

Indicators of Criminal Justification or Repentance in a Qualitative Analysis of Inmates Autobiographical Criminal Self-Narratives

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Abstract

This study explores the narrative contents obtained from the description of autobiographical memories reported by a sample of incarcerated males that exemplified their most aggressive, transgressive, or criminal selves. Participants were 110 men serving a prison sentence for different types of crimes. Three main phenomena were identified from their stories: the narration of the criminal self, description of the crime (or crimes) committed, and the criminal responsibility attributional processes. The results showed the existence of mechanisms to justify the crime among a large section of participants, whereas the assumption of personal responsibility for the

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commission of the crime and the consideration of an unfair or excessive sentence were not as frequent. Also, some specific crimes concurred with concrete responsibility attributional processes, especially with the justification of criminal behavior. These findings generate useful information regarding recidivism, resocialization, and the attribution of responsibility among inmates.

Keywords

crime, narrative, inmates, responsibility, desisting

Introduction

First described by Singer and Salovey (1993), self-defining memories (SDMs) are episodic autobiographical memories that influence one's self-concept and life narratives (Conway, 2005). Human beings construct life stories as a way to organize memories of events that are meaningful to the self (Tulving & Craik, 2000). Previous research has found association between memories with angry or aggressive content and measures of trait aggression (Hung & Bryant, 2016). The induction of violent memories was predictive of self-reported delinquent behavior (Vannucci et al., 2014). A crime that an individual has committed in the past may contribute to the development of the individual's identity as a criminal. Thus, exploring characteristics of SDMs from incarcerated criminal offenders may elucidate factors unique to the "criminal self." Examining the relationship between past memories and criminality may help gain insight into the development of a criminal career, which can help guide later efforts to prevent recidivism. Thus, when rehabilitating individuals who have been incarcerated, it may be beneficial to emphasize how SDMs play a role in their identity as a criminal. Literature from the field of criminology highlights the impact of self-identity as an offender, and reshaping that identity, on desistance (e.g., Farrington, Ttofi, Crago, & Coid, 2014). Prevention of criminal recidivism might focus on reframing past criminal behavior as concrete events from the past rather than a necessary and stable characteristic of one's identity or trait (e.g., "I committed a crime once, that does not define me, and I could change my behaviour," rather than "I am a criminal and I always will be").

Traditionally, the analysis and assessment of current and observable components of autobiographical memories is conducted from a quantitative perspective (e.g., Gardner et al., 2012). According to this approach, the researcher quantifies the narrative as follows: (1) the researcher matches the narrative with closed categories previously defined in the literature (e.g., the narrative reveals an experience of personal growth in the participant) and (2) a series

of items on a Likert-type scale (from none to great) in which participants rate the phenomenological experience associated with their memories, typically the affective valence (positive vs. negative), the level of activation that the memory produces, and the degree of re-experiencing that is felt when recalling the experience (the feeling of being currently in the situation). Following a quantitative perspective, in line with Singer and Salovey's (2005) work, the current study first collected the accounts of inmates to the following question: "Remember an autobiographical memory that describes your most aggressive, most transgressive and most delinquent self." However, once the data analysis began, the researchers became aware of the different interpretations of the question that participants made because different definitions of "self" were used and considered synonymous, and participants varied in the severity that they attributed to the adjectives. The narratives constituted fragments of self-defining autobiographical memories, that is, memories that help define one's self-image, identity, or their most personal self (Singer & Salovey, 2005); and yet, the narrative also contained fragments of inmates' broader life stories. As such, most inmates reported the criminal conduct that had led them to prison, focusing on their most delinquent self, and only a few reported an aggressive or transgressive action that was not considered criminal. Nevertheless, this is to be expected because data collection was carried out with incarcerated individuals (Rowe, 2011). However, unexpectedly, inmates demonstrated a tendency to justify or explain their criminal *self* from different perspectives and attribution styles.

This finding underlines the need for a qualitative-inductive analysis of inmates' descriptions of memories related to their most aggressive, transgressive, and delinquent selves. This would enable researchers to make a rigorous assessment of the subjective qualities of inmates' autobiographical accounts and their meaning in the prison context. Hence, the narratives described in this study are excerpts of autobiographical memories, from which inmates' self-image regarding their deviant trajectory and their sentence is examined. It is also important to highlight that some authors consider that 70% of adults constructed rich false memories of crimes as adolescents (Shaw & Porter, 2015). However, when we distinguish between false beliefs and false memories, 26% to 30% of participants met criteria for false memories (Wade et al., 2018). We must assume that all our memories are distorted by nature as we reconstruct them each time we retrieve them. Highly superior autobiographical memory individuals or hyperthymesics (individuals who can remember the day of the week a date fell on and details of what happened that day from every day of their life since mid-childhood) are equally as likely as controls to false recognition, mistaken reports, and false memories (e.g., Patihis et al., 2013).

Previous Empirical Studies

There are different examples of research that have used self-reported narrative accounts to investigate inmates' perceptions of their past criminality. A large proportion of those studies revolve around two main criminological questions: Why the inmate committed the crime and how the inmate considers the criminal act now that he or she is serving a custodial sentence (Presser, 2009).

The narrative of the commission of a crime has traditionally been linked to the justification of the conduct as explained by Sykes and Matza (1957) in their theory of neutralization and the consequent techniques. The justifications allow an individual to deny responsibility for the crime, the harm caused, and the presence of the victim, while also rejecting those who condemn their conduct and appealing to higher allegiances (e.g., committing a crime for divine purposes). With the development of research in psychology and criminology, new techniques have been added: the *need*, where the crime is committed by necessity and the perpetrator has no choice than to perpetrate it; the *ledger technique*, when a perpetrator argues that the committed crime is acceptable because most of the time they otherwise demonstrate good behavior; the *denial of the law*, when the law is considered inappropriate and hence the perpetrator does not need to obey it; *they all do*, where the crime is justified because there is a general consensus that detracts from the value or importance of the conduct, despite it being antisocial or negative; or, the *technique of law*, where an individual excuses themselves because they consider themselves to have the right to participate and/or commit the crime (Minor, 1981; Moore & McMullan, 2009; Siponen & Vance, 2010).

Thus, it has been observed that criminals justify their actions through excuses when they are aware that their behavior is inappropriate (Gottschalk & Smith, 2011). Using cognitive defenses, the individual neutralizes guilt and protects his or her self-image (i.e., justifications that provide momentary relief from moral violations, guilt, and shame; Topalli et al., 2014). Other authors suggest that inmates' explanations of their crimes provide an illusory sense of conventional morality but does not have a moral structure—the neutralization of the action. The offender's excuses explain their behavior but fail to reconcile this behavior with any real commitment to conventional morality (Jacobs & Copes, 2015). For example, Zoettle (2015) analyzed the narratives of 40 juvenile offenders regarding police violence in Lisbon and identified different types of police violence, depending on their purpose. Dickinson and Wright (2017) identified good-humor narratives in drug dealers' accounts of their criminal behavior and described how humor influenced the construction of drug dealers' identity. Hochstetler et al. (2017) analyzed a

sample of street criminals examine their perspectives on their identity and place of residence. Street criminals identified themselves as soldiers in a war zone. Through this analysis of narratives, the authors demonstrated how identity and broader societal factors influenced the violent behavior of participants, as in everyone, and their potential future behavior.

In addition to the above, there is also research on narratives related to the identification of the self, both in incarcerated and reformed criminals and victims. Maruna (2001) conducted a longitudinal study on crime desistance among previous offenders in Liverpool, England. Participants were found to build narratives to make sense of their past, find satisfaction in productive behaviors, and to feel control over their future while being able to change and transform their lives toward prosocial behaviors. Rowe (2011) investigated the representations of self and identity in the narratives of 59 incarcerated women. The author identified content related to day-to-day experiences and the impact of prison on women's identities, describing the feelings that occurred by the commission of the offense and the conviction, along with the meanings that defined their self since imprisonment. Youngs and Canter (2011) developed the Narrative Roles Questionnaire (NRQ) to classify the narrative of inmates into four criminal roles and their underlying structure: hero, victim, professional, and avenger. Similarly, Sandberg and colleagues (2015) identified four types of narratives in a sample of drug dealers: business, intimidator, moral, and survivor. Also, Mhyre Sunde (2017) reported the characteristics of jihadist narratives in propaganda magazines and the function of such narratives in the radicalization process. Qualitative examinations of offender narratives have therefore given valuable insights into the way that they perceive their crimes and the cognitive methods that they use to protect and enhance their self-identity. However, there has yet to be a qualitative analysis of inmates' memories related to their criminal behaviors.

The purpose of this study was therefore to examine inmates' memories of their most aggressive, most transgressive, or most delinquent past moment from a qualitative approach. We also intended to identify the main topics emerging from the analysis of the narratives, namely what kind of narrative of the self was most frequent across participants and the ways in which they justified their crimes.

Data and Method

The authors obtained approval from the Ethics Committee of Inquiry and permission from local prison officers. The participants received a consent form with information about the aim of the study, the confidentiality of the data, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Subsequently, they were

invited to answer the Self Defining Memory Task, developed by Singer and Salovey (2005), adapted to collect a particular type of autobiographical memory: "Remember an autobiographical memory that describes your most aggressive, most transgressive and most delinquent self." The instructions were individually read to each participant to ensure their understanding. After that, the inmates had unlimited time to write down their memories, privately. Participants were interviewed over the course of 1 day between February and September 2017, by a trained interviewer, and each interview took approximately 30 to 45 min. Participants completed other questionnaires included as part of a larger study but were not included in the analyses presented here. If participants asked for clarification about the instructions, they were prompted to focus on the term "aggressive" and to try to retrieve memory of a situation where they had behaved in an aggressive manner.

Participants

The sample comprised a total of 110 narratives from men serving a sentence in the Europa Prison. The inmates' age ranged from 24 to 69 years (mean age 41 years). Regarding the distribution of inmates' ages, 29.1% were aged between 24 and 36 years, 46.4% were aged between 37 and 48 years, and 24.5% were aged between 49 and 69 years. Regarding marital status, inmates were mostly single (48.2%): 31.8% were married, 16.4% divorced, and 2.7% widowed. They showed a mean of 14.72 years worked and 9.51 years of received education as average. Overall, 76.3% presented a history of drug use, and 41.1% reported serious mental or physical illness. Their number of times in prison ranged from 1 to 11.

Analysis

To explore the various subjective characteristics of the narratives (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000), we conducted a holistic content analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998). According to this technique, each account was inductively examined, prioritizing the discovery of emerging categories resulting from the analysis of the particular narratives of the inmates. This led to a flexible approach, without forcing any interpretation, allowing the data to emerge just as it had been narrated by the participants (Denzin, 2003).

First, general reading of the narratives from the first three authors was carried out for identification of categories (central thematic units from essential ideas narrated by each inmate) and their corresponding codes (label) in a group discussion meeting. These authors agreed upon the criteria for the coding process and the thematic units of interest. Second, the most significant

units of analysis and categories from all narratives were extracted and transferred to the Atlas.ti 7 (Muñoz & Sahagún, 2017) qualitative data analysis program by first author and submitted to the same three authors for final agreement. Examining themes within inmate narratives regarding the criminal self and the processes of attribution/justification of criminal behavior provides crucial information about criminal identity. This is possible using concurrent analyses activating the automatic Atlas.ti's tool "concurrent explorer" and its corresponding visual display "concurrent tables." This tool detects concurrent codes (labels), that is, what themes coincided in the same narrative. For example, if we want to know what codes concur with the crime with the code "aggression," Atlas.ti's "concurrent explorer" detects all of them: so, the label/code "aggression" can concur with a criminal or aggressive self-narrative and some different justifications (as commit the crime for revenge or by provocation). Accordingly, concurrent analyses were carried out between the criminal self employed by the inmates in their narratives (criminal behavior) related to the crime itself and the attribution of responsibility process. Different 2 x 2 tables are presented to visualize these concurrences. Finally, to examine the relations between sociodemographic variables and the kind of narratives described by the inmates (that had emerged in the qualitative analysis), three new variables were created in a regular statistical program: (a) age: 24 to 36 years, 37 to 48 years, and 49 to 69 years; (b) type of narrative: criminal, aggressive, transgressor, personal experience, victimization experience, and unknowing narrative; and (c) assumptions related to the criminal behavior: justification, responsibility acceptance and/or regret, both or none of the above.

Results

Descriptive results. Two central themes emerged from the data: namely, the description of the "criminal self" and the acknowledgment of responsibility used to justify the criminal behavior. The first theme describes the type of crime committed by inmates; the second theme relates to how inmates explain and account for their criminal behavior.

Description of the "criminal self." Mainly, inmates recounted experiences regarding their criminal self (i.e., associated with their criminal behavior). Some inmates discussed other personal experiences, especially in the context of intimate partner relationships: "the problems I have had since my marriage and divorce" (N1208).¹ Four inmates reported violent episodes (i.e., fights and assaults), both internal and external to the prison setting. Two inmates described transgressive experiences, such as failure to report

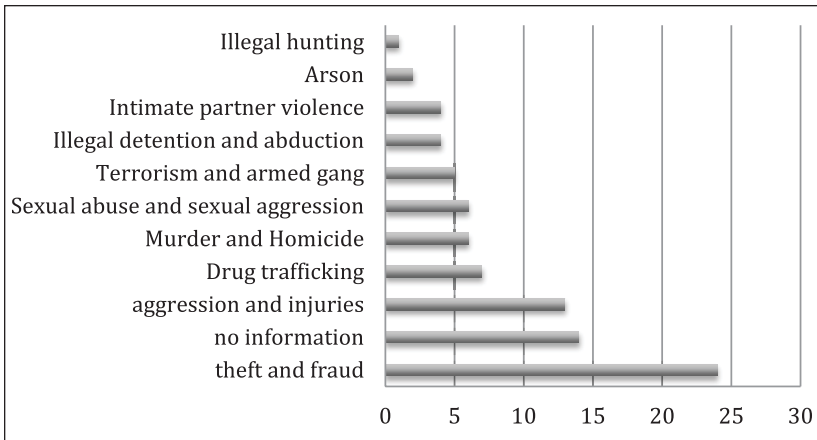


Figure 1. Descriptive analysis of the criminal activity.

for military service or “escaping from a barracks of the Civil Guard.” Moreover, only one mentioned an adverse childhood experience: “when my father raped me at age nine. It is what hurt me the most” (N1229).

Figure 1 shows the type of crimes that the inmates described in their narratives, the majority of which coincided with the crimes for which they are serving a sentence.

The most common crimes described were robbery and fraud/embezzlement. Robbery includes stealing from homes, public buildings and premises, property theft and other burglary: “One morning I entered a store and threatened the clerk with a gun demanding the money of the cash register” (N1289). Physical violence and aggression were also common in the sample: “My brother-in-law raised his hand to my sister and my mother. I had a disease (I felt weak), but when he told me what he had done, I beat him” (N1182). Drug trafficking or public health offenses were discussed less frequently: “My criminal memory is related to damage to public health” (N1378). There were also reports of physical abuse, sexual assault, and homicide: “I managed to take the gun and struck him. I called the ambulance and then at one o’clock, the police came and told me that he was dead” (N1325). Other types of crimes including illegal detention and kidnapping, as well as terrorism and gang affiliation were also reported: “My acts are not aggressive, but I belong to an armed organization, which is a crime according to the law” (N1245). Some inmates also discussed intimate partner violence, for example, “To have beaten my partner” (N1202). The least common crimes reported within the narratives were arson and illegal hunting.

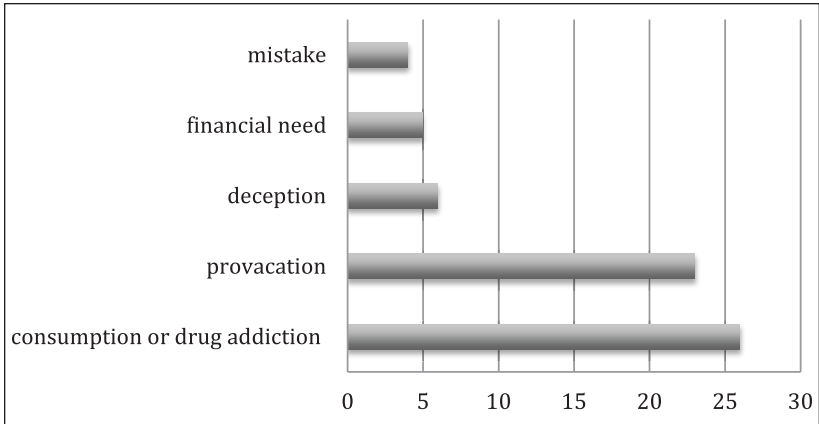


Figure 2. Descriptive analysis of criminal justifications.

Responsibility. One of the most striking findings was that most inmates provided several justifications to explain their offense. Of the 79 inmates who narrated their crimes, 64 provided a rationale, 18 admitted to committing the crime, and 15 considered their sentence unfair or unreasonable (see Figure 2).

The most frequent justification for having committed a criminal offense was substance use (including alcohol) or abuse because dependency can act as a trigger to commit a crime, or the offense might have been committed to financially support further drug use:

I did not realize what had happened until I was not under the influence of cocaine. (N1223)

I have committed all kinds of crimes (violent robbery, intimidation . . .) to pay for my addiction to drugs. (N1191)

These offenders believed that drug use was the cause of their criminal behavior: “I have fought with other people, I have committed assaults and domestic violence because of my addiction, and my partner was also using drugs” (N1184). “When I used drugs, I committed delinquent behaviors such as stealing” (N1188).

Other individuals mentioned provocation as a justification for delinquent behavior. The situations described referred to self-defense, grief, and revenge: “It all started when I was almost killed by an error (I wasn’t the person they wanted to kill); when I got physically better I planned a kidnap to get revenge” (N1187). Furthermore, several inmates reported that they committed a crime

when they felt challenged by others and/or felt a lack of control: "I reckon that I beat him because he was pushing my limit" (N1284). Similarly, some people considered that their reaction was an appropriate response to the aggression of others: "I lost my temper when I saw the lady with a knife, stabbing me. At that moment, I believed that my actions were reasonable given what she was doing" (N1224).

A smaller group of participants justified their criminal actions because they felt deceived by others. For example, "I was misled into a robbery and was blamed for a crime I did not commit" (N1316). "I was deceived by my bosses. I worked for a shipping company, and they transported drugs on the truck" (N1291).

Regarding other financial needs, some inmates reported committing crimes to support their family or to pay bills, as illustrated here: "I needed money to pay my mortgage, and because of that I stole a tobacco truck" (N1321).

Some inmates stated that they were unaware of the illegality of the act, particularly in cases of sex-related crimes: "My wife cheated on me. In Ecuador, laws do not work as they do here. [In Ecuador] it is legitimate [to attack adulterers]" (N1324). "I did not know how old the girl was" (N1393).

Assuming responsibility and/or repentance. Another theme that emerged was the assumption of responsibility for crimes that were committed and reflection on the consequences of their criminal behavior. Almost a third of the sample claimed some responsibility or regret for their reported crime: "I stole from my mother . . . She did not report the incident, but I felt despicable because of my actions" (N1178). "Because of drugs I have not been as good [of a person] as I wanted to be, both personally and for my family" (N1191). "I feel as if I have lost my parents because I have left them helpless and abandoned, so I feel horrible in prison" (N1204).

One inmate reported that he surrendered because he felt guilty: "Two days later I surrendered myself. At the time of the aggressive act I felt good, but then I felt worse" (N1284). Other participants came to terms with their conviction: "It is the worst thing that has happened to me, but I am doing well" (N1358).

Viewing the conviction as unfair or excessive. In the narratives, inmates were considered to disagree with their prison sentence if they considered their crime to be not dangerous or thought the duration of their sentence was disproportionate to the severity of the crime. Some participants minimized the severity of their offense: "In my country, my case would have already been closed, I have not killed nor stolen" (N1324). Others described their

sentence as unfair: “There are pedophiles who are only condemned to 5 years” (N1192). Other inmates did not view their behavior as a crime: “I was unjustly punished since I only saw videos and was accused of wanting to attempt rape when it is a lie” (N1335). Others convicted of sexual offenses described the injustice of their legal conviction: “My sexual aggression crime, in my opinion, is not aggressive, because it is only abuse” (N1361). “I only exchanged sexual photos with girls without getting to know them, but I have been convicted of rape. That bothers me because it is not the same and should [have] a different [consequence]” (N1227).

Concurrent Analysis

Kind of narrative and self-justification. As detailed in Table 1, the participants elaborated on their narratives related to their “criminal self” by seeking a self-justification for their crime. Inmates also identified the existence of a relationship among the “criminal self,” assumptions regarding their conduct, and the consideration of the sentence as unfair or excessive.

Type of offense and attribution of responsibility. The majority of the inmates who described the criminal self included a justification of their criminal behavior. The relationships among criminal identity, justification, and crime committed are shown in Table 2.

Justifications were given for all types of reported crimes (except illegal hunting), but primarily theft and fraud. Also, these crimes were associated with the behavioral acceptance theme. Finally, three types of crimes were the most frequently perceived as having an unfair or excessive conviction: sexual assault, terrorism, and gang affiliation.

Regarding justification and type of crime, inmates who were convicted for robbery or fraud reported that they were deceived or had financial motivations: “I robbed 500€ and jewels to pay off drug debts and to be able to maintain my addiction to cocaine” (N1178). Other inmates stated that they acted in reaction to provocation: “I remember that they attacked me first and I tried to defend myself, and we fell on the ground” (N1217). It is important to note that participants who did not take responsibility for their crime often did not consider it to be an aggressive act and denied links with terrorism or gang affiliation. Finally, inmates who viewed their case as a wrongful conviction were often convicted of sexual assault. As described above, inmates convicted of sexual assault were the only group that was uncomfortable with the legal classification of the crime: “I am in jail for having meetings with a minor without having sex. However, because she had previous sexual relations that she did not want her mother to know about she accused me of violating her” (N1337).

Table 1. Attribution Processes and Descriptive Self (Number of Cases).

Descriptive Self	Justification	Behavioral Assumption	Unfair Sentence
Delinquent self	64	18	15
Aggressive self	2	–	–
Transgressive self	1	–	–
Conflictive personal experience	2	2	–
Victimizing experience	–	–	–

Table 2. Criminal Activity and Attribution Processes.

Criminal activity	Justification	Behavioral Assumption	Excessive Sentence
Theft and fraud	15	4	1
Aggression and injuries	7	1	–
Drug trafficking	2	2	–
Murder and Homicide	3	2	1
Sexual abuse and sexual aggression	3	1	3
Terrorism and armed gang	1	–	3
Illegal detention and abduction	4	1	–
Intimate partner violence	1	–	1
Arson	2	–	–
Illegal hunting	–	–	–

On the other hand, convictions for drug trafficking, fraud, and robbery were associated with inmates taking responsibility for their behavior: “I assaulted a bank to get money to buy a motorcycle for my son. So, I am paying for it, and sometimes I feel guilty because it had to be solved in another way” (N1390).

Type of narratives by group age and education. Regarding type of narratives by group age, criminal narrative was more common (50.6%) among adults between 37 and 48 years than among the oldest participants (29.1%) who also described personal experience narratives (13.6%). Regarding self-behavior assumption, the group of inmates who most justified their criminal action

was the group of participants aged from 37 to 48 years, but at the same time, they were the group who felt most responsible for the crime they were convicted for (6.3%). The youngest group of inmates justified their criminal behavior more than the oldest participants (34.9% vs. 23.3%, respectively). Inmates presenting criminal narratives had mainly achieved secondary level of education (85%).

Profile of nonresponders. Finally, a group of 10 inmates did not answer the question or wrote a narrative that was unintelligible or without sense, for example,

It was a calm, calm, relaxed day and I saw a cosmic *cordulence* coming down from the constellation galaxy . . . and I began to make a sketch of the constellation galaxy: of the solar, the median, the polar, of the distant *vejan* and of the *clural*, and then, by telepathic cosmic *cordulence* I thought that Colonel Guanchoua had been attacked and Colonel Truman manipulated me with a thermonuclear metaphysical astrophysical machine, taking me away the constancy of consciousness. (N1177)

Those 10 inmates were aged between 30 and 56 years and were convicted of homicide ($n = 4$), sexual assault ($n = 2$), gender-related violence ($n = 2$), homicide, sexual assault, and robbery with violence ($n = 1$), and aggression and robbery with violence ($n = 1$).

Discussion

Using a qualitative perspective, we obtained more information than would have been achieved through a traditional quantitative analysis of the autobiographical self (see Gardner et al., 2012). Regarding the question we asked (“Remember an autobiographical memory that describes your most aggressive, most transgressive and most delinquent self”), which could have been considered a source of bias, we have demonstrated that the question did not limit inmates’ narrative responses and also created new categories according to their responses. A useful account is the one that makes it possible to discern whether the individual attributes importance to the memory of the commission of a crime or, on the contrary, if they prioritize the remembrance of other vital events experienced (McKendy, 2006; Sandberg, 2010).

The “criminal self” narrative, regarding the commission of a criminal act, was the most predominant theme within the analysis. Other themes, such as personal experience, aggressive self, transgressor self-victimizing experience, were not frequent in the current sample. The predominant narrative of the “criminal self” may be a result of the prison context in which

the interviews took part. Being sentenced to prison is one of the most devastating experiences for any person (Maruna, 2001); and therefore, it can explain why the majority of inmates considered it the most significant and self-defining experience of their transgressive SDMs. There are several consequences of imprisonment, namely those that are physiological (tension, insomnia, tachycardia), cognitive (recurrent ideas), and emotional (anxiety, distress, anger, depression, fear), along with environmental stressors or prison overcrowding (Departament de Justícia, 2011). As such, it was not a surprise that inmates narrated their criminal conduct as their first defining memory, which was also evident in Rowe's (2011) investigation, where the narratives described by female inmates were associated with the impact of imprisonment on their lives (Rowe, 2011).

It has been shown that incarceration evokes thoughts about the commission of a crime and the feelings about it as their most conflicting memory, which might imply that it is a memory that defines their identity and is meaningful to the individual. The narrative of the self gives an overview of individuals: self-identification and what image they have of themselves (Dickinson & Wright, 2017; Hochstetler et al., 2017; Rowe, 2011; Sandberg, Tutenges, & Copes, 2015). Furthermore, some individuals who presented a narrative of their criminal self reported having been involved with criminal acts since adolescence, which could have generated a criminal identity label (self-assigned or imposed by third parties) that criminalizes and stigmatizes them (Rowe, 2011). Once an individual identifies themselves as criminal this may encourage recidivism, as they are less likely to amend their criminal conduct to end the criminal activity or reduce its frequency, versatility, and severity (Farrington, 2007). In terms of identity, desistance might be achieved through the cognitive process of transforming the identity of individuals by which they no longer identify themselves as criminals (Cid Moliné & Martí Olivé, 2011; Stone, 2016). Maruna (2001) suggests that our identity is built continuously throughout life. Therefore, the identity can be modified if it integrates life experiences such as the criminal identity and the stigmatization. This integration could lead consequently to personal growth and recovery (Maruna et al., 2004; Rowe, 2011; Stone, 2016).

The type of crime committed and the processes of attribution of responsibility were the other main themes that emerged regarding inmates criminal self: the majority of the inmates presented a justification for their crime, others reported the liability of their conduct and, another group reported how they were wrongfully convicted. Almost 80% of the inmates narrated a justification for their conviction. This can be explained as a protective mechanism from moral and personal guilt, and avoidance from harming their self-image (Sykes & Matza, 1957). After the crime has been committed, the justification serves

a social function of managing stigma and building one's identity (Topalli et al., 2014). The displacement of responsibility for the crime committed involves an external control locus (Maruna, 2001) and blaming others for the crime. The use of these strategies in the current sample matches with previous results (Maruna et al., 2004; Sandberg, 2010). For example, Sandberg (2010) identified in the narratives of three drug dealers behavioral justifications and a denial of responsibility, as well as a lawful image of the individuals.

Regarding the assumption of the conduct or regret of the inmates, some inmates assumed responsibility, others felt bad, and one recounted that they had turned themselves in to police after the crime. Similar to previous studies, feelings such as guilt and shame emerged in the accounts, as well as the recognition of the accountability for the crime (Rowe, 2011; Topalli et al., 2014). Thus, Maruna et al. (2004) found that crime desistance narratives mostly concerned excuses, justifications, and neutralizations of previous conduct, while also discussing the persistence of their previous actions. Regarding the age and education of participants, compared with the youngest and the oldest groups, those incarcerated men between 37 and 48 years and who had obtained secondary-level education were able to retrieve narratives related to their criminal self. At the same time, that age group showed the highest effort in terms of justification of the crime they were convicted for (accepting their crimes or not). Moreover, those participants who declined to provide information about their criminal activity were also from that age range and had committed serious crimes (homicide and sexual assault emerged as the most frequent crimes among them). These results suggest that, when trying to use narratives to increase self-acceptance of criminal behaviors, middle-aged incarcerated males with at least secondary education are the most sensitive population to use this therapeutic tool.

An introspective analysis of criminal responsibility can only be done if a crime has been committed and if there is an attributional process associated with the criminal self. In the case of inmates that regret the commission of a crime, they could, for example, interpret prison time as a form of personal growth (see Rowe, 2011) and therefore change their mind-set regarding criminality. These results can be interpreted in two ways: on one hand, there may be inmates who feel bad about the consequences of the crime but not the commission of the crime itself. This may imply that the assumption of responsibility and/or repentance is distorting the feeling of guilt or anguish generated, for example, for having lost a family member while in prison or not being able to see a child grow up. Maruna (2001) observed that criminals who reconstruct their identity through assuming what they have done and/or interpreting their stay in prison positively demonstrated less risk of recidivism and orientation toward a prosocial lifestyle.

On the other hand, a small percentage of inmates in our sample considered their conviction to be unfair or excessive. Those individuals minimized the crime, revealed feelings of injustice for being imprisoned, considered their sentence arbitrary or abusive, and some did not consider their acts as criminal, even though the judicial system condemned them. Some inmates considered themselves innocent and claimed not to have committed the crime, whereas others attributed responsibility to others—the victim, the system, or their living circumstances—through cognitive and social processes that exempted them from guilt (Bandura, 1999). Fariña et al. (2010) proposed a cognitive-behavioral intervention to help inmates take responsibility for their conduct, to work on processes of attribution of responsibility to gain awareness of the consequences of their actions, and to resocialize in a law obeying manner (Ministerio del Interior, 2006).

Finally, we have shown that apart from illegal hunting, the attribution of responsibility is present in all crimes, especially theft and fraud associated with consumption or addiction to alcohol or drugs (e.g., raising money to buy drugs; Cid Moliné & Martí Olivé, 2011; Colman & Vander Laenen, 2012; Siponen & Vance, 2010). Despite the diversity of influences conditioning criminal recidivism (Martínez-Catena & Redondo, 2016), some participants described an antisocial trajectory since adolescence, often associated with drug use, an idea supported by Moffitt's (1993) taxonomy. This criminal trajectory or criminal career belongs to life-course theory, a criminological theory that tries to analyze criminal behaviors across development (Sampson & Laub, 1997). Longitudinal studies in this area focus on an individual's involvement in crime, including the dimensions of their participation such as their frequency, specialization, escalation, career length, and desistance (DeLisi & Piquero, 2011). There is evidence that offending rates peak in late adolescence and decline gradually into adulthood (Day et al., 2007; Hussong et al., 2004; Piquero, 2008). The relationship between crime and drug abuse is often reported in the scientific literature (Hammersley, 2011; Laub & Sampson, 2001; Schröder et al., 2007). In our sample, some inmates reported that they committed crimes under the influence of drugs, and others committed a crime to obtain the money to acquire the drugs. Some authors consider drug addiction a cause for the start and maintenance of a criminal career (Ruiz & Santibáñez, 2014). As a result, some individuals are more likely to be repeat offenders, despite having faced prosecution or criminal sentences, and continue to develop a versatile criminal career (theft, drug trafficking, kidnapping) to maintain their drug habit. Vaughn et al. (2008) developed a typology of burglars who had developed a criminal trajectory. One of the types that they identified was the drug-oriented burglar, who had committed more crimes of possession and drug trafficking, as well as theft (as in our

sample) and use of weapons. This profile of burglars involves illegal attempts to obtain money to buy drugs and to maintain drug consumption. It is difficult for drug or alcohol addicts to reintegrate into society and desist because they might have a social circle related to drug abuse, their personal and social relationships tend to be unstable, or they might present difficulties in obtaining or maintaining employment (Colman & Vander Laenen, 2012; Ruiz & Santibáñez, 2014; Schröder et al., 2007). Effective intervention to break the circle of drug consumption/addiction, crime, prison, release, and recidivism is a challenge still pending for prisons worldwide.

As for the assumption of responsibility for the conduct, those who committed theft and fraud also agreed, although to a lesser extent. Inmates convicted for terrorism and gang-related offenses considered their conviction unfair or excessive. This is a clear example of the neutralization technique related to a denial of the law (Siponen & Vance, 2010). Another finding suggested that individuals convicted of sexual assault disagreed with their criminal conviction. Those participants found it challenging to recognize the commitment of the crime and disagree on its legal classification. Also, some of the inmates imprisoned for sexual assault claimed to be remorseful, but at the same time justified their action. This is a typical pattern reported in sex offenders and is the result of a distorted cognition that legitimizes the behavior (Ward et al., 1997). Some inmates convicted for sexual offenses express that the victim was lying, or that they were deceived or misinterpreted. Hence, it would be appropriate to emphasize the importance of educational work focused on gender issues and sociocultural attitudes that might favor or demonstrate tolerance about sexual assault toward women, to personalize the concerns and to stop instrumentalizing the sexual offense. In addition, educational programs should be capable of dealing with issues of consent, emotional awareness, and empathy with the victim (Herrero, 2007; Martínez-Catena & Redondo, 2016; Ministerio del Interior, 2006).

This study shows the importance of acknowledging how people initiate and maintain a criminal career, their attitudes before and while serving sentences, and their expectations after being jailed. This knowledge will not only increase our understanding of offenders and criminality but can also help design more effective reintegration programs.

Limitations

Although this research is the first qualitative analysis of the narrative self in a sample of Spanish inmates, there are a number of limitations. First, the amount of information obtained was small and limited due to the brevity of the narratives. The second limitation could be related to the veracity and

subjectivity of the criminal narratives. Nevertheless, narratives about crime and delinquency are useful regardless of their veracity (Miller et al., 2015; Sandberg, 2010) because distorted stories also add meaning to the study of the criminal self (Mhyre Sunde, 2017; Sandberg et al., 2015). Third, the lack of a group of female offenders as well as the lack of data regarding race, ethnicity, nationality, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, geography, and ability reduces the applicability and generalization of the current results. In this vein, as an example, Hallet and McCoy (2015) observed in 25 successful ex-offenders that Christianity was the source of their desistance.

Implications for Future Research

Given the potential of narrative research, similar studies could be extended to female inmates (Rowe, 2011), mothers in prison (Stone, 2016), and juvenile offenders (Fariña et al., 2010). However, there is still a lack of exploration of narratives in incarcerated women and, when they are analyzed, they correspond to dominant cultural values (Dewey et al., 2018). In addition, when gender identity is explored in narratives of offenders, literature tends to focus on the reconstruction of masculinity (Nandi, 2002). Other sources of diversity such as race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation should be included in research about offenders' narratives.

Concerning the resocialization of inmates, the admission of responsibility for the criminal act is an essential step toward future rehabilitation and desistance and is an indispensable condition for entering and/or remaining in any treatment program in Spanish prisons (Redondo, 2006). Therefore, from a therapeutic and psychosocial standpoint, inmates, particularly those convicted of sexual-related crimes, should take part in programs to work on the consequences of their conduct both at their level and the victims, with an impact on the erroneous cognitive patterns and predictors of risk of recidivism. Those programs aim to promote criminal responsibility, willingness to change, and avoid future recidivism (Giordano et al., 2015; Redondo & Martínez-Catena, 2011). At the same time, regarding the high number of inmates that justified their conduct due to drugs or alcohol addiction, it is crucial to be attentive to physical, psychological, and social problems caused by drug addiction and its consequences. An intervention based on the promotion of empowerment, transformation, participation, and motivation to change is more useful than corrective, sanctioning, and punitive ideas. Any such intervention should focus on the individual, their relationship with the substance, and the social scenarios in which they participate, as well as on social support in the final stages of treatment and reinstatement to life outside (Ruiz & Santibáñez, 2014).

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Note

1. N = Narrative. The annexed number corresponds to the order of narratives' codification during data collection.

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