

The indebtedness scape spiral: shame as a cause for immoral conduct leading to indebtedness

Abstract

Using escape theory as a theoretical lens this study applied qualitative research to investigate causes for immoral behavior linked to indebtedness. We conducted 16 in-depth interviews using projective techniques with employees and members of a credit union in the south of Brazil. The data collected shows evidence supporting the use of the Escape Theory as model that explains irrational, unethical and immoral behaviors linked to indebtedness and supports the notion of socially constructed forms of shame as the starting point of the escape process. Suggestions for applying theory to practice are discussed.

Keywords: Escape theory, indebtedness, shame

Introduction

The high immorality of behaviors shown by people with very troublesome indebtedness problems perplexes most financial institutions. The seemingly shameless attitudes, not caring about having their reputations destroyed, the debauchery, the lies and the avoidance strategies applied all cause perplexation, financial losses and even emotional cost to people involved, be it the indebted person, his guarantors, his family and even the financial institutions employees. Following research agenda set out by Brüggem *et al* (2017), this paper intends to shine light upon the personal causes and motivations of indebtedness which is one of financial well-being's personal antecedents.

The Brazilian Central Bank's (BCB) (2020) research on the socio-economical profile of our population studied among other things citizen's debt status from 06/2016 to 12/2019. In this research the BCB defines that citizens are in a risky debt category if they present at least two of the following criterion: (a) arrears on at least one credit item; (b) exposition to at least three unsecured credit items; (c) income gearing of over 50%; (d) the total monthly income still available after paying all debts is below the poverty line (circa R\$ 440). The research indicates that 4.6% of the total of 85.3 million Brazilian debtors present at least two of the criteria and 0.73% present three or four of them in the last month of the research period. The profile of these debtors shows them to usually be over 65 years old (this age group has proportionately double the number of debtors than the 30-40 age group), of having income range from R\$ 5,000 to R\$ 10,000 predominantly living in the northern part of the country. It's important to note that this study is prior to the COVID-19 outbreak and as such it is presumable that these indexes may have gotten worse during the last few months. It is then imperative and a matter of national well-being that financial institutions, academia and governments should understand as much as possible about the causes that may lead people into indebtedness.

There is a vast research body, especially in behavioral and psychological economics and finance, looking at indebtedness through objective sociodemographic and financial measures. Though a lot can be understood through these lenses, very little can be said about behavior and especially the antecedents of these behaviors that drive indebtedness (Brüggem *et al.*, 2017; Disney, Bridges, and Gathergood, 2008). Beyond this scope, recent endeavors cast light into the subjectivity around financial well-being, especially the underlying processes that could account for the reason people would behave in a way that would produce indebtedness. Most studies look at cognitive psychological factors, and although many mechanisms are studied, materialism and self-control stand out as major players for indebtedness (Garðarsdóttir and Dittmar, 2011; Ottaviani and Vandone, 2011).

We also point out that emotions are largely neglected by standard economic theory and indebtedness studies. Mostly viewed as consequences, if much. There is comparatively little research investigating emotional factors as antecedents, even though emotions greatly impact decision-making processes, including those related to self-control and materialism (Noval, 2016; George and Dane, 2016). In this regard affective forecasting and other affect infused consumption decision making processes would seem to be a very promising research venue for this research (Noval, 2016; George and Dane, 2016). And this is why our research focused on Escape Theory (Baumeister, 1988; 1990) as a lens to analyze consumer indebtedness. Escape Theory explains the process through which an individual will try to avoid self-awareness of an afflictive emotional state and eventually engage in disinhibited and irrational behavior, such as indebtedness prone consumption.

This research aims to delve into the specific mechanisms of emotionally driven consumption decisions and understand how the cognitive deconstruction that is predicted in Escape Theory leads consumer down a path of indebtedness (vs. a path of renegotiating existing debt, for example). This research was conducted using semi-structured in-depth interviews (Flick, 2008) with employees and members of Sicredi Serrana, a credit union from Rio Grande do Sul (RS), Brazil's southernmost state. RS presents an above average risky debtors' population of 6.8% (BCB, 2020). By May 2020, the credit union had approximately 117 thousand members (clients) and R\$ 2.27 billion of funding including deposits, investment funds, saving accounts and others. By 2019 the total value of over 90 days indebtedness operations was of roughly R\$ 12 million representing 7.5% of total operations under renegotiations, 65% of these are values under R\$ 50 thousand, which represent only 14% of the total amount that is owed. Due to the COVID outbreak, the credit union expects this value to almost double and hit R\$ 21 million. By June 2020 the total amount of operations that have gone through indebtedness had grown from 7.5% to 9%, an average below what the general financial market is experiencing as a whole.

This paper is organized in the following manner: first, we will present a theoretical framework based on Escape Theory and emotionally driven consumption decision making. Second, data collection and data analyses methodologies are explained. Following are the results of content analyses applied to the interview data. We finish with conclusions, limitations and future research suggestions.

Escape Theory and affect infused consumption

Escape Theory was originally conceptualized as a way to understand masochist behavior (Baumeister, 1988). It has also been applied to other disorders such as suicide (Baumeister, 1990), compulsive eating, alcoholism and compulsive buying (Yi, 2012). According to Chatard and Selimbegovic (2011), Escape Theory is an integrative framework proposing a causal chain that leads to the outcome of such behaviors. The authors point out it integrates important notions from personality and social psychology, such as self-discrepancy, self-awareness, attribution, among others. Its main assumption is that individuals do not desire the direct outcomes of whatever disorder they are facing (masochism, suicide, compulsive eating, etc.) but rather because they are motivated to escape from self. Outcomes such as binge eating are the individual's attempt to lower their self-awareness related to pressures, threats, long-range concerns, and lasting consequences of their experiences (Qi and Cui, 2019). Self-awareness of afflictive emotional state can also be painful for some people and such individual engage in immediate, concrete tasks that are self-destructive in order to escape from this painful self-awareness (Yi, 2012).

Escape Theory is laid out in 6 steps. The first step is falling short of one's own standards. This may occur because standards are too high, because events are very negative,

or both. It is the discrepancy between the standard and the reality that is crucial (Baumeister, 1990).

The second step is generating self-blame. In other words, responsibility for failure is attributed to the self (Chatard and Selimbegovic, 2011). If people do not blame themselves for falling short of standards, the self is not implicated and therefore there is little motivation to escape the self (Donnelly *et al.*, 2016).

The third step is one of acutely high self-awareness. These self-attributions of responsibility for failure create a focus on the self, which is experienced as acutely high self-awareness (Donnelly *et al.*, 2016). The fourth step is a direct consequence, in which unpleasant affective states of aversive emotions and emotional distress appear. Escape Theory holds that certain self-attributions cause an awareness of self as inadequate, which leads to negative affect, especially depression and anxiety (Baumeister, 1990). According to the author anxiety may take many forms and guilt is one of them, and there are vast evidences linking suicidal inclinations to guilt. Yi (2012) argues that shame is also a negative affect associated with Escape Theory. Though it is often used interchangeably with guilt, there is growing consensus that they are distinct emotions, the key difference resting in the role of the self in these experiences. Shame derives from negative evaluation of the global self (“I did that horrible thing”), while guilt condemns the specific transgression (“I did that *horrible thing*”). According to Yi (2012) shame is experienced when people attribute negative events to perceived deficiencies of the core self and perceive that their deep-seated flaws are revealed to themselves or others. Shame prone individuals chronically make internal, stable and global attributions for setbacks and transgressions whereas guilt is associated with the tendency to make internal, temporary and unstable attributions. Shame is a mal-adaptive tendency associated with greater negative psychological outcomes than guilt.

The fifth step is cognitive deconstruction. According to Baumeister (1990) in Escape Theory an individual tries to escape from negative affect by rejecting and avoiding meaningful thought. There are three main signs of cognitive deconstruction. The first is that one’s time perspective is constricted to a narrow focus of the present. Yi (2012) states an example of deconstructed cognitive state linked to compulsive buying where some individuals narrow their attention by focusing exclusively on the act of buying in sensory-rich store environments (e.g. lights, sounds and smells). While blocking out negative self-awareness, cognitive narrowing prevents individuals from considering the long-term consequences of their actions and induces “magical thinking” and the feeling of grandiosity. A second sign is of concreteness or the focus on immediate movements and sensations rather than broader ideas and emotions that characterize high-level thinking. The last sign is that of proximal goals rather than distal goals. Baumeister (1990) also shares evidences that individuals in deconstructed cognitive states seek to deny meanings and avoid high-level interpretations of circumstances in a sort of tunnel vision which presents a lack of openness to new ideas or interpretations.

The sixth and final step is of consequences, such as disinhibition and irrational thinking. It reflects the consequences of the deconstructed state. According to Donnelly *et al.* (2016) maintaining a concrete, low-level focus disengages many inner controls that normally guide behavior, such as rational analysis and socially normative inhibitions. According to Baumeister (1990) there are four main consequences to the deconstructed state: disinhibition, lack of emotions, passivity and irrational thought. Disinhibition is the first and most important one. It is characterized as the removal of inner restraints and is considered the most important for bringing about suicide as it makes the individual willing to engage in actions that violate normal patterns of behavior.

While Escape Theory is a well-studied framework that has been applied to various phenomena, no work, to the best of our efforts, was found applying it to indebtedness. It’s

important to notice though that Yi (2012) research links shame and Escape Theory to compulsive buying. Compulsive and also impulsive buying have been found to be predictors of indebtedness and financial well-being (Ottaviani and Vandone, 2011). Donnelly *et al.* (2016) conceptualized materialism as a consumption strategy based on Escape Theory. By using a 200+ paper systematic review, the research shows strong parallel for the claim that materialistic consumption is used as a coping strategy for one looking to flee from afflictive emotional states, such as shame, and also as a means to dampen self-awareness. In this lens, it seems then possible for shame struck consumers aching to get rid of his or her negative afflictive emotional state to formulate emotionally driven consumption goals. It is then possible to take into account that potentially misleading decisions could arise since one is under affective forecasting (George and Dane, 2016), or because one's cognition has been underrun by impact bias, focalism (Noval 2016) or hyperbolic discounting (Rogers and Bazerman, 2008), and then so engage in indebtedness prone consumption.

Method

This research used qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews as data collection method. According to Flick (2008) this technique uses a script that has questions that can be adapted to the ongoing interview, serving as a guide where the interviewee may elaborate on the subject. The interview script was elaborated based on literature review about drivers of indebtedness (Disney, Bridges and Gathergood, 2008), cognitive psychological factors linked to indebtedness (Garðarsdóttir and Dittmar, 2011; Ottaviani and Vandone, 2011), emotional influence on decision making, such as affective forecasting (Noval, 2016; George and Dane, 2016) and Escape Theory (Baumeister, 1988, 1990; Donnelly *et al.* 2016; Yi, 2012; Chatard and Selimbegovic, 2011).

The sample selection and recruitment were done by credit union employees following strict instructions we provided. They were instructed to recruit from three different target audiences. The first being administrative headquarter employees who worked directly with judicial and extra-judicial credit recuperation or with the credit union's financial education social program. Four employees formed the sample for this audience.

The second was street branch employees who service credit union members directly. The instructions specified that the mix of employee should be both from small sized cities (up to ten thousand inhabitants) and larger cities (the largest city having around one hundred thousand inhabitants). Besides that, employees must have had experiences collecting or dealing with cases of indebtedness up to six months prior to the COVID outbreak. This instruction was necessary to make sure the sample wasn't overwhelmed with income shock type indebtedness (such as job loss due to pandemic) which is well mapped out and studied (Brüggen *et al.*, 2017; Disney, Bridges and Gathergood, 2008). Seven employees formed this audience's sample.

The last audience was credit union members who had experienced cases of indebtedness prior to the COVID outbreak. Due to the sensitivity and difficulty of contacting this specific public, the sampling method used was snowball sampling. The employees that were selected in the second audience were instructed to recruit themselves at least one member they had attended and that fit the indebtedness criteria. A total of seven were recruited. But only five interviews were executed (one member informed she did not want to participate and the other did not show up on the scheduled time).

As so a total of 16 interviews were conducted (10 men, total duration of approximately 17 hours, average duration 1 hour 4 minutes; see Table 1). A main interview script was used for all cases but minor adaptations were used for each different audience.

All interviews were recorded (with consent from participants) and transcribed. Content analysis was applied (Bardin, 2011) in order to analyze individual responses with the

objective of identifying and coding categories related to Escape Theory and indebtedness across all interviews. During analyzes five categories were created *a posteriori*: The Escape Spiral, The self-whipping effect, Immorality blindness, The wheel of death and Socially approved shame branding. Each category is presented below.

Names of individuals, cities and establishments have been either removed or giving an alias as a procedure to guarantee anonymity.

Table 1 - Interview sample

Public	Alias	Duration	Age	Experience in financial sector (y)
Administrative headquarters employee	Eliana	01:04:50	26	5
	Eduarda	00:52:50	38	20
	Elias	00:54:00	34	9
	Diogo	01:00:35	45	19
Street branch employee	Jackson	01:21:53	28	3
	Rafaela	01:15:59	30	16
	Leandro	01:17:27	42	18
	Ana	00:59:40	27	9
	Karina	01:21:12	35	3
	Álvaro	01:08:30	21	6
	Ricardo	01:09:05	27	11
Credit union member	Roberto	00:48:53	59	N/A
	Julio	00:40:57	39	N/A
	Felipe	01:00:30	48	N/A
	Antonio	00:51:12	46	N/A
	Ellen	01:25:53	37	N/A

The Escape Spiral

Baumeister's Escape Theory (1990) is a self-repeating process that lingers on for an indefinite, but usually long, timeframe. The evidence gathered during this exploratory phase seems to indicate that escapism behaviors linked to indebtedness prone behavior may appear in a spiral fashion. In the sense that behavior tends to repeat itself, but every turn around the spiral, it may become more substantial just like a spiral's helix may grow longer while it spins around its own axis. Most debt stories that were collected show a tendency to deter ethical or moral behavior as time passes. The unhealthy behavior associated with consumption patterns that lead to future arrears or indebtedness starts small and perhaps seemly innocuous. Then it gradually builds-up, breaking more significant ethical barriers and eventually transforms itself into an utterly immoral portfolio of bad choices and behaviors. One way to illustrate this spiral is by looking at Karina's story, an employee at one of the credit union's street branches.

[...] this guy would always pay up late. I'd had to call him, but he would eventually pay. Until came the day he said he had lost his job. He said he would wait for the rescission money to come in, and then he would pay. A month later I called him, and he told me he had a problem and spent all the money. [...] He said to not worry because he was already getting a new job and as soon as the first salary came in then he would pay. Ok, I called him again sometime later, and he said: "Oh because I bought a car with the rescission money and it broke and I have to fix it". So, I guess he didn't even notice, but he admitted that he was lying on the last call. [...] These guys will give you excuses until the day comes that they simply don't answer anymore. Moreover, it's really offensive because you can't stop asking yourself, "does this guy really think I'm so dumb that I won't notice his lame excuses?"

The avoidance strategy clearly builds up. Karina tells another story of how this behavior can get even worst.

I called the person's mother and said it was from the credit union and that I had to talk to her son. [...] Eventually, he called. And he was mad, and I mean really mad! "You called my mother? Come on!". Anyways... it worked. He renegotiated. Paid the first installment. Paid the second. And then nothing more. I tried to talk to him through WhatsApp. All my messages appear as if he hadn't read them. I tried calling his mother, but she wouldn't answer anymore either. [...] You can't get in contact anymore.

Ana's story brings a new point that we must bear about the escape spiral. Ana also works in one of the street branches. She tells a story about her sister.

My sister is a good example. She still doesn't understand how credit cards work. [...] So, she goes spending her limit as if she had that value, and when the bill comes, she can't afford to pay it [...] I can see that my parents always tried to equal things out. If they bought me something, they would go and buy her the same thing. [...] When I got my first job, I would earn R\$100 per week. And every time I would go out to buy something with my salary, my parents would give her money, so she didn't get left out. Maybe she feels that she is still trying to equal things up. [...] I imagine my sister now if she didn't have me or my father helping her. I am 100% sure that she would be one of those really messed up indebted people. I am apprehensive about her behavior.

Using the spiral analogy, we could say that this kind of behavior is still in the early stages. She is showing arrears that could be easily taken as "bad financial habits". However, how could we know what type of behavior she would have if indebted? We must ask ourselves how many people live "on the edge" of the escape spiral? Not yet indebted because of the resources of closest friends, relatives, and support network. Many of the credit union employees tell the same story: "there is a point in which the amount you owe is so big that you lose control, you just can't get out of it. You will be indebted until the end of your life".

Dawney, Kirwan and Walker (2020) point out that debt in post-capitalist life is intrinsic, and per passes our day-to-day. A longtime frame may pass by, and our structural debt and the emotional toils it carries may flow through us in a low intensity, in an almost invisible fashion. Picking up on this notion of passing time, we could relate these stories to Baumeister's six steps Escape Theory (Baumeister, 1990; Donnelly et al, 2016). One can argue that the escape spiral creates spaces in time for steps five (cognitive deconstruction) and six (disinhibited consequences) to build up again and represent new opportunities for immoral behavior to come in to place with the indebted person not even noticing it. But we could also argue that given the necessary timeframe, these new "places" in time could also prove to be opportunities for the indebted to choose a different, non-escapist path. Karina's last example shows exactly that. By contacting his mother, she had the opportunity to present the member with a new path. He chose, unfortunately, to keep up with his former behavior.

Following up on this example is Elias's remarks. He is a lawyer at the credit union's administrative headquarters. "Sometimes people stop answering when you call from your phone, but they'll answer when you call from a different one [...]. Sometimes, when I have to charge a debt, I present myself as a lawyer, not necessarily as someone working at the credit union. People tend to open up that way". It seems these "connection shifts" create spaces for these debtors to choose different paths.

Felipe owns a small chain of pharmacies (one headquarters and two branches) in two different small-sized cities. Despite the early success, his endeavor reached a tough patch due to market fluctuations. Felipe's "good heart," as he said of himself, was the spark for some very poor management options, like ignoring his consultant's advice and choosing not to fire some employees despite the revenue's steep decline. At the time, he was sure he would feel bad for doing that to one of his employees. Even if that meant he would arrive without a doubt to an unsustainable financial condition. He contracted some emergency credit lines, and soon enough, the installments became unpayable. Eventually, he had to sell one of the branches to try to pay off suppliers and bank debts but still fell short of meeting his obligations. He eventually became seriously indebted which led to his social security number being blacklisted, and his business was left hanging on the brink of bankruptcy. He was

forced to fire personnel anyways. Felipe said he blames himself, that it was all obviously his fault. And till this day he never really forgave himself for it. But he did find a way out.

A colleague of mine suggested that I tried talking to the credit union. I accepted but went to talk entirely without hope. You know... Because when you hit rock bottom, everybody closes their door to you. But I talked to the account manager anyway, and she said: "Let's figure out what we can do". [...] When we sat down and talked, I still had my first branch. [...] And she said: "Due to the conjecture I suggest you sell the branch, concentrate only on the HQ, reinforce this and that". I did just that. They trusted me, and they valued what we had arranged. And with that, I was able to pay off my suppliers, the banks, and there was still some money left for us to invest. [...] To contract this credit I had to use my house as a collateral. It was hard, really hard. But it was either that or shut everything down. [...]

Leandro works at another street branch. He recalled the story of a member who attended one of the credit union's financial education courses.

A few days later, she came to branch with a whole plan laid out, showing that she needed R\$ 5,000 to straight out her complete financial life. We gave her credit, and in the first few months, she was okay with it. However, somewhere along the road, she started to fall back to some old behaviors and eventually became indebted again. [...] We guess it could have been some problem with her daughter. [...] I know both of them to have a close and strong relationship. I think that it has to do with not wanting to say no to the kid. "Yeah... I really shouldn't do that, but ok, sure, here take the money". While trying to help her kid, she got herself in trouble.

Connection shifts, being granted a second chance, family relations. It would seem that some diverse events and happenings create these momentary time spaces in the escape spiral. Nonetheless, these stories show that the paths chosen by the debtor vary from a complete stop in the destructive spiral to a momentary relief (something like the spiral's helix shortening for some time) to a complete transition to full immorality (the helix grows bigger). One may then ask himself: What makes an indebted choose one path or another? What could be done so as to maximize the probability of choosing a healing path instead of a destructive one?

The self-whipping effect

If a person is taking a trip down the escape spiral, then we can say undoubtedly that there is a series of struggling issues behind it all. Baumeister (1988) initially used Escape Theory to understand why masochists wanted to feel physical pain and humiliation. He points out that the masochists are very keen on pain but consciously seek ways to feel it without getting injured. He also suggested that suicide mechanisms follow the Escape Theory model (Baumeister, 1990), but in this case, they really seek their own harm. In both cases, the individual is trying to run from afflictive self-awareness. There is then an open question about indebtedness-oriented escapists: How far would they go to inflict pain or injury to themselves? And why would they do that?

A series of the collected stories seem very much alike in the sense that they tell a tale of someone quite keen on destroying their own reputation. "But do you understand if you don't pay or renegotiate this debt, then your social security number will have to be blacklisted? That you will have to pay a huge amount of interest? Aren't you worried about your financial future?" A lot of stories had employees asking members that type of questions. Almost all answers looked the same: "No. I'm not worried! Who cares if you pin a lawsuit on me? Who cares if my name gets dirty? You're just one more name in the list of people I owe anyways".

If we think about the escape spiral analogy, we can certainly see that the above response is a behavior that has already climbed to a very high level. We argue that this type of reaction is equivalent to the masochist seeking pain. But in these cases, the financial and social injuries the debtors cause themselves are real. Nonetheless, these damages can have somewhat of a low-level construal in the sense that it can be of an abstract and symbolic

nature (Rogers and Bazerman, 2008). For example, if the indebted person has income to cover his basic needs, he might not suffer immediately or directly with a credit withdrawal. If he is not confronted by someone charging him, he might not even be reminded that he is in debt. Some common consequences linked to the sixth phase of the escape theory model include: concrete thinking (the incapacity to think or use abstraction as a cognitive reflection process), absence of distal goals (only focusing on a short term or proximal goals) and rejection of meaning (avoiding high-level interpretations of circumstances) (Baumeister, 1990; Donnelly et al., 2016). All of these seem to corroborate to the notion that the debtors really seek his own social or financial demise but might not be able to conceive the consequences of such actions fully.

Let's take a moment and contrast this type of answer with stories that seem to be more reasonable. Eduarda, who works at the administrative HQ of the credit union, recalled a story: "We are helping a member settle off debt with us and with a second bank by selling his house. We have to sell it and negotiate in a way he can settle both debts at once. In this case, the member feels comfortable with the help and guidance he is receiving from the credit union's employees". Karina shared another example she attended to.

A story that struck me was this lady that had just moved to town. She had an appalling financial record and the credit union has a policy of not opening new accounts for people who have too many financial restrictions on file. But she had moved to town because she got a new job and the company's whole pay list is here with us at the credit union. She said to me, "Look, I know I made mistakes in the past. But now I need a chance for a fresh start. And this company is giving me that. They are betting on me". That moved me, and I decided to open her account. "Look, I can't give you any credit, and I'll just open a regular account with a debit card. But if you show a good record we can talk about credit in the future". And she did just that. I helped her showing her how to organize her finances. She did great and was very grateful. A few years later we were able to give her a credit card and credit lines.

Both stories indicate that the indebted person showed positive emotional responses. We could argue that people who grab the chance to take a new path that leads them out of the escape spiral can access this type of emotion. But people caught up in the spiral appear not to be able to access that. Elias shares a story that helps illustrate this.

She avoided the credit union for years until she finally came back to settle her debt. She was an autonomous professional, and she sold beauty products. [...] She ran into debt and it was nasty whenever we tried to charge her. Called out names, made a ruckus in the street branch, laughed hysterically, said she really didn't care. But at some point, she sold off a car to a third person, but didn't transfer the property of the vehicle to that buyer. This guy tried to sell the car to another person and discovered that the asset had been frozen by the credit union. We don't know what happened, but we do know he contacted her and at this time she decided to negotiate her debt and even paid it off in one installment. We found that she had severe marriage and drug abuse problems. Her behavior was really off the chart.

The actions of these indebted people caught up in the escape spiral are not only hurtful to themselves. They inflict emotional distress and financial damage to others. Karina accounts with a heavy heart that "I think people are completely aware of their actions. We sometimes feel they answer things with debauchery like 'I know I have a debt but I don't want to pay it. Leave it be, and in 5 years it will wear off'¹ or 'I don't want to pay it fully. I want to pay X'. They try to bribe you off, try to impose themselves". Elias remembered a different story: "In one specific case, the son was the debtor and his father the guarantor. The father was called to the street branch not aware of what was going on. Then the branch employee told him that the credit union had even sent a letter informing him of the debt. The guarantor seemed surprised and shocked and told him he had never received such a letter. The most plausible explanation is that his son destroyed the letter."

It's interesting to note that bringing consciousness and awareness to the extent to which an indebted person's behavior affects or has already affected other people is a form of creating those new spaces in time, where this same person has the option of choosing different

paths. When we presented the “The Escape Spiral”, we talked about how family relations can open up new opportunities. Karina gives us yet another example, not linked to family: "Here in our city we have a few cases that we were able to collect the debt because we contacted a third person. Like João, who knows Antônio who works at that place and who knows the debtor. I don't know if it's a matter of shame, but commonly that the person will in fact come out of hiding and try to renegotiate after that. It's social pressure." Ricardo, a credit union employee working at a street branch, gives us another clear example:

He only pays us today because the credit we conceded was linked to both him and his ex-girlfriend's assets as collateral. He made that extremely clear to us. He owes us and other three of four banks, and God knows how many suppliers and he only pays us because his ex is a good person and he doesn't want her having to pay with her assets if he falls short. Because, if it depended only on him, he would hit the “whatever” button. What's the difference if you owe one other person or institution?

This makes us conclude that perhaps a more effective strategy for getting a person to get out of the escape spiral is to highlight how many people in the debtor's network are potentially being harmed by his action. This is the same as saying that trying to elicit cooperative participation of an indebted-escapist by showing all the financial and social adverse effects to the individual's situation will only intensify his desire to keep on haring himself. This interpretation goes in line with the escape model as a whole. As pointed out earlier, a person suffering the disinhibited behaviors of the cognitive deconstruction pertained to the escape model will look for ways of destroying his or her reputation as an irrational attempt to loosen the burden of self-awareness (Baumeister, 1988; Baumeister, 1990; Donnelly et al, 2016). It would be the equivalent of an attempt to murder one's social identity or perhaps a social identity suicide.

Immorality blindness

Ellen is a member of the credit union. A few years ago, she opened a small sweet-shop. Things were doing all right. She had big ambitions. Following the impulsivity common to the young entrepreneur, she made a bold move. She got a big credit loan and opened a neighborhood grocery shop alongside her sweet-shop. It seemed like a great idea. There were no competitors anywhere near her location, and nobody had ever seen such an innovation offering the two services in the same place. It looked like a great story until the problems started coming. She used a very loose and trust-based payment system². She didn't expect to have so many customers paying late (or not paying at all). She also didn't keep tabs or have tight control over the enterprise finances, and soon enough, she started not having enough money to pay her financial commitments on time. Arrears started piling up, indebtedness came, and the cash flow got disastrous. She didn't have enough money to pay her suppliers or the credit union or the other banks. She had to close the store, sell her stock at sales price, sell her apartment, and move back to her family's house in the countryside to try to pay off the debts. But even after all that, she was still a long way from clearing the whole amount. She was married, her husband earned a low income and they had two small children. And her name was blacklisted.

I guessed what hurt me more, what caused most shame was not answering the phone when I knew it was someone I owed. I really ran because you don't know what to tell the person. “Look, I don't have any money right now.” But they keep on calling. But how are you going to pay if you don't have any money? So... first off. You run. And it's not a lack of character, and it's not a lack of moral. It's a lack of money. And with my age and with my experience, I had absolutely no clue how I would resolve it. So, you run. But that made me feel sick. I couldn't sleep. I was afraid of going out because I could bump into somebody. I couldn't deal with it. It made me sick.

Ellen's case is interesting. During her interview, she points out how blind she got due to her ambition and clearly understands how a lot of bad behavior derived from that. “When I

was a child, I didn't have those things all the other kids had. And I really wanted to be a big deal, really wanted to prove to everybody that I could make it. [...] It makes sense now how I turned up that way". We could argue that she fits classically in the escape model and that she was riding the escape spiral while she was on a path of financial destruction but only up to the point where she started to feel bad about the debt. She stated that "it was a hard and torturous road that took me several years. But after I sold everything, I took a job in a confectionery store earning a minimum wage, and I worked at night making my own sweets and selling them as side job. For real, I only slept 4 or 5 hours a day for a few years. I saved some money every month, and as soon as I had enough, I would go to one of the places I had a debt, and I would settle it. I paid the whole debt. Every single penny is paid". A few years later she opened a new shop and has had an impeccable financial record since then.

What's most interesting is to analyze the ethical flexibility Ellen has demonstrated along the way. Making bad financial choices while keeping yourself blind to them is, in itself, a moral dilemma. But, as far as she could reckon, she wasn't doing anybody any harm. Only when she started to get behind on payments did her moral red alert rise up, and she realized that her actions had external consequences.

When we analyze this through the escape spiral analogy, we can build the case that every turn around the spiral makes you bend your ethical flexibility a little bit more towards immorality. But once you get out of the spiral your "immorality blindness" seems to fade. But that only happens once you get out of the spiral. Most street branch employees agreed that "snowball indebted" people have a peculiar and repeated behavior. They seem conscious of their action, they even plan it, but they seem to lack the moral criticism that brands their actions as delinquent. Elias shares a shocking story "Last year, we had an indebted member who practically committed the crime of swindle against the credit union. He came in, did a major renegotiation saying he wanted to clear up his name. Then one day he just disappeared. He cleared out the overdraft limit. Took some credit in another bank and "puff". We've been trying hard to locate him, but it seems he's even left the country". We can easily affirm there is rational planning involved. Nonetheless, Rafaela, who works at one of the street branches, and attends only business accounts, shared a story illustrating the "immorality blindness" point:

Sometimes they try to go over the account manager. They say they are being persecuted, that it's unfair. And then they demand to talk to the branch manager [...] With some experience, you develop a knack to guess who has a bad character. You see it in everything from the way they walk and talk. Like they impose stuff, they come and tell you there is limit available and need to do this or that. They simply impose it: "I need this credit now. Give me." They also always seem to need it urgently: "I need it for today, not tomorrow". There was this one time a business partner of a company came and asked for some credit. I didn't concede the credit because of some bad financial behavior that showed up in the records. He didn't accept it and went out really mad. A few days later, he came back and talked to his natural personal manager; she was a newer, less experienced employee who conceded the credit. Bingo. Didn't take too long and he became indebted.

We can conclude that the longer you stay in the escape spiral, the more "immorally blind" you become. You may start off experiencing a little bit of ethical flexibility, but soon enough, your actions may break all socially available moral codes and conducts. The way to stop is getting off the spiral.

The wheel of death

All employees from the credit union, be them from the administrative HQ or from one of the street branches, came to the exact same conclusion: overdraft + credit card + personal credit available through online channels (site or app) = wheel of death. A very large amount of cases of high indebtedness present the use of these three products, almost as if they were a

financial Molotov cocktail. They all point out that the problem isn't using any of the three products themselves, or even the simultaneous use of all of them. They are not themselves hazardous to the members. But they explicitly recognize there is a very clear pattern of misconduct in regard to the use of these products that always leads to indebtedness. Some times real bad cases of it. Eliana, who works at the HQ, said: "The origin [of an indebted member' debt] was the credit card. But then he used the overdraft to cover it. Then he contracted a personal credit through the app. And then he renegotiated the whole thing. Interests build up in each passing turn. And now he's complaining that the final amount he's due isn't fair." Jackson, who works at a street branch, shared a complementary insight:

We at the branch try to convince the member to renegotiate [the overdue credit card] but they usually don't accept it. And arrears get even more stacked up and more interests and fines keep on rolling. Then the member usually contracts the personal credit line available through the app or site. And then things just get worse, first because the cost [of the personal credit] is actually higher. Second because if you leave the person's credit limit unchecked, be it on the overdraft or the credit card, then he'll actually make the owed debt amount higher because he uses the limits again. And then he doesn't have the money to pay either for the personal credit's instalments or the newly used limits.

This type of behavior is very close to what Abrantes-Braga and Veludo-de-Oliveira (2018) identified and study in their work. Their research looks at how some people develop the believe that credit limits are an extent to their incomes. Ana reported a story about her sister that we already shared about her sister's behavior using credit cards that reinforce this concept. Finding ways of stopping this type of behavior is a clear and ultimate necessity. Both Eduarda and Eliana point out that people who use those products in the "wheel of death fashion" very commonly present a "red alert sign": they usually ask for a second renegotiation. In their experience, those cases will definitely end up badly and involve law suits or assets apprehension. "It's a vicious cycle", point out Eduarda, and she carries on saying "The online personal credit (app or site) is a very risky credit line. When the member talks to the account manager before contracting credit, he can be informed of better credit lines, with smaller interests, for an example". Elias says:

In the last few years, the search for negotiations or renegotiations of debts has increased. But only 10% of the cases of renegotiation are from people who are not yet indebted or with arrears. It's uncommon then that people look for us when they already know they are facing problems and preemptively want to sort a deal for them before they fall into debt. In any case, of the total renegotiations about 30 to 40% of them incidence into indebtedness. And of this lot only 10% of the cases lead back to a negotiation deal with the credit union. Be it by judicial or extra-judicial negotiations.

The online offering of personal credit is indeed a matter that needs to develop better risk assessment controls. It's very easy to contract and, because it works with pre-approved credit lines, it's quick and can be done completely without the knowledge or orientation of any of the street branch's employee. Nonetheless, it's a noteworthy question to be made: why do people not consult their account managers before contracting this type of credit? One very important thing to point out is that the online personal credit isn't more indebtedness prone than overdraft or credit cards are. Sure, it's an unsecured type of credit and both the credit union and the academia say it is a riskier type of financial product (Disney, Bridges and Gathergood, 2008; Chancellor and Lyubomirsky, 2011; Brown and Woodruffe-Burton, 2015; Holmgren *et al*, 2019). But what's interesting to point out is that the employees say that people who get indebted with that type of product already show a bad behavior. They are the type of people who have stories such as the one's we've already shared in this paper: they don't accept a "no" for credit requests, they don't want their limits to be withdrawn, they show immorality blindness, etc. In other words, they show the classical escape spiral style behavior. Because of that understanding we can conclude that one very possible reason they choose that type of product is because they can escape from facing their account managers and the potentially negative and afflictive emotions that an encounter with them may produce.

And this takes us to a very important point in this research: can it be that these indebteders are running from shame?

Socially approved shame branding

“These people don’t have character. They’re just shameless about owing, about having their name blacklisted. They just don’t care”. This line of thought appeared in virtually all interviews we conducted. But we argue that this very common understanding of an escape spiral style indebtedness behavior although being socially sound is, in fact, logically mistaken. These people aren’t shameless. In fact, they are covered in shame and running from it as the devil may run from the cross. Baumeister’s escape theory model (1990) clearly states that an individual falls short from reaching any given desired standard, then they feel guilty and blame themselves for it; in turn they will develop acute high-awareness about these negative feelings. This will then lead to a cognitive deconstructed state that will allow morally disinhibited behavior such as the one’s we’ve encountered during our interviews in order to try to escape this self-awareness.

Baumeister himself acknowledges various researches in psychology that link suicidal escape to shame (a self-focusing emotion). Rogers-Vaughn (2019) argues that the indebted feel ashamed and guilty. Noval (2016) presented evidence that experimentally reducing (increasing) emotional expectation of a desired outcome will reduce (increase) that probability of participants engaging in unethical and selfish outcomes. In this sense, a shame-induced individual might be highly likely of committing unethical acts. Yang et al (2019) say that self-control acts as a protective factor to reduce the possibilities of feeling ashamed by providing resistance to temptation by inappropriate impulsion. It has been proven that shameful feelings are negatively correlated with resilience, and there are many studies suggesting that resilience may predict self-efficacy. All of these prior findings reinforce our argument that escape spiral behavior can be fueled by shame.

But we feel that this is a very specific type of shame. Or at least the origin of the expressions of these emotions in the stories we analyzed are linked to a very specific cause: social norms of morality create a socially approved shame branding. We feel that this isn’t a culturally unique characteristic but we argue that the local culture of hard working, Christian, severely poor and honor bound Italians immigrants that helped populate the region in the last 80 years play a very big role in this context. Karina brings a comment that represents the major mindset of both employees and members that were interviewed.

There's the matter of values, right? Like in my case, in my upbringing, when you commit to something be it financial or not you have to oblige to it. Sure, unforeseen stuff happens but if you have the right values, you'll seek the person out and try and get an understanding.

Roberto is one the members we interviewed. He developed a successful restaurant in Rio Grande do Sul state. A few years ago, he decided to open a new restaurant in another state. Unfortunately, the new restaurant didn’t work out and he was left with a very large debt he had contracted with the credit union in order to invest on that enterprise. During the interview Roberto didn’t seem bothered or embarrassed by what had happened. He said paying the debt was hard but he had a higher strength helping him through it all.

You see my friend I believe in the greatest strength in the universe. And because I believe, I received help. You know what that is? That gives me strength? I believe in God. The almighty saw my flaws but didn’t judge me. Sure, it’s not like we wrote me a check or anything. But the helped me through it all. He guided me to seek out help as soon as possible to try to negotiate the debt with what was available to me. And you know what happens to those who don’t believe in God? Those who don’t have faith? They lose character. They lose their moral compass. But that didn’t happen to me. Do you believe in God?

Leandro shared his opinion also.

The majority of indebtedness cases that led to law suits where from people that came from out of town. In the last 8 years we haven't had a single problem from someone from this town that we weren't able to deal negotiating directly with the person. [...] They would say "I want to resolve it". Character seems to have a lot to do with culture and the people that you have around you. If you live in a larger city and you have a debt you can perfectly say "so what? Who cares?". But if you live in a small community like ours then you can bet that if you are in debt everyone in town will know!"

At the end of Leandro's interview, he shared with us a question often makes to himself. He says it's something he really thinks on, that really makes him intrigued and to some extent makes him extremely uncomfortable because he simply doesn't understand why it happens:

I ask myself why does someone not understand that when we cut off their credit limit during a serious debt negotiation problem it is because we are trying to help them out. The first thing that person thinks is that you're a judging her, that you are trying to do something to harm her [...] Why can't these people see and understand that the situation is not normal and that the first step to helping them is trying financial reeducation?

His questioning shows that the social moral judgment that exists in the region is very coherent, concise, accepted and internalized by the majority of the population. People really struggle to understand why someone might fall out of the range of the socially accepted moral boundaries. They suffer a sort of cognitive dissociation that, as we can ascertain by Leandro's remark, really bothers them.

We can argue that this socially approved shame branding is a major component in the escape spiral behavior. We conclude that it could be related to phase one of the escape model. That is if there is a socially cultivated and accepted sense of morality, then a person who is taking their first steps toward ethical flexibility and immoral behavior will definitely notice that he did not live up to that social expectation. We could also argue that shame plays a major role in phase two of the escape model. If there is a socially approved shame branding then it would be almost impossible for someone going through the spiral to not feel guilt or blame about it, in fact he would also be emotionally motivated to take a few more steps towards their escapist demise.

The remaining three phases of the escape model also seems to relate directly to shame. The stories we shared so far clearly show signs of deconstructed state of cognition. For example, most credit union employee's agree that indebted people don't seem aware of their delinquency but they occasionally show signs of planning their actions (for an example, clearing out the overdraft and fleeing from the country or even making up consecutive lies) which would be a sign of "tunnel vision" (Baumeister, 1990) aimed at escaping from the shameful moment of coming back to the negotiation table. They clearly don't accept to hear a "no" to their requests and also do not allow that others question their life styles or financial decisions, all signs of lack of open thinking (*ibid*) with the objective of not owning the fact they we're wrong or financially not able to do what they want. And finally, the overall avoidance strategy associated to the debtors is a clear way of showing they are ashamed of being called out upon.

Conclusions

The content analysis show evidences that Escape Theory can be used to analyze and understand indebtedness-prone behavior. We identified all six phases of Escape Theory in the stories told. For example, Ellen and Felipe's remarks of their ill turned enterprise investments that were motivated by deeper matters (the want to prove herself and the need to be externally validated, respectively) are examples of the Escape Model's first phase of falling short of one's expectations or standards (Baumeister, 1990; Donnelly *et al*, 2016). Their stories also connect directly with Escape Theory's second phase of generating self-blame.

Escape Theory's third and fourth phases (acutely high self-awareness and unpleasant affective state of aversive emotions, respectively) can be inferred looking at debtor's avoidance strategies where members may make up excuses of why the payments is late, or even completely stop answering the phone. The backdrop of all stories told by credit union's employees show a clear wish to "escape" the blame by using lies or half told stories. Socially approved shame branding might be a major player in incentivizing this type of behavior in the indebted member. Because painful self-awareness motivates the need to escape via indebtedness (or immorally ignoring the indebted state) and shame, which reflects the affective propensity to devalue the global self in response to setbacks and failures, is likely to increase the risk of escape spiral behavior to continue (Yi, 2012).

Socially approved shame branding also plays an important part in Escape Theory's fifth phase, the cognitive deconstruction. Failure to conform to cultural standards can induce fear of social exclusion which, in turn, has been shown to foster a deconstructed state of mind (Chatard and Selimbegovic, 2011). We propose then that the connection shift effect (having a different employee make contact with the member) could be an ally for trying to increase effectiveness of credit recovery during this phase hence it might dampen the amount of dispositional shame a debtor might feel during the call. Other important aspects that our interviewees shared are linked to escape model's deconstructed cognition such as the indebted member's incapacity of voluntarily adjusting the consumption patterns to their real income, the unwillingness to receive "no" to a credit request, etc. All of which seem to be examples of behavior linked to tunnel vision, lack of open thinking and concreteness (Baumeister, 1990).

The last of the six phases of Escape Theory finds ample examples in the stories collected, from lying, to digging deeper in the unpayable credit loans, to taking the money and fleeing the country. With this we can clearly concluded the effectiveness of using Escape Theory to analyze indebtedness producing behavior.

Donnelly *et al.* (2016) makes the case that materialistic consumption also fits in Escape Theory's six step model. The stories we've presented hold true and complement that claim. But we also argue that despite being quite present not all indebtedness cases, even the ones that climb high in the escape spiral, are linked to indebtedness. Felipe quasi-bankruptcy, Roberto's restaurant unhappy expansion and Leandro's case of the member who couldn't say no to her daughter are examples of stories not linked (at least directly) to materialism. We conclude than that materialism may be a component that raises the risk of indebtedness for individual presenting escape spiral behavior.

In terms of managerial implications, there are important lessons that could be applied to the credit union's credit recovery strategy. For example, if a member does not pay his arrears in some specified time-frame the charging calls from the branch remain but the administrative HQ's specialized team (comprised of lawyers and accountants) may assist, especially if the overdue value is of a large sum. The self-whipping effect is very important aspect of the escape spiral indebtedness behavior. If credit union does not shift the conversation strategy towards bringing to conscious the negative effect of the debtors' actions towards other than we hypothesize that the debtor's behavior might get even more unethical, unhealthy and immoral. The wheel of death mechanism is definitely a common practice that will lead members to a path of indebtedness. And as such should require the credit union to keep a close eye on these product's consumption patterns.

A major limitation of this study was the inability of actually recruiting people with far gone immoral behavior. The more complicated stories we've collected were told by a third party and it's impossible to understand the extent of bias that these stories actually hold. Since this is a qualitative research effort generalization is not warrant since the objective is to pinpoint specifics mechanisms to a specific sample. Nonetheless, it is important to point out that the cultural and geographical specificity of this research should be weighed heavily if

future research is to be built upon these findings seeing as culturally specific factors can impact one's relationship with negative affect and indebtedness (Higgins Neyland and Bardone-Cone, 2017).

Future research suggestions include: (a) more qualitative research with debtors that presented high reproachable immoral behavior. It would be of specific interest to understand the circumstances related to when these individuals are exposed to the possibilities of getting out of the Escape Spiral. What interventions help these individuals get out of deconstructive cognitive state? And what interventions fuel them to keep on such endeavor?; (b) quantitative research to establish causality between presented constructs, such as the wheel of death, the self-whipping effect, the connection shift, etc. and development of quantitative predictors of arrear or indebtedness based on these constructs; (c) quantitative experimental research establishing the causal chain of Indebtedness Escape Theory as a consequence of shame-avoiding behavior. It would be interesting to test materialism as a moderator in this chain. As the interview establish, some cases of indebtedness weren't linked to materialism, nonetheless the presence of materialistic goals was highly common. Thus, we ask ourselves if more materialistic individuals wouldn't be more prone to indebtedness or at least be exposed to potentially higher values of indebtedness.

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Notes

1. Brazil's Consumer Defense Code states that after five years a citizen's name has to be cleared out the credit blacklist. Nonetheless people believe that the debt would be forgiven and not eligible to law suits or recuperations attempts. (Elias, 2020)
2. Brazil's countryside still has a strong local culture of payment systems based only on trust using a notebook to write down client's expenses.

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