**Forced or Free Choice in Female Criminal Lifestyle**

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**Abstract**

This study aims to investigate patterns of decision making and responsibility-taking vs. a compulsion process selection among women prisoners choosing a criminal lifestyle. A life story approach and semi-structured interviews sampling 30 female offenders during their first imprisonment was used. The results showed that although most participants had a history of victimization, they did not emphasize the abuse as their main reason for breaking the law or for their criminal life styles. The conclusion is that rehabilitation programs for women offenders should combine gender-natural and gender-specific approaches, with the starting point based on their taking responsibility for their behavior.

**Introduction**

For years, numerous theorists have tried to explain female delinquency. Examining the theories of women's delinquency reveals two significant tendencies. This first is the use of gender stereotypes to explain female criminality (Block, 1984; Giordano & Cernkovich, 1997) and explanations emphasizing that women's criminal behavior has characteristics similar to that of men (Adler & Adler, 1975; Moffitt et al., 2001; Simon & Landis, 1991). The second approach focuses on the unique characteristics of female offenders, highlighting the relationship between a woman’s victimization and her delinquent behavior. Victimization can refer to physical or sexual abuse (Campbell, 1993; Katz, 2000; Trauffer, & Widom, 2017) or social and economic discrimination (Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2016; Reckdenwald, & Parker, 2008; Steffensmeier & Haynie, 2000).

 An analysis of traditional and contemporary approaches to accounts of women's criminal behavior indicates that most of them portray women offenders as having no alternative to having been passively led to commit crimes. Treating delinquent women as victims can cause them to adopt corresponding terminology to explain their criminal behavior and can cause them to refuse to accept responsibility for their actions, although such acknowledgement is the basis for rehabilitation processes. The purpose of the present study is to examine patterns of choices in criminal lifestyles made by female offenders as reflected in their life stories.

**Theoretical Background**Delinquency can sometimes serve as a career or as a lifestyle of the individual. Super (1980) defined a career as the integration and development of roles during a person's life. According to this definition, career development signifies a long-term process in which an individual's abilities and interests combine with environmental constraints. Hasin (1987) defined career as a means of attachment towards the personal, professional goal, which is carried out by personal choice, and followed by external and internal rewards. Coombs (1996) argued that if a career is indeed an individual's life, then if a person's primary occupation is crime, it can be considered a career. Similarly, Edelstein (2016) pointed out that a career is an individual's principal occupation, which can be normative or delinquent, and involves the degree of professionalization, and the learning of techniques, norms, and rules, as well as the justifications and excuses associated with this occupation.

 Shover (1996) opposed the concept of a "criminal career," preferring to use the term "delinquent lifestyle," wherein offenders, especially those committing offenses against property, were accustomed to a particular lifestyle for which they had to commit offences in order to maintain it. Walters (1990) also uses the term "lifestyle" instead of "career," arguing that "delinquent lifestyle" is part of the delinquent career definition. He ignored offenders who acted due to pathologies and emphasized the rational choice the individual makes when entering the world of crime. Consequently, rather than confronting any sense of inferiority or fear of failure, a person with a delinquent lifestyle usually avoids obligations and doesn't take responsibility for their actions.

 Few studies have examined women's criminal lifestyle (Baskin & Somers, 1993; Denno, 1994; Flood-Pageet al., 2000; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001; Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2019). These studies have generally addressed positivistic elements, such as the ages when woman begin and end their criminal careers. Pathway research divides offenders into two groups: adolescent-onset offenders who begin their criminal lives as minors, and late-onset offenders who begin their criminal careers as adults (Moffitt & Caspi, 2001). It was found that a female criminal career begins at an older age than does a man’s criminal career (Baskin & Somers, 1993; Flood-Page et al., 2000). Moffitt and Caspi (2001) found that factors predicting late delinquency among boys and girls are similar, but usually, girls' delinquency starts later than does that of boys. In Shechory et al.’s (2011) study of female delinquents, one of the groups was characterized as "chronic" delinquents. These women suffered from childhood abuse, began their delinquent behavior at an early age, and tended to use drugs. In contrast, another group of women embarked upon their delinquent lifestyle at an older age, with only a few of them having suffered sexual or physical abuse in childhood, and with most of them committing financial offences. This latter group of women were found to have high levels of self-control and low levels of aggression. Simpsonet al., (2008) found, as have numerous other studies (See: Katz, 2000; Papalia, 2018; Peterson et al., 2019) that risk factors for female delinquency are physical and sexual abuse in childhood and the use of addictive substances. However, they also found a large group of female criminals who had few of the few risk factors associated with delinquency. These women did not suffer from addiction, neglect, or childhood victimization. What did characterize them was victimization arising from abusive intimate relationships, and they usually began their delinquents career at a relatively more advanced age. Similar findings were confirmed in another recent study (Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2019).

The last decade has witnessed the appearance of new studies describing female offenders as rational and active. Ajzenstadt (2009) examined explanations given by delinquent women and their rational decision-making for breaking the law. The study found that the majority of participants described their involvement in a crime as a calculated process. Their deviant behavior was described as a rational choice to achieve goals that they defined as important. In the life stories of these women, their choice of delinquency was an optimal option given the social circumstances of all the options available to them. Neissl et al. (2019) tested rational choice theory (RCT) across gender groups, finding that while the performance of RCT is consistent, but not identical, in explaining crime by men and women, both genders’ perceptions of the rewards of crime rewards appeared more compelling than the threat of sanctions. These studies indicate a new trend in explaining the motives and causes of delinquent behavior among women, with an emphasis on their being active and rational in their decision to break the law. At the same time, these studies examined decision-making regarding the crimes of which they had been convicted of and did not consider the decision-making processes of delinquent women throughout their lives which could help in the understanding of their different criminal life choices.

This spate of recent research tends to examine women's delinquent behavior in terms of rational choice and is the basis of the present study. The present study assumes that taking responsibility for the criminal act is the basis for rehabilitation, whereas transferring responsibility to an external party does not allow for effective change or recovery. This assumption is based on clinical and empirical studies in the treatment of delinquent men that focuses on their recognition of their delinquent acts, and on their assumption of personal responsibility as a prerequisite for undergoing a therapeutic process and as a measure of treatment success (Beech & Fordham, 1997; Wright & Schneider, 2017). According to this approach, a sense of personal responsibility increases motivation to maintain normative behavior. Conversely, when an individual’s self-perception is that of a victim, their sense of personal accountability is diminished. This thereby enhances deviant behavior by reinforcing their sense of inability to change the course of their lives. Consequently, transferring responsibility to an outside party may not allow for effective rehabilitation. The main purpose of the present study was to investigate patterns of decisions and responsibility-taking vs. the compulsion process selection of a criminal lifestyle among female prisoners as reflected in their life stories. Understanding this pattern may help in the development of more appropriate treatment programs for female offenders.

**Method**

**Participants**

The current research is based on a sample of 30 female offenders who had been imprisoned in Israel for the first time, and who had been sentenced for various offenses between the years 2007 and 2009. The decision to use first-time offenders was based on the assumption, supported by studies, that the number of times an individual has been incarcerated affects how the individual perceives and presents him or herself, as being in prison leads an individual to develop or become part of a subculture in which norms, values​​, and delinquent attitudes are adopted (Tomas, 1977; Walters, 2003). Therefore, to minimize the effect of imprisonment as much as possible, only offenders imprisoned for the first time participated in the study. Table 1 displays the social-demographic characteristics of the participants.

**[Table 1. about here]**

As Table 1 shows, the average age of the participants was 42-years-old, most of them Jewish and with a minimum education of 12 years. Forty-three percent of the participants had a college degree. Table 2 displays the criminal background of the participants.

**[Table 2 about here]**

The average sentence length was approximately four years. Three prisoners were sentenced to life in prison, and another prisoner was sentenced to 25 years in prison. According to data from the Israel Prison Service System, most of the offences committed by the women could be classified into four categories: violent crimes, including murder, manslaughter, negligent death and violence against a minor, committed by 14 of the participants; drug offences, committed by nine of the participants; economic offences, such as fraud, embezzlement, theft, and robbery, committed by six of the participants; and kidnapping, committed by one participant.

**[Table 3 about here]**

More than 40% of the participants had not experienced any type of abuse. Nonetheless, the majority of the participants had either suffered from sexual abuse during childhood, or from physical abusive from a spouse or partner during adulthood.

**Data collection**

1. **Life Story Approach:** A narrative interview is an open, in-depth interview through which the story of the participant is revealed. When an individual describes the course of his or her life, a great dealing of information emerges, revealing the deep meaning of that person’s life (Bertaux & Kolhi, 1984). The participants were asked to write their life stories and to participate in in-depth interview to tell their life stories. Using this method, the researcher's influence on the process is minimal, as perceptions are formed by the participants’ own words, without any interference from the researcher during the participant’s spontaneous narration. The instruction to the participants in the present study was, "Please write your life story in any mother tongue or any language that is convenient for you." After completing this written portion of the study, participants underwent in-depth interview, during which they were instructed to: "Please tell the story of your life."
2. **Semi-structured interview:** These interviews included closed questions relating to the offences for which the women had been convicted and their levels of responsibility acceptance according to three-time frames based on Abulafia’s work (2005, 2008):
3. Reference to the offence **present tense**: "I committed the offence because…"
4. **A retrospective** vision of the offence: "Factors that led me to break the law…"
5. **Hypothetical statement**: "I could have prevented the offence…"

**Procedure**

The study was conducted in the Neve Tirtza women’s prison, the only prison for women in Israel. The prison’s capacity is 230 prisoners, with 40% of the prisoners under arrest and awaiting trial and 60% already convicted. After obtaining the permits for conducting the study from the Israeli Prison Service (IPS), the researchers had the IPS officials make a request to the prisoners to participate in the research and to obtain their consent. After obtaining written permission, the first stage of the study was conducted, and each prisoner was asked to write her life story without any specific guidelines. Life stories were usually written in their mother tongues of Hebrew, Russian, or English). The narrative interview and the structured interview were conducted during the second stage of the study. At the end of the interview, each participant was asked to answer a personal information questionnaire.

The research data was analyzed using a method that combines qualitative research of content analysis (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1988) and quantitative analysis focused on descriptive statistics. Combining the two research methods, quantitative research and qualitative research, neutralizes any disadvantages of each research paradigm and optimizes the advantages of each.

**Results**

Life story analysis shows the decision-making of the delinquent life course among women and their responsibility acknowledgement or negotiation for their criminal behavior. To maintain originality, the participants’ quotes from their life stories are related literally, including any grammatical or linguistic mistakes they made.

**The Beginning of the Delinquent Life Course**

Following the model of Abulafia (2005, 2008), participants’ explanations were divided into three categories based on the degree of responsibility for the delinquent act: **personal-choice,**  or recognizing full or partial responsibility their course of action; **blaming situation or others,** or taking minimal personal responsibility; and **not guilty/not an offender**, or denying any responsibility. Table 4 shows the distribution of delinquency responsibility:

**[Table 4 about here]**

Life story reports ranged from "taking absolute responsibility for choosing the current course of life" to "not taking responsibility for the delinquent act." In this context, there was a distinction found between the ten interviewees who began their delinquent life course as minors and the twenty interviewees who first broke the law as adults. The former are referred to as **chronic delinquents,** and the latter as **adult delinquents**. **Chronic delinquents** can usually be characterized as drug users, alcohol drinkers, or involved in prostitution. The **adult delinquents** were mainly economic offenders. The question of whether the age of onset of the offender's behavior can be linked to the extent of taking responsibility was examined in the study.

**[Table 5 about here]**

**Personal-choice:** This refers to engaging in a delinquent life style and participating in criminal acts as a personal choice. Twenty percent of the participants reported that they rationally chose to break the law, thus indicating that they took full responsibility for their delinquent behavior. The main reason given for their offense was a desire to make a lot of money quickly. For example, L., who was convicted of drug trafficking, related:

I began trading [drugs] before I started using it. My first delivery at the age of 16 was from Colombia. I saw that I was able to deliver it, and it "spoke to me" [liked it]... I did it. I know I did. It is a check I should repay. I'm not innocent at all. Thank goodness I am only accused of this and not other stuff.

The participant described herself as active and solely responsible for her actions. She chose to break the law for two reasons: emotional satisfaction and career development. She began her delinquent behavior out of curiosity and for personal pleasure, and continued to trade drugs as a way to support herself financially. Similar explanations characterized offenders who started their delinquent lifestyles as minors. In contrast, participants who broke the law as adults were convicted primarily of financial offenses, and claimed that they had chosen to break the law to obtain material objects and economic abundance, and, mainly, to create an image of themselves as successful and strong women in the eyes of the others. They had built impressive careers, but despite their economic wealth, the fear of losing everything was great, and they felt unsatisfied with their lives. For example, N., 41, married and mother of three, who had been convicted of fraud and theft and sentenced to five years in prison, described her life:

My salary is good, but you start thinking about what is needed in life. Where else you need?... I was afraid to look at myself and say I did something wrong... Most comfortable in these situations is denial/ I was off doing something wrong. And on the other hand, I was not concerned with what I was doing, thinking less about feeling, the thinking was about doing and not a result … Another ordinary life, but I'm a very active person - organizing parties, school, kindergarten too. Challenging with lots of interest and still bored.

The participant claimed that the desire for economic prosperity and higher social status was stronger and more compelling than the realization that her actions were prohibited and that she was breaking the law. She also pointed out the feeling of boredom that arose even after breaking the law for the first time and not getting caught. It is interesting to note that the four out of six interviewees in this category independently stopped their criminal acts of their own initiative, and confessed their actions before getting caught by the police. Stopping their criminal behavior is also an example of their rational thinking or the control of their actions.

**Blaming the situation on others:** This reaction involves imposing responsibility for the delinquent life course on the situation or on other people. Nine participants (29%) reported that they began a delinquent life course as a result of the impact of the situation to which they had been subjected, and were forced to break the law unwillingly. Seven participants (23%) reported that they began their delinquent life style as a result of the influence of others. This category was more common among chronic delinquents (70%) than among adult delinquents (45%).

 These participants who blamed others related that as children, they grew up with a great sense of deprivation, mostly emotional. Their parents could not give them the warmth, love, support, and encouragement they craved. These participants described growing up in a state of great loneliness. They had all lived in slums, and at very young ages, met up with "bad" company: men who drank alcohol or used drugs. Quickly, they found themselves using drugs or drinking alcohol as well. They were all sexually abused at an early age, and most of them took the time to open up and talk about these events. They claimed that they had broken the law under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and in most of the cases, the incident ended in murder. For example, J., who was convicted to four years for manslaughter, related:

I don't drink in general, but when I drink, I can't stop. I chose vodka because it was available... People that say - the fact that you are convicted of killing because of the influence of alcohol, I agree with that. Alcohol opened the door for me to take my anger out. Maybe it doesn't hurt me because he [the victim] was a criminal. Still, I know I'm not God, and I had no right to take his life even though he was rubbish.

On the one hand, J. claimed that only under the influence of alcohol did she allow herself to release all her inhibitions and act on her urges. Nonetheless, on the other hand, she realized that she was responsible for the commission of the crime and that she was solely responsible for taking a human life. Among "adult delinquents," the main claim was that their lives with a violent partner had led them to choose a delinquent life course. All of them had been convicted of violent crimes. Their stories are filled with harsh descriptions of abuse by their spouses or partners, the difficulty of leaving because of the children, and failed attempts to get help from outside parties, such as the police and social agencies. While the chronic offenders saw their nuclear families as the source of the beginning of their criminal life, the adult offenders reported that they had committed their offenses because of their spouses or partners. They shifted most of their responsibily to their spouses or partners by describing themselves as normal, and by claiming that their behavior at the time of the offense was the result of blind reliance on their spouse’s or partner's decisions, or the result of acting under the influence of their spouse or partner. For example, M., who was convicted of child abuse and child endangerment, described her faith in their partner, who had claimed to be a very religious and holy man:

It sounds absurd. You believe in that person. This sentence doesn't work that way. I couldn't move. I prayed that this correction [using violence on the children as punishment] be over. I thought I'd be with this man until 120. I couldn't because I am paralyzed.

M. was raised in a very religious lifestyle where there was no doubting the righteousness of the rabbi. Her partner was, in her eyes, a great religious man. As a result, she had to obey him and not ask questions, even if she felt his behavior was wrong. However, even interviewees who did not grow up in the religious world reported that they trusted their spouses or partners, underestimated their own responsibility, and tended to blame the partner for breaking the law.

**Not guilty\Not offender:** Participants in this category did not perceive themselves as delinquent, regardless of whether or not they took responsibility for the commission of the offense. Eight of the interviewees (27%) described themselves as innocent, normative, and mistakenly imprisoned. For example, H. convicted of infanticide explained:

My child died at birth. I wanted this boy. I love children. I've never done anything wrong. Suddenly, I got a letter to came to court. I was accused of child murder and threats. I did not threaten anybody. And that's it. I was sentenced for seven years.

Like other participants in this category, H. described the feeling of surprise when she realized that she was on trial and was even more surprised when convicted and sentenced to time in prison. Other participants admitted that although an offence had been committed, they usually insisted that it had been committed not by them, but by another person, usually their partner, who had incriminated them. Most of their life stories focused on the positive and good things they had done in their lives. The only bad thing that they considered as having happened to them was becoming involved with a person whom they didn't suspect would incriminate them. They described themselves as "not guilty," and felt a sense of injustice and helplessness that had accompanied them since the trial, because of their inability to prove their innocence. They took no responsibility for their criminal acts.

 In summary, the analysis of life stories shows that most of the participants (74%) claimed partial or full responsibility for their illegitimate actions. Most of them (64%) started their delinquent life style as adults, 18 years and older. Among the chronic offenders, participants who had begun a criminal lifestyle at a younger age, the reasons for delinquency were usually expressed in terms of external causes, including bad company or unfortunate situation.

**A Reference to an Offense in Three Time Frames**

Using Abulafia's (2005) semi-structured interviews, the references to the offences of which they had been convicted were presented in three time frames: **present tense**: "I committed the offence because…;"**retrospective perspective of the offence**: "Factors that led me to break the law…;" **hypothetical state:** "I could have prevented the offence…"

The answers to these questions were classified on a range from "innocent" to "guilty." The range can be classified into four categories:

**Depends on me:** I could have prevented the criminal act — taking full responsibility;

**Depends on others:** I could have prevented the criminal act if someone had helped me or done something for me first —– taking partial responsibility;

**Blaming others:** Somebody else committed the criminal act — denying self-responsibility;

**I am innocent:** The offence did not take place at all — denying all responsibility.

**[Table 6 about here]**

The main finding that emerges is that referring to the same offence in a hypothetical state received the most responsibility reaction than referring to it in the present or retrospective tenses.

Responses to the **depend on me** situation were divided into three categories: avoidance of particular behavior, different thinking, and different behavior. Avoidanceof particular behavior usually referred to avoiding the use of psychoactive substances: "I would not use drugs,"or avoiding breaking the law: "If I wouldn't sell the drugs."

Different thinking referred to thinking about the expected consequences of committing the offence. Such reactions included statements such as the offense could have been prevented if "I had self-satisfaction, insights with myself, …, and I could realize the results;" or "If after the first trial I realized the meaning of it;" or " If I was built differently mentally I might have married someone else."

Different behavior included contacting relevant help agencies, such as, "If I called the police and told them it was happening, or that a person was injured..." The participants argued that the results could have been altered and the offense could have even been prevented if somebody had helped them at some point in life. The responses of the participants can be divided into two types:

1. Demand for active support of another party: For example, "If they helped me... the police or social workers help me;" or "If I had family support, financial support, if I had steady employment, I wouldn't go through life I had;" or "If they send me to rehab, they gave me some chances."
2. Listening requirement: Expecting that if someone had listened to them, it would have helped change their perceptions and would have helped them to find other solutions. For example;

If just I talked, explained the difficulty and stopped seeking to use drugs that gives me confidence. But there was no one with whom I could talk. At the age of 12, I contacted a social worker. I begged them to be taken to boarding school, and nothing happened" or "If I had anyone to talk to... If I had the opportunity to talk to a professional, talk about control issues that my [bad] behavior could have been prevented.

**Blaming others** referred to blaming the victim for the offences. In three cases, the interviewee saw the victim as the main culprit for the offence. For example, "I committed the offence to keep her silent and not talk about what happened" or "if he [the victim] hadn't let me drive if he had insisted."

The **I am innocent** situation is the only one in which there is the least responsibility taken for the commission of the offence, and the greatest perception of not having committed a crime: "I did not commit an offence. I am only accused of being present and nothing more".

 In summary, concerning the offence, there is a tendency to take responsibility, with the majority of women inmates in this study referring to their delinquency in terms of partial or full self-responsibility.

**Discussion**

The main argument in the present study is that, as with male delinquency, the basis for a female’s criminal lifestyle is rational choice based on profit or loss considerations. Although most of the participants in this study had been victimized in childhood or adulthood, their explanations for their acts did not emphasize the abuse as the main reason for breaking the law.

 Examining a history of childhood shows that like delinquent women, delinquent men suffer from physical sexual and mental abuse (see Burto et al., 1994;  Chen & Gueta, 2019; Dargis et al., 2016; Dutton & Hart, 1993; Miley et al., 2020; van der Put, 2015). Therefore, it can be concluded that there is not much difference in the family backgrounds of delinquent women and delinquent men. However, theories and studies explaining delinquent behavior among men are focused mainly on providing rational explanations for concepts of personal choice and personal and mental gain (Akers, 2017; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Loughran et al., 2011; Sutherland & Cressey, 1992) and do not address their delinquency in terms of victimization. In contrast, studies of female delinquency, including current rational choice studies (Becerra & Serra 2019; Goldenson et al., 2007; Hanley & Ruppanner, 2015) claim that female delinquency originates from different motives than does male delinquency. These studies emphasize the victimization of delinquent women by explaining their infractions of the law as the result of mental distress or lack of choice, and they ignore rational choice. For example, Chen & Einat (2010) found that most of the women inmates they interviewed were victims of prolonged physical and mental abuse. In addition, the researchers noted that "some of the incarcerated women may not have experienced abuse in their lives, so there is no moral, legal, social, or practical dilemma regarding their incarceration" (Chen & Einat, 2010, p. 200). With the exception of this one remark, there is no real discussion in their article of the delinquency of women who did not suffer from victimization or who did not consider victimization as the origins of their delinquency.

The assumption that victimization is the origin of female delinquency overlooks women who have not experienced any abuse. These are mainly educated women, some of whom have had successful careers and medium-high socioeconomic status, who are usually sentenced for financial offences. It can be assumed that these women were influenced by the processes of modernization and the social changes associated with gendered perceptions of career, independence, and equal distribution of social roles (Adler & Adler, 1975; Kossek et al., 2017).

This contention is reinforced when examining the starting age of the criminal lifestyle of the participants. Offenders who began their delinquent lives during adulthood tended to engage in delinquency while doing their normative work. Their crimes were mainly financial offences: embezzlement, theft, document forgery, and such. Most of the participants in the present study were convicted of violent and property crimes, which are "classic" offenses, with personal gain and benefit as the motive. Hence, their delinquency can be characterized by the concept of a "career" that has economic gain, development, and professional progress (Coombs, 1996; Edelstein, 2016). These participants, as well as young participants (aged 18-30), described themselves as acting actively and assertively, including choosing a career, choosing a partner, and even entering the criminal world. Their answers suggest taking partial or total responsibility for their decisions and behavior, even regarding deviant and delinquent behavior.

In contrast, older offenders (over 30-years-old), and those convicted of violent offenses tended to describe their criminal behavior as passive and themselves as not guilty. These responses may be linked to stereotypical models of "femininity and masculinity" with which they had been socialized. Thus, they probably found it difficult to break free from the inherent tendency to erase themselves, thus engaging to in passive behavior and shirking responsibility for both their normative and deviant acts.

It can't be ignored that in this study, more than half of the participants claimed full or partial self-responsibility for engaging in a criminal lifestyle or for the offence of which they had been convicted. This finding reinforces the assumption of the impact of social change on non-normative aspects of life as well. It suggests the need to stop ignoring the existence of "career" delinquency in women in criminological research. Delinquent behavior among women in terms of rational choice is consistent with the findings of some of the studies published in recent years (Ajzenstadt, 2009; Kruttschnitt & Lopez, 2006; Shechory et al., 2011). Kruttschnitt & Lopez (2006) analyzed the explanations of women convicted of violent offenses. They found that the causes of violence were not childhood or marital abuse, but a wide variety of factors that included a desire for money and respect. These studies have presented new explanations for female delinquency, some of which are similar to those of delinquent men. Similar to the conclusion in the present study, the outcome of these studies is that gender differences alone cannot explain the differential phenomena of male and female delinquency. Consequently, additional factors, such as social status and ethnicity, should be considered (Ajzenstadt, 2009; Kruttschnitt & Lopez, 2006; Shechory et al., 2011).

Another finding of this study was that victimization construction explanations characterized mainly participants who were in therapy during their incarceration. One of the main correction intervention approaches for delinquent female is called a gender-specific approach (Caudy et al., 2018; Daley, 1994; Holtfreter, 2015; Vos et al., 2013), also known as gender-informed (Blanchette & Brown, 2006; Blanchette & Taylor, 2009) or gender-responsive (Bloom et al., 2005, 2006) and is based on the assumption that female offenders' therapy must address specific psychological needs. During these therapy sessions, the participants repeated the stories of their complicated lives and the vulnerabilities they had experienced, emphasizing the origins of their misconduct as helplessness, discrimination, and ongoing victimization, that led them to drug use and crime (Blanchette & Taylor, 2009; Wadsworth et al., 1995).

In this study, participants who were in the process of therapy emphasized their victimization and tended to assume partial, if any, responsibility for their delinquent behavior. This above-described therapeutic approach derives from a stereotypical view of women's delinquency, focusing solely on their personal victimization history, while minimizing and normalizing the violent and abusive acts they committed. Moreover, an individual’s self-perception as a victim does not inhibit deviant behavior. On the contrary, it enhances it, emphasizing self-helplessness and a sense of inability to change the course of one’s life. Hence, a by-product of gender-informed perception in therapy is that focusing on the minimization and normalization of delinquent acts committed by women reinforces stereotypical view of their delinquency.

In contrast, therapy of delinquent men is usually based on gender-neutral interventions (Gobeil et al., 2016). The gender-neutral approach assumes that same criminogenic needs lead men and women to adopt a delinquent life style (Blanchette & Brown, 2006; Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2013) and emphasizes the assumption of personal responsibility as a prerequisite for a therapeutic process and as a measure of successful rehabilitation (Beech & Fordham, 1997; Fortune et al., 2014). According to this approach, a sense of personal responsibility increases motivation to maintain normative behavior. However, this approach ignores gender-specific issues, like gender inequalities or female criminogenic and non-criminogenic needs (Andrews et al., 2006; Hollin & Palmer, 2006).

In recent years, there has been a reference to a third approach whereby female criminality cannot be explained solely through general causes or gender-specific causes. The thinking is that in order to explain female delinquency, it is necessary to combine the two approaches of a gender-neutral approach, that explains general motives for delinquency, and a gender-informed approach, that examines the existence of gender-specific factors that can explain female delinquency. A combination of these two approaches can help explain female criminality and better define effective gender-sensitive therapeutic interventions (Cortoni, 2017).

The results of this study support this integrated approach. Over 50% of the participants described their decision-making processes as rational, and the majority of women inmates referred to their delinquency in terms of partial or full self-responsibility. By showing that women have made a deliberate choice in following the path of a delinquent lifestyle, this study’s findings differ from most theoretical approaches that describe female criminal lifestyles as derivatives of various types of victimization.

Thus, we argue that therapy and rehabilitation programs for women offenders should combine the gender-natural and gender-specific approaches. The starting point of each therapy should be the individuals’ acknowledgement of responsibility and personal accountability for their behavior and actions. This point of view does not ignore the understanding that women offenders have experienced different types of victimizations, but rather shifts the operational focus toward a more integrative approach, noting that the women made choices and that their actions harmed others. Understanding the motivation of female criminality and criminal life-styles as driven not only from victimization but also from personal choice will enable them to reclaim, and for some, to realize for the first time, a sense of control over their lives.

The feminist struggle takes place on different levels: the political, social, educational, and legislative are conducted through increased awareness of sectarian discrimination and the fight against the oppression of women and their rights. This struggle has indeed put women's inequality and discrimination on the public agenda, but in some areas, especially in the field of ​​crime, female organizations continue to maintain gender inequalities. The present study highlights the importance of treating female delinquency equitably, rather than stereotypically. The findings of the present study provide a new perspective for understanding women's criminal lifestyle. The main conclusion of this study about women's view of their delinquency as a behavior made by choice and their assumption of personal responsibility for their acts should be considered as a basis for treatment and rehabilitation programs for delinquent women.

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**Table 1. Social-Demographic Characteristics**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **N** | **Characteristic** |
| M=42, Sd=15.12 | 30 | **Age** |
| M=2.1, Sd=2.49 | 22 | **Number of children** |
| M=12.5, Sd=3.93 | 30 | **Education (num. of years)** |
| 60% 26.3%6.2% 6.2% | Israel Former USSR Europe USA  | **Place of birth** |
| 33.5% 30%30% 6.7% |  | Divorced SingleMarried Widow | **Family status** |
|  |  |  |
| 66.7% | 20 | **Profession** |

**Table 2. Criminal Background**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Characteristic** |  |  |
| **Criminal history of** | FatherMotherSibling | 13.3%0.0%6.7% |
| **Addiction history of** | FatherMotherSibling | 26.7%20.0%13.3% |
| **Length of imprisonment (months)** | M=48.76Sd=60.35 |  |
| **Main conviction offence** | ViolenceDrugsEconomicsKidnaping | 46.7%30.0%20.0%3.3% |

**Table 3. History of Victimization (N=30)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Characteristic** |  |  |
| **Abuse at childhood** **Abuse at adult life****No abuse**  | 14(46.7%)9 (30%)13(43.3%) |  |
| **The type of abuse** physical sexual both | 7(41.2%)8(26.7%)2(6.7%) |  |

**Table 4. Distribution of Delinquency Responsibility**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Explanations** | **N** |
| **Personal-choice** | 6 | (20%) |
| **Blaming the situation or others** | 16 | (53.3%) |
| **Not guilty / not offender** | 8 | (26.7%) |

**Table 5.** **Attitude to the Delinquent Course and the Age of the First offense**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Explanations** | **Age of the first offense****Under 18 18 +** |
| **Personal-choice** | 2 (20%) 4 (20%) |
| **Blaming the situation or others** | 7 (70%) 9 (45%) |
| **Not guilty / not offender** | 1 (10%) 7 (35%) |

**Table.6 A Reference to a Conviction offence in Three Time Frames and Age of the First Offence**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Age of the first offence** **Under 18 18 +** |
| **Present tense** **Depends on me** **Depends on others** **Blaming others** **I am innocent** | 40%(4)40%(4)0%20%(2) | 55%(11)20%(4)10%(2)15%(3) |
|  **Hypothetical state** **Depends on me** **Depends on others** **Blaming others** **I am innocent** | 80%(8)10%(1)10%(1)0% | 60%(12)30%(6)0%10%(2) |
| **A retrospective vision** **Depends on me** **Depends on others** **Blaming others** **I am innocent** | 50%(5)40%(4)0%10%(1) | 50%(10)30%(6)5%(1)15%(3) |