



# The moderating role of psychopathic traits in the relationship between period of confinement and criminal social identity in a sample of juvenile prisoners



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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The main aim of the current study was to examine how primary psychopathy may interact with period of confinement to predict Criminal Social Identity (CSI) scores, while controlling for covariates.

**Methods:** The Measure of Criminal Social Identity, Levenson Self-report Psychopathy Scale, and the Measure of Criminal Attitudes and Associates were administered to 126 male juvenile offenders incarcerated in prisons in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

**Results:** Results indicated no significant direct relationship between period of confinement and CSI scores. However, as expected, a significant moderating effect of primary psychopathy on the association between period of confinement and CSI scores was observed while controlling for covariates. Specifically, the significant effect of period of confinement on CSI was observed only for those participants who scored higher (1 *SD* above the mean) on primary psychopathy (affective and interpersonal features).

**Conclusion:** For incarcerated juveniles with greater primary psychopathic traits, the formation and/or intensification of CSI may be an adaptive response to incarceration.

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## Introduction

Social identity refers to people's internalised sense of their membership in a particular group (Tajfel, 1978), and theorists have argued that when a given social identity is salient, this is a powerful motivator of social perception and behaviour (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). Research has shown that salient social identities are a basis for social judgment, social influence, trust, and cooperation (see Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Haslam, 2004; Haslam & Ellemers, 2005; Tyler & Blader, 2003). Consequently, individuals tend to see the world from the perspective of fellow in-group members, are more likely to be influenced by in-group members, and are more likely to show preference in their attitudes and behaviours toward them (see Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Applied to the analysis of crime, the above ideas have led to the development of Criminal Social Identity theory (CSI; Boduszek, Dhingra, & Debowska, *in press*; Boduszek & Hyland, 2011). In line with Cameron's (2004) earlier suggestions, the model of CSI was proposed to be

comprised of three factors, namely cognitive centrality (the cognitive importance of belonging to a particular group), in-group affect (the emotional valence of belonging to a given group), and in-group tie (the psychological perception of resemblance and emotional connection with other members of particular group). The theoretical framework has been utilized to make a number of important predictions. Most importantly, if an individual's criminal social identity (CSI) is salient, it is predicted that there will be an increase in an individual's likelihood of developing criminal cognitions, and subsequently engaging in criminal behaviour (Boduszek & Hyland, 2011). Consistent with this, CSI salience has been found to be a powerful determinant of criminal thinking styles and engagement in a range of criminal acts (Boduszek, O'Shea, Dhingra, & Hyland, 2014; Boduszek, Adamson, Shevlin, & Hyland, 2012; Boduszek, Adamson, Shevlin, Hyland, & Bourke, 2013; Boduszek, Shevlin, Adamson, & Hyland, 2013; Shagufta, Boduszek, Dhingra, & Palmer-Kola, 2015a, 2015b).

Given the recent development of the theory of CSI (Boduszek & Hyland, 2011; Boduszek *et al.*, *in press*), little empirical work exists on the factors capable of initiating and/or maintaining a criminally oriented self-view. In one study, associations with criminal friends were, however, found to positively predict all three CSI components (Boduszek, Adamson, Shevlin, Mallett, & Hyland, 2013). Another factor

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that may be capable of maintaining a criminally oriented self-view is socialisation in criminal environments, such as prisons (Holsinger, 1999; Losel, 2003; Rhodes, 1979; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Larson and Nelson (1984), for instance, in a study that followed 121 women from three prisons, determined that the amount of time served/remaining in prison and friendship diversity was more strongly associated with prisonization (a form of secondary socialisation in which offenders learn how to adapt to the prison life style; Clemmer, 1940) than individual's criminal history. Clemmer further suggested that although all inmates experience prison assimilation, this might differ in degree due to the duration and frequency of the sentence, as well as the degree of previous contact to criminal structures. Thus, although relatively stable, identities may change over the course of incarceration. Consistent with this, Rhodes (1979) found that incarcerated offenders who initially registered identities that were more deviant recorded a slight temporal trend in favour of increased conventionality; whereas, legitimate identities became more criminally oriented as time progressed. Similarly, Walters (2003a) found that criminal identity and proactive/instrumental criminal thinking increased over a six-month period in novice inmates (i.e., those with no prior prison experience) exposed to a medium-security prison environment. By contrast, the scores of experienced inmates (i.e., inmates with at least one prior incarceration and at least five years of prison experience) remained reasonably stable over time.

Although previous research has typically used number of prior incarcerations as a measure of prisonization (e.g., Boduszek et al., 2013; DeLisi & Walters, 2011; Dhimi, Ayton, & Loewenstein, 2007; McCorkle, Miethe, & Drass, 1995), it is possible that the total amount of time spent in prison is a better measure of prisonization. That is, one long prison sentence could be much more detrimental than several short(er) prison sentences. Indeed, Wheeler (1961) indicated that *"the inmate culture should give expression to the values of those who are most committed to a criminal value system—the long termers, those who have followed systematic criminal careers... and if the culture is viewed as an outgrowth of the criminogenic character of inmates, it is reasonable to expect a reinforcement process operating throughout the duration of confinement"* (p. 708). Studies examining whether prisonization is more potent in inmates with longer sentences or in inmates who have served a greater portion of their sentences have proved inconclusive (MacKenzie & Goodstein, 1985). However, consistent with Wheeler's (1961) suggestion, a recent study of incarcerated offenders and males drawn from the general population revealed a positive significant effect of length of imprisonment on cognitive distortions pertaining to rape (Debowska, Boduszek, Dhingra, & DeLisi, in press). This suggests that period of confinement can affect an individual's prison assimilation.

The above research indicates that environmental influences (e.g., incarceration), and criminal associations may offer a sufficient explanation for variations in CSI. However, previous research has neglected the potential role of personality traits (Boduszek et al., in press). This is an important omission as research by Boduszek et al. (2012) indicated that personality traits can serve to moderate the relationship between CSI and criminal orientations. Specifically, moderated multiple regression analysis found that the impact of in-group affect (CSI factor) on criminal thinking was stronger among those criminals who were more introverted, while the impact of in-group ties (CSI factor) on criminal thinking was stronger among those criminals who were more extroverted. Research to date has not examined the role of psychopathy in the development and maintenance of CSI, and given the significant impact of psychopathy on criminal behaviour (Dhingra & Boduszek, 2013), research in this area is warranted. Historically, psychopathy refers to two distinct but interrelated facets (Brinkley, Newman, Widiger, & Lynam, 2004). The first dimension, primary psychopathy, consists of interpersonal-affective traits (grandiosity, shallowness, manipulativeness, lack of remorse etc.); whereas, the second dimension, secondary psychopathy, consists of behavioural traits (antisocial behaviours, impulsiveness, irresponsibility, etc.).

Widom (1976) demonstrated that psychopaths are unable to distinguish their own evaluations and appraisals from those of others. He suggested that this was indicative of the presence of cognitive biases among psychopathic individuals. Along similar lines, Blackburn (2006) suggested that the psychopath's attributes are *"mediated by dysfunctional schemas about the self, the world, and the future that are maintained through selective, confirmatory experiences"* (p. 46). Accordingly, the beliefs of psychopaths encompass such biases as entitlement and the need to manipulate others. Consequently, those with higher affective and interpersonal features of psychopathy may portray a more criminally orientated self-view because in-group members are seen as part of the self.

#### Cultural context and current study

The criminal age of responsibility is between 7 and 12 years of age in Pakistan, and is derived from a range of criterion such as levels of maturity and understanding (Talpur, Pathan, & Shah, 2012). In Pakistan, money, land, sexual assault, illiteracy, honour killing, hostility, and drugs are the main factors causing juvenile delinquency (Mahmood & Cheema, 2004). Other frequently cited factors include broken homes, delinquent community environment, bad company of peer/ school group, slums with criminal neighbourhood, poverty, and unemployment (Aoulakh, 1999). Human Rights organizations, such as the United Nations Commission for Human Rights, have noted that juveniles in prison in Pakistan are not treated in accordance with international treaties and declarations (Talpur et al., 2012). Indeed, while in custody, juveniles have been found to be subject to physical maltreatment and abuse by adult prisoners as they are not separated from them. It is assumed that incarceration in such difficult environments will contribute to the development of CSI. Moreover, in line with Criminal Social Identity Theory (Boduszek & Hyland, 2011), more skilled offenders (e.g., those with greater interpersonal manipulation skills) are more likely to develop CSI in order to survive incarceration.

The aim of the current research is to extend Clemmer's (1940) prisonization hypothesis by examining (a) the direct relationship between period of confinement and Criminal Social Identity (CSI) scores while controlling for psychopathy factors (primary and secondary), age, criminal friends, and (b) the moderating effect of primary psychopathy on the relationship between period of confinement and CSI scores.

**Hypothesis 1.** It is predicted that period of incarceration has the capacity to facilitate the intensification of a criminally orientated self-view (CSI) among juvenile offenders incarcerated in Pakistan.

**Hypothesis 2.** It is further predicted that primary psychopathy, the core personality traits of psychopathy, would moderate the association between period of incarceration and CSI scores. Specifically, we anticipate that period of incarceration will be significantly positively related with CSI only for those juvenile offenders with greater primary psychopathy traits.

#### Method

##### Participants and procedure

One hundred and sixty male juvenile offenders incarcerated in three prisons in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan were approached. Participants selected for this project were suspected to collaborate with organised criminal groups. The sample was reduced to 126 participants due to unavailability and pairwise deletion of missing data (data were missing at random, Little's MCAR test:  $p = .34$ ). Participants ranged in age from 12 to 21 years ( $M = 16.28$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ). In Pakistan, juvenile wards are located in regular jails for offenders up to the age of 21 years. Children below the age of 15 charged with a particularly serious offence are also located in these wards. There are no separate cells for these juvenile offenders,

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