

Titre du mémoire : Criminal achievement and offender self-efficacy

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Abstract

The idea of success in crime has been primarily restricted to a single objective indicator: earnings. While there is broad cultural agreement that money is a central component of career success, it is unlikely that earnings are the sole factor equated with achievement. Understanding how offenders subjectively define success for themselves might prove informative in understanding criminal career outcomes such as motivation and commitment. Self-efficacy – the belief that one can successfully perform a behavior leading to desired types of performance – has been shown to predict various legitimate occupational outcomes. Drawing from the self-efficacy and social cognitive career theories, this thesis explores how criminal self-efficacy beliefs are formed. It is argued that factors akin to the ones leading to the development of legitimate self-efficacy also serve as a basis for perceptions of success in crime. More specifically, it is hypothesized that criminal self-efficacy is forged as offenders interpret information from four experiential sources: personal performance accomplishments, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and physiological states and reactions. Because cognitive self-appraisals are not formed in a vacuum, it is also argued that individual and environmental characteristics exert a significant impact on the development of criminal self-efficacy. Based on interviews with 212 incarcerated offenders, our results suggest that criminal self-efficacy is complexly built from individual and environmental characteristics, as well as from personal experiences with crime. The potential repercussion of these findings on the understanding of criminal persistence and desistance are discussed.

Keywords: criminology, self-efficacy, offenders' cognitive appraisals, persistence, desistance, human agency.