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The Theoretical Model of Criminal Social Identity: Psycho-social perspective.

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Philip Hyland²

Abstract

Individuals become criminals because of the presence of a persistent criminal identity which has its origin in processes of negative social comparisons carried out by individuals who have failed in their pro-social roles and have exhibited non-conforming behaviour, aggravated and compounded by contextual factors such as a dysfunctional family environment and/or the presence of criminal peers. Development of a criminal identity might be influenced by representations of known criminals which are stored in memory system, and are made accessible due to relevant situational cues. This is consistent with the concept of multiple social identities which postulates that as a person's social context changes, corresponding social identity changes are likely to occur as a result of the activation of situation-specific schemas.

Introduction

In addition to the unique identity that is sometimes labelled the personal self-concept, there are also social aspects of the self that criminals share with other criminals. The self is defined depending on their criminal affiliation. Part of who they are and how they think of themselves is determined by a collective identity that is the criminal social self. Baumeister and Leary (1995) argued that the social identity is based on a fundamental need to belong that is a genetically based characteristic of humans.

The development of social identity has been a source of great interest to social psychologists, however to date research has been limited to examining the development of social identity with respect to an individual's membership within particular national, religious, cultural, or demographic groups. The aim of this paper is to develop a theoretical model (see Figure 1) of Criminal Social Identity (CSI). The development of CSI will be examined from a psychosocial perspective in order to explain how a person's social self can be defined by one's membership within anti-social or criminal groups such as gangs or small non-organized criminal groups. In order to achieve this goal an explanation of the meaning and role of identity as a social psychological concept as described by Social Identity Theory (SIT - Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT - Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher and Wetherell 1987) will be presented. It will then be argued that these concepts can be utilized in order to explain the development of CSI thus demonstrating the multidimensionality of CSI as a social psychological concept. Additionally, based on assumptions of Social-Cognitive Theory of Self and cognitive centrality in the process of development of identity, this paper proposes that development of a criminal identity is influenced by representations of known

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criminals which are stored in an individual's memory system, and are made accessible at certain times due to relevant situational cues. It will be indicated that this is consistent with the concept of multiple social identities which postulates that as a person's social context changes, corresponding social identity changes are likely to occur as a result of the activation of situation-specific schemas.

Social Identity and Self-Categorization Theory

One theoretical approach in which social comparisons occupy an essential place is SIT (Tajfel and Turner 1979), and its more updated explanation SCT (Turner et al 1987). According to SIT, individuals' perceptions of, and attitudes toward, in-group and out-group members ultimately develop from their need to identify with and belong to groups that are relatively superior, as means of enhancing their level of self-esteem. The result of these processes is that individuals perceive other group members to be similar to themselves and show preference in their attitudes and behaviours toward them, whereas out-group members are perceived to be dissimilar from in-group members and to possess less favourable qualities, and therefore they can justifiably be discriminated against.

Turner's (1982) distinction between personal and social identity illustrates the beginning of SCT. Personal identity is defined as self-definition of a unique individual in terms of interpersonal or intra-group differentiations ("I" or "me" versus "you"), whereas social identity means self-definition as a similar group member in terms of in-group – out-group differentiations ("we" or "us" versus "they" or "them"). The theory was then developed in greater detail by Turner et al (1987) who pointed out that SCT specifies the antecedents and consequences of both personal and social identity. Therefore, it can offer explanations for both individual conduct as guided by personal identity and group behaviour guided by social identity.

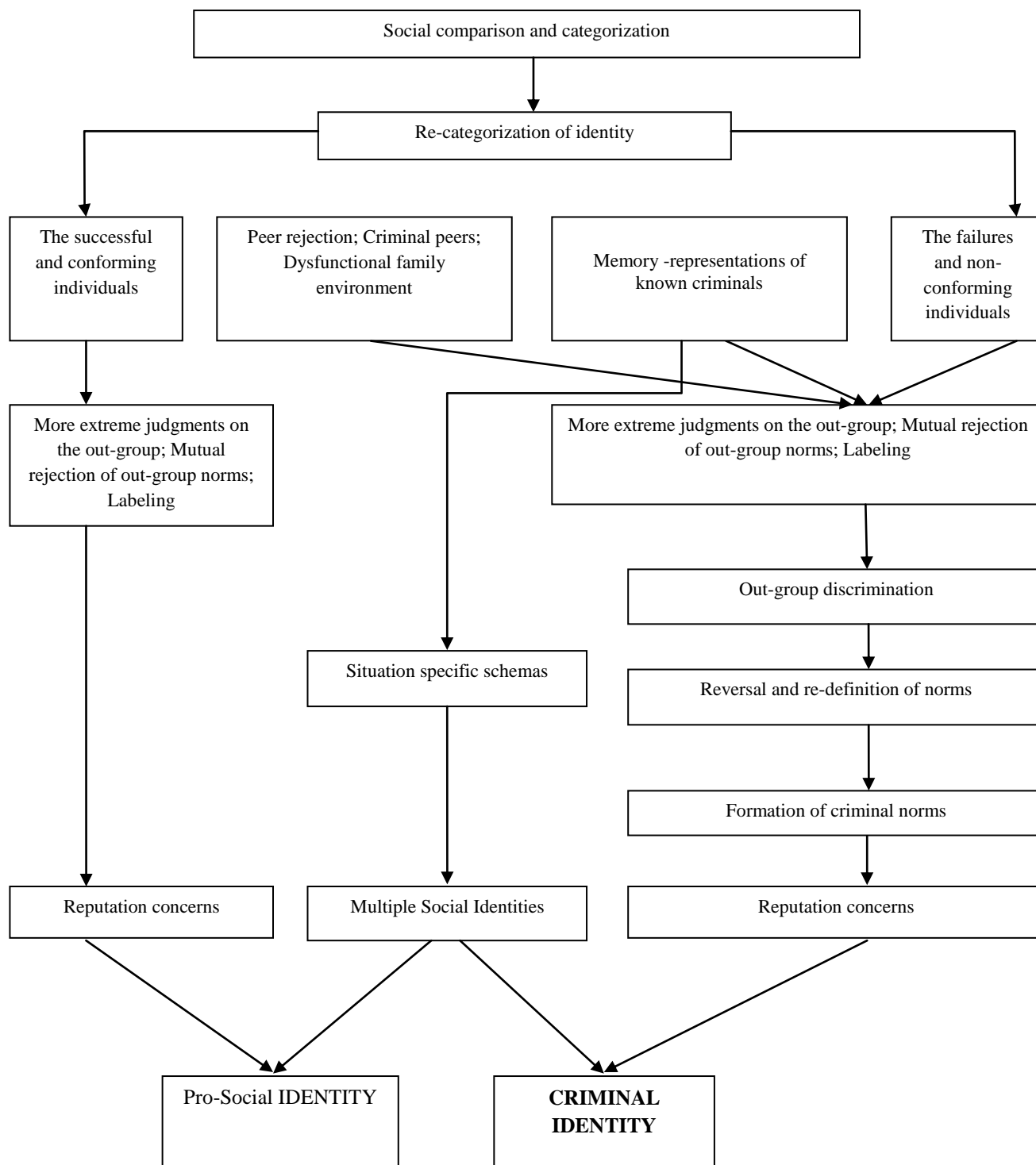
According to SCT, both personal and social identities develop from self-categorizations, which are: "...cognitive groupings of oneself and some class of stimuli as the same ... in contrast to some other class of stimuli" (Turner et al 1987, p. 44). The theory suggests that identity salience is a combined function of an individual's readiness to adopt a particular identity and the degree to which that identity is accommodated as a significant self-definition within a specified social framework. Readiness to adopt a specific identity depends on the individual's universal principles, changing motives, current objectives, former experiences and so forth. For example, a former experience of being ignored because of particular group membership will likely decrease an individual's readiness to classify oneself in terms of the corresponding social identity, if the individual wants to escape from further mistreatment. However, if one's present aim was to draw public attention to particular mistreatment, readiness for such self-definition should increase. Moreover, readiness to adopt a specific identity can be influenced by the comparative strengths of one's needs for assimilation or differentiation (Brewer 1991). For example, adolescents in large anonymous neighbourhoods may wish to join a local criminal group in order to achieve a noticeable identity, whereas within criminal groups a new member may wish to assimilate and blend in with the rest of the group in order not to become an outsider.

The salience of personal identity is constructed in the same way as a combined function of readiness (e.g., a high need for distinctiveness) and fit. However, the significant distinction lies in the consequences of personal versus social identity salience. The salient personal identity should accentuate the perception of individual differences and intra-individual similarity or consistency. A salient social identity, however, is supposed to improve the perception of self as similar to or even identical with, other in-group members, and as diverse from out-group members, who are perceived as highly similar to each other.

It is the mechanism of depersonalization, related to a salient social identity, or personalization, associated with a salient personal identity, that is responsible for group behaviour or individualistic behaviour, correspondingly. This process of depersonalization specifies a shift from personal to social identity which should not be confused with a loss of identity – a state that has been referred to as deindividuation (Zimbardo 1970). This process not only depersonalizes self-perception but also transforms self-conception and assimilates all aspects of one's attitudes, feelings, and

behaviours to the in-group model; it changes what individuals think, feel, and do (Hogg 2001). Depersonalization is the fundamental process underlying group phenomena; it perceptually distinguishes groups and provides group members with particular perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviours that are stereotypical and group normative.

Figure 1. Theoretical Model of Criminal Social Identity.



The Development of the Criminal Social Identity

Follow by the Erikson's (1963; 1968) and Marcia's (1967) theory of ego identity formation, it can be suggested that the development of one's criminal identity arises out of the identity crisis that occurs during adolescence when peer relationships play an important role (Waterman 1985). In order to deal with psychosocial crisis, an individual has to engage in a process of exploration of different identities and roles, eventually emerging with either a pro-social or antisocial identity. It is suggested that the need for social comparison increases during adolescence. Goethals and Darley (1987) maintain that the school setting is one that supports strong social comparisons, especially in terms of academic achievement. Such comparison processes involve social categorization, as the two are strongly linked, and have implications for one's self-concept (Turner 1985). Self-categorization's metacontrast principle clarifies how adolescents who engage in these comparisons achieve their group identity (Turner et al 1987). This depends on:

...the degree that two or more people come to perceive and define themselves in terms of some shared in-group - out-group categorization. (p. 51)

Therefore, it is the perceived relative resemblance and distinction that results in identification and psychological group development. Membership of a particular group is "psychological" when the social identity of the group members is incorporated into their self-concept and becomes salient without the physical presence of individuals of that given group. As a consequence of social comparison and categorization processes, it can be suggested that two groups are distinguished within the higher level category of the person identity; the successful and the failures (when the measurement of comparison is intellectual and social abilities), and the conforming and the non-conforming (when the comparison is measured by attitudes towards authority; see Tremblay et al 1992; Zingraff et al 1994).

The more successful individuals, under certain circumstances when their social identity is salient, tend to identify themselves as members of particular group. This process is influenced by higher status and increased impermeable boundaries of the group (Ellemers 1993) and provides a socially protective purpose. In addition, the group identification of the failures and non-conforming individuals is expected to be facilitated by the low status, high stability, and perceived impermeability of group boundaries (Ellemers 1993). It is anticipated that for these people, there is only a slight probability of transferring to a higher status group, as this is significantly influenced by individual intellectual and social abilities, which is comparatively constant. Over time, group boundaries are likely to become strong and constant, once categorization and labelling followed by rejection between groups takes place. The failures and non-conforming group would exhibit significantly higher level of out-group discrimination. The identification of the failures and non-conforming individuals as a group fulfils the emotional function of providing its members with an alternative social identity and an increased self-esteem, as hypothesized by social identity theory.

Individuals, who have failed in their social roles and exhibited non-conforming behaviour on a personal level, would see themselves as inconsistent in relation to higher level identity. Higgins (1987) suggested that they would experience a sense of discrepancy in terms of their actual and ideal selves which is associated with depression or a sense of agitation. This statement corresponds with Agnew's (1993) Strain Theory which suggests that inability to reach important goals results in frustration and anger.

These unconstructive feelings of self-derogation, anger, frustration, jealousy, antipathy, and hostility (Salovey and Rodin 1984) may be aggravated by external family factors, including a lack of tenderness, parental rejection, or inappropriate parenting style (Shaw and Scott 1991; Simon et al 1991). A lack of parental tenderness and affection can retard the development of empathy and guilt (Baumeister et al 1994), while emotional, psychological, and physical isolation of individuals from their parents can have negative impact on the bonds of social control (Hirschi 1969) and reduce any

motivation to engage fully in pro-social accomplishments or to conform with existing institutions of authority. An empirical study conducted by Downs and Rose (1991) suggests that peer groups are deviant in terms of un-involvement with pro-social activities and non-conforming behaviours. Members of this group are rejected by the other pro-social groups and manifest more psychosocial problems than individuals from the other groups and they tend to indicate lower level of self-esteem.

The role of peer rejection has a significant influence on the development of criminal identity. Parker and Asher (1987), followed by Juvonen (1991), have suggested that the consequences of peer rejection are reported by individuals' low self-esteem, violent tendencies, increased risk of dropping out of school or social activities, and the development of criminal behaviours. Rejection by peers, whether real or perceived, is then an additional source for categorization into groups which mutually reject one another. However, rejection can also be the cause, or the product of, self-categorization. Therefore, the negative identity that results as a consequence of being self-discrepant or inconsistent, pertains not only to individual group members who consistently fail in social tasks and are non-conforming with respect to pro-social attitudes and behaviours, but also applies as a whole to the group of members, who also face the dilemma of a lower social status in society compared to the group of successful and conforming individuals.

In the process of identification with others and forming a subgroup within the higher level of social identity, non-conforming and less successful individuals adopt the scheme of "social creativity" and according to social identity theory, they achieve increased level of self-esteem (Oakes and Turner 1980; Lemrye and Smith 1985) through their positive distinctiveness, which is characterized by rejection and reversal of pro-social norms. In other words, what is considered constructive, positive, and valued in society is redefined as unconstructive, negative, and derogated (Cohen 1955). However, non-conforming behaviours associated with criminal identity, such as aggressiveness or any aspect of anti-social conduct, would be perceived as desirable traits.

Criminal identification creates mutual agreement among members who have similarly agreed as a group to reject the conventional model of social norms. McGarty et al (1993) have suggested that this has the effect of uncertainty reduction and is likely to be a source of self-enhancement (Kaplan 1987). As such, this group of individuals tend to engage in criminal behaviours in spite of their sense of self-derogation (Fischer and Bersani 1979), in contrast to those people who maintain strong psychosocial bonds with the family and the society, who tend to exhibit low self-esteem after engagement in criminal behaviour (McCarthy and Hoge 1984).

Campbell's (1987) research conducted on Puerto Rican gang members has supported the concept of identity formation as a result of rejection and reputation. This study has discovered that the gang membership is a manifestation of a rejected identity. Campbell concluded that gang members:

See themselves as different from their peers. Their association with the gang is a public proclamation of their rejection of the lifestyle which the community expects from them. (p. 463).

Their criminal identity or criminal self-image derives from the process of rejection and depreciation of those peers who are not associated with their anti-social norms. Therefore, they often define themselves in negative, rather than positive terms: these individuals define themselves not by the traits and characteristics they possess and exhibit but rather by the traits and characteristic that they lack, or more precisely, those characteristic which they reject.

Once the criminal social identity with reversed (criminal) norms becomes established, members of criminal group then achieve a sense of self-consistency through a manifestation of their new identity in terms of criminal behaviours. This has been suggested by Breakwell (1986) who emphasized the significance of relationship between identity and behaviour:

Action is the social expression of identity. The only route of access to the identity of another is through his or her action, whether verbal or not. Since identity comprises emotions, beliefs, and attitudes it is a prime motivator of action. Identity directs action. (p. 43)

Therefore, once the criminal social identity becomes salient, members tend to display behaviours that are exemplary of the criminal group model and may participate with other in-group members to express their conformity (Turner 1982; Thornberry et al 1993). Demonstration of over-conformity to criminal standards and conduct would then be positively encouraged and reinforced by other in-group criminals, consequently leading to an increase of criminal behaviour, or an alteration of non-criminal acts to criminal one. Therefore, criminal group members do not have to apply persuasion in order to make an impact on others anti-social attitudes or commit a crime because it occurs through the process of identification and self-categorization. The investigation conducted by Klein and Crawford (1968) and that of Pabon et al (1992) suggested that the criminal group members are characterized by a sense of belongingness, which is an inter-group rather than inter-personal feature. Klein and Crawford (1968) found that the cohesiveness of the criminal group is due to external rather than internal aspects, and Pabon et al (1992) established in their empirical research that members of criminal groups tend to lack intimacy and affection with regards to their relationships.

Cognitive Perspective of Criminal Identity

Having presented the sociological aspect of development of criminal identity attention now turns towards the question; what is the cognitive process involved in development of criminal identity? This can be better understood from Interpersonal Social-Cognitive Theory of Self proposed by Andersen, Chen and Miranda (2002). Andersen and colleagues (2002) suggest that mental representations of significant others are stored in memory and that:

transference reflects basic social-cognitive processes – namely, the activation of the perceiver's mental representation of significant other in an encounter with a new person, leading the perceiver to interpret and remember the person in terms of the activated representation, and to respond emotionally, motivationally, and behaviourally to the person in representation-derived ways (p. 160).

It further postulates that significant others' (criminal others in this particular case) mental representations are significantly influential because they are loaded with affect; and because they describe the manner in which one's expectancies, affects, motives, and behaviours in relation to other individuals arise. Furthermore, it assumes that representations of significant-others are connected to a person's own self-identity, therefore the individual's self identity is related to their stored mental representations of particular significant others. The presence of such a connection assumes that the activation of the significant-other representation within the individual should influence features of that person's identity which are related to the significant-other. However, as suggested by Linville and Carlson (1994), the idea that one's whole pool of self-knowledge is likely to be working at once is unrealistic. It is proposed that only a subset of this self-knowledge is present in an individual's working memory at any given moment. Therefore, the contextual cues determine the particular elements of self-knowledge that are made accessible in working memory, suggesting that the self and identity is fundamentally created alternatively in each context. In Andersen and colleagues' (2002) opinion:

When contextual cues activate a significant-other representation, the working self-concept shifts toward the self one is with the significant other. (p. 161).

These findings lead to next issue associated with development of criminal social identity – the concept of multiple social identities and their change based on situation specific schemas which are activated by external factors such as company of criminal others.

Multiple Social Identities and Their Change

Societies, in general, produce various moral principles for different settings and situations, such as for behaviour in the home, in the community, or on the streets. Moral behaviour is not only

context-specific, but is also formed by the social identities that occupy an important role in a given circumstance. Particular social identities represent particular beliefs and values about what is morally appropriate or inappropriate, and when they become significant in a precise context, they are likely to model individual behaviour. Subsequently, aggressive practices which take place in the situation of the assertion of a particular social identity do not necessarily carry over into another situation within which a different identity, with diverse moral standards, prevails. Therefore, as suggested by Dawes (1992), moral behaviour may shift as social context and social identity shift.

It has been postulated in the Situational Theory of Delinquency (Sykes and Matza 1957; Matza 1964) that criminals tend to drift in and out of non-conforming or anti-social behaviour. Under certain circumstances, such as in the company of criminal group, individuals can be expected to think and behave consistent with non-conventional norms. Thus, anti-social behaviour is manifested only when the criminal identity is salient. Individuals are expected to be more delinquent in the presence of criminal in-group others, although the physical company is not essential for salience to take place. What matters most is the psychological identification with the criminal in-group members. In other words, it is suggested that those individuals in their personal identity as members of their family tend to have less anti-authority attitudes than when they are in the social identity as criminals among criminal in-group members. It has been also noticed by Cohen (1990) that in the commitment of criminal activities, criminals act as interchangeable units of a collectivity, thus, any insult caused to one member of criminal group is perceived as an insult to all members who share the same identity.

Strocka (2008), in her research in Latin America, reported the degree to which gang members' behaviour changed across different social situations which made her realize the presence of different social identities which young people held apart from their gang membership. She observed that a number of gang members were permanently drunk and involved in criminally violent behaviour, however during the time they worked in their rural communities, they completely abstained from alcohol and violence. Moreover, two ex-gang leaders, whose police records indicated that they had no scruples when it came to eliminating their rivals, revealed a lack of violent tendencies towards their children or wives. Both gang leaders had been physically abused by their parents when they were children and did not want to copy that behaviour in their families. Thus, Strocka (2008) suggested that the youth gang members were not generally and inherently violent because they only showed violent and criminal behaviour in the context of their social identity as gang members; that is, at joint actions with their peer group and encounters with opponent gang group. In these situations, individual criminal conduct is more likely to be directed by the norms and values of the criminal group, according to which violence is a desirable characteristic when it comes to defending the gang's honour and territory. However, youth gang members appeal to different moral behaviours and ways of reasoning when they identify with their different social roles such as being a father, a husband, or a day worker.

Youth gang membership is limited to a certain period of the life cycle (Rodgers, 1999). The question, then, arises; what happens to gang members when they grow older? According to Strocka (2008) the prevalent assumption in public discussion is that most youth gang members either die before they reach adulthood or will end up as "professional criminals" with persistent violent tendencies. In other words, it is believed that as gang progress through the life cycle they either adopt social identities similar to those associate with their respective gang or they develop even more negative characteristics (professional criminals), or carry over the harmful behaviours related to gang membership to other social identities.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to develop a theoretical model of criminal social identity. This paper puts forth the hypothesis that individuals become criminals because of the presence of a persistent criminal identity which has its origin in processes of social comparison. Specifically, negative social comparisons carried out by individuals who have failed in their pro-social roles and

have exhibited non-conforming behaviour on a personal level, aggravated and compounded by contextual factors such as a dysfunctional family environment and/or the presence of criminal peers, can contribute to the development of a negative self-identity which is consistent with strain and social control theories. Additionally, based on assumptions of Social-Cognitive Theory of Self, this paper proposes that development of a criminal identity might be influenced by representations of known criminals which are stored in an individual's memory system, and are made accessible at certain times due to relevant situational cues. This is consistent with the concept of multiple social identities which postulates that as a person's social context changes, corresponding social identity changes are likely to occur as a result of the activation of situation-specific schemas.

Through the integrated application of these social and psychological theories it is proposed that a comprehensive understanding of the development of a CSI can be achieved. This hypotheses await empirical investigation however if the development of CSI as outlined in this paper is supported, it would have significant implications in criminal psychology. It would suggest, for example, that the process of re-socialization of criminals should preferably be conducted within a pro-social context rather than a penal, anti-socially dominated context which would likely serve only to reinforce CSI rather than foster the development of a pro-social identity.

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