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SITUATIONAL CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY AMONG MALE STREET THIEVES

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Increasingly, theorists recognize that the influence of masculinity on decision making is situationally contingent and embedded in interactions. Using interviews with ninety-four male street thieves, the authors describe the situations that bring constructions of masculinity into the foreground of street crime. In certain situations, men are likely to engage in criminal behavior as a mechanism for constructing their masculinity. The authors find that hanging with criminally capable associates and partying are critically significant for understanding when masculine concerns bear on criminal decision making. In these situations, copresent others interpret inappropriate actions or responses as definitive signs of weakness, passivity, and failure in the struggle to be a man. They also examine how age and criminal experience shape conceptions of masculinity and the style of their enactment.

Keywords: *masculinities; crime; criminal decision making; situational*

Recently, criminologists have devoted increased attention to crime-antecedent events (Athens 1997; Groves and Lynch 1990; Katz 1988). Out of an apparent concern for the state of existing decision-making research, many researchers began studying the situations that lead to crime. These critics noted that examining criminal decisions as the outcome of an economic calculus provided a misguided understanding of the choice process (Shover and Honaker 1992). Criminal decisions are embedded within a framework of events and an outlook that tremendously slants economic calculation. To understand criminal decisions, it is necessary to understand the perspective of the actors making decisions, their interpretations of events, and their material and expressive goals (Katz 1988; Jacobs and Wright 1999; Shover 1996). How the offender wishes to be seen by others is of great importance in the development of many crimes. In certain circumstances, the malefactor views committing crime as altogether appropriate, if not righteous (Katz 1988).

Researchers interested in masculinity endorse this recent focus on underlying social considerations in specific criminal choices and how they play out in real criminal situations. If we argue that crime is the situational accomplishment of gendered expectations, then the means for

AUTHORS' NOTE: The authors contributed equally to research and writing. We thank the editors of the journal and the anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier version of this article. Direct all correspondence to Heath Copes, Department of Justice Sciences, University of Alabama-Birmingham, 901 South 15th Street, Birmingham, AL 35294.

achieving these expectations are theoretically critical links between masculinity as structure and masculine action (Jefferson 1997). As Messerschmidt (1993) stated,

Because masculinity is a behavioral response to the particular conditions and situations in which men participate, different types of masculinity exist in the school, the youth group, the street, the family, and the workplace. In other words, men do masculinity according to the social situation in which they find themselves. (pp. 83-84)

Those young men who prove their manhood by fighting in the streets or in bars might not call on physical violence in their homes or at work. Despite admonitions against the neglect of situated action, surprisingly few studies have focused specifically on the accounts ordinary offenders give of their decisions and the role that masculine considerations plays in their choices (Jefferson 1997, 538; Miller 1998).

In this article, we examine the typical arrangement of events and interactions before street thefts are committed with an eye toward identifying obvious and less than obvious masculine themes. We pay special attention to antecedent situations that appear to be particularly criminogenic for street thefts committed by males. Understanding theft by men is important since it is these acts that encompass much of what we understand about criminal decision making, and it is these acts that largely compose the "crime problem." Analysts have argued, more or less implicitly, that street crimes emanate from a subcultural venue where the connection between emphasized forms of masculinity and crime is easy to see. However, even for common crimes, the mechanisms and details of interaction that connect beliefs and ideals are underexamined. As a result, it would be easy to inaccurately conclude that offenders draw on uniform, trans-situational, masculine repertoires and to neglect how environments and interactions shape the ideals decision makers reference (Jefferson 1997). Recognizing that the work of previous investigators subsumes our findings, we attempt to paint a picture of masculinity, interaction, and the foreground of criminal decision making with slightly more detailed strokes than used in the past. As part of our analysis, we specify how conceptions for evaluating worth among men in the lower tiers of the working class are valuable for interpreting stylistic differences between crimes of older thieves as compared to those of younger thieves.

SITUATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND MASCULINITY

Two empirical discoveries reinvigorated interest in how situational interaction contributes to crime. First, investigators confirmed that offending is associated with lifestyles that include drinking, drug use, and congregation with other offenders and is likely to occur in domains where these activities occur (Agnew and Peterson 1989; Felson 2002; Kennedy and Baron 1993; Sacco and Kennedy 2002). Second, research showed clearly that many offenders give their crimes little forethought and that criminal choices are often improvisational and spontaneous (Bennet and Wright 1984; Feeney 1986; Wright and Rossi 1986). These discoveries led criminologists to recognize that certain situations are imbued with meanings that contribute to criminal potential and to look more closely at the situations where crimes develop (Birkbeck and Lafree 1993). Many of the resultant ethnographies and qualitative studies speak to the situational construction of masculinity and its place in criminal decision making.

Beynon (2002, 54) pointed out that investigators interested in situational interaction often study masculinities indirectly without specific reference to gender. To reinforce the point, he noted that researchers of youth culture and delinquency for many years have focused on gendered interactional norms without acknowledging specifically that this is what they are doing. Indeed, the same can be said of many criminological investigations of the offender's perspective. For example, when Cordilia (1986) interviewed sixty-seven imprisoned male robbers, she found that thefts often arise out of a "group drinking context." Her participants reported that their crimes originated out of spontaneous interaction within a drinking group. She described the situational establishment of a fatalistic, competitive, and reckless outlook among groups of impoverished, intoxicated men that causes offenders to "focus on the proximate rewards of group cohesion" at the expense of more careful consideration of their choices (p. 170). Similarly, Shover (1996) contended that evaluation of risk can easily be neglected in company that "celebrates and affirms values of spontaneity, independence, and resourcefulness" (p. 233). The aforementioned researchers imply that offenders' concerns about acting masculine and their gendered character projects guide many interactions preceding crime. Several researchers note specifically that crime can be interpreted as an endeavor that proves one's adherence to a particular form of

masculinity and as an effort to get a reputation as an adherent (Collison 1996, 441; Jackson 1995, 28; Messerschmidt 1993; Hobbs 1994; Katz 1988).

The concept of situational accountability is critical to linking constructions of masculinity to criminal behavior (Fenstermaker, West, and Zimmerman 1991; Messerschmidt 1993, 1997). Actors realize that others hold them accountable to behavioral dictates consistent with immediate circumstances. Thus, "they construct their actions in relation to how they might be interpreted by others in the particular social context in which they occur" (Messerschmidt 1993, 79). Actors demonstrate that they are appropriately masculine or feminine by performing behaviors that others easily interpret within an evaluative framework. This framework is localized, immediate, and attributed to present company, albeit nested in cultural and subcultural ideals. It is widely acknowledged that masculinity is a "situational accomplishment" (Kersten 1996) and "has the capacity for rapid modification" (Beynon 2002, 10). It is lived experience in specific spaces (Westwood 1990), a presentation of self "which is negotiated implicitly or explicitly over a whole range of situations" and interactions (Morgan 1992, 47). Therefore, understanding the influence of masculinity on any given phenomenon requires close attention to commonality in immediate circumstances and in the ideals referenced by participants.

There are slight differences in the masculine values attributed to street criminals by researchers, and there is ongoing discussion of regional and temporal variation in offenders' constructions of self (Bottcher 2001; Collier 1998; Winlow 2001). However, descriptions of street offenders' lifestyles and broad ideals are largely the same, and most everyone seems to agree that crime is especially likely to occur in situations that impugn or threaten character constructions based on claims of dangerousness, criminal know-how, or criminal capability (Athens 1997; Katz 1988; Messerschmidt 2000; Shover 1996, 107). Despite this fact, investigators give more attention to the subcultural value system among street thieves than to how this system affects unfolding situations that lead to crime and intracategory variation in how offenders try to establish character and act masculine in specific social situations. Our analysis focuses on social situations and settings that evoke a particular masculinity through implied and overt interpersonal challenges and manly competitions. These definitive situations make masculine claims salient and constrain available repertoires.

Offenders understand that others will interpret inappropriate action in these settings as failure in the “struggle to be masculine” (Jackson 1995, 24).

METHOD

For this study, we draw on data from semistructured interviews with ninety-four men under community supervision in a southern metropolitan area between 1998 and 2000. All were on probation or parole at the time of the interviews for robbery, burglary, or motor vehicle theft. The state department of correction granted us access to files of men under community supervision. We used information from these files to identify and contact suitable participants to interview. They contained addresses and phone numbers, if available, of offenders who had committed the crimes of interest. We contacted nearly three hundred men and invited them to participate. The ninety-four participants represent those who consented to be interviewed. We paid participants \$15 for a one- to two-hour interview.

Our sample is one of men who had formal contact with the criminal justice system and not one of free-ranging offenders. Critics have voiced their concerns over the potential shortcomings of research based on samples derived from criminal justice sources (Cromwell, Olson, and Avary 1991; Glassner and Carpenter 1985). Despite these criticisms, there is little doubt that investigations of street crime using samples of known offenders have produced detailed, accurate, and useful data on a variety of topics (e.g., Athens 1997; Maruna 2000; Rengert and Wasilchick 2000; Shover 1996). There is little reason, moreover, to believe that the results of these studies contradict or are inconsistent with what has been learned from studies using active offenders, especially when discussing their interpretations of their lives and behaviors. Even when confined to prison, an offender “carries his interpretations with him” (Sutherland 1973, 50).

We conducted interviews in places that were convenient for respondents. Interview locations included probation and parole offices after their regular appointments, their homes, local libraries, or other quiet places. In a few instances, we conducted interviews in areas that were not ideal settings for interviews, including parks, cars, and taverns. We constructed an initial interview guide to provide uniform coverage of

topics, but we allowed offenders the opportunity to talk about events that they thought were important in shaping their criminal decisions. Interviews focused on offenders' motivations to commit crime, the target selection process, perceived risks and rewards of participating in crime, and techniques and skills used to accomplish the tasks. We also asked offenders about their families, relationships, occupations, criminal histories, patterns of drug use, and other aspects of their lives, with a particular emphasis on the time surrounding their most recent period of criminal activity. Substantial attention was devoted to understanding the lifestyle of offenders, how they saw themselves, and how they selected other members of their social circles at the time of their offenses. This lifestyle section of the interview provided significant insight into what offenders valued among their male peers.

Interviews followed a loose structure and concentrated on the immediate life circumstances and events preceding a "typical" felony theft that the respondent could recall. Through probing for recollections of conversations and activities that precede theft and events that occur during and immediately after it, we had participants recount the process of a felony theft in as much detail as possible. Obviously, offenders located the events that they described within a larger lifestyle and extended course of events including repeat offending. Nevertheless, the most fruitful request we made was to have the offender think of one of his typical crimes and then to describe in as much detail as possible all of the events leading up to the incident. Participants described what they were thinking about, what kinds of conversations they were having with co-offenders, and what happened during and after they completed the offense. We tape-recorded and transcribed interviews. We then analyzed the interviews with a software package designed to code and organize textual data.

Although reflecting a wider range of criminal experience, the offenders we interviewed are very much like those in other investigations of street crime (Jacobs 1999; Shover 1996; Wright and Decker 1994, 1997). The offenders in the sample varied from criminal novices to persistent offenders. Some had no previous arrests, and others had lengthy rap sheets that reflected years of persistent offending. Crimes in offenders' records ranged in severity from minor drug possession or driving under the influence to rape, kidnapping, and murder. Even among those who had few convictions, most admitted that they committed multiple thefts. Admission of dozens of felony thefts was not

rare. This level of criminal activity is common among persistent thieves—a category that clearly captures at least 25 percent of the men we interviewed. Thirty-one of our participants had been imprisoned more than once for felony theft. The mean age at the time of the interview was thirty-one. Only eighteen (19 percent) of the offenders were married, while sixty-five (69 percent) were single. Eleven had previously been married (12 percent). These men typically were poor and uneducated. Approximately 60 percent of them did not have steady jobs at the time of the offense, and almost all of those who did occupied the lowest rungs of the labor market. Racial minorities made up half of the sample. As mentioned earlier, the sample consists entirely of men. While this is a limitation of the research, it also allows for efficiency in presentation and analysis since women are likely to have different influences on their decision making, and masculinity may have a distinct influence on female offenders' decisions (Miller 1998).

MASCULINITY IN THE FOREGROUND: JUMPING IN OR PUSSING OUT

To describe how certain social situations bring masculine concerns to the foreground, it is necessary to briefly review the masculine ideals held by those in our sample. Many masculine concerns are intertwined with other values associated with street culture that have been documented by decades of ethnographic research on street criminals. This line of research informs us that among street offenders, it is important to appear (1) autonomous, (2) capable of providing for oneself, and (3) action oriented (Anderson 1999; Cohen 1955; Gibbs and Shelley 1982; Jacobs and Wright 1999; MacCleod 1987; Miller 1958; Shover 1996; Wright and Decker 1997). Offenders contrast their lifestyles with those of hesitant, passive, and compliant persons who settle for mundane existences and dependence on others (Akerstrom 1985). This outlook, long thought to be criminogenic, is linked to conceptions of masculinity and can be construed as a universally available avenue of achievement that allows the offender to interpret failures at work and domesticity as achievement of freedom (Jefferson 1994; Messerschmidt 1993, 1997; Simpson and Ellis 1995). Their ideals are masculine because they draw on general ideals of manhood and are contrasted with traits

symbolically attributed to women in patriarchal society and even more so in the harshly patriarchal worldview of the street offender.

Nearly all investigations of street offenders' lifestyles show that they have an exaggerated desire for autonomy. They typically resent authority, external control, and restrictions associated with conventional work-a-day living and domesticity; that is, "to be cool, one must not be under anyone else's thumb" (Jacobs 1999, 33). Many active offenders cannot envision themselves in workplaces or relationships that require subordination, discipline to authority, or interference with their habits and parties (Akerstrom 1999; Irwin 1970; Shover 1996; Sutherland 1937). As part of their particular visions of autonomy, street offenders place a great deal of importance on appearing to be independently capable of providing for their needs (Maruna 2000). They spend money in ways that emphasize ostentatiously their seemingly effortless ability to provide for themselves and those around them even at the cost of empty pockets in the morning. Like most males, street offenders emphasize what Brittan (1989) colorfully called the "heroic hunter as breadwinner" (p. 77) as a masculine ideal (Kersten 1996). However, they approximate successful achievement of the goal by wanton partying and conspicuous consumption meant to demonstrate independence from the restraints of relationships and routine financial concerns. In some ways, their pursuits resemble vacations taken by young working men (Collison 1996).

In further demonstration of their adherence of a value system emphasizing unrestricted freedom, many street offenders associate manly behavior with risk taking and subsequently admire those who do the same. A measure of impulsivity and a "devil-may-care" attitude are respectable in street offenders' social surroundings. Men are expected to enjoy, or at least not shirk, adventures ranging from street fights, to heavy drug use binges, to commission of acquisitive felonies. Those who cannot keep up are quickly labeled *punks*, *pussies*, *bitches*, or other similar terms intended to highlight subjectivity and the inability to face trying situations head-on.

Offenders, like most everyone else, are not committed to a singular view of masculinity and are tolerant of diverse ideals and means of achieving them. Most offenders have long-term goals that in some ways conflict with their desire for the forms of autonomy and action they are seeking during periods of active offending. At the same time, they are

notably intolerant of those who play at the notion of masculinity outlined above but are unable to back up their claims in defining situations. Once a criminal identity is claimed, it must be backed up or the actor risks losing credibility in the few venues where his style and abilities are taken seriously (Katz 1988). Offenders use any number of insults, most with feminine connotations, to describe cowardly pretenders who provoke or help create situations that they cannot handle.

These masculine ideals are not inherently criminogenic, as they can be realized in a number of ways not involving crime. They are, however, conducive to crime in certain social situations. Specifically, these values lend themselves to criminal behavior when men find or place themselves in situations where they are partying or hanging out. Here, crime becomes a mechanism of gender construction because the situation has clarified the salience of a particular vision of masculinity. In these social settings, men often engage in grandiose talking, which frequently involves boasting that relies on cultural stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. The likelihood of having one's identity challenged is significantly increased when circumstances clearly evoke the particular form of masculinity admired on the streets or when one is already showing off. For instance, being at a party without offerings, being unwilling to jump into a criminal and potentially dangerous situation, or being unable or unwilling to back up boasts undermines masculine claims. Similarly, posturing oneself as one of the boys in a crowd that defines itself as criminally capable often results in situations where one is expected to act.

We argue that street thieves use constructions of gender to create and interpret criminal opportunity and to generate compliance from indecisive or wavering co-offenders, especially when partying or hanging out. In certain social spaces, offenders often have a heightened sensitivity to being labeled as anything but masculine. They are aware that those they encounter while partying or hanging out are likely to endorse the same focal concerns. Reference to the importance of autonomy, provision, or action inevitably occurs in these situations. In many cases, interaction is scripted intentionally by at least one actor who is firmly set on a criminal outcome or who is creating a scene suitable for demonstrating his ostensible familiarity and experience with crime or street life. In other words, some men use situational scripts quite consciously to entice or coerce others to join them in criminal adventures and to enhance the

value of their own actions in maintaining a desired social and self-image.

PARTYING AND HANGING WITH THE BOYS

Offenders' descriptions of their lifestyles left little doubt that participation in hedonistic parties preceding crime was interpreted among their peers as a worthwhile endeavor, if not the only way for a man to live life to its fullest. If there is one phrase that describes typical events that precede decisions to commit acquisitive street crime, it is "desperate partying" (Wright and Decker 1997, 35). By partying, offenders unambiguously mean the use of drugs and alcohol for prolonged periods. Some of the parties were milder than others, but most were exceptionally "wild" or "hard" even by the standards of regular drug users. By the time they committed their crimes, some groups had been partying for days, a feat attributable in part to a taste for drugs that interfere with sleep. Offenders who fail to invest fully in the party by moderating drug use or attempting to leave early may be taunted playfully but with a clear message. On trying to leave a party to get some sleep, one offender recalled that he decided to stay only after his friend asked antagonistically, "You need a nap? What are you, an eight-year-old girl or something?" Another robber recalled that he rode along on a crime purely out of a sense of obligation to the people with whom he had indulged in a lengthy binge. Having already committed to the party, leaving when supplies are soon to be replenished would be awkward:

[We were] snorting dope all night. They were going to do this [crime], but I had to go to work in the morning. I know I've got to go to bed. I didn't even do any of the drugs we got out of it; I had to leave. Everybody else is going, so I go. Can you believe that seven of us piled in a car to go and do this?

A thief who was well connected with fences explains that in the context of certain parties, criminal opportunity is sure to be seized by eager recruits: "I just take anybody, whoever, along. Somebody's gonna go when you are around a bunch of dope and the stuff [merchandise] is already sold." Another offender explains that attendance at certain parties is key to identifying the criminally motivated or those who can be easily motivated:

And then the next time I would go somewhere I would take somebody else. I mean these people just hang out. They ain't got nothing to do; they just want some dope probably . . . just something to do. I would just take them along.

Partying implies the presence and consumption of drugs and alcohol. But many offenders do not have a constant supply of illicit drugs on hand. Street thieves sometimes "hang with their boys" without indulging in illicit intoxicants, often while milling around and waiting for an opportunity to get high. Offenders frequently congregate on street corners, in bars, or at someone's house where the types of parties that interest them occur regularly. One reason that participation in offenders' social gatherings implies criminal capability is that those assumed to have criminal experience and ability frequent these settings. Our point is that the mere choice of attending these gatherings contributes greatly to criminal potential, and it is not just the activities likely to occur in these settings that contribute to criminal definitions of the situation. The spaces impart meaning, and the presence of known and reputed thieves sends a message that those present are tolerant of criminal activity and potentially willing to participate. Several of the offenders whom we interviewed had local reputations for their criminal prowess or experiences. These men could safely assume that the people willing to go "riding around" with them were also open to criminal opportunities.

In many cases, a novice offender's perception of opportunity is rooted in the presence of people assumed to be more capable of crime. The point is not lost on inexperienced offenders that criminal motivation, whether acquiescence or eagerness, for crime began when they came into the presence of someone they knew or suspected to be criminally active, criminally capable, or intent on offending. In hindsight, they often comment that these inspirational co-offenders "seemed to know what they were doing." From the perspective of the other side of the interaction, an experienced burglar notes that an established criminal reputation turns others' heads toward criminal opportunities: "They know if they come with me, they going to get some money." Merely to be in the presence of seasoned offenders forms the basis of a claim of criminal ability and opens eyes to criminal possibilities. To the extent that street crime results from masculine claims, the claim of association with the criminally capable is essential. Established thieves have proven to others in their social world that they are appropriately masculine. To hang with people of this caliber establishes one's own identity

and reputation; therefore, younger men often position themselves socially around the more experienced so that they can profit by association.

In addition to the importance of proper reciprocation and carrying through on a line of action commensurate with partying activities, it is important to many young street offenders to be viewed as dependable and loyal in risky situations (Cohen 1955; Shover 1996). If one is partying and cannot continue to “hang” with the rest of the group or cannot provide for his share of the drugs, then his worth is threatened. This individual is at risk of being perceived as weak and passive, or as “having no heart.” This threat occurs not only in the mind of the individual offender but is also expressed by other group members. The desire to live up to a masculine self-image then becomes a strong component in the decision to engage in antecedent activities and street crime.

CRIMINAL DELIBERATION: BUCKING UP HEADS

Certain settings are criminogenic due to the potential of challenges and confrontations of one’s masculine persona. In the presence of people who are already engaged in risky behavior or are known to be active offenders, events or statements that might otherwise be ambiguous impart meanings that are clear to all. Offenders often discuss crime using ambiguous language. The phrase *making money* or discussions of the need to make money initiated many of the criminal deliberations described to us. It is the setting that gives meaning to the phrase, and everyone knows that nothing legal is being proposed. Once everyone is “on the same page,” offenders often rely on conversational posturing and one-upsmanship to build confidence and move their group toward crime (Cromwell, Olson, and Avary 1991; Hochstetler and Copes 2003). Tales of past criminal successes, exaggerations of expected rewards of an offense, diminishing the potential risks, and encouraging statements like “we can do this” or “there ain’t nothing to it” are elements of these challenges. These conversations create such an optimistic tone that hesitation by those who have claimed to be criminally capable is laughable. As one offender said,

When you get like that and you get around a couple of your partners and they like ,yeah, we going to do this. You like, alright let’s do it. That’s just how it is. You buck each other’s head up. And then when you around

them you ain't going to coward out. There on the spot, you might as well do it. So there it is.

Most criminologists who have considered offenders' conversations as an important element of crime construction have focused on conversations after they turn to planning (Cromwell, Olson, and Avary 1991; Feeney 1986). By this point, the scene is set. Criminal deliberation and planning do not emerge from a blank conversational slate but from earlier conversations and events in which at least one offender has made claims of criminal capability or ability. Often, these claims are made in an indirect manner that evokes the masculine themes of being a provider and an adventurer. By conversationally posing as one who has what it takes to commit a crime, offenders cause others to reference appropriate cultural tool kits (Swindler 1986). An experienced thief explains how his inexperienced partner initiated their crime:

One thing led to another and everybody is talking about robbing and stealing and stuff like that. The other guys knowed that I was pretty well off into criminal activities. And so, maybe one thing led to another and I was just cutting up with the dude. Then he got kinda serious about it and I said, "Well hell, if you're serious let's go for it."

Making claims during conversations designed to impress can easily be taken as an interpersonal challenge and often instigates more direct challenges. A car thief remembers the turn in the conversation that preceded his crime.

One night me and two of my partners was sitting on the levy smoking weed. For some strange reason my little partner Chip was like, "So-and-so went on a car lot the other night and you know those little boxes they had the keys in the boxes on the window." I'm like, "They don't have the damn keys in the window. Stop tripping!" [He said,] "Man, I'm telling you." So, we end up going to a car dealership. . . . I am just really being nosy to see if they are lying, to call their bluff. And we break one of the boxes and he was right, they had keys in it.

For individual offenders already committed to completing a crime or for whom crime is routine, masculine posturing is opportunity. A young burglar recalls the last minutes of his group's criminal deliberation and how his friend encouraged the crime by questioning the extent of the young man's nerve:

[He would] just go on and say all kind of stuff, like say you're getting scared and say your momma had more nerve than you did. [He would say] stuff to more or less make you mad so that your temper and you just would get out and do it anyways.

These overt challenges are best understood as metaphorical devices that raise the question, "Are you really with us, or have you only been acting criminally capable?" Overt references to gender typically appear at this stage and can be seen as one form of "talking it up," a phrase that captures the general encouraging tone of criminal conversations directly before engaging a target (Cromwell, Olson, and Avary 1991; Hochstetler and Copes 2003; Shover 1996; Tunnell 1992).

I was worrying about what they going to say, that I ain't got the balls enough to go do this. I said, man I got to do this or they are going to look down upon me. I said the hell with it, I'm just going ahead and doing it. I had to do it or they would clown [make fun of] me.

Last-minute chatter keeps masculine claims salient and is intended to shore up allegiance and to ensure commitment to a dangerous situation. Emasculating insults bring the subtext of masculine ideals already present in less overt posturing and risky antecedent situations to the surface. One offender recalls the taunts he received prior to a crime he committed: "They had started trying to buck my head up to do some things. [They said things] like, 'Ah man, you wouldn't do this, you a pussy.'" "

AGE AND SITUATED MASCULINITY

We have mentioned that gendered ideals are used to generate compliance and to interpret the presence of criminal opportunities in specific social settings, particularly partying and hanging out. The masculine themes that are called on and the way offenders use these themes are not the same for all. A significant body of research shows that masculine identities vary by social position, or as Messerschmidt (1993) contended, "boys will be boys differently" (p. 87). Our interviews reveal that thieves construct their behavioral ideals in ways that are appropriate for their ages and that their ages influence the structure of the situations where they conduct themselves and their crimes.

To understand how masculinity shapes crime, it is necessary to examine various forms of situations and subtle variation in what men are trying to accomplish in them. Age and criminal experience play prominent parts in this variation. Obviously, it is difficult to distinguish the unique effects of age and criminal experience in a sample of convicted street thieves, since most have lengthy criminal records for men their ages. There are also exceptions to statements about the relationship between age and offending style, which add further complexity. Young men with tremendous criminal experience and who are thoroughly socialized into entrepreneurial criminal subcultures often approach crime much like older men, for example. Some older men, usually those who are extremely intoxicated, commit thefts that are in the usual style of juveniles. Nevertheless, the older men and younger men in our sample conducted the situations preceding their offenses differently. In addition, their degree of reliance on different conceptions of masculinity varied. Older men were apt to define their actions in opposition to the passive acceptance of a mundane and humble daily existence and in opposition to juvenile styles of acting out. Younger men, almost singularly, focused on distinguishing themselves from cautious and weak qualities stereotypically attributed to women.

As can be seen in prison narratives across the decades, older offenders have always worried over the dishonorable and foolish behavior of upcoming generations of offenders in ways that mirror the concerns of conventional elders (Irwin 1970). This mature concern, in part, reflects the fact that the action-adventurer role, as carried out by young men, is a distasteful mark of immaturity among aging men. Older offenders believe that the young often lose sight of the purpose of crime, which is to remain free to do as they please over an extended period. In their view, youths do not understand that the trick to successful crime is to always be on the lookout for criminal opportunities having either low risk or high potential for return and for the appropriate time to seize them. Criminologists have recognized for decades that older offenders have more clearly defined materialistic motivations than do their younger counterparts. This explains, in part, why older men are more likely to offend alone and to commit property crimes with less purely expressive motives than younger offenders (Ezre 1987). As one older offender said,

Everybody steals cars for different reasons. Now to a teenage kid, he might steal a car just to joyride, and the police may chase him, and he may end up killing himself or killing somebody. But to a mature person, if they stole a car, they going to steal it for two reasons. They either going to steal to fix up their car or they going to steal it to sell to somebody else.

When older and younger thieves offend together, older offenders encourage their young accomplices to act like men by staying “calm, cool, and collected.” As a rule, older thieves have little tolerance for those who panic or those whose disregard for risk shows while “on the job.” One aging habitual thief recalls stealing with a young accomplice:

Nervous people make me nervous and accidents happen when people are nervous and frustrated. It’s a bad thing to say, but I was good at what I done. I have busted someone in the head that I was with for trashing a place. . . . What good does that do you?

When young men encounter older men, especially older men with extensive criminal experience, they are generally impressed and often aim to borrow the style of their elders. Extremely experienced offenders usually acknowledge that at some point in their careers they acquired a criminal maturity beyond their years by emulating older thieves (Shover 1996). A robber explains his admiration of his partner in their early offenses together: “He had experience. He knew what the hell he was going in there for. He knew what the hell the deal was. He was someone I looked up to.”

Although desperation and drug use sometimes cloud their judgment, older offenders typically have enough experience to know how to be temporarily successful at crime. They are “streetwise” (Anderson 1999; Westwood 1990). They pride themselves on having the patience to wait for the right moment, a trait they do not believe younger men and men of the younger generations possess. They often keep dozens of possible targets or promising locales under casual surveillance until a convenient chance arises. When they are ready to offend, older offenders arrange their social circumstances with more clearly defined criminal intent than youthful offenders do. For older men, crime often is the desired outcome of the day, and they seek out circumstances that make it possible.

Older offenders' crimes tend to be "put together" by someone. Often, one offender has a specific crime in mind, or simply a desire to offend, and assembles others whom he assumes will also be motivated for and capable of the crime. Since co-offenders were assembled because they are known or thought to be candidates for recruitment, these men probably are beyond being impressed by blind bravery. In seasoned offenders' groups, there is little to gain by emphasizing willingness to commit crime or showing off one's ability to take risks. Posturing as a deliberate, seasoned thief and willing provider rather than an adventurer is more appropriate for crimes hatched in circumstances preceding older men's crimes than in those that erupt instantaneously in the street and are more common among the young. Among older men, conversations before crime are more practical, involving slightly more planning, somewhat realistic estimates of the expected take, and a plan for disposal of stolen items and subsequent acquisition of drugs. The tone of the conversation is little different from any time these men get together and rarely has the same degree of the nervous, giddy quality of deliberations that precede young offenders' crimes. For offenders who know that all present are familiar with crime, little needs to be said, and conversation on the way to the scene of the crime is minimal or composed of small talk.

At the scene of the offense, older men tend to concentrate on staying cool under pressure, and when they show off, they emphasize the ability to do so. In a few cases, for example, older burglars stopped to smoke a joint or eat a sandwich during an offense. Others prided themselves on how nonchalantly they could commit felonies without drawing attention even though the crimes occurred in public settings. The rush of crime is to be controlled and usually is enjoyed fully by older men only when they have returned to safety.

While the crimes of older men are likely to arise from intentional settings and play predominantly on the provider and autonomy ideals, younger men's crimes are relatively spontaneous, and their form is shaped by the desire for action and to avoid being seen as passive or cowardly. Young men spend more leisure time in each other's company than older ones. Therefore, they usually need not assemble a crew for theft. Young offending groups, especially those that have not stolen together many times, typically do not congregate with their sights firmly set on offending. They recognize that they are assembling for action and that places where the action is have the potential for crime.

But even when hanging out in open-air drug markets or driving around aimlessly at midday while drinking with other unemployed young men, crime remains a possibility and not a clearly articulated objective. Younger offenders often think that their crimes “happened” with little volition when circumstances seemed to demand immediate action. As one young offender describes, “I just got wrapped up with a stolen car.” This young man claimed to be unaware of his friend’s intention to steal a car, and before he could back out, it was “too late.” He added, “It wasn’t something planned—it just happened.”

For young men, the appearance of a target often sparks criminal motivation and strikes everyone simultaneously. In fact, young men often see the appearance of a target in the presence of their peers and onlookers as a challenge to the front of bravery and ability to take risks that they have presented. Many robberies have occurred because someone confronts or insults a group of young men in the streets or has the gall to treat them as if they were incapable of crime. A young, homeless robber remembered that his brutal robbery began when another young man had the audacity to show that he was carrying valuables in a setting where he should have known better: “I ain’t going to be played for a punk like that.”

When conversations precede youths’ crimes, they often focus on whether a crime should be done at all and on determining who has the courage to go through with it. Dares and overt challenges are common. When young thieves are “called out,” they believe that they have little choice but to go through with a criminal act. They must act regardless of fear, and if they show signs of hesitation, whether in the form of excessive questions or delays, the power of their adventurous displays is diminished. Recalling his youthful days of joyriding in stolen cars, an offender stated,

I had a friend named Craig. He used to brag, “Man I can get them [cars] in five minutes, man.” And I would say, “Yeah, but you get nervous. I don’t. I bet I can get that before you.” It was something like . . . we would just be walking around town or around the courthouse, you know. I would say, “Get it.” He was like, “Check if nobody is looking.” I would say, “I told you, you was nervous.” I’d get in there, start it, and take off.

In these conversations, youths play off each other in an exploration of willingness to offend. This banter helps assure them that they have

support and an appreciative audience for crime. In the face of such challenges, eager young thieves seem determined to demonstrate unpredictability, risk taking, and fearlessness.

We were driving down the road after leaving the club; we noticed a guy walking. I was like, "man we should rob him." They were like, "Yeah man. What, you going to do it?" I said, "Look, you don't know me." Everything I done did in the past, how's he going to sit there and call me a pussy. He don't know what I'm [capable of] doing.

The way in which they show off and the inherent excitement of dangerous events often cause youths to commit theft with a flare that distinguishes them from older men's thefts. Youthful offenders embrace, and sometimes attempt to intensify, the rush that results from crime. In retrospect, they often are surprised by the extent to which they "got carried away" and let their better judgment fall under the influence of the excitement of showing off. Fights turn to robberies where violence far exceeds what was necessary to steal. Burglaries result in needless destruction of property. Stolen cars are driven dangerously and in ways that attract attention. Stolen guns are shot from cars. The thrill of it all sometimes results in rowdy celebrations before an escape has been achieved. In part, these actions are the reckless mistakes of immaturity. They can also be interpreted as attempts to accomplish the image that youthful men value. In their view, hard men flaunt risk taking and take it to levels that will impress even other risk takers.

Variation in situational structures where crimes occur is an important reason for differences in how younger and older men carry out their crimes. Most thieves precede their offenses with parties, big talk, and social exchanges. But the parties, talk, and posturing of younger and older thieves are different. These differences speak to respectable behavior as one ages in the unsuccessful life trajectory of the type lived by most thieves. Although older offenders continue to conspicuously display the proceeds of crime, they are much less concerned with their friends' evaluations of their readiness, toughness, or "badness."

DISCUSSION

Offenders' views of what it means to be a man influence action within a context that leaves few outlets available. For a number of

reasons, they cannot provide a financially or socially stable existence for their dependents; they cannot be players in the stock market, business world, or even the factory. They cannot indulge in real luxury. Thus, these men seek adventurous situations that lend themselves to demonstrations of willingness and eagerness to break the law, tempt danger, and spend criminal rewards. In demonstrations of autonomy and action, they jump to the forefront of criminal deliberation and crime commission and often look forward to the opportunity for doing so.

Masculinities may have infinite personal forms that are channeled and formed by cultural, social, and organizational positions. People construct gender based on the situation that confronts them. We have examined how male offenders use their interpretations of the expectations attributed to men in their social world to symbolically frame lines of action when considering a particular offense. Offenders, who already heavily invest in masculine fronts that emphasize their unrestricted lifestyles and freedom from concerns, turn masculine posturing up a notch in appropriate circumstances. To participate in heavy drinking and drug use, to engage in conversations that imply criminal ability, and to join in social networks and groups where potential for crime is high are to evoke masculine cultural norms of the variety discussed here. If there is any set of actions that lead to street crime, it is these instances of showing off.

Description of "moment-to-moment accomplishment" of "what is and what is not proper to the categories woman and man" is recognized in a way that is intuitive with both the analyst's and reader's understandings of their culture (Coleman 1990, 186). The disreputable young men who occupy the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder and are responsible for most street crime probably do not have the same conventions and attitudes toward women as middle-class college professors. For them, to act like a woman is to be a passive subordinate or a punk. Such a reputation can be bothersome in a world where intimidation games are common and the threat of violence lies just below the surface of many interactions. Even within this world, however, offenders are cued toward criminal trajectories of behavior by situational actions and words that evoke subcultural themes of the taker and the taken or the "players and the punks" in current street lexicon. The interactions that precede many crimes are exchanges of subtle and overt social signals that remind participants of their place and the expectations of manhood. Indeed, it seems that in many crime groups, self-interested actors are quite

consciously and apparently playing on others' masculinities, insecurities, and claims to simultaneously achieve a criminal objective and enhance their own status as criminally capable.

One aim of this article was to contribute to the theoretical understanding of criminal decision making. Our findings have implications for at least three theoretical issues. First, they imply that constructions of gender are important symbolic frames for determining appropriate situational behavior and as such are a relevant part of criminal decision making. Gender metaphors enter the minds of offenders as they deliberate over crime and encourage offenders to follow through on a criminal course. Criminal decision-making research has often concentrated on easily operationalized perceptions of risk and rewards, but psychosocial variables influencing constructions of opportunity and decisions often escape empirical research. For example, current models of decision making fail to address the cognitive process that might explain why men typically are greater risk takers than women in experimental studies, an oversight that should be clear to decision-making researchers.

Second, our finding that older men construct the situations preceding crime in a style that differs from that of young men suggests that constructions of masculinity may be important for understanding variation in the subjective rewards and costs of crime. Most men age out of crime and the desire to be action oriented. Even the aging thieves whom we interviewed no longer sought to be seen as impulsive action-adventurers. As men age, they no longer rely on impulsiveness and action as a way to frame their identities, and as such, threats centered on these themes no longer provoke them to engage in crime. If understanding of criminal decision making is to advance, we must recognize that seemingly equivalent outcomes do not necessarily result from equivalent goals in what offenders are trying to accomplish. The intersection of life history, identity, cognitive schemes, and situations is as important for understanding criminal decisions as is simple utilitarian calculus of risk and reward of crime.

Finally, our findings show that settings determine the scripts that offenders draw on when choosing crime. Criminologists have emphasized the importance of the settings in which offenders place themselves for decades, especially in the lifestyle and routine activity perspectives (Cohen and Felson 1979; Hindelang, Gottfredson, and Garafolo 1978). Routine activities studies have demonstrated, mainly

by examining the temporal and spatial correlates of crime, that crime is likely to occur in some settings much more than others and that these settings are characterized by motivated offenders and the presence of suitable targets (Cohen and Felson 1979). Lifestyle studies expanded on this notion by showing that victimization and offending can be predicted by lifestyles that place people in public, high-risk settings for crime. However, insufficient attention has been given to how certain settings and activities trigger cognitive frames that make offending seem reasonable to some people. Why is it that crime is likely to occur in certain bars at certain hours of the evening? Our analysis would suggest that it is not only the selection of the locale but the meaning that the locale has for participants and their expectations. Motivated offenders do not just bump into suitable targets and react. They build a frame of interpretation within the confines of the setting and the dictates of their lifestyle that makes the target suitable. Masculinities come into play within this interaction of offenders, audience, and environments. Ethnographers can contribute greatly to understanding the details of how gendered lifestyles and objectives enacted in environments affect the choice to offend.

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