



From Learning to Choosing: A Study of Criminal-Career Development in Organized Crime

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Abstract

The study explores the developments of criminal careers of individuals engaged in organized crime in Sri Lanka, where the lens of the research is the application of Differential Association Theory and Rational Choice. Criminal networks continue to develop internationally and locally. This study implements a mixed-methods approach, inclusive of semi-structured interviews with 30 incarcerated offenders and questionnaires with rehabilitation officers. The results of the study established evidence of peer association, initial context of family background and level of deviance as the main influences to initiate participating in an organized crime network and supporting DAT. As offenders build a body of experience and status in the organized crime network, they begin to behave more strategically, consistent with RCT and rationale-based decisions involving risk assessment, opportunities available, and anticipated outcomes. The research also discovers structural barriers low education, unemployment, and social marginalization as long triggers and reinforcing antecedents of sustained crime involvement. Developing a criminal career from social learning to rational choice, this study advances theoretical understandings and offers insights for practice. It also advocates for prevention and rehabilitation interventions appropriate to the offender's position on the criminal career continuum, especially places like Sri Lanka, where socio-political circumstances intersect with organized crime.

Keywords: Organized crime; Criminal careers; Rational choice theory; Differential association theory

Introduction

Organized crime is a persistent and evolving threat in both local and transnational contexts. Organized crime organizations respond to local and transnational recruitment and operational opportunities in different geographical, political, and cultural situations, and they adapt their activities by recruiting new members, introducing new illegal behaviors, and adjusting their operational activities in response to enforcement pressures. It is notable that, despite the advanced literature that seeks to examine the structures and operations of organized crime, there has been less scholarly focus on the ways that individuals enter, stay in, and exit organized crime [1]. These discussions around the cases of offenders' life history timelines sometimes referred to as "criminal careers" are vital in

shaping the prevention and restoration of offenders to non-offending states. There are some discussions of criminal career development indicating that things are not simply a product of an individual's static personality or random role and opportunity. It is understood as a dynamic approach that includes a longitudinal development with social learning, situational constraints, and rational decision making [2,3]. This article examines how people engaged in organized crime transition from learning to choosing: how some aspects of involvement at early stages are determined by social networks and learned behaviors, while involvement at later stages is determined by more calculated, deliberative decisions. Those pathways are examined through the integrated frameworks of Differential Association Theory Rational Choice Theory [4,5]. In Differential Association Theory (DAT) it is important to

understand that criminal behavior is learned as a result of interactions with others in intimate personal groups. The original premise of DAT was that through interactions with criminal peers people learn the techniques for committing crime, as well as the motivations and justifications [4]. Since DAT was introduced, several empirical studies have examined the appropriateness of the theory for several forms of crime (e.g. juvenile delinquency [5]; cybercrime [6]; and white-collar crime [7]). In organized crime specifically, loyalty and trust, as well as shared ideologies, are a necessary part of the recruitment and retention processes [8,9]. These early forms of differential associations help form a deviant "value system" that allows them to legitimize their engagement in criminal conduct and to enhance their engagement with criminal networks.

At the same time, Differential Association Theory, by itself, does not explain how offenders make deliberate choices about crimes, roles, or the timing of actors. In these contexts, Rational Choice Theory (RCT) provides complementary knowledge. RCT, according to Cornish and Clarke (1986), is summarised as the crime is the product of a choice made by an actor weighing the perceived benefits of offending against the potential costs of punishment or failure. RCT acknowledges decisions are only boundedly rational and influenced by an individual's own knowledge, emotions, and the constraints of the situation [10,11]. In crimes of an organised nature where risks are high, and rewards are generally substantial, offenders exhibit sophisticated decision-making strategies that optimise individual actors' profits while minimising the risk of detection [12]. Studies have shown that when people engage in trafficking, extortion, or financial crime, they calculate expected utility around factors such as police presence, market conditions, and connections with political influences [13,14]. There is an emerging body of research to indicate that the two theories are not mutually exclusive and further develop at different points of the criminal career [15]. Early engagement with crime is likely to play a social role, such as through peer influence, familial connection, or community expectations. As individuals gain experience and status in organized networks, their role transitions from apprentice to strategist. At this point, risk, opportunity, and cost begin to supersede status rational calculations about behavior [16]. For example, a young gang sniper. At one point, they will become a decision-maker deciding which methods and forms of criminal activity to use - since they will have now developed methods of risk calculations and ways to navigate the market using crime patterns and law enforcement patterns quantifiable ways [17].

Sri Lanka presents a very interesting context to study this kind of social development. The organized crime landscape is considerably derided by, a civil conflict, political patronage and economic inequality [18]. Criminal organizations in Sri Lanka are

embedded in the very local communities that they operate in, and regularly intersect with a number of political, religious, or business elites [19,20]. Youth demographic members often become members of the local network through family relations or local proximity connection. While the member may be part of a social criminal career, the youth member is often mentored by senior criminals and is socialized into a deviant subculture. As their experience and knowledge increases acquire important forms of specialized calculus and decision-making, they navigate and respond to increasingly complex risk environments as regards in transnational contexts, often involving narcotics, human trafficking and contract killings [21]. This research paper addresses important gaps in criminology literature by providing a longitudinal study of the criminal careers of organized crime offenders in Sri Lanka. The methods used draw on and combine qualitative and quantitative studies in the field of criminology. We wish to demonstrate how the processes of learning – through social interaction – and choosing – through rational deliberation, are interrelated processes and develop through time. In part, our empirical study builds on the work of Kleemans and de Poot (2008) concerning opportunities for crime embedded in social networks, and Pratt et al. (2006) on the continued importance of risk in the decision-making process, even for seasoned offenders.

The research is framed by three questions

1. How do initial social associations and learning experiences inform organized crime involvement?
2. How does a cost–benefit analysis develop over time and with experience and criminal capital?
3. What life events or turning points cause offenders to switch from socializing to rationalizing to make decisions (and vice versa)?

By analyzing the movement from socially learned motivations to deliberately chosen actions, this research provides a more layered and nuanced conceptualization of criminal development. It has practical implications for law enforcement and rehabilitation by demonstrating that at various points in criminal development, practitioners require (and we presume should use) different types of interventions (social dislocation in pre- and early emergent phases and risk manipulation in latter stages [22]). Ultimately, this work contributes to the burgeoning criminological literature that advocates for the development of integrated, contextual, and politically relevant accounts of organized crime careers in the Global South.

Literature Review

To explore the human and criminal career development of organized crime generally will require a comprehensive theoretical framework. Criminologists have long debated if crime is learned

behavior within social groups, or products of rational choice. This section will discuss in depth two important theoretical frameworks Differential Association Theory and Rational Choice Theory and examine the extent to which they can be combined to enhance our understanding of criminal career development in organized crime. This section will also examine the emerging literature surrounding social learning, strategic choice, cultural context and other environmental factors that contribute to the offender decisions of organized crime.

Differential association theory and social learning

Differential Association Theory (DAT), introduced by Edwin Sutherland, is the classic explanation of how criminal behavior is learned. Sutherland's (1947) position was that criminal behavior is not passed from one individual to another but, instead, learned from communication within a single individual group of friends or family. The central tenet of DAT is that friendships and membership in a group predict criminal behavior, such as delinquency or organized crime. Individuals learn to commit crimes by associating with individuals who already carry out crimes, on a group level. It is the frequency, duration, priority, and intensity of this participation that ultimately leads individuals to learn criminal norms. There is also considerable empirical support for the basic principles of DAT, especially in the area of gang opening and social learning from peers, onward to organized crime. For example, Warr (2002) showed that peer influence is an important predictor of adolescent delinquency. Akers (1998) is an extension of DAT to a broader model of social learning, while including reinforcement, imitation, and differential reinforcement. Similarly, in organized crime, social processes have been shown to be important for recruitment, training, and socialization of new members. Specifically, with the Dutch offenders, Kleemans and de Poot (2008) found that many of the Dutch offenders became involved with organized crime through a family or neighborhood connection and learned illegal methods for illegal trades, with some direction from the perpetrators. Likewise, Calderoni et al. (2022), in a systematic literature review of risk factors associated with recruitment into organized crime, reiterated a strong argument concerning the significance of intimate social networks and trusting relationships. In their study, Calderoni et al. revealed the kinship ties, proximity, and shared cultural identity, aided the internalization of criminal values and the acquisition of deviant techniques. Further, Calderoni et al. observed that these relationships extended beyond early adolescence and, in fact, were often consolidated into adulthood forming strong emotional attachments and group loyalty, which can often increase resistance mechanisms to law enforcement intervention. In the South Asian context, specifically in regard to Sri Lankan case studies, Silva (2017) highlighted that most of the youthful male participants

recruited into organized drug networks were initially introduced into dealing by family members or peers within the urban slum context. When dealing with individuals with whom there were already trusting relationships existent, youths often felt protected and seen as legitimate partners in the criminal endeavor. Therefore, young, novice offenders were able to access criminal resource and mentorship based on their early connections. Early identified relationships set the stage for ongoing criminal careers.

Rational choice theory and strategic decision-making

In contrast to socially oriented explanations, Rational Choice Theory (RCT) views crime as the outcome of purposeful decision-making. Cornish and Clarke (1986) assert that criminality occurs when individuals calculate the costs and benefits of their choices although RCT acknowledges the existence of constraints such as lack of information or emotional cues, it maintains that offenders evaluate the reward expected from the crime, the risk of punishment, and the effort required to commit the crime. Recent literature has applied RCT to organized crime. Evidence suggests many offenders consciously construct their choices and think strategically, particularly concerning criminal activities with significant risk and reward. Leclerc and Wortley (2013) explain that organized crime offenders evaluate their choices according to police visibility, surveillance technologies, and timing. Their research on sexual and financial offenders demonstrates that knowledge of the physical environment (including past experiences) and anticipation of the risks associated with perceived capabilities contribute significantly to the type and amount of crime that is committed. Paternoster and Pogarsky (2009) developed the "thoughtfully reflective decision maker" and further speculation argues that an individual with superior decision-making will contemplate future consequences, as opposed to engage in impulsive offending. These findings are especially important to organized crime because these individuals need to consider long futures when planning long-term activities, formulate a division of labor, and rationally manage illicit enterprises. Additionally, Liu et al. (2022) used neuropsychological instruments to demonstrate that organized offenders have an elevated reward profile and are less risk adverse than non-offenders with criminal status. These behaviours compliment the contention that rational decision-making, despite being bounded by biases and incomplete information, still drives criminal displacement, particularly when they are employed in a rational way during mid- and late-career stages. One longitudinal study conducted by Van Koppen et al. (2010) found that while Dutch organized criminals typically start in networks of typical socializing, when they progressed to social influence or leadership positions, their deception and habitual risk taking requires decision-making and ability to manage risk taking. Their study

displayed a development progression from socialized engaging in networks to evaluating and making rational choices as leaders.

Integrating differential association and rational choice theories

The debate regarding social learning and rational decision-making has typically been expressed dichotomously. Yet, new scholarship indicates that these mechanisms are not mutually-exclusive, but are instead complementary and sequential [15,23]. Specifically, one way in which this may manifest, is that individuals may learn criminal behaviors, and justifications entirely through association and come to rationalize and refine their actions once they have experience and "criminal capital." In examining street gangs and organized crime, Campana and Varese (2021) found that, social learning processes serve as an entry point into deviance, but once inside, survival and success within networks of criminals is less a function of affective ties and more a function of processing risk and perceived benefits. Once individuals began calculating benefits and risks, they had fully forged a professional identity as a criminal through a separation of crime from normality, facing the crucial shift from affective or normative ties to instrumental or calculative ties [15]. Kleemans and van Koppen (2020) presented a criminal career approach which addressed the traverses of development in organized crime - a point that the early social learning decidedly transitions to strategic action. Their conclusions are consistent with this notion, that Rational Choice Theory becomes increasingly predictive in the later phases of the process while Differential Association Theory maintains its explanatory power during phases of initial criminalization.

In Sri Lanka, organized crime is made more difficult due to state-criminal collusion, ethnic group ties, and poor law enforcement [18]. These contextual factors shape the social construction of risk and opportunity, which modifies both learning and decision-making. As Silva (2017) demonstrated, people in criminal networks with links to political actors often feel safe and unlikely to be prosecuted, which changes their risk assessments and bolsters their engagement with criminality.

Gaps in knowledge and future directions for empirical investigation

Given the increasing literature on integrating DAT and RCT, there is not much empirical data using these models in the South Asian context with most studies being cross-sectional which restricts our understanding of the changes between social learning and rational decision-making. A longitudinal format would provide invaluable data on including the transitions between peer influences and rational thought regarding engagement, as well as the conditions which determine this transition. This study fills an obvious gap in

Dartmouth's literature with a longitudinal mixed methods study that focuses on the criminal career development of organized crime offenders in Sri Lanka. It adds to the growing body of research examining not only why people commit crimes, but also how they develop into persistent and ultimately strategic decision-makers within organized criminal environments.

Theoretical framework

This study is situated within a stage-contingent theoretical model that integrates Differential Association Theory (DAT) and Rational Choice Theory (RCT) in the broader criminal-career framework [2,3]. The theoretical model assumes that social learning processes dominate early-career entry into organized crime, whereas cost-benefit calculations become increasingly explicit at mid- and late-career decision points--even if both mechanisms are mutually reinforcing across all stages (Table 1).

Conceptual framework

Differential association theory (DAT): DAT argues that crime is learned through interaction with close personal associates who provide criminal definitions favorable to obedience to the law [4]. In an organized crime context, ties with high density and intensity transmit technical know-how (e.g., drug-cutting methods) and the moral vocabulary of justification [5]. Empirical network research finds that kinship and neighbors are the most common recruiting conduits into Italian mafias [8], Dutch trafficking organizations [9], and Sri Lankan drug syndicates [21].

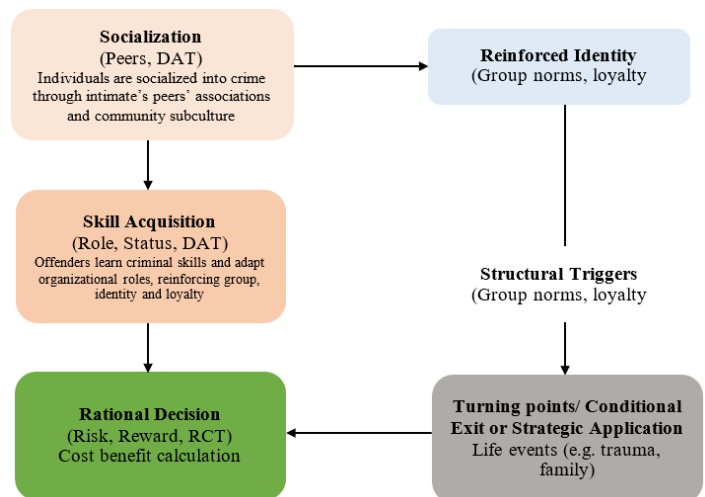


Figure 1: Conceptual framework.

Rational choice theory (RCT): RCT frames offending as purposeful, driven by expected utility [24]. Organized crime actors undertake weighing payoff, effort, and sanction probability when attempting to plan smuggling runs, contract killings, or money laundering [12]. Neuro-cognitive evidence suggests that chronic

offenders have heightened sensitivity to rewards and lower levels of risk aversion consistent with bounded-rationality assumptions of RCT [25].

Criminal-Career paradigm: Life-course studies support the idea that participation in crime is developmental, including onset, maintenance, escalation, specialization and desistance [3]. Integrated DAT-RCT models are able to conceptualize that social influence is strong at onset, but the utilitarian reasoning behind criminally acts increases as actors amass 'criminal capital' and move toward managerial or executive level roles [1,17] (Figure 1).

Methodology

Applying a mixed-methods research design, the current study examines the developmental pathways of organized crime offenders following both Rational Choice Theory (RCT) and Differential Association Theory (DAT). The mixed-methods research design combines quantitative and qualitative data to provide an understanding of the learning processes, the strategic choices, and the critical moments in the criminal careers of organized crime participants. The nature of triangulating the two methods creates internal validity and provides a better contextual understand of the situational social and psychological factors that are present in organized crime [26].

Research Setting and Population

The research was undertaken at Welikada Prison, one of the largest high-security correctional institutions in Sri Lanka. Welikada Prison has a sizable population of those imprisoned for organized criminal offenses in which the felons are involved in many illegal activities in conjunction with others such as drug trafficking incidents; extortion and seriously violent crimes including contract murders, and smuggling. Potential participants were prisoners with definable links to organized criminal subject matter and included confirmed connections within organized crime groups or arrangements based on a review of prison records and rehabilitation officers' categorization.

Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

A purposeful sampling process was made to collect data on people who have direct experience with organized crime as an individual. A purposeful or judgemental sampling is a nonprobability sampling approach that is applicable when one studies hard to reach or specialized populations [27]. This sample consisted of 30 has incarcerated offenders with valid histories born in organized crime operations.

Five rehabilitation officers who worked in two of the prison's reintegration and behavior monitoring units were also selected to provide expert perspectives by filling out structured

questionnaires. The rehabilitation officers have frequent and systematic contact with inmates and were well placed to provide expert opinions regarding patterns of behavior indicative of risk of recidivism and responsiveness to rehabilitation programming.

Data Collection Methods

Qualitative Data: Semi-Structured Interviews

Qualitative data were primarily collected via semi-structured interviews with the 30 offenders. This approach was chosen due to its flexibility, permitting the researcher go deeper into individuals' narratives, perceptions, and social interactions [28]. The interview guide contained open-ended questions on:

- Criminal norms and early exposure, influenced by peers (influenced by DAT)
- Decision-making processes, including cost-benefit analysis (influenced by RCT)
- Significant turning points and transitions in careers
- The experience of desisting from criminality, where applicable

Quantitative Data: Questionnaires Used with Rehabilitation Officers

Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires given to five rehabilitation officers. As a method of data collection, the questionnaire materials included the following:

- The frequency and severity of involvement in organized crime among inmates
- Indicators of recidivism
- Institutional misconduct and compliance or non-compliance
- Risk and needs assessments

Most items were on a Likert scale (e.g., 1–5) or categorical. These instruments provide additional, triangulated data on offenders' behavioral consistency and conceptual basis.

Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis

Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed thematically [28]. It was decided to proceed with an inductive coding process in which themes would emerge directly from the data while also being informed by core concepts from RCT and DAT. Coding categories included "peer influence," "rational justifiers," "turning points," and "criminal capital."

Demographic and background analysis of offenders

This section aims to provide a profile of the thirty offenders using significant socio-demographic variables that relate to entry into organized crime. The data was collected via interviews and verified through institutional records when available (Table 2).

The largest demographic (47%) was in the 26 - 35 age group, which reflects evidence that the highest age for participation in organized crime exists in early adulthood (Farrington, 2003). The portion over 45 suggests a smaller proportion of long-term participants and leaders (Table 3).

Nearly 77% of offenders had just an O/L or less, indicating a serious lack of education. This educational disadvantage reflects research that shows low education is a substantial risk factor in criminal career development, especially in economically deprived areas.

Table 1: Theoretical framework.

Stage	Dominant Mechanism	Core Constructs	Key References
Entry / Apprenticeship	Social learning (DAT)	Peer intensity, family ties, and criminal definitions	Sutherland (1947); Kleemans & de Poot (2008)
Consolidation / Professionalization	Hybrid (DAT + RCT)	Criminal capital, opportunity recognition, bounded rationality	Bouchard & Morselli (2014); Campana & Varese (2021)
Leadership / Brokerage	Strategic decision-making (RCT)	Risk–reward calculus, network brokerage, opportunity structuring	Cornish & Clarke (1986, 2014); van Koppen et al. (2010)
Turning-points / Desistance	Shifting mix	Mentor loss, sanction certainty, and prosocial ties	Paternoster & Pogarsky (2009); Kerstholt et al. (2024)

Table 2: Age distribution of the sample.

Age Group	Number of Offenders (n = 30)	Percentage (%)
18–25 years	5	16.7%
26–35 years	14	46.7%
36–45 years	7	23.3%
46+ years	4	13.3%

(Source: Field Study, 2025.)

Table 3: Educational background.

Education Level	Number of Offenders	Percentage (%)
No formal education	3	10%
Up to Grade 5	6	20%
Grade 6–O/L (Ordinary Level)	14	46.7%
A/L completed	5	16.7%
Diploma or Higher	2	6.6%

(Source: Field Study, 2025.)

Table 4: Employment before join organized crimes.

Employment Category	Number of Offenders	Percentage (%)
Daily wage laborers (e.g., masons, porters)	8	26.7%
Small business owners/self-employed	4	13.3%
Drivers (private and goods transport)	3	10.0%
Unemployed before being involved in OC	7	20.3%
Skilled technical workers (e.g., electricians)	2	6.7%
Clerical/administrative work	1	3.3%

Armed Forces or Police Services	5	20.0%
(Source: Field Study, 2025.)		

Table 5: Integration of RCT and DAT.

Theme	Rational Choice Theory (RCT)	Differential Association Theory (DAT)
Military/Police Service Transition	Strategic skill utilization	Peer-linked recruitment within services
Economic Strain	Cost-benefit analysis of criminal income	—
Peer/Gang Influence	—	Learning techniques, definitions, group validation
Family and Early Socialization	—	Transmission of pro-criminal norms
Opportunity and Decision-Making	Rational selection of criminal paths	—
Desistance Perception	Rational entrapment through sunk costs	Continued exposure to deviant associations
(Source: Field Study, 2025.)		

Gaining insight into the employment status and work histories of offenders prior to their involvement in organized crime also provides information on socio-economic status, how people might be able to exploit criminal opportunities, and how they become recruited into organized crime. The employment history data obtained from 30 incarcerated individuals presented rich variety (Table 4).

The largest group (26.7%) had previous employment as daily wage laborer's, suggesting they were likely vulnerable due to unpredictable income; 20% (n = 5) were previously employed in the police or armed forces. This is important, as they had formal training, structured discipline, and had access to restricted information (or tools), and may have facilitated and/or enhanced their roles in organized crime; Lastly, a significant portion (20.3%) were unemployed, suggesting there might be an economic dimension to the crime, consistent with Strain Theory.

According to the study, the armed forces and police services have recruited members to organized crime because of several psychosocial and structural risk factors.

- **Identity loss post-service:** Finding civilian life difficult, some veterans were vulnerable to the economic pull of criminal networks.
- **Economic shortages:** A lack of income through pension or savings led some veterans to engage in criminal activity
- **Moral dissonance:** Crimes were rationalized as “missions” or “orders” in interviews.
- **Peer normalization:** There were members from the same military unit who were already members of a criminal network, which was regarded as an act of survival or loyalty.

Thematic data analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted by coding semi-structured interview transcripts from a total of 30 convicted organized crime offenders. Coding followed the six-phase protocol established by Braun and Clarke (2006) and was derived through both inductive and deductive methods. The quantitative profiles and qualitative narratives were triangulated to confirm primary themes that correspond to criminal career formation and development.

Early Socialization and Family Background

Many of the offenders described their family contexts as either absent of supervision or immersed in criminality (deviance). This was especially true for offenders who faced neglect, poverty, or a family legacy of criminality.

"My father went in and out of jail. I thought it was normal. Everybody had respect for him in the neighborhood." - Respondent 4

Twelve out of 30 offenders (40%) reported being exposed to criminal behaviors in their home environment during adolescence. This theme corresponds with Differential Association Theory, whereby criminal behaviors are learned through interaction with primary groups. The family, as a socializing agent, occurs at an establishing age and is one of the earliest means of normalization of criminal behavior.

Economic Pressures and Survival Motives

Economic and sometimes physical pressure was the number one motive for most of these offenders to engage in organized crime. Data showed that 13 offenders (43.3%) were either unemployed or employed in low-paying, daily wage work.

"It was just anything I could scrounge up as a regular income. I have two kids, and I had zero help. That's how I got approached with an offer." - Respondent 17

These economic pressures were indicative of General Strain Theory, where a person does not achieve societal approved goals (e.g., job stability, family stability), and as a result strikes legitimacy as a means to achieve. Because of the structural pressures, organized crime became a rational response.

Role of the Military and Police Services

A very telling theme was the transformation from disciplined service to deviant enterprise. Six offenders (20%) had some military or police service (Army, Navy, Air Force, Police).

"I was taught to obey orders. When say a senior from my unit ask for assistance, I didn't hesitate. I was taught loyalty." - Respondent 12, Ex-Army

These individuals described their difficulty reintegrating after military or police service, pointing to unemployment, the vague transition away from service and promotion of themselves by former colleagues. Their transition into deviance demonstrated a deviant transformation of loyalty to a level of organization and tactical knowledge that was recomposed for engagement in crime. This suggests that after training in highly structured registry into the military or police forces, when separated from that structure those individuals would be highly vulnerable to the opportunistic co-option practices of criminal networks. It also provides a further justification for a possible convergence of Rational Choice Theory and Differential Association Theory as their decisions were being made rationally but could often be seen as being socialized away via familiar social relationships associated with military or police service.

Peer Pressure and Gang Membership

The majority of participants cited peer influence (e.g., neighbors, friends, or ex-colleagues) as the reason for their criminal involvement. Interview data also revealed that 22 offenders (73.3%) reported having close friends that were already involved in organized crime before they themselves became involved.

"Everyone I then hung out with was doing it (smuggling, dealing, whatever). You either get in the game or go broke." - Respondent 7

Peer association not only normalized crime, but also was a conduit for engaging with organized networks. This supports the idea behind Differential Association Theory, where people learn crime norms more often than law-abiding (prosocial) norms.

Crime opportunity and the rational way of knowing.

Some offenders described rational consideration in deciding to engage in crime rather than work in legitimate employment. In many cases offenders who had technical or military skills had made

rational choices to utilize that skill set in high-reward, illicit activity.

"I knew how to move weapons without being detected. That skill set got me into the gang." - Respondent 21

This phenomenon is consistent with Rational Choice Theory, whereby perceived benefit (e.g., income, respect, protection) outweighed the perceived risk (e.g., arrest, imprisonment). Interestingly, men who identified as having higher education qualifications (O/L or A/L) attributes described their decision making as more often incorporating cost-benefit thinking.

Structural Marginalization and Systemic Failure

While offenders articulated their disenchantment with formal institutions and highlighted low expectations of opportunities, discrimination, and corruption, they suggested that these elements even after they attempted to abide by the law.

"I wanted to follow the law and get a job. Nobody helped me. One cop said I would always be a thug." - Respondent 9

This systemic failure contributed to a sense of alienation, and further to their acceptance of criminal involvement in their worldview. This theme is reflective of a larger structural critique—one which situates poverty, inequality, and lack of opportunities as barriers that have continued to engage offenders in further crime.

Desistance as a Distant Concept

When asked about their future, the majority of offenders did not articulate tangible plans for desisting from crime. The respondents voiced this schema of 13 of them utilizing imprisonment as a "pause," rather than a turning point.

"Once I am out, I have no choice. Who is going to hire me with my record?" - Respondent 19

What this consistently suggests is that offenders demonstrated little internal motivation for desistance and affirmed a cyclical criminal identity sustained by social structural barriers and expectations. The remaining four that expressed intent to change were all students operating in rehabilitative or spiritual programs in prison.

Discussion

The study was designed with the purpose of assessing how people engage in organized crime using a purposively selected sample of 30 incarcerated offenders located at Welikada Prison. Using a mixed-methods approach that included semi-structured interviews and questionnaire data, the study employed some analyses of age, education, family background, employment history such as military service or service with the police, from a socio-psychological perspective on peer influences (refusal types, level of involvement) and self-state models of decision-making to help assess and examine their criminal careers. The participants were young to middle-aged men who were primarily found around 25 to

40 years old. The data indicated that the majority of participants were initially engaged in organized crime in the ages of 18 to 25 years. This age pattern likely reflects a time in the life of these individuals where they began making decisions for economic survival, social identity, and whether to align with other peers, sometimes with subcultural identities. At this point, Rational Choice Theory becomes particularly relevant. The data indicated that many individuals that the researcher interviewed, made rational choices to commit crime during the early years of their development, sometimes for basic needs as a rational solution because of limited employment opportunities and financial issues. Differential Association Theory has an important role to play here, some offenders were exposed to criminal exposures much earlier, often through the family unit or community, and prior to the time they made conscious choices to enter crime. This indicates that, while their act may have been calculated, they were socialized to engage in crime much earlier based on learned association and a social normalizing of deviance. The level of education was low across the sample. Many had only completed primary and secondary education, and very few had post-secondary or vocational education. This is an internal finding to be mindful of when considering the type of activities, they engaged in related to organized crime. Lower education attainment limited their legitimate employment choices, and many rationalized that criminal activities made economic sense. Through the rational choice perspective, this logic makes sense -- that the value of being unemployed or under employed in terms of opportunity costs will always be greater than the perceptions of the risks that attend organized criminal activity. There is value in holding differential association theory as a base too. The same individuals with low education often talked about frequent exposure to criminally involved family and friends, supporting deviant values and patterns of behavior. Therefore, lack of education limited both opportunity and created dependency on criminal alternatives that were socially learned.

A major theme throughout the data concerned family background. Many of the participants came from a family where one or more members had engaged in some type of criminality. This direct exposure to crime within the family, particularly socializing agents, led to the acceptance of crime as a legitimate option in the individuals' lives. This finding strongly supports ideas in DAT, where criminal behaviors are learned in context of groups with which the offenders have an intimate connection. The offenders in this study adopted values, methods, and rationalizations for criminality that were influenced by intimate relationships in their homes or thereabouts. Even where individual participants declared that their choices to become involved in organized crime was personal, it was clear that their choices were influenced by a learned context, suggesting that social learning supersedes rational

choice. Interestingly, an important subgroup in this study consisted of offenders who had previously worked in the military or police. As we interviewed these offenders, it became clear that their training and employment heavily influenced their criminal behavior. Indeed, these offenders played a number of roles in crime, many of them were best described as logistics managers, enforcers, or recruiters for criminal organizations. Although many in the sample turned to crime due to economic need, the group of former military/police engaged in crime much more deliberately. RCT was particularly relevant in this context. The individuals we interviewed seemed to weigh the relative "benefit" of using their skills in the criminal market, against the potential costs and made rational choices based on achievable outcomes. At the same time, their entry barriers and connections to crime were often through former colleagues or social interactions linked to their time of service, demonstrating a connection with DAT. The comparison within the sample demonstrates that even while the military/police group relied on their specialized training to enter and operate in organized crime, they still were affected by social networks. Therefore, we can draw a clear distinction between rational choices as a factor and look to examine more closely how rational choice and differential association played together within this subgroup. Peer influence was a major component in almost all cases, irrespective of the background. The reasons for this were primarily due to friends from school, friendship networks from the neighborhood, and as one prison inmate noted, other inmates. What is critical for their evolution was the role peers played in fostering and maintaining their criminal involvement. Numerous offenders expressed that they joined a group to gain protection, resources, and a sense of belonging.

At the root of this study, we see how those who did not have any family crime introductions, later became entrenched criminals through peer networks. This is concerning for DAT's focus on through close personal contact they learn definitions favorable to law violation. Even when participants joined their criminal commitments for an ostensibly rational motivation of economics, participation became reinforced by loyalty to the group as well as their shared group identity, which correspondingly diminished the psychological costs of continued deviance. This influence corroborates the outside literature and suggests that any initial rational cost-benefit analysis could become buried under a milieu of criminal reinforcement, which could result in lifelong attachment to organized crime. Another noteworthy finding from the study is the cumulative nature of early decisions. Those participants who entered crime mindedly or through social learning early in life embedded themselves in that lifestyle for longer periods of time. And, numerous arrests, prison sentences, and social stigma made it harder for them to exit that lifestyle, once they became a regular criminal. Once again, RCT and DAT blend

together. Offenders who made the rational choice to offend got ensconced in a structure that socialized them to participate in deviant behavior. Additionally, offenders who social learning frameworks eventually rationalized their choices at the cost-benefit level of RCT thinking, because criminal success provided monetary gain or identifiable social status. This internal comparison demonstrates that once a criminal career initiates, social learning and rational choice are not mutually exclusive; rather they are interdependent, complementary, and mutually reinforcing (Table 5).

Conclusion

This study was designed to examine how individuals develop criminal careers in organized crime by tracing their development over multiple pathways from early exposure and social learning to the rational choice of committing to ongoing criminality. The authors utilized 30 incarcerated offenders from a purposively subsampled cohort of inmates from Welikada Prison and applied a mixed-method methodology using qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and quantitative data from questionnaires given to rehabilitation officers. The authors utilized Differential Association and Rational Choice Theories to analyze findings in order to attain a more holistic understanding of the social factors and individual decision-making factors that contribute to entry into organized crime. The findings of the research highlighted that involvement in criminality typically emerged in early adulthood, and was often preceded by early exposure to deviant values, behavior and role models in both family associations and community affiliations. Convenient with DAT's central premise, that criminals learn criminality through close associations, many subjects indicated associational-early normalization of criminal behavior in their family household and peer environments to a point where they were deeply prepared to join a more structured criminal group later, in organized crime.

At the same time, the research showed that people are thinking through opportunities and risks and benefits regarding entering an organized crime group, particularly if they have poverty, no job, or educational constraints. This also aligns with the conditional rationality assumptions of RCT evaluating personal alternatives and making decisions based on outcomes. For some individuals, particularly for individuals having prior jobs in the armed services or police forces, the decisions made were truly tactical, as they aimed to use their bureaucratic skills and networks to maximize their power and status in the organized group or networks. In addition, this research found that peer reinforcement and group loyalty and economic dependency played a role in entrenching individual people into the organized crime group from the moment of entering. Although some illegal actions may be a result of needs

or peer pressure, their continued involvement is often a way of life and is reinforced by group norms based on continued material or symbolic rewards. This suggests that rational decision-making and social learning live in a state of interdependency criminal careers are not wholly voluntary nor are they conditions but negotiated through an evolving constellation of trade-offs between individual agency and environmental influence.

The research also revealed important risk factors that seem to lead to persistent engagement in organized crime:

- Low levels of formal education
- Criminal family backgrounds
- Prior defence or security-related employment/experience
- Peer pressure initiation and reinforcement

With an understanding of these interconnected factors, the research represents an important addition to criminology, especially in the South Asian context, where there is a limited empirical evidence base on organized crime and video games. Importantly, it not only demonstrates the complementary strengths of both DAT and RCT in understanding the development of a criminal career, the research also has implications for policymakers, prison rehabilitation programs, and crime prevention mechanisms more generally. In conclusion, the research concluded that the shift from exposure to and learning about crime, to determining the rational choice to actively pursue crime, was a complex process that develops over time. It involves the accumulation of learning about criminal environments through socialization and progression to a rational determination that crime was a legitimate or necessary role. Recognizing this process and its complexities is vitally important to developing appropriate interventions that consider not only the structural conditions of crime but also the cognitive rationales for criminal choices. Future research should examine longitudinal studies and sensible rational samples to further research the journey of criminal careers, successful rehabilitation, and the potential for social structural reform that interrupts long-term criminality [29-35].

Conflict of Interest Statement

I hereby declare that there is no conflict of interest in relation to the research study titled "*From Learning to Choosing: A Study of Criminal-Career Development in Organized Crime.*" The research was conducted entirely independently, without any influence from external parties, organizations, or individuals who might benefit from the findings. No financial support, grants, or sponsorships were received from government bodies, private institutions, commercial enterprises, or non-profit organizations throughout the process of this study. The decisions regarding the study design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and writing of this manuscript were made solely by the author without any external

pressure or bias. Furthermore, there are no personal, professional, or financial relationships that could be perceived to have influenced the outcomes or conclusions of this research. This declaration is made in the interest of maintaining full transparency and upholding the ethical standards expected in academic research and publication.

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