviews varied in length from 30 to 90 minutes. We transcribed all interviews verbatim. For coding transcripts, we each read them to identify common themes regarding identity construction and violence. We then conferred to compare coding and come to agreement on axial coding. Once we agreed upon the overarching themes we then recoded all transcripts. The passages of interviews where offenders talk about the meanings of violent identities form the findings that follow.

When relying on offender narratives some may question the veracity and reliability of their responses. For example, accounts given by the incarcerated may be designed to present positive images for the researchers and that these presentations may differ depending on the social and physical location of the interviews. Doubtless, the definition of the situation—including the prison setting, the interview itself, and the people conducting it—shapes how participants discuss their crimes and themselves. Those active carjackers interviewed by Jacobs, Topalli, and Wright (2003) did not seem to be as concerned with discussing victim safety or resisting an authentically violent identity as those with whom we spoke. While the interview setting likely shapes how participants respond, this would be true regardless of the setting (Spradley, 1979). We think there is reason to suspect that sober offenders in prison settings confronting inquiries from researchers about violence and being violent would be more reflective on nuances of terminology and also less likely to whole-heartedly embrace impressions of ruthlessness than would free offenders in settings closer

to the streets and the impressions that are important to maintain there. Interviewed inmates may have a more daunting struggle in balancing a hustler or violent image with attempts to portray their pursuit of rehabilitation.

The question then becomes the extent to which the interview setting determines the validity of offender narratives. We therefore want to emphasize that the interview setting itself is not *fully* responsible for shaping inmates' descriptions of themselves and others. Rather, we view their narratives as socially constructed within the setting but referring to a sense of self that may extend into the past and future as well (Sandberg, 2009a). Among other things, their talk objectifies the internal dialogues that go through most people's minds when they engage in deviant behaviors. In addition:

The suspicion that offenders' stories are strategically pitched and thus potentially inauthentic belies a view of stories as social artifacts for some, when they are social artifacts for all. Moreover, the concern with stories as inauthentic reflects a conception of narrative as data on human experience—as valid or invalid only insofar as the stories equate to what *really* happened. It is only one of the ways that narrative may be conceived. We might instead focus on narrative as a guide to behavior. (Presser, 2009, p. 181)

In this light, narratives are analyzed as forms of patterned talk about violence and its sources and should not be taken as claims to having uncovered any underlying "truth" reflecting objective features of authentically violent identities.

Finally, we admit skepticism concerning some details in their accounts and we expect the reader to react similarly. Some degree of dishonesty is expected and assumed (Jacobs & Wright, 2006). Yet this does not diminish the claims being made here because our interest is not so much in the substantive events these stories depict (i.e., what happened during their crimes), but more in the meanings they attached to such facts. We believe that distorted facts and stories impart meaning. Exaggerations and fictions may reveal as much about people (e.g., their personality, identity, and perceptions of self) as "facts," especially when they are discussing their self-conceptions in relation to others (Bruner, 2003). Of course, offenders' talk gives us insight into more than just the situational construction of a personal identity within the context of the interview. Their talk also represents some of the processes through which they construct and enact meaningful social identities. In what follows we describe the process through which inmates who admitted to committing violent crimes made sense of their crimes and resisted being labeled as violent in a prison setting.

Constructing Violent Others

When we posed questions about participants' violent behaviors, they often turned the conversation away from themselves to focus on describing the

characteristics of “authentically” violent others, against which they contrasted themselves. While a few admitted that at one time in their lives they had been in a mental state where others may have assigned them a violent label, all were careful to explain that it never truly fit their self-conceptions or nature. In part, they relied on common and well-known justifications for crime (see Maruna & Copes, 2005; Orbuch, 1997 for review of this literature). Street rules dictated their actions or victims “forced” them to do it. Desperate situations outside of their control led to desperate measures. Muddled thinking and particular demands brought on by persistent drug use caused them to commit crime without forethought. Those who have studied rationalization and thinking errors among offenders know these characterizations well (Maruna & Copes, 2005). However, the participants left no doubt in their claims that violence was much more consistent in the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of authentically violent individuals.

Much in their narratives represents the maintenance of social distance from those they defined as authentically violent. Interviewees constructed their own relatively nonviolent identities along several semantic dimensions, which we subsequently coded into three contrastive pairs: seeking vs. avoiding violence, acceptable vs. unacceptable victims, and magnifying vs. minimizing harm. In each case, interviewees sought to convince us, and perhaps themselves, how they differed from the authentically violent street offenders who fit a rare type referred to by Lonnie Athens (1997, 1998) as the “ultraviolent.”

Seeking vs. Avoiding Violence

Interviewees reported that when committing violent crimes the culprits should show control and exhibit sensibly exercised and measured force. Despite general adherence to a code that not only allowed violence but required it in some circumstances, the inmates clearly distinguished those who sought violence from those who tried to avoid it. They framed this distinction in several ways. One of the most important and recurring claims was that motives matter. Criminal law sets apart those who use violence in the pursuit of criminal objectives as deserving of extra punishment (as in felony homicide), yet the inmates justified a certain amount of violence in crime. They contrasted instrumental and expressive forms of violence, condemning the latter as senseless and counterproductive.

Those who indulged in expressive violence were portrayed as authentically violent, while those who drew limits at instrumental violence were not. Chantey explained this difference, “Well, I consider a violent person [to be] a person that do a lot of things for the hell of it, just for the sport ... but me, I be stealing, you know what I’m saying. It’s because I have a reason.” Violence could be instrumentally administered for specific reasons, but pleasure was not one of them. Thomas echoed this point, “As far as trying to hurt people, that wasn’t an intentional thing. I just wanted their money.” None of our respondents claimed

to have enjoyed inflicting the violence “required” in their crimes and most tried to make it clear that they did not. Instead, they generally portrayed violence as part of the admittedly nasty business of acquisitive crime (see also Feeney, 1986).

Violence made a powerful statement to victims that they were not in control and should do as they were told. Some offenders argued that instrumental violence, such as a punch or pistol to the head, would reduce both the risks to themselves and the potential need to kill. They claimed that victims were assaulted in order to reduce the chances of either party being injured or killed. Their threshold of tolerance of violence was high and many of those we interviewed recounted leaving victims seriously wounded, but they claimed that such violence was part and parcel of their business and was *not* an indication of their essential selves. Rather, they claimed that violent gestures were intended to control the crime scene, efficiently remove property, and avoid killing. In fact, many claimed to enact the crime in a way to minimize the potential need for serious injury (see also Presser, 2008).

Several participants described their roles in a violent crime not as catalysts but as inhibitors for violence. For example, some thought that brandishing a gun reduced the likelihood of actual violence. Research on robbery confirms that these claims are not baseless or uncommon (Cook, 1986; Gill, 2000):

Yeah, as long as [victims] do what I say they’ll be all right. A lot of people ain’t like that though. One of my little partners was one of the aggressive types and man he used to sometimes not even use a pistol.

In this extract, Philip constructed a social comparison between himself and one of his partners by explaining how his partner would not always carry a gun in his crimes because he enjoyed beating victims with his bare hands. His partner’s propensity for beatings was a mark of the authentically violent—a mark he did not possess.

By not actively seeking unnecessary violence, the inmates maintained acceptable criminal selves and adhered to codes that deemed a certain amount of violence tolerable (Athens, 1997, 1998). In their minds, violence was sometimes unavoidable due to situational contingencies. Derrick justified his behaviors by stating:

I feel I’m not trying to hurt you. I’m just trying to get what I want and at the same time I’m not going to let you hurt me, you know. If I see you go reaching for a gun, I’m gonna bust one in you. It’s mandatory because you not just going to let me say, “well I’m sorry bro, go on ahead about your business.” You reaching for a gun, you going to shoot me!

What Derrick did not reflect on was how his choice to rob a person could result in having to commit a violent act and thus being seen as someone who instigated and sought violence. Rather, he framed himself as a person who wanted to avoid violence but who might have his hand forced. Likewise, Michael

explained, "I wouldn't kill nobody unless I really have to. That's one thing. I admit forever that I wouldn't kill nobody unless I have to, you know. ... I say the situation like if somebody try to kill me, I'm going to kill them." Philip expressed similar restrictions on the use of force:

A violent person to me is just always wanting to fight, always wanting to put their hands on somebody, and just wanting to beat somebody up basically. And I was never like that unless you bring trouble to me. Then I'm going to cause trouble to you.

In other words, Derrick, Michael and Philip—who described themselves in essentially nonviolent terms—resorted to violence only when confronted with more-than-troublesome victims or those who threatened their immediate safety. They freely admitted that their criminal intentions sometimes resulted in harm to victims and rivals, yet they accepted only part of the blame—the rest was unavoidable, the result of great provocation, unpredictable turns of events or victim resistance (Presser, 2003). This is not to say that any of these inmates denied that they were not volatile during crime; their contention of being nonviolent was tempered by recognition that in some crimes violence was easily sparked. When that happened, it was not a violent intent or propensity that led to harm, but a single-minded focus on the objective in combination with a heightened emotional state that resulted in outrage when their situational goal was impeded.

On the other hand, the participants portrayed the authentically violent as bloodthirsty individuals who enacted violence with minimal provocation. Further, the violence they inflicted was seen as irrational and outside the goal of successful crimes. William described this distinction while talking about a situation in which he and his partner assaulted a victim during a carjacking:

Mark hit him hard enough to where, dude, he didn't shake back. Dude was in a coma for a long time ... ended up with brain damage. It was messed up. We had the dude beat. The dude gave us the car keys. Mark, he didn't care. His adrenaline was full he didn't care if he killed the kid or not.

William framed the violent action of Mark as "messed up" because it did not serve a function to the successful commission of the theft, as they already had the victim's keys. Mark's violence was expressive rather than instrumental; hedonistic rather than necessary.

The actions of "authentically" violent offenders like Mark were regularly attributed to biological causes or serious mental pathologies. As David said of his partners' propensity for criminal fantasies and crimes with impossibly high risks, "him and the other one I live with, oh man, they live for chaos!" Richard similarly recounted a history of "insane" behavior by a codefendant, who he labeled as a particularly violent person:

[My friend] was kind of out there 'cause I seen him before take a knife and just jab a knife in his own leg when we was out of dope and out of money, you know.

And he was the one that I seen him one time stab a buddy of ours in the back seat of the truck, you know. He turned around and stabbed him in the chest 'cause we was out of dope and out of money. You know he was kind of throwed off there when it come down to that.

The violence committed by the partners of William, David, and Richard was framed as senseless, self-defeating, and crazy—all indicators of being inherently violent. It was a symbol of something wrong inside the person that kept them from understanding the difference between completing crimes and hurting others beyond necessity. It also represented acts that could not be sensibly predicted and thus were dangerous for partners involved in the criminal enterprise.

David discussed several situational contexts where he was capable of violence, and contrasted these restrictions with another who was authentically violent:

Definitely I'm violent, don't get me wrong. I'll fight. Here in the prison, here I'm on the boxing team. But fighting's not everything. ... But [a co-offender], you know, he's not like me. We get along good as a team, you know in situations, but as far as being a lot alike, we're nothing alike. He'll kill somebody! I mean I'll do whatever, but when it comes to killing somebody out of cold blood for no reason—that's not me. Carjacking the whole time you're doing it you're thinking, "Yeah, if he don't give it up, I'll kill him." Once you get there, it's not so easy. Aiming the gun flashing it around—that's easy. Pulling the trigger it's a lot harder than people think.

It may be no accident that David mentioned acceptable contexts for violence by alluding to prison fights and a boxing ring and then transitioned to a discussion of carjacking, presumably another context where violence was necessary and made sense. He even went so far as to note that he considered himself to be quite capable of "anything," a clear reference to ability to engage in violent crime. David noted comfortably that part of his mental preparation for carjacking and robbing included the acknowledgement of the possibility for violence and possibly murder, but in a twist at the end of the passage he set all of that aside to hint that his deeper self is revealed by the fact that using a method to maximize the chance of a successful robbery—flashing a gun—was much easier than actually using it to shoot someone. If pulling the trigger required additional cognitive effort, even in appropriate criminal situations, then he could not be fully violent.

Our interview with Gerald elicited many of the themes separating offenders from the violence in which they engaged, as seen clearly in the closing sentences from an interview:

No, I was the most humblest person you could probably ever meet at that time, even on the drugs, because they got guys out there that just don't care about nobody and I can't see myself just sit there and bash somebody's head in with a pipe, you know. You really about to kill this person? I can't see myself doing

that regardless if I'm on drugs or not, you know ... I know that I ain't going really hurt you, but I can punch you a couple [times] or hit you in your stomach to knock your wind out. That way you see, just that little time, that's enough time for me to get in the car ... What I'm saying is just so you know, but I never was a violent person. Still to this day, I have a lot of compassion for people. You know, that's just me.

Acceptable vs. Unacceptable Victims

Another way that interviewees distinguished themselves from authentically violent criminals was through their descriptions of victim selection. They generally frowned upon victimizing classes of people they viewed as innocent or interrupting contexts they viewed as wholesome, while claiming that "authentically" violent offenders did not use such discretion. Sykes and Matza (1957) made note of the respect granted to the elderly, to the family and its ordinary activities, and to those who are for one reason or another noticeably distant from the criminal lifestyle to show how many delinquents still identify with conventional culture. Derrick's comments reflected this attitude:

I didn't say this earlier but we had a fucked up life [growing up]. We thought about stuff a lot of people don't normally think about, you know. We didn't have no father so we used to get jealous of people in the park with they kids because we didn't have that. That's why we never mess with women. They going in they car they trying to get somewhere. Go do your thing. We don't want your car. You safe. Kids, you safe. Men with their kids and in they life, go on, do your thing. We had a little morals so to speak, you know. But a man just going to his car? That's it man ... we did a lot of them.

Interviewees' definitions of unacceptable victims fit well with Sykes and Matza's earlier claims. Assaulting families—especially women and children—was seen as taboo and unnecessarily violent, something only authentically violent people would consider seriously. The potential (un)acceptability of victims was regularly defined by improvisation as their definition of the situation developed. In some cases, the participants regretted having committed crimes against the wrong sort of victim, usually because they or their partners had chosen crimes unwisely. Others were thankful that they had averted such catastrophes at the last second and emphasized that their "true" self emerged at the last moment to overcome external motivations for crime:

I look in the backseat, they had a little girl, you know. She was looking at me in my eyes, you know what I'm saying, and I'm thinking I done ran up on a little girl. So, I let it go, you know. Now I mean—children—I don't mess with. (Shawn)

A few offenders also avoided injuring women by refusing to escalate beyond intimidation or mild force when robbing them. This sentiment reflected a general ethic that women should not be harmed:

I've never laid my hand on a woman in force or out of anger. I slapped my sister a couple of times but you know that's because she forced me to hit her. But as far as, you know, just beating up on a woman or physically hurting her just out of the joy of it. No, I can't do that. (David)

They claimed that authentically violent individuals, however, were less discriminating:

You know I got some people that I run with they a lot worse than me. See I have a heart. I do have a heart. A lot of people think cold-heartedly. ... A cold-hearted person don't give a fuck about nobody. A cold-hearted person fuck with anybody. Momma. Daddy. Anybody, you know what I'm saying. That's a cold-hearted person. (Michael)

Interviewees communicated a common perspective that those who selected the criminal lifestyle willingly entered a game where they would likely be victimized, and deservedly so (Jacobs, 2000). Choosing a streetwise victim meant a greater chance of harm, but these victims were fair game. Victimiting other offenders was seen as relatively honorable and, therefore, not viewed as indicative of a violent character-trait. While several offenders noted that the trappings of a criminal lifestyle in dress or automobile style helped identify attractive targets, Brennon presented a more idealized scenario to show that these material articles represented participation in street culture: that representation, rather than the articles themselves, legitimized violent behavior:

Mostly everybody I rob, I mean you know carjack, it was mostly drug dealers. It wasn't really no ordinary person like you or something like you. Even if you got a 350 and sound in it and we didn't never see you on the corner or know you deal any kind of dope, we wouldn't even bother. We wouldn't even bother.

Discriminating between relative innocents and acceptable victims served the purpose of showing interviewees' essential goodness and abidance to accepted codes of behavior. They claimed that authentically violent offenders made no distinctions about the deservingness of victims and were equally willing to harm suburban mothers and street-wise hustlers.

Exaggerated vs. Minimized Violence

In the previous examples, we saw how the interviewees defined certain victims as unacceptable. Yet the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable is deceptively simple. Once an "acceptable" label was placed on a target, crimes purportedly were designed to minimize the chances of someone being injured unnecessarily or excessively. As suggested earlier, interviewees reported a willingness to do only as much harm as was necessary for victim compliance. Inflicting pain to shock and/or communicate with victims was portrayed as acceptable, with the qualifier that the pain should be inflicted in proportion to

the physical threat the victim offered and what was likely to be needed to separate the victim from property while minimizing the danger to self.²

Whether or not physical harm occurred was partially contingent on the victim but also subject to the propensities of those in control of the situation. Those we spoke with claimed to have scruples regarding the plausibility and level of violence, which they construed as a distinguishing feature from the authentically violent. Leroy expressed anger and repulsion at the degree to which his most enthusiastic partner was unmoved by the serious injury they inflicted on a victim during a beating:

Yeah, I got real sick. He was about to kill this dude too. I had to tell him, "No don't do it." If he would have killed [the victim], I would have killed him. ... [I felt sickened] that's why I threwed up. I was sick! I told him "don't do it" from the beginning.

Leroy's depiction of the event suggests that he did not have the stomach for exaggerated violence and that it was his presence at the scene that protected the victim from being killed. It is unlikely that Leroy would have followed through with avenging the victim by killing his partner; thus, the intent of this statement was likely to convey that he was a good person and differed in a measured way from his truly violent partner.

Yet another interviewee, David, committed a crime with a co-offender who he claimed was ostensibly more violent. Together they robbed a victim, whom the partner beat severely. In this talk he revealed the distinction between his partner, who inflicted violence naturally, and himself who could not abide senseless brutality and did his best to interfere. In his words:

He wouldn't stop—that's just the way he was. He didn't care if he hurt somebody or not. We robbed an old couple in California before this happened, and he was going to kill them. If I hadn't pushed him out of the way when I did he'd a killed them.

David, like Leroy, claimed that his presence at the crime mitigated the violence and argued that without his presence the victims may not have survived the attack. Just as for David and Leroy, all our interviewees agreed that situations often called for a measure of violent action, but none of them saw themselves as natural-born killers.

The violent self is associated with excessive harm and even the slightest gesture of morality (i.e., immobilizing victims before they did something stupid or interfering in their partners' violent actions) was given as evidence against the violent stigma that the social justice system had placed on them (Presser, 2008). Philip explained how he made sure to leave an abducted carjacking victim near a place where he knew that she would find help quickly:

2. This level of restraint does not appear to be granted when the motive is revenge or retaliation (Jacobs & Wright, 2006).

I had to cross the bridge. I made a big little ride to help her out and bring her to Metairie [Louisiana], but it was better than dropping her off in mother-fucking-Egypt somewhere. I got a good heart a little bit, you know.

In describing another crime, Philip explained that he went to considerable trouble to avoid abandoning his victim in a dangerous area, which he claimed less compassionate offenders (in this case his partner) might not have done:

[My] partner starting wrapping duct tape all around [the victim's] face. ... I thought he was going to smothercate the dude. ... I went and dropped this dude off at the hospital in the parking lot. ... I know if I dump this dude off and he's just rolled up in duct tape somebody's going to see him and call the police. I don't want to leave him somewhere in duct tape—if he ain't found two days or something he might you know ... [die]. I ain't really about killing nobody unless it's my life or yours.

De-escalation of potentially violent events was offered to further substantiate nonviolent selves. In addition to selecting victims that reduced harm to innocents, several expressed a willingness to flee crimes that were developing into events with unplanned or excessive forms of violence. In David's words, "There's a lot of lines I won't cross, you know. And if I feel that the situations got out of control, I'm gone. Forget it, you know." Tony, who was proud of the restraint he exhibited, expressed the sentiment that when crime escalated beyond control, his response revealed his essential nonviolent character:

Well, one woman, after she gave me the money and I went to turn around, she started shooting at me. But I didn't shoot back. I just took off running. ... Because you don't really want to kill anybody. Because I had the money and didn't think I needed to use force.

Popular accounts of street life are filled with the *lex talionis* mentality that many people expect of hardened criminals. In the previous and next interviewee extracts, we see how they found themselves in situations where exaggerated violence might be expected. However, some claimed that they lacked violent pre-dispositions and rejected or utilized with greater discretion an ethic of retaliation, common among the authentically violent (see Topalli, 2006). Shawn described how one of his female carjacking victims stabbed his leg with a knife, yet he maintained the image of a hardened robber and also of being nonviolent:

I'm talking about to the bone I felt it hit. It hit my bone and like the pain ... I want to bust her at this point in time; I want to pull this trigger. You, man, you trying to hurt me, so therefore I got to hurt you. But I don't know what made me not do it. That's something I don't know 'til this day, you know. I just took my lick on that one, you know. I couldn't even get out of the car man when she hit me, I'm talking about it like paralyzed that whole leg or something man. I'm trying and she just drove, I'm like "god," I said, "I can't

believe it's a knife." Tip is still in me. It is still in me. She was just bolder than I was, you know.

Another way to establish that violence was minimized was to explain that sometimes there was more to a crime than using brute force to terrify victims. Being nice during a crime, especially to overly frightened victims, helped interviewees depict a nonviolent self (Presser, 2008). Philip, who held one victim for a short time, recounted his compassion:

[I told her] "You just cooperate and everything will be all right." I was loaded [high on heroin]. I was on all kinds of dope so I wasn't really kind of angry. And see I was loaded, so I'm talking slow kind of nice trying to calm her down you know. Telling her I just want the truck.

His victim may have interpreted his soft talk as frightening rather than soothing and probably wanted the situation to end as quickly as possible, reassurances aside (Gill, 2000).

The inmates also seemed to realize the unusual, almost surreal, contrast between the violent frame of the situation and their own pleas against victim actions that would precipitate violence. They wielded such examples as evidence of the lengths to which they went not to be seen as murderous, thereby avoiding the impression that they would harm without reason. In the stories of humanizing themselves to victims, they also communicated that they could not keep up the front of the villain throughout the crime. Anthony explained that he had minimized the psychological toll of abduction through conversation that revealed that he was a generally compassionate person who intended no grave harm:

She was like tripping. She was like in shock. She was an older woman. You know, she was in shock. It was a trip. After I had done it I had come to myself, you know what I'm saying, I started talking to the woman like she was a counselor or something. I started telling the woman my problems. [Laughs] Yeah. She was listening, you know what I'm saying?

He contended that this soothing conversation with the victim resulted from the fact that he calmed down and "had come to myself." Implicit in his rhetoric is his self-characterization as a nonviolent person whose violent actions were a means to an end. Other interviewees repeated such stories:

[The victim] was just crying. She tell me not to hurt her or nothing. And I'm telling her I ain't going to hurt her, I got a mother ... I need the truck as simple as that. ... I'm going to drop you off at a store with your bags ... I don't want nothing from you.

These descriptions of the events express both rationalizations and attempts at establishing a nonviolent self. The violence did not reflect their "true" self (see Pogrebin, Stretesky, Unnithan, & Venor, 2008), but was a consequence of a definition of the situation.

On Violence and Offender Natures

No one should take from the previous extracts that those with whom we spoke always avoided violence in action or necessarily rejected all parts of a violent image. Many committed acts that polite society and the law would deem brutal, excessive, and criminal. After all, they all described participating in forcible auto theft. Some did so regularly. The larger lesson is that by contextualizing violent acts and refusing to internalize violent actions they could account for their repeated violent offenses. Offenders' enabling accounts can be interpreted as being designed to explain or make excuses for behavior that the culturally distant or otherwise ignorant outsider might assess as aberrant or inexplicable and distasteful. The struggle to defend the valued self might also be looked at not as a means of rationalizing crime, albeit it probably can be just that, but as one way to demonstrate that resisting crime is a "heroic struggle" in which the true and good self can be set back or fail in tests of character but ultimately prevail or show through (Presser, 2004).

When portraying violent others, interviewees regularly insinuated that the referents were more naturally violent than themselves. This patterned way of framing the actions of themselves and of others is well known among social psychologists working within attribution theory (Jones & Harris, 1967; Weiner, 1974). Here, interviewees' personas were constructed by portraying their authentic selves as more complex and nuanced than those of violent criminals, whose actions were manifestations of fundamental character traits. Several men who worked in criminal groups made social comparisons between themselves and their partners, alleging that they were either less violent or not violent at all. When asked to explain why he thought his partner was violent but he was not, Terry stated bluntly, "Like I said, it's in his character." This statement summarizes the sentiment that many offenders attempted to impart by explaining that in their social worlds they harbored relatively restrictive definitions of allowable contexts for violence, and that their true character could be found in adherence to limits. Another interviewee, Kristee, explained that she found little intrinsic enticement in violence, but that a regular co-offender she knew was "wanting to hurt somebody." Others have had similar findings. For example, when Feeney (1986, p. 65) asked a robber why his partner continued beating a victim the robber said, "Knowing him, he did it for meanness. He likes to hurt people" (Feeney, 1986, p. 65). The violence committed by others was portrayed as stemming from inherent character traits and not situational demands. Moreover, situations were incidental in explaining crime or the harm that might result when the offenders are authentically violent.

The attraction of violence was more ambiguous for offenders when they spoke of their own crimes. Athens (1998, p. 680) described such offenders as having a "definite willingness to take serious violent action, but only under extreme dominative provocation." Indeed, most of our respondents indicated that they adhered to a criminal code and accompanying identity, often seeing and portraying themselves as "hustlers" (see Copes et al., 2008). Many also

admitted that they were very willing to use violence and did so regularly. In fact, none made a distinction between authentically violent offenders and themselves based on the length of criminal careers or offending frequency for violent or nonviolent crimes. Rather, frequent and infrequent violence was portrayed as a small part of their complex character and shown to conflict with other aspects of it. As Michael explained:

Sometimes you sit back and you laugh at it, you know. But then sometimes you get back and you like, "Damn I don't know why I did it," you know what I'm saying. It'd be like ... sometimes I be like switching sides, you understand. I be like, like, "Damn why I'm doing this [carjacking]," you know what I'm saying? Then I be like, "Man fuck it; it's done." You know I can't take that back. That's something I already done.

Thomas echoed this sentiment on complex characters and the internal conversations that support them:

I always considered myself confused. It was like ... if I get around you and you're a good person and you're doing things positive I want to follow. Man, I want to follow you. But now it could be an hour later and you could see me with a bunch of gangsters and they selling drugs and I'm going to want to follow them. And I'm like, I'm trying to figure out, who am I? I couldn't figure this out ... I'm thinking, is this me? Well, I mean if this is me, why do I not like this? And if this is me, why do I like that? And it always have kept me confused.

Participants described how the "authentically" violent offenders they knew did not have troubling internal debates nor fret over violent actions. Because each person expressed these sentiments in response to direct questions of whether she or he was a violent person, we interpret their discussion of internal conversations as demonstrative that persons who were not committed to violence in thought could still be regularly violent in action. Michael, Thomas, and others admitted to continuing violence after internal debate, but that did not make the internal conversations irrelevant in their minds. Rather mental turmoil and fleeting guilt was seen as indication that any exhibited violent self was inauthentic.

This assessment of a nonviolent character is a foundation or core belief upon which inmates' rationalizations were constructed. With it, violence was framed as transient and situational and, thus, could not be accurately viewed as a trait or defect. By relying on a variety of situational justifications for their violence, offenders resisted internal and external labels of being violent, at least as they defined it. They engaged in violence but distanced themselves from it by pointing to situations or circumstances that caused their actions.

Conclusions

Despite recently invigorated interest in meaning and culture there remains, "an extraordinary tendency to suggest that the motive to commit crime springs fully

fledged out of certain material predicaments (e.g., poverty, unemployment) or social circumstances (e.g., lack of control) or biological characteristics (e.g., youth and masculinity), almost as if no connecting narrative or human subjectivity were necessary” (Young, 2004, p. 15). Where narratives that form these essential connections are acknowledged, they generally have been oversimplified. The vast literature on rationalizations, for example, pairs various rationalizations to discrete acts and relates how each excuse allows a particular behavior, giving little attention to consistent underlying forms and even less to why some people rationalize easily, consistently, and frequently and others do not (Maruna & Copes, 2005). A similar simplicity is found in use of identities associated with criminal or street cultures as key links from structure to behavior. Investigators who use these devices focus almost exclusively on the affirmative endorsements of acting criminally, mainly in interpersonal confrontations where street codes certainly apply. Criminal identities become idealized versions of what offenders are trying to be or accomplish as they commit crime and, therefore, emphasize the desired dimensions of persons associated with criminal acts and associated styles. The offender’s goal in crime is portrayed as becoming authentically street or criminal by emphasizing dangerousness, courage, and disregard for consequence, but our analysis attempts to add to a more complex understanding of criminal identities.

Criminal identities can be communicated and survive not only because of what they facilitate in terms of affirmation of self, but also because of what they scorn and disallow. Criminal identities are as complex and creative as any other role-based identity (for discussion of complex identities see Bruner, 1990; Vryan, Adler, & Adler, 2003). They extend beyond mere contrasts with the imagined world of the straight or square John as they contain contrasts with disreputable offenders as well. In crafting a self-concept, those who commit violence regularly borrow images from the reputable world but rework them in everyday interactions to construct and articulate subcultural meaning.

There is a great deal of variety and creative freedom in narratives, but they are likely to be structured as well. For example, the use of masculine constructions and themes in understanding self and crime are surely important and likely to vary between women and men and types of offenses (Messerschmidt, 1997; Miller, 2002). Offenders’ talk, moreover, changes depending not only on where they are and to whom they are talking, but also according to their progress in struggles to reform (Maruna, 2001). Illuminating these distinctions are worthwhile topics for investigators interested in narrative, representational, and interactionist approaches to explore, but require grander investigations than the one presented here, which in broad strokes describes a single recurring device used by a sample composed mainly of men heavily involved in crime and who had records of violence. Explorations of violent narratives by gender or by interview setting are likely promising avenues of future research.

Our goal has been to enrich conceptualizations of criminal identity, specifically the process by which inmates resist being labeled authentically violent. We present a view of it as psychosocial terrain where boundaries are created

and imagined using contrasts that affirm certain idealized acts and characters as honorable and that portray even more idealized acts and persons as repugnant. The violent offenders interviewed here attempted to negotiate a self that incorporates demonstrated ability to commit widely condemned acts of violence with claims that they are essentially and authentically nonviolent. Creating a hyper-violent idealized other allows the claim that a person who commits violence is not necessarily “really” violent. This is part of both the mental *and* interpersonal work that occurs as inmates turn over ideas about themselves, form self-concepts, select the types of behaviors in which they might engage, create reasons that their criminal selves and crimes are tolerable, if not representations of their essential goodness, and account for their behaviors.

These social-psychological processes have important implications for prison rehabilitation programs that focus on cognitive change and for others who think about reducing recidivism. Goffman (1959) suggested that there is a constant tension between a person’s desire to be true to himself or herself and the need for social approval. Among institutionalized populations, the desire for social approval is perhaps even stronger than it is in other dimensions of social life because people are forced to deal with unflattering images of themselves that are reflected from staff and other inmates. Their institutionalized selves are dictated through official records and further entrenched because they lack the ability to influence others’ definitions of the situation. In short, they have very little power over how others define and treat them (Goffman, 1961).

Social psychologists have shown that people in everyday life may counter unattractive reflected appraisals (Gecas & Burke, 1995), but definitions of who inmates “really” are govern institutional interactions, and such definitions almost inevitably locate the causes of problem behaviors and feelings within the individual. Completely setting aside processes of self-as-criminal in these contexts presents considerable obstacles for a variety of reasons. Inmates often must tread a middle-ground, maintaining a sense of their own hustler cool or criminally capable self, while not coming across as unremorseful in the eyes of program facilitators. They engage in a form of “apologia” or present “sad tales” (Goffman, 1961), which serve to account for their past behaviors in a way that aligns them *to some extent* with the core social values of society and presents a self who can do certain crimes but who is still redeemable (Presser, 2009). Sandberg (2009a, 2009b) has found similar sad tales among active drug users interviewed on the streets of Oslo, Norway. Nevertheless, we are aware that prisons bring nearer to the surface contrasts between violent and nonviolent identity and complicate attempts to manage criminal and conventional identities. The fact that our interviews occurred in prison might alter constructions of what is authentically violent, but it also may reveal consistent aspects of the ongoing struggle to refute violent ascriptions among those with violent pasts where it is most relevant to practitioners—in prison rehabilitation programs.

In contemporary total institutions, conceptions of the self are significant in a formal sense. Numerous institutional rituals and programs are centered on

self-reflection and reshaping the self. In her research on a “cognitive self-change” prison program, Fox (1999) explored specifically how prison structures employ power to convince prisoners they had a faulty self that could only be “fixed” once they came to terms with the fact that they were essentially flawed people. This was achieved through emphasizing the violent nature of prisoners’ thoughts, feelings, and actions. The psychologists in charge regularly required inmates to decontextualize the behaviors that resulted in their convictions. When inmates tried to incorporate situational factors that helped account for their behaviors, for example, noting that the assault they perpetrated was the result of their own sense of being in imminent danger, facilitators were quick to label such talk as justifications or excuses (Scott & Lyman, 1968). Until convicts were able to talk about themselves as violent people in a way that facilitators decided was authentic rather than manipulative, they could not be considered for reduced prison sentences. In other words, only by conceiving a self that claimed personal and unmitigated responsibility for one’s violent actions (i.e., internalizing a definition of self as authentically violent) could prisoners begin to work toward correcting their spoiled status in the eyes of the criminal justice system.

Such programs cannot easily stop inmates from attempting to create a competing sense of authenticity that may diametrically oppose the reflected appraisals they receive from program facilitators and other prison staff, although inmates may learn to keep quiet. Rather than accept a monolithic, negative self-reflection, inmates are likely to engage in restorative face work, often by constructing ideal-typical identities *against which* their own identity is understood. This suggests that critically understanding acculturated depictions of the nuances of criminal identities may add to inmates’ evaluations of their behavior and strike them as more realistic than a presentation that focuses on flawed choices in discrete offenses or consistent errors in decision-making. We are not questioning the overall goals of cognitive restructuring *per se*, but suggesting that evaluating constructions of self versus constructions of others publicly may be an important part of it. This seems to mesh neatly with the notion that there are core beliefs underlying the thinking errors common among offenders, and with the emphasis in some treatment regimens on recognizing and transforming the self as well as errant thought patterns (Sharp, 2000). It is a matter of emphasis.

We also are not suggesting that inmates should be encouraged to give up their sense of a nonviolent self in discussing their own violent actions, although they should perhaps be encouraged to acknowledge that the same picture of the benevolent self exists in others. Honesty requires more careful evaluation and appraisal of the relativistic defense mechanisms used by all who want to justify. Indeed, there is considerable reason to think that casting one’s life as a struggle to become the good person that one truly is supports rehabilitation, and that a very common device in this narrative is to point out that one was never comfortable with crime and doing harm (Presser, 2004). Certainly, no therapist would want to completely undermine accounts of the good self, although it might help

to point the offender toward realizing the fact that comparison to those with greater deficiencies is common among those who desist and those who continue to offend (Maruna & Mann, 2006).

Appraisal of attempts to become or be a "morally good criminal" or a "nonviolent violent offender" reveals the divergent outcomes that are possible among those who consider themselves relatively moral. Inmates can be led to the conclusion that they can decide if being a moral criminal suffices and that they may choose to maintain a partial fiction that crime does not reflect upon their character. Alternatively, they can choose to use their sense that they are essentially good to meet societal standards of the acceptable. Critique and exchange centered on this could contribute to the sort of forward-looking and active responsibility in decisions where offenders concentrate on what needs to be done and who they want to be rather than what has been done and why it is or is not defensible. This transformative outlook seems essential for rehabilitation and in attempts to turn away from future criminal opportunities (Bovens, 1998; Brickman et al., 1982; Maruna & Mann, 2006). Claims of criminal or conventional identities potentially can be barriers or mechanisms for rehabilitative efforts depending on how they are used.

According to Fox's (1999) research on cognitive self-change prison programs, there is a considerable barrier to reform in the men interviewed here in that much of what they must say to be reformed is unlikely to be thought relevant. Prison apparatchiks *want* prisoners to take full responsibility for their actions and decisions so that the prisoners are clear on who needs to change. Yet as Fox shows in multiple examples, inmates constantly attempt to negotiate situations in which they are defined in essentially spoiled terms. By understanding and discussing shared processes for cognitively defending core beliefs and esteemed identities, offenders may learn that their techniques for *acting* criminal without *being* criminal are common devices; thus, their usefulness for denial and shame avoidance may be undermined and deeper self-appraisal may occur when considering new crimes. Perhaps, when self-questioning about whether actions reflect self arises, offenders will be prepared to acknowledge and act on it in positive ways just as they are now being prepared to negate situational rationalizations. Cognitive self-change becomes more aptly titled if it is not about decision-making and situational rationalization but if greater attention is paid to understanding the situational and cognitive dimensions of self.

References

- Akerstrom, M. (1985). *Crooks and squares: Lifestyles of thieves and addicts in comparison to conventional people*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press.
- Athens, L. (1997). *Violent criminal acts and actors revisited*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Athens, L. (1998). Dominance, ghettos, and violent crime. *Sociological Quarterly*, 39, 673-691.
- Bovens, M. (1998). *The quest for responsibility*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Bruner, J. (2003). *Making stories: Law, literature, life*. Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Brickman, P., Rabinowitz, V. C., Karuza, J., Coates, D., Cohn, E., & Kidder, L. (1982). Models of helping and coping. *American Psychologist*, *37*, 368-384.
- Cook, P. (1986). The relationship between victim resistance and injury in noncommercial robbery. *Journal of Legal Studies*, *15*, 405-416.
- Copes, H., Hochstetler, A., & Williams, J. P. (2008). We weren't no regular dope fiends: Negotiating hustler and crackhead identities. *Social Problems*, *55*, 254-270.
- Feeney, F. (1986). Robbers as decision-makers. In D. B. Cornish & R. V. Clarke (Eds.), *The reasoning criminal: Rational choice perspectives on offending* (pp. 53-71). New York: Springer-Verlang.
- Fox, K. J. (1999). Changing violent minds: Discursive correction and resistance in the cognitive treatment of violent offenders in prison. *Social Problems*, *46*, 88-103.
- Furst, R. T., Johnson, B. D., Dunlap, E., & Curtis, R. (1999). The stigmatized image of the "crack head:" A sociocultural exploration of a barrier to cocaine smoking among a cohort of youth in New York City. *Deviant Behavior*, *20*, 153-181.
- Gill, M. (2000). *Commercial robbery*. London: Blackstone Press Limited.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Doubleday.
- Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums*. New York: Anchor.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Behavior in public places*. New York: The Free Press.
- Gecas, V., & Burke, P. J. (1995). Self and identity. In K. S. Cook, G. A. Fine, & J. S. House (Eds.), *Sociological perspectives on social psychology* (pp. 41-67). Needham-Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Jacobs, B. A. (2000). *Robbing drug dealers: Violence beyond the law*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Jacobs, B.A., Topalli, V., & Wright, R.T. (2003). Carjacking, streetlife and offender motivation. *British Journal of Criminology*, *43*, 673-688.
- Jacobs, B. A., & Wright, R. (2006). *Street justice: Retaliation in the criminal underworld*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, E. E., & Harris, V. A. (1967). The attribution of attitudes. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *3*, 1-24
- Katz, J. (1988). *Seductions of crime: Moral and sensual attractions in doing evil*. New York: Basic Books.
- Maruna, S. (2001). *Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association Press.
- Maruna, S., & Copes, H. (2005). What have we learned from five decades of neutralization research? *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research*, *32*, 221-320.
- Maruna, S., & Mann, R. E. (2006). A fundamental attribution error? Rethinking cognitive distortions. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, *11*, 155-177.
- McCall, G. J., & Simmons, J. L. (1978). *Identities and interaction*. New York: Free Press.
- Messerschmidt, J. W. (1997). *Crime as structured action: Gender, race, class, and crime in the making*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Miller, J. (2002). The strengths and limits of "doing gender" for understanding street crime. *Theoretical Criminology*, *6*, 433-460.
- Miller, J., & Glassner, B. (2004). The "inside" and the "outside:" Finding realities in interviews. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative Research* (pp. 125-139). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Orbuch, T. L. (1997). People's accounts count: The sociology of accounts. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *23*, 455-478.
- Pogrebin, M., Stretesky, P. B., Unnithan, N. P., & Venor, G. (2008). Retrospective accounts of violent events by gun offenders. *Deviant Behavior*, *27*, 479-501.
- Presser, L. (2003). Remorse and neutralization among violent male offenders. *Justice Quarterly*, *20*, 801-823.

- Presser, L. (2004). Violent offenders, moral selves: Constructing identities and accounts in the research interview. *Social Problems*, 51, 82-101.
- Presser, L. (2008). *Been a heavy life: Stories of violent men*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Presser, L. (2009). The narratives of offenders. *Theoretical Criminology*, 13, 177-200.
- Sandberg, S. (2009a). A narrative search for respect. *Deviant Behavior*, 30, 487-510.
- Sandberg, S. (2009b). Gangster, victim or both? The interdiscursive construction of sameness and difference in self-presentations. *British Journal of Sociology*, 60, 523-542.
- Scott, M., & Lyman, S. (1968). Accounts. *American Sociological Review*, 33, 46-62.
- Sharp, B. D. (2000). *Changing criminal thinking: A treatment program*. Lanham, MD: American Correctional Association.
- Shover, N. (1996). *Great pretenders: Pursuits and careers of persistent thieves*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Snow, D., & Anderson, L. (1993). *Down on their luck: A study of homeless street people*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Spradley, J. P. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Sutter, A. G. (1966). The world of the righteous dope fiend. *Issues in Criminology*, 2, 177-222.
- Sykes, G., & Matza, D. (1957). Techniques of neutralization: A theory of delinquency. *American Sociological Review*, 22, 664-670.
- Topalli, V. (2006). The seductive nature of autotelic crime: How neutralization theory serves as a boundary condition for understanding hardcore offending. *Sociological Inquiry*, 76, 475-501.
- Topalli, V., and Wright, R. T. (2004). Dubs and Dees, beats and rims: Carjackers and urban violence. In D. Dabney (Ed.), *Crime types: A text reader* (pp. 149-169). Los Angeles: Roxbury.
- Vannini, P., & Franzese, A. (2008). The authenticity of self: Conceptualization, personal experience, and practice. *Sociology Compass*, 2, 1621-1637.
- Vannini, P., & Williams, J. P. (Eds.) (2009). *Authenticity in culture, self and society*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Vryan, K. D., Adler, P. A., & Adler, P. (2003). Identity. In L. T. Reynolds & N. J. Herman-Kinney (Eds.), *Handbook of symbolic interactionism* (pp. 367-390). Boulder, CO: AltaMira.
- Weiner, B. (1974). *Achievement motivation and attribution theory*. Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press.
- Wilcox, D. M. (1998). *Alcoholic thinking: Language, culture, and belief in alcoholics anonymous*. New York: Praeger.
- Wilkinson, D.L., & Carr, P.J. (2008). Violent youth's responses to high levels of exposure to community violence: What violent events reveal about youth violence. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 36, 1026-1051.
- Williams, J. P. (2006). Authentic identities: Straightedge subculture, music, and the internet. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35, 173-200.
- Williams, J. P., & Copes, H. (2005). How edge are you? Constructing authentic identities and subcultural boundaries in a straightedge internet forum. *Symbolic Interaction*, 28, 67-89.
- Young, J. (2004). Voodoo criminology and the numbers game. In J. Ferrell, K. Hayward, W. Morrison, & M. Presdee (Eds.), *Cultural criminology unleashed* (pp. 13-28). New York: Routledge-Cavendish.
- Zerubavel, E. (1991). *The fine line: Making distinctions in everyday life*. Cambridge: MIT Press.