

Balagan: Delinquency as a Result of the Lack of a Center of Norms and Consciousness

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Abstract: *From interviews with prisoners and ex-prisoners in Israel, it emerges that their delinquency was an outcome of what is called in many languages, including Hebrew, balagan (a chaotic or messy life). The balagan is caused by a lack of moral and behavioral centers, and it is characterized by confusing and contradictory norms of criminal and noncriminal behavior. This conclusion is inconsistent with theories that explain criminality in terms of cultural perspective, but it fits the center theory and the theories of social control. The balagan was mainly expressed by contradictions between their attitudes and behavior, as well as between their positive images and criminal acts. None of the convicts and ex-convicts justified breaking the law, but they attempted to minimize their responsibility by means of justifications and excuses. This study is based on phenomenological interviews conducted with 25 prisoners and 50 former prisoners who underwent programs of rehabilitation in kibbutzim and in yeshivot in Israel.*

I'm tired because I didn't sleep. All night I listened to Yossi Sayas on the radio [a weekly phone-in program whose callers come from society's deprived fringes]. I listen to his program every week. Last night I even donated my refrigerator, for some poor woman from Ashdod whose husband threw her out of the house. I'm not going to need it anyway for the next 6 years, when I'll be in prison. And anyway, I'll buy a new one when I get out. Last week I donated a bed and a washing machine. What do you think? That a con can't be goodhearted?!

Excerpt from an interview with prisoner number 12, serving a 6-year sentence for robbery and assault

What motivates the behavior of this and many similar offenders? He does not act consistently in accordance with some definite culture that is in any way different from ours; neither is he motivated by any antisocial or antinormative orientation. In all likelihood, his actions spring from a confused orientation, conflicting drives, and the lack of commitment to any defined behavioral norms, resulting in behavior that contradicts itself.

This study deals with delinquency that results from a lack of commitment to any clearly defined moral or social center, or to the behavioral norms to which such a center gives rise. Both the criminal and the legitimate activity described herein are random and reflect confusion and inconsistency. The reasons for delin-

quency described here contradict those posited by theories that relate delinquency to cultural norms in a specific cultural environment (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Miller, 1958; Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967). Some of the claims mentioned in this article are consistent with theories dealing with social control. According to these theories, the weakening of the social control, hand in hand with a diminishing social commitment, are among the principal factors leading to the weakening and even the nullification of a center of consciousness and values that directs the individual toward clear, unequivocal behavior (Briar & Piliavin, 1965; Hirschi, 1969; Matza, 1964).

Individuals' actions are inspired by a center of consciousness and ideas, which impels and directs their behavior (James, 1961, pp. 191-192). This center can be more or less solid, and it can change in the course of time, as formerly peripheral ideas or new ideas take on an increasingly central position. Without such a center, individuals' worldviews and behaviors have no orientation (Eliade, 1961, pp. 20-24). In essence, they will be without any world of their own, and instead will have only "fragments of a broken world, an amorphous mass containing an infinite number of neutral places" (Eliade, 1961, p. 24).

The structural-functional theory acknowledges this center of awareness. According to this theory, society's center is its central values system. This system is intimately related to what the members of the society see as being most important. It is based on their need to feel that their individual existence is connected to something exalted (Shils, 1975, p. 15), and it has an integrative social function (Eisenstad & Curelaru, 1982, pp. 208-209).

Individuals may feel alienated from the centers of the surrounding society and may sense that they lack a personal center (Cohen, 1979; Cohen, Ben Yehuda, & Aviad, 1987) as a result of various factors, some of which overlap to some extent. These factors are likely to be the radical secularization of modern society (Bruce, 1992; Kovalis, 1970), young people's feelings of alienation in modern society (Lukes, 1978; Wallis, 1984, p. 48), social rejection and negative social stigmatizing (Goffman, 1964), and the rejection of society's accepted goals and of the means of achieving them, as expressed by the pattern of withdrawal in the strain theory (Merton, 1957).

Persons without a center of consciousness are in a state of anomie, in which, as I have said, they lack the orientation for a certain behavior. Such a reality may lead the individuals in a number of directions. They are likely to seek a center for their world and to find it, for example, by joining a particular cult (Anthony & Robbins, 1987; Bainbridge, 1997). The individuals may narrow their areas of interest, withdraw into passivity, or escape from the reality that for them is meaningless, for instance, by becoming addicted to drugs (see for example Kandel, 1980). They are also liable to remain in their anomic situation and to function without any particular center of consciousness directing their behavior (see, for example, Matza, 1964). Matza (1964) claimed that the less commitment to values individuals have, the less committed they are to the social limitations that accompany those values. If individuals are committed neither to accepted values nor even to unaccepted

ones, they find themselves in a state of drift, with no direction, and are likely to turn to crime. As Matza put it,

The delinquent transiently exists in a limbo between convention and crime. Responding in turn to the demands of each, fluttering now with one, now with the other, but postponing commitment, evading decision. Thus, he drifts between criminal and conventional action. (p. 28)

Hirschi (1969) stressed the commitment to society and to the individuals in it. As individuals' connections to the law-abiding society weaken, so do their commitments to its opinions and behavioral norms, and they are likely to slip into criminal behavior. At the most extreme level, when there is no commitment whatsoever, an anomic situation is created, in which the individuals are indifferent to the moral outcomes of their actions (Kornhauser, 1978). Similarly, the lack of legitimate opportunities for success and an inequity in the distribution of social assets may very likely lead to hatred of those who have more and to the denial of the connection between standards of morality and social order. Personal and social controls are weakened, and individuals feel at liberty to take advantage of illegitimate opportunities and break the law (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Shils (1975) defined this process as the weakening of the individual's connection to the central values system and its representatives. Such a weakening tends to impel individuals to act on their own, independent of this system and with no connection to it, including criminal activity (Shils, 1975, pp. 11-14).

When being interviewed, former criminals rehabilitated in one of two different programs for the rehabilitation of criminals in Israel tended to characterize the period of their delinquency as a period of confusion and lack of values and behavioral orientation. In their words, they repeatedly defined this period in their lives as a *balagan*.¹ In contrast, they described the subsequent period, that of their rehabilitation, as a time of consistent behavior, in which they forged new and unequivocal social values and behavioral commitments (Timor, 1989, 1998; Timor & Shoham, 2001).

Descriptions and accounts regarding the past given by people who have changed their perceptions and their way of life are likely to be suspect in terms of their validity because they may reflect these individuals' new worldview and the perspective that springs from it (see, for example, Kvale, 1987; Plummer, 1983, pp. 101-104) rather than their world and perceptions during the earlier period of their lives. Former criminals who have been rehabilitated in kibbutzim or in yeshivot² also are likely to suit their descriptions and accounts regarding the past to their new worldviews. Their descriptions of the past as a period of *balagan* may not accurately reflect the behavior and real worldview of their criminal period.

To examine whether active criminals do indeed act out of the lack of commitment to a center of consciousness, it was necessary, in addition to the two delinquent groups that had undergone rehabilitation programs in kibbutzim and in yeshivot, to investigate a third group, one of criminals who had not undergone any

rehabilitation program, to ascertain their worldview and their connection to centers of culture, values, and norms.

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent are the criminals committed to a clearly defined normative center of values?
2. How is this level of commitment in the criminals formed?
3. How much similarity is there between the descriptions of the former world given by rehabilitated and nonrehabilitated criminals?
4. How is the commitment to a new center formed among rehabilitated criminals?

METHOD

This study is based on 75 phenomenological interviews conducted with 50 former prisoners who underwent a program of rehabilitation and with 25 prisoners who did not undergo such a program. The sample of the latter group was chosen at random from among a population of 71 felons serving prison terms in the central region of Israel in the years 1996 to 1999 who asked to participate in weekly encounters with volunteer students in the framework of a prisoner education program.³ The former prisoners who took part in a rehabilitation program were drawn from two samples of 25 participants each. One sample, of former prisoners who underwent rehabilitation programs in yeshivot for the newly religious, was chosen randomly from a population of 97 former prisoners who stayed in these yeshivot for at least 6 months, between the years 1995 and 1998. The second sample, of ex-convicts who were rehabilitated at kibbutzim, was chosen at random from among the 92 who participated in a kibbutz rehabilitation program for at least 6 months, between the years 1984 and 1999, and who expressed a willingness to be interviewed. The characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1.

The lower average age of the rehabilitated in kibbutzim and the lack of crimes of murder and sex among them reflect the kibbutzim's rehabilitation policy, which favors absorbing relatively young prisoners and prohibits absorbing sex offenders and murderers (see Lapid, 1990).

PROCEDURE

The study is based on phenomenological interviews conducted with all the participants, which lasted an average of about 2 hours. The interviewers were directed to draw the participants out while interfering as little as possible. They were requested to ask only questions that would steer the participants to concentrate on the following subjects: the nature of their delinquency, the reasons for their delinquency, their worldview in the context of obeying the law, and their relationships with the law-abiding society or with criminal society. The partici-

TABLE 1
PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

	<i>Underwent Rehabilitation in Yeshivot (n = 25)</i>	<i>Underwent Rehabilitation in Kibbutzim</i>	<i>Did Not Undergo a Rehabilitation Program</i>
Average age	28.7	24	29.1
Average years in prison	2.7	3.4	3.6
Types of offenses (<i>n</i>)			
Drug dealing	7	6	7
Robbery	2	3	4
Burglary	16	12	6
Assault	5	3	4
Attempted murder	1		1
Murder			1
Rape/indecent act	1		2
Auto theft		1	3
Fraud	1	1	2
Total ^a	33	26	30

a. The number of crimes of various kinds does not equal the number of prisoners and former prisoners interviewed because some of them committed more than one kind of offense.

pants that had been through a rehabilitation program were also asked about the differences between their present world and their former criminal world.

The phenomenological interview was chosen because it is the most appropriate instrument to learn about the participants' world and behavior from their own point of view, as they are the ones who are exposed to and act in accordance with the influence of this reality (McHugh, 1968; Thomas & Thomas, 1968, p. 572; Watzlawick, 1976, 1984). An analysis of the interviews was done by means of content analysis based on their explicit content only (Holsti, 1969, p. 16). The conclusions were drawn inductively based on the testimony of the participants regarding their world and behavior, and they are supported by quotations from the interviews (Stiles, 1993).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

DESCRIPTION OF THE CRIMINAL PERIOD AND ACCOUNTS GIVEN FOR IT

The respondents from two of the research groups, those of former convicts rehabilitated in yeshivot and in kibbutzim, resemble each other in general in the

manner in which they describe and give accounts for their criminal past: They make frequent comparisons between their new world in the yeshiva or in the kibbutz and their former world as criminals. In accounting for their former behavior, these participants primarily employ the sort of accounts regarding delinquency that are commonly accepted in their new social setting. Those who were rehabilitated in yeshivot often employ accounts that ascribe their delinquency to a lack of moral values; those rehabilitated in kibbutzim tend to use the lack of a binding framework and of work habits to excuse theirs. In contrast, the participants in the third group, that of nonrehabilitated prisoners, have no such option, so that their descriptions and accounts regarding their criminality are, on one hand, less clear and unequivocal, and on the other hand, more varied. The groups of former prisoners made great use of comparative sentences explaining the criminal past against a background of their law-abiding present. For example, regarding a commitment to norms, one former criminal, rehabilitated in a yeshiva said, "I saw both sides. The old [criminal] way brought me only troubles and confusion, emptiness and crap. In the new way I chose I felt a lot better. I felt my life has meaning, that I'm not dead, not empty." Another former criminal, rehabilitated in a kibbutz, said, "I get up every morning at 4:30 and go out to work, and I feel great with this routine, because before I didn't have this. Before I didn't have any framework."

The nonrehabilitated prisoners had a harder time explaining their criminal world, because in addition to their inability to compare between their reality and the reality of the law-abiding society, they are also still in the criminal world and they lack the perspective of time and place needed to define its nature from without. This difficulty is clearly reflected in their words. For example, one of these prisoners said, regarding commitment to norms, "I was used to getting up in the afternoon, or whenever I felt like it, and no one ever dared to tell me what to do. Even here [in prison], nobody messes with me." His words reflect an external expression of the phenomenon but not its substance—the lack of a commitment to norms. At the same time, because he is closer, both in fact and in terms of his consciousness, to the criminal world, it is probable that his words are more faithful to the criminal worldview and its accompanying behavior.

THE CRIMINAL PERIOD AS A PERIOD OF ANOMIE

Participants from all three of the research groups described their criminal periods as periods of anomie, during which they acted inconsistently and confusedly, in a reality without clear boundaries and unequivocal behavioral norms. They made frequent use of the word *balagan* to characterize this period, as illustrated by the following interview excerpts. One yeshiva-rehabilitated participant said,

My teen years were years of balagan. I didn't have a steady job. If I worked at all, I quit right away, because it was easier to steal and to break into places. I wanted to leave that balagan, but no one even tried to help me. That old way only brought me troubles and confusion.

A kibbutz-rehabilitated participant said,

The only way I ever remember myself is in a balagan. I grew up in a neighborhood that had a lousy influence on people. I got everything I wanted. I never put any effort into anything. I did whatever I wanted.

A nonrehabilitated prisoner said,

There have to be cops and laws, because otherwise there would be balagan. Until I was arrested, I was a disgrace. I didn't work, and I did whatever I wanted. I walked all over my parents and family and never gave an accounting to anybody.

With different variations, all three participants described their lives in the delinquent period as a life with no direction or boundaries, and their explanation for this was that their parents exercised no control over their behavior and were insignificant as far as they were concerned. The results, according to their descriptions, were a lack of commitment, an unwillingness to invest any effort in any legitimate activity, and directionless and random behavior, including criminal activity.

FAULTY SOCIALIZATION

Many of the participants in all three groups had difficult family backgrounds. Generally one or both parents were either absent or did not function properly as parents, and at the same time, there was no one else of any significance who fulfilled this function in their stead. Many studies have shown that such factors are a central cause of the descent of young people into delinquency (for example, Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Chilton & Markle, 1972; Gove & Crutchfield, 1982). Children from these families are likely to experience difficulties in the development of a meaningful relationship with society—with its values and norms—and they will lack a foundation and any reason to be law abiding (Hirschi, 1969, pp. 16, 34). Parents exercise control over the behavior of their children by means of the positive emotional ties that they develop with them (Hirschi, 1969; Toby, 1974). According to Hirschi (1969), they do this by means of the following factors and in the following ways: (a) attachment (the stronger the bonds between a child and his or her parents, the more effort the child will make not to let deviant behavior damage that connection); (b) commitment (the more socially esteemed achievements and goals a young person has, the more he or she will avoid jeopardizing them by means of deviant activity); (c) involvement (the more time and energy a young person invests in the relationship with his or her parents and in legitimate activity, the fewer resources of time and energy will remain for illegitimate activity); and (d) faith (the more antidelinquent positions and values the young person adopts, the more he or she will avoid criminal behavior). Thus, dysfunctional parents reduce their children's commitment to them and to normative society.

The participants attested to the failure not only of parents and family in the formation of their commitment to society but also of the formal educational system and school in particular. A yeshiva-rehabilitated participant said,

When I was 9 I was thrown out of school, because the teacher got mad at me and I almost hit her with a chair. After that I hung around the town and fought with my father. When I was 12, I ran away to Jaffa, and when I was 13 they sent me to reform school.

Another participant, rehabilitated in a kibbutz, said,

I lived on the street and slept in buses in the central bus station since I was 10. When I was 11 I started working with my father selling in the market. . . . I didn't go to school at all.

And in the words of a nonrehabilitated prisoner,

I was a student—I mean I was registered—in reform school, where I passed the time till fifth grade. All that time all I wanted to do was to cause damage. . . . When I was about 10, I started to hang around the streets and I stopped going to school.

Students' faulty connections to school, manifested in absenteeism, discipline problems, and a lack of investment in their studies, were found to be related to delinquency (Gibbons, 1981; Hagan & Simpson, 1978; Krohn & Massey, 1980). Even a tenuous commitment to school (Hirschi, 1969) was found to be a predictor of delinquency.

A student's commitment to school, its goals, and activities is influenced to a considerable extent by his or her home situation. A broken home, a dysfunctional family, or a home filled with tension is related to children's low degree of commitment to school (Jenkins, 1995). Such a family's lack of interest in its children's functioning in school also increases the chances that the children will not develop any commitment to school and will ultimately descend into crime (Jenkins, 1995; Simons & Whitbeck, 1991; Witt, Hanafin, & Martens, 1983).

DIRECT TRAINING FOR DELINQUENT BEHAVIOR

A number of participants told how their parents contributed directly to their delinquency. Two nonrehabilitated prisoners said that their parents committed criminal acts with their knowledge and even involved them to a certain extent in this activity; a third said that his parents encouraged him to continue in his delinquency. The first prisoner said,

My father never gave us any money, so we used to sneak money from his stash. So did my mother. Sometimes she would sneak money from him and give it to us.

The second prisoner said,

My father observed the Sabbath, and other commandments too, but that didn't keep him from stealing or beating me for every little thing. Lots of farmers where we lived would "make up what's missing" from their equipment [steal from neighboring farms]. My father too. . . . When I got out of the army, I went back to our farm and continued the tradition of "making up what's missing."

The second example dramatically exposes the difficult educational reality in which the young man finds himself. On one hand, his father uses an iron hand to teach him his worldview and the behavior that should go with it, while on the other hand, he himself acts in contradiction to this worldview. The logical result of these contradictory messages is a lack of commitment to any world of values or any consistent behavior whatsoever (see, for example, Trasler, 1962). The delinquency in such cases may also be explained as an imitation of the parents' behavior (for example, Bandura & Walters, 1963).

The third prisoner said that his parents encouraged him to continue burgling; that is, for an extended period they gave him positive reinforcements for specific criminal behavior. But at the same time, they made demands on him consistent with conventional norms: that he should deposit his money in a savings account and buy a refreshment stand to make a living. In his words,

By 15 I had stashed away quite a lot of money from my breaking in. So my father suggested that I open a savings account, so I'd have money when I grew up. Looking back today, when I think about it, my father put the stamp of approval on being a criminal. After all, he knew I got the money by stealing. I did what he suggested with part of the money, and I decided to use what was left to buy my parents a store [a refreshment stand]. We registered the refreshment stand in my father's name, so that the police wouldn't come and start asking questions about where a 15-year-old kid gets the money to open a store.

Here too the parents' messages are contradictory and contribute to a lack of moral commitment and to confused behavior, and reinforcing the criminal behavior encourages the person to continue resorting to it.

Most of the participants who blamed their parents directly for their delinquency were from the group of nonrehabilitated criminals. Participants from groups that had been rehabilitated made little use of such accounts, either because during the rehabilitative process they learned to accept responsibility for their conduct and to avoid blaming others for it directly (see, for example, Eskridge, 1989) or because they repaired to some extent their relationship with their parents (Sherman, 1998; Taylor, 1985).

A SENSE OF EMPTINESS AND A LACK OF VALUES

Many of the participants rehabilitated in yeshivot, and a few of those rehabilitated in kibbutzim and some of the nonrehabilitated prisoners, accounted for their

delinquency in the past as the outcome of life in a materialistic world, in which physical pleasures and having a good time are the most important thing. In their words, a spiritual, values-oriented dimension was totally lacking from their world in the past. One yeshiva-rehabilitated participant said, "All I ever thought about was soccer and having a good time. I didn't know anything else." A second participant said, "I lacked for nothing [when I was a criminal]. I was spoiled rotten, I had everything—money, women, cars, but actually I didn't have anything. Everything was bland and you know, easy come, easy go." A third participant said, "[When I was a criminal] I used to think that the pleasures in life were physical. But we're not animals. . . . You have to have emotional satisfaction in life, you need something spiritual." Finally, in the words of a participant rehabilitated in a kibbutz, "My family was screwed up. There weren't any values at home. The reality I was born into was alcohol, crime, and drugs, without any culture."

William James (1968) defined man as an entity having three components: the material (referring to the material things that are important to him, such as his body, his family, his property), the spiritual (referring to his psychological characteristics, the positions and goals that give direction to his life), and the social (the esteem in which he is held). Weakness in one or more of these three components is expressed in the perception and the behavior of the individual. The words of the respondents here reflect a past in which the spiritual self is weak, constricted, and lacking in values that obligate them, and most of their behavior results from and is influenced by material factors. Frankl (1962, p. 99) ascribed the fundamental striving to find meaning for life to man's spiritual realm. He believed that this striving is man's primary driving force. It is not the striving for pleasure, as Freud (1959) asserted. People who do not seek or who do not find a meaning for their lives are likely to experience a sense of existential emptiness (Frankl, 1962, p. 107), which manifests itself primarily in boredom but also possibly in a striving for power, money, pleasures, and sex.

The fact that accounts like these characterized principally those rehabilitated in yeshivot may be explained by the new worldview that they acquire in the yeshivot. According to this view, the world of piety that is new to them is antithetical to the secular culture in which they descended into crime. This culture in which they once lived is perceived by newly pious former prisoners as being hedonistic and impervious to moral values (Cromer, 1979; Timor, 1989, pp. 145-149).

A small number of respondents from the group of nonrehabilitated prisoners cited being addicted to money and to physical pleasures to account for their criminality, in that these addictions, like drugs, leave no room for any other commitments, whether moral or behavioral (see, for example, Daley, 1988, pp. 54-59). A nonrehabilitated prisoner said, "Just like some people are addicted to drugs, I'm addicted to spending money. I have to have money. I used to go into stores and buy everything in sight. Money just blinded me and I stopped thinking." Another prisoner explained that what lay behind his delinquency was the emotional enjoyment that the criminal activity and its attendant danger afforded him. In his words,

“When I broke into apartments to steal I simply enjoyed it. I did it for the fun of it, not for the money.”

His delinquency was neither purposeful (i.e., for material gain) nor a protest against anything or anyone. It did satisfy his need for excitement in the frustrating and monotonous reality in which he lived. He had only limited access to cultural or economic resources in this reality, and the chances that this would change were small (Corrigan, 1979; Cusson, 1983; Downes & Rock, 1988, p. 149).

CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN MORAL PERCEPTIONS AND BEHAVIORS

As I have said, the participants from the two groups that underwent a rehabilitation program differentiate between the two periods of their lives as being qualitatively distinct from each other. The first period is connected to delinquency and generally lasts from childhood until entrance into the program of rehabilitation. The second begins with the rehabilitation program, and living according to legal norms is its manifestation.

The respondents from the group of nonrehabilitated prisoners, as opposed to the two other groups, were unable to relate in their accounts to an earlier period of their lives (i.e., different from the present) and to compare the two periods. They related to one period only, characterized by delinquency. This way of relating often exposes contradictions in their world and behavior. Sometimes the contradictions are between their declared perceptions and their actual behavior, as in an example of the prisoner sentenced to prison for burglary, theft, and drug dealing. He said, “I can’t stand deviants like rapists, thieves, and junkies. As far as I’m concerned, a thief is like a junkie. Just like a junkie can’t live without drugs, a thief won’t stop stealing, either.” On one hand, he rejected thieves and junkies, while on the other hand he himself was both of those.

Sometimes the contradictions are between declared perceptions regarding their selves in the area of values and their deeds, as in this example of a prisoner serving a sentence for theft: “I think I’m a decent person. . . . If things don’t work out [after I’m released] and someone makes me a tempting offer, I’m not sure I won’t fall [into crime]. I can’t make any promises.” His perception of himself as an honest person does not obligate him to behave honestly and to avoid committing crimes. As a matter of fact, most of the prisoners define themselves as being positive people and law abiding to a certain extent, despite the fact that at the same time they do not deny the crimes that they committed. A prisoner, sentenced to prison for burglary, said, “I’m a peace-loving person by nature, not violent and not problematic. I’m not a bad guy; on the contrary, I’m always ready to help the other guy.” (See also the quotation that opens this article.) Another prisoner, serving a sentence for bank robbery, said, “I feel that I obey the law and am a good person.” A third prisoner, convicted of forging checks, complained about having been sent to prison at all: “I don’t belong here, in prison. I’m an honest person and people know that.”

These nonrehabilitated prisoners nearly always reconcile the contradiction between their self-assessment as positive people and their admission of their crimes by means of justifications for their actions. By means of these justifications, they acknowledge responsibility for the criminal acts for which they were convicted while they deny that there is anything wrong with what they did, by making use of the following means of neutralization (Sykes & Matza, 1957):

- Denial of injury/victim

None of the drugs that I smuggled were for Israel. We used to pass the stuff on to an Arab, who brought it straight to Egypt, and as long as it isn't in Israel, it doesn't bother me.

It's OK to steal from a bank, because no one is physically hurt. And anyway, they're insured.

- Blaming others (condemnation of the condemners)

What I did everyone does. Everybody steals or cheats, but not everyone is caught. I was caught and I took the rap.

I didn't steal anything at all. I just asked two kids, who were thieves anyway, to steal me a motorcycle.

- A more important commitment (appeal to loyalties)

A friend of mine kept asking me for help. He kept asking me to set up a meeting for him with someone in drugs, I mean where drugs are smuggled in from Lebanon. At first I didn't want to, but in the end I agreed just to set up a meeting. After that the cops picked us up on the road and I was sentenced to 6 years in prison.

A friend of mine broke into an apartment, but I took the rap for him, because my friend has a wife and kids, and if he went to trial, he'd get 5 years.

- Self-realization

You can't be too honest. You have to break the rules once in a while.

Some of the prisoners employed more than one justification. For example, the last quoted prisoner also blamed others who stole for him, as well as denying the damage caused by his action, dealing in soft drugs. He said, "Grass is no big deal. So what if it's against the law?! I think in the near future the law will allow smoking grass, because it doesn't cause any harm."

None of the respondents justified committing crimes in general, but as has been said, most of them worked at neutralizing the negative aspects of their specific offenses in an attempt to minimize the damage to their social and their self-image (Mills, 1940). There was only one prisoner who admitted his guilt without making any attempt to neutralize it. He said, "What I did was wrong and I only have myself to blame. I got myself into that situation and today I'm paying for it."

Of the 25 nonrehabilitated prisoners, only 3 denied committing the crimes of which they were accused. One made a complete denial, and 2 claimed that they were covering for friends who committed the offenses. One of them said that he

refused to give away the real guilty party, and the other claimed he confessed to the crime to cover for the real guilty party and to spare him severe punishment.

In general, despite the fact that most of the prisoners tried to neutralize their specific guilt by means of various justifications, not even one of them gave a general justification for criminal behavior. Furthermore, some of them even mentioned that they felt shame while they were committing the offenses. One prisoner said, for example, "I don't like to hurt people, and when I did it I felt really bad." In a similar vein, another prisoner said, "I've always had a strong conscience, so a lot of things that I did made me feel bad."

In other words, based on their accounts, their delinquency is not only inconsistent with their moral worldviews (to the extent to which they have moral worldviews) but it also contradicts them.

ACCOUNTS FOR THE DELINQUENCY GIVEN BY FORMER PRISONERS WHO HAVE UNDERGONE REHABILITATION PROGRAMS

As has been said, those rehabilitated both in yeshivot and in kibbutzim tend to account for their criminal past according to the new worldviews and the values they acquired in the course of their rehabilitation.

Respondents from the two groups often ascribed their delinquency to a moral emptiness and a lack of clear norms of behavior, as a result of a lack of social control. In contrast to the nonrehabilitated criminals, they made relatively little use of justifications, whereas they made lavish use of a variety of excuses. In these excuses, they admitted that their past behavior was wrong, but they tried to minimize their responsibility for it (Scott & Lyman, 1968). In each of the following examples, the first quotation is that of a kibbutz-rehabilitated participant and the second is of a yeshiva-rehabilitated one.

- Not knowing any better

No one at our house ever said "No," and that's a shame. It could have helped. I never put any effort into anything. I didn't know what I was doing. I simply did.

I didn't know there was such a thing as something spiritual. What did we have in our heads?! Nonsense.

- A one-time occurrence/mistake

I was a soldier, completely on my own, without parents or money. At *Beit Hahayal* [a network of soldiers' clubs] I met someone in the same situation. We saw a movie about a robbery and we thought it looked easy to steal. I suggested robbing a restaurant in Jaffa. We went there armed and we said to the owner, "Stay where you are, this is a robbery." The dude wasn't afraid. He took out a gun and fired. Then I shot into the air. I didn't want to hurt him, and then I ran away. After wandering around for an hour, I understood that I had a problem and I turned myself in. I was in prison for 4 years. I had

terrible pangs of conscience. I couldn't wait till the day I got out. I wanted to ask the guy to forgive me. I was a good person before and I'm still a good person. I only slipped that one time.

It was nothing but a one-time deal. She (my wife) was driving me nuts. I never hurt her before that.

- Behavior that is out of control

I was never able to control myself. Ever so often I have to let go, and I don't know why that happens to me. I feel like sometimes I just can't control myself.

When you take drugs, you don't think about anything, only about how to get more drugs, and then you steal, break in and just grab, without thinking.

The striking use made of excuses by the rehabilitatees is an indication of the influence of the rehabilitation process that they underwent, because of which they no longer justify their past offenses. At the same time, they continue to attempt to minimize their guilt to some extent, while playing down their responsibility for criminal acts. Thus, they try to preserve a certain positive degree of their former social and self-image (Mills, 1940). There are those among them who state explicitly that it was only the influence of the rehabilitation program that made them recognize the wrong of their past actions. A kibbutz-rehabilitated ex-prisoner said, "Today I'm ashamed of what I did. Then I didn't have the awareness." Compare the words of a yeshiva-rehabilitated ex-prisoner:

After a period of rehabilitation in a yeshiva I was tried for an old charge against me, from the time when I was an animal, and they didn't have any witnesses against me. I could have denied the charge like I would have done in the past, but I told the truth and confessed, and I said I'd accept whatever they gave me.

As I have said, both groups of rehabilitated ex-convicts are characterized by extensive use of excuses, but their specific accounts for their delinquency are different, as a result of the new and different worldviews that they adopt in their new surroundings. The kibbutz-rehabilitated participants often mentioned two reasons for their delinquency—the lack of a framework to which they must commit themselves and the lack of a work ethic. A kibbutz-rehabilitated ex-prisoner explained,

In the past I used to get up late, sit in bars, and break into places at night. Today it's still hard for me to get up early in the morning for work, but in kibbutz I'm valued according to how good a worker I am.

Another kibbutz-rehabilitated ex-prisoner said,

I lived on the streets from the age of 10. . . . I was outside any framework of school or treatment. I was in and out of jail maybe 15 times. The most important change in the kibbutz was a daily routine. At first I was in complete shock. I had to work every day for 8 hours, to get up every morning to get into the routine.

Nearly all the kibbutz-rehabilitated ex-convicts mentioned the qualitative difference between their former lives, lives with neither social obligation nor the need to exert themselves to make a living, and their present ones, in a social framework that keeps them in line and requires that they commit themselves to it. The influence of the way of life and the worldview that characterize the kibbutz may be clearly seen here (Fischer & Geiger, 1991; Rosner, 1970, 1980).

In contrast, the yeshiva-rehabilitated ex-convicts often employed religious accounts regarding their delinquency in the past, which they attributed to two principal factors. The first of these was the secular social reality in which they used to live, for example,

From a vacuum and a lack of belief, I came to commit a very serious offense. People who lack faith live in a world that revolves around money and physical pleasures, and they don't have any spiritual world. A person who doesn't believe is a criminal, and all he can do is laugh at you, as if he isn't committing any crimes.

The second factor is "the evil inclination," which tempts a person from his youth on to break the law; however, one can overcome the evil inclination by studying the Bible, as seen in this example: "Criminals are poor slobs. The evil inclination has the better of them, and they can't break out of their situation. They have to be shown that the only good path is the path of faith."

All of the yeshiva-rehabilitated ex-prisoners used the first explanation, which blames the influence of a criminal secular society for their criminality, and many of them went on to blame the evil inclination. These accounts reflect content learned in the yeshivot for the newly religious and heard often from the rabbis in the yeshivot (Timor, 1989).

The common denominator that arises from the words of the kibbutz- and the yeshiva-rehabilitated ex-convicts is the acquisition of new behavior patterns and worldviews. The yeshiva and the kibbutz absorb released prisoners lacking in normative behavior patterns and having poorly formed, confused worldviews. Then they offer them ways of thinking and behaving that are accepted in their midst and thus help them to adjust to their new surroundings.

CONCLUSION

This study endeavors to understand the central reasons for criminal behavior, based on the words and descriptions of prisoners and ex-prisoners. Our point of departure is that the prisoners' own words are the best reflectors of their world and make it possible to understand their behavior. Howard Becker (1963) writes on this issue in his book *Outsiders*: "Very few tell us in detail what a juvenile delinquent does in his daily round of activity, and what he thinks about himself, society, and activities. One consequence of this is the construction of faulty or inadequate theories" (p. 166).

From interviews with prisoners, it emerges that confused and contradictory behaviors and the lack of commitment to any social or moral center whatsoever characterized their lives during the delinquent and the pre-delinquent periods. There is a similar profile for ex-convicts who have undergone rehabilitation programs in kibbutzim or in yeshivot in Israel, but the influence of the worldviews that they have adopted from their rehabilitative settings is implicit in their words and descriptions.

This conclusion (of criminal life within a life of moral and normative chaos) is not consistent with the theories that explain criminality in terms of a cultural perspective, such as the theory of cultural deviance or the theory of cultural disorganization, according to which delinquency is a product of a certain culture or sub-culture or is a response to the lack of opportunities and of status within a certain culture. In contrast, this conclusion of delinquency as an outgrowth of chaos is eminently consistent with the center theory, which states that without a conceptual center, a center of consciousness for their world, individuals have no orientation for a worldview and for a specific type of behavior, and their behavior will be random and confused. This conclusion is also consistent with the theories of social control, which explain delinquency as a product of failed social control and of the lack of social and moral commitment.

It is clear from the interviews with the prisoners that the randomness and the confusion are the products of faulty socialization, which found expression in their parents' lack of control over their behavior and the lack of direction during their childhood, in contradictory educational messages that they received from their parents, and in the failure of educational institutions to develop in them a commitment to normative behavior. From the interviews with ex-convicts who underwent a rehabilitation program, an additional reason for randomness and confusion emerges: life in a materialistic reality, devoid of values or meaning.

In fact, the randomness and the confusion were primarily expressed by the contradictions between the prisoners' stated attitudes and their actual behavior, and between their explicit self-images as positive people and their criminal acts.

The majority of the prisoners sought to settle the contradictions by means of neutralizations in the form of different kinds of justifications, which deny that there was anything wrong in their actions—by denying the injury, denying the victim, blaming others, appealing to higher loyalties, and claiming the right for self-fulfillment. None of them made a blanket justification for breaking the law.

Most of the rehabilitated former criminals acknowledged that their criminal actions had been wrong but attempted to minimize their responsibility for these actions by means of various types of excuses—by claiming a lack of knowledge, chance or one-time offenses, or a loss of control. The difference between the two groups of rehabilitated ex-convicts, that of the kibbutz and that of the yeshiva, was that the former blamed their delinquency on the lack of both a work ethic and of boundaries on their behavior, whereas the latter often employed religious accounts and blamed their delinquency primarily on their secular backgrounds and on the evil inclination, which tempts a person to do wrong.

Both the kibbutz and the yeshiva absorb released prisoners and attempt to provide them with normative behavior patterns and a clearly formulated worldview to support these behaviors. In this way, they deal with the central characteristics in the world of the delinquents, which this research shows to be the lack of a normative center of values and the lack of social commitment.

NOTES

1. *Balagan* in Hebrew suggests mess, chaos.
2. *Kibbutzim* (singular *kibbutz*) are cooperative communal settlements in Israel. *Yeshivot* (singular *yeshiva*) are Jewish religious seminaries.
3. This sample was chosen because attaining the cooperation of a random sample of the general prisoner population was impossible.

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