

## **The psychological sense of time of young offenders in detention**

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### **Introduction**

Young offenders engage in crime for different reasons, at different points of their development, in different situations, alone or with different people, for different periods in time, and also persist in or desist from crime for different motives. However the experience of crime offers only a temporary sense of gratification and control of one's own life. This is what emerged from a study made on young offenders' socio-psychological reality. Often offenders find themselves in the situation in which they have to respond to their behaviour in front of the law. This experience of facing the consequences of their own actions, going through a trial and being sentenced to detention has its psychological consequences. "Doing time", an euphemistic way of meaning "being in prison", plays a significant role in how people shape their self-perceptions and anticipate their future.

This paper focuses on the psychological sense of time of young offenders in prison. In the qualitative part of a study, conducted in some detention centres of North East England, the concept of self-identity was explored on the basis of how the offenders recollected who they were in the past, who they are at present, who they expect to be and who they would like to become in their near future. Qualitative methods give emphasis to the importance of exploring individuals' subjective experiences and their understanding of life events. In other words, as McDonagh (1999) puts it, qualitative approach in research emphasises meaning over measurement.

The analysis follows two steps. First, it examines how the young offenders anticipated their future in terms of possible selves. By doing so it is possible to explore the level of expectations, fears and hopes the individuals invested in imagining possible and/or alternative realities for themselves. Second, it explores the level of self-sameness and self-diversity the respondents indicated when asked to identify themselves with a list of negative and positive items.

### **Selves preserved inside a story**

The self is constructed from a life-long accumulation of experiences, beliefs, hopes, fears, emotions and thoughts. We try to understand who we are, what we intend to do and what we have actually done, what we have thought and felt, and what we have hoped for. How we see and evaluate our selves and others' selves has a tremendous impact on self-acceptance, self-control, adaptation and acceptance of others. Expectations, fantasy wishes, realistic wishes and fears are

defined in the literature as possible selves (Markus, et al., 1986). This concept is similar to what James (1910) termed one's awareness and potentials. Possible selves (or self-representations into future end-states) are cognitive, motivational and emotional structures, which are the interface between self-concept and behaviour (Cantor, et al. 1986; Cross, et al., 1990; Yardley, 1987; Zara, 1995).

The leading assumption is that the possible selves of these offenders are based on two psychological temporal aspects of their experience in prison: *doing time* and *what next?*

“Doing time” refers to the time of the offenders’ sentences (e.g. being in custody) and what they do for themselves during their time in custody. “What next?” refers to what these offenders think of themselves in the near future, the “what then?” of their possible selves.

As Matthews (1999) argues time served in prison is not so much time invested and spent but time wasted. Foucault (1977) spoke about prisons as a means to commodify the time and space of the inmates to the production of discipline; a way of capitalising on other people's time. In this work the concept of *doing time* refers to the links the offenders make with “the experience inside” and their “possible selves outside”.

The socio-psychological reality, what Berger and Luckmann (1967) defined the person's symbolic universe, includes an interactive and constructive relationship between the individual and the world. Research studies show that all individuals have possible selves and that they can easily reflect upon them and manifest a selection of them in their behaviour (Higgins, 1998). The nature of possible selves, their importance to the individual, the cognitive and affective elaboration involved to evoke them, and the consequent behavioural strategies employed to realise them will, of course, depend on the individual's view of their position within his or her reality and the reality that surrounds them.

### **The theoretical and empirical underpinning of the study**

In this study a sample of 145 English young offenders (between the ages of 15 and 23), of whom 28 females and 117 males, were asked to speak about their dreams, their expectations and their fears. They responded from their own personal perspectives, because it was about them and their world that they were asked to speak.

The majority of these offenders was already sentenced and convicted to detention. Some of them were waiting to be allocated to another prison, others were on remand and others were waiting to be released. Only a small group was serving probation. This means that their near futures were under the concern for “what could happen next”.

The aim of the study was to explore the expectations young offenders have for “what could happen next”. In the case of the offenders, “the what next?” implies what is possible for oneself to do, to be and to achieve after “the doing crime experience” and the “doing time”.

The offenders in this study were able to conceptualise their possible selves having elaborated a psychological time divided into before and after prison. Their present time was conceptualised in terms of time in custody.

The examination put an emphasis on the socio-psychological changes thought of as necessary to enable young people to endure the experience of being in prison, by making rational and practical connections between more positive imagined futures and what they themselves might do to bring those futures within reach.

The caveat that emerges from this study is significant. The experiences people bring about, via their own behaviour, have important consequences for their self-representations. In most instances it is highly likely that the effects are bi-directional. That is, self-concept influences criminal behaviour and is influenced by it. Self-representations of young offenders were explored by using the adapted Possible Selves Measure (Zara, 2001) in which participants were asked to openly speak about their fantasy selves, hopes, their expectations and fears for the future. (This paper focuses on the qualitative analysis of the data; for a review of the quantitative/statistical analysis see Zara, 2001, in press).

### **A social psychology of possible selves**

What has emerged from the analysis is that the self-expression of these young people included two aspects. The first one was in the form of a *performance*, especially when the offender spoke about their ideals on what they wanted to be. The second one was more in the form of a revelation of the *second selves*, especially when they said something about who they were at present, and what their expectations and their fears for the future were. The *second selves* stand on the borderline between life and representations; they are the ones that people experience underneath the masks. These selves are second; this does not imply a hierarchy of importance but a *covered existence*. They can be the feared selves the individual tend to hide from others because of the social anxiety of being ridiculed, but they can also be the alternative selves which offer other chances for self-realisation.

*Doing time*, as specified above, refers to the time of the offenders' sentences.

*Selves of performance in crime*

The offenders' personal accounts reported in the text have not been altered either in the linguistic or conceptual structure. Features such as spelling and punctuation have been left exactly as the respondents organised their thoughts and wrote them on the questionnaires<sup>1</sup>.

With respect to confidentiality the names of the participants have been modified<sup>2</sup>.

Many young offenders in this study fantasised about a life in crime and showed their fascination for the sense of power they associated with it. They tried to magnify their criminal experience so as to be able to give status and reputation to a self in need of being socially sustained and recognised:

- I wish I could make a fortune being a gangster (Paul, aged 18, Whitley Bay)
- I wish I could kill Slobodon Milosovic and then becoming a hero (Conrad, aged 20, Consett)
- I wish I could do a hijack and then being back home and make a big robbery for cash (James, aged 15, Sunderland)
- I'm imagining myself be rich and a Mafia boss (it's alright in here) or a member of Parliament (Jonathan, aged 18, Hartlepool)
- Life could be great with life time supply drugs and life time supply of money (Daniel, aged 18, Stockton).

Fantasy is fancy thinking of improbable and impossible things which makes these young people escape from the heaviness of their lives outside and their waiting stage of the life inside prison. If the lives of many of these young people were performed, as if on the stage, it would be crucial to understand the links between life lived and life represented.

An example of a double self-discrepancy (real-ideal-ought): first the discrepancy between who one is and who one would like to be; second the gap between who one is and who one should be, can be found in the words of three young offenders, Ron, Paul and Gary.

Ron (aged 18, South Shields) said:

- 'What I'm really like is that I'm a lover, good personality, sports fanatic, look after myself, and look after my family. I wish I could be a film star, mafia boss, a millionaire, a rally driver. I should be myself. I should respect other people, brave, kind, and generous'.

Paul (aged 17, Gateshead) said:

- 'What I'm really like is that I'm good looking, smartly dressed, criminal. I wish I could be a million air [a millionaire], a boxer, a foot baller, stay out of trouble. I should be no one, no one, no one'.

Gary (aged 16, Peterlee) said:

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<sup>1</sup> Transcription conventions (from Willott, et al., 1999, p. 450) are as follows:

[...] Square brackets indicate that something has been deliberately omitted.

[realised] Material in square brackets is 'clarification' information.

Something A word or phrase underlined or in *italics* indicates additional emphasis.

'Martin' All the participants names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> 'In order to live in the world, we must name it. Names are essential for the construction of reality, for without a name it is difficult to accept the existence of an object, an event, a feeling' (Spender, 1985, p. 163).

- 'What I'm really like is that I am alright, I just get stoned, and I get drunk. I wish I could be a millionaire, and a big business man. I should be a millionaire and a good brother'.

Several offenders have fantasy wishes related to financial bliss and abundance:

- 'I wish to get that one last score the big one loads of \$\$\$!! I done robbery's to try and achieve the 3<sup>rd</sup> (money) once!' (Don, aged 20, Hartlepool).

Many, if not all, of these possible selves are an attempt to exhibit an interest for power, borne out of 'Hollywood films' in which money, sex and drugs exhilaration are the only values of the Beverly Hills scenario:

- 'It could be great winning the lottery; being a professional footballer or being the owner of Disesyland' (Marc, aged 16, Peterlee)
- 'I wish I could win the lottery' (Marie, aged 20, Peterlee)
- 'I wish to own a Ferrari and have money by a wind fall' (Jim, aged 19, North East<sup>3</sup>).

Of course, these young people who fantasised about money and power are aware of the "unlikeliness" of these possible selves becoming true, but this is a way of becoming others than their actual self, often described in derogative and failing terms. The gap between life represented and life lived emerged even more clearly when some young offenders let their imagination come back to earth: "if I cannot be Rockfeller, I can always think of what I could have in my pad to make my stay here more enjoyable". Some of these offenders think that life in prison is not, after all, so bad, and it could be even improved for the inmates comfort by adding things which have only little to do with "a life driven by a Ferrari testa rossa":

- It'll [prison] be alright. I'll asking female's to write (Lee, aged 20, Stockton)
- To be in prison is easier and saver (David, aged 20, Seaham)
- Life here is not bad if I have a little tv in my pad and I have a quilt in my pad. Meeting Pamela Anderson in my pad and walk around with my own set ov key's (Andrew, aged 17, Stockton)
- A lass 'n here, a beer bar in cell and a visit every day of the week (Shaun, Jarrow, aged, 18)
- Here I can have everything for free (Simon, aged 19, Consett)
- I will have a lot of penfriends (Tom, aged 18, Chester-le-Street).

In more detail Vicky, a girl of 18, from Newcastle, speaks about who she is and who she would like to be and should be.

Vicky said:

- What I'm really like is that I am a nice girl, a good personaley [personality], bubbly girl, help full, help my body when bad, and that I do not look for trouble. I wish I could be a moddle [model], a million air [a millionaire], a super star, a singer, and Adam Snow's wife, the Newcastle footballer. I should listen to people. I should be help full to my self, not in hear [here] I am lawless. I should be in my own home settled down with someone.

Research shows (Ito, 1994) that many male offenders may resort to "megalomaniac tendency" because they appear to magnify whatever they have done in crime, while female

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<sup>3</sup>When the town of residence is not specified or known, North East [of England] will be reported instead.

offenders often tend to slip into a pejorative vision of their self when they recollect their criminal experiences. The prison atmosphere may require that male offenders show their “manhood” through practice of physical strength, bravery often associated with the recollection of their offences and the construction of a hierarchy on the basis of the type of crime committed: the riskier the offence the higher position in the parameter of self-worth. Women on the other hand tend often to gain self-respect not by recollecting the offences committed, but by looking forward to the assimilation of more conventional roles:

- I would like to go abroad to Spain, some [someone] to meet. Some very nice to look after me and my family (Vicky, aged 18, Newcastle)
- I want to be happy in life and settled down propily with my son and my partner. I want to have a better paid job, so I wouldn't find myself struggling with bills; to be able not to get so stresses out, as I find myself worry about over things (Barbara, aged 22, Washington)
- I hope getting married, have a familie and move away from my dad I got engaged last year so we plan to get married & have a baby & have planned to move to a different area (Paula, aged 21, North East).

At a socio-psychological level these research results might find explanation in the “Cinderella Complex” (Dowling, 1982; Breakwell, 1990), which helps to put in perspective the self-limiting representations of the future and possibility for change that several of these women manifested.

There was however the case of Shelley, a 21-year-old girl, nicknamed in her neighbourhood as “the skirt dealer”. She said that dealing in drugs was an easy way of making money and becoming a respected and desired woman:

- I came back to jail because I didn't think at the time what I was doing. Having money was more important than everything else. Everybody seemed to know me and wanted to make business with me. I was called the ‘skirt dealer’ and it made me feel ‘attractive’ and at ease with what I was doing. I had my own council house, and I had money every day, but I lost everything. My aim is to get everything back and be happy (*emphasis* added).

Shelly has re-offended many times. She felt unable to cope with her drug problem and the idea of her dealing in drugs was in the past the only thing that could give her an identity (the skirt dealer) and security – the money for herself and her daughter.

This self-representation (the memory of herself dealing in drugs) was not considered a problematic one; she felt respected and admired. It was when she was doing business that she felt of some value and importance.

### *The second selves*

The second selves of these young people suggest that there are situations in which the experience of crime and the sense of delusion related to it, might develop the need for change in a person.

The case of Phil, a 21-year-old young man sentenced to two years in custody, might clarify how the elaboration of new possible selves reinforces the motivation to change:

- 'I am in prison now but once I am released I'll keep my behaviour straight, because I've applied for a job and I got back the trust of my family. I don't want to lose, again, all this again'.

Such an alternative view of oneself in a new scenario is necessary if Phil, and any other offenders in his situation, believe that they can change the course of their life. A change in their self-view can aid the modification of their role in the social environment.

The case of Andrew, a 19-year-old offender who wanted to become a mechanic in life serves to illustrate the incentive role played by possible selves in motivating behaviour.

- 'My dream is to own my own shop or garage, get married and have kids and settle down (a bit). I wish to be a car mechanic. I have got NVQ<sup>4</sup> in car maintenance. I also hope to get my licence back and get a job. I have done nothing as such yet. I'm afraid of coming back to jail and getting caught driving again. I'm afraid of stay off the dole. I am not going to drive anymore but get some one to drive for me'.

Andrew's aim was to find a place where he could do his apprenticeship as a mechanic and then find a job. However the possible self of "being a mechanic" is a representation of the self in a specific situation, so, as Markus and Nurius (1987) suggest, any negative response to this potential self could be far worse than an attack on his performance or achievement. This is so because it might threaten the sense of self-efficiency in pursuing that particular goal, and block Andrew's motivation and initiative to pursue the goal and make a change in his life. This is substantiated by other theoretical perspectives, which approach the study of motivation with the analysis of identity (Kasser, 1996). "Thus, when doubt of identity creeps in, action is paralysed" (Foote, 1951:18, quoted in Markus, et al., 1987:162).

It seems that for some of the offenders the time spent in custody has helped them to sort out the confusion of their life, to deal with their drug or alcohol dependence and the sense of self-inefficacy that has prevented a lot of these young people from investing their skills:

- It's ok to have come to jail for a while to sort my self out and think about things probably it's the way. I am no-one, absolutely nothing because I don't know what to do (Craig, aged 20, Stockton)
- I am sent in jail but it is pretty good, really keeps me off drugs (Toni, aged 19, Middlesbrough)
- Iv come to jail and relised [realised] there is life after drugs but I don't know what to do. I think Iv grown up a bit and relised [realised] what a mess my life was in! but still I don't know ... (Lisa, aged 19, North East)
- Since I have come here my mam has relised [realised] how much I have grown up because when I speak to her I make sense, were as before I was immature and didn't speak sense. Since I have come in here I have had a lot of time to my self to think and because of medication I am feeling a little more relaxed I have won lots of awards at the gym, and Im doing lots of corses also that will help me become a P.E instructor. I expect to do a G.C.S.E<sup>5</sup> in English. I have began doing a G.C.S.E. I expect

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<sup>4</sup> National Vocational Qualification

<sup>5</sup> General Certificate of Secondary Education

to meet some one new in my life who his very special to me. I got to meet this person by writing to him in prison (Cathy, aged 19, Redcar)

- I came to jail because I don't know what to do, but it was a good thing as I got off drugs and I'm trying to get my life sorted out. I've stayed off drugs for 5 months and I get a visit off my mum every 2 weeks and I really feel loved now (Shelley, aged 21, Stockton).

Stephen, a young man of 20, spoke about the difficulty faced in finding help for his drug problem. It was not the first time he had been in prison, and he was in fact in custody before, but he blamed the lack of support for being back to prison.

Stephen said:

- What I'm really like is that I'm easy going, understanding, bright, fitness, easily lead, I can be stubborn and brave. I am kind and polite. I wish I could have will power, be confidence, and have support (from drugs workers) I need help because when I'm out I don't get help. I go to the GP and he says see you in 2 weeks and by then I've already committed another crime. To stay in prison is easier, you get everything you want - bed, food and some sort of help. I should be out of jail, and honest. If I had money I wouldn't be here. I didn't want to stop crime really, because to committing a crime was much more profitable.

### **A self lost in time**

The sense of time in prison assumes a new connotation. Lefebvre (1991) made a distinction between physical, social, and psychological times (Gulotta, 1995). Physical time is the duration of a task, a body function, or the rhythm of an activity. In prison this is set up at pre-established sections of the day. The social time is specified as the creation of links between past, present and future. It is based on daily activities by which the individual tries to understand the process of change (Matthews, 1999). For the offenders who are *doing time* in prison the only certainty is the past. Their present is in the charge of somebody else and the future often seems vague and uncertain. Cohen and Taylor (1972) say that the prison inmates are in danger of losing a sense of personal development and purpose. The psychological time refers to the process of imagining and constructing alternative scenarios where the self can be other and different, possible and expected, but also feared. On some occasions it may be a sort of fantasy time (Matthews, 1999), so that inmates can, through the activities they are involved with in prison (e.g. Job Club, education, gardening and so on), pantomime some of the familiar activities which may have a link with the outside world (Devlin, 1998). Time in prison re-acquires its own values, which are much more "taken-for-granted aspects" of everyday life (Cohen, et al., 1972). Inmates have in fact to sustain their selves by finding ways of marking out the passage of time and the sense of change that can be associated with it. In other words, they have to break up time into assimilable parts. Any event of the day in prison which is thought of as pleasant and psychologically energising (e.g. family and friends visits) is stretched, from the point of its anticipation to the point of its description after its

occurrence, what in Davis' words (1967) was defined as "the accordion effect" (quoted in Cohen, et al., 1972:99).

Matthews (1999) advances the idea that time for the inmates has lost its meaning and the sense of connection with self-identity. If time is treasured as a form of power, even common sense and popular wisdom<sup>6</sup> makes an eulogy of it: "time is the most valuable thing a man can spend"<sup>7</sup>, but "paradoxically the more time one has in prison, the more it decreases in value" (Matthews, 1999:40), and at the end of a custodial confinement "time-expired" is applied to a convicted person who has served his or her sentence. And when *doing time* is simply an experience of segregation, from the conventional world, with no utility whatsoever, until the offenders are redeemed, the offenders may experience this segregation with an even angrier and more revengeful attitude.

Thus, Jean Genet said that he decisively repudiated a world that had repudiated him. Having been described as a thief, the young boy resolved to be a thief, whose distinction between good and evil was not only because of and despite personal choice and decision (Sartre, 1972).

- "As for me, I've chosen; I will be on the side of crime. And I'll help children not to gain entrance into your houses, your factories, your laws and holy sacraments, but to violate them" (Jean Genet quoted in White, 1996:1).

### **When the future gets worse**

The *troubled selves* (Parr, et al., 1995) of these offenders follow the logic of the "inside out" in which a periodical ambivalence emerges. When these offenders thought "backwards" over their experiences in crime, they perceived things in their socio-psychological world as a continual shifting from top (being in control of their life) to bottom (losing the control over life), from front (being release from prison) to rear (being back to prison) (Zara, 1997, 2000). The troubled selves revealed the innermost significant expectations and preoccupations that have characterised the offenders' self-thoughts. Several of these young people reduced their expectations to what is most likely to happen for them:

- I expect nothing because I have getting out of jail before and nothing changed (Gary, aged 16, Peterlee)

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<sup>6</sup> In praise of time

From Encarta (1999, 2000):

Time heals what reason cannot (Lucius Annaeus Seneca, "the Younger" (4? BC-65 AD).

From Stevenson (1974) (Time, pp. 2002-2014):

He who gains time, gains everything (Benjamin Disraeli, Tancred. Bk.iv, ch. 3).

Time ripens all things. No man is born wise (Cervantes, Don Quixote. Pt. II, ch. 36).

Time is the soul of the world (Pythagoras in Plutarch, Platonic Questions, viii, 4).

From The Wordsworth Dictionary of Phrase & Fable. (1993) (p. 1084): 'time and tide wait for no man' (A. Barton, 1796, "Disappointment" II, IV, 50).

See Gulotta, 1995 specifically at pp. 842-843, "The tyranny of time".

<sup>7</sup> Theophrastus in Diogenes Laertius, Theophrastus, Bk. V, sec. 40 (Stevenson, 1974, *ibidem*).

- What I expect? nothing yet I can not expect very much as I still be in jail (Derek, aged 15, North East)
- I expect nothing been were & am and knowing I would end up in this situation again (Lee, aged 21, North East)

Alan is a young offender of 20 who has the fantasy wish of not going to prison again. The case of Alan can be taken as an instance of a more general criminal fantasy and then a criminal expectation.

Alan said:

- Killing someone, I thought a lot of doing it. I expect - to come back to lovely old Northallerton. I have done nothing to prevent this. I re-offend, re-offend means to come to prison and I am afraid of going to jail for very long time, but I made sure no evidence.

In these terms life, as depicted in Beckett's (1955) play *Waiting for Godot*, can be compared with life in prison. In both instances life is primarily about hope, a waiting experience for hope to arrive, a focus on the idea of "waiting for something to alleviate boredom and nothingness", like the two major characters in Beckett's play (Estragon and Vladimir) suggest:

**Estragon:** Nothing to be done.

**Vladimir:** I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me [...], be reasonable you haven't yet tried everything. [...]. Nothing you can do about it.

**E:** No use struggling.

**V:** One is what one is.

**E:** No use wriggling.

**V:** That passed the time.

**E:** It would have passed in any case.

**V:** Yes, but no so rapidly.

**E:** What do you do now?

**V:** I don't know.

**E:** Let's go.

**V:** We can't.

**E:** Why not?

**V:** We're waiting for ..... (Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, Act I, pp. 9-48)

The concept of the passage of time leads to a general irony. However, contrary to the play, in which each minute spent waiting brings death one step closer to the characters and makes the arrival of hope for change (Godot) less likely, in prison each minute spent is a gain towards the door for the outside.

If offenders are helped to think forwards and to re-conceptualise different realities for themselves, they can be able to imagine alternatives.

The following is an example of how a female offender sees herself in her future and how she wants to find ways of changing what she does not like in herself and in her life.

Donna a girl of 21, said:

- Be in prison get my head sorted for when I go home. Look fit and healthy for when I get out. I am sentenced & remand so I don't now when I am getting out. Well it has sorted my head out up to now

even though I would like to be at home. My dad has got for me a job for when I do get out. I have stayed off drugs in prison so I am going to go to drug groups so that I can try my hardest to keep off them. I look a lot healthier than I did when I come in as I was really thin & green. I want to be a different person when I get out. To get a good job and enjoy doing it. I want to stay off all drugs for ever. Since I came into prison I have realised there is more to life than crime and I want to be a normal person when I get out.

### **Doing time, what next?**

In some instances “doing time” seems to have helped offenders to have hopes and expectations for a different future, to believe in the temporary nature of the sentences they are serving, and it even comforts them so as to feel less their sufferance and the sense of loss. To have a project to pursue has helped some of these young men and women to go through the passage of time and to look forward to a better life “out there”, they found strength in “what they could do next”.

In other circumstances, the offenders thought of their doing time in terms of the frustration associated with institutional life, the absence of privacy, separation from family and friends, and enforced associations with other offenders are not easily coped with.

Even though some of these young people had a clear idea of what they wanted, yet they had concerns about the possible difficulties they might encounter after release - how to face the social demands and the people out there.

The anxiety of the release was mostly dependent on the fear of *outsideness*. The offenders seemed to be aware of the possible rejections and social exclusion situations they might experience once being back into the social world. These offenders were the Status Zero young people who were outside the main structures of support and policy provision (De Leo, et al., 1992; De Leo, 1996; Gormley, 2000; Istance, et al., 1994, 1996), and who represented a marginalised section of the socially excluded population. They often had doubts about who they were and they were even more uncertain about what future awaits them. Some of them were without jobs before going to prison; some lost their job through going to prison. They were afraid of not finding employment; some were waiting for a job and almost all of them took life as it came.

These young people offered their personal accounts of their lives in crime and their expectations to get off crime. Their self-representations focused more on their losses than their gains. Many of these young adults have already forgotten the sense of gratification, if any, they experienced in crime. All of them, unanimously, independent of each other, identified their criminal experiences with their consequent failures: they committed their crime because they could not do, have, feel, express and achieve their desired possible selves.

### **Conclusion**

This study wanted to be a reflexive analysis of the lives of young adults who have become other than their possible selves. Committing crimes, or being an offender was never considered desired expected selves by any of the youths involved in this study. When some of them mentioned the possible self of “becoming a Mafia boss or a feared powerful person”, they were referring to the sense of self-power that those roles imply for them.

Crime “as the experience of delight in being deviant” (Katz, 1988:231) is only one of the many performances in the theatre of life, and on most occasions it is not the chosen and the wanted one. Young people involved in crime are not the jesters on stage. Most of them end up in crime because they have disengaged themselves from all the possible selves they are capable of being. The self that acts in crime finds in it a way of escaping from reality and not of enjoying it. In all this, violence has become “a vital element in the formation of young people’s identity” (Presdee, 2000:142): it is better to be *a bad one* rather than being *no-one at all*.

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