

# The Integrated Psychosocial Model of Criminal Social Identity (IPM-CSI)

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## **Abstract**

The integrated psychosocial model of criminal social identity attempts to synthesize, distil, and extend our knowledge and understanding of why people develop criminal social identity, with a particular focus on the psychological and social factors involved. We suggest that the development of criminal social identity results from a complex interplay of four important groups of psychosocial factors: (1) an identity crisis which results in weak bonds with society, peer rejection, and is associated with poor parental attachment and supervision; (2) exposure to a criminal/antisocial environment in the form of associations with criminal friends before, during, and/or after incarceration; (3) a need for identification with a criminal group in order to protect one's self-esteem; and (4) the moderating role of personality traits in the relationship between criminal/antisocial environment and the development of criminal social identity. The model produces testable hypotheses and points to potential opportunities for intervention and prevention. Directions for future research are discussed.

**Key words:** integrated psychosocial model of criminal social identity, identity crisis, self-esteem, personality traits

## **Introduction**

Social identity is a person's sense of who she or he is based on group membership. Tajfel and Turner (1979) were some of the first theorists to suggest that the group to which an individual belongs is a central source of self-esteem and pride. Group membership gives an individual a sense of social identity, a sense of belonging to the social world. Boduszek and Hyland (2011) recently adapted Tajfel's (1979) concept to a criminal context and suggested that a criminal group may provide an alternative identity, for those who have failed to establish strong and positive attachments to parents or significant others and do not conform to societal norms, in order to increase their self-image. Therefore, according to Criminal Social Identity Theory (Boduszek & Hyland, 2011), group membership is not something superfluous or fake which is attached onto the individual; it is a real, true and vital part of the person. Today, little is known about development of criminal social identity. Thus, the aim of this paper is to briefly review the original concept of criminal social identity and introduce the integrated psychosocial model of criminal social identity (IPM-CSI). The IPM-CSI attempts to provide a structural explanation of the development of criminal social identity with a particular focus on four important groups of psychosocial factors: identity crisis, exposure to criminal/antisocial environment, a need for identification with a criminal group to protect self-esteem; and the role of personality traits in a relationship between an antisocial environment and the development of criminal social identity.

### **Criminal social identity**

In addition to the unique personal identity, there are also social aspects of the self that criminals share with each other. Part of who they are and how they think of themselves is determined by a collective identity that is the criminal social self (Boduszek & Hyland, 2011). In line with Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner 1979), Boduszek and Hyland (2011) suggested that criminals' perception of, and attitudes towards, criminal group

members ultimately develops from their need to identify with and belong to a group that is relatively superior. People strive to attain a criminal social identity in order to protect their self-esteem. As a result, criminals perceive other criminal group members to be similar to themselves and show preference in their attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and behaviour.

Turner's (1982) distinction between personal and social identity illustrates the beginning of Self Categorization Theory (SCT). Personal identity is defined as self-definition of a unique individual in terms of interpersonal or intra-group differentiations ("I" or "me" versus "you"); whereas, social identity refers to self-definition as a similar group member in terms of in-group – out-group differentiations ("we" or "us" versus "they" or "them"). The salience of personal identity is constructed in the same way as a combined function of readiness (e.g., a high need for distinctiveness) and fit. However, the significance of the distinction lies in the consequences of personal versus social identity salience. The salient personal identity should accentuate the perception of individual differences and intra-individual similarity or consistency. A salient social identity, however, is thought to improve the perception of self as similar to, or even identical with, other in-group members who are perceived as highly similar to each other.

It is the mechanism of depersonalization, related to a salient social identity, or personalization, associated with a salient personal identity, that is responsible for group or individualistic behaviour, correspondingly (Hogg & Smith, 2007). This process not only depersonalizes self-perception but transforms self-conception and assimilates all aspects of one's attitudes, feelings, and behaviours to the in-group model; it changes what individuals think, feel, and do (see Hogg 2001). Depersonalization refers to viewing oneself as a category representative rather than a unique individual, and it results in a change of identity. This process is not the same as de-individuation, which refers to loss of identity (Zimbardo, 1970). According to the social identity model of de-individuation, depersonalization can produce

antisocial behaviour but only if individuals identify with a criminal group (Postmes *et al.*, 2001). Boduszek and Hyland (2011) concluded that membership of a criminal group is “psychological” when the criminal social identity of the group members is incorporated into their self-concept and becomes salient without the physical presence of individuals of that given group.

The concepts of SIT and SCT formed the basis for the development of Criminal Social Identity theory (CSI; Boduszek & Hyland, 2011), which explains the aetiology and consequences of identity within a criminal/antisocial group. Based on Cameron’s (2004) earlier research into the components of social identity, criminal social identity was proposed to comprise three factors, namely cognitive centrality, in-group affect, and in-group ties (Boduszek *et al.*, 2012a). Cognitive centrality stresses the cognitive importance of belonging to a criminal group. Criminal identity, then, is seen as central to an individual’s self-concept, which renders him or her more likely to endorse the group norms and act accordingly even in the absence of other group members. Although a relatively new concept in SIT (Cameron, 2004), ‘centrality’ is considered to be an integral component of the theory of Criminal Social Identity as it reflects the conscious, cognitive component of belonging to a criminal group. In-group affect refers to the positive emotional valence of belonging to a criminal group and is thought to develop to reduce the anxiety associated with the discrepancy between ideal and actual self by changing an individual’s point of reference from wider societal norms to sub-group norms. The final factor, in-group ties, pertains to the psychological perception of resemblance and emotional connection with other members of a criminal group. Individuals with strong in-group ties are persistently readier to display behaviours condoned by the group in order to demonstrate their conformity (Boduszek, Adamson, Shevlin *et al.*, 2012b; Boduszek *et al.*, 2014b). Demonstration of conformity to criminal standards and conduct are positively encouraged and reinforced by other in-group criminals, consequently leading to an

increase in the frequency of criminal behaviour, or an alteration of non-criminal acts into criminal ones. Consequently, criminal group members do not have to apply direct persuasion in order to make an impact on another individual's antisocial attitudes or increase that person's likelihood of committing a criminal act because the necessary persuasion stems directly from the in-group ties.

### **The Integrated Psychosocial Model of Criminal Social Identity (IPM-CSI)**

As previously mentioned, the integrated psychosocial model of criminal social identity (IPM-CSI; Figure 1) attempts to combine, simplify, and further our knowledge and understanding of why people develop criminal social identity, with a particular focus on the psychology and sociology of criminal identification. It is suggested that psychosocial processes which influence the emergence of criminal social identity include four important groups of variables. First, identity crisis, which results in weak bonds with society, peer rejection, and is associated with poor parental attachment and supervision. Second, is exposure to a criminal/antisocial environment in the form of associations with criminal friends before, during, and/or after incarceration. Third, is a need for identification with a criminal group to protect self-esteem. Fourth, is the moderating role of personality traits in the relationship between criminal/antisocial environment and the development of criminal social identity. Each of these processes are elaborated on in the following paragraphs.

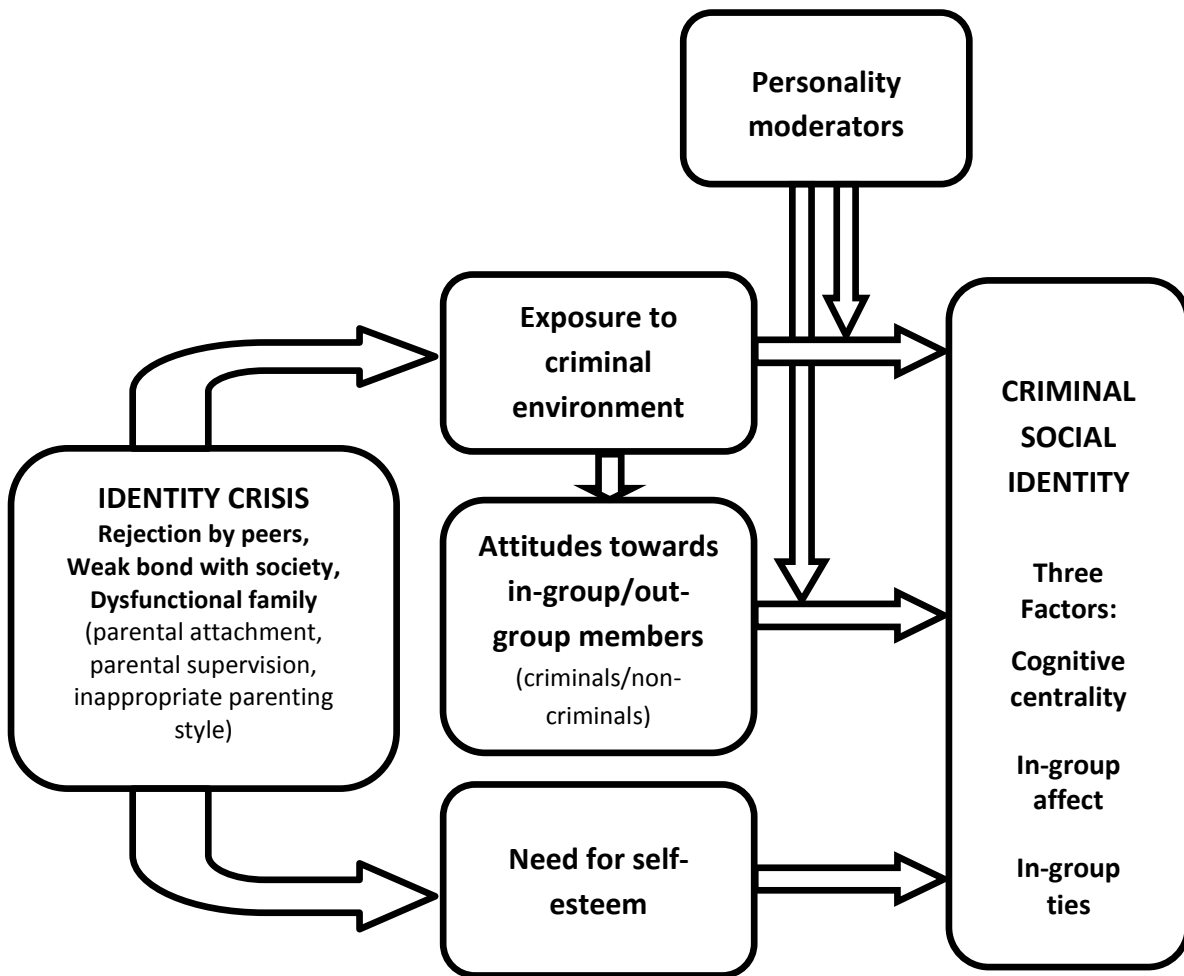


Figure 1. The Integrated Psychosocial Model of Criminal Social Identity (IPM-CSI)

### *Identity crisis*

In line with the Erikson's (1963, 1968) and Marcia's (1967) theory of ego identity formation, Boduszek and Hyland (2011) suggested that the development of criminal social identity arises out of an identity crisis that occurs during adolescence when peer relationships play a crucial role (see also Waterman, 1985). In order to deal with this psychosocial crisis, an individual explores different identities, eventually emerging with either a pro-or anti-social identity. The need for social comparison has been noted to increase during adolescence. Goethals and Darley (1987) suggested that the school setting is one that supports strong social comparisons, especially in terms of academic achievement. Such comparison processes involve social categorization, as the two are strongly linked, and have implications for one's self-concept (Turner 1985). Adolescents, who have failed in their social roles and exhibited non-conforming behaviour on a personal level, see themselves as inconsistent in relation to those who are successful. Higgins (1987) suggested such individuals experience a sense of discrepancy in terms of their actual and ideal selves, which results in feelings of agitation. This is consistent with Agnew's (1993) Strain Theory, which suggests that the inability to reach important goals results in frustration and anger.

Over time, boundaries between successful and unsuccessful groups are likely to become strong and constant, particularly once categorization and labelling followed by rejection between groups takes place. Peer rejection, therefore, has a significant influence on the development of criminal social identity. Parker and Asher (1987), followed by Juvonen (1991), have suggested that the consequences of peer rejection include low self-esteem, violent tendencies, increased risk of dropping out of school or social activities, and the development of criminal behaviours. Rejection by peers, whether real or perceived, is then an additional source for categorization into groups that mutually reject one another. However, rejection can also be the cause, or the product of, self-categorization. Therefore, the criminal



social identity that emerges as a consequence of being self-discrepant or inconsistent, pertains not only to individual group members who consistently fail in pro-social tasks and are non-conforming with respect to pro-social attitudes and behaviours, but also applies to the group who also face the dilemma of a lower social status in society compared to the group of successful and conforming individuals.

Feelings of self-derogation, anger, frustration, jealousy, antipathy, and hostility that occur because of peer rejection may be exacerbated by family factors, including a lack of tenderness, parental rejection, or inappropriate parenting style (Shaw & Scott, 1991; Simon *et al.*, 1991). A lack of parental tenderness and affection can impede the development of empathy and guilt (Baumeister *et al.*, 1994), while emotional, psychological, and physical isolation from their parents can negatively impact upon the bonds of social control (Hirschi, 1969), and reduce any motivation to engage fully in pro-social accomplishments or to conform with existing institutions of authority.

When looking at the results of studies examining the role of family variables in predicting associations with criminal friends and subsequent engagement in criminal behaviour, the findings suggest a significant role of parental supervision. In line with social control theory (Hirschi, 1969), Boduszek, Adamson, Shevlin *et al.* (2014a) found that recidivistic prisoners who reported a low level of parental supervision were significantly more likely to develop on-going relationships with criminal friends (see also Ingram *et al.*, 2007). They also observed an indirect effect of parental supervision on criminal behaviour through criminal peer associations which indicates that parental supervision has a significant effect in controlling the type of friends with whom individuals were associated. Boduszek *et al.* (2014a) also found that weak parental attachment indirectly influenced the type of friends with whom individuals associated with, due to insufficient or, in some cases, absence of, parental control. This indirect effect again illustrates that ineffective parental supervision is a

key factor in the development of criminal association and further intensification of criminal cognitions and behaviour.

### ***Exposure to criminal/antisocial environment***

Akers's (1985) differential reinforcement theory suggests that people are first initiated into delinquent conduct by differential associations with antisocial companions. Then, through differential reinforcement, they gain knowledge of how to reap the rewards and avoid punishments as the actual or anticipated consequences of particular conduct. This theory tends to fit well into criminology because it provides an explanation of the decision-making process involved in the development of the cognitive, behavioural, and motivational techniques essential to commit a criminal act (Akers *et al.*, 1979). Holsinger (1999) suggested that people who have been socialized in criminal settings and have acquired criminal cognitions are more likely to commit a crime in the future. Further findings reported by Losel (2003) suggested that through interactions with group influences, delinquent adolescents develop attitudes, values, and self-related cognitions that encourage criminal behaviour. Similarly, Andrews and Kandel (1979) along with Mills *et al.*, (2002, 2004) reported that the normative influence of criminal friends interacts with criminal cognitions and, when these variables are strongly associated, the relationship to criminality is especially strong. Additionally, Rhodes (1979) in his research found that those who initially registered cognitions that were more deviant recorded a slight temporal trend in favour of increased conventionality; whereas, legitimate cognitions became more criminally oriented as time progressed given persistent contact with criminal others. Similarly, Walters (2003) found that criminal identity and 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.

More recent research (Boduszek, Adamson, & Shevlin *et al.*, 2013a) suggested that criminal friend associations (influenced by low levels of parental control) play a significant role in the development of all three factors of criminal social identity. More specifically, Boduszek and colleagues reported the strongest direct effect of associations with criminal friends on in-group ties. This finding suggests that association with criminal friends is a significantly contributes to the development of the psychological perception of resemblance and emotional connection with other in-group criminals. In addition, associations with criminal friends were also significantly correlated with cognitive centrality. This suggests that through interactions with friends who are involved in criminal activity, individuals develop a strong evaluative belief about the importance and value of belonging to a criminal group. For such an individual, being part of a criminal group becomes a central aspect of their life and their criminal self-concept. Associations with criminal friends were also strongly correlated with the emotional component of criminal group membership, which is consistent with SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This suggests that the more an individual interacts with criminal peers, the greater the likelihood there is of those individuals developing positive feelings towards belonging to the criminal group.

### ***Need for self-esteem***

As suggested by Boduszek and Hyland (2011) criminals' perception of, and attitudes toward criminal group members ultimately develops from their need to identify with that particular group and to protect their self-esteem. A prison study conducted by Boduszek *et al.* (2013b) highlighted the role of self-esteem in the development of criminal social identification.

Statistical analysis indicated significant direct effects of negative aspects of self-esteem on cognitive centrality. In other words, those criminals who reported higher levels of negative

attitudes towards themselves tended to show a greater propensity to represent their criminal social identity as a central part of their life. Following Tajfel and Turner's theory (1979), it can be suggested that for criminals, the cognitive centrality of their criminal identity serves the purpose of increasing the positivity of their self-evaluations. It should be noted, however, that previous studies conducted in the general population (e.g. Abrams & Hogg, 1988) have indicated that self-esteem and social identity have a mutually reinforcing relationship, in that self-esteem levels may encourage identification with certain groups but that changes in self-esteem can also occur as a result of identification with a particular social group.

### ***Personality moderators***

It appears that personality traits should also be examined in relation to the formation of criminal social identity. Using a sample of Irish ex-prisoners, Boduszek, McLaughlin, and Hyland (2011) found psychoticism to be a strong predictor of criminal cognitions. In a follow-up study, personality traits were found to moderate the relationship between criminal social identity and criminal thinking style (a construct strongly related with criminal social identity). Specifically, moderated multiple regression analysis found that the impact of in-group affect on criminal thinking was stronger among those criminals who were more introverted, while the impact of in-group ties on criminal thinking was stronger among those criminals who were more extroverted (Boduszek *et al.*, 2012b). Additionally, Boduszek and Dhingra (in press) found that period of confinement had a significant positive effect on the formation of criminal identity but only for those participants who scored higher on primary psychopathy. Therefore, the moderating role of personality traits in CSI appears to be an important factor.

Although identities can and often are re-constructed, people are motivated to keep their self-conceptions stable in order to maintain harmony (Weigert & Gecas, 2003). For this reason, they are likely to employ selective affiliation, i.e. interact with similar others (Swann,

1987). However, selective affiliation is not available in all social contexts, for example in prison settings, where membership is not voluntary. Consequently, should a prolonged discrepancy between an individual's self-concept and environment occur, new self-relevant meanings can be created, which leads to identity change (Burke, 2006). It is important to note here that identity change due to social adaptation is not simply a passive response to environmental stimuli (Bakker, 2005). Instead, people are often motivated to enact this change by recognising what they want, establishing a goal, and deciding on an appropriate course of action to bring them closer to the desired object (Blumer, 1966). Thus, criminal identity may be developed or displayed if categorizing the self as a part of criminal group is seen as advantageous. In light of this line of reasoning, Boduszek and Dhingra (in press), suggested that those more skilled at interpersonal manipulation, may portray a more criminally orientated identity because of the benefits such behaviour might provide, such as increased status within a group. An important limitation of this research, however, was that the researchers considered the interpersonal and affective features of psychopathy as a single dimension. Given that other empirical studies demonstrated that those traits correlate differentially with external variables (e.g., Debowska *et al.*, 2014; Debowska, *et al.*, in press; Debowska & Zeyrek Rios, 2015; Dhingra *et al.*, 2015), future research should include the interpersonal and affective dimensions of psychopathy as separate components.

### **Conclusion and further directions**

Building on the hypothesis of Boduszek and Hyland (2011) that stated that individuals become criminals because of the presence of a persistent criminal social identity, the aim of this paper was to develop a testable integrated psychosocial model of criminal social identity (IPM-CSI). The IPM-CSI attempts to synthesize and extend our knowledge and understanding of why people develop criminal social identity. The processes that we posit are involved in development of criminal social identity include: (1) an identity crisis which

results in weak bonds with society, peer rejection, and is associated with poor parental attachment and supervision; (2) exposure to a criminal/antisocial environment in the form of associations with criminal friends before, during, and/or after incarceration; (3) the need for identification with a criminal group to protect self-esteem; and (4) the moderating role of personality traits, particularly traits of psychopathy, in the relationship between criminal/antisocial environment and the development of criminal social identity.

The presentation of the IPM-CSI is only the first step; we hope that it will generate interest and stimulate further research. Needless to say, it needs to be tested further as to date, only components of the model have been investigated simultaneously. Looking forward, the IMP-CSI offers itself to comprehensive empirical examination, particularly within a structural equation modelling framework and longitudinally. The applicability of the model to both juvenile and adults also warrants further attention as this may lead to important insights for intervention and prevention efforts. Studies conducting in a variety of cultural contexts would also be beneficial and would provide insights into the cross-cultural applicability of this model, and how different cultural forces may impact on the formation of criminal social identity.

Studies to generate a more extensive list of the psychosocial factors that both comprise and influence the identity crisis phase and the exposure to criminal/antisocial environment phase would be extremely fruitful. These could be supplemented by experimental and field studies (e.g., prisons, gangs, youth offending groups) to determine the moderated role of psychopathic traits in relationship between period of incarceration and criminal social identity. It would also be useful to know to what extent psychopathic traits, particularly interpersonal manipulation, moderate the influence of secondary socialization in prison (process of prisonization; Clemmer, 1940) on the development of criminal social identity. At the same time, the direct association between self-esteem and criminal social

identity could be considered. It would also be beneficial to identify protective factors (or moderators), particularly modifiable ones, that obstruct the transition from pro-social to criminal social identity. The model also outlines the different phases along the path to development of criminal social identity, which represent potential opportunities for intervention. These must to be explored in more detail, as through more targeted intervention, we will be better placed to prevent the development of criminal social identity, which leads to criminal conduct. This model await empirical investigation, however, if the development of criminal social identity as outlined in IPM-CSI is empirically supported, it would have significant implications in criminal psychology. As indicated previously by Boduszek and Hyland (2011), it would suggest, for example, that the process of re-socialization of youth offenders should preferably be conducted within a pro-social context rather than a penal, anti-socially dominated environment which would likely serve only to reinforce criminal social identity rather than foster the development of a pro-social identity.

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