Telling My Truth: A Frame Analysis of Blame in Prisoner Accounts

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This thesis titled

Telling My Truth: A Frame Analysis of Blame in Prisoner Accounts

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ABSTRACT

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In analyzing the causes of crime, one source of data has been often overlooked: the life-course narratives of criminals themselves. In an attempt to uncover the criminal perspective on causes of crime, I have read twelve first-person narrative texts and identified instances of blame within them. In coding for blame, I discovered four basic Blame Frames differentiated by their implication of responsibility taken by the author and by the source of control, as seen by the author. Separating the texts by time period with the 1950s as an experimental group, I compared the frames as they were found in each time period grouping. Within this small sample size, I nevertheless was able to discern a trend between the time period separations and the frames predominantly referenced. I found that the Blame Frame referenced most frequently in the 1950s was External in nature while in the Post1950s period, the blame shifted towards being Internal in nature.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Since the birth of society, people have debated the causes of crime. Is there a biological “criminal gene” or do people choose to break the law? Does a mother steal food for her children to keep from starving or do men and women go on killing sprees because they are fun? If the study of crime has discovered nothing else, it has revealed that the scope of crime causes is as large, if not larger than the range of crimes themselves.

**Why Blame?**

Blame is a word that implies fault and responsibility. Who do we find responsible and at fault for committing offenses against us and others? Who do we see as being ultimately responsible for committing a crime? The law states that we find the criminal or person who conducted the crime to be responsible. We point the finger and blame those who we feel have wronged us. “It’s your fault,” we say. But what if the criminal doesn’t feel that they are the responsible party? If criminals seek outside sources of blame, the likelihood that any source of punishment will be effective is greatly diminished. In analyzing potential patterns of blame from the criminal perspective, policy implications are made. Suppose criminals by and large place blame for their crimes on a lack of opportunities or the legal system? Does it then make sense to punish them exclusively for the crimes they commit? The time for considering blame has come in the midst of this retributive era in punishment. In a culture wherein much emphasis is placed on the punishment of a crime, we must consider who is actually to blame.
Another reason to consider blame lies in a curiosity of a society that seems almost excessively punitive. Our imprisonment rates are higher than any other country in the world and our prisons are filled to bursting. In a society where punishment of criminals is a high priority, one wonders what or who is ultimately the cause of these criminal acts? The answers to this question have varied across time.

**Crime Theories**

Historically, the prevailing winds of crime theories have wandered all over the map. As the “father of criminology,” Cesare Beccaria (1764) believed that all humans were rational beings who could be successfully deterred from crime through deterrence. Using swift and sure punishments, Beccaria claimed that crime could be eliminated altogether. In what later came to be known as the *Classical School* of Criminology, rational, thinking humans ruled. Believing in the free will of actors, the classical school believed that punishment could deter crime as long as the punishments were proportional to the crime, fit the crime, and occurred soon after the crime itself. The blame in this school was directed at the flawed system that failed to deter potential criminals.

But the study of crime theories has hardly remained stationary since Beccaria and the classical school. The *Positivist School* believed that the source of criminality was from the individual. In attempting to quantify criminal behavior, Cesare Lombroso (1895) saw criminals as atavistic throwbacks, blaming criminality on the genetics of the individual. Based on a series of identifiable physical traits, he believed that criminality could be predicted by physical appearance. The scientific method was gaining in
popularity and the positivist school attempted to create a scientifically-based way of identifying criminals before they committed crimes.

The *Chicago School* was based around the belief that criminality derived from the geographical area in which one lived. In combining theory and ethnographic fieldwork, this school was developed in a time when immigration into the United States was high. Robert Park and Ernest Burgess (1921) identified five concentric zones around the city of Chicago, defined by the types of communities within each. In identifying these five zones, one in particular seemed to have both higher crime rates as well as a higher immigrant population. In part because of this link, the Chicago school began the symbolic interactionist perspective in which crime is caused by social structures and physical environmental factors, as opposed to biology or the system. This school was also the basis for the theory of *social disorganization* (Henry McKay and Clifford Shaw 1942) which saw high rates of poverty and economic deprivation as being responsible for high population turnover rates. This population turnover was claimed to lead to a failure of informal social structure, blaming the neighborhood and its social disorganization for crime rates.

In the 1940s and 50s, Robert K. Merton (1938) began to popularize *strain theory*. He developed a typology that blamed social structures within society as the cause of crime. Merton believed that when an individual is unable to use institutionalized means (working hard) to fulfill institutionalized goals (making money), they will adapt, possibly committing crimes as a result. The 1960s brought the advent of *labeling theory* from Howard Becker (1963). Deviance, he claimed, was not a result of a criminal or deviant
act, but instead was the result of personality factors commonly associated with deviance. Associated with the self-fulfilling prophecy, Becker saw crime arising from the tendency of majorities to label minorities and deviants in a negative fashion. Under this theory, identity and self-image are formed around the labels used to describe and classify individuals. Blame in this theory seems to stem from a society that places labels on deviants, which in turn promote the deviant behavior and become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In the 1980s, the family came under public scrutiny as a leading cause of crime. Blaming the parents for the child’s criminality was nothing new, but experienced resurgence in public opinion during this time. Social Control became a leading theory in the 90s and acted as a direct response to Sutherland’s differential association theory, which emphasized that criminality was bred from interacting with criminals and learning the values, attitudes, techniques, and motives for criminal behavior. Social Control (Travis Hirschi 1969) attempted to explain why people do not become criminal as opposed to Sutherland’s explanation as to why people become criminal. A lack of self control was to blame for criminality, according to Hirschi. Acknowledging that these theories of criminality are historically specific, it seems likely that the criminals themselves are as well. Do their explanations for crime depend upon their historical position? Why should we bother?

A rather large void in the social sciences, especially sociology and criminology, exists in detailed qualitative studies on the causes of crime. We constantly claim to know the causes of crime, but our opinions seem to be as varied as the sources we use. But one
source that seems to be missing from the literature are the words of the criminals themselves—uninterrupted, uninfluenced, and personal—and their views on who is responsible. With society torn about who or what is ultimately to blame for crime, what do the criminals themselves think? Laub and Sampson find inherent value in studying the words of criminals to fill a void in criminology: “We concede that the development of quantitative methods has solidified criminology’s claim as a scientific enterprise, but what criminology is lacking is a rich, detailed knowledge base about offending from those who commit crime, expressed in their own words,” (2003, p.59).

This perspective is often devalued for a number of reasons. The very bulk of the research is done on memories or recollections made by criminals. The prevalence of lying seems to increase when discussing crimes committed. Even if not lying about what occurred, it is still possible that the criminal will lie about the events surrounding the case, to decrease their own level of responsibility. Another factor to consider is that some of this data will come in the form of memories, some of which may have occurred many years prior to the recollection.

But, regardless of the seeming complications in using this type of qualitative data, value still can be found. In the case of lying, we must consider why they are lying. If they are intentionally changing their story, then their perception that the lie is more believable, more valuable, or more desirable to their audience is important in itself. If they are unintentionally changing their story (flawed memories), then the facts that they do remember and relate are important as well. The way in which they remember past events effects the way in which they react to each memory, flawed or not. In reality, they
are likely to relate the memories as they remember them, which is still the way the memories affect the individual in question. These recollections can then successfully be used in my attempt to determine the historical cultural internalization of blame from those within the system.

In this study, I attempt to discover if a pattern exists in the distribution of blame by those who have become part of the very system that punishes. The time for studying blame has come in this retributive, punitive era and an analysis of these prisoners’ culturally-structured narratives seems a valuable way to go about it. If the theories of crime themselves have varied across time, then why should the beliefs and opinions of those imprisoned in the system itself be any different.
CHAPTER 2: THEORY

In this section of the paper, I will be discussing the available literature and theories surrounding this topic. Covering the concept of blame and the ways in which it relates to this project is my first task. A discussion of the vocabulary of motive follows and includes a variety of concepts: the attribution of blame, accounts, and techniques of neutralization. A brief overview of Theodore Sasson’s work in *Crime Talk* follows, along with a rationalization of the value of social construction for this project. I then will make a case for the use of the life-history record as a source of data and end the section with an argument for splitting the data by time period and the importance of adolescence in the life course.

Blame

So why do we blame? Is it to see the guilty party receive some sort of punishment? Is it to make ourselves as outsiders feel better? Does blaming help the wronged party in any way? Sharon Lamb (1996) asks some of these questions. There is an inherent difficulty with blaming for “it does not, in reality, seem to help. You point the finger, and usually the accused points back. The more you blame a person, the more ashamed he feels and the greater his tendency will be to hide his head, deny his wrongdoing, or look outward for causality,” (Lamb 1996, p.11).

In studying blame as it pertains to crime, Lamb finds a number of reasons why individuals blame. She claims that in our general tendency to blame others, we do it to be rid of guilt, to deny responsibility for our failures, and even just to “disaffiliate with losers,” (quoted in Lamb 1996, p.24). It seems that blaming is used not only as an excuse
or a denial of responsibility, but an action people use as a “defense against thinking of themselves as “bad,” or as “bad” people;” (Lamb 1996, p.14-15). In an attempt to reconcile their public image with their inner selves, blame serves to resolve this internal conflict. In blaming others, they settle their conflicted selves with the reassurance that they are “good” people. The act of other-blaming may be caused in part, by what Lamb claims is a “misreading of cues” (Lamb 1996, p.78-79). In misreading the available cues, one may feel that they are indeed not responsible for their discretions and that another party is actually at fault. Another aspect of other-blaming seems to come from a sense of entitlement. Being denied something one feels they are entitled to may cause a lack of remorse when they are held responsible for an infraction. This is likely to cause an increase in the chance that the one being held responsible will in turn, blame a third party for the incident, claiming that the third party is responsible for the lack of fulfillment.

Two common types of criminal blame in the social environment are that of a history of abuse (predisposing one to a life of crime) and mother-blaming (focusing the blame outward and onto the lack of ideal mother influences). These are just two of the types of blame that have been studied in relation to criminality.

Two Types of Blame: History of Abuse and Mother Blame

One of the most culturally-prevalent instances of blame in relation to offenders is one claiming a history of abuse that has predisposed them to acts of violence. Sharon Lamb (1996) claims that a statistical relationship has been documented between a history of physical or sexual abuse and adult men acting out sexually and violently (1996, p.60). Whether the relationship is cause or merely correlation is not clear as of yet, but a
relationship has been documented and has been shown to have measurable impacts on criminality. Cultural references are often made implying that those who abuse must have been abused during their vulnerable childhood. How else are we, as a society, to justify and construct blame onto those violent offenders who abuse others? It is a claim similar to the one made about serial killers having a history of animal abuse. No causal relationship has been found in the history of abuse argument. “We currently find that so many adults have suffered from childhood sexual or physical abuse, lived with an alcoholic parent or a dysfunctional family, that it may be the commonality of these experiences that makes it so easy to find them in the history of abusers,” (Lamb 1996, p.60).

If one claims a history of abuse is responsible for delinquency, we can form policy around the prevention of abuse and create appropriate programs for those who have fallen victim to said trauma. This type of blame is complex in its implication that someone who has been made a victim of abuse may in turn seek to victimize others for a number of reasons. Whether this link is causal or merely correlational, actual patterns have been found between a history of abuse and delinquency. When considered in the context of this study, we can see that past events can and do have an effect on the outcome of an individual. But is there a variance over time? Is it possible that as different blame sources are advocated by the media or society, that those at the mercy of the system may come to support these different blames?

A more recent source of blame centers on the role that mothers play in their children’s upbringing. Culturally, we assume that if something is amiss with the child or
the way the child was raised, that it is the mother’s fault alone (Hoffman & Vander Ven 2007, p.169). This mother-blame is defined by Vander Ven & Vander Ven as “the propensity to explain negative outcomes for children by focusing on the failures of mothers” (2003, p.97). And although mothers seem to get a bad rap, single mothers often seem to be the target of social commentators when it comes to delinquency.

It has been documented by Grogger (1997) that between 1950 and 1975, both teen pregnancy and national crime rates rose dramatically. This implied link was supported by the statistical reality of a number of disadvantages that exist among young single-mother-households. “Poverty, welfare dependency, and unstable marital unions” are just a few of the issues cited by Hoffman and Vander Ven (2007, p.161). Delinquency scholars have consistently seen the “broken home” as a primary explanation for delinquency. Unfortunately for these scholars, “the great majority of children raised in fractured families do not take part in serious patterned delinquency. Although a child of divorce may have a higher probability of delinquency, divorce itself does not doom a child to a life of crime,” (Hoffman & Vander Ven 2007, p.163).

Single working mothers have recently come under fire in claims that as working mothers, they are unable to sufficiently support and discipline their children (Cohen and Katzenstein 1988). This claim, made by social critics and childrearing “experts” references attachment disorder and behavioral problems as symptoms of mothers who work outside the home (see Eyer 1996 for a more thorough description). In a study conducted to evaluate this claim specifically, Vander Ven and Cullen looked at the effect, if any, that maternal employment had on a child’s delinquency. They found that maternal
work itself had little effect on delinquency, but that when the mother worked in a
coercively controlled job in the secondary labor market, children were at a statistically
greater risk for delinquency.

Each of the two types of blame discussed above has been evaluated in the study of
delinquency, but more importantly, they have become part of a cultural crime discussion.
One in which abusive parents and single, working mothers are often vilified in social
considerations of crime causes. But how does blame relate to crime? Why must we
make these verbal excuses for our behaviors? There is a vocabulary to be explored: a
vocabulary of motive.

**Vocabulary of Motive**

Coined by C. Wright Mills, the term “vocabulary of motive” has important
connotations for this research. Designed to “capture the language by which people
describe their motivations and account for their conduct,” (Marshall 1998) this concept
notes that “both motives and actions very often originate not from within but from the
situation in which individuals find themselves” (Mannheim 1940). This vocabulary of
motive is relative to the situation and individual at hand. The true motive is impossible to
discern, for Mills believes that:

> “[t]here is no way to plumb behind verbalization into an individual and
directly check our motive-mongering….As I see it, motives are
circumscribed by the vocabulary of the actor. The only source for a
terminology of motives is the vocabularies of motives actually and usually
verbalized by actors in specific situations.” (Mills 1940, p.910)

This vocabulary has come more recently to be associated with a number of theories
among which are Scott and Lyman’s discussion of accounts and Sykes and Matza’s
techniques of neutralizations. I will be using this vocabulary of motives in my attempt to discover historical trends in blame recorded by prisoners of the system. Do these attributions of blame vary over time?

**Attributions**

When an average person perceives an event, psychologist Fritz Heider (1958) believed that he or she will continuously make inferences about why said event has occurred. Based on this casual phenomenon, Heider developed what he called attribution theory. This concept focuses on the ways people explain (or attribute) behavior of themselves and others. “External” or “situational” attribution puts blame on an outside factor while “internal” or “dispositional” attributions put blame on internal factors. External factors can range from the weather to another’s influence, while internal attributions assign causality to factors inside the individual. Attributions of blame are part of the vocabulary of motive. When an individual feels the need to explain themselves, to justify their motive, they attribute blame to the party they feel is responsible. These individual accounts become the data in an effort to uncover possible historical trends in the blaming of prisoners—of those locked within the system.

**Accounts**

Defined by Scott & Lyman as “a statement made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior,” accounts are separated into two basic types: excuses and justifications. According to Scott and Lyman, the difference in these two types is reduced to an acceptance of responsibility (justifications) or a denial of full responsibility (excuses). Excuses are defined as accounts made wherein “one admits that
the act in question is bad, wrong, or inappropriate but denies full responsibility” (Scott and Lyman 1968, p.47). These excuses are reduced to four types: an appeal to accidents, an appeal to defeasibility, an appeal to biological drives, and scapegoating.

In the appeal to accident, responsibility is eased “by pointing to the generally recognized hazards in the environment, the understandable inefficiency of the body, and the human incapacity to control all motor responses,” (Scott & Lyman 1968, p.47). An appeal to defeasibility makes the claim that full information was not available or that the “will” of the perpetrator was not entirely “free.” The latter claim carries with it the possibility of intoxication (either alcohol or drug-related) and lunacy (both temporary and permanent).

The third modal form of excuses is those made that relate to biological drives. Scott and Lyman cite a few groups in American society that are seen as having “a ‘normalized’ fatalistic view of their condition,” including both adolescents and African-Americans (1968, p.49). These groups often see themselves as at the whim of larger forces against them. Phrases like “men are like that” encourage this view and imply sex-linked traits that determine actions beyond the control of one’s will. Scapegoating is the fourth and final of the modal forms. This type of excuse occurs when the individual under question claims that his or her actions are a response to the attitudes or actions of another (Scott & Lyman 1968, p.50). One example of an excuse is that of victim blame.

Victim blame seems to occur most often when an offense occurs between sexes. Lamb explains that perpetrators may “claim that their victims are almost directly responsible for their fates, that the little girl wanted to be fondles, that the raped woman
was asking for it by her behavior and dress, and that the abused wife provoked her beating with her comments or behavior” (1996, p.79).

Justifications, differentiated from excuses, are defined by Scott & Lyman as “accounts in which one accepts responsibility for the act in question, but denies the pejorative quality associated with it,” (1968, p.47). In situations like these, acknowledgement of responsibility is important, but not everything.

Blame was earlier defined with responsibility as a central focus. Although justifications inherently accept responsibility while excuses inherently deny it, both must be acknowledged and counted as frames of blame for the purpose of this study. To deny justifications is to deny blame frames that focus on sources external to the individual such as laws. Justifications are further linked by Scott and Lyman to techniques of neutralization.

Techniques of Neutralization

“It is our argument that much delinquency is based on what is essentially an unrecognized extension of defenses to crime, in the form of justifications for deviance that are seen as valid by the delinquent but not by the legal system or society at large.” –Sykes and Matza 1957, p.666 [italics in original].

Linked to Sutherland’s differential association theory (1939), Sykes and Matza claim that learning these techniques of neutralization is what makes individuals deviant, rather than learning the attitudes and behaviors of crime as Sutherland believes. Instead of learning to commit crimes, Sykes and Matza do not believe that one becomes truly deviant until they are taught and begin to justify or neutralize their deviant acts.

Possibly occurring before, during, and or after the deviant act itself, these techniques of neutralization can be divided into five different types. The Denial of
Responsibility acts to reduce the effectiveness of the disapproval of others as a restraining influence (Sykes & Matza 1957, p.667). Included within this category is blaming outside forces. Unloving parents, bad companions, and a slum neighborhood can all be seen as forces beyond one’s control that are likely to influence the actions of the individual (Sykes & Matza 1957, p.667).

The Denial of Injury is one which separates acts that are wrong in and of themselves (*mala in se*) and acts that are illegal but not immoral (*mala prohibita*) (Sykes & Matza 1957, p.667). In situations like this, the delinquent may claim that the lack of harm neutralizes his or her guilt.

The third technique of neutralization is a Denial of the Victim. “Even if the delinquent accepts the responsibility for his deviant actions and is willing to admit that his deviant actions involve an injury or hurt, the moral indignation of self and others may be neutralized by an insistence that the injury is not wrong in light of the circumstances” (Sykes & Matza 1957, p.668). In claiming that the supposed injury is in actuality a punishment or retaliation to a previous wrong, the delinquent positions him or herself as a righter of wrongs while turning the victim into the offender.

Similar to the denial of injury, in a Condemnation of the Condemners, the delinquent “shifts the focus of attention from his own deviant acts to the motives and behavior of those who disapprove of his violations. His condemners, he may claim, are hypocrites, deviants in disguise, or impelled by personal spite,” (Sykes & Matza 1957, p.668).
The fifth technique of neutralization is one that Sykes and Matza have dubbed the *Appeal to Higher Loyalties*. In this technique, the violation of the law is regrettably necessary in order to uphold the demands of a smaller social group (i.e. sibling pair, the gang, or the friendship clique). “[T]he delinquent may see himself as caught up in a dilemma that must be resolved, unfortunately, at the cost of violating the law,” (Sykes & Matza 1957, p.669).

Each technique of neutralization shows a way in which individuals attribute blame to external factors. One important thing to remember is that in all accounts (justifications *and* excuses), the individual acknowledges that they have committed a harm. The five types of neutralization techniques do not deny the wrong, merely the responsibility *behind* the wrong. In each of these instances, the one thing being debated is the ultimate responsibility for the wrong.

Neutralization techniques occur throughout society, but seemingly within one population more than any other: the criminals. In an effort to evaluate any existing historical socio-cultural trends in blame, these techniques of neutralization become important sources of information for those trapped within the system.

*The Missing Piece of the Techniques of Neutralization*

There appears to be at least one important thing missing from Sykes and Matza’s analysis of neutralization techniques. In studying only middle-class bankers and reform school detainees, Volkan Topalli claims that a rather large population has been ignored: the hardcore street offenders (2006, p.477). Topalli professes that in ignoring the unconventionally-attached individuals, that Sykes and Matza have limited their ability to
address the behaviors and decision-making processes of nonconventional criminals.

Topalli sought out and interviewed active, noninstitutionalized street offenders. Based on research he completed in 2005, Topalli found that “many offenders consider law breaking and victimization to not only be appropriate but enjoyable,” (2006, p.477). For many of these offenders, the need to neutralize became irrelevant. Because many of the offenders Topalli studied found enjoyment in lawbreaking and victimization, they were less likely to feel guilt and much less likely to neutralize their actions. Topalli is careful to note that these mindsets (i.e. “crime is fun” and a lack of guilt) are adopted:

“because they are the most logical and competent responses to the environments in which offenders are forced to live and operate in […] This is not to say that they feel forced to engage in crime (as traditional subculturalists might contend) but rather that criminal behavior is simply more sensible given their circumstances, (Topalli 2006, p.477-78).

Topalli’s findings seem to indicate that techniques of neutralization are not employed by hardcore offenders, that they instead discount guilt by defining violence as normal, leaving no need for guilt in the first place. By casting violence in a “mundane, inevitable, or enjoyable light,” any necessitation of guilt neutralization is rendered moot (cited in Topalli 2006, p.485).

A trend Topalli discovered in studying hardcore street offenders was one in which many of the criminals “referred to their criminal behavior as a career, job, or work,” (Topalli 2006, p.487). He also noted a trend that many of these hardcore street offenders referenced ideas related to the just-world hypothesis (Lerner 1980; Lerner and Miller 1978). They often described their lives as being controlled by fate or luck. Near the end of his article, Topalli attempts to redeem Sykes and Matza’s work on the techniques of
neutralization. He claims that the rejection evident in street offenders may in fact have developed through a traditional neutralization process after all. This “hardening process,” gradually weakened the offenders’ commitment to conventional ideals “to a point where considerations of guilt or shame would be treated with indifference or where approval of nonconventional beliefs and behaviors becomes dominant,” (Topalli 2006, p.493).

These techniques of neutralization are common in accounts and an important part of the vocabulary of motive. In this study, this vocabulary will be analyzed in an attempt to find historical trends in the blame used by prisoners. These techniques of neutralizing blame will be collected and studied. As individuals trapped within the system that punishes them, prisoners are in a unique position.

One differentiation that must be made is that between blame and accountability, especially in terms of restorative justice. Restorative justice is currently one of the most rapidly expanding areas of criminology. This form of justice is slightly different than the type many outside the legal system may be used to. Restorative justice focuses the attention on the harm done to an individual or community, instead of the state. It emphasizes the personal nature of the crime committed and often involves an apology or reparation directly or indirectly from the one who has caused the harm. In this way, it attempts to make legal proceedings more personal for those involved.

Another unique aspect of restorative justice is the difference between the terms “accountability” and “blame.” Instead of attempting to discover who is to blame for the crime, as our current system often does, restorative justice attempts to discover the harm
done, who was harmed, and how reparation can be made. One of the most rapidly expanding areas of criminology today, restorative justice places accountability for a crime on the individual who has caused harm instead of blaming someone for the criminal act. Just a difference in terms seems to change the whole nature of the concept. When considering blame in terms of the vocabulary of motive, we are reminded that these instances of blame fall under the larger heading of accounts. But, while Scott and Lyman focus their discussion of accounts on actual conversation, we know that they can also be found in written form—in the form of a life-history record.

**Accounts and the Life-History Record**

In this section, I will make the connection between accounts and narratives. I will then describe the benefits and drawbacks of the life-history record and reveal the value of this often-overlooked qualitative source. A description and discussion of Theodore Sasson’s work on the public perception of crime causes will then follow.

**Accounts: Part of a Narrative**

As previously defined, accounts are employed when something untoward or unanticipated has occurred and an explanation is required. But, one thing to remember is that accounts are merely portions of narratives. Considered stories that are put into a constructive format, narratives describe a series of events, real or fictional. Given this fact, a narrative may act as a type of frozen account (Scott and Lyman 1968, p.56-57) when memoirs and autobiographies are written. A key component to a narrative, though, is its historical context. “[N]arratives are occasioned, put together in the context of particular times and places; these circumstances influence how the self might be storied...
by presenting local relevancies,” (Holstein and Gubrium 2000, p.106). These sorts of relevancies are more easily noticed in life-history narratives.

Life-History Record

In the course of this paper, the terms “life-history record” (Shaw 1930) and “life-history narrative” (Laub and Sampson 2003) may be used interchangeably. For both terms imply a first-person written record about key experiences in one’s life. This form of data is used in an attempt to link social history and social structure within the context of human lives. Research using this type of data relies on four basic principles: 1) stories placed within the context of a particular time and place serve to emphasize that “the life course of individuals is embedded in and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their lifetime”; 2) that timing matters—“the developmental impact of a succession of life transitions or events is contingent on when they occur in a person’s life”; 3) the idea of linked lives and interdependency—that “lives are lived interdependently, and social and historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships”; and 4) the importance of agency throughout one’s life course (Elder 1998, p.3-4). The unique value these narratives provide is one that allows us to get to an individual’s words the way they were originally intended to be received. Because they are worded by the one who experienced the events, they hold inherent value for the researcher. “Life-history narratives offer a way of breaking down complex phenomena by providing detailed information about events as they are experienced and the significance of these events for the actors involved,” (Laub and Sampson 2003, p.58-59).
Drawbacks of the Life-History Record

The biggest flaw of using data of this type is one that finds issue in aging individuals writing about events that occurred years prior. Will they remember the events exactly as they occurred? Very unlikely. But the accounts that they do describe key the reader in to the ways in which these events affected the individual. “It is not expected that the delinquent will necessarily describe his life-situations objectively. On the contrary, it is desired that his story will reflect his own personal attitudes and interpretations, for it is just these personal factors which are so important in the study and treatment of the case,” (Shaw 1930, p.2-3). In studies like this one, wherein an attempt to discern an individuals’ reasoning for criminal activity is made, it is vital to get the perspective of the individual, not an objective listing of facts.

This study itself is not intended to diagnose the causes of crime, but is intended to discern the social and historical contexts that may have led the individual to their deviant act. “By means of personal documents it is possible to study not only the traditions, customs, and moral standards of neighborhoods, institutions, families, gangs, and play groups, but the manner in which these cultural factors become incorporated into the behavior trends of the child” (Shaw 1930, p.7). Looking at personal accounts and narratives is ideal for this study because each account is a full tale, with only the author’s intended words. These narratives give us insight into historically-specific forms of blame. Autobiographies and memoirs are the best sources because of their inclusion of the entire life-course, from childhood through adolescence and perhaps into old age. Autobiographies and memoirs of prisoners, who are constantly being reminded of what
brought them to their current incarcerated state, are ideal in studying individually-perceived causes of personal crimes.

The life-history record holds value in placing the actions and attitudes of the individual in question within a particular historical and social context. The author relates their narrative and enables the reader to view the values of the author. These records are the best way to discover instances of blame within the accounts of actors. Life-history records of prisoners are even more valuable in determining if there are any historical variations in the types of blame leveled by deviants within the system that is punishing them. So what does the public think about the causes of crime? Theodore Sasson attempted to answer this question.

*Crime Talk*

Sasson (1995) compiled a sample of media discourse consisting of 58 op-ed columns that both a) referenced crime and b) “offer[ed] either an analysis of its sources or recommendation for its cure” (Sasson 1995, p.17). He then recruited neighborhood crime watch groups and held group discussions on the causes of crime that he had discovered in his op-ed search. Split into five different frames, Sasson found that his results clustered around a set of concepts. So who/what did Sasson find to be the cause of crime? Who/what did the participants in his study ultimately blame for crime?

*Faulty System*

The first frame, classified as the “law and order” frame, is titled *Faulty System* and it “regards crime as a consequence of impunity: People do crimes because they know they can get away with them” (Sasson 1995, p.13). Two subframes were created to cover
differing aspects of the frame: Leniency and Inefficiency. Most of the references to Leniency contest that current punishments given out by the criminal justice system are too lax, or that harsher treatment of offenders is needed. Participants in the peer discussion groups made the claim that prisons were “excessively pleasant.” Sasson noted that in “[r]eadying the transcripts, one learns that prisons offer “three hots and a cot,” a chance to “pump up,” air conditioning, swimming pools, parking garages with mosaic floors, opportunities for higher education, special rooms for sexual liaisons, top quality medical care and a host of other amenities unavailable to most Americans” (1995, p.43).

An inherent claim of this subframe is that harsher punishments will deter potential offenders. Sasson has identified three categories of advocacy displays in the subframe Inefficiency. The first attributes crime to the system’s failure to provide swift and certain punishments to offenders, reminiscent of Cesare Beccaria’s argument in the 1700s. Requests for more cops or a complaint about the absence of police resources comprise the second category of Sasson’s Inefficiency subframe. An appeal for new approaches to policing and sentencing makes up the third category of advocacy displays including intensive policing of “hot spots” and a request for officers to be assigned and walk a daily “beat”. Faulty System was rebutted in Sasson’s research, though: the claim was made that the system itself is irrelevant to crime levels, that there are other sources of crime that are more influential to the statistics than the lack of enough prisons, harsher prisons, or police officers.
Social Breakdown

The second frame is Social Breakdown which cites crime as a consequence of family and community disintegration. Divorce rates, out-of-wedlock births, and an indifference to crime rates seem due to the moral and social bonds of communities weakening. It was also unanimously embraced by 60% of the peer discussion groups while none of the groups unanimously rejected this frame.

Four types of advocacy displays can be found in Social Breakdown: family breakdown, community disintegration, a call for interventions for offenders, and a call for collective action from the residents. Negligent parenting was referenced in almost all of the discussions: “participants insisted that crime stems from the failure of parents to supervise, discipline and properly care for their children.” These sorts of claims were made in all of the black and mixed groups and in six of the eight white groups (Sasson 1995, p.64). Table 1 is a representation of the causes of poor parenting as set forth by and documented in the peer group discussions.

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Causes of Poor Parenting as Supported by Crime Watch Groups</th>
<th>Number of Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cause of Poor Parenting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family breakdown or the absence of fathers</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selfishness and greed</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to work in order to make ends meet</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youthfulness of parents due to &quot;babies having babies&quot;</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance abuse</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrusion of government into family life (child abuse laws)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The main rebuttal to the *Social Breakdown* frame is the realization that despite parents’ every effort, some children still wind up criminals. This indicates that crime may in fact be a matter of personal choice. Despite the rebuttals of crime as a choice, this frame’s performance in the discussions tempted Sasson to label it a “consensus frame.” This was not done because members of several discussion groups “expressed reservations about its claims concerning ‘family breakdown’” (Sasson 1995, p.84).

*Blocked Opportunities*

*Blocked Opportunities* is the third frame Sasson found in the data. This frame sees crime as a response to inequality and discrimination, focusing on their emergence within unemployment, poverty, and inadequate educational opportunities. “People commit crimes when they discover that the legitimate means for attaining material success are blocked” (Sasson 1995, p.14).

One of the responses for those individuals who find their path to attaining cultural goals blocked is *innovation*. Modeled after Merton’s deviance typology, this response involves using illegitimate means (crime) to achieve legitimate goals (the American Dream, represented by material success). The second response to blocked opportunities is that of *retreatism*. Again modeled after Merton’s typology, this category of individuals are those who reject both the institutionally prescribed goals (making money) as well as the institutionally prescribed means of achieving those goals (working hard). In this situation, Merton claimed that the individual would attempt to escape or retreat from society altogether. Although Merton’s typology moves through several other types of
deviance, Sasson only referenced these two and in focusing on his analysis, I will follow suit. In Sasson’s analysis, he found that many of the op-eds and discussions referenced the frame of *Blocked Opportunities* in regards to crime being born of necessity. Sarah, a retiree from Cape Verdean, who did not complete high school, is in her early 60s: “People would take a loaf of bread to feed their kids,” (Sasson 1995, p.93). With this comment, Sarah seems to be implying that if the means where otherwise available, theft would not be necessary. But what about white-collar crime? And why don’t all poor people steal?

Sasson discovered some of these issues as rebuttals in his data. *Blocked Opportunities* was disputed with the fact that most poor people do not turn to crime (Sasson 1995, p.98). Poverty alone cannot be responsible for crime. A second rebuttal found in the discussions is that offenders often choose to commit crimes because “it is either easier or more lucrative than legitimate employment” (Sasson 1995, p.101). Why work for minimum wage when a quick theft or breaking and entering job will provide more than enough money? What about those individuals who commit crimes who have no need for the money or objects they steal? White-collar crime was broached as a key rebuttal for *Blocked Opportunities* in the group discussions.

*Media Violence and Racist System*

The fourth and fifth frames, *Media Violence* and *Racist System* respectively, are treated as secondary frames because their performance both in the op-eds and the group discussions was less prevalent than *Blocked Opportunities, Social Breakdown, or Faulty System* (Sasson 1995, p.105). Media Violence sees crime as “a consequence of violence
on television, in the movies, and in popular music” (Sasson 1995, p.16). The average child, having reached the age of 18, will have “witnessed…some 18,000 murders and countless highly detailed incidents of robbery, arson, bombings, shooting, beatings, forgery, smuggling and torture,” says Dr. Thomas Elmendorf while testifying to the House Subcommittee on Communication (quoted in Sasson 1995, p.16). As a major source of information and entertainment for today’s youth, television seems to hold a great deal of power over impressionable minds, or so this argument seems to claim. Sasson links this frame to some of the research done by Sutherland (1955) and his “differential association” theory. With increasing numbers of children spending the majority of their time in front of a television set, this non-living entity must be acknowledged as a source of information and influence, especially to children and adolescents. The implication is made that children and adolescents are exposed to a number of glorifications of violence, in turn cheapening their regard for life (Sasson 1995, p.106).

The truth of these types of claims has been studied by social cognition theorists and in particular by Albert Bandura. Believing that individuals do not merely absorb information, he believed that there was in fact a cognition process that took place between the information absorption and learning stages. That in fact, individuals cognitively process the information they receive before. This research has helped to prove that the belief that television ‘corrupts young minds’ is a false one. Although conclusive research has been done to the contrary, Sasson’s findings are significant in the fact that a number of research subjects believe the corruption of television is true.
Performing poorly in Sasson’s research, it must be reported that Sasson found no rebuttal displays of *Media Violence*. According to the data gathered by Sasson, this frame appears to be a consensus perspective on crime, despite psychological research to the contrary.

As the final of the five frames, *Racist System* is created from an analysis of the criminal justice system itself, and not of the criminals. This frame claims that the courts and the police act as racist agents of oppression. Where advocated, writers of the op-eds seemed to allege a racial “double standard” when considering the administration of justice. Claiming that this double standard is one of the reasons that blacks are disproportionately arrested and imprisoned, this frame was brushed off in the all-white group discussion. Claiming that they were “bored” with the topic due in part to the amount of media coverage it was receiving, the group dismissed it from being a leading cause of crime.

Sasson’s *Crime Talk* study is important in that it attempts to evaluate the public perception of a difficult topic: the causes of crime. But, in looking at his study it also becomes clear that many of these popular opinions also have roots in criminology theory. An analysis of accounts written by prisoners becomes valuable in an attempt to discover potential historical cultural changes in blame that have already been recorded in criminology theory. In constructing these theories, we construct the blame associated with each. How each type of blame is constructed is vital to the way in which we, as a society, react to it.
Social Construction

“If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, it’s a social construct of a duck” (Cronin 2006). A social construct is defined as any phenomenon “invented” or “constructed” by social actors. These constructs only exist because social actors agree to behave as if it exists. Constructs vary in type and can range from the concept of “social class”, “masculinity”, and even to the term “deviant”. These constructions are entirely social in nature. In using social construction for this project in studying blame, we are able to avoid the objective nature of social problems and look more towards the sources and dimensions that beget them. This approach focuses on the political activities that cause certain conditions to be seen as problems in the first place. It looks at the ways in which problems come to be “framed” in certain ways.

An important part of social construction is cognition. An individual must be able to link the concepts or the construction (term) with the object that is constructed (object). In dealing with prisoners and their life-history records, we must consider their cognition.

An important stage in life, and in their lives in particular, is that of adolescence both for its memory-recall levels and for its cultural influences.

The Importance of Adolescence

Statistically, adolescence is a key life stage as well as a key criminal offending stage. It is the time wherein individuals are most likely to begin absorbing and retaining cultural values. It is also the time in which individuals are more likely to commit a crime (Moffitt 1993, p.675). Farrington (1983) reports that the adolescent crime peaks shows a temporary increase in the number of individuals engaging in antisocial behavior. But
how long does this ‘crime increase’ last? “Typically, criminal offending begins in pre-adolescence, peaks sharply during adolescence, and rapidly declines in the transition to young adulthood,” (Laub and Sampson 2003, p.16).

For the purposes of this study, we must define adolescence with numbers. I posit that this period in an individual’s life is key to their moral, cultural, and social development. Adolescence, for the purposes of this study, is to be defined as the years between the ages of 11 and 18 (Moffitt 1993, p.686). Classifying subjects by age beginning at age eleven, Moffitt discovered that between the ages of eleven and seventeen, children were more likely to be deviant. The range ending value of eighteen was used because at this age, the United States (from which my data sample is taken) declares that individuals are legal adults and thus, no longer adolescents. This period of seven years is more important now than it was before modernization.

Modernization has widened the gap between social maturity and biological maturity. Biological maturity has been occurring at younger and younger ages due in part to better nutrition and health care while social maturity has been pushed off due to an increased need for individuals to stay in school for longer (Moffitt 1993, p.686). This ensuing gap, called the maturity gap, has been shown to lead adolescents into attempting to reconcile their different maturities by committing crimes (Moffitt 1993). Although they are not allowed to act like adults, they are biologically able to do so, and their bodies and minds are restricted by laws. Thus, to reconcile these different ages, they are likely to act out against the laws that bind them.
This period is important for this study because of its importance both in deviance studies and in cultural absorption. If we assume that adolescence is the peak time for cultural absorption, we are able to more accurately divide our sample by time period. Dividing based on birthdates is difficult because very few individuals are able to retain memories from younger ages. Standardizing adolescence as the division range makes it much more likely that the individuals within the divisions were affected by the cultures at the time. But now we move from a discussion of the way in which we divided and into a discussion of why and where we divided the subjects.

**Time Period Classification**

The data I have collected have been placed under several time period constraints. Each offender/author must have been born after 1900. The beginning of modernization is an important cut-off time for reasons that have previously been discussed. But why is a division to be made around the 1950s? In this section, I will do my best to describe why the 1950s is the ideal decade to pull subjects from. For reasons related to the social climate and its revolution around a particular set of ideals for the family, the 1950s in the United States has culturally become one of great interest.

*The 1950s: A Cultural Look*

The cultural family images most often referenced are ones that bring to life the 1950s ideal of the “traditional nuclear family”. This vision is based on “a sharp division of labor…with the female as full-time housewife and the male as primary provider and ultimate authority,” (Popenoe 1989, p.1). As a cultural commonality, the phrase “traditional nuclear family” takes on a powerful role in assisting us in determining what
is “normal” for our own families. So where do we get these images of the “traditional” family? Stephanie Coontz claims that “[o]ur most powerful visions of traditional families derive from images that are still delivered to our homes in countless reruns of 1950s television sit-coms,” (1992, p.23). This then becomes a problem. When culturally surrounded by visions of this “traditional nuclear family”, we begin to assume that our family should fit the mold in order to be “normal”. A broken family, even when statistically prevalent, becomes abnormal or “flawed” in relation to this culturally-emphasized vision of the “normal” family with two happy parents, a white picket fence, and 2.5 children. Stephanie Coontz makes an important evaluation:

“The problem is not only that these visions bear a suspicious resemblance to reruns of old television series, but also that the scripts of different shows have been mixed up: June Cleaver suddenly has a Grandpa Walton dispensing advice in her kitchen; Donna Stone, vacuuming the living room in her inevitable pearls and high heels, is no longer married to a busy modern pediatrician but to a small-town sheriff who, like Andy Taylor of “The Andy Griffith Show,” solves community problems through informal, old-fashioned common sense.” (1992, p.8-9)

This disagreement between the myth and the reality became a real problem for children growing up in this time period. Coontz reports that the most common reaction of individuals who have realized that their family isn’t perfect is one of guilt. “Even as children, my students and colleagues tell me, they felt guilty because their families did not act like those on television,” (1992, p.6). She states that the second most common reaction seems to be anger—“a sense of betrayal or rage when you and your family cannot live as the myths suggest you should be able to do,” (Coontz 1992, p.6).
The Role of Women

Women in the 1950s were staying home, cooking, cleaning, and raising the children. But just how much housework were they doing? Stephanie Coontz has a reply:

“Nineteenth-century middle-class women had cheerfully left housework to servants, yet 1950s women of all classes created makework in their homes and felt guilty when they did not do everything for themselves. The amount of time women spent doing housework actually increased during the 1950s, despite the advent of convenience foods and new, labor-saving appliances,” (Coontz 1992, p.27; see Mathews 1987 and Friedan 1963 for further explanation)

Even movie stars were participating in the housework game. “Joan Crawford, for example, one of the brash, tough, independent leading ladies of the prewar era, was now pictured as a devoted mother whose sex appeal and glamour did not prevent her from doing her own housework. She posed for pictures mopping floors and gave interviews about her childrearing philosophy (see May 1989; May 1988). But even in motherhood, women were struggling to determine the boundaries of their role; they were getting conflicting views from society. A woman who did not want to be mothers were seen as “unnatural”. “Women were told that “no other experience in life…will provide the same sense of fulfillment, of happiness, of complete pervading contentment” as motherhood,” (see Hartmann 1982; May 1988). At the same time, though, the prevailing view of psychologists and popular writers of the time insisted that women who invested too much in the raising of their children were the source of a great deal of social ills.

Employment outside the home for women was greatly frowned upon. Who would take care of the children while women were out of the house? Even college educations were highly gendered. Employment opportunities were scarce for females. Being
excluded from several professions, women had very few options. Coontz confirms this reality when she somewhat sarcastically claims that “[t]here were not many permissible alternatives to baking brownies, experimenting with new canned soups, and getting rid of stains around the collar, (1992, p.32). Also in the 1950s came the cultural ideal of women acting as both the perfect mother (fully absorbed with her children) and the perfect wife (performing her “wifely duties” without complaint). This ideal reportedly “drove thousands of women to therapists, tranquilizers, or alcohol when they actually tried to live up to it,” (Coontz 1992, p.9).

The Role of Men

Coontz claims that the 1950s were a time of cultural change for men as well. Encouraged to center their identity in familial and parental roles, men not only were expected to work hard as the sole breadwinner of their family, but were encouraged to act as the perfect father. “For the first time, men as well as women were encouraged to root their identity and self-image in familial and parental roles,” (Coontz 1992, p.27). They were culturally pressured to get married and have children, for the “lack of a suitable wife could mean the loss of a job or promotion for a middle-class man. Bachelors were categorized as “immature, “infantile,” “narcissistic,” “deviant,” or even “pathological,” (Coontz 1992, p.32-33). Largely absent from work done on the period, men were portrayed in the media as the sole breadwinner of the house who left, went to work at an often undisclosed occupation, and came home to share a meal with the family and perhaps toss a few balls with the son out in the back yard.
Although Coontz argues that men’s roles were changing in the 1950s, Barbara Erenreich disagrees. In her book *Hearts of Men* (1987), Erenreich instead claims that roles for men have not changed since the 1900s. She believes that Hugh Heffner and his release of *Playboy* have been the ultimate encouragement for a flight from commitment for men. While Erenreich believes that women’s roles were changing in the 50s, she does not feel that the same was true for men. In terms of the disagreement between the two authors, the main claim by Coontz was not that men were purposely ditching commitment to their family, but that their identities were becoming more and more family-central and that any lack of perfect commitment was seen as deviant. The pressures, Coontz claims, were building.

This role consideration may become important in terms of this study. While men were being pressured to make their families their central focus, many children grew out of this decade citing a lack of a paternal figure. I will return to this discussion in my findings, when I consider the role that fathers play in prisoners’ blame.

*The Family Malfunctions*

Families in the 1950s were often far from perfect. “The reality of these families was far more painful and complex than the situation-comedy reruns of the expurgated memories of the nostalgic would suggest. Contrary to popular opinion, “Leave It to Beaver” was not a documentary,” (Coontz 1992, p.29). But this irreconcilable distance between reality and illusion becomes even more obvious when one looks at some of the underlying societal issues during the time period. In a time without food stamps or housing programs, forty to fifty million people were poor. A full fourth of the American
population was barely getting by, and because of the cultural demand that family life be “perfect”, many families were culturally conditioned to deny and hide any signs of imperfection or destruction. “Behind the hedges and driveways of upper-middle-class suburbia were tragedies of madness, suicide, and—most prevalent of all—chronic and severe alcoholism….” (Benita Eisler, quoted in Coontz 1992, p.34).

Wives were hidden victims. Not yet considered a “real” crime, wife battering was rarely discussed and even more rarely treated. In the 1950s, psychiatrists “regarded the battered woman as a masochist who provoked her husband into beating her,” (see Pleck 1987 for further explanation). Incest and sexual assault were other family-based hidden crimes. “We will probably never know how prevalent incest and sexual abuse were in the 1950s, but we do know that when girls or women reported incidents of such abuse to therapists, they were frequently told that they were “fantasizing” their unconscious oedipal desires,” (Coontz 1992, p.35).

Changes in Childhood and Youth

The youth had a difficult time as well. As was previously discussed, modernization caused youth to be trapped in a maturity gap; an extended period between social maturity and biological maturity, now seen as “adolescence”. When looked at through the lens of the 1950s, the shift becomes more specific. Child labor now abolished and schooling extended, “[a]lmost all children gained a protracted period of freedom from productive responsibilities and then moved quite rapidly from school to work to leaving home to getting married and establishing a second family,” (Coontz 1992, p.187; see Zeliger 1985 and Hareven 1991 for further explanation). These cultural
changes locked adolescents within the maturity gap and those of racial minorities seemed to be at an even greater disadvantage.

*The Role that Race Played*

The race of the family played a key role in the situational reality of the family. Two-parent black families suffered a poverty rate of more than 50%, which at the time was approximately the same as the rate for one-parent black families (Coontz 1992, p.30). In particular cities, race became more than just a poverty statistic; it became a reason for violence. Coontz reports that in 1953, when the first black family moved to Chicago’s Trumbull Park public housing project, they were targeted. “Neighbors “hurled stones and tomatoes” and trashed stores that sold groceries to the new residents,” (Coontz 1992, p.31). In considering that a statistical majority of prisoners are of a racial minority, it becomes important to consider this factor and to realize the additional impact that it had on their lives, especially in the 1950s at the beginning of the civil rights movement.

*Post 1950s*

The changing culture of the 60s helped to put an end to the 1950s cultural ideal. Even today, the ideals and expectations of the family affect us. Work, school, and medical care are still subject to the 1950s motherhood myth of a domestically-bound individual: doctor and dentist appointments are scheduled in the middle of the day, children must be picked up for early dismissal days, and if a child becomes ill, they cannot be left home alone. The expectation by our society that mothers can and will take care of these instances are only some of the cultural issues still facing mothers today, although it is interesting that this one in particular is still centered around the 1950s
cultural family myth. Along with the 1960s came the rise of the second wave of feminism. The political and cultural climate was changing in the United States and as the counterculture era began, the views of the family began to change.

The culturally-stereotyped family of the 1950s is important for this study. In a defined decade of the ‘family-ideal’ being so counter to the ‘family-real’, individuals grew up without the realization that the two ideas were separate. The 1950s also become important when we consider that they end almost abruptly with the turning of the decade. In terms of the family and its role in enforcing cultural values and in creating or preventing delinquency, potential considerations must be made for the results of this study. Just how much of a role did the family play in the lives of these prisoners? Do prisoners who spent their adolescent years in the 1950s blame their family more or less often than those in the other time period divisions?

This discussion of the theory behind this study has attempted to discuss the benefits of analyzing blame in this retributive era and a description of the vocabulary of motive, its associated concepts and an explanation of its importance. Social constructions become vital when considering the way memories and personal realities affect social actors. The importance of adolescence and the benefit of dividing the sample around the 1950s are two concepts that play heavily into this research and its attempt to discover historical changes in blame as related by individuals trapped within the institution.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

In this chapter, I will be discussing the methodology that I have used in the project. First, I will discuss the questions that brought me to this research. An explanation of this project’s data restrictions will follow. Reasons for each restriction are described and a complete description of the collection of data is given. A discussion of frame analysis and its benefits to this study is then followed by a description of the data analysis process.

Research Questions

In considering this research, I am curious to find out if accounts vary across time. I am also interested in finding out if the role of the family, a primary source of social and cultural information, plays a part. Whether or not the family is statistically responsible for criminality, I want to know if the criminals blame their family. If the criminal does blame their family, I am curious about who they blame. Is it their mother’s fault? Their father’s? It is with a mind to these questions that I conduct my study.

Data Restrictions

In determining my sample, I implemented several data restrictions in the interests of attempted homogeneity of the sample type and the availability of sources. In the following sections, I will list each restriction along with my reasoning said restriction.

Prisoners

In considering the perspectives of criminals, the best place to go seems to be the hardest to get to: the criminals themselves. But why did I choose prisoners specifically? Are they not merely “failed criminals”? While it is true that prisoners are merely the
criminals who were caught, their position in the institution makes them a unique group to study. The physical structure of the total institution serves as a unique setting from which to draw a population. The total institution may be defined as “a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life,” (Goffman 1961, p.xiii). This setting serves to allow the inmates a great deal of time in which to consider their crimes. The architecture of the institution serves more than just the manifest function of holding the inmates inside and the public outside.

The “total character [of the total institution] is symbolized by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside and to departure that is often built right into the physical plant, such as locked doors, high walls, barbed wire, cliffs, water, forests, or moors,” (Goffman 1961, p.4). In settings such as this, it becomes difficult for one to move around without the constant reminder of where they are and thus, why they are being held. When considering the way architecture plays a role in the lives of those who utilize it, the symbolic interactionist perspective reveals that “this designed physical environment is not merely a backdrop for our behavior. Quite the contrary, because some designed physical buildings, places and objects act as agents to shape our thoughts and actions; they invite self-reflection,” (Smith and Bugni 2006, p.124).

Another aspect of the prison culture that lends itself to this study is the prevalence with which convicts write. “For as long as there have been prisons, prisoners have turned author for diversion, creative expression, solace, penance, vindication, vengeance and release (physically and metaphysically),” (Blumenthal 2000). In his study of convicts
who attempt to publish and their penned results, Ralph Blumenthal (2000) notes that: “[m]any if not most prison memoirs qualify as confessionals, extended mea culpas, often with strong religious overtones and purplish prose.” An important fact to remember is that although a number of prisoners write, not all of their texts are published.

It has been argued by Topalli that considering the words of an inmate as research is dangerous because the inmate may attempt to control the view the interviewer or reader has on them by “altering the content of their responses to protect themselves against further prosecution, improve their status in prison, or advance their chances for parole,” (2006, p.483). As I briefly touched on before, facts of this nature are very unlikely to affect this research because instead of searching for true causes of crime, I seek the accounts made that the prisoner knew would be seen. In other words, if they claimed against their personal belief that society was at fault for their criminality, then we must consider why they lied. But even in lying, the ‘truth’ that they release is one that they feel is important to express.

Sex

In the interests of keeping the sample as homogeneous as possible, women have been excluded from the data sample for several reasons. Their underrepresentation in the prison population is the first statistical issue. On June 30th, 2008, the Bureau of Justice published a set of statistics on prisons. Of the total 2,310,984 prisoners, only 115,779 of them are women. Considering that females are thus approximately five percent of the current prison population, I have decided to keep them from this study. Although their actual numbers are low, their writing is not uncommon but finding full life-course
narratives written by women without editing proved to be difficult for me. Another issue related to this uneven ratio of women prisoners is one brought to light by Judith Scheffler: “[m]ost female inmates, who generally have a below-average formal education, do not express themselves in writing,” (1986, p.13).

U.S. Institutions

In the interests of creating a more manageable and homogeneous sample size, I have also limited the data sources to individuals who were imprisoned in domestic institutions. The sheer variety of crimes and punishments that are in existence around the world would be difficult, if not impossible to parallel. As such, exclusively looking at United States institutions ensures that only United States laws were violated. The homogeneity of laws is thus upheld by this narrowing of the sample scope.

No Organized Crime Families

A third type of crime I have felt it necessary to block from the data sample is that of family-central organized crime. Traditionally, this type of organized crime has been linked directly to the family. The Sicilian-bred Mafia and the Japanese Yakuza are organized crime syndicates that are ruled by and defined by the role of the family. A potential skewing of results is likely if this restriction on the data is not made.

First-Person Narratives

In the interest of getting as close to criminals’ accounts as possible, no second-hand accounts were used. The legitimacy of the blame is impossible to defend if a second party is recording the narrative or making the claim. If left in the first-person setting, legitimacy of the opinion is restored.
No Pulp Fiction

Any accounts written exclusively for entertainment purposes (pulp fiction) have been excluded for the simple fact that their claims cannot be defended as true. Although focusing on cultural discourses, an element of believability must be evident. To determine if there are patterns in the blame of individuals within the institutional system, I must have accounts written by those who have actually been a part of said system. Narratives written by authors who have never committed a crime—let alone served a prison sentence—are categorized as complete speculation on the part of that author. Any legitimacy of the accounts is taken away when the narrative itself is based on falsehood.

These restrictions have been created to assist in not only homogenizing the data sample, but in making the content more manageable. Prisoners are those locked within the system that is punishing them. They are the closest to the institution and thus, the ones most affected by it. In determining if any historical variation exists in the blame used by prisoners, we must find full life-history records. Finding actual prisoner narratives is vital to this research. Collecting the actual accounts can begin only after the sample has been framed.

Data Collection

In the interest of making this study as academically relevant as possible, I have attempted to use only full texts that are more likely to be recognized or in use in the sociological/criminological discipline today. So how would one go about collecting these types of sources? Considering a lack of search engines that list only full texts that are
then ranked by their social, academic, and cultural prevalence, I was forced to develop my own system.

In the interest of finding full books, I surmised that the best place to start was keyword searches on popular websites for their range of access to available sources. I conducted word and phrase searches on popular book sites amazon.com and barnes&noble.com. These sites were chosen not only for their popularity, but for their ability to access and provide the chosen sources. The search terms used are as follows: “prisoner”, “criminal”, “memoir”, “prisoner” AND “memoir”, “criminal” AND “memoir”, “criminal” AND “account”, and “prisoner” AND “account”. These searches led me to compile a list of over 200 book titles in print that, based on their title, available summary, or both, seemed to fit my intended sample.

To narrow my sample to a more manageable size, I sent my list of books to my committee. I requested that they mark the texts that they had read or that they knew would fit my criteria. The list of over 200 book titles (including author, publication date, and a website link) was returned with a number of books circled and a fair number crossed off, as they would not fit my criteria.

With the remaining titles (those that had not been crossed off entirely), I attempted a slightly more scientific data selection process. I wanted to use texts that both fit my criteria and that could be recognized within the discipline. To that end, I chose to conduct academically-oriented searches using four different search engines: SocIndex, CJIndex, GoogleScholar, and JStor. SocIndex and CJIndex are academic search engines that focus on articles within their respective disciplines, allowing me to evaluate the
prevalence of each source within the sociology and criminal justice literature. If a text is referenced in an article, the Index searches will register each article as a hit and display the list of hits accordingly. In this way, I was able to get a better idea of the popularity of the texts within these two disciplines. JStor is an engine that contains an un-discipline-oriented selection of academic articles, and GoogleScholar was used in an attempt to determine the social prevalence of these texts. JStor’s value rests in its access to all disciplines and their academic publications, as does GoogleScholar. In each search engine, I entered the title of each potential data source in quotation marks (to help ensure my results were in reference to each of the texts). I then recorded the number of ‘hits’ for each title in each search engine. The texts were then ranked in order from highest to lowest number of hits (assumed to imply popularity). This popularity is important as both a way to narrow down the available data sources and to choose texts that already are recognized within the academic disciplines.

The next step was to begin gathering as many of the texts on my list that I could find, focusing on those with more hits, in the interest of choosing texts with more cultural currency. During my actual collection of texts, I managed to discover a few more potential sources. Each time a new potential source was found, I returned to the search engines and ran the new titles and re-ranked the text list where necessary.

After acquiring each text, I made an initial skimming or surface reading to determine if the criteria I had set for my sources were met. Those that matched the criteria were kept and a list of twenty-one texts remained. The next source separation that needed to be made was by time period based on the adolescence of the offender.
Four of the twenty-one texts were unable to be dated after an initial surface reading and a Library of Congress date search. These sources were discounted and my list of possible data sources was down to seventeen. Of these seventeen remaining texts, my committee met and jointly decided that twelve total sources would be evaluated - four from each time period (pre-50s, 1950s, and post-50s).

Once these sources were divided into time periods with an equal number of sources in each, the actual reading could begin. To discern whether or not a historical variation exists in the blaming done by prisoners, we must look at how each instance of blame is framed.

**Frame Analysis**

Often used in order to conduct research in constructivist paradigms, this frame analysis works as “a central organizing principle that holds together and gives coherence and meaning to a diverse array of symbols” (Gamson 1992, p.384). Three basic premises are inherent in frame analysis. People work as active assemblers of meaning. Using culturally available resources to construct meaning for themselves, individuals communicate meanings to one another. Evidence of this premise can be found in popular catch-phrases, references to public figures, and shared symbols. The phrase “there was nothing Brady about our bunch” (Williams 2004, p.51) makes a cultural reference to a television family-based sitcom that began airing in 1969.

The second premise of frame analysis relies on the fact that framing occurs in a variety of forums including (but not limited to): public discourse, media, and scholarly journals. The third premise that must be acknowledged tells us that claimsmakers often
push preferred frames while they measure success by the prevalence of their preferred frame. So, if a claimsmaker is pushing the view that crime is a result of genetics, the more this concept is used in cultural references, the more successful the claimsmaker has been.

Frame analysis is ideal for this project because of its ability to take into account social constructions. Using cultural references as a unit of measurement in analyzing accounts is important. Categorizing instances of blame into different frames can help us make sense of the vast number of blame recipients that may exist. When discussing the causes of crime, they can be used to “represent all of the important views and ideas in the crime debate” as well as to “summarize and simplify the debate” (Sasson 1995, p.13).

Data Analysis Process

I began my data collection with a thorough reading of the text, making note of any instances of blame, explicit or implied. Key words and phrases were sought out in the context of criminal activity. Words like “blame”, “fault”, and “responsibility” were often good indicators of data. The author’s use of phrases such as “if only I had…” and “I found excitement in [crime]” were two indicators of data. In this section, I will discuss my sources along with providing descriptions of the data itself. A complete list of data sources can be found in Appendix A. Each text was read through once wherein each instance of blame was recorded. Once finished with the text, the recorded instances of blame were re-read to determine whether or not the blame was crime-related (see Appendix B). Those that were used as a cause for crime (or a Blame Frame) were then coded based on an emerging pattern of responsibility-taking and denial (see Appendix C).
I had narrowed my data sources, separated them accordingly, and collected my actual data. Once all of the data was analyzed and coded accordingly, I returned to my research questions and sought the answers in my data.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The initial interpretation of the data shows no overall trend across time. Nine of the twelve authors reference one frame more frequently than they reference the other three frames, per text. This implies that each author has an overarching blame frame that they hold responsible for their criminal conduct. For authors like Braly, Williams, Cleaver, and Shakur, a personal accepting of responsibility seems evident while authors like McCune, Jackson, and Peltier see External forces as being in control of their criminality. Looking closer at the data after running a few analyses, we can see that a shift does appear to take place between the 1950s group and the Post 1950s group. I will use this section of my study to discuss the overarching blame frames I found, describe my data sample and then discuss the findings related to my time period classification division. A more qualitative analysis will follow including focusing on two data sources in particular and then a more thorough look at a few of the discovered subframes. Returning to my research questions, I will then attempt to analyze what role, if any, family blame may have taken in the deviance of my data sources.

Blame Frame Descriptions

Each of the four frames discovered in the data will now be addressed individually. The first frame I have titled Influenced. This frame consists of instances of blame that imply another individual is responsible for the deed. Including subframes that place responsibility on a parent or peer, this frame implies an ultimate denial of responsibility for the crime committed. Blaming the victim and a claim of self-defense are included in this category. External is the second frame, and it deals with overarching forces or
external controls being the responsible party for crimes. A belief that fate or mystical forces are responsible as well as the view that the legal system is at fault are both included in this blame frame and again, a denial of responsibility is implied. Other subframes included are those that blame a “criminal environment” or the media. Also included in this frame is the claim of innocence. If we believe that the prisoner is in fact innocent, then it seems logical to believe that an external party or control is in fact responsible for them being in prison. In this way, innocence is seen as being part of the External frame.

The third frame deals with an acceptance of responsibility for the crime. Each of the subframes included in this frame imply that the individual is themselves at fault. In terming it Internal, I have attempted to portray this reality. Committing a crime by impulse, for revenge, or for a cause are included in this frame. Also included are claims of rational choice and a seduction of crime. Compelled is the fourth and final blame frame to be coded. Instances of this type imply that the individual had little or no control over their own actions due to drug use, biology, and losses of control, and that the fault for the crime, ultimately, was not theirs. Included are the subframes of “rage” and “instinct” wherein no conscious decision was claimed to have been made, but that something else was biologically or physiologically compelling the individual to commit the crime.

Description of Data

The data itself is relatively homogeneous. All males in prison and born after 1900. A racial breakdown of the sources is given in Appendix A. While glancing at
Appendix A, another interesting fact becomes clear—that all of the individuals in the Post 1950s group grew up in the 1970s, making them members of the same cultural cohort. Looking at the data itself, it becomes obvious that while some prisoners repeatedly proclaim innocence, others admit to a number of crimes and the reasons behind them. Still other sources make few allowances for their own crimes and instead make a number of inferences for crime in general. The frequency of blame instances varies widely based on the source of data itself. As such, let us take a look at the frequency with which some authors blame. Table 2 reveals that some sources have more instances of blame than others.

Table 2

Data Frequency Table by Author, Arranged Chronologically

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaw</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braley</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McCune</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>27.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaver</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>32.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>39.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbott</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>43.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peltier</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>49.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lerner</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>51.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>80.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gagnon</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>89.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shakur</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>727</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While Williams certainly has the most instances of blame, we can see that the range of frequencies is large. Ranging from 17 to 212 instances, the majority of the frequencies are between 34 and 76 per text. With over seven hundred instances of blame to code, it becomes clear that criminals attributing blame for their crimes is not unusual.

Let us take a different look at the data. How many instances of each of the four blame frames were found? Table 3 gives a presentation of the frequencies of each of the four blame frames, regardless of the source.

Table 3

*Blame Frame Frequencies*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blame Frames</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influenced</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>50.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>89.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compelled</td>
<td>727</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table shows a drastic difference in frequencies depending on the frame considered. While only ten percent of the frames referenced were *Compelled*, more than eighty percent referenced either *External* or *Internal* as sources of blame. So how does this break down by source? Figure 1 shows us a histogram of each source and the frequency of blame frames in each one.
Figure 1. Clustered Bar Graph of Blame Frame Frequencies by Author, arranged chronologically.
Looking at the histogram, we are able to visually represent the breakdown of blame frames by author. It is interesting to note that some authors, though obviously preferring one frame to the others (Williams, Jackson) nevertheless reference all four while other authors (like Shaw) reference only three of the four frames.

In this initial look at the data, no historical cultural trends became evident. The interesting answers were only to be found once I split the data by time period.

Time Period Split

How does this vary by time period split? Does it? Figure 2 displays three separate pie charts that summarize the blame frames for each time period citing the frequency of each frame within each time period separation.
Figure 2. Blame Frames Split by Time Period, showing frequencies of each frame

This figure shows what might be a difference based on the time period split. Based on the visuals of the figure, we can see that on the Pre 1950s chart, that the blame frames *Internal* and *External* are each indicated about a third of the time. In the 1950s chart, it seems that a change has taken place. *External* blame has become dominant while
the other three frames have been reduced. The third pie shows a different view, though. While the Pre 1950s chart showed a form of equilibrium between *External* and *Internal* blame frames and the 1950s chart showed a preference toward *External* blame, the Post 1950s chart shows a shift toward *Internal* blame. Several potential reasons for this exist. The most important of which seems to be that prisoners are taking more responsibility for their crimes than they have in the past. But is this because prisoners are changing or is it perhaps because of prevailing cultural opinion that believes criminals are in fact responsible for their deviant acts? Taking a closer qualitative look may help us to get a better idea as to the answer to this question.

**A Closer Look: Two Criminals and their Subframes**

So now we can see how this small sample of data is distributed by time period, using the 1950s as a cultural shifting point. But how do these four frames break down by author? Referring back to Table 2 on page 48, I have chosen the two authors with the highest frequencies of blaming to study more in depth: Shaw and Williams.

*Stanley: The Jack-Roller*

Clifford Shaw’s book features the life-course history of a delinquent known to us only as Stanley. Born in 1907, Stanley begins his criminal career at an early age. The son of two Polish immigrants, at age nine, he runs away for the first time and is arrested. Claiming he has run away from an abusive stepmother, Stanley becomes a frequent visitor of the local police station: “As far back as I can remember, my life was filled with sorrow and misery. The cause was my stepmother, who nagged me, beat me, insulted me, and drove me out of my own home,” (Shaw 1930, p.47). He takes to stealing (led by his
stepbrother William and encouraged by his stepmother) and eventually hooks up with a few friends who get him into “jack-rolling” to stave off poverty. “My buddy, being an old “jack-roller,” suggested jack-rolling” as a way out of the dilemma. So we started out to “put the strong arm” on drunks. We sometimes stunned the drunks by “giving them the club” in a dark place near a lonely alley. It was bloody work, but necessity demanded it – we had to live,” (Shaw 1930, p.85). Figure 3 shows us the numerical breakdown of the four blame frames (in Stanley’s case only three).

Figure 3: Pie Chart of Blame Frames in Shaw.
Okay, but what does this mean? Each of the three frames is of similar frequency and we cannot tell much just by looking at this figure alone. But what if we were to break down the blame frames and look at the SubFrames in *The Jack-Roller*? Table 4 breaks down the frequencies into the coded subframes (see Appendix C for a complete listing of subframes).

Table 4

*Frequency Table of SubFrames in Shaw*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SubFrames</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Members</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>36.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mystical Forces</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>64.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal System</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>66.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to Environment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>68.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>68.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impulse</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>70.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seduction of Crime</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>85.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenge</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>86.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>89.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime as Work</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>91.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rational Choice</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These numbers help us to see where Stanley places his blame on a case-by-case basis. The largest percentage of responses put the blame on Mystical Forces (*External*), which in this case includes “circumstances”, “a higher power”, and “fate”. “I felt that I
could get along some way on my own hook. But I soon learned that Fate was still master of my destiny,” (Shaw 1930, p.56). But, although the majority of his responses were in reference to Mystical Forces, sixteen percent were devoted to Family Members (Influenced) being at fault. The third most frequent subframe was the Seduction of Crime (Internal), which is referenced when a claim is made that the author committed the crime because either it gave him some sort of enjoyment or because the act or item seemed to seduce him in some way. In relating stories of theft with his stepbrother, William: “He also took me to the five and ten cent store on Forty-seventh Street, and would direct me to steal from the counter while he waited at the door. I usually was successful, as I was little and inconspicuous. How I loved to do these things! They thrilled me. I learned to smile and to laugh again,” (Shaw 1930, p.52). So what does this frequency chart of subframes look like in color? Is there a way to get a more visual idea for the results? Figure 4 shows us a chart revealing the subframes in Shaw’s work—the reasons why Stanley claims to have committed his crimes.
While only once did Stanley claim to commit a crime for Revenge, he claimed that he was influenced by his Peers in 10 of the 103 cases. Being of the Pre 1950s group, Stanley’s case fits the visible trend of this group as he uses three of the four blame frames almost equally. How do Stanley’s percentages stack up to those from a different group?

**Tookie Williams: The Crip Leader**

Stanley “Tookie” Williams is a black youth, born in 1953 and growing up in Los Angeles. Getting picked on by bullies for his small size, he begins to stand up for himself and fight back. “For me fighting wasn’t done for fun; it was a survival necessity.
I wasn’t a born fighter. I had to become one,” (Williams 2004, p.35). In high school, he and a few friends decided to band together to keep the local gangs from bullying them. “I envisioned our being not a gang in the customary sense, but an unstoppable force that no gang in Los Angeles or the world could ever defeat. The thought appealed to my growing megalomania. I made up my mind right then that the alliance was on,” (Williams 2004, p.86). Beginning as a group formed to stand up to gangs, the Crips soon became one of the most notorious gangs ever to exist on American soil with Tookie as their King. Drug use, rage, and a reputation then began to take their toll on Williams:

“I hid my drug problem from everybody, even Jackie. There I was, King Crip, seeking comfort in drugs like a drunkard seeking salvation in a bottle. I needed desperately to escape the madness around me, so I used acid and other deadly stimulants to block out the living nightmares, even though the blockage was temporary. My sharpness of wit was leaving me like water seeping through hundreds of tiny holes in a bucket. Though my chameleon role as a counselor was working—I believed I had most everybody fooled—I was destroying my mind in the process. My life was a contradiction. I didn’t really expect to die, but I didn’t care if I lived or died. In the back of my mind was the delusion of invincibility.” (Williams 2004, p.160-61)

Figure 5 gives us a visual of the Blame Frames called on by Williams.
Figure 5. Pie Chart of Blame Frames in Williams.

This chart shows all four blame frames represented with over 45% of the data falling under the Internal frame. But how do these numbers break down into subframes? Table 5 gives us the frequency readings for each subframe referenced by Williams.
Table 5

*Frequency Table of SubFrames in Williams*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SubFrames</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Members</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Defense/Protection</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mystical Forces</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>27.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal System</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>30.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to Environment</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innocence</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.9</td>
<td>.9</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impulse</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>56.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seduction of Crime</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>63.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenge</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>69.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>80.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime as Work</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>80.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untouchable</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>81.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Cause</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>85.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rational Choice</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>87.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.9</td>
<td>.9</td>
<td>88.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under Influence of Substances</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>96.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rage</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The numbers on the table above introduce us to the breakdown of blame that Williams claims. 13.2% or twenty-eight of two hundred twelve data samples show that Impulse (*Internal*) was responsible for Williams’ criminality. He committed crimes because they would get him things he wanted: “Like locusts we swarmed and stripped
people of their valuables—and then melted quickly away. Leather coats and jewelry were
the hot commodities, as precious to us as ivory and animal skins were to blacks in
Africa,” (Williams 2004, p.105-06). Another ten percent of his responses claimed that
Reputation (Internal) was ultimately to blame. “I relished doing the dirty work because it
added to the legend of who I was. I seized every angle in life to define myself as being
somebody. It didn’t matter how ruthless or despicable I had to become in the realm of
ganghood as long as I was the best,” (Williams 2004, p.184).

For the purposes of a more complete detailed qualitative analysis, I feel it is now
necessary to look not only at individual sources, but at a selection of blame subframes
and their presence over the course of sources.

**Looking at Subframes**

Of the variety of subframes available, I will be looking a select few. In the
interest of analyzing historical cultural trends, I feel it is necessary to look at a subframe
that blames society, or a lack of opportunity for criminality. Easily linked to Merton’s
deviance typology and his theory of blocked opportunities, this *External* subframe can be
seen in the table presented below.
Table 6

*Performance of SubFrame 2.1: Society, sources arranged chronologically*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Number of Instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shaw</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braly</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McCune</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaver</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbott</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peltier</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lerner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gagnon</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shakur</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Looking at the above table, we can see that the actual frequency varies with no real pattern although the frequency with which it is referenced is proof that it remains an important subframe. Moving from Merton and strain theory to a closer look at Theodore Sasson’s ‘faulty/racist system’ frames, we can look at Table 7 and see that a much more pronounced trend seems to exist.
Table 7

*Performance of SubFrame 2.3: The System, sources arranged chronologically*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Number of Instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shaw</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McCune</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaver</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbott</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peltier</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lerner</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gagnon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shakur</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Peaking in Jack Henry Abbott’s text, blaming the system seems to have the most trend-like pattern in the sample. “…Responsibility? I am not responsible for what the government—its system of justice—its prisons—has done to me. I did not do this to myself;” (Abbott 1981, p. 16-17). Later in this same text, Abbott is talking about the commonality of in-prison killings: “…It isn’t prisoners who work out their petty relationships in prison. It’s the prison system in America that drives them to outrages on one another. We are not to blame,” (Abbott 1981, p. 84).

An interesting finding in the course of this study was a discovery of the frequency with which the blame frame of “crime as work” was referenced. A look at Table 8 will show us how this subframe was distributed throughout the sources.
Table 8

Performance of SubFrame 3.5: Crime as Work, sources arranged chronologically

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Number of Instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shaw</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McCune</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaver</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbott</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peltier</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lerner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gagnon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shakur</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although Topalli references this claim as being found exclusively in hardcore street criminals, we can see that it was in fact first referenced (in this sample) by Shaw’s jackroller, Stanley. “All in all, we were well satisfied with life, and as long as plying our trade brought such handsome returns we did not suffer any qualms of conscience about our stealing,” (Shaw 1930, p.140). In ‘plying his trade,’ Stanley was merely doing business. But, true to Topalli, it seems that the more “hardcore street criminals” such as those found in gangs may take this concept more seriously. Shakur discusses the role that gangbanging had in his life: “Ironically, I never gave stopping an inkling of a thought. This was my career, my “calling,” as church folks say when someone does one thing real well….This was not some awkward stage of my life. This was a job to me, and I was employed full-time, putting in as much overtime as possible,” (Shakur 1993, p.40).
The Family Subframe

As previously mentioned, one of my personal interests in this study was the role, if any, of the family in blame. Appearing only thirty-two times in a sample size of 727, the family blame subframe seemed only popular in the Shaw text. Breaking this subframe down and looking at individual instances of blame proves that although the numbers for the frame may not be strong, the feelings are.

Mother-blame, as defined in the theory section of this paper, was found only a handful of times in the texts:

“A few months after my sister Barbara was born, our mother left us and our father to live with another man, with whom she spent the rest of her life. I try to sense the fragrance of this new romance—she was only twenty-four—and I try to sense the anguish it must have cost her to leave her children, but nothing stirs in me, and I have often seen her as an angry Medea who murdered the normal lives we might have had.” (Braly 1976, p.9)

Blaming his mother for walking out and leaving him, Braly was obviously affected by his mother’s absence. Whether or not his mother actually caused him to be criminal through her absence, it is evident that Braly feels that she is at least somewhat responsible for his criminality, for having “murdered the normal lives we might have had”.

Braly isn’t the only one who employs a bit of mother-blaming. Jackson also seems to blame his mother in part for his criminality. “I would not be in prison now if she hadn’t been reading life through those rose-colored glasses of hers, or if [my father] would have had time and the wisdom to tell me of my enemies, and how to get the things I needed without falling into their traps,” (Jackson 1970, p.45-46). But, while these two
instances of mother-blame seem a bit damming, they are two of a small handful of instances of mother-blame.

On a slightly different note, father-blame, previously ignored in criminological research, made a stronger showing. More than twice the number of showings as mother-blame, this type of blame occurred surprisingly in each time period division except the one reserved for those who grew through their adolescence in the 1950s. “But darker and more complex, perhaps my father was the authority who had not loved me and I could not and would not abandon this bitter disappointment until I could draw to myself an authority—the sheriff!—who would love me,” (Braly 1976, p.39). Blaming his father’s lack of attention and love, Braly claims that he perhaps became a criminal because he was seeking attention and love from an outside source: the sheriff.

Father-blame frequency peaks in the Williams text when Williams is contemplating his own fatherhood role:

“As a youth I often felt emptiness in my life, and not simply for lack of a father’s presence. My biological father was a sad example of fatherhood. I yearned for an esteemed black male figure who projected a dynamic image I could strive to emulate or to surpass. In different circumstances my chances for success would have increased considerably.” (Williams 2004, p.319)

He goes on to say that:

“There are thousands of fatherless households where male youths grow up to become responsible adults. Perhaps I was just needier. In my early life, absent a strong fatherly presence, I launched a doomed odyssey in search of uncovering a maleness to fashion as my own. Although my mother and grandmother contributed fortitude, wisdom, dignity, and love, my psyche instinctively rejected their femininity as a base on which to build my manhood. […]My defiance was not an attack against my mother but an effort to establish my manhood with no father around. I despised him for not being there to support our family.” (Williams 2004, p319-20)
These sentiments are echoed, in a way, in another prisoner’s text when he attempts to write his birth father a letter after a lifetime of not knowing him:

“I began the first page with the normal greeting, but then, naturally, the questions started to surface: Where have you been? And Why did you abandon me? Eventually it came to I needed you, man, and you weren’t there for me and It’s people like you who contribute to the destruction of people like me.[…] I wasn’t able to finish the letter, just mailed it half-finished, like his fatherhood had been to me.” (Shakur 1993, p.348, italics in original)

Despite being a numerical minority in the blaming, it seems that the family, when flawed, becomes a source of anger and bitterness for the criminal. In considering my research questions pertaining to the family and who is blamed, it seems that yes, criminals can and do blame their family on occasion. As for who they blame? It depends highly on the context. Often siblings are blamed for teaching criminality, while fathers are the parent most often blamed (when a parent is blamed at all) and are more likely than not blamed for their absence, lack of affection, or lack of guidance.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this study was to delve into a portion of literature not often used but still deemed important by research and to attempt to locate historical cultural trends in blame from prisoners locked into the institutional setting. Looking at the public perception of crime, a great deal of speculation is made as to its causes and each theory can be supported and refuted with a number of cases. For each individual that claims that crime is caused by people stealing to feed themselves/their families, there is another individual ready to point out the existence and prevalence of white-collar crime. Attributing blame to others is a normal human process. We excuse and justify our bad behaviors because we do not want to seem like bad people. This normal human process applies to criminals as well. They attribute blame just as the rest of us do, perhaps more often in their effort to explain and justify their actions not one individual or a group of people, but to a court room, to a legal system, and to a society.

As products of our social environment (social construction), we internalize the beliefs of the culture we are surrounded by. In doing so, we become part of the culture. During the teenage years, individuals are more likely to recognize and absorb their culture more fully. This culture, like crime theories, varies across time and from the results of this study, we can see that blame does as well. Have the criminals internalized these cultural theories? The answer may be more complicated than one might think, but this study seems to say yes.

Have we found statistically significant results? Not yet. In a culture focused on crime and the causes of criminality, studies of this type seem even more important for
their potential policy implications for the treatment of criminals, especially during this retributive era. A shift in blame seems evident. From a two-way tie between *External* and *Internal* blame frames, to a domination in the 1950s of *External* blame, and into the Post 1950s with a statistically-dominant percentage of *Internal* blame frames, it seems that criminals may be taking more responsibility for their criminality.

These results seem important in this retributive, punitive era we find ourselves in. The areas of punishment and criminology, especially in regards to blame, father-blame, and historical trends, would seem to benefit most. In considering blame, we allow the criminals to defend more than just their actions, but to identify the circumstances that may have led to said actions. The trends found in this research including the shift in blame frames across the time period divisions and the prevalence of father-blame seem to incite further research. Expanded, this study could become key to the discussion of blame and may in fact encourage policy changes for the legal system. For if criminals feel that they are not to blame, what do we gain by punishing them?

This important question has been touched on by the concept of reintegrative shaming (Braithwaite 1989) as an alternative to punishment. Reintegrative shaming separates shaming into two types on a continuum: stigmatizing shaming and reintegrative shaming. While stigmatizing shaming labels the person and their actions as deviant or evil and often involves humiliation, reintegrative shaming emphasizes a disapproval of the action without labeling the person as evil and focuses on a relationship of respect. This approach to criminality, while not yet mainstream, may be key in light of the results of this study. While it is important to notice that an increase of *Internal* blame was
found, the fact remains that prisoners do not blame themselves exclusively. Perhaps an increase in reintegrative shaming linked with restorative justice is called for. Restorative justice emphasizes the individual nature of the act and involves an apology or reparation to the one who has been harmed. With reintegrative shaming, restorative justice can benefit from the results of this study. If policy can begin to focus on the act instead of the actor, those who break the law may be able to see their actions as being more directly responsible for the harm they have caused and place blame accordingly. In using a method not often used in the social sciences, I have attempted to explore and interpret a not-often-used data source: prisoners’ accounts. I have found a trend across twelve data sources, proving to some extent that the process of internalization can in fact be mapped into culture and traced through narratives.

Limitations

Perhaps not fully able to be socially generalized yet, this study has too few samples to determine if any such relationship actually exists in the data. More research is needed to determine statistical relationships. External validity is also denied because of the numerous data restrictions imposed. In leaving large populations of criminals out of the sample, the likelihood that these results are in line with the general population are slim.

Although a trend seems to be present in the data, more research is necessary to determine if the trend is based on time period of adolescence (as I have proposed), or merely time period (born in). Another possibility is that the time period they were born
in or grew up in has no relevance whatsoever. Perhaps the trend instead comes from the
time period in which the text was written/published.

This research is important in its exploratory and interpretive nature. In attempting
a detailed, qualitative study, I have attempted to retain and report as much data as
possible, and perhaps opening this type of research to a few new directions.

Future Directions

A possible follow-up step would be to add more sources to the sample size, thus
making the results more generalizable and helping to test the trends that were noted in
this study. Even just doubling the sample size would increase the validity of the tests and
results. It could also be argued that opening the study up to women would provide an
interesting gender comparison, again made in an attempt to make the study’s results more
generalizable. A third possibility involves making the next step an entry into actual
prisons. Instead of using strictly textual sources, interviews with prisoners may provide a
supporting data set to that which has been proved for here.

Ultimately though, this study exists as an introduction to the study of criminal
perspectives through memoirs. The possible new directions are numerous, and perhaps
with stronger data, legitimate policy implications can be found. For although we blame
criminals for their crimes and punish them accordingly, the possibility exists that our
recidivism rates continue to grow because we’re punishing a population that feels
wronged—that knows that they are not the ones to blame.
REFERENCES


## APPENDIX A: COMPLETE LIST OF DATA SOURCES, ARRANGED CHRONOLOGICALLY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text Author</th>
<th>Title of Source</th>
<th>Year of Birth</th>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clifford Shaw</td>
<td><em>The Jack-Roller: A Delinquent Boy’s Own Story</em></td>
<td>1907</td>
<td>Pre 1950s</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malcolm Braly</td>
<td><em>False Starts: A Memoir of San Quentin and Other Prisons</em></td>
<td>1925</td>
<td>Pre 1950s</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy McCune</td>
<td><em>The Autobiography of Billy McCune</em></td>
<td>1928</td>
<td>Pre 1950s</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eldridge Cleaver</td>
<td><em>Soul on Ice</em></td>
<td>1935</td>
<td>Pre 1950s</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dannie M. Martin and Peter Sussman</td>
<td><em>Committing Journalism: The Prison Writings of Red Hog</em></td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack Henry Abbott</td>
<td><em>In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison</em></td>
<td>1944</td>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonard Peltier</td>
<td><em>Prison Writings: My Life is My Sun Dance</em></td>
<td>1944</td>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Native American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jimmy A. Lerner</td>
<td><em>You Got Nothing Coming: Notes from a Prison Fish</em></td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>Post 1950s</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanley Tookie Williams</td>
<td><em>Blue Rage, Black Redemption: A Memoir</em></td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>Post 1950s</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert J Gagnon</td>
<td><em>053803: Life at Fifteen</em></td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Post 1950s</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B: TEXTUAL EXAMPLES OF BLAME AND HOW THEY WERE CATALOGUED

- A Simple Phrase in a Sentence

  Example: “So now I guess you readers are ready to read just why and how I happened to be grabbing and snitching ladies’ purses. My reason is I needed the money.” (McCune 38)

  This example clearly provides an instance of blame. In claiming that he was stealing because he needed money, he is blaming a lack of money or a lack of opportunity (Merton) for his criminality.

- Two Instances of Blame in the same Sentence/Paragraph

  Example: “Sadness and gloom settled down upon me like a heavy cloud, and I thought what an unfortunate creature I was. It was all because of a bad start in life and no opportunity.” (Shaw 146)

  This example shows two different instances of blame in the same paragraph. The “bad start in life” was considered a reference to fate or external forces being in control. The phrase “no opportunity” was taken to refer to an aspect of Merton’s deviance typology, claiming that society was at fault for the blocked opportunities.

- Two Instances of the Same Blame in a Sentence/Paragraph

  Example:

  “Perhaps it would be better for everyone concerned if I was one of them birds who after drinking so much have no recollection of what they did in the following minutes or hours. Or perhaps I might tell you readers I was too drunk to remember anything. Or that I don’t feel responsible for my behavior while under the influence of intoxications. But the last twenty years behind bars proves that I was indeed responsible and am yet
This excerpt provides four separate instances of blame. The first “I was too drunk to remember anything” implies that the individual felt that he was not entirely at fault, that because of his altered state, he couldn’t be wholly responsible. “[I]nfluence of intoxications” again implies an altered state and is important to note as well because the frequency of reportings is important. The more frequently used a frame is, the more stock the individual puts in its control. The phrase “I was indeed responsible and am yet responsible” brings the focus back to the individual and his internal acceptance of his own responsibility. Again demonstrating the frequency of data to be important, the last phrase also implies an acceptance of personal responsibility and blame: “I have no one to blame but myself.”

- Difference Between Blame for Crime and Blame for Other

Example:

“I no longer blamed him. I no longer believed he could have saved me. I had done it to myself. I knew the first rule—never cop out! And I had copped out, taken the plea, simply because some time-serving old bastard had made it seem like the easy and agreeable thing to do and I had wanted to please him.” (Braly 150)

Although the key word “blame” is in evidence, this excerpt is not an instance of blame for a criminal act. Yes, blame is occurring, but he is blaming himself (“I had done it to myself”) for copping out, not for committing a crime.

- Difference Between Blame and Statement

Example:
“The “crime school” charge, however, bears some examination. It isn’t, I think, information one gets here. I heard many accounts of how to hotwire cars to bypass the ignition so they could be stolen without the key, but this technique never became clear to me, and I’ve never used it. And today anyone with the price of a movie ticket or access to a television can see the most elaborate criminal techniques worked out in accurate detail and presented as entertainment.” (Braly 51)

Although it seems as though Braly is blaming the media for encouraging and teaching others how to commit crimes, he is not. He is merely stating his opinion that people are able to learn just as much, if not more, about committing crimes from watching movies and television. Braly does not blame movies and television for causing crimes in this excerpt.
APPENDIX C: BLAME FRAME CODES

1 Influenced (by Others) – Individuals DENY RESPONSIBILITY
1.1 Peers
1.2 Family
1.3 Victim
1.4 Other
1.5 Self-Defense/Protection – bodily harm implied if no action taken

2 External (Controls/Forces) DENY RESPONSIBILITY
2.1 Society (includes strain theory)
2.2 Mystical Forces (includes “circumstances” and higher power)
2.3 System (legal system/government)
2.4 Lack of Education
2.5 Criminal Environment – “Crime is Normal” (response to environment)
2.6 Media
2.7 Other
2.8 Innocence

3 Internal (Choice) ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY
3.1 Covet – includes attempts to get alcohol and drugs
3.2 Seduction of Crime
3.3 Revenge – includes rational planning
3.4 Reputation
3.5 Crime as Work (includes “Calling” and “moral obligation”)
3.6 Believed absence of recourse - Untouchable/Invincible
3.7 Dedication to a Cause
3.8 Rational Choice – knew alternates/risks (includes “it was easier than…”)

4 Compelled (Biologically/Physiologically) DENY RESPONSIBILITY
4.1 Biological
4.2 Lack of Intelligence
4.3 Substances – Under Influence
4.4 Medical
4.5 Rage
4.6 Instinct – “Can’t help it” – physical, not mental response