THE FOREGROUND DYNAMICS OF STREET ROBBERY IN BRITAIN

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Research into the situational dynamics of street robbery in the United States has identified a commitment to street culture, and participation in the self-indulgent activities promoted by that culture, as primary etiological mechanisms operating in the phenomenological foreground of such offences. Little research, however, has been undertaken on the extent to which British street robberies evolve out of similar cultural dynamics. This paper, based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 27 offenders serving sentences for robbery in England or Wales, explores the cultural values and pursuits that mediate their crimes. Our aim is to understand the socio-cultural context in which British street robbers contemplate and carry out their offences.

Introduction

Research into the situational dynamics of robbery in the United States has identified a commitment to street culture and participation in the self-indulgent activities promoted by that culture, as primary etiological mechanisms operating in the phenomenological foreground of such offences (Wright and Decker 1997*a*; 1997*b*). Where this happens, the decision to commit a robbery emerges out of an immediate desire to 'keep the party going' and involves little or no advance planning (Wright and Decker 1994: 39; Jacobs and Wright 1999). Traditionally, British robberies have been attributed to a very different set of etiological factors, being carried out by what Matthews (2002: 138) has called 'more professional and career robbers', who approach their crimes in a rational, calculating and far less desperate frame of mind. Recently, however, there has been increasing evidence that the situational dynamics of robberies in Britain are changing, with offences becoming correspondingly more spontaneous and desperate (see Matthews 2002). As Hobbs (1995: 9) has observed:

What has been traditionally defined as professional crime has now fragmented into a number of quite distinctive forms of criminality. The decline of key criminal activities that were previously central to the concept of professional crime into haphazard, essentially amateur excursions featuring minimal planning, a low level of competence, and a lack of commitment to specialized criminality typifies contemporary armed robbery and stands in stark contrast to the teams of robbers whose competent practice was efficient enough to establish 'blaggers' as a criminal elite.

But if it is clear that the situational dynamics of robbery in Britain are changing, the cultural commitments and pursuits underpinning those changes remain poorly understood. This article, based on interviews with 27 offenders currently serving prison

sentences in England or Wales for robbery, explores the phenomenological foreground of such offences, i.e. the immediate context in which robberies are contemplated and carried out. Our aim is to understand how and why would-be robbers move from an unmotivated state to one in which they are determined to commit robbery. We argue that while the decision to offend self-evidently stems mostly from a perceived need for cash, it is activated, mediated and channelled by participation in an emerging street culture in Britain similar to that described by ethnographers in urban America. As such, street culture and its constituent conduct norms represent an essential intervening variable, linking criminal motivation to subjective situational conditions.

American Street Culture

The streets have been a major focus of American criminology almost from its inception, but the last 15 years have witnessed intensified interest in the ways in which participation in street culture shapes offender decision-making and behaviour in the United States (see Shover and Honaker 1992; Shover 1996; Wright and Decker 1994; 1997a). American street culture subsumes a number of powerful conduct norms, including, but not limited to, the hedonistic pursuit of sensory stimulation, disdain for conventional living, lack of future orientation and persistent eschewal of responsibility (see Fleisher 1995: 213–14). Street offenders in the United States typically live life as if there is no tomorrow, and the self-indulgent pleasures of trendy consumerism and open-ended street action—including not just drinking, drug use, gambling and sexual conquest, but also fighting, assaults and other forms of expressive violence—become the primary means to this end (Jacobs and Wright 1999).

The pursuit of fast living cuts to the very core of offenders' perceptions of self-identity. To be regarded as cool, hip or 'in', street culture participants must constantly prove their worth through their appearance, conspicuous outlays of cash and violent displays of aggressive masculinity (Jacobs and Wright 1999). Put differently, on the streets of urban America, the image you project is paramount (see, e.g. Anderson 1990) and one of the few sources of status available to most offenders.

It should go without saying that American street culture has been exported worldwide through film, television and the recording industry. Young people across the globe have adopted the speech and dress of urban America. It is striking, therefore, that so little research has been undertaken on the ways in which the diffusion of such information has influenced street crime in Britain. Does robbery in the United Kingdom, for example, evolve out of street culture participation and, if so, to what extent are the etiological mechanisms underpinning this process similar to those documented for robbery in urban America? The answers to such questions are important: decisions to offend do not take place in a socio-cultural vacuum. Rather, they are embedded in an 'ongoing process of human existence' (Bottoms and Wiles 1992: 19), being mediated by prevailing situational and sub-cultural conditions.

Street Robbery in the United Kingdom

Research on robbery in the United Kingdom has tended to focus on armed robbery against banks and other commercial organizations. As a result, it has concentrated disproportionately on financial motives and the more rational elements of offending. Gill

(2000), for example, interviewed 340 male commercial robbers and concluded that the main motivation for robbery was money. Over 80 per cent of the robbers spoken to said that they had committed their last robbery for cash. Some of them spent the money on everyday items and providing for their future, and examples were given of robbers starting their own businesses with the proceeds or investing in property abroad. He acknowledged that some spent the proceeds of robbery on gambling and drugs. However, he concluded that 'This somewhat cursory analysis shows most robbers to be rational' (p. 155). Morrison and O'Donnell (1996) also based their research on a rational choice theoretical framework. They interviewed 88 incarcerated armed robbers currently serving prison sentences about their decision to offend. They found that most robbers were able to make fairly precise appraisals of the potential rewards of robbery and selected targets in a way that would increase their returns. They also noted that their robbers engaged in 'risk reduction' strategies to minimize the chance of detection, including timing robberies to coincide with the quietest periods of the day. The authors concluded that 'the subjective interpretation of these individuals may be viewed as logical calculations . . . based on a reasonably well-founded, balanced and accurate appraisal of the odds' (Morrison and O'Donnell, 1996: 183).

Not all studies of commercial robbers have concluded that the motivation for the offence is utilitarian. Matthews (2002) interviewed armed commercial robbers serving sentences in English prisons. He also found that the main motive for armed robbery was acquisition of cash and, among some of the more professional robbers, money was used to finance everyday expenditures. However, Matthews was less inclined to explain this in terms of rational choice theory, which he described as 'crude and simplistic' (2002: 37). Some of the robbers he interviewed were drunk or on drugs just before the robbery and therefore limited in the extent to which they could calculate rationally. He also found that younger and amateur robbers were less likely to use the proceeds of robbery for everyday subsistence, tending instead to spend their money on leisure pursuits, designer clothes and other luxury goods.

Commercial robbery and street robbery, however, are different. The former often involves greater planning and targets an organization rather than a specific individual. The latter can be more opportunistic and is enacted in the more open and less predictable environment of the street. Hence, it might be expected that the motivation for the two offences is different. There are very few studies conducted in the United Kingdom on the motivation of street robbers. However, there is some research, a portion of which has focused attention on the cultural elements of the offence. Smith (2003) conducted a study of personal robbery based on over 2,000 crime reports and witness statements in seven police force areas in England and Wales. He concluded that the main motive for robbery was financial advantage for the suspect. However, when robbery was committed by groups of young offenders, he found that it served to enhance personal reputation and status. Another UK study that acknowledged the influence of cultural factors in the motivation for robbery was conducted in London by FitzGerald *et al.* (2003). This study involved focus group interviews with 103 school children and 17 young people of a similar age given non-custodial sentences for street crime. Some gave instrumental reasons, including the need for money for everyday expenditure, and a few said that they robbed to order. However, others offered more expressive reasons. Some said that they spent money from robbery on status objects, designer clothes, and drink and drugs. Others said that they committed robberies for fun and

excitement and mentioned the buzz or adrenaline rush inherent in such offences. They also mentioned that they committed street crime as a way of settling scores or to protect themselves by generating a reputation for being tough.

It would appear that UK research is divided on the nature of the motivation for robbery. Some researchers see robbery as a rational choice, informed primarily by the need for financial gain and a desire to minimize the risk of detection. Others see robbery as a cultural pursuit in which the costs and rewards take second place to the emotional immediacy of the offence and its benefits for the offender's lifestyle.

Method

The data for this paper were collected as part of a larger research project on the nature of violent street crime in the United Kingdom. The project was based in prisons in South Wales and the south-west of England, which, in practice, meant that most of the respondents came from either Cardiff or Bristol—the two largest urban areas. Cardiff has a new and growing street crime problem, whereas Bristol has long been associated with this type of offending. The prisons were originally selected for the research on the basis that they were in reasonable travelling distance from the research base and contained inmates of the kind in which we were interested. This meant that the combined group of establishments included offenders who had been convicted of a range of street-based violent offences. In total, five prisons agreed to collaborate with the research, covering adults, young offenders, males and females.

The method of selecting prisoners to interview varied slightly across the establishments. In most prisons, the researcher and a liaison person (usually a psychologist) conducted searches on the prison database in order to locate suitable offenders who were serving sentences for 'robbery', 'GBH', 'ABH', 'wounding with intent' or any offence involving firearms. In addition, at most of the prisons, the researcher accessed files on all 'lifer' prisoners in order to determine their suitability (those who had committed domestic homicides, for example, were excluded). At other establishments, when the computerized system was not available, the researcher went through paper records by hand and located suitable prisoners using the same selection criteria. In some prisons (when permission was granted to do so), we also displayed large posters on the wings informing inmates of the study and requesting suitable volunteers who met our selection criteria. Hence, potential violent offenders were located by our approaching inmates and by inmates approaching us. This paper focuses only on those offenders selected who had committed street robbery.

The main method of data collection was the semi-structured interview. A major advantage of the semi-structured interview is that respondents are allowed to answer questions in their own way without unnecessary control and direction from the interviewer. Apart from ensuring that all of the research topics are covered, the order of the discussion can be determined in part by the offender. This leads to a more natural description of events by the respondent. The main disadvantage of the semi-structured interview is that the responses can sometimes be discursive and wide-ranging and not every issue raised will be covered by every respondent. The interview was given a broad structure by using a schedule that covered four main topic areas. The first covered the offenders' personal and criminal justice history. The second included questions about their most recent street robbery (regardless of whether they had been arrested for it).

The third concerned details of any other forms of street violence in which they had been involved (not discussed in this paper, unless it concerned street robbery). The fourth included questions on offenders' lifestyles prior to imprisonment. On average, the interviews lasted one hour. All interviews were tape-recorded—with each offender's permission—using a digital recorder and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Offenders were asked at the beginning of interviews to identify a false name for themselves and those self-assigned pseudonyms are used throughout the paper.

Studies of prisoners are sometimes criticized on the grounds that the responses given are untruthful or otherwise invalid. It is impossible to determine whether interviewees always tell the truth. However, prison-based interviewing is a common method of data collection and it has been shown that there is reasonable concordance between what offenders say in relation to verifiable facts about themselves and the recorded facts (e.g. their conviction history) (Martin 2000). It is also believed among fieldworkers that it is rare for offenders to attempt to deceive them (Bennett and Wright 1984). This is not to claim, however, that their memory invariably is accurate or that their understanding of the truth is valid. Indeed, this is one reason why it is important to present what was said by the offender *in his or her own words*.

The current paper reports data from the 27 offenders who had been interviewed by the end of the first period of the research. In total, these offenders described 38 separate robberies. Twenty-five of the offenders were male and two were female, with an average age of 25 (and a modal age of 19). One of the respondents was Asian, one was Afro-Caribbean and one was from the Middle East. The remainder described themselves as 'white', 'Welsh' or 'English'.

Motivation and Street Culture

Street culture

The idea that crime might be explained with reference to culture has a long tradition in criminological theory and includes the work of Miller (1958), who described gang membership in terms of style and symbolism generated both by gang members and by the broader society. Symbolic interactionists called attention to the 'symbolic' aspects of social interaction and the role that these symbols played in the development of deviant subcultures (Blumer 1969). In recent years, these ideas have been revisited and consolidated in what is sometimes described as 'cultural criminology' (for an overview, see Ferrell 1999). This includes the work of Katz (1988), which emphasized the role of emotions and the seductions of crime and the way in which the meanings of crime are generated within deviant subcultures. It also includes the more recent work by Jacobs and Wright (1999) and Wright and Decker (1997a; 1997b), which introduced the idea of street culture as a mediating process in explaining crime among American street robbers. Jacobs and Wright (1999: 155) noted that the most important element of the street culture of robbers in St Louis was their desire 'to have a good time' and 'to keep the party going', which, in this case, mainly meant 'gambling, hard drug use and heavy drinking'. In the following sections, we will look at the extent to which offenders' motives for robbery can be understood in the context of their socio-cultural pursuits and commitments.

Fast cash

Perhaps not surprisingly, street robbers often say that the decision to commit a robbery typically arises in the face of an immediate need for cash. American researchers have documented this fact time and again (see, e.g. Conklin 1972; Feeney 1986; Jacobs and Wright 1999; Tunnell 1992) and the same is true among studies of robbers in the United Kingdom (Matthews 2002; Smith 2003; Fitzgerald *et al.* 2003). However, their responses need to be interpreted with caution. The first reason for caution is that questions about intentions and rationality are likely to result in responses that show intentionality and rationality. However, De Haan and Vos (2003) argue that answers to such questions can be both obvious and meaningless if offenders do not think in this way. The second problem is that accounts are retrospective attempts to explain behaviour and can take the form of excuses and justifications (Taylor 1972). The need for money might be one of the simplest ways of explaining to an interviewer the complex and perhaps not wholly comprehensible thought processes leading up to a robbery. The third problem is that simply knowing that a robbery was committed for money does not tell us very much. De Haan and Vos (2003) give the example of the bank robber who responded to a TV host who asked why he robbed banks by saying: 'Because that's where the money is.' Perhaps more important is Katz's (1988) contention that, for street robbers, committing robbery is much more than an easy way to get money and it is the reasons for needing money that are the more revealing.

Our own research gives some support to previous studies in showing that offenders frequently mention the need for money. However, the relationship between money and robbery was quite variable. It is interesting to note that very few of our offenders mentioned needing money for subsistence, such as paying bills or buying food. One offender said that he used the proceeds of robbery for petrol for his car and another said that he once used the proceeds of robbery to buy cigarettes. Much more commonly, however, the relationship between money and robbery reflected a commitment to what might be described as a criminal lifestyle, wherein the pursuit of illicit action generated an ongoing need for 'fast cash' that realistically could only be satisfied through crime.

Good times/partying

In their study of US street robbers, Jacobs and Wright (1999) found that a desire for money to 'keep the party going' was one of the major reasons for committing such offences. Robbery generated fast cash that could be spent quickly and used easily to finance gambling, drug use and heavy drinking. A desire for fast cash to pursue good times and partying was also one of the major reasons given for committing robbery among our own sample of street robbers. The need for money to buy drugs was mentioned by 25 of the 27 offenders and to purchase alcohol by 20 offenders. All 27 of the interviewees reported using drugs at some time in their lives and 12 said that they were also involved in drug dealing.

The link between drug consumption and partying is most clearly visible among street robbers who spent the proceeds of their crimes on soft drugs, such as cannabis, ecstasy, amphetamines and tranquillisers or alcohol. In these cases, there were clear parallels

between accounts of UK and US street robbers. The use of drugs and alcohol was often described by the respondents as 'partying' or 'having a good time'.

I went back to my house to let things cool down before I went back to the pub. Partied the money away and then the next day I got arrested. (#17, Thomas)

In the following example, the offender describes how money from robbery was spent on 'good times', which included drugs, drink and clothes. Here, drug use could be seen as both a cause and a consequence of offending.

Res. It was a spur-of-the-moment thing. I'd been drinking most of the day. Smoking most of the day. Umm, somebody came with a handful of valium as well. Like I said it was a spur-of-the-moment thing. I don't remember doing it. I woke up in the morning with a stinking headache. Feeling terrible . . . I had a lot of money in my pocket and wondered where it came from.

Int. How much is a lot of money?

Res. Couple hundred quid. Emm, I wondered where it came from, went and asked and found out I done a robbery.

Int. What happened then?

Res. I spent it.

Int. What on?

Res. More good times. Drinking . . . . When I first woke up I thought 'Oh, no!', then as the day progressed I thought, 'Well, it's done now, I might as well spend the money'. More drugs and drink and clothes. Once it's done, it's done. If you can stop yourself before it's done, OK, but not gonna waste it when it has been. Once it's done, there is nothing you can do, just wait for the cops to get you. (#2, Mike)

The accounts of robbers who were addicted to hard drugs (19 of the 25 drug takers said that s/he had used heroin, crack or cocaine) sometimes sounded less like a form of partying than a desperate struggle to stave off the cravings of addiction.

It was about five in the morning and I had bad stomach cramps like. Needing heroin like. Sweating and that. So I went down and I seen one of the boys . . . I said' Lets do a smash like' Bit of money like. . . . [Made] about twenty odd pound, but that's like half a bag innit. All of it. It's all to fund the drugs. If it comes to it, and I have no money, and I need it, I do whatever. (#5, James)

More out of desperation or debt to do with drugs. Drugs fuelling it, like desperation. (#14, CharlieBrown)

Street action almost invariably has an edge of desperation to it and, in this sense, it is never a party in the conventional understanding of that term as a relaxed gathering of friends and associates. As Jacobs and Wright (1999) have observed, street-corner partying is never relaxed; it is far more intense than its suburban counterpart, with participants showing little or no inclination to exercise any form of personal restraint, preferring instead to live for the moment, heedless of the consequences. Understood in this light, addiction is just another consequence of the unrestrained partying characteristic of US street culture, wherein the pursuit of good times simply drives participants deeper into desperation. Katz (1988: 198) also has called attention to the reckless pursuit of action that characterizes the distinctive lifestyle of street robbers in the United States, noting that it plays a direct role in motivating their crimes: "It is specifically the connection

among the various forms of illicit action—the possibility of constructing a transcendent way of life around action—that sustains the motivation to do stick-ups." Perpetual partying leads to a need for cash that facilitates crime, while the proceeds of crime facilitate partying in a self-reinforcing cycle of self-indulgence (see, especially, Jacobs and Wright 1999). Elements of this self-reinforcing cycle of indulgence can clearly be seen in the reports of UK street robbers too.

Keeping up appearances/flash cash

Aside from the need for cash in relation to basic subsistence or 'partying', some offenders in our sample used the proceeds from robbery to purchase non-essential, status-enhancing items. Research in the United States by Jacobs and Wright (1999) and Shover and Honaker (1992) has identified the fetishized consumption of certain items amongst those on the 'streets' (such as particular clothing or jewellery) as a means of flaunting the material trappings of success (i.e. 'showing off') and consequently being seen as 'with it'. Our research suggests that the picture is much the same amongst British robbers.

One of the most common status items mentioned by robbers was a car. This was not so much for what the car *did*, but for what it *said* to others. Simply put, cars were a way to enhance your status and to show off among your peers:

. . . after we've done a few armed robberies I, I bought a brand new car, I love cars . . . I just love cars—all my time is cars, skiing, snowboarding, I used to like adventure sports and stuff like that. I like cars, I like clothes and I like having a good time, really. It's like showing off really. (#30, Karl)

Cars were also dynamic in the sense that they could be used for cruising around, thereby making the occupants in the car and their possessions visible to others. This form of driving is referred to by Jacobs and Wright (1999) as 'flossing' and includes turning the sound system up loud, not only to mark your own presence, but also to ensure that others hear *your* music, not theirs. In such cases, cars are used to establish both a presence and a dominance on the street:

. . . I like the cars, don't I, got to drive 'em around, don't I. I like big Lexus' and stuff. Didn't really need to do it, just liked the cars and stuff. (#20, Anthony)

Other items that were displayed as a means of looking good and impressing the group were gold and designer clothes:

The money. Get some weed or showing off really, innit. Just like to have money in my pocket, innit. I bought some gold with it and trainers and cars. Always trying to look good and go around in good stuff. (#18, Jonathan)

Cash was sometimes used as a fashion item in itself, indicating style and esteem. Possessing a wad of cash and displaying cash on the streets could be used to impress others who were less fortunate. It also indicated to the possessor and to others that whatever they wanted could be purchased at a moment's notice:

Lads always have the money. Always have to have cash on 'em like. Even when we don't need it, got to have a ready supply. We were all addicted to money like at one time, saving it all up. We all sit around and look at our piles, count our stashes of cash, innit. . . . Just to show off to the girls like. The more money you had, the more status. (#18, Jonathan)

I just love money, it's like, I feel big when I got money, like when I haven't got money, it feels like shit, do you know what I mean, cause I like to be able to do stuff. I like to have the money, it's like secure . . . having money, I love, I love money, I love money . . . . (#30, Karl)

Buzz/excitement

Robbery was also found by some to be a pleasurable pursuit in its own right. As already noted, the seductions of crime and the emotional benefits of offending have been described by Katz (1988) in great detail in relation to robbers in the United States. In most cases, offenders simply said that robbery gave them a 'buzz' or was otherwise fun or exciting. One offender said that he was addicted to robbery:

I don't know like—it weren't even for money. It was just, I had money, it was more like the buzz you get from doing things. It wasn't like, for money—I was more addicted to robbing than I was to drugs. Just get a funny feeling when I go out robbing. (#6, Steve)

One element of the excitement of robbery was to do with overpowering the victim and obtaining dominance over the situation. In some cases, the buzz was greatest when victims resisted. When this happened, the challenge for the robber was even greater and so too was the reward of ultimately winning over and completing the robbery. One carjacker described how he sometimes discussed successful outcomes with his co-offenders after the offence:

Oh, yeah! Its like, 'That bugger didn't want to give the keys up for nothing!', 'Had to beat him to death', and all that. We get a buzz off it. I love it. Love the cars and the buzz. (#20, Anthony)

It was clear that one of the most pleasurable experiences mentioned by UK robbers was the excitement of fighting. In the following example, the offender told us that he did not commit robbery for money. Instead, the main reason for robbery was to be involved in a fight. His definition of a perfect robbery was one in which the victim fought back. An unsuccessful robbery was one in which the victim complied with his demands:

Res. It's for the fun . . . . 'Cos, the point of street robbery is to get them to fight back, innit. I'd give him a couple of slaps and tell him to fight back, yeah. If he won't fight back, we just give him a kick and go.

Int. So how would a perfect street robbery go?

Res. Walk up to people, hit 'em like and try and take their things. They refuse and start fighting back like. And we end up beating each other up and we end up taking their stuff. (#7, Tyrese)

Ultimately, this robber gained pleasure from achieving his objective of beating up victims and taking their possessions. However, the feeling of success was even greater when the victim (at least initially) refused to comply with his demands.

   The pleasures of robbery not only involved personal satisfaction, but also the social prestige it could generate. Some robberies were committed as a 'rite of passage' in order to gain acceptance by a valued peer group. Others were conducted for little more than countering a dare:

Well I think it was about half past two in the afternoon and I was sat in the car with some of my friends and that and we was all off our heads, you know what I mean, on drugs and that, and we was having a laugh and that, and this bloke walked past the car, or this lad walked past the car, and one of them says,

'I dare you to go rob him with that knife in the front' you know what I mean. 'He grassed so and so up' you know what I mean. So I got out the car and he was walking, and . . . I says, 'Come here, I want a word with ya' and I just said 'Look, I want ya wallet' and that was it and I got arrested for it. [laughs]. That was the first time I had ever done anything like that, you know what I mean. I was off my head. Normally, I fight, when I've been on drugs, 'cos I think I can take on the whole world and that. But that's just me, I'm a fighter and that, you know what I mean. I don't normally do things like that. I was buzzing, I was thinking about the boys basically. It was something to do. I was just bored, weren't I? (#40, Gemma)

Anger/desire to fight

Sometimes robberies were prompted by anger to start a fight, with cash being taken only as an afterthought. In each of the following examples, the offender's primary aim was to attack somebody and the level of violence used to commit the offence was well beyond that required to secure the victim's compliance:

I started to try to make my own way home but I had spent a lot of money on drink. I picked a fight with someone on the street. They were the first people I come across. I just presumed they had been out so I started hitting one of them and calling him names and said, 'what are you looking at?' and stuff like that. 'What did you say to me?' The other two just walked away. So I bashed him. Then I can't remember how but I started hitting him and then I just jumped on him. Punched him, turned him over, went through his pockets. (#15, John)

I have left the night club and had a big row with my girlfriend and split up with her. Told her to 'fuck off' . . . So I told her, 'I don't want to hear from you. Don't phone me. Fuck off and get out of my face.' So she has left and I'm real angry now. So I have left with three of my mates. They are nothing to do with this. It's all down to me. . . . Walked down to the town and there was a guy asleep on the floor. Woke him up and heard him speak. I punched him and kicked him in the head ten times. Took his gold and his credit cards. (#26, Jason)

I went and got some drugs and some drink and I was with two friends, one was a male and one was a female. We were having a laugh and that and there was this girl walking up this street. I had no intentions of doing anything to her, do you know what I mean, and it was like, 'No . . . leave it' Because they knew that I'd either end up hitting her. I think they must have picked up the way that my face, my face reactions, do you know what I mean, my face lit up! . . . Just to terrorise her. Just to bully her and try and upset her a bit, you know what I mean? . . . She was the only one around [laughs] apart from me and my friends. It was just she was then only one around and when I get bored, I tend to get mischievous and that's when I tend to start going off on one [laughs]. I did terrorise her at first. Just by calling her names and that; 'You fucking slag' and just things like that. And I had this fag on and I was going to put it out on her face. For some reason I stopped myself from doing that, do you know what I mean. I just said to her 'Let me have a look at your jewellery' and she said 'no.' I said 'Look, I want that one, that one and that one.' Wanted five rings off her. . . . It was something to do. I didn't even wear 'em, I just put them in my purse. (#40, Gemma)

Informal justice/righting wrongs

Beyond a generalized desire to vent anger through fighting, some robberies were committed to achieve a measure of informal justice. The use of robbery to right a real or perceived wrong has been described in the US literature, with particular reference to

the resolution of drug-related disputes (see Jacobs *et al.* 2000; Topalli *et al.* 2002). This research suggests that street criminals seldom rely on the police to rectify wrongs perpetrated against them, for fear of exposing their own illicit activities. Instead, they 'take the law into their own hands' and administer justice in their own way. We found two main ways in which robbery was used to rectify injustices: the first was robbery as 'debt collecting' and the second was robbery as 'revenge'.

Seven of the 27 respondents interviewed described recent robberies that involved 'taking back' money that they believed was owed to them. The following example shows that the offender was more interested in 'righting wrongs' than in financial gain, as he took only a portion of the victim's cash. He defined the offence as a simple case of 'debt collecting gone wrong':

This guy owed my mate a thousand pounds of rent which caused my mate to get kicked out of his house. . . . I sees him get three hundred quid out the bank and I says to him to give my mate a hundred and fifty quid, you know. And then, he says 'no', so I is taking hundred and fifty pound off him like. I leaves him with half his money and give his wallet back with money like. I mean it was a violent robbery 'cos I hit him 'cos he retaliated and head butted me like, but I took his wallet and knocked him out like. But I gives him his hundred and fifty pound back like, so I didn't take it all like. (#8, Rabbit)

As was shown to be true in the United States (see Topalli *et al.* 2002), one of the most common reasons given by our interviewees for debt collecting through robbery involved drug disputes. Clients of illicit drug dealers often end up owing them money that they are not inclined to pay back. When this happens, some dealers will resort to robbery to exact repayment:

I have sold drugs in the past. Umm, people have owed me money and my way of collecting that money is, well, if I was arrested, it would be classed as street robbery. In my eyes, I don't see it as that, I'm just collecting the debt. . . . If they haven't got the money, you take something else to pay for it . . . clothes, trainers, jewellery. Whatever. (#2, Mike)

Debt collection can also work the other way around in cases where dealers attempt to cheat their clients by selling them fake or adulterated drugs:

He sold me two bags of 'heroin' and I realised it wasn't heroin, it was face powder. So I took my money back. I punched him in the face and took it. Got done for robbery. (#19, David Jones)

Those involved in the selling and purchasing of illicit drugs often carry large sums of money, making them especially vulnerable to robbery. Moreover, these robberies can backfire, with the roles of offender and victim reversing in an instant:

Well this guy went to rob me. . . . He tried to grab my bag off me and tried to grab me by the neck. I grabbed him and stabbed him in the neck with my screwdriver and then robbed him. I went through his pockets [and took] about four hundred quid. (#31, Tyrone)

Another form of informal justice involving robbery is revenge, in which the cash taken represents an additional form of punishment and humiliation for the victim:

He said he slept with my Mrs, like. So I told him I was going to kick the hell out of him like. I said if he went out the pub he was dead like. The whole pub knew. So then I found out he had like three four hundred quid on him. So I thought I'd rob him like. My mate put the idea in my head by telling me

about the money like and so we kept it quiet and then he walked out the pub like and we dragged this boy down the alley way, the subway like. He dropped the money and run like. . . . We dragged him back and nicked his trousers like, which I found very funny at the time like. (#8, Rabbit)

Discussion

We have argued that the immediate decision to commit street robbery can be explained in part by offenders' participation in an emerging street culture in Britain that in many ways resembles its American counterpart. Research conducted on street robbers in the United States has identified cultural aspects of offending, most notably a desire for desperate and hedonistic 'partying', living life for the moment, without regard for the consequences. Until recently, there has been little research conducted on the cultural commitments and pursuits of street robbers in the United Kingdom. Instead, British research traditionally has drawn heavily on the rational choice perspective, focusing on situational factors that might affect cost–reward calculations in the decision to offend.

The results of our research on British street robbers highlight the shortcomings of the rational choice perspective when it comes to explaining their crimes. Rational choice theorists believe that the decision to offend is the outcome of a deliberate weighing of potential costs and rewards (Clarke and Cornish 1985; Coleman and Fararo 1992; Cornish and Clarke 1986). Models of so-called rational decision making, however, are limited in that they greatly oversimplify a highly complex process (Shover 1991; Wright and Decker 1994). Such models leave many gaps in our understanding of how offenders make decisions in real-life settings and circumstances. For example, it is widely accepted that whatever 'rationality' would-be offenders possess is 'bounded' or 'limited' in the sense that it does not take account of all of the information theoretically available to them (see, e.g. Walsh 1986). Why is this so? And what do these boundaries or limitations consist of? We would suggest that rational choice theories are poorly suited to answering such questions because they focus on objective properties of the immediate criminal situation—things that increase the potential risk or decrease the potential reward—and pay scant attention to the wider cultural context within which offenders commit their offences. This is a serious omission because actual decisions are never made in a vacuum; they are embedded in, and shaped by, an individual's socio-cultural 'matrix of evaluation' (Lofland 1969: 48). Put differently, the potential risks and rewards attached to any sort of criminal activity inevitably will be evaluated with reference to cultural symbols and values that are meaningful to the would-be offender.

This brings us to the second main conclusion to be drawn from our research, namely the strong influence of specific cultural commitments and pursuits on offender decision-making in street robbery. As has been shown for robbery in the United States, street robberies in the United Kingdom often emerged out of a desire for fast cash to purchase drugs, alcohol or various non-essential status-enhancing items (see, especially, Wright and Decker 1997*a*; Jacobs and Wright 1999). In other words, many of the street robberies in our sample were committed not to sustain the offenders' *lives*, but rather to maintain a particular sort of hedonistic *lifestyle* that rejects 'rationality and long-range planning . . . in favour of enjoying the moment' (Shover and Honaker 1992: 283). Needless to say, such a lifestyle is extremely difficult to sustain over any appreciable

period of time, so the question is *why* offenders are motivated to maintain it. The answer must be tied to cultural context. As Jacobs and Wright (1999: 165) have observed in regard to American street robbers:

The fetishized world of street-corner capitalism dictates that fiscal responsibility be jettisoned and money burned on material objects and illicit action that assert in no uncertain terms one's place in the street hierarchy. Carefree spending creates the 'impression of affluence' (Wright and Decker 1994: 44) by which offenders are judged; it serves to demonstrate that they have indeed 'made it'—at least for the time being. . . . To not buy into such an approach is to abandon a source of recognition that offenders can get nowhere else . . . or, worse yet, to stare failure full in the face.

Status and one's place in the street hierarchy, of course, derive from more than just carefree spending and conspicuous consumption. As has been shown for offenders in the United States, the British robbers we interviewed often also were concerned to project and protect a violent identity as someone not to be messed with. Indeed, for some of the offenders—especially those who already were angry and primed for violence—the potential for resistance, fighting and danger was their primary reason for being attracted to robbery in the first place, whereas for others, the offence represented a direct and effective means of righting a perceived wrong. In both cases, robbery serves as a vehicle for the display of a violent persona, with the added benefit that it provides offenders with fast cash.

That offenders come to the robbery decision with a set of pre-existing cultural commitments and pursuits is hardly surprising, save for the fact that this has been largely ignored by rational choice theorists. Those commitments and pursuits are critically important to our understanding of criminal decision making because they serve to narrow the range of options subjectively available to would-be offenders. For example, individuals seeking to maintain a hedonistic lifestyle centred on illicit action are unlikely to consider legitimate employment as a realistic solution to their immediate need for cash, especially if they also place special value on a reputation for toughness that, inevitably, would be compromised by the disciplined subordination to authority demanded by most employers. Nor are robbers seeking to sustain a bout of partying likely to contemplate alternative forms of criminality, either because such offences do not net cash directly (e.g. burglary, shoplifting) or because they require start-up funds (e.g. drug selling) that, by definition, already have been exhausted in the pursuit of illicit action. Likewise, offenders seeking to vent anger and collect on a bad debt while, at the same time, protecting a reputation as someone not to be crossed are unlikely to regard a sneaky crime such as burglary to be a viable vehicle for doing so.

What this means, in practical terms, is that street robbers in Britain—and elsewhere (see Jacobs and Wright 1999)—'decide' to commit their offences in a social and psychological terrain, containing few realistic alternatives (Shover 1996). In part, this helps to explain why street robberies often appear so irrational in the sense that they net little cash relative to the lengthy prison sentences that can follow. Almost by definition, people who perceive themselves as having an immediate need and few alternatives for meeting it are desperate. Desperation, in turn, leads to a mindset in which individuals are too focused on meeting the immediate need—be it to keep the party going, restore personal honour, dissipate anger or exact informal justice—to maximize reward or to think clearly about the possibility of threatened sanctions (see Shover 1991; Wright and Decker 1994). It is difficult to view decisions made in such an

emotional state as truly rational. Indeed, it could reasonably be argued that they are not really 'decisions' at all, but rather the almost inevitable result of a street-oriented lifestyle.

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