

# The Role of Violence in Street Crime

## A Qualitative Study of Violent Offenders

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Studies on the motivation for violent street crime, such as robbery and assault, have tended to draw on either the rational choice or the subcultural perspective. This study explores the extent to which violence on the street can be explained by rational factors associated with the successful commission of the offence or social factors related to street culture. The study is based on qualitative interviews with 55 violent street offenders who were serving sentences for street robbery and assault in six prisons in the United Kingdom. The findings, based on accounts of 101 incidents of street violence, identified four main explanations for street violence: (a) successful offence enactment, (b) buzz and excitement, (c) status and honor, and (d) informal justice. The article concludes that there might be benefits in combining the insights of both perspectives by generating an integrated theory that would properly explain both the rational and the seemingly irrational components of street violence.

**Keywords:** *street violence; robbery; assault; rational choice; culture*

Studies on the motivation for violent street crime, such as robbery and assault, have tended to draw on one of two broad perspectives (Hochstetler, 2001). The first is the rational choice perspective that gives importance to the role of decision making and the achievement of identifiable objectives. The second is the cultural perspective that gives importance to general lifestyle and individual needs. The former view has its origins in economic theory on decision making (e.g., Becker, 1968) and the latter has its origins in sociological theory of subcultures (e.g., Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967).

The rational choice perspective has been interpreted to take both a “narrow” and “wide” form (Opp, 1997). The narrow version of the model is associated with

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classical economic theory and is based on the principle that a person commits an offence when the expected utility of the crime exceeds the costs of committing it (Becker, 1968). The wide version of the model is associated with the view that people do not make exhaustive and complex calculations prior to action but act on the basis of a few simple facts or guesswork that in most cases falls short of optimal (Carroll, 1978).

The approach gained ascendance in the 1970s and 1980s through the work of Carroll (1978) in psychology and Clarke and Cornish (1985) in criminology. Clarke and Cornish acknowledged that they built their perspective on the economic analysis of criminal behaviour and the concept of evaluating costs and rewards. However, they adopted what they referred to as a "limited" approach to rationality in which decision making was seen as imperfect. They argued against expressing concepts in mathematical terms, as was the case in Becker's economic model, and preferred instead to draw on decision diagrams that included concepts from psychology and sociology to explain decision making (Clarke, 1992). In this way, offenders' utilities could be extended beyond financial reward to include social status and excitement. Nevertheless, the key principle of the approach remained the same in that behaviour was viewed as goal oriented and could be understood as an outcome of an assessment of costs and rewards.

The cultural perspective also has grown in popularity in recent years and is based on the principle that the motivation to offend arises out of shared values rather than personal utilities. It has its origins in the concept of subcultural theory developed among sociologists associated with the "Chicago School" of criminology. The first substantial text devoted to this topic was by Cohen (1955), who saw delinquency as a collective response among working class youths to the strains placed on them by the values of middle-class society. In particular, they attempted to restore the lack of status experienced in conventional society by achieving status within a deviant subculture. Miller (1958) developed the ideas of Cohen, but argued that the delinquent subcultures drew almost wholly from lower-class values. In particular, boys were expected to be tough and streetwise and to value action and excitement. This idea was developed further by Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967), who invented the term "the subculture of violence" to describe social groups who resolved conflicts through physical attack and who valued fighting and displays of "toughness."

In more recent times, the role of culture and value systems in the use of violence has been developed further by sociologists and psychologists through the concept of "street culture." One hallmark of street culture is the pursuit of pleasure and status through conspicuous consumption and living a lifestyle characterised as "life as a party" (Shover & Honaker, 1992, p. 283). According to Jacobs and Wright (1999), the lifestyle of street offenders typically involves pleasure pursuits such as drinking, drug use, gambling, sexual conquest, and fighting, assaults, and other forms of expressive violence. The overall ethos of street culture is summarised by the authors in the following quotation:

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. . . . Street culture puts tremendous emphasis on virtues of spontaneity; it dismisses "rationality and long range planning . . . in favour of enjoying the moment." . . . Offenders typically live life as if there is no tomorrow, confident that tomorrow will somehow take care of itself. On the streets, "every night is a Saturday night" . . . and the self indulgent pursuit of trendy consumerism and open-ended street action becomes a means to this end. (Jacobs & Wright, 1999, p. 165)

Toch (1995) has drawn attention to the role of masculinity in generating a reputation on the streets. He found that nearly half of his sample of offenders could be described as "self-image promoters" or "self-image defenders." The former referred to men who worked at manufacturing an impression that they were formidable and fearless. Violence among this group took the form of fights as demonstration matches designed to impress an audience. The latter referred to men who were sensitive to attacks on their manliness. Violence among this group arose as responses to challenges to their integrity and self-image.

The values of the street culture are relevant to understanding offender behaviour and decision making. The requirement to be spontaneous and to live life for the moment to some extent discourages rational choice and long-term planning. In fact, it has been argued, to be a successful street robber, "it is necessary to steel oneself against utilitarian thinking" and to become "impervious to attacks of reason" (Katz, 1991, p. 288). Street criminals are required to develop an image of toughness and to instil fear in their victims by appearing non-rational and unpredictable.

There are some similarities and differences between the rational choice and cultural approaches. They are similar in that both perspectives argue that street violence can be goal oriented and achieve both instrumental and expressive outcomes. They are different in terms of the decision-making processes that lead to the motivation to offend. In the case of rational choice theory, the motivation to offend arises from some kind of calculus of the likely costs and rewards of offending. In the case of cultural theory, the motivation to offend arises out of a value system that supports violence and the conduct norms that reinforce it.

The difference between the two approaches can be seen in relation to the amount of violence used. The rational choice perspective (with the exception of the loosest forms of the approach) would lead to an expectation that violence would be purposive and proportionate to that needed to commit the offence. The cultural perspective would lead to an assumption that a violent offence could result in any amount of violence depending on the emotional state of the offender and the situation in which the offence occurred.

There are clearly gaps in our knowledge about the motivation for violence in street crime and the extent to which this emerges out of rational choice or out of sub-cultural values. This article investigates the motives for street robberies and assaults

among a sample of offenders currently serving prison sentences for violent offences in the United Kingdom. The aim of the study was to determine the extent to which street violence can be understood as purposive and relating to the successful commission of the offence or whether it is better understood as a product of subcultural values and conduct norms that support it.

## Method

The aim of the research method was to obtain the views of recently active violent offenders about their motives for street violence. The study was based on a sample of 55 offenders currently serving sentences in U.K. prisons for various kinds of street crime. In the current research, the terms *street crime* and *street violence* refer to street robbery and assault. The sample comprised 40 men and 15 women. The average age of the women was 24 years, with a range of 18 to 31; the average age of the men was 27, with a range of 18 to 47. More than three quarters (78%) of the respondents were White, whereas the remainder were Black (4%) or mixed race (18%). The data for the study were generated from the transcripts of semi-structured interviews with these 55 offenders covering details of 101 separate violent incidents in which they had been directly involved.

The research was conducted in six prisons selected by purposive sampling. This method of selection was designed to yield reasonable numbers of male and female prisoners and young and adult offenders. The ultimate purpose of this method was to generate a wide range of responses that would reveal a variety of uses of violence in street crime. The method of selecting prisoners to interview varied slightly across the establishments. In most prisons, the researcher, with the assistance of a liaison person (usually a psychologist), conducted searches on the prison database to locate suitable offenders who were serving sentences for violent offences, including robbery, grievous bodily harm (GBH), actual bodily harm (ABH), wounding with intent, or any offense involving firearms. At other establishments, when the computerised system was not available, the researcher searched 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 a large poster on the wings, informing inmates of the study and requesting suitable volunteers who met our selection criteria. Hence, potential violent offenders were located by approaching inmates and by inmates approaching us.

The main method of data collection was a semi-structured interview. A major advantage of this kind of interviewing is that respondents are allowed to answer questions in their own words with minimal control and direction from the interviewer. Apart from ensuring that all of the research topics are covered, the interviewer can allow the flow of the discussion to be determined in part by the offender. This should lead 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 might be covered by every respondent.

The interview was given a broad structure by using a schedule that covered four main topic areas: (a) the offender's personal and criminal justice history, (b) details of his or her most recent street robbery, (c) details of any other forms of street violence in which he or she had been involved, and (d) the offender's lifestyle immediately before imprisonment. On average, the interviews lasted 1 hour. All interviews were tape recorded, with the offender's permission, using a digital recorder and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Offenders were asked at the beginning of interviews to provide us with a false name as an identifier, and these self-assigned pseudonyms were used throughout the research.

The transcripts were analyzed first by identifying each incident of robbery or assault discussed. The narratives relating to each incident were then investigated to identify motivational statements that explained why the offence or the act of violence was committed. In total, there were 101 narratives of incidents comprising 113 motivational statements. The total list of statements was analyzed to determine the most frequently occurring concepts. These statements were grouped provisionally into categories reported in the research literature (e.g., buzz and excitement and status and honor). Where an interviewee discussed two different motives for the same violent event, these would be coded twice.

The authors worked separately on a sample of the transcripts in the first instance and then came together to discuss their findings. Agreement was struck regarding the most commonly used explanations that were emerging and the clearest categories that could be used for coding. One researcher then completed the analysis and the second researcher cross-checked the coding. Those statements left over were then analysed to determine whether there were any frequently occurring themes. These additional categories were then added to the existing categories.

The four main response categories described in the results section encompassed the majority of the motivational statements recorded. Two categories of response identified were not included in the findings. The first concerned the influence of alcohol and drugs. This was excluded on the grounds that the mechanisms of the link were rarely elaborated sufficiently to understand the connection (e.g., the offender simply said she or he had been drinking and ended up fighting). The second concerned just two accounts that made specific reference to disliking the victim who was assaulted. These were excluded on the grounds that there were too few cases to warrant a unique category.

There are a number of limitations to the current research. The first is the small sample size of offenders. It is possible that a larger sample would have led us to discover further subcategories or main categories of motives for violence. However, samples of about this size are common in qualitative research and are usually thought sufficient to reach saturation on the major response categories. Second, our

sample is made up entirely of individuals who have been apprehended and imprisoned for their violent offences and it could be argued that these do not represent all offenders. Although researchers in the United States have conducted research with “active” street criminals, we thought that this might not be appropriate owing to ethical constraints relating to fieldworker safety. Third, offenders’ accounts of their actions are inevitably retrospective and might not accurately portray their thinking at the time. We tried to minimise this effect by encouraging respondents to provide narratives of their action rather than questioning them directly about their motives (see Miller & Glasner, 1997, for a more comprehensive discussion on the problems of qualitative research).

## Results

The offenders were asked to provide examples of two main types of street crime: street robbery and assault. These offences were selected because they provided an example of an offence based on violence that results in financial gain (robbery) and an offence based wholly on violence with no financial gains (assault). They were also typically committed on the streets and sometimes in collaboration with, or proximity to, other street criminals. The descriptions of the offences were analyzed to determine the role that violence played in the offence.

In the following analysis, the most common motives for violence have been summarised by grouping them into four main response categories using the procedure discussed in the method section. The results are then presented for each response category in two main ways. First, the main variations in motives in each of the response categories are identified and discussed in the text. Second, individual quotations from respondents are presented. The individual quotations were selected on the grounds of their clarity and relevance in depicting the issues being discussed. The choice of quotation to include was made in collaboration between the two main researchers conducting the analysis.

### Violence in Robbery

The descriptions of motivational statements for recent robbery offences revealed four main ways in which violence was used in the offence: (a) successful offence enactment, (b) buzz and excitement, (c) status and honor, and (d) informal justice. As mentioned earlier, these were the most common categories and other less common responses were not included in the analysis. In total, more than one third (39%) of responses concerned successful offence enactment, 21% concerned buzz and excitement, 15% status and honour, and 25% informal social control. There was no discernible difference in the proportion of responses allocated to each category among male and female robbers (39% of males and 36% of females reported motives relating to the successful commission of the offence).

## Successful Offence Enactment

Motives included in this category are consistent with the principles of the rational choice approach in that they are typically goal oriented, purposive, and describe or imply some kind of forethought and planning. In these instances, violence played what might be referred to as an instrumental role in the successful commission of the offence. Instrumental violence in robbery was typically used either at the outset of the offence to ensure compliance on the part of the victim or during the offence to overcome resistance when the victim fought back.

Violence at the outset of the offence typically was used to take control of the situation and to increase the chance of completing the offence. Offenders who were large and naturally intimidating or who carried a gun might need to use less violence than offenders who lacked a threatening presence. Charlie Brown (a small man) typically favored violence from the outset as he viewed his appearance as insufficient to intimidate the victim. He explained:

It all depends on the bloke, like a big Black guy with a gun is frightening but me, well, I'm not intimidating with a gun. Little White fellow like me, he probably think it's plastic like. It's not a good enough weapon. It's image. They are not intimidated by my size so I am inclined to give them a little clonk first. Let them know they ain't gonna get away. [Charlie Brown]

In some cases, overwhelming force was used from the outset to ensure the successful commission of the offence and to make resistance impossible. John, who robbed a man on the street late at night, explained why he used extreme violence to achieve his objectives:

I was there for ages just hitting him and punching him and head-butting him. . . . Once he was on the floor I have a tendency to keep the person down. If you hang around and wait for the person to get up, chances are, you are going down. [John]

Violence to overcome resistance was only used during the enactment when control was being lost. The levels of violence adopted varied depending on the level of victim resistance. One offender recounted a car-jacking incident in which he had to attack the victim repeatedly to ensure compliance.

Sometimes if someone getting in with shopping bags and that we drag 'em out and take the keys. Or sometimes if they jump in the car, just run up and drag them out. . . . Sometimes they just shit themselves cos we got bats, but others, they fight for their cars. This one geezer we beat him up three times. [Anthony]

## Buzz and Excitement

Sometimes violence in robbery was not explained in instrumental terms. Instead, it was described as serving other functions that were best understood within the

context of street culture. One explanation was that robbery provided offenders with an adrenalin rush or what they often referred to as a “buzz.” In some cases, the excitement of robbery was the only reason given for the offence and the financial gain was viewed as of secondary or no importance.

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. It was just get a funny feeling when I go out robbing. [Steve]

Another motive for violence in robbery associated with excitement was the pleasure of fighting. Several of the robbers indicated that they specifically committed robbery in order to create an opportunity to fight. As Tyrese explained:

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. [Tyrese]

Other street robbers spoke in terms of the pleasure gained from the feelings of power and control over their victims. One of them talked about the excitement generated in seeing fear in the victims’ faces and his own fear of potentially being attacked by a victim. At the same time, he enjoyed being part of a four-man robbery team that was tightly knit and would defend each other should the need arise:

I loved to see fear, you know, that made, it put you in a position of an almost Godlike status, you know? And [em], I wouldn’t say I commanded respect but it just came to me, but the people around me, I respected the people around me because I knew that, my life was on the line just as much as theirs was. If I was to get attacked . . . is that person that’s with me prepared to attack that person? And if one of my friends are getting attacked am I prepared to attack the person that’s attacking them? And it was a yes all round, so we had a good little [em], a good little four-man crew when we, when we expanded from two to four, and everybody knew [eh] what each other’s job were. You know it’s, it’s precision. [Ben]

## Status and Honor

A reputation for robbery and violence can also serve to enhance status on the streets. An image of toughness not only generates respect but also guards against being victimised by others. Leon explained how his status among his peers was elevated when he became a violent street robber.

I didn’t feel any of the older boys were respecting me. When I started fighting and that, knocking people out and that, I gained their respect over the years. I didn’t used to feel really good about beating people up and . . . I just felt the boys respected me because they knew whatever happened I would get in there first. I would be there first. [Leon]



Other offenders also believed that violence enhanced status. James was involved in a carjacking with a friend, which resulted in him hitting the driver over the head with a bottle. He talked about how this served to improve his image on the streets.

I think it was showing someone else the image that, bollocks, "look at the big I am" sort of thing, "look at me," do you know what I mean, it was one of them ones, innit. I think it was more of an issue of me having a bigger status than me mate, do you know what I mean, and saying to him, "Look, you need to respect me now." [James]

An important element of attempting to increase street credibility through violent acts is that others in the street culture know about it. It was not always necessary for robberies to take place in front of an audience. The street culture provided a means of disseminating information about violent encounters and both the victim and the offender were likely to tell their respective groups.

This was just outside my area, I was walking home I saw this kid who I didn't get along with, I'd been drinking and I mean he was coming down the other side, so I just run over knocked him out, stamped on his head a couple of time, and took everything he had and that. I just wanted to knock him out anyway. I thought fuck it, I've knocked him out now you kna wot I mean, I've stamped on his head, I may as well take what he's got innit. You kna what I mean, he can go back and tell his boys, you know what I mean. We don't get along anyway so, he deserved it. [Sean]

## Informal Justice

Violence within robbery also served as a means of exacting informal justice. Many of these incidents were concerned with various forms of debt-collection and drug-related disputes. Street criminals rarely rely on the police to rectify wrongs perpetrated against them for fear of exposing themselves to unwanted police attention.

The two elements of robbery, violence and theft, were both used to retaliate against a perceived injustice.

It was a 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 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. [Rabbit]

Sometimes regaining the material losses were not the main reason for the robbery. In these cases, the aim of the robbery was more directly violence and revenge. Here, physically hurting the victim was the main impetus for the attack; the theft of an item merely represented an additional layer of punishment or an additional bonus. One drug user interviewed recounted how he became involved in an altercation with another man in a telephone box while waiting to meet a crack dealer. The man verbally insulted him several times. In response, the offender assaulted the man and only as an afterthought ended up robbing him.

So I crossed over the road and we started exchanging words and before I knew it we were both fighting and I kicked his legs from underneath him and his wallet came out on the floor and I picked his wallet up and said, "That will teach you, you stupid twat" and just walked off. [Jay]

## Violence in Assault

The descriptions of motivational statements relating to recent incidents of assault could be categorised under the same four types of motives for violence identified in relation to robbery: (a) successful offence enactment, (b) buzz and excitement, (c) status and honor, and (d) informal justice. Fifteen per cent of all responses concerned successful offence enactment, 8% buzz and excitement, 41% status and honour, and 36% informal justice. The main difference in the proportion of motivational statements in each category was in relation to successful offence enactment, which was much more prevalent in relation to robbery (39%) compared with assault (15%). Conversely, responses concerning status and honour were much more prevalent in relation to assault (41%) than robbery (15%). There was some difference in the proportion of responses in each category among male and female offenders. More than one fifth (22%) of males reported motives relating to successful commission of the offence, whereas no female offenders gave responses relating to utilitarian motives. Instead, all their responses related to the buzz excitement, status and honour, or informal social control. One possible explanation of this is that males more frequently mentioned the desire to fight and to win the fight at all costs as their primary motives.

## Successful Offence Enactment

Violence in assault can also be viewed as consistent with a rational choice approach when it is used to successfully complete the offence. In practice, this means that the offender succeeds in hurting the victim and avoids being hurt himself or herself.

Some offenders described this as "winning the fight." The ostensible goal of assault is to win. Paddy equated the incident to a boxing match or army combat.

To hurt him. To hurt him. Yeah. To hurt him. Like two boxers in a ring. Two soldiers face to face. That's how it was. [Paddy]

In some cases, the level of violence used in the assault was extreme and sometimes escalated as the need to win the fight became more pressing. Rabbit provided an example of an incident in which increasing levels of violence were used to beat his opponent.

He starts walking and stumbling towards me and I just flew into him like. He was a strong kid, he pinned me onto the floor and so I took a chunk out of his cheek with my

teeth. Then I let him go and that but he decides he is going to hit me again but before he could, I bit his nipple off. Then he staggers a bit like and he pulls out a pole. He starts shouting that I'm a cannibal like and that I bit him like. So I gets out my sword. [Rabbit]

In most cases, there appear to be rules associated with the levels of acceptable violence in an assault and offenders rarely aimed to kill or even maim their victims. Instead, offenders typically aimed to "harm" their victims. As Steve explained,

I suppose my intention was the same as his intentions, causing some harm. . . . When you are fighting, you know, you're fighting to win, you're not fighting to lose . . . and, you know . . . you're trying not to get hurt yourself and my intention was, that evening, was to, you know, to win that fight not to get hurt. . . . I intended just to beat him up. I certainly didn't intend to kill him and I certainly didn't think I'd gone that far, you know. [Steve]

In practice, the line between inflicting enough harm to ensure that the victim no longer fights back and inflicting serious injury is often a fine one. Perhaps surprisingly, offenders often appeared to be successful in achieving this aim. As Leon explained,

Fights are better ended there and then and not really, really hurt the person, but give 'em a good kicking like so that at least he knows there's no point in coming back. [Leon]

## **Buzz and Excitement**

As with robbery, assault was not only committed to achieve the utilitarian objectives of harming the victim. Assault was often committed for the buzz and excitement that it generated. Silk, for example, described the excitement that she felt when she was involved in street fights.

Yeah, the fighting, you do buzz, especially when you're winning, do you know what I mean. I don't know what it is, before a fight, I feel invincible. I do. I just feel like no one can take me on. [Silk]

Interestingly, interviewees who spoke about the excitement associated with street assaults almost always described such encounters as occurring in a group or gang context or, at the very least, in the presence of an audience of friends. Tyrese described an incident involving rival groups.

I was just drunk, all the other people, where we like to go, all the other people, we don't get on like. They come over, thinking they is all that and had bats and coshes and that and me and some other boys had our guns and that, went out and beat them up and some of them grabs my mate and carried him off and they come up to me and I stabbed them like and two of my mates came and said "move away or I'll shoot you." Some of

them went, and some of them just stayed there innit, so we started shooting a car and then asked them to go but then I beat one of them up and got done for GBH. . . . I love fighting. [Tyrese]

## Status and Honor

Violence in assault, as with violence in robbery, often concerned status and honor on the streets. In particular, these values concerned maintaining a reputation for toughness. Gemma described an incident in which her friends beat up a girl of their own age in order to protect their violent street identities.

We already had that [respect] but it was just something to do, not just to do, but it were, we had to keep, make sure people, I don't know actually, so people knew that we were still the way we portrayed ourselves through the year and . . . we had a reputation to keep basically. [Gemma]

One of the aims of acquiring a violent identity is that it can protect against victimisation. However, on some occasions it can do the reverse. Tallulah explained that she had developed a strong identity for violence and, as a result, she was "fair game" for others who wanted to prove themselves. As a result, she was often involved in status- or reputation-defending fights.

Because I were a nasty bitch, people had to try and prove a point and try to come and fight me. . . . I will stand my ground, I won't walk off from nobody, not even a man—no way. [Tallulah]

One of the core elements of street reputation is "respect." For those who did not have respect, engaging in violent street crime could help earn respect. Laura explained how she acquired respect on the streets through her violent acts.

I think that's why I've got respect, because I've been in and out of jail, survived. If you're a survivor, stupid things like fighting. I got respect when I did that street robbery and then when I got charged with Section 18, stabbing. [Laura]

Among the male offenders, a core element of street reputation was "masculinity." The men had to appear tough in relation to other men to gain respect and to avoid victimisation. It was necessary to demonstrate this through courageous acts and through appearing to be fearless. Thomas explained the importance of demonstrating his strength and masculinity in front of his male peers.

When you are out on a Friday night, everyone has fights. We all got in fights. It is quite normal. Couldn't walk away like. This guy was quite chunky like . . . it's better I hit a big guy like. Don't want to be seen hitting little uns, do I? . . . It's about my mates really. [Thomas]

## Informal Justice

Assaults were also committed as a form of informal justice in order to right a perceived wrong. In effect, these were usually violent retaliations relating to some kind of loss or injustice. It is problematic for a street offender to rectify injustices by using formal means of control, as they may bring to light their own criminal activities. There was also a clear preference among offenders for informal justice, which was described by one offender as “the street way” of dealing with problems.

A common injustice described by the respondents concerned losses relating to drug dealing. In some case, it was not possible to retrieve the money lost and a violent attack was used as a method of compensation. Sarah, for example, beat up another woman who owed her money for drugs.

Broke her ribs and that. Blacked her eyes. Give her a good pasting. I knew I wasn't gonna get money out of her and at the end of the day, she took piss and tried to make me look a cunt. She thought she could get away with it. [Sarah]

Similarly, Leon attacked a man who owed him money for drugs:

I thought he was like, he was belittling me a bit, so I head-butted him first and then I stabbed him. [Leon]

In some cases, a retaliatory assault occurred in response to an injustice against others, such as a friend or family member. John described an assault on two men who had beaten up his friend the night before. Similarly, the victim of the assault might not be the person who had wronged the offender. Tula reported a violent assault against the mother of a young man who owed him a large sum of money.

Just pushed her on the floor, grabbed her by her feet, dragged her through the house and ran up the stairs, so her head was hitting off the stairs (*laughs*) it was going like that, it's more just terror really, know what I mean? It's just, it's kind of like a short sharp shock of fright init? [Tula]

## Discussion

This research has shown that violence in robbery was often used in order to achieve the material goals of the offence (to steal money or goods) by ensuring compliance and by overcoming resistance. It has also shown that violence in assault was used purposively to achieve the immediate goal of harming the victim. In both cases, violence was used in ways that could be directly attributed to the successful commission of the offence. In other cases, violence performed additional functions, such as enhancing the status of the offender, generating a reputation for toughness on the street, providing a response to challenges to masculinity, giving an outlet for aggression and the desire to fight, and as a means of administering retaliation and revenge

through informal justice. Violence of this kind is better understood as an expression of a value system that condones violent behaviour.

Offenders' accounts are consistent with the rational choice perspective when they are depicted as purposive and goal oriented and when they focus on the successful completion of the offence. In addition, they are consistent with the "wide" version of the approach when they are described as fulfilling psychological and social needs. There are other aspects of their accounts that are less obviously goal oriented that are not consistent with this approach. It is uncertain how useful it would be to push the rational choice perspective further to encompass behaviours that were not based on prior thought or planning and were not related to the immediate goals of the offence. In these cases, another kind of explanation would seem more appropriate.

The descriptions of violent street crimes can also be explained by a cultural perspective that emphasises the role of violent values. This approach gives support to the idea that robbery and assault are sometimes committed to achieve social status, to obtain respect, and to generate a reputation for toughness. It also can help explain seemingly gratuitous acts of violence that might be the result of impulsiveness or anger. However, it is less able to explain actions based on rational economic assessment. In these circumstances the behaviour is more appropriately explained by a perspective based on personal utilities.

The motives for violent street crime are wide ranging and it is unlikely that any single theory will do justice to the complexity of factors involved. There are two possible theoretical developments that might assist in achieving a more substantial explanatory framework.

The first is to broaden either the rational choice or the cultural perspective to encompass all aspects of street violence. There have been some attempts to develop a wide version of rational choice theory that would allow for non-material utilities to be encompassed within the approach and for decision making to be softened to include partial assessment of the costs and rewards. The main criticism of this approach is that in the absence of evidence that offenders actually made rational choices prior to action, there is a danger that goals could be reconstructed retrospectively. This would then result in a tautology in which almost any outcome of action could be viewed as evidence of rational choice (De Haan & Vos, 2003). Cultural theory could also be expanded to include economic analyses and rational risk assessment. This solution is also not wholly satisfactory as the cultural approach clearly explains action as a response to a value system and conduct norms influenced by social and psychological factors. It is ill suited to encompass, without substantial revision, the idea that offenders are also rational decision makers and make careful risk assessments of outcomes.

The second option is to generate an integrated theory of street life that would encompass both approaches and perhaps additional approaches that might add to the explanation, such as environmental, situational, and dispositional influences. There is some historic justification to this approach in that there has been pressure within criminology for several decades to develop integrated theories, and their perceived

benefits over single theories are well documented (see Barak, 1998). In particular there already have been several attempts to integrate rational choice theories with other theories to produce a more substantial explanatory framework. These include combining rational choice with routine activities theory (Clarke & Felson, 1993), dispositional theories (Tibbetts & Gibson, 2002), and deterrence and social learning theory (Akers, 1990).

There has been some theoretical work that has begun to integrate elements of rational decision making with cultural motives. The work of Jacobs and Wright (1999), for example, discusses the way in which the decision to offend occurs in a context in which rationality is "severely bounded" by the cultural and economic demands of life on the street. In practice, they argue, street robbers do not have sufficient realistic alternative courses of action to enable rational choice (p. 167). They are clear that they do not rule out the role of rationality. However, they believe that rationality is so distorted and weakened by the constraints and demands of the street culture that its influence is severely limited.

Katz (1988, 1991) discusses the integration of rationality and street culture in practice in a slightly different way. In his description of the "ways of the badass," he explains that "badasses" are neither irrational nor stupid. In fact, they understand precisely the nature of rationality. They will use violence in a utilitarian and wholly instrumental manner when it suits them. However, it is also necessary to show to others that they can "transcend rationality." In other words, the badass (in order to be a badass) must demonstrate "a commitment to violence that is beyond any reason comprehensible to others" (Katz, 1988, p. 100). Hence, Katz (1988) sees rationality as playing a dual role in the use of violence. Some acts of violence might be used "in a utilitarian, instrumental fashion" to achieve particular offence objectives (p. 100). Others might be used to manage the impressions of others by appearing to be "irrational" or by seeking purposely to avoid rational deliberation at the time of the offence.

Anderson (1999) investigated street robbery in Black urban areas in Philadelphia and found that both rational and cultural factors played a part. He notes that the primary motivation of the street robber is to obtain money. However, the assailant also wants his undisputed power over the victim to be recognised (Anderson, 1999, p. 128). Anderson also shows that enactment of the offence can include rational and cultural components. The offence is often based on detailed calculations of the costs and rewards involved. The perpetrator will aim to select the right setting and the right victim. "He must assess the general surroundings, such as how secluded and dark the spot is and whether the potential victim appears able to handle himself" (Anderson, 1999, p. 126). At the same time, the robbery will be conducted in a way that achieves cultural objectives. The assailant will expect deference and respect from the victim to confirm his status on the street. Anderson in a sense integrates rational and cultural factors through his concept of the "code of the street" (p. 32). Rationality is constructed and operates within a cultural system that governs and reinforces forms of decision making and behaviour.

Although some progress has been made in integrating rational choice and cultural explanations of violence, there is still a need for a more comprehensive approach. Previous studies have helped link the concepts but have done so in relation to the specific problems being addressed. There has been no comprehensive attempt to integrate the complexities of the two perspectives. What is needed is a general integrated theory that can help explain the broader inter-relationship between rational and cultural factors in explaining street crime. This would mean unravelling the complexities of the concepts of rationality and culture as they might apply to the various stages of an offence, including the original aims of the offence, the decision-making process involved, the method of enactment, the utility of the outcomes, and the consequences of the action. Such a theory would not only help understand the commission of violent street crime but also would help inform effective responses to it.

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