Invited article

A fundamental attribution error? Rethinking cognitive distortions[†]

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The notion of 'cognitive distortion' has become enshrined in the offender treatment literature over the last 20 years, yet the concept still suffers from a lack of definitional clarity. In particular, the umbrella term is often used to refer to offence-supportive attitudes, cognitive processing during an offence sequence, as well as *post-hoc* neutralisations or excuses for offending. Of these very different processes, the last one might be the most popular and problematic. Treatment programmes for offenders often aim to eliminate excuse-making as a primary aim, and decision-makers place great weight on the degree to which an offender "takes responsibility" for his or her offending. Yet, the relationship between these after-the-fact explanations and future crime is not at all clear. Indeed, the designation of *post hoc* excuses as criminogenic may itself be an example of fallacious thinking. After all, outside of the criminal context, *post hoc* excuse-making is widely viewed as normal, healthy, and socially rewarded behaviour. We argue that the open exploration of contextual risk factors leading to offending can help in the identification of criminogenic factors as well as strengthen the therapeutic experience. Rather than insist that offenders take "responsibility" for the past, we suggest that efforts should focus on helping them take responsibility for the future, shifting the therapeutic focus from *post hoc* excuses to offence-supportive attitudes and underlying cognitive schemas that are empirically linked to re-offending.

When people are asked why they did a certain thing, their answer usually involves a *causal attribution*: they attribute a *cause* to their behaviour by describing what they believe brought about the behaviour, or they give a *reason* for their behaviour by describing what they were trying to achieve through that behaviour (Buss, 1978). These attributions have numerous dimensions on which they can be differentiated (internal/external; intentional/unintentional; specific/global; stable/unstable; controllability/uncontrollability). Weiner and colleagues (1987) define excuses as those

explanations that involve dimensions of externality (cause outside the person), uncontrollability (cause beyond the person's control) and unintentionality (the person did not mean to enact the behaviour). In other words, excuse making is 'the process of shifting causal attributions for negative personal outcomes from sources that are relatively more central to the person's sense of self to sources that are relatively less central' (Snyder & Higgins, 1988, p. 23).

A wide variety of research studies, ranging from laboratory-based experiments to field-based ethnographies, indicate that modern Western individuals tend to formulate *post hoc* excuses and justifications when they do something that is perceived to be offensive (Snyder & Higgins, 1988; Zuckerman, 1979). Unsurprisingly, then, a large body of criminological research has found that perpetrators invoke excuses and justifications when accounting for criminal transgressions as diverse as deer poaching (Eliason & Dodder, 1999), becoming a hit man (Levi, 1981), committing hate crimes against the Amish (Byers & Crider, 2002), assaulting prostitutes (Miller & Schwartz, 1995), stealing office supplies (Hollinger, 1991), contributing to genocide (Stewart & Byrne, 2000) and snitching on peers (Pershing, 2003). Indeed, the cross-study consistency in the types of accounts used to explain these widely disparate acts is rare in the social sciences. In almost every such study, it is found that people will seek to excuse these behaviours by seeking out external, unstable and specific causes, rather than internalizing personal responsibility. In other words, when we humans do bad things, we typically say, 'But it wasn't my fault'!

Faced with such a robust correlation between offending and excuse making,[1] it is no surprise that social theorists have presumed the two processes may be causally related. What is surprising, however, has been the assumption regarding causal direction. Rather than arguing that offending leads to excuse making, a variety of social scientific theories have posited that the relationship is the other way around: excuse making *causes* – or at least allows for – offending. This idea can be traced back at least to psychoanalytic work on ego defence mechanisms (e.g. Redl & Wineman's, 1951 list of guilt evasion techniques), but is usually referred to among criminologists as originating with neutralization theory (Cressey, 1953; Sykes & Matza, 1957). Neutralization theory suggests that 'much delinquency is based on what is essentially an unrecognized extension of defenses to crimes, in the form of justifications for deviance' (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p. 666). Sykes and Matza identify five neutralization techniques that allow offenders to engage in wrongdoing without suffering from pangs of guilt: denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of condemners and the appeal to higher loyalties. They argue that 'It is by learning these techniques that the juvenile becomes delinquent'. More recently, Bandura (1990) developed a similar theory of moral disengagement involving the following techniques for avoiding self-sanction: displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distorting the consequences of an action, dehumanizing the victim and assuming the role of victim for one's self.

In their multi-volume work *The Criminal Personality*, psychiatrists Yochelson and Samenow (1977) listed 52 'thinking errors' associated with violence and criminality. Gibbs and his colleagues (Barriga, Landau, Stinson, Liau, & Gibbs, 2000; Gibbs, Potter, &

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[1] *Rather than repeat the mouthful of 'excuse and justification making' we will use the terms 'excuses' and 'justifications' synonymously even though these terms are actually distinct (Scott & Lyman, 1968). An excuse involves the admission that something was wrong, but the claim of irresponsibility ('It wasn't my fault'); whereas, a justification is the acceptance of responsibility, but the claim that the act was not wrong ('They had it coming'). Both neutralize blame however, which is what is important for the purposes of this review.*

Goldstein, 1995) have developed a more coherent and rigorously evaluated framework of attributional styles associated with criminality including 'blaming others', 'minimizing' or mislabelling and 'assuming the worst' (see also Slaby & Guerra, 1988). This notion of criminal thinking styles is well summarized by Sharp (2000) in his book *Changing Criminal Thinking*:

> Criminal behavior is the result of erroneous thinking. Criminals' thinking leads to their feelings, their feelings lead to their behavior, and their behavior reaffirms their thinking. To use the words of Alcoholics Anonymous, the criminal is afflicted with 'stinking thinking,' which includes rationalizing, justifying, excuse-making, blaming, accusing, and being a victim. (p.2)

Theodore Dalrymple (2001) takes this theory of excuse making one step further, perhaps to its logical extreme. He argues that not only crime, but poverty itself is the result of excessive excuse making and a failure to take responsibility for one's actions (although his anecdotal research lacks a comparison sample of the ever-responsible bourgeoisie).

Still, nowhere has the notion of the criminogenic nature of excuse making had greater influence than the applied world of offender treatment, where excuses and justifications are often assigned the specialist label of cognitive distortion. In his classic article on deviance disavowal, McCaghy (1968) wrote 'Of primary importance to therapists is that offenders assume full responsibility for their behaviour without relying on alcohol or other factors as rationalizations' (p. 47). This concern with 'taking responsibility' and not making excuses still characterizes therapeutic efforts with convicted offenders of all types (but particularly sexual and violent offenders). It is consistently recommended in the treatment literature that a primary purpose of a sex offender group is 'to identify and confront cognitive distortions, rationalizations and excuses for offending' (Salter, 1988, p. 114). The goal of such confrontations is to encourage offenders to replace externalized accounts with 'internal, stable, global attributions of cause' (Beech & Mann, 2002, p. 265).

In Anna Salter's (1988) influential treatment handbook for working with sex offenders, for instance, she writes:

> Many offenders admit the actual behaviours . . . and accept their seriousness, but deny responsibility for them . . . This is sometimes blatant, as when an offender attributes the abusive behaviour to alcohol . . . Careful listening to their descriptions of the abuse will detect constant externalization. Blame is placed on their wife's nagging, their wives' lack of interest in sex, their own problems at work, provocation by the child, lack of attention and care from the world in general, excessive care and attention rom the child . . . and on their own emotional loneliness. Such offenders find numerous excuses for their behaviour, mostly external but *also frequently internal* [emphasis added]. These excuses have the cumulative effect of reducing offender responsibility. (pp. 107–108)

Salter continues to explain that the goal of therapy must be to eliminate all external explanations and even those internal explanations that are unstable, uncontrollable and specific in nature (e.g. blaming 'momentary madness'): 'Through therapy, they . . . will admit the offences and the seriousness of the behaviours and assume the responsibility for them' (p. 110). Her advice to those running sexual offender groups is to establish peer confrontation, with external, unstable attributions being a specific focus for this type of interaction (see also Sharp, 2000).

As a result of this theoretical assumption, the individual's willingness to adjust his or her account in these ways has serious consequences. Whether or not one takes responsibility for his or her crime can determine a person's access to and ability to complete state-required treatment programmes (see especially Kaden, 1999), one's eligibility for parole (Horne, 1999; Tidmarsh, 1999) and even, as in the case of Stan Tookie Williams, whether a person will be allowed to live.[2] It is therefore important to ensure that there is sound evidence that excuse-making is indeed criminogenic, and that taking responsibility is linked to a reduction in recidivism risk.

This review addresses these and related questions regarding offender rationalizations. The first section is a very brief review of the concept of cognitive distortions in criminological psychology. The notion of cognitive distortion has become enshrined in the offender treatment literature over the last 20 years (Beech & Mann, 2002), with Neidigh and Krop (1992) describing 38 separate categories of distortion. Nonetheless, it is a term that has suffered from unclear or inconsistent usage and problems in definition. As the best developed theories and most sophisticated research in this regard relates to sex offending (e.g. Polaschek, Ward, & Hudson, 1997), this brief review will focus primarily on the sex offender treatment literature. Building on this review, the second section of this paper outlines a broad critique of this central focus on excuses in treatment theory and practice. Finally, the conclusion takes up the question of the alternatives to the current focus on targeting and eradicating excuses in criminological psychology, reviewing a variety of promising new directions in cognitive work with offenders.

The overall argument is that criminological psychology may be guilty of committing something akin to the 'fundamental attribution error' (Jones & Harris, 1967) writ large. That is, many of the rationalizations and minimizations offered by offenders may be situational rather than dispositional (see Heckert & Gondolf, 2000). When challenged about having done something wrong, all of us reasonably account for our own actions as being influenced by multiple, external and internal factors. Yet, we pathologize prisoners and probationers for doing the same thing. In everyday use, excuses are employed as an 'aligning action indicating to the audience that the actor is aligned with the social order even though he or she has violated it' (Felson & Ribner, 1981, p. 138). Pathologizing such aligning techniques when used by criminal justice clients places them in a no-win situation: If they make excuses for what they did, they are deemed to be criminal types who engage in criminal thinking. If, however, they were to take full responsibility for their offences – claiming they committed some awful offence purely 'because they wanted to' and because that is the 'type of person' they are – then they are, by definition, criminal types as well.

Our argument is not that treatment providers should ignore cognition or issues of self-efficacy in promoting change. Far from it. We argue only that as a discipline, we need 'more sophisticated views of denial and the related motivations to avoid versus accept responsibility' (Schneider & Wright, 2004, p. 16).

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[2] *In denying clemency to Stan Tookie Williams, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger suggested that his primary evidence that Williams was not fully reformed was his unwillingness to take full responsibility for his crimes.*

Examining the term 'cognitive distortions'

The term 'cognitive distortion' seems to have been adopted from the cognitive therapy literature on depression. In this field, the term was originally used to describe 'Idiosyncratic thought content indicative of distorted or unrealistic conceptualizations' (Beck, 1963, p. 324). Beck uses the term *cognition* to refer to 'a specific thought, such as an interpretation, a self-command or self-criticism' (p. 326), adding that the term is 'also applied to wishes . . . which have a verbal content' (p. 326).

In the offender treatment literature, the concept of the cognitive distortion differs from Beck's definition (and has changed over time). Abel *et al.* (1989) defined cognitive distortions in sex offenders as

> An individual's internal processes, including the justifications, perceptions and judgments used by the sex offender to rationalize his child molestation behaviour . . . [which] appear to allow the offender to justify his ongoing sexual abuse of children without the anxiety, guilt and loss of self-esteem that would usually result from an individual committing behaviours contrary to the norms of society. (p. 137)

One year later, Murphy (1990) defined the term as 'Self-statements made by offenders that allow them to deny, minimize, rationalize and justify their behaviour' (p. 332). This definition was slightly reworded by Blumenthal, Gudjonsson, and Burns (1999) to 'Attitudes and beliefs which offenders use to deny, minimize and rationalize their behaviour' (p. 129). These authors distinguished 'Enduring and situationally non-specific' (p. 139) attitudes from offence-specific cognitions such as blame attributions, suggesting that:

> Both may be seen as different means of justifying an offence. While blame attribution relates to an individual's perception of the specific circumstances of the offence, cognitive distortions relate to more global attitudes and beliefs about the acceptability of sexual offending in general (Blumenthal *et al.*, 1999, p. 132).

It can be seen from these definitions that Abel *et al.* (1989) and Murphy (1990) conceptualized cognitive distortions in offenders as *self-serving* biases (see Barriga *et al.*, 2000), an implication that is not present in Beck's work. In fact, Beck emphasized in his writing the negative personal consequences of cognitive distortions in depression cases (Beck, 1963). There are two main differences between Murphy's definition and that of Abel *et al.* (1989). First, Murphy also included denial and minimization as an aspect of cognitive distortions (as did Blumenthal *et al.*, 1999), but Abel *et al.* (1989) did not. Second, Abel *et al.* included in their definition a reference to 'perceptions and judgemnts'. This aspect of their definition suggests that, in their view, not every cognitive distortion is conscious or deliberate.

Neither Murphy nor Abel *et al.* were explicit about the relationship between cognitive distortions and offending and, contrary to their definitions, in practice they both viewed attitudes as examples of cognitive distortions. For example, Abel *et al.* (1989) reported the development of a 'Cognitive Distortions' scale which is, in fact, an attitude scale, consisting of items reflecting general beliefs about the acceptability of sex with children. Blumenthal *et al.* (1999) explicitly included both attitudes and excuses as examples of cognitive distortions. However, it is not at all obvious that attitudes – definitions of which usually imply enduring and evaluative properties – can be grouped

together as a similar entity to justifications and minimizations. Neidigh and Kropp (1992) drew attention to this problem, noting that

> Idiosyncratic rationalizations may represent the offender's automatic thoughts or conscious self-talk [but] they are not necessarily representative of the offender's deeper attitudes and beliefs . . . It may be inappropriate to attempt to assess offenders' surface level distortions by utilizing instruments that present cognitive statements as general rules or beliefs. (p. 211)

Neidigh and Kropp (1992) cited the Abel Cognitive Distortions scale as an example of a scale that does not measure what it purports to measure. Despite their criticisms, new cognitive distortion scales have been reported which are actually attitude scales (e.g. Bumby, 1995). Consequently, the use of the term to refer to attitudes and beliefs, as well as excuses and justifications, has become more common. The quote from Salter (1988) above is a good example of a conflation of attitudes, excuses and minimizations as if all were equally responsible for offending.

The other lingering issue regarding cognitive distortions is when these thought patterns occur in the chronology of offending. Abel and colleagues (1989) emphasized the maintenance function of cognitive distortions. They saw distortions as resulting from attempts to reduce subjective discomfort about engaging in behaviour which is unacceptable in the eyes of others. It is implied within both Abel *et al*.'s and Murphy's definitions that distortions are engaged by the offender after an offence (or after disclosure of an offence) to reduce subjective shame and guilt, and allow the behaviour to be repeated. Thus, in this view, cognitive distortions have a maintenance role, not a causal role (see also Maruna & Copes, 2005, pp. 271–281). This view is not universally held. For instance, Hartley (1998) argued that 'Offenders do not just use these rationalizations to excuse their behaviour after disclosure. Rather offenders reported using these rationalizations as a way of overcoming their internal inhibitions against offending *throughout the history of sexual contact*' (Hartley, 1998, p. 36; author's emphasis). Finkelhor (1984) also held this position, describing four stages that precede sexual offending, the second of which is to 'overcome internal inhibitions' by excusing or justifying one's intended actions. Finkelhor's 'Four Preconditions' model has strongly influenced clinical work with offenders. Likewise, Sykes and Matza (1957) argued that neutralization techniques 'precede deviant behavior and make deviant behavior possible' (p. 666).

However, the argument that excuses precede and lead to offending (as opposed to just following it) has almost no empirical support (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Pollock & Hashmall, 1991; Quinsey, 1986), and it is difficult to imagine a research design that could conclusively demonstrate this link.[3] Certainly, some of the more innovative attempts to establish this chronology retrospectively and longitudinally have been unable to identify any strong link between the acceptance of rationalizations at Time One and criminal behaviour measured at Time Two (see e.g. Barbaree & Marshall, 1988; Hanson & Wallace-Capretta, 2000; Henning & Holdford, 2006; Kropp & Hart, 2000). In recent years, there have been numerous reviews of the research on cognitive distortion theory in the sex offender literature (Drieschner & Lange, 1999; Segal & Stermac, 1990; Ward, Hudson, Johnston, & Marshall, 1997) and on neutralization theory in criminology

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[3] *The same is not true for offence-supportive attitudes and beliefs, which are also included as part of the wider concept of cognitive distortions (see Beech & Mann, 2002; Ward, 2000).*

(see especially Maruna & Copes, 2005, for a review of 50 years of this research). These reviews all reach the same conclusion: research on cognition and crime to date has failed 'to distinguish between post-offence cognitions and those that predispose men to offend' (Ward *et al.*, 1997, p. 498). In the most recent systematic review, Gannon and Polaschek (in press) argue that clinical practice has 'run ahead of scientific knowledge' (p. 1) and that there is 'little or no longitudinal evidence to support' (p. 14) the theory behind the idea of cognitive disortions: 'So where has support for the cognitive distortion hypothesis come from? We can only conclude that the popularity of the cognitive distortion hypothesis is due to factors other than its empirical validity' (p. 16).

In short, the concept of cognitive distortion has suffered both from an absence of empirical support and also from a lack of clarity in definition. Over time, this lack of clarity has become increasingly problematic. Authors have broadened the concept of cognitive distortion in different ways; for example, using the term to describe general antisocial thinking (Ward, 2000). In clinical practice, the term cognitive distortion has become confused with any causal explanation for offending given by offenders, no matter how valid the explanation might be (Mann & Webster, 2001). Moreover, the cognitive distortion label is used to group together far different phenomena such as attitudes, cognitive products and *post hoc* excuses. Hence, we will avoid the slippery term cognitive distortions altogether in our review below, and concentrate only on excuse-making (e.g. "I was drunk and did not mean to do it"). We explicitly exclude attitudes which are supportive of offending, such as pro-violence attitudes or (in the case of sex offending) beliefs that child victims enjoy sex with adults or are not harmed by it.

Rethinking excuse-making and criminality

The inconsistencies in defining cognitive distortion and the lack of empirical evidence that these rationalizations precede offending suggest that the topic should be treated with more caution than it typically is. In the following review, we present several arguments in favour of tolerating some level of excuse making among offenders. By this, we mean only reasons for shifting the focus of cognitive interventions away from individual excuses and toward other aspects of self-identity (beliefs, schemas, implicit theories, etc.) (see also Beech & Mann, 2002; Ward, 2000). These suggestions for alternative targets are discussed in the final section of this paper.

Is excuse-making normal?

Excuses and justifications enjoy the awkward position of being 'universally condemned while being universally used' (Schlenker, Pontari, & Christopher, 2001, p. 15). Central to the new notion of criminal thinking or the criminal personality is that, 'Criminals do not think like law-abiding prosocial people' (Sharp, 2000, p. 2). Yet, the psychological literature on excuse making is clear that taking full responsibility for every personal failing does not make a person normal, it makes them extraordinary – and possibly at risk of mental illness.

In his review of 38 studies, Zuckerman (1979) found substantial confirmation for the idea that modern, Western adults make predominantly external attributions for our failures and predominantly internal attributions for our successes. Moreover, one of the most robust findings in cognitive psychology is that this excuse making for negative

events is both healthy and beneficial (Dodge, 1993; Seligman, 1991). Schlenker *et al.* (2001) write:

> It is now commonplace to encounter, in books and journal articles, the recommendation that people who fail or otherwise encounter difficulties in life should be taught to shift causal responsibility away from core components of the self, thereby making excuses to shield them from the emotional and interpersonal costs. (p. 20)

Posing the question 'Do excuses work?' Snyder and Higgins (1988) concluded that excuse making is a highly adaptive mechanism for coping with stress, relieving anxiety and maintaining self-esteem. Research suggests that excusing past mistakes even enhances one's sense of control over future challenges of the same nature (Snyder, Higgins, & Stucky, 1983; Wortman, 1976).

Those who assume full responsibility for their failings, on the other hand, put themselves at risk of suffering depression. In their 'revised helplessness theory' of depression, Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale (1978) argued that individuals who have an explanatory style that invokes substantially internal, stable and global attributions for negative life events (and external, unstable and specific attributions for positive events) will be most at risk when faced with unfortunate circumstances, such as the loss of a job or a relationship breakup. Seligman (1991) writes:

> For nondepressives, failure events tend to be external, temporary, and specific, but good events are personal, permanent, and pervasive. 'If it's bad, you did it to me, it'll be over soon, and it's only this situation. But if it's good, I did it, it's going to last forever, and it's going to help me in many situations'. (p. 110)

People who display this sort of 'beneffectance' (Greenwald, 1980) or 'self-enhancing biases' (Bandura, 1989, p. 1177) tend to be healthier (Peterson, Seligman, & Valliant, 1988; Taylor, 1989) and perform better in school (Wilson & Linville, 1985), in the work place (Seligman & Schulman, 1986) and in politics (Zullow & Seligman, 1990) than those who do not think as optimistically.

Do listeners encourage excuses?

Rather than being dispositional, Weiner and colleagues (1987) described excuse making as a product of *negotiated reality* (see also Auburn, 2005). That is, excuse makers and their audience collaborate to agree on a cause that is acceptable to both. Through a series of experiments, Weiner and colleagues (1987) demonstrated that most listeners prefer accounts in which wrongdoers excuse or justify their offending behaviour. Accounts characterized by *preference* (I did it because I wanted to) and *negligence* (I did it because I didn't think) made listeners angry; whereas the majority of excuses offered in these laboratory-based encounters were welcomed, believed and accepted (see also Greenberg, 1993; Sitkin & Bies, 1993). Indeed, extensive research in social psychology demonstrates that the provision of excuses (or mitigating accounts) for one's harmful actions can reduce conflict (McLaughlin, Cody, & O'Hair, 1983), preserve the speaker's reputation (Crant & Bateman, 1993) and reduce negative sanctioning (Blumstein *et al.*, 1974). Excuse making seems to convey a level of respect for the victim. 'The very fact that the perpetrator thinks that the victim is due an explanation signals respect for the victim and tends to diminish the victim's anger' (Miller, 2001, p. 537; see also Bies, 1987).

A similar interactive process appears to operate even in the case of highly violent crimes (Kleinke, Wallis, & Stalder, 1992; Rumgay, 1998, p. 204). When we feel an

individual's crime is the result of the offender's circumstances we are more likely to advocate rehabilitative than punitive interventions (Cullen, Clark, Cullen, & Mathers, 1985; Grasmick & McGill, 1994). Alternatively, offenders whose crimes are attributed to internal, stable and controllable causes are considered by most to be more dangerous and less treatable (see Hanson & Slater, 1988; Kelly, 2000; Quinsey & Cyr, 1987).

This is not true of every culture at every historical moment. In Japanese society, for instance, full acceptance of responsibility, apology and repentance are both expected of law breakers and rewarded with forgiveness and reintegration when deemed to be authentic (Braithwaite, 1989; Haley, 1996). The same cannot be said of contemporary Western culture, where ex-offenders struggle to be both responsible and redeemable (Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 2001; Stefanakis, 1998).

Does excuse-making predict recidivism?

Similar to the notion of victim empathy before it (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004), theoretical assumptions about irresponsibility and excuse making have been strongly challenged by recent meta-analytic studies of the predictors of reoffending. Meta-analyses by Hanson and Bussiere (1998) and especially Hanson and Morton-Bourgon (2005), for instance, suggest that responsibility taking has no consistent relationship to recidivism among sex offenders. These striking results 'could provide justification for novel approaches to treating and managing denying offenders, provide a rationale to support a change in standards of practice, or provide a basis for departing from established standards for approaches to the clinical problem of denial' (Lund, 2000, p. 276). Instead, critics of this research (e.g. Lund, 2000; Schneider & Wright, 2004) point to the difficulties in interpreting these results, in particular because of the heterogeneity in the way that denial is measured across the different studies.[4] Although these concerns are valid, it is still the case that no systematic review of the literature, to date, has found conclusive evidence of a link between responsibility taking and future recidivism (as opposed to the simple finding that offenders make *post hoc* excuses).

Moreover, there are some theoretical reasons for suspecting that, in some cases (although not all), the relationship between excuse making and recidivism may be in the opposite direction of what is implied by the cognitive distortion literature. In some cases, proffering excuses for criminal acts might suggest a shared commitment to social norms and a desire to move on from one's past. As Hanson and Morton-Bourgon (2005, p. 1159) write, 'Offenders who minimize their crimes are at least indicating that sexual offending is wrong'.

Theoretically, offender neutralizations might be understood as providing crucial 'insulation from labelling' (Covington, 1984, p. 621) or protection from the sorts of stigmatizing shame that can lead to future offending (Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 2001). Shame is a rich, but dangerous emotion and, in general, more research is needed to understand better its role in criminal aetiology and reform. Still, the best theoretical work on shame and crime, to date, suggests that different types of shame can both increase and decrease risk for criminality, with stigmatizing shame being particularly criminogenic (Braithwaite, 1989; Harris & Maruna, 2005).

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[4] *These meta-analyses include both studies of categorical denial (measured as yes/no), and studies that utilize a spectrum of responsibility mediated by the use of excuse making and minimization.*

In terms of the rehabilitation process, in some cases, it may be better for an individual who has committed a crime to believe 'I only did that because I was drunk and I was badly provoked' than to internalize the blame for the offence with the seemingly dangerous attribution 'I did it because I wanted to' or 'I did it because that is the type of person I am'. Individuals making such internal attributions may take responsibility for their offence, but they also show a shocking lack of social awareness and provide little evidence that they should be reintegrated or forgiven.

This suggestion is well articulated by Hood and colleagues (2002). Hood *et al.*'s study found that offenders deemed to be in denial[5] by a parole board were less likely to reoffend than those who took responsibility for their crimes (see also Ryan & Miyoshi, 1990; Smith & Monastersky, 1986). Hood and colleagues explain this finding by arguing:

> Some 'deniers,' when faced with the stigma of conviction and punishment may not accept their deviant sexual acts as a reflection of their 'real self.' Nor may they wish to associate with those they regard, unlike themselves, as 'real' sex offenders. It is possible that such persons may be less likely to become 'secondary deviants,' that is, persons who accept and seek to justify their sexual deviance (Hood *et al.*, 2002, p. 387).

Indeed, Lemert was clear on this point in his formulation of primary and secondary deviation: 'The deviations remain primary deviations or symptomatic and situational *as long as they are rationalized*' (Lemert, 1951, p. 75, emphasis added). According to Lemert, an individual does not move into secondary deviation until she or he undergoes 'a process of identification' through which the deviant acts are 'incorporated as part of the "me" of the individual' (p. 75). As Meisenhelder (1982, p. 140) later argued, 'The plan to exit from crime is in large part founded on the sense of the self as noncriminal'.

Hanson and Wallace-Capretta (2000) found some support for this hypothesis in their study of the offending outcomes of 320 male batterers in a community treatment programme. In the study, treatment clients responded to the 40 items that make up Version 3 of the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding measure (Paulhus, 1984) comprising two subscales: self-deception and impression management. Contrary to expectations, those treatment clients who scored highly on these social desirability scales (and so, denied things such as 'I have taken things that didn't belong to me' or 'I have sometimes felt like I wanted to kill someone') were the least likely to reoffend as reported by their partners. Individuals who were the most open about admitting to minor infractions, such as traffic violations and violent thoughts, were the most likely to recidivate in the study. Perhaps a little creative self-deception (Taylor, 1989) is not always a bad thing if this helps to create a non-deviant real self for stigmatized individuals.

In their recent, longitudinal study of clients in a domestic violence treatment programme, Henning and Holdford (2006) also found that externalization of blame was largely unrelated to subsequent involvement in domestic violence incidents, and that: 'Participants who intentionally denied minor character flaws in a possible attempt to appear socially conforming were less likely to recidivate than offenders who were more forthcoming on standardized self-report measures' (pp. 123–124). They speculate that

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[5] *The concepts of denial and cognitive distortions have long been theoretically linked (see Conte, 1985) and are 'frequently used interchangeably to refer to diminished accounts of offence behaviour' (Schneider & Wright, 2004, p. 6). Some research has explored what is sometimes called categorical or absolute denial as a dichotomous construct (one is either in denial or not). More recently, observers have treated denial as a continuum that includes minimization, blaming others and refusing to acknowledge the seriousness of one's offences (Levenson & Macgowan, 2004).*

one reason for this is that there is a subsection of perpetrators who take responsibility for their crimes, but have no remorse in this regard:

> The authors' experiences in working with a large number of batterers have raised a final concern with regard to minimization, denial and externalization of blame as predictors of recidivism. Among the minority of offenders who accept responsibility for their abuse is a subgroup of men who . . . simply do not care whether assaulting an intimate partner is socially acceptable. Anecdotally, most of these individuals appear to have characteristics of psychopathy. (p. 126)

Finally, additional support for the possible value of excuse making has emerged from research on successfully reformed (or desisting) ex-offenders (see e.g. Stefanakis, 1998). In his analysis of findings from the Tübingen study of criminal desistance, Mischkowitz (1994, p. 319) concludes, 'Using neutralization techniques also enables [the desisting ex-offender] to reconstruct his own biography and modify his past in a manner that is conducive for his present self-concept'. He argues that these techniques of self-presentation are usefully employed to find a non-criminal marriage partner – one of the best known correlates of desistance (see Farrall & Calverley, 2006). Likewise, recent studies by Maruna (2001, 2004) found desisting former offenders were more likely than active offenders to employ external, unstable and specific attributions in explaining their past offences. The explanatory style among active, habitual offenders in Maruna's sample was consistent with what Abramson *et al.* (1978) refer to as 'learned helplessness' found among the clinically depressed. The long-term offenders felt doomed to a life of criminality, addiction and incarceration.

Are risk factors ever really external and unstable?

Lastly, it cannot be forgotten that some of the individuals who do not accept full responsibility for their crimes may indeed have been influenced by external, unstable circumstances. Leaving aside the obvious possibility of wrongful conviction (e.g. the 120 death row prisoners in the US who have been exonerated since 1973; see Death Penalty Information Center, 2006), almost every criminal action is obviously a product of both internal and external factors. Although such things do not make it right to commit crimes, people really are influenced by their upbringing, by others, by drugs and alcohol, by emotional pressure and by contextual circumstances to behave in various ways. It is ironic that these sorts of basic criminological understandings are deemed to be evidence of pathology, when offered by offenders themselves (Kendall & Pollack, 2003).

Process evaluations and discourse analyses of cognitive therapy encounters with offenders in both the US (Fox, 1999a, 1999b) and the UK (Auburn, 2005; Marshall, Serran, *et al.*, 2003) demonstrate the frustrations inherent in this attribution error. In an ethnographic study of one prison-based cognitive treatment programme, Kathryn Fox (1999a) found that the 'somewhat sociological' (p. 91) accounts used by prisoners to explain their offences were rejected by therapists as examples of criminal thinking. Alternatively, she argues, treatment discourse worked to decontextualize inmates' past actions, leaving the individual with little choice but to accept the dominant therapeutic discourse of pathology and an 'ideology of moral autonomy' (Fox, 1999b, p. 442). Indeed, Fox writes, the following was listed as a thinking error in a workbook for a cognitive treatment programme for prisoners: 'The criminal believes that he is a good and decent person. He rejects the thought that he is a criminal' (cited in Fox, 1999b;

see also chapter 10 of Samenow (1984)). This of course becomes something of a catch-22 for treatment participants – if they claim to be decent, that is proof that they are criminally minded; if they admit to being criminally minded, that also is proof that they are criminally minded (see also Beech & Mann, 2002).

Like the fundamental attribution error itself, this misattribution is fully understandable. Those individuals who have never committed a certain offence themselves, can find the idea of someone making excuses for crimes such as rape, murder or burglary to be abhorrent. It can be more comforting to believe that offences are the product of bad people not circumstances. After all, if criminal acts can be committed by fundamentally good and decent people in bad circumstances, then even the best of us have the potential to commit such atrocities. That can be an unsettling thought. After all, excuses can undermine the very foundations of criminal justice. If we are to punish (or arrest, convict, study, classify, etc.) a person as an offender, the individual needs at some level to be responsible for the crime. In the face of a body of social science work that exculpates offending behaviour by shifting blame to parents, schools, communities and culture (among other forces), there is no small comfort in having the individual him or herself claim full responsibility.[6]

Thinking differently about cognitive distortions

Robert McGrath and colleagues' review of the core treatment targets of sexual offender treatment programmes (McGrath, Cumming, & Burchard, 2003) suggests that most treatment programmes fail to target criminogenic risk factors and, instead, direct too many resources toward characteristics that have little or no demonstrated empirical relationship with recidivism (e.g. victim awareness and empathy). We have argued that, if responsibility is understood as making internal, stable and intentional attributions for one's crimes ('I did it because I wanted to), then taking full responsibility for one's crimes is also overrated as a treatment goal – and may even be counterproductive in some instances. This does not mean that we advocate that offenders be taught or encouraged to make excuses in treatment (as this seems to be a natural process for most anyway), only that those working with offenders rethink their assumptions about excuse-making. In this, we agree with Schneider and Wright (2004), who concluded:

> Although it would be a mistake to reinforce biased views or to excuse dishonesty, it may be just as harmful to attack these excuses and explanations without appreciating their meaning to the offender . . . Abandoning their [denials and minimizations] is likely to exact a huge cost in their self-view and perceived social status. (p. 16)

It is important to note that, unlike with recidivism, there is a clear, empirical link between minimization of responsibility and treatment attrition rates (e.g. Daly & Pelowski, 2000; Hunter & Figueredo, 1999). This finding is sometimes interpreted as a rationale for denying treatment to offenders who will not take responsibility for their crimes. As getting offenders to accept responsibility better for their crimes is typically considered a treatment *goal*, however, this would be 'tantamount to requiring them to . . . cure themselves before they can receive treatment' (Schneider & Wright, 2004,

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[6] *A similar scapegoating function probably explains the popular appeal of books such as Dalrymple's (2001) that exculpate society by locating the roots of poverty in poor people's behaviour (and in particular their excuse making aided by liberal ideology).*

p. 7). Instead, the finding that minimization is linked to programme attrition could more usefully be reinterpreted as a rationale for changing the accepted styles of dealing with minimization in treatment (see especially Beyko & Wong, 2005; Maletzky, 1996).

For instance, it is already generally accepted in the field of offender rehabilitation that confrontational methods are not helpful in assisting motivation and change (Murphy & Baxter, 1997). The series of studies conducted by Marshall and associates (Marshall, Fernandez, *et al.*, 2003; Marshall, Serran, *et al.*, 2003; Serran, Fernandez, Marshall, & Mann, 2003) indicate that a warm, genuine, motivational style is more effective at promoting change than a confrontational, judgmental style (see also Beech & Fordham, 1997; Birgden & Vincent, 2000; Kear-Colwell & Pollock, 1997). As such, treatment programmes increasingly are utilizing other techiques such as motivational interviewing (Mann & Rollnick, 1996) or what Jenkins (1990) calls 'an invitation to responsibility' in order to effect a change in thinking styles (see especially Marshall, Thornton, Marshall, Fernandez, & Mann, 2001). Most notable in this regard is the 'good lives' model developed by Tony Ward and his colleagues (see e.g. Ward & Brown, 2004) that expands the rehabilitative focus from targeting deficits to building strengths. In this final section, we set out some additional alternatives to working with issues of personal responsibility in research and practice.

Consider different ways of taking responsibility

A probable reaction to what we have written is the question: 'How can people change if they do not accept responsibility for the acts they have committed?' One response is that taking responsibility for one's actions is about more than attributions for past behavior. Bovens (1998) differentiates between passive and active responsibility. Whereas passive responsibility means holding someone responsible for something they have done in the past, active responsibility means the virtue of taking responsibility for putting things right for the future (see also Braithwaite & Roche, 2001). Active responsibility is future oriented and forward thinking, focusing on what needs to be done in order to make good or make amends or make it right (see Maruna & LeBel, 2003). Research on ex-prisoners who have been able successfully to desist from crime finds these active responsibility themes to be far more prevalent than internal, stable and intentional attributions for one's past crimes (Maruna, 2001; Stefanakis, 1998).

Brickman and colleagues (1982) suggested a third way in regard to the vexing internalizing–externalizing debate. In what they refer to as a compensatory model of responsibility, individuals do not blame themselves for their problems, but hold themselves responsible for the solution to the problems. Brickman *et al.* (1982, p. 372) quoted the Reverend Jesse Jackson's various slogans as being representative of this model of responsibility (e.g. 'You are not responsible for being down, but you are responsible for getting up'). Maruna's (2001) desistance research suggested that this compensatory model characterizes the self-narratives of successfully desisting ex-convicts. He concluded that, although it may be therapeutic for a person to locate the roots of one's problems in the social environment (disadvantage, inequality, victimization), to desist one might need to internalize responsibility for overcoming these obstacles (see also Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 2001). Dividing the concept of responsibility into 'blame for the past' and 'control over the future' then, might be a valuable therapeutic tool (see also Stefanakis, 1998; Ward & Brown, 2004).

Consider account dimensions besides internality

As explanatory style research has progressed in other areas, the internality–externality dimension central to the locus of control concept has become of less interest to researchers. 'It has more inconsistent correlates than do stability or globality, it is less reliably assessed and there are theoretical grounds for doubting that it has a direct impact on expectations *per se*' (Peterson, 2000, p. 48). In particular, future neutralization research needs to transcend the overly simplistic and long *passé* (see Weiner & Graham, 1999) notion that an internal locus of control is always better than an external locus of control, and develop a more complex understanding of neutralizations. One suggestion from the psychological literature is to focus more on other dimensions of attributions, such as stability, globality, intentionality and controllability. These other dimensions have been found to be better predictors of a variety of other outcomes (see e.g. Peterson, 2000; Wilson & Linville, 1985).

For instance, excuses and justifications that rely upon highly stable and global attributions (e.g. 'That is just the way the world works;' 'This is just who I am') and attributions of a hostile nature (e.g. 'It is because everyone is against me') may be most likely to be associated with persistent criminality (see Maruna, 2004). Excuses that separate past offending behaviour from the individual's core self (e.g. 'It was a complete accident') may be more commonly associated with maintaining desistance from crime. These remain important, lingering questions, not just for their value in working with ex-offenders, but also because they allow us better to understand desistance or persistence from the individual offender's point of view.

Treat excuses as the identification of risk factors

Process evaluations of the dynamics of therapeutic encounters (e.g. Marshall, Fernandez, *et al.*, 2003) suggest that counsellors should listen with interest to the messy, realistic, explanations that clients offer, rather than rejecting these automatically as cover-ups. Honouring accounts in this way not only builds trust and promotes cooperation, it also generates more valuable material for therapeutic work. That is, statements of cause that may typically have been categorized as excuses may actually point helpfully towards criminogenic needs and dynamic risk factors. For instance, the offender who explains that 'I did it because I was stressed' is noting that he has poor coping skills for managing life stress. The offender who thinks his offending may have been caused by loneliness is revealing that he lacks intimacy in his adult relationships and that this is a source of distress to him.

When untreated sexual offenders are asked to explain their offending, they typically provide reasons which reflect known dynamic risk factors for this type of crime, such as intimacy seeking, poor emotional management or impulsivity (Mann & Hollin, 2006). Confronting and eradicating these explanations leaves both therapist and client with little raw material for dealing with the crucial psychosocial issues surrounding the offending. Consider the excerpt from Salter (1988), cited above. Many of the issues she described as externalizations, such as lack of emotional intimacy, emotional loneliness and emotional congruence with a child, have now been empirically established as factors that raise the risk of recidivism (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005). To eliminate such factors from an offender's account of his crimes could dangerously affect his ability to understand, recognize and manage acute changes in risk in the future. After all, the self-statement 'I did it because I wanted to' meets the standards of being an internal,

stable, attribution of cause, but is futile as a basis for awareness of how to avoid offending in the future (see Mann & Hollin, 2006).

Probe cognitive style beyond offence accounts

Schneider and Wright (2004, p. 15) argued that 'The primary vehicle for assessing and modifying offenders' cognitions is likely to be found in the explanations provided by offenders to account for their offences'. Very much on the contrary, Hanson and Morton-Bourgon (2005, p. 1159) concluded from their recent meta-analysis that it is possible that evaluators and treatment providers looking for risk factors 'have little to gain from listening to offenders' attempts to justify their transgressions'. Of these two assessments, we are persuaded that the latter is probably the safer conclusion. Of all the cognitions available to treatment professionals, offence accounts appear to be the most 'loaded' – for legal reasons and purposes of self-definition and identity management. Why prioritize these accounts over any other in assessing client locus of control or self-efficacy?

In the last 15 years, there have been three major reviews of cognitive factors in sexual offending (Drieschner & Lange, 1999; Segal & Stermac, 1990; Ward *et al.*, 1997). All three reviews concluded that studies of sexual offenders' cognition have focused far too much on measurement of excuses, justifications and offence-supportive attitudes, at the expense of differentiating cognitive structures, processes and outputs. According to Tony Ward (2000), although considerable attention has been paid to documenting the content of specific cognitive distortions in sexual offenders, there has been 'little attempt to develop a theoretical account of the mechanisms generating these distorted attitudes' (p. 493). Much research on sex offender rationalizations, he argues, provides little more than a long list of common cognitive distortions used by offenders of various stripes with the 'underlying assumption . . . that these beliefs constitute separate, and unrelated, vulnerability factors' (p. 492). Ward suggests that instead of focusing on the symptoms of distorted thinking, correctional counsellors should look to the source or the cognitive schemata underlying these patterns of belief. Likewise, Beech and Mann (2002, p. 268) describe a schema-based treatment programme that focuses not just on offence-justifying attitudes, but also on underlying self-understandings, motivations and implicit beliefs.

A schema is usually defined as a structure that contains attitudes, beliefs and assumptions and which directs cognitive activity such as processing of events (e.g. Beck, 1999). A schema contains core beliefs about the self and the relationship between the self and the outside world, as well as related attitudes about external objects and ideas (see e.g. Huesmann, 1988; Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991; McFall, 1990). A shift in focus from rationalizations to schema would require more of an attempt to tease out the broad views individuals have of the self, others and the social world and the way these are embedded in practices and ways of living (see Polaschek *et al.*, 1997; Ward, Keenan, & Hudson, 2000). Instead of aiming to eliminate neutralizations, it is suggested that rehabilitative interventions should primarily seek to assist the offender in understanding his characteristic thinking patterns where they may have contributed to his eventual selection of antisocial behaviour as his response in a given situation. By focusing solely on post-offence cognitive products such as excuses, treatment providers risk ignoring the stable underlying cognitive structures such as schemas and leave clients open to future processing errors.

Separate offence-supportive attitudes from rationalizations

An attitude is defined as an orientation towards an object or concept, that comprises a cognitive component, an evaluative component, an affective component and a disposition for action. Offence-supportive attitudes and beliefs are defined as enduring, non-situation-specific (Blumenthal *et al.*, 1999) attitudes which justify or support sexual offending. Offenders' attitudes have been extensively studied, usually under the term cognitive distortions (Abel *et al.*, 1989). Yet, the relationship between excuses and attitudes is murky and has received little research attention in criminological psychology (see Blumenthal *et al.*, 1999; Gudjonsson, 1990) so grouping them as parallel entities is unwarranted. Unlike excuses and rationalizations, considerable evidence exists for the relevance of such attitudes to habitual offending. For instance, considerable research suggests that attitudes such as the belief that children enjoy sexual contact with adults, are linked to sexual offending (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005). Furthermore, it appears that such enduring attitudes promote the likelihood that an offender will attribute provocation to their victims (Mann, *et al.*, 2006). These beliefs have been categorized as cognitive distortions along with excuses, but they are probably a very different phenomenon and a better target for treatment.

Differentiate between 'good' accounts and 'bad' excuses

Some work in the cognitive distortion tradition suggests that all offender accounts are created equal: essentially any explanation is a bad explanation. For instance, in their influential study of the thinking errors of convicted rapists, Scully and Marolla (1984) appear to categorize every causal attribution that their subjects made as either an excuse or a justification – the coding scheme being utilized apparently had no other categories. One of their interviewees, for instance, described how alcohol had 'brought out what was already there but in such intensity that it was uncontrollable. Feelings of being dominant, powerful, using someone for my own gratification, all rose to the surface' (p. 538). Although the speaker refers to internal and stable causes for offending, his statement is labelled by the researchers as alcohol blame. This blanket treatment is unfortunate, and might be one reason why neutralization theory has failed to gain a great deal of empirical support.

It would make sense for future research to try to identify the elements that make some accounts adaptive and others non-adaptive (see Schlenker, Pontari, & Christopher, 2001). In particular, priority might be to identify which rationalizations are the most toxic and separate these out from the more neutral or even benign explanations offenders hold on to in order to maintain their self-esteem. Some contenders for the worst of the worst explanations might be 'dehumanizing one's victims', 'seeing the world as hostile' or 'labelling one's self as "naturally" deviant'. For instance, considerable research suggests that the dehumanizing and demeaning of one's victims promotes and allows for further offending. This can be seen both in laboratory research on aggression (e.g. Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975) and systematic studies of mass violence (e.g. Kelman, 1973). Moreover, there is considerable support for the relationship between aggression and a 'hostile attribution bias' (Dodge, 1993) by which aggressive school children misinterpret social cues, perceiving external threat and aggressive antagonism under ambiguous conditions. On the other hand, excuses such as 'blaming one's upbringing' or 'alcohol blame' may be useful insights into a person's risk factors and limitations. It is an open question that would require more sensitive and sophisticated research methodologies.

Last thoughts

In this paper, we have suggested that some of the common assumptions about *post hoc* excuses (sometimes called cognitive distortions) are worthy of reinvestigation. In particular, we point to a large body of literature that indicates excuse making is normal and frequently healthy, and we make the uncontroversial point that behaviours frequently do have external causes. We suggest that, just because many offenders seek to excuse their offending by appealing to external, unstable causes, this does not justify the assumption that such an attributional style is risky. Such an assumption may mean that those concerned with understanding offending, whether through research or clinical practice pay too little attention to other, perhaps more important, cognitive phenomena. As always, more research is needed, but future work should maintain a more open, unbiased mind in regard to offender accounts and seek to avoid misattributions of labels such as cognitive distortion.

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