



A crying shame:

The over-rationalized conception of man in the rational choice perspective

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Abstract _____

The rational choice perspective explains all forms of crime by viewing offenders as reasoning criminals. In this article, we take this approach to task by trying out its heuristic potential. More specifically, we look at how well it works for one special type of crime, i.e. street robbery. On the basis of a detailed analysis of offender accounts we argue that rational choice theory fails adequately to conceptualize some of the essential aspects of this form of criminal behaviour: impulsiveness, expressivity, moral ambiguity and shame. We argue that adequate explanation and understanding of criminality requires taking more seriously the affective aspects of criminal behaviour and the normative meanings that perpetrators attribute to their own behaviour before, during and after the crime.

Key Words _____

criminology • moral emotions • rational choice • street robbery

Several years ago, the police in Amsterdam took the following statement from a 68-year-old woman who had been the victim of a street robbery:

Around 18.40 on Friday, I went shopping and was followed by a white male, approximately 22 years old, who had come from behind. In his hand

he held a six-inch-long knife. I heard him say: 'Your money or I'll stab you.' I took my wallet from my left coat pocket, showed him that there were two bills of ten and one of twenty-five in it and gave him the forty-five guilders. Then he wanted my necklace as well, but I told him it was a fake. After this I saw him lean against the inner court wall and he started crying. I heard him say: 'I've never done this before but I need a hundred guilders for my mother.' After that he gave me back my money. I then gave him twenty guilders and went into my house.

Of the almost 5000 police statements that we studied in the course of our investigation of street robbery in the city of Amsterdam, the case of the crying street robber was clearly an exception, but not because of the man's desperate act. In many cases of robbery, the crimes were acts of desperation. It was exceptional that this perpetrator so clearly showed that he had mixed feelings about his actions. Perhaps he was ashamed, realizing that the victim was his mother's age. Or maybe he was feeling guilty and, therefore, decided to give back the extorted money. What really possessed this unknown assailant we will never know. We did, however, speak to a number of muggers and street robbers to try to discover what motivated their action.

Within criminology, street robbery tends to be regarded as an 'opportunistic' offence. It is viewed as an act of desperation, committed by 'desperados' with a chaotic lifestyle, by 'muggers' who act spontaneously out of boredom or by 'losers' who 'accidentally' get caught in a theft or a break-in and, instantly, decide to rob the person (Conklin, 1972; Walsh, 1986). In the typical case of street robbery, there seems to be no obvious relationship between the means and the goal like in the extreme example of the case of a woman who was beaten with an iron pipe one evening by two men who tried to rob her and, when they failed to get her handbag, threw both her and the bag into a canal. How can such excessively violent behaviour, which shows a large discrepancy between a small gain for the perpetrator and the serious violation of the personal integrity of the victim, be understood?

In this article, we take one of the most commonly used explanations for criminal behaviour, the rational choice perspective, and confront it with the accounts provided by the street robbers we interviewed and who participated in focus group discussions. In this way, we take the rational choice model to task by trying out its heuristic potential. It is not our intention to test empirically the rational choice theory (RCT) as this is impossible because RCT is not a theory but merely a heuristic model which, by definition, cannot be refuted but only evaluated in terms of its usefulness. Therefore, as much as we would have liked to refute rational choice theory, all we do is evaluate the rational choice perspective by trying out if it delivers what it promises: to shed light on all forms of criminality, including the impulsive or irrational ones, enabling such forms of criminal behaviour to become more plausible. However, before embarking on this journey we

need to present a brief exposé of the nature and varieties, pretensions and problems of the rational choice perspective.

Rational choice

Rational choice theory has its roots in utilitarian moral philosophy, political and legal theory and economics. Classical sociological theorists like Marx, Durkheim and Weber argued that the utilitarian view of the rational individual was a fundamentally flawed ‘fiction’ (Marx). ‘Individuality’ as a concept and as a way of existing is a product of the division of labour in society (Durkheim) and all social actions have meaning only within a context of norms and values (Weber). To these social theorists, the social construction of the individual and the problems of meaning and morality were essential to the explanation and understanding of social action. Rational choice theorists have considered this a fundamental straying and, therefore, claim that a focus on rational choice will offer a proper foundation for social theory and bring sociology back in line with the ‘hard’ sciences of psychology and economics. Over the last few decades, rational choice theory has rapidly developed into a rational action theory or, rather, a whole variety of rational choice or action theories, which can be distinguished ‘according to whether they have strong rather than weak rationality requirements; focus on situational rather than procedural rationality; and claim to provide a general rather than a special theory of action’ (Goldthorpe, 1998: 169).

Compared to the current diversity and level of sophistication of rational action theory in sociology, rational choice theory in its criminological variety seems rather simplistic. Following a suggestion of economist Gary Becker that ‘a useful theory of criminal behaviour can dispense with special theories of anomie, psychological inadequacies, or inheritance of special traits and simply extend the economist’s usual analysis of choice’ (1968: 170), Clarke and Cornish (1985) were the first criminologists to offer a conception of crime as the outcome of rational choices and decisions, which was built on developments in the economic analysis of criminal behaviour. Reviving the cost–benefit analysis of criminal behaviour as one of the concerns of the utilitarian tradition in criminal law and criminology, these economic models assume that individuals, whether criminal or not, share in common the properties of being active, rational decision makers who respond to incentives and deterrents (1985: 155–6). Cornish and Clarke acknowledge that the purely economic models are too idealized and too abstract to be useful for empirical research. Therefore, they take as their own starting point:

the assumption that offenders seek to benefit themselves by their criminal behaviour; that this involves the making of decisions and of choices, however rudimentary on occasion these processes might be; and that these

processes exhibit a measure of rationality, albeit constrained by limits of time and ability and the availability of relevant information.

(Cornish and Clarke, 1986a: 1)

The characteristic feature of their rational choice approach of reasoning criminals who make rational decisions based on 'strategic thinking' is that it rejects deterministic and pathological explanations for criminality in favour of explanations for criminal behaviour, which give the goal-oriented, rational and everyday aspects of human activity a central place. In this respect, the rational choice theory can be distinguished from traditional criminological theories that presuppose that criminals are different from 'normal' people. However, within criminology rational choice theory may have become popular not so much because to many criminologists this approach offers an attractive alternative to what they consider overly deterministic or pathological explanations for criminality as for promising more effective strategies and tactics of criminal policy and crime prevention (Clarke, 1992).

While critical criminologists reject rational choice theory mainly for its policy implications, which they see as reproducing conservative (neo) classical penal policies, they have only rarely taken the trouble of critically investigating the theoretical problems of the rational choice approach. However, a critical discussion of rational choice theory should not be limited to the realm of crime policy but should also, and more importantly, question the basic assumptions, limitations and shortcomings of its theoretical model (Karstedt and Greve, 1995: 173).¹ However urgent questioning the basic assumptions of the rational choice model might be, it seems a tall order, which we can only hope to deliver partly and provisionally, and, for the sake of our empirical analysis of offender accounts, by briefly discussing the scientific status of the rational choice approach and the meaning of its central concepts of 'rationality' and 'choice'.

Sociologists critical of rational choice or rational action theory see it as a dubious form of 'economic imperialism', misunderstanding or disregarding the importance of the problems of meaning and morality with which the classical sociological theorists were concerned, and unwarranted in its claim to be a general theory of social action. A case in point is sociologist Dennis Wrong who raises the rhetorical questions:

Are we likely to rest content with a theory that makes a purely pragmatic case for itself and takes for granted superiority at a nomological-deductive mode of reasoning? Are we not likely at some point to be driven to ask: 'but what are human beings really like and how do they get that way?'

(1994: 200–1)

In a similar vein, sociologist Donald Levine calls on critics of rational choice theory 'to mount a more vigorous offensive to engage its defenders in an exploration of the limits of that conceptual framework, insisting on a full accounting for the customary, habitual, emotional . . . and serendipitous dimensions of human action' (Levine, 1997: 7).

Indeed, numerous sociologists have critically analysed rational choice theory and, among other things, concluded that:

from a classical theoretical perspective, we cannot evaluate the rationality of an action, understand the reasons for action, or understand the meaning of an action apart from the circle of value that has shaped the persons and their relationships to one another in a given society.

(Rawls, 1992: 222)

By disregarding the role of norms, values and moral emotions like guilt and shame and leaving aside these normative and emotional elements of decision making, the rational choice perspective seems to misrepresent the nature of the action it explains in terms of rational choice (Scheff, 1992). Moreover, the rational choice model ‘misconstrues rationality and choice, by neglecting that social actors often do not have or make choices and, if they do, these choices are not necessarily rational (Zafirovski, 1999: 512). And last but not least, as a general theory of action, rational choice theory is forced into tautology when being confronted with such anomalous findings. As soon as there is no way of denying the prevalence of systematic irrational or non-rational action, rational action theory fails and clearly more explanatory work needs to be done (Goldthorpe, 1998: 183, 186).

As penetrating as these criticisms may be, in reality they have not been very effective. Largely this has been the result of certain ‘immunization strategies’ that proponents of rational choice theory tend to apply. One important way in which rational action theorists counter these criticisms and try to defend their approach is by arguing that the question of what exactly counts as ‘rational’ is simply beside the point, if only because ‘the very concept of rational action is one of “understandable” action that we need to ask no more questions about’ (Coleman, 1986: 1). In other words, ‘we need to know nothing more’ (Boudon, 1998: 817), because ‘rational action is its own explanation’ (Hollis, 1977: 21).

Although this ‘final’ aspect of rational choice theory, i.e. ‘the fact that these explanations are without “black box” frustrations’, is probably, as suggested by Coleman (1986: 1), the main source of RCT’s attractiveness, this tautological definition of ‘rationality’ also seems one of the weakest sides of the rational choice approach. Boudon (1998) points out three major problems with the generality claim of rational choice. One problem is that rational choice assumes that individual action is instrumental and has to be explained by the actors’ will to reach certain goals, whereas action is not always instrumental and, therefore, rational choice theory cannot be a general theory of action (1998: 818). The second problem is that RCT has never succeeded in explaining satisfactorily important classes of phenomena (1998: 820). Moreover, and this is a third problem, this version of rationality is not the only one representing the uniqueness of providing explanations without black boxes. As Boudon notes, classical sociologists like Max Weber have pointed out that the causes of action reside in their meaning, i.e. in the reasons the actor has of adopting this

action, and these reasons can take the form of cost–benefit considerations but they can also take other forms (1998: 821). Strategies currently used to make non-instrumental actions appear instrumental, e.g. by assuming that the causes of behaviour are unknowable in principle or by supposing that actions that seem to be non-instrumental are actually instrumental at a deeper level, appear to be unconvincing if only because they raise more problems than they solve (1998: 821).

Within criminology, Stanley Cohen addresses the same issue by accusing Cornish and Clarke of portraying their ‘reasoning criminal’ as ‘someone who not only has more rationality than the determined creatures of sociological inquiry but also has nothing but choice and rationality. Disembodied from all social context—deprivation, racism, urban dislocation, unemployment . . .’ (Cohen, 1996: 5).

Against this kind of critique, Cornish and Clarke would most certainly stress that their model is ‘an idealized picture of decision making’ (Clarke and Cornish, 1985: 170), that their version of rational choice theory is merely ‘informal’ and that accounts of criminal behaviour do not have to be ‘complete’ explanations of criminal conduct. In their view, simple and parsimonious accounts of criminal offending can have considerable heuristic value and be ‘good enough’ to accommodate existing research, suggest new directions for empirical inquiry and provide new clues for preventing and combating criminality. Therefore, they deliberately called their approach a rational choice perspective.

However, as Karstedt and Greve have nicely pointed out, this recourse to a merely heuristic perspective offers no way out. On the contrary, left without any substantial criteria of rationality this line of defence, ironically, creates several paradoxes. A first paradox is that in their eagerness to provide practical policy recommendations Cornish and Clarke, prematurely, gave up the very normative concept of rationality that economists successfully applied to issues of crime, punishment and social control (Karstedt and Greve, 1995: 189). A second paradox is that, as a consequence of the fact that the number of subjective assumptions that need to be made as well as the possibly anticipated consequences of any course of action that the formal model requires are both seemingly endless, the basic idea of rational choice loses ‘its spartanic elegance’ to become almost ‘baroque’ (1995: 187) And, last but not least, there is the paradox that, without a clearly defined concept of rationality, rational choice theorists need to differentiate between the decision-making processes of ‘reasoning criminals’ and everybody else, which leads them right back to the deterministic and pathological explanations of a ‘types of people’ criminology that they, initially, rejected (1995: 189).

This takes us to the remaining issue of the scientific status or pretensions of the criminological version of the rational choice approach. Unfortunately, in this matter Cornish and Clarke are also not as consistent as one might expect and, therefore, it remains unclear whether they are claiming that their rational choice perspective should only be evaluated in terms of

its heuristic value and applicability or whether it needs to be empirically refuted or validated. On the one hand, Cornish and Clarke seem to claim the former by arguing that it was not their intention to develop a new theory but merely a ‘framework’ within which existing theories and research could be assembled with the aim of providing more insight into criminal behaviour (1986a: vi). Therefore, their ‘blueprints’ of criminal behaviour are meant to be ‘temporary, incomplete, and subject to continual revision as fresh research becomes available’ (Clarke and Cornish, 1985: 173).

But on the other hand, they seem to claim the latter by arguing that a ‘substantial body of ethnographic work’ (1985: 150) on the perspectives, attitudes, and lifestyles of offenders may not only ‘provide valuable insights and hypotheses’ (1985: 152), but that ‘rational choice premises have generally been supported . . . by recent studies in which offenders have been interviewed about motives, methods and target choices’ (Clarke, 1992: 5). Thus, paradoxically, because of all their disclaimers Cornish and Clarke remain ambivalent and inconsistent regarding the scientific status or pretensions of their rational choice approach.

If we accept that the rational choice perspective is not a theory but an idealized model of decision making, there is no point in empirically testing the rational choice approach. The value of a model should be in its heuristic usefulness and is, therefore, to be appreciated by applying it and seeing how much insight and understanding of criminal behaviour it provides. This is what we try to do in this article. As a hypothesis for this exercise we take the conclusion (Karstedt and Greve, 1995: 201) that Cornish and Clarke’s reduction of a rational choice theory to a heuristic rational choice model does not solve any of the theoretical problems that criticisms of RCT have revealed and that, rather, because of this reduction, the heuristic potential of the model cannot be fully developed.

Interviews and focus groups

Let us now look at how well the rational choice approach helps us understand one specific type of crime, i.e. street robbery. The litmus test will be to what extent committing street robbery becomes a plausible line of action when regarded as the outcome of a process of rational choice whereby the perpetrators are seen as if they weigh the advantages and disadvantages.

As part of our investigation we conducted several interviews and group discussions with perpetrators of street robberies.² Some of the respondents were detained, while others underwent alternative punishment and still others were released. For this article, we have reassessed the accounts of the respondents and interpreted them from the rational choice perspective in order to get an answer to the following questions: What were their goals? What did they consider to be specific advantages in robbing passers-by?

Were perpetrators aware of any disadvantages of street robbery? Why was street robbery preferred to other forms of violent criminality and offences against property?

If we interpret the accounts given by our respondents³ from a rational choice perspective, we would have to conclude that most of them committed robbery for the money. In order to understand what compels people to commit street robberies, however, we need to know more—like, for example, what they wanted to do with the money.

Two of the respondents committed street robbery in order to provide for their daily cost of living. One of them, Dahroeg, did not have a permanent dwelling and, therefore, did not receive any aid. Work did not provide enough to make a living because he gambled with his money in the local gaming den, which he visited on a daily basis. So he was ‘forced’ to find an alternative way to make ends meet. The other, Mahmoed, who needed money for his cocaine habit, often spent up to 300 or 400 guilders per day.

Three interviewees committed robberies in order to make a ‘good’ living. They spent all their money on clubbing and luxurious consumer goods. Fabian, who had snatched a purse twice riding on his scooter, spent his income on cigarettes, records, shoes, food, drinks and clubbing. Richard gambled away his money and Nico spent it all on soft drugs, for which he needed about 75 guilders each day. Since his allowance was not sufficient, he resorted to snatching purses in a mall. The money was ‘easily earned’ but it was spent again just as easily.

Among the respondents, there were also a few who committed robberies to impress their peers with luxury or courage or just because they wanted ‘to try something else’. Robbing a passer-by can be attractive as a way to fit in with the crowd. Within one’s own group or community, street robbery can be valued positively because you need to have ‘courage’ in order to commit the robbery. It is a way to gain the ‘respect’ of peers. For the youngest category of perpetrators, fitting in and showing courage meant robbing old ladies of their purses. The money was used to buy expensive designer goods in order to impress peers. Sometimes expensive designer shoes and clothing, mountain bikes and scooters were simply taken away from others by frightening them.

It appeared that for three respondents who initially indicated they were in it for the money, the need to release tension did play a role. One perpetrator laughed out loud just remembering the ‘good joke’ he had played, while another recalled choosing a particular ‘difficult victim’ just for the excitement. Another interviewee got a ‘kick’ out of noticing people were afraid of him. Only one of the interviewees indicated he had committed the robberies exclusively for the ‘kick’ and the excitement. He was part of a gang who went to the inner city of Amsterdam to ‘have some fun’. In those days, which he assured us were in the past, he had sometimes knocked people off their bike or scooter. Most of the respondents, however,

were only in it for the money and for them the committing of robberies was ‘stressful’ rather than ‘exciting’. This last group regarded the ones robbing for ‘fun’ as ‘weird’.

From a rational choice perspective, it is obvious that the first disadvantage of robbing a random passer-by is that it is generally not known in advance what a person is carrying and that it usually ‘does not yield anything’. A second disadvantage is that, in general, street robbery is not prestigious. Particularly in the case of robbing an old lady, this often gives rise to being given a cold shoulder, not only among one’s enemies but also one’s friends. While robbing men is still considered acceptable and even heroic, snatching purses from older women tends to be disliked because it ‘looks odd, it is not a proper trade’. In retrospect, two of the respondents that had snatched away purses from old ladies themselves, said they found it ‘terrible’ that they had fallen so low. A final disadvantage is the risk of being caught by the police, or, even worse, being caught in the act by bystanders. However, most respondents considered the probability of being caught to be low and they also did not consider the bystanders to be a threat, although they always had to take into account that they might run into someone stronger than themselves. According to the rational choice perspective, the manner in which advantages and disadvantages are weighed depends on the goals that the perpetrator seeks as well as his or her circumstances, skills and experiences, self-image, and moral attitudes (Clarke and Cornish, 1985: 167). From this perspective, robbing old ladies might contribute to the courage of very young perpetrators and hence their status in the group.

What we noticed first was that for most respondents the first two disadvantages—uncertain outcome and low prestige—weighed the heaviest, so heavy, in fact, that most preferred to do ‘something else’. For them, committing street robberies was second choice. Only when things were at their worst, did the advantages of street robbery begin to weigh heavier than the disadvantages. For instance, Anwar had agreed to a friend’s proposal to rob tourists together when he had got into problems and did not know how to support his two children. For him, robbing was a ‘once and never again’ affair and, for that reason, he could be called a ‘desperate street robber’. One of the most important advantages was that it ‘earned’ money quickly. It hardly requires preparation and is not time-consuming. For those who urgently need drugs or have not eaten a proper meal in several days, this is the decisive factor. Just as committing a stick-up is a last resort for desperate robbers, for drug addicts, the homeless or illegal residents, committing robberies is often a desperate move.

The disadvantage of street robbery that it usually does not yield much weighs less heavily on the age group of 12–18-year-olds because they have a relatively underdeveloped notion of ‘money’. Young street robbers are satisfied with very small profits. One example is that of a 17-year-old boy who had snatched purses 25 times, each time obtaining an amount of 10 to

25 guilders. For these young perpetrators the most important advantage of street robbery is that it is so 'easy'. As opposed to stick-ups, where, for some—especially beginners—the 'excitement', the 'game' and the 'sensation of power' during the act of the offence is a pleasant and incidental circumstance, but hardly the goal itself, for these young street robbers the excitement is playing a major role. Even if they assess the risks of street robbery, these risks will only make the committing of the offence more attractive because it satisfies their need for excitement or relaxation. By choosing the time, place, form of action and opting for a 'difficult' victim, the risks—and along with that the excitement—can even be increased, such that these perpetrators get a 'kick' out of it.

However, when street robbers get older, this changes: 'you start thinking more carefully; you want to earn more.' Their notion of money increases and the risks that come along with committing robberies start to weigh more heavily. For some perpetrators, the observation that the robberies yield too little in relation to the risks that are attached to it and the effort required are a reason to stop. For other perpetrators, this is a reason to consider committing other offences.

All things considered and reasoning from a rational choice perspective, it seems as if street robbers can be viewed as having chosen to rob a passer-by after having weighed the advantages and disadvantages against each other. From that perspective, so it is claimed, criminal behaviour is more understandable. However, criminal behaviour also consists of impulsive actions and emotional reactions or forms of behaviour whereby perpetrators apparently act without thinking, are compelled to act, are indecisive or perform conflicting actions. Although, robbing a passer-by is technically very 'easy', it is still a problem for the perpetrator: 'You have to be able to do it, you're scared, you feel guilty and ashamed of yourself.' What can be said—from within the rational choice perspective—about how perpetrators experience the committing of robberies? What does the fact that they rob passers-by mean to them and to other people that are important to them? What kind of self-image do perpetrators have and what kind of moral opinion do they express with regard to street robbery? Is it possible to make sense of these elements within a rational choice perspective?

Clarke and Cornish observed that there is a lack of knowledge and insight in how the advantages and disadvantages of street robbery are weighed against each other, as well as in how perpetrators deal with the tensions which arise from the immorality of their act and how they deal with the effects of emotions such as anger and indignation (1985: 177). For our purposes it is interesting whether feelings and emotions can be integrated into the rational choice perspective at all. In particular, we would like to consider whether three aspects of robbery—impulsivity, moral ambiguity and expressivity—can be reconciled with the assumption that the committing of offences can be seen as the outcome of a rational decision-making process.

Impulsivity

The first aspect of street robberies that we would like to discuss concerns the impulsivity of the act. We came across examples of robbery that were committed without planned intentions or in which the perpetrator suddenly changed his mind, without being able to give a rational explanation for this in retrospect. The rational choice perspective assumes that the committing of a crime involves costs and benefits and that analysing them makes criminal behaviour more understandable.

Research indicates that most street robbers and some muggers themselves hardly ever weigh the costs and benefits against each other and are in fact hardly capable of doing so (Shover and Honaker, 1992). The majority of robberies, and most certainly street robberies, are ‘opportunistic’ (Conklin, 1972). They are committed by impulsive, chaotic youngsters who seldom prepare their crimes and who are not capable of advance planning (Silberman, 1978: 51, 54). Silberman refers to a study conducted by Feeney and Weir (1975), who spoke with more than 100 street robbers and muggers. In retrospect, Feeney (1986) concluded that both offences are often committed ‘en passant’, without any preparation. One out of three perpetrators stated they had not even intended to commit a robbery; it happened ‘just like that’. More than half of the perpetrators had not given the possibility of getting arrested any thought at all. One out of five men and one out of three boys had become involved in a robbery more or less ‘accidentally’. So, one can hardly speak of real rational behaviour in this context. More recently, Jacobs and Wright found that the ‘choice’ to rob occurs in a context in which rationality not only is sharply bounded, but barely exists (1999: 167).

Cornish and Clarke recognize that many raids and robberies are ‘impulsive and not planned’ (1986a: 6). Nevertheless, they maintain that even in situations where an unexpected opportunity exists for committing a crime, ‘the offender still must decide to take advantage of the situation’ (1986b: 6) and this can even be a ‘substantial degree of rationality’ (Cornish and Clarke, 1986a: 14). In the theory of Cornish and Clarke, this demand of substantial rationality seems to be easily fulfilled for ‘it seems likely that “pattern planning” would be sufficient for offences that rely largely for their success on surprise, intimidation and a general ability to seize the initiative and think on one’s feet’ (Cornish and Clarke, 1986a: 14). Even if the choices made and decisions taken are far from optimal, if measured according to the results, ‘they may make sense to the offender and represent his best efforts at optimising outcomes’ (Clarke and Cornish, 1985: 164). Clarke and Cornish seem to ascribe some—conscious or unconscious—degree of substantial rationality to robbers.

Like Cornish and Clarke, Feeney (1986) believes that raiders and street robbers’ impulsively taken decisions may still be considered rational because committing robberies ‘clearly requires some thought’ (1986: 66). In his view, the only exception is robbery committed under the influence of

alcohol and/or drugs. Whereas Feeney questions whether these robberies can be considered rational (1986: 67), Walsh (1986) is willing to go so far as to consider even these offenders as rational because they 'feel' able to act rationally (Walsh, 1986: 50). From this point of view, criminal behaviour is rational if there is a conceivable framework in which this behaviour can be seen as functional, as some means to some end. However, as such a framework can (almost) always be conceived the rational choice perspective, as a theory, is tautological and cannot be refuted. This leaves us the question, namely, to what extent does a rational choice perspective render this kind of criminal behaviour more plausible?

In our own research, we came across offenders who, in retrospect, found it difficult to explain or did not even 'have a clue' why they had committed the crime. We would like to illustrate this with the following story about the robbery of a perfume shop where the perpetrators took money from the till while they walked past it. The answers to some questions that were asked during one of the focus group discussions indicate how difficult the offender found it to even imagine that committing the crime could be seen as involving a choice.

Question: At which point could you have chosen not to do it?

Andy: Have chosen not to do it? If we hadn't seen the price tag.

Question: Which price tag?

Andy: From where we were standing we saw bottles of seventeen hundred, eighteen hundred, sixteen hundred guilders. Yes, at that point we became a bit paranoid, you know . . .

Ahmed: One bottle?

Andy: One bottle, man, of sixteen hundred guilders, man, 'Giorgio Beverly Hills' . . . Yeah, man, we became all paranoid . . .

Ahmed: What did you want to do with it anyway?

Andy: We didn't want to do anything. We had no money, man. We thought it would be nice to have all the money . . .

Question: That was just an idea occurring to you? You had not decided in advance to rob the store?

Andy: No, not yet . . . Yes, when we walked past and could see there was nobody in the store . . .

Question: But that was a point at which you could have changed your mind.

Andy: No way, man . . . We just had too much courage that day. We just went . . . Yes, a mistake, yes.

Question: And you got the idea by looking through the display window?

Andy: Yes, you could put it that way. Then we got even more courage, when

we saw that . . . Sixteen hundred . . . I hate it when I see a perfume shop . . .
I never look at perfume any more.

If we had asked Andy directly about his goal of emptying the till, he would surely have given the same answers as during the group discussion: ‘We had no money.’ It is an answer that is both obvious and meaningless. To give such an answer is just as unsatisfying as the answer a bank robber gave when he was asked by an American TV host why he robbed banks. He said: ‘Because that’s where the money is.’ Asking such questions is to ask for the sake of asking. However, from a rational choice perspective, it is unavoidable that offenders be asked about their intentions, even though we know in advance they want money, are seeking shelter and trying to stay away from the police. RCT assumes that ‘*a priori*’ choices and decisions are made and that the street robber’s way of operating can be assessed in terms of rationality and orientation towards a goal. The question, however, remains whether choices are made in all cases and whether robbery offenders act in order to achieve an explicit aim. And if this is not the case, can robberies be made more understandable by assuming that, in fact, this was the case?

From a rational choice approach, street robbers’ impulsivity can indeed be retrospectively reconstructed in terms of rational choices and decisions. Hence, the rational choice perspective enjoins us to assume that offenders make rational decisions in split seconds, even if they were not aware of doing so. We believe that we understand certain forms of behaviour better if the involved parties have told us they have weighed pros and cons we were perhaps not aware of or had imagined being different. However, forms of behaviour in which decisions are taken impulsively or intuitively and in which other possibilities for action are not assessed in terms of pros and cons, do not become more understandable by applying the rational choice perspective.

Within the rational choice perspective one can draw the conclusion that Andy could no longer see any disadvantages in committing the crime. He brought himself to a position in which the benefits outweighed the costs. Within a framework of ‘bounded rationality’ even committing this impulsive crime can be seen as rational. But from a rational choice perspective we cannot understand why Andy brought himself into a situation in which he dismissed the disadvantages and was compelled ‘to do the crime’. Andy clearly finds it difficult to view his behaviour as a choice, nor is he capable of explaining in a rational way what got into him at the moment he committed the robbery. He admits something went wrong and tries to make clear how this could happen: he ‘just had too much courage’ that particular day. A rational choice perspective cannot explain what it means to have ‘too much courage’, where this emotion comes from and where it leads. Within a rational choice perspective we have to be satisfied with understanding this kind of criminal behaviour as the outcome of a decision-making process and a cost–benefit analysis. Within the rational choice

perspective, 'having too much courage' can easily be dismissed as a rationalization by claiming, for instance, that street robbers' preparations have been misjudged as 'this lack of explicit planning may be more apparent than real' (Cornish and Clarke, 1986a: 53).

When we label someone's motivation as 'rationalization', this suggests s/he tries to be a better person than s/he really is by thinking of excuses instead of providing an explanation for the behaviour. It is an assessment of the validity of motivation in which one takes an external position vis-a-vis one's own behaviour. In addition to apologies and justifications, motivations in terms of goals, motives, urging or compelling circumstances can also be considered as attempts to interpret or explain a person's actions.

When people try to make sense of their behaviour, their accounts usually go hand in hand with apologies and clarifications. For example, 'impulsivity' not only provides the perpetrator with an excuse but also clarifies what s/he was experiencing before, during and after s/he committed the offence. When we discount such justifications as pure rhetoric, we neglect a useful opportunity for obtaining insight into some of the motives that played a role for the perpetrator. Instead of labelling perpetrators' accounts as unconvincing or discounting them as irrelevant, it may be more productive to acknowledge their reasons, analyse the context in which they are given and interpret them from the standpoint of the perpetrators themselves.

An example of such an approach can be found in Katz (1988, see also 1991), who refuses to believe that criminal behaviour is always deliberate or that those who behave in an unpredictable way 'just choose to act that way' (1988: 5). He assumes that there is more to be said about criminal behaviour precisely because something causally essential happens at the moment that an offence is being committed (1988: 4). In another context, Coulter has delineated the conditions that are necessary if reasons are to be regarded as causal (1989: 137). In order to determine what this is, it is necessary to understand what it is like to commit an offence, how it feels. To that end, attention to the definition of the situation, the *modus operandi* and the emotional dynamics is required.

In order to answer the question of why people commit offences, it is necessary to listen to what they have to say and to respect their moral feelings and emotions as authentic (Katz, 1988: 5). Moral emotions that play a role during the commission of an offence are, for example, humiliation, self-righteousness, arrogance, ridiculousness, cynicism, horror, vengeance (1988: 9). Drawing upon the accounts of perpetrators, Katz made a case that perpetrators more or less consciously construct the 'causes' themselves—'causes' that they feel compel them to commit the offence (1988: 216). For street robbers, this means that committing a robbery is more than an easy way to get money. Robbing people serves a 'larger, more widely embraced fascination with the achievement of a morally competent existence' (1988: 272). The impulsivity of a street robber is ultimately

inconceivable without a deep-seated conviction that he is a ‘real criminal’.⁴

Thus, there is more to say about how a criminal offence takes place than whether the perpetrator consciously or unconsciously chooses to do it. A rational choice approach is not only misleading because it emphasizes or even projects rational elements into this process. By putting human action in a cost–benefit analysis it also overestimates the importance of rationality in these activities, and thereby underestimates if not neglects the relevance of the shadow side of these activities, namely, impulsivity, lack of self-control and faulty awareness (Scheff, 1992: 102).

Moral ambiguity

Many perpetrators try to justify the offence for themselves and for others. Sykes and Matza (1957) have described several fallacies that delinquents use to legitimate their crimes, namely, denying their own responsibility, denying the victim, denying injury, damage or harm and denying others the moral right to condemn their behaviour. The apparent need for self-justification suggests the presence of feelings of shame and guilt that are ‘neutralized’ through the above-mentioned ‘neutralization techniques’. Thus, these neutralization techniques can be used to shed more light on offenders’ feelings of shame and guilt.

Feelings of guilt or shame can generally be only indirectly inferred from perpetrators’ utterances. The most remarkable thing that emerged from our interviews and focus group discussions is that by far the majority of the respondents were not attracted to robberies and many even resented having to commit such offences. Most considered the crime as a last resort or desperate act or at least presented it as such.

Irene, for example, considered snatching purses ‘the lowest’ one could do and she knew she would be ‘given the cold shoulder’ for doing it. Her first robbery was an act of despair that she committed after she had helped her victim, an elderly lady with a walking frame, to get up the stairs. She noticed the purse hanging on the walking frame and, since she desperately needed drugs, she could not resist taking the purse. She committed her second robbery on the same day the Municipal Social Service’s Department had turned down her request for money and she took some Rohypnol to assuage her frustration when she was back on the street. She then felt she could ‘do anything’. After catching sight of an elderly lady, all she could see was the woman’s purse. She even forgot to look around to see if there were any bystanders helping the victim.

Perpetrators’ justifying street robbery as a desperate act is an example of a ‘neutralization technique’. Strangely enough, the rational choice theory does not answer the question whether this neutralization technique is only used in retrospect as justification or whether it enables perpetrators to commit crimes without twinges of conscience. For the rational choice

perspective, neutralization techniques or rationalizations are only interesting as part of a cost–benefit analysis. Truth and the function of these rationalizations are of no concern to the rational choice perspective. At best they can give insight into the boundaries of one’s rationality. So Andy’s saying he had too much courage the day he committed the robbery of the perfumery indicates his ‘bounded’ rationality that day. By leaving the question unexplored whether these so-called ‘neutralization techniques’ are used in prospect or in retrospect, their significance for perpetrators is misjudged, or, at best, underestimated. In contrast, we consider motivation to be both a rationalization in retrospect and a reference to motives that enables perpetrators to commit their crimes without fear or twinges of conscience. In other words, motivations offer both justifications and explanations. They refer to current as well as past feelings, thoughts, desires and fantasies. The way in which perpetrators provide accounts for their behaviour provides an indication of what is important to them. For example, during focus group discussions about street robbery the atmosphere was often so heated that one could almost feel the excitement of committing a robbery.

From a rational choice perspective, it is of no interest whatsoever how criminal perpetrators deal with their emotions or how they make sense of their feelings. Of interest is merely whether the result of their thoughts and feelings can be conceived as the outcome of a cost–benefit analysis. Employing a rational choice approach leads to evaluating thoughts and feelings in terms of their functionality, whereby feelings, in particular, are defined as primarily negative. In a rational choice model, emotions are subordinate to a mode of formal reasoning, and actors behave more rationally in a substantial, empirical way to the extent that feelings, which deter them from reaching their goals, are eliminated or suppressed. From a rational choice perspective, emotions are merely interesting as elements in a cost–benefit analysis and hardly as indicating different ways in which decisions can be made.

The notion that is sustained in RCT, that neutralization techniques serve to suppress or eliminate feelings, gives a rather limited perception of the role of emotionality and morality in the committing of a robbery. The habit of some street robbers, for example, of listening to loud, aggressive rap music and consuming drugs and alcohol, before ‘having some fun’ can hardly be understood as simply a way of suppressing emotions. Moral ambiguity is displayed in the fact that feelings are not only suppressed, but also evoked. Perpetrators must feel they are capable of doing anything, that they can control things, and that at the moment they are seduced by their surroundings they can ‘rise above’ them. The behaviour of street robbers can be seen as rational to the extent that they act within the boundaries of their own limited rationality. From this point of view, drugs and alcohol can be seen as ways to manipulate the cost–benefit analysis in such a way that, subjectively, perceived costs decrease and benefits increase. It is our contention, however, that taking drugs and alcohol is a way of deliberately

dismissing a cost–benefit analysis and of defying the normal injunction to think and act rationally.

The emotional and moral significance of a robbery is not ahead of time. Until the moment that perpetrators and victims assess the situation as a robbery, they find themselves in a situation of fear, tension and insecurity. For the robbers the question that may arise is how much pressure they will have to use to get the victim into a state of obedience. There is always the possibility that the victim will unexpectedly resist. For victims, it is not always immediately clear what perpetrators want and how far they are willing to go to reach their goal. It is far-fetched to maintain that actors are able to act rationally even in such cases or can be seen as acting rationally. In any case, to our minds it is by no means the essence of what is taking place at that moment.

Our research showed that street robbers adopt moral boundaries. A high moral barrier for the actual committing of a robbery must be overcome by ‘giving yourself some pep talk’. There is always the danger of creating a situation that cannot be controlled and in which borders are crossed that the person would prefer not to cross. If s/he does not want to end up in a situation in which the means seem to justify the goal, it is better to anticipate this in advance than to place all hope in ‘common sense’. For that reason one of the participants in the focus group discussion never carried a knife with him because he feared that he would stab someone in blind anger: ‘you carry that knife for a reason.’

Compared to the rational choice perspective, it is possible to approach criminal behaviour by stressing the often ambivalent emotional and moral aspects of a robbery. When one of the respondents hangs around the foreign exchange office, this should not only be understood as waiting for a suitable victim and a large profit. It is also a necessary ‘moral warm-up’ to not only seeming insensitive but also being insensitive at the crucial moment (Katz, 1988: 173). Such ‘moral’ strategies serve to get the street robber ‘charged up’ until the moment when s/he does not ‘see another way out’ or ‘just has too much courage’ and believes s/he can ‘get away with a robbery’. In a cost–benefit analysis these strategies become void of meaning.

If the actual commission of street robbery is not so much a matter of rationally deliberating the advantages and the disadvantages, but rather the unpredictable result of ambivalent feelings and ‘moral warm-ups’, then it would seem that the rational choice perspective has not paid enough attention to the role of (moral) feelings. For example, Tunnell (1992) took rational choice theory as a starting point in his research and discovered that emotions did, in fact, play an important role for the perpetrators of hold-ups and break-ins. His respondents emphasized that in some cases they did not refrain from committing an offence because they saw that something was wrong, but rather because they had a feeling that all was not as it should be (1992: 106): ‘Such internal or instinctual reasons may be beyond the scope of rational decision-making theories and also may be indicative

of decision-making among both criminals and non-criminals' (1992: 108). We can probably understand Irene's attitude, but it is difficult to imagine that rational choice theory will contribute to this with its emphasis on her act as the result of rational decision making. Within a rational choice perspective we could take moral feelings into account in a formal analysis of perceived costs and benefits. But does it help us understand those feelings and their meaning to a street robber? The claim put forth by the rational choice perspective, that mixed feelings can be eliminated by a rational assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of an act, is an attempt to make emotional ambiguity plausible by simplifying it. But in real life morality is rarely simple.

Expressivity

A third aspect of robberies, which we wonder whether it can be reconciled with the basic assumptions of the rational choice perspective, concerns expressivity. All human forms of behaviour consist of instrumental and expressive aspects (Blok, 2001: 107–8). On the one hand, we can consider what is the function of a concrete form of behaviour, what purpose it is meant to serve. On the other hand, we can look for the meaning of a certain action—that is, what the perpetrator wants to make clear with his/her action. Blok suggests that expressive aspects of criminal violence are often misjudged. Violence is dismissed as 'useless' because an easily recognizable goal is absent (2001: 189). But if forms of behaviour can be considered as instrumental, this does not necessarily mean that expressive aspects are missing altogether (Lofland, 1969: 105; Lejeune, 1977: 125).

Within a rational choice perspective the act of robbery can be seen as rational because its success strongly depends on the surprise effect the perpetrator evokes in the victim (Cornish and Clarke, 1986a: 14; Walsh, 1986: 42, 44). In order to exploit the fear and uncertainty, which the victim is experiencing, the street robber must not think, but 'just do it'. Thus, while committing a robbery rarely involves a 'sophisticated' plan, impulsiveness or excessive violence can still be considered rational. In such a functional interpretation of street robbery, even an irrational attitude towards violence could be called rational, because the street robber can count on encountering the unpredictable.

As we said above, from this point of view criminal behaviour is rational if a framework can be conceived in which it can be seen as instrumental even if such a framework can only be constructed afterwards. In this way, every robbery can be called instrumental and, therefore, rational, which leaves us wondering whether qualitative empirical research on the perpetrator's perspective makes any sense when everything will *a priori* be conceived as rational. In our view, this shows the poverty of the rational choice approach with its overly rationalized conception of man. It does not lead us into the field and into the lives of the actors (offenders) that we

want to understand. Instead of trying to discover the objectives of criminal behaviour by inspecting it as closely as possible, a rational choice approach deflects researchers from ethnographic investigation giving away the opportunity of fully developing its heuristic potential.

As an example, we would like to take a look at one of the group discussions, where it was discussed what a street robber should do in the case that the victim resists.

Marciano: When you rob someone and you don't want to hurt them and he starts resisting, then you don't know what else to do, then you have to stab. I mean, you can run away, but well, then you're also stupid.

Question: Why would you be stupid?

Marciano: You're already committing a robbery, so then you should finish it . . . Otherwise the victim will think, 'Oh, that was easy.' Running away while you have a weapon in your hand and while you're robbing someone . . .

Question: Still, why would it be stupid to run away?

Marciano: You're robbing him. I mean why would one run away?

Robin: Either you do it, or you don't.

Marciano: You have different thoughts when you're robbing someone; then you don't remind yourself to run away. You remind yourself instead just to get him . . . Not that you immediately want to stab him, but when he resists, you just see red . . . And then you just start stabbing.

Onno: It's just the excitement, and then he's the one getting in your way, and then, yeah . . .

Marciano: Yes, I mean, you could run away. But then he might start chasing you, and then he'd kick your butt. Well, that's no good. 'What did you do last night?' 'Well, I robbed someone, but he hit me, and so I didn't make a lot of money.'

Marciano's violent behaviour could be considered functional. For example, he intends to make it clear to the victim that he is serious or to prevent the victim from running away. However, it remains to be seen whether this is really Marciano's intent. It is for a good reason that the question about the functionality of his behaviour was a surprise to Marciano. Just like Andy did not know how to deal with the question about the moment of choice, neither did Marciano. When he is committing a robbery Marciano does not realize what he is doing; he 'just does it'. Committing a robbery does not fulfil a particular function for him, but is an expression of his thoughts and feelings at that particular moment.

The rational choice theory does not do justice to the expressivity of committing robberies, because the theory focuses on the functionality of the means that are used for achieving a certain goal. If one wishes to use the

perpetrator's perspective to make the committing of robberies more understandable, then it is not sufficient to put all the elements of a robbery into a functional context. Committing a robbery has a meaning for the perpetrator and that meaning extends beyond the direct goal of his actions. As the rational choice theory asks the wrong questions based on wrong assumptions, the expressive meaning the perpetrator attaches to committing a robbery cannot be retrieved.

In an approach to criminal behaviour which leaves room for expressive aspects, robbery is not understood as a separate act that can be placed in a functional context and assessed in terms of rationality, but 'as part of a larger ethnically or subculturally relevant project' (Katz, 1988: 272). Even though there is no way to know whether Marciano really had the intention to prevent the victim from running away, we cannot be satisfied with some sort of assumed functionality of Marciano's behaviour. From his own perspective, functionality is not the essence. Far from it: his behaviour can only be understood as part of a larger subcultural 'identity project' (Giddens, 1991).

In our research we came across different examples of such 'projects', the core of which seems to lie in the norm of being 'ruthless'. In one of the group discussions Rico pointed out to Glenn what 'ruthless' means.

Rico: Tight, no jokes, tough guys.

Glenn: More courage, dare to fight with the police.

Rico: For nothing, but if you're ruthless, then you should also look for other people. For instance, I hang out with them. He is a tight Antillean; I am a tight Antillean. We have a couple of friends; they are tight too.

For Rico and Glenn, committing robberies is assigned meaning partly by a subculturally valued attitude of being 'tight' or 'ruthless'. However, it is not only determined by the dominant subcultural norms and values. The perpetrators themselves actively express these norms and values. By committing robberies they give shape to their lives. The risks that are attached to committing robberies are dealt with in a daring and non-rational way. They command respect, if not from others, then at least from each other, and this enables them to continue the business of committing robberies (Katz, 1991; Shover and Honaker, 1992). They not only develop a personal style of robbing, but also a corresponding self-image. The committing of the robbery reflects who the perpetrator is. Thus, it becomes part of a lifestyle and the perpetrator considers committing robbery as an 'identity project' (Giddens, 1991).

Living a life in which committing robberies goes hand in hand with an unrestrained consumption of sex, drugs, alcohol and gambling entails creating circumstances which constantly pressure perpetrators into committing more robberies. Although many of our respondents indicated they preferred not to commit robberies and intended to stop doing it after a few times, most of them continued doing it. They committed robberies because,

no matter how risky it was, it at least provided them with the opportunity to maintain a lifestyle that they had become used to and that suited them. Why they nevertheless labelled the robbing of passers-by as a desperate act can only be understood when we take their mixed feelings about doing this into account.

For the street robber, the main questions are not how s/he suppresses feelings, but how s/he evokes them, not how s/he uses his/her reason, but how s/he succeeds in banning certain thoughts from his/her mind and does 'not to give in to his reason' (Katz, 1988: 236). Each time s/he commits a robbery, the robber has to show that s/he is serious and that there is no other way out for him/her. The expressivity of committing a robbery is embedded in the robbers' conviction that they do what they 'gotta do'. Their inner conviction is crucial. Being able to commit robberies and having the willingness to do violence if necessary requires a mental toughness on the part of the perpetrators. It is a challenge for them to prevent themselves from giving up (Katz, 1988: 194). The use of violence serves as confirmation of their determination to complete the robbery and be ruthless. Since it is practically impossible to pretend being 'ruthless' and simply using violence when it suits, 'you must live the commitment to deviance. You must really mean it' (Katz, 1988: 193). Because the rational choice approach employs the wrong starting point and poses the wrong questions, the expressive meaning of robbery for perpetrators cannot be uncovered.

Conclusion

Within criminology, the rational choice perspective claims to shed light on all forms of criminality, including the impulsive or irrational ones, enabling such forms of criminal behaviour to become more plausible. To put this claim to the test, we have examined to what extent one particular type of crime, i.e. street robbery, can be considered as a rational and deliberate choice. We have done this by applying the rational choice perspective to the utterances that street robbers made about their crimes in the context of our research.

At first sight, it appeared that street robbers chose to commit an offence only after they had weighed the relative advantages and disadvantages. However, after we examined to what extent impulsivity, moral ambiguity and expressivity could make sense if considered as part of a rational choice process, we began to doubt whether the spontaneous and moral aspects of criminal behaviour can be understood if we assume that the crimes were committed as the result of a rational and deliberate choice.

Before, during and after an offence, perpetrators often experience contradictory feelings. In addition to relief and pride, they also experience feelings of fear, regret, shame and guilt. In the rational choice perspective, these emotional aspects of criminal behaviour can be placed in a functional

context without further ado as, from a rational choice point of view, goals like excitement, status, friendship or respect are, 'of course', also rational (Clarke and Cornish, 1985: 163; Cornish and Clarke, 1986b: 7). Although these emotions occur in different phases of the crime and are not necessarily inconsistent with a rational decision-making process of weighing costs and benefits, we would still argue that the three dimensions of impulsivity, moral ambiguity and expressivity are essential in understanding street robberies and that a rational choice perspective is incapable of taking these into account without being abstract and artificial. In other words, besides the shamelessness with which this approach has manifested itself forcefully as a 'new' perspective even without adding anything essential to already existing theory (Akers, 1990), the rational choice approach turns out to be rather 'shameless' in its analysis as well (Scheff, 1992).

Our conclusion is that a rational choice perspective does not take seriously enough how perpetrators themselves perceive such forms of criminality. We believe that impulsivity cannot be regarded as a 'virtual' choice, that feelings like fear, guilt or shame are just not simply being neutralized and that expressivity is something different than a goal. The way that impulsivity, expressivity, and feelings of fear, shame and guilt are integrated in a rational choice model does not enable a better understanding of these important aspects of criminal behaviour. As Jacobs and Wright argue, a rational choice model fails 'to recognize contingencies and reciprocal relationships that moderate, mediate, or mitigate predicted outcomes' (1999: 164).

This does not mean that the proponents of a rational choice perspective are opposed in principle to lending significance to the accounts of perpetrators. On the one hand, rational choice theorists agree that 'personal accounts can play a large role in the development of crime theory and policy' (Agnew, 1990: 268). But, on the other hand, the perpetrator's point of view is not taken seriously as empirical evidence necessitating a further development of the rational choice perspective. In the end, the rational choice approach distances itself from the ethnographic starting point that the agent's reasons themselves have a kind of explanatory primacy.

Thus, although the rational choice perspective lends ample lip service to the explanations of perpetrators, it fails to do justice to the meaning that perpetrators give to their own behaviour. The reasons that actors give for their actions are regarded as deficient and need to be articulated rationally in order to be understood. Strictly speaking, within a rational choice perspective, the robbers' explanations cannot be allowed primacy in the explanation and understanding of criminal behaviour. Therefore, a fundamental 'discrepancy' remains between the reasons which the perpetrators themselves give for their actions and the rationality, which, in the rational choice perspective, explains their behaviour (Turner, 1992: 191).

Within a rational choice perspective, it is not important whether the

perpetrator has actually made a rational analysis of the costs and gains at the moment of his/her action, but rather whether his/her behaviour can be interpreted retrospectively as rational in the light of specific goals. Given that these goals can be reconstructed retrospectively, a tautology emerges in which the motives of perpetrators are irrelevant, simply because ‘the presumed causes of action are reconstructed in a circular fashion on the basis of what is actually chosen; they are “revealed”’ (Turner, 1992: 193). As any decision-making process can always be interpreted as rational by way of what Elster (1993) has called ‘backward induction’, the rational choice perspective opens the door to an unrestrained ‘pseudo-rationalism’ (Karstedt and Greve, 1995: 188).

In this fashion, criminal behaviour is explained by assuming that the perpetrator will have considered other ways of meeting his/her needs. More specifically, it is assumed that his/her deliberations are influenced by earlier experiences, which enable him/her to behave impulsively and with success. Furthermore, it is assumed that his/her deliberations are influenced by moral views, which help him/her to justify his/her behaviour and neutralize his/her feelings of guilt (Sykes and Matza, 1957). And, finally, it is assumed that his/her deliberations are influenced by his/her self-image—his/her identity—that is expressed and sustained through his/her behaviour (Clarke and Cornish, 1985: 167).

In a rational choice perspective, even ostensibly senseless criminal behaviour is seen as ‘calculated’ to meet more or less legitimate but unsatisfied needs of the perpetrator (Cornish and Clarke, 1986b: 7). By using a heuristic method of rational reconstruction, nearly all behaviour can be seen as rational. For the proponents of a rational choice approach, even an emotional outburst does not pose a problem: it has advantages and disadvantages and can, therefore, be interpreted as a choice (Turner, 1992: 193). Thus, in this perspective ‘rationalizing everything is the solution, not the problem’ (Turner, 1992: 193). It hinders rather than helps us to understand why offenders feel ‘they gotta do what they gotta do’.

We believe that it is not possible to understand and explain criminal behaviour without paying attention to the way in which offenders themselves try to understand and explain the committing of crimes. Taking seriously the emotional aspects of criminal behaviour and the moral significance perpetrators assign to their actions calls for a theory that does justice to both the rational aspects of committing a crime and the moral feelings of a perpetrator before, during and after the offence. A more adequate explanation of criminality needs to take account of the affective aspects of criminal behaviour, the normative meanings that perpetrators attribute to their own behaviour and the social and cultural circumstances of the perpetrators. In order to explain criminal behaviour, a theory is required that does not treat perpetrators as rational actors, but rather assumes that they are moral subjects who are compelled to give meaning to their lives.

Notes

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1. See, however, Karstedt (1993: 64), who notes that, in many cases, the policy implications of the economically based approach to crime and punishment and those of critical or liberal criminology differ only in their theoretical justification.
2. In total 45 male and four female juvenile delinquents between 12 and 18 years old were interviewed or participated in focus group discussions. Some of them were merely suspected of, but most of them had previously been convicted of, street robbery. Obviously, these juvenile delinquents are not a representative sample of perpetrators. However, we believe this is immaterial for our case.
3. Although their accounts should not be taken at face value, listening to the 'voices' of these offenders offers a way of understanding what brought them to do what they did.
4. Just in passing, we would like to point out that another 'crying shame' concerning rational choice theory is that it is 100 per cent gender neutral—i.e. fully unreflexive about the genderedness of crime and criminality. For an account of gender and the accomplishment of street robbery the reader is referred to Miller (1998). Throughout this article, we have used 'he' and 'she' literally to refer to our male and female respondents.

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