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CARJACKING, STREETLIFE AND OFFENDER MOTIVATION

BRUCE A. JACOBS, VOLKAN TOPALLI AND RICHARD WRIGHT*

For all of the media attention it has received in the United States, Europe and elsewhere, carjacking remains an under-researched and poorly understood crime. In this article, we explore the decision-making processes of active carjackers in real-life settings and circumstances, focusing on the subjective foreground conditions that move such offenders from an unmotivated state to one in which they are determined to act. Drawing from semi-structured ethnographic interviews with 28 active carjackers in St Louis, Missouri, we argue that while the decision to commit a carjacking stems most directly from a situated interaction between particular sorts of perceived opportunities and particular sorts of perceived needs and desires, this decision is activated, mediated, and shaped by participation in urban street culture.

This article explores offender decision making in carjacking. How do would-be carjackers move from an unmotivated state to one in which they are committed to taking an occupied motor vehicle by force or threat of force? An adequate answer to this question can only be achieved by focusing on the phenomenological foreground of carjacking: the immediate context in which the decision to offend is made. Background conditions may help us to understand why some individuals enter situations more open than others to committing such crimes, but they cannot identify the factors that activate carjackings in the offending moment. As Katz (1988: 4) has observed: 'Whatever the relevance of antecedent events and contemporaneous social conditions, something causally essential happens in the very moment in which a crime is committed.' Katz maintains that this is a 'magical' process, whereby potential offenders are irresistibly drawn into crime by sensual and emotional dynamics. But the foreground of offending involves more than sensual and emotional states, and it is embedded in an ongoing socio-cultural context. With this in mind, we aim to provide a broad overview of offender decision making in carjacking, drawing on ethnographic interview data from a sample of currently active carjackers in St Louis, Missouri.

Carjacking

For all of the media attention it has received in the United States, Europe and elsewhere, carjacking remains an under-researched and poorly understood crime. Carjacking in the US has increased dramatically in recent years. According to a study conducted by

*Bruce A. Jacobs and Richard Wright, University of Missouri-St Louis; Volkan Topalli, Georgia State University. The research on which this article is based was funded by the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation and the University of Missouri Research Board. Points of view or opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the funding agencies. Names of the authors are listed alphabetically; each contributed equally to the article. The authors wish to thank Eric Baumer, Janet Lauritsen, Richard Rosenfeld, and the Journal's anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and criticisms. Address correspondence to: Richard Wright, Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Missouri-St Louis, St Louis, MO 63121.

the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS 1999), an average of 49,000 carjackings were attempted each year between 1992 anolmd 1996. This is up from an average of 35,000 attempted carjackings each year between 1987 and 1992—a 40 per cent increase.

Like other forms of robbery, carjacking bridges property and violent crimes. The offence is manifestly violent, yet it retains elements of planning and calculation usually associated with supposedly more instrumental or rational offences like burglary. Unlike other forms of robbery, however, carjacking is apparently directed more at an object than a subject—although this remains speculative in the absence of empirical evidence about offender intentions.

The literature on offender decision making in robbery (e.g. Conklin 1972; Feeney 1986; Wright and Decker 1997a, b; Jacobs and Wright 1999; Shover 1996) is of little help in specifying the motivating forces in carjacking. It suggests that stick-ups typically are activated by a pressing need for (mostly drug) money and are attractive to offenders because they net cash directly (Wright and Decker 1997a; Jacobs and Wright 1999). On its face, carjacking appears less obviously motivated by financial desperation; clearly it represents a less direct way of dealing with monetary problems (though it can be lucrative).

The car theft literature is not of much help either. Existing data are mostly anecdotal, found in popular magazines and practitioner-oriented journals. Some academic research does exist (e.g. Herzog in press), but most of it focuses on issues tangential to the actual offence (e.g. McGaghy *et al.* 1977, on offender characteristics; Harris and Clarke 1991, on car 'chopping' operations; Tremblay *et al.* 2001, on so-called body switching and related adaptations in the resale of stolen vehicles; Brill 1982; Faberman 1975; and Leonard and Weber 1970, on the role of big business).

Most of what we know specifically about carjacking is based on official police reports or large pre-existing data sets such as the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). These data suggest that carjackings are highly concentrated in space and time, and that most offences occur in particular areas at particular hours. One district in Fort Worth, Texas, for example, accounted for 75 per cent of all reported carjackings in the city. Similarly, half of the carjackings in the District of Columbia occurred in just two areas. The majority of carjackings occur between 6 pm and 6 am (Friday and Wellford 1994), and weapons are used much of the time (in 66 to 78 per cent of offences). Offender weapon usage increases the chances of success, and anywhere from one quarter to one third of victims are injured during attacks (BJS 1999; Donahue *et al.* 1994; Fisher 1995; Rand 1994).

Although numerous studies offer insight into the aggregate characteristics of carjacking offences (e.g. BJS 1994, 1999), we know little of the situated nature of these offences and what specifically energizes them. Only one study (Fisher 1995), based on interviews with imprisoned carjackers, has come close to providing such insight, but results of that analysis were designed to complement and confirm previously obtained results from both the 1994 and 1999 BJS reports using NCVS data. Studies of imprisoned offenders may not be representative of the offender population anyway. They are based on unsuccessful criminals—those caught, prosecuted, and interviewed in an institutional setting. Additionally, prisoners' accounts of their activities may be distorted—intentionally or not—by the passage of time, the prison environment, and a host of other factors (see Wright and Decker 1994). What *active* carjackers do and why they do it remains speculative. Active offenders, operating outside of any institutional setting and living in

day-to-day criminogenic contexts, offer researchers a better chance to obtain accurate and veridical information about their crimes.

Method

The data on which this article is based were obtained from interviews with 28 active carjackers recruited from the streets of St Louis, Missouri. Active carjackers were defined as individuals who had committed two or more carjackings in the previous year.[1] All of the carjackers interviewed were African-American. Otherwise, the sample was quite comprehensive, comprising three females and 25 males, aged from 16 to 45, with a mean age of 25.3. This comprehensiveness was crucial in the context of our research, which aimed to encompass the diversity of views found among local carjackers.

The active carjackers we interviewed were located through the efforts of a street-based field recruiter, who himself is a member of the city's criminal underworld. This individual has worked with us on many previous projects, during which he has demonstrated his reliability and trustworthiness. He has extensive connections to networks of African-American street offenders and, within those networks, enjoys high status and a solid reputation for integrity. Trading on this reputation, the field recruiter approached family members, friends, and acquaintances whom he knew to be currently involved in carjacking. He explained our research objectives and informed prospective interviewees that they would be paid $50 for participation.

The interviews, which typically lasted between one and one and a half hours, were semi-structured and conducted in an informal manner, thereby allowing offenders to speak freely using their own words. We asked the offenders to tell us as much as they could about their most recent carjacking. Throughout their description of this offence, we prompted them with further questions regarding such things as motivation, target selection, and commission of the crime. After the carjacking had been described fully, we broke down the crime into its component parts and, for each part, asked the offenders whether this aspect of the offence was typical for them. If they answered that it was not, we asked them to describe a more typical situation. Our aim was to get a rich, complete overview of the way in which the carjackers carried out their crimes.

We promised interviewees complete anonymity and confidentiality, identifying them only by a self-assigned street moniker. This appeared to create a more relaxed atmosphere and to raise the confidence and level of cooperation of the offenders. The truthfulness of their responses was monitored by checking for and questioning seemingly inconsistent answers. As an added quality control procedure, we went so far as to re-interview three of the carjackers, and used the opportunity to go back over topics covered during our initial conversations with them. There was a remarkable amount of agreement between interviews and no glaring discrepancies between their first and second accounts of the same incident. We are not so naive as to think that the offenders never embellished their stories to impress us. And a few may have lied to protect themselves. Nevertheless, we believe that undetected cases of distortion were sufficiently rare that they do not undermine the overall quality of the data.

[1] Carjacking is a rare offence and, in order to ensure a reasonable-sized sample, we adopted fairly liberal inclusion criteria. We believe that the commission of at least two carjackings in the previous year, plus not having made any sort of decision to stop committing such offences, certainly qualifies a would-be respondent as being a currently active offender.

We have written elsewhere about the generalizability, representativeness (including issues related to the over-representation of African-American offenders), validity (both internal and external), and reliability of data generated using field-based recruitment strategies (see especially Jacobs and Wright 1999, but also Jacobs*et al.* 2000). There is no need to reiterate that information here. Suffice to say that care was taken to ensure the quality and veracity of the data, and the appropriateness of the sampling design.

The Paradox of Carjacking

Carjacking's appeal is not obvious. Unlike other forms of robbery, it seldom nets cash directly and, unlike burglary, it involves a potentially dangerous confrontation with the victim. Carjacking does provide short-term transport, but on its face at least, auto theft seems a less risky way to accomplish the same thing. So why choose carjacking?

Part of the answer to this question is fairly straightforward; while carjacking clearly has some drawbacks compared to other common street crimes, it also has some advantages. Unlike the typical street robbery or residential burglary, the rewards associated with carjacking—i.e. the car itself—are in plain sight so there is no need to guess or 'intuit' what an offence might yield. And for those who can stomach the violence, carjackings are fairly quick and uncomplicated to commit: a simple matter of overpowering the driver and seizing the vehicle. This compares favourably to auto theft. Stealing unoccupied cars has become increasingly difficult in recent years owing to improved anti-theft technology, and doing so can be both time-consuming and dangerous. The car must be broken into and hot-wired, often to the accompaniment of a blaring alarm. The vehicle's owner may return unexpectedly and intervene, thereby reversing the element of surprise that usually operates in favour of would-be offenders.[2] In addition, it is risky to drive around in a hot-wired car, and much more difficult to sell one; the shattered glass, busted steering column, and absence of a key betray its illicit origins.

But the factors that motivate carjacking go beyond such prosaic matters. The offence grows out of the deeper commitments and broader pursuits that shape the day-to-day lives of urban street criminals: it results from street culture pressures, emergent opportunism, offender networks, and perceived attributes of drivers and vehicles. This should become clear in the pages that follow.

Motivation, Streetlife and Carjacking

Need motivates most, if not all, human behaviour, and carjacking is no exception. In and of itself, this is not a particularly illuminating observation. It is widely acknowledged that virtually anyone can turn to crime when they perceive themselves as having little or no alternative. Much more interesting is the nature and intensity of the needs that lead would-be offenders to commit carjackings, and how these needs are generated and experienced. Beyond the most basic necessities for survival (what might be termed absolute or objective needs), need is a highly subjective state that reflects the individual's cultural commitments and pursuits. Subjective need does not exist in a socio-cultural vacuum. Thus, needs that motivate all but the most instinctual actions cannot adequately be

[2] The advantage of surprise is widely recognized by street offenders and is captured in a phrase commonly used by them: 'The ups beats the draw.'

understood outside of the needy individual's socio-cultural 'matrix of evaluation' (Lofland 1969: 48).

With this in mind, it is important to situate our sample of active carjackers in the context of urban street culture, which places great emphasis on spontaneity, hedonism, the ostentatious display of wealth, and the maintenance of honour (see Wright and Decker 1994 and, especially, Shover 1996). In this volatile context, seemingly minor frustrations can erupt in criminal behaviour with little warning. For example, Tall's need for bus fare provided all the motivation he required to commit a spur-of-the-moment carjacking:

> I was broke. I didn't have enough bus fare. I'm walking down the street, there's a guy sitting in his car. I go asked him for change. He was going in his pocket. I just grabbed him outta his car. Why just take his change when I can take his car and get a little bit more?

Bankrolling streetlife

The spontaneous hedonism and ostentatious display characteristic of street culture mean that financial need is effectively a constant, fuelled by reckless spending habits and the anomic desire for material goods (Bourgois 1995; Shover 1996; Wright and Decker 1994). On the streets, cash is burned as fast as it is made, typically on 'party pursuits' like drugs and alcohol or status-enhancing items such as high-end trainers (see Shover 1996; Wright and Decker 1994). Indeed, Katz (1988) has gone so far as to suggest that the carefree spending of street criminals represents an end in itself, which demonstrates their disdain for the ordinary citizen's pursuit of financial security. 'Easy come, easy go,' Kow illustrates:

> Just got the money to blow so fuck it, blow it. Whatever, it don't even matter. Whatever you see you get, fuck it. Spend that shit. It wasn't yours from the getty-up, you know what I'm saying? You didn't have it from the jump so . . . Can't act like you careful with it, it wasn't yours to care for. Easy come, easy go. The easy it came, it go even easier. Fuck that, fuck all that. I ain't trying to think about keeping nothing.

Mo agreed:

> Just get high, get high. I just blow money. Money is not something that is going to achieve for nobody, you know what I'm saying? So everyday, there's not a promise that there'll be another [day] so I just spend it, you know what I'm saying? It ain't mine, you know what I'm saying, I just got it, it's just in my possession. This is mine now, so I'm gonna do what I've got to do. It's a lot of fun. At a job you've got to work a lot for it, you know what I'm saying? You got to punch the clock, do what somebody else tells you. I ain't got time for that. Oh yeah, there ain't nothing like gettin' high on five thousand dollars!

The great irony is that in such a free spending context (which almost by definition rests on the notion that money is 'nothing'), any shortage of ready cash may be perceived as threatening out of all proportion to objective circumstances. As Wright and Decker (1994: 201) have observed: 'Streetlife revolves around partying . . . Participants in the street culture use drugs and drink alcohol literally as if there were no tomorrow. Such activities are cash intensive; sustaining them for any period of time requires considerable resourcefulness. Those with the ability to do so, whether by legal or illegal means, are accorded respect and high status. Participants unable to sustain these activities are liable to be labelled 'scum bums' and excluded from the action. It is easy to appreciate why street offenders regard the lack of money . . . as an immediate threat to their social

standing.' Seen in this light, PoPo's willingness to commit a carjacking to finance what, to an outsider, might appear to be frivolous pursuits takes on a different meaning:

I ran up to her [victim] and said, 'Bitch, give me them keys. Drop your bags and get the fuck out of the way' . . . I took her purse and took her god damn diamond ring . . . went and bought some drink [alcohol] and . . . weed and . . . got my hair did, bought me some tennis shoes and walked the street with that ring.

A number of the carjackers we interviewed reported committing offences even though they had sufficient money at the time. Little Ty, for example, claimed that he had a 'pocket full of money' on the day he committed one particular carjacking, but this did not prevent him and a friend from exploiting an easy score:

My partner, he wanted him some rims . . . I needed a radio and some speakers . . . saw this little cat . . . riding around one o'clock in the morning with his gal . . . pumping his beats [listening to his stereo loudly], riding his rims, goddamn me and my partner got on [it] . . . We'd rather go take it than spend the money in our pockets . . . You know . . . like when you see, like a baby . . . when they see something they want they're gonna cry for it, they want it[?] That was like us . . . we don't need money. We have money. We're selling dope, we got money. [Take the car . . .] go sell it to get more money . . . you can never have enough of money.

Loco also 'had a little cheese [money]' on the day of his offence 'but . . . spotted [a] lick [opportunity]' he did not want to let slide by. 'I like to go for a little more,' he explained. And Corleone claimed that even if he had the financial security of a job, he likely would commit a carjacking if the situation were right. 'I still probably would do it,' he ruminated, 'it wouldn't change nothing.'

While it is tempting to read into the above comments a rational commitment to 'getting ahead' or 'saving for a rainy day', there is little support for this in our data. Instead, increased resources are used mostly to finance more extensive and intensive partying, thereby ensuring that the offenders soon will find themselves short of cash. This is what makes them so open to emergent opportunities.

Opportunistic carjackings involve little advance planning or casing of targets (Katz 1991; see also Feeney 1986). The would-be offender 'sees a vulnerable target from which to gain some immediate reward, and does not preplan considerations of attack' (Pettiway 1982: 263). Motivation, target selection, and commission of the offence are merged into one continuous process (Jacobs 2000).

[We were] just walking around . . . looking for things to happen . . . to get money . . . He [victim] just drove up and my cousin was like 'Look at that car, man, that's tough. I'm getting that'. 'Straight up, you want to do it?' He was like, 'Yeah'. He was all G for it. [Corleone]

Opportunity dominates carjackings more than it does most other street crimes because the targets of such offences are uniquely mobile. A car is there and gone in a matter of seconds, and there often is little or no time for hesitation. Opportunities that are allowed to slip past may be lost forever. This means that would-be carjackers have to be primed to see what they want and strike immediately.[3]

[3] This applies especially to cases where the offender is on foot and unable to follow the vehicle.

Of particular salience are the cues that energize the carjackers' interest in a specific vehicle, the signals that grab their attention and effectively move them from a state of indifference or neutrality to one in which they are determined to act. 'Beats' (high-performance, booming stereos) and 'Ds' (fancy gold or silver-spoked wheels manufactured by Datun Corporation) were the cues identified most often. On the streets, there are standing orders for both, and they command a good price.

[The victim's car] had all the right things that I need . . . The rims, the beats, the whole lot . . . Four-point stars on the rims, 100 spoke, detachable face [stereo and] some fifteens [booming speakers]. [Little Rag]

Two or three in the morning . . . we the only ones out . . . we [see this]...scary little punk [at the stop-light with] . . . twenties and blades [high-priced wheels and tires] . . . say I want that and I'm gonna go get that . . . went over there and took it. [C-Ball]

Offenders knew exactly what they wanted when they saw it, thanks to a 'perceptual shorthand' (Skolnick 1966) developed through years on the street. This bank of knowledge is especially important where decision making is bounded by time-pressure, uncertainty, and risk. High-pressure situations often call for instantaneous decisions. Hesitation can mean the difference between a big score and going home empty-handed. With sufficient experience, offenders learn to ignore superfluous information and to focus on the cues that count (Logie *et al.* 1992; Wright *et al.* 1995). This helps to inspire decisive moments of clarity necessary to carry out brash, threat-laden offences like carjacking with maximal efficiency and minimal delay (Jacobs 2000; see also Bennett and Wright 1984).

Dense street networks mean that well-connected offenders sometimes receive inside information about potentially lucrative targets. This allows them to broaden their predatory horizons and target persons not otherwise in their immediate 'sampling frame'. Here again, such opportunities are likely to be transient, so offenders must be primed to strike. Along these lines, Little Rag's cultivation of a 'tipster' ultimately paid off handsomely. 'I told him that if he ever sees something,' he recalled, 'give me a phone [call] and I'd come up over and do it.' The informant phoned and Little Rag pounced, netting a nice take in the process ($500 cash, the victim's wallet, jewellery, a stash of crack-cocaine and, of course, the victim's car). Similarly, Goldie was given the location and approximate time when a particular individual would drive his vehicle through the neighbourhood. His informants apparently did not want to jack the car themselves, but stood to benefit from its seizure. Using this intelligence, Goldie waited at the appropriate spot and attacked when the moment arrived:

He pulled up [to the described location] you know and the light changed just in time. So I just tapped on his window you know and [said], 'Can you please spare some change?' Then I put the gun to his head, asked him if he was going to get out or die, you know what I'm saying, 'Either one, you going to get out this motherfucker or die?' Boom! Shot him on his leg. He got to screaming and shit hollering, you know what I'm saying, 'You shot me! You shot me! You shot me!' like a motherfucker gonna hear him or something. Cars just steady drive past and shit, you know what I'm saying. By this time I opened up the door, 'Fuck you!' Forced his ass on up out of there. He laying on the ground talking about, 'This motherfucker shot me! Help, help!' Hollering for help and shit. But before I drove off I backed up, ran over him I think on the ankles like . . . 'Aaaah!' scream. I hear bones break, like all this down here was just crushed. I didn't give a fuck though. Sped off . . . [I did it because] I know a place

that want this car . . . a ['99] Caddy . . . The paint, the sound system . . . the rims . . . Yeah, he had some beats, rims cost $3,000, some chrome [100 spoke] Datuns . . . [I] needed money . . . they told me . . . they wanted this car . . . told me around the time that he leaving this spot . . . I'm standing there and . . . he [came and I got him].

Though Goldie admitted that he needed money at the time, financial motives for him and most of the other offenders in our sample were, as already noted, essentially limitless. Recall Little Ty's admonition that 'you can never have enough money'. In effect, the carjackers were locked into a self-enclosed system of behaviour in which the cash-intensive activities promoted by street culture continually threatened to exhaust the financial resources required to sustain them, and thereby sowed the seeds for further offending (see Lemert 1953; Wright and Decker 1994, 1997a, b). That being the case, emergent opportunities often served to determine when, where, and how frequently offences occurred. It is reasonable to conclude that financial inducements were almost never really absent in these cases, but rather dormant, in a state of hibernation from which they could be awoken at a moment's notice. Bennett and Wright (1984) refer to this state as one of 'alert opportunism', a willingness to offend when propitious opportunities present themselves.

Going with the flow

Street culture is characterized by spontaneity and an openness to illicit action whereby participants can never know for sure what will happen next (see Shover 1996). This may be part of its attraction for people who live outside the law. The offenders in our sample, like virtually all street criminals, associate with similarly situated others who often have enemies and agendas of their own. This can unexpectedly pull the offenders into carjackings induced by circumstances not of their own making. When this happens, they have little choice but to go with the flow of unfolding events. C-Low, for instance, got caught up in a carjacking when he and a friend, Mackie, became embroiled in a running gun battle. The incident started in a neighbourhood dentist's office, where he and Mackie were waiting to have some dental work done. Mackie recently had ripped off a local drug dealer. As fate would have it, the drug dealer, accompanied by two friends, arrived at the same office for his own dental appointment. Recognition was followed by accusations and an angry exchange of threats. The drug dealer's friends pulled out their guns, whereupon C-Low and Mackie rushed out the door. They desperately needed a getaway car. C-Low picks up the story:

> They started popping at my partner, just started shooting at him . . . we had no car . . . so we were running . . . and the guy was popping at us . . . So, there was a lady getting out of her car, and he stole it . . . she had her purse and everything. [Mackie] just came on her blind side, just grabbed her, hit her. She looked, she just looked like she was shocked, she was in a state of shock. She was scared, she was really scared. And [we] took her car and we left. We could've got her purse and everything, but we were just trying to get away from the scene cause we had no strap and they were all shooting at us. We just burnt on out of there.

Nicole, similarly, was drawn into an offence by the actions of her boyfriend. The carjacking in question evolved without warning. Failing to provide assistance was not a realistic option, so she sprang into motion almost instinctively. 'My partner just jumped

out of [our] car,' she recalled. 'He jumped out of the car and right then when I seen him with the gun, I already knew what was happening . . . [I had to move].' Although the interviewees had no hand in instigating these carjackings, it is clear that they evolved out of their broader participation in street networks conducive to lawbreaking. This is what Hobbs (1995: 4) means when he declares that the day-to-day activities and friendships associated with life on the street 'are part of, not separate from, criminal action'.

Punishing affronts

For many of our offenders, strong elements of moralism often combined with fiscal concerns to motivate the commission of a carjacking. The intersection between moralism and money makes sense because the financial needs underlying offences usually were less objective than perceptual, or more accurately, relative. Relative deprivation is an entrenched feature of street culture, such that those who have more are vehemently resented by those who have less. On the streets, this resentment slumbers just below the surface of everyone's awareness; those who disturb it are asking for trouble. 'Player-haters' like Snake and Pacman will make them pay:

I was tired of seeing them just coming through, always trying to floss as they went past . . . always showing off, talking a lot . . . You floss it too much you get [carjacked]. [Snake]

This motherfucker [was] . . . flossing . . . showboating and shit . . . He had all the shit in that motherfucking [car] . . . He flossed his ass off . . . That motherfucker was clean . . . He had beats and everything . . . So we was gonna get the motherfucker. [Pacman]

'Flossing', as the offenders quoted above intimate, was by far the most common instigating affront. To floss means to show off material possessions such as clothes, jewellery, and, of special relevance for our purposes here, cars. In regard to cars, flossing involves cruising slowly through an area in a gaudily fancy vehicle with the stereo pumping out a bass heavy beat, while the driver regards those on foot with a look of disdainful disinterest and invulnerability. While middle-class observers may regard flossing as nothing but a minor annoyance, bothered more by the noise than anything else, the practice is anathema within the context of street culture because it is widely understood as both a putdown and a provocation that says, 'I'm better than you.' As such, it easily can move potential offenders from an unmotivated state to one in which they are determined to act. On the street, where one's honour must be protected at all cost, no affront is trivial. Esteem is so precarious that it can be undermined by a mere word or glance (Anderson 1999).

Playboy thus took retaliatory action against a showboating driver who looked at him the wrong way while he was walking home with friends:

People were out there with their windows down or whatever late at night. You know you got your little self on or you flossing. That's considered flossing . . . you know, you look at a certain person and one of them's like when we was walking, he looked at us . . . But a look like, ha, they walking and I'm not [so we jacked him].

Making such crimes easier to contemplate was a widespread belief that would-be victims had probably not obtained their wealth legitimately. It was one thing to show off, it was

quite another to show off spoils that were themselves taken from someone else. As Pacman declared, '[A] motherfucker that's rich . . . done nothing good to get rich.' Snake echoed these sentiments: '[T]hey [victims] got the stuff the same way [as we do].'

From the perspective of the offenders, carjacking represents the ideal way in which to punish drivers who dare to, as they put it, 'floss their little stuff' by cruising through their neighbourhoods in a disrespectful way. They recognize, however dimly, that the customized and accessorized vehicles associated with flossing are so designed to project something about the drivers themselves and that, in this sense, the identity of the driver is merged with the car (see Katz 1999: ch. 1 for a fascinating discussion of this phenomenon in the context of road rage). They also realize that, in becoming one with their vehicle, flossers experience a feeling of invulnerability that facilitates their provocative behaviour (again, road rage exemplifies this phenomenon in a slightly different context). By forcefully taking their vehicles, then, the carjackers are able to diminish the flossers' status directly, deprive them of the means used to project that status, and shatter their illusion of invincibility.

'Deserving' victims were not limited exclusively to those who flossed. Other sorts of social wrongs also can activate the desire to inflict punishment. The nature of such wrongs varied from the personal and filial, to the social and subcultural, capable of inspiring vendetta-laden offences designed to put the violator in his or her proper place. Goldie, for example, claimed that he carjacked one victim in retaliation for a sexual assault against a female friend when he chanced upon him at a local gas station.

> [I] put it [the gun] to his head, 'You want to give me them keys, brother?' He's like, 'No, I'm not givin' you these keys.' I'm like, 'You gonna give me them keys, brother. It's as simple as that!' Man, he's like, 'Take these, motherfucker, fuck you and this car. Fuck you.' I'm like, 'Man, just go on and get your ass home.' [Then I] kicked him in his ass, you know what I'm saying, and I was like, 'Fuck that, as a matter of fact get on your knees. Get on your knees, motherfucker.' Then I seen this old lady, right, that I know from around this neighbourhood. I was like, 'Fuck!', jumped on in the car [and] rolled by. I wanted to hit him but she was just standing there, just looking. That's the only thing what made me don't shoot him, know what I'm saying?

In a similar vein, Playboy carjacked a woman at a service station who refused to pay a young child for pumping her gas. Witnessing the incident, Playboy became sufficiently incensed to act. 'She don't want [to] pay the little dude,' he recounted. '[T]his was a little boy, no older than eight or nine, he just want to make some change to buy some snacks and you don't do people like that . . . what she did was what she got.'

For Sexy Diva, the need for retaliation often was generated within the actual offending frame. Her *modus operandi* was to seduce male victims in nightclubs, thereby setting a trap for associates to spring later, after she had manoeuvred her quarry into a compromising position. Many of the intended victims were married, angering Sexy Diva and broadening her purpose beyond money. 'How can you commit yourself to one woman,' she wondered aloud, 'and then you be out [trying to pick me up]?' Her own experience of being 'dogged out' made payback very much on her mind:

> You flirting [with me] and talking about your wife which you don't do . . . in her face and that's what pissed me off, cause I got dogged out like that before. You look for a bitch on the side and stuff like that...I say, 'This motherfucker is just like the one I just got rid of.' So basically it just brings back memories to me. So I'm gonna get you.

Mo's retaliatory resolve also emerged within the process of offending. Reprisal may not have been the primary motivation for targeting his victim, but it was the reason he unleashed the offence at the moment he did. Given our present concern with the situational foreground of crime, this distinction is critical:

> I waited on him [dressed like a bum], I asked him with a spray window cleaner, 'Do you have any change?' I asked him if he could help me out, he said, 'No. Fuck you.' He was pissing me off . . . It made this situation better from my point, he said fuck me so that pissed me off and my blood's a-racing. So I did what I had to do.

Being thrilled

We can learn a great deal about the aetiology of crime by attending to its course, but it would be remiss to discuss the motivations that drive carjacking without reference to the sensual dynamics that mediate its enactment. Katz (1988) argues forcefully that the sensual or seductive features of offending figure prominently in crime causation. Crime, Katz notes, contains strong elements of existential transcendence. It is thrilling, the thrill comes from the danger, and that is what entices offenders to break the law. Without the prospect of discovery, arrest, and/or victim-resistance, the motivation to offend would probably dissipate. Crime, in this view, is a dance with danger and the 'rush' comes from facing adversarial circumstances and transcending them through sheer force of will.

Threat of arrest did not appear to be a major issue for the carjackers in our sample, one way or another. Carjackings could be completed in a matter of moments, and as long as police were out of sight, they tended also to be out of mind. Confronting and dominating drivers and passengers was a different story. A number of our respondents clearly relished the prospect of using brute force to get their way. Tall, for instance, described the adrenaline surge that coursed through him as he wrenched one driver from his vehicle. '[I]t's a rush thing . . . when you're pulling someone out the car,' he said, 'just a rush come over me . . . I mean, I feel good.' Sleazy-E took obvious pleasure in smashing a recalcitrant victim's head with a bottle. 'Why you standing there [asking questions]?' Pick it up, 'Pow', cracked his head. Shit, I put a nice old little knot on it. Crash, simple as that.' PoPo claimed that she felt compelled to hit her victim during one offence, even though the victim put up no resistance. '[H]ad to hit her,' she explained, 'I had to hit her . . . I like to be bad . . . It's just in me.' Nicole's accomplice reportedly shot his carjacking victim in the back, *after* the vehicle was safely in hand:

> 'Nigger you do something, you look back, I'm gonna kill your motherfucking ass.' The dude just kept running, [but] he shot him and the dude fell. What he shot him for, I don't know what went through that man's head.

Instilling panic in victims seemed to be something of a sport for several of the carjackers we interviewed. PoPo thus found amusement in 'the way people look at you when they scared and panicky and stuff . . . It is funny just to see them shaking and pissing all over theyself.' Big Mix described the scared reactions of his victims as 'hilarious', adding that 'you just get a kick out of seeing [them] screaming and hollering.' And Nukie loved seeing the 'motherfuckers [victims] scared of me . . . especially [when] they [think they are] all tough.'

The search for thrills sometimes extended well beyond the enactment phase. A number of our respondents described joyriding around in the vehicles they had just carjacked, showing them off to friends and potential foes alike. Binge, for example, picked up some friends and went 'riding around listening to the music . . . run all the gas off, keep the sounds up as loud as I can'. Pookie and friends reportedly went to the mall to buy some 'rings and stuff', and then drove the vehicle around for another hour and a half. Little Rag drove the car to a strip club in East St Louis, staying out until four in the morning. Goldie took the stolen vehicle and flossed it himself, 'beat his beats [listened to the high-performance stereo] for a minute. They was tight.' Sleazy-E and his associates drove their newly-acquired car to the 'set', showing it off to some friends before embarking on a raucous night of drinking and clubbing.

On its face, such behaviour seems paradoxical. After all, many of our carjackers claimed that they purposely targeted those who flossed their vehicles. But this apparent paradox disappears once you appreciate the hierarchical context of the streets. Both would-be victims and would-be carjackers understand that flossing is fundamentally an exercise in one-upmanship, a public display of dominance. Again, this is why the carjackers in our sample found it so threatening to their self-esteem. What better way for them to reassert their own status than by turning the tables and flossing the carjacked vehicle themselves? Once they were behind the wheel and sealed off from lesser mortals 'hanging' on the street corner, the carjackers were likely to experience the same feelings of invulnerability that previously had insulated their prey from undue fear of attack.

But even when carjackings were not directed at so-called flossers, some of the offenders nevertheless celebrated their successes by driving around in the vehicle afterwards, picking up friends, cranking up the stereo, and setting out in search of good times. Remember that urban street culture is centred on party pursuits, and that much of the cash generated through predatory crime is spent on maintaining a hedonistic lifestyle. In this context, a carjacked vehicle may emerge both as a means to generate the financial wherewithal to continue partying and as the *medium* for continued partying. This is what sets the motivational allure of carjacking apart from most other forms of robbery: the targets of such crimes frequently represent not just a *means* to an end, but an end in and of themselves.

Discussion

What light, then, does our research shed on the motivations that drive carjacking in real-life settings and circumstances? The short answer is that the carjackings committed by the offenders in our sample grow out of their broader participation in urban street culture.[4] Street culture subsumes a number of powerful conduct norms, but the ones most relevant to our argument here include the hedonistic pursuit of sensory stimulation, disdain for conventional living, lack of future orientation, and persistent eschewal of

[4] Following Katz (2001: 469), we will sidestep recent debates about the textual representation of culture, while reminding the reader that even if culture 'has lost its [intellectual] moorings in any particular place around which a [researcher] might "hang" . . . it is something else to claim that people now shape their conduct without reference to the interaction situation they are in' (see also Bottoms and Wiles 1992). A related issue concerns specifying the mechanisms that promote and perpetuate street culture participation. This issue has attracted the interest of researchers from Thrasher (1927) onward, but it lies beyond the scope of our project.

responsibility (e.g. Fleisher 1995). Street culture lionizes spontaneity, and dismisses 'rationality and long-range planning . . . in favour of enjoying the moment' (Shover and Honaker 1992: 283). Offenders caught up in streetlife typically conduct their affairs as if there will be no tomorrow, confident that the future will take care of itself. On the streets, 'every night is Saturday night' (Hodgson 1997), a philosophy that finds its expression in the pursuit of trendy consumerism and open-ended 'partying'.

Needless to say, street culture participation is a cash-intensive activity. This means that our offenders are in perpetual need of money, and thus are always at least 'half-looking' for any opportunity to generate quick cash to 'keep the party going' (Wright and Decker 1994: 38). Put in more academic terms, they remain in a more or less permanent state of 'alert opportunism' (Bennett and Wright 1984), wherein the motivation to offend is, at some level, omnipresent. In this sense, the offenders enter situations already primed to commit an offence.

But this does not explain why the offenders choose to commit a carjacking in preference to some other sort of crime. To understand that, we need to pay close attention to the foreground dynamics of the offences themselves. By doing so, we can see that sometimes the offenders are seduced by the vehicle itself, something about it (e.g. gold-spoked wheels or a booming sound system) catches their fancy.[5] In psychology, these attractants are referred to as behavioural releasers—physical constructs in the environment that compel the observer to orient toward them and react (Lorenz 1966). Once seduced, the offenders typically have little or no time for contemplation, lest the opportunity be lost forever. In such circumstances, they are not inclined to consider alternative ways of satisfying their desires. Nor can they dwell on the potential risks of offending.[6] Besides, most of them have gotten away with carjackings in the past, and thus have reason to be optimistic about their chances of success in the future (see McCarthy 1995). From the offenders' perspective, then, carjacking emerges both objectively and subjectively as the 'most proximate and performable'—and perhaps the only—means of getting what they want *there and then* (Lofland 1969: 61).

Similar factors are at work where 'flossing' or some other form of disrespectful behaviour brings the would-be victim to the offenders' attention. The difference is that in these situations it is the drivers, not the vehicles, who prompt the offenders to take action. Flossing drivers may deserve what they get, but if the would-be carjackers do not immediately move to punish the affront, the opportunity to do so will disappear. And if the affront on its own is insufficient to trigger a rapid response, remember that the offenders are always looking for an opportunity to generate quick cash. Thus they may have an additional incentive to commit the carjacking.

Though less common, the offenders sometimes get pulled into carjackings unexpectedly, through the actions of associates. It would be inaccurate to claim that the offenders lack motivation in such cases. After all, they could conceivably walk away from these offences, though perhaps not with impunity. The fact is that, even in these cases, the offenders are primed to offend prior to the crime, or at least their actions suggest as much. They join in without prompting or protest, and quickly adjust their actions to the contours of the evolving offence. What differentiates these offences from most others

[5] Katz (1988) notwithstanding, there is nothing especially 'magical' about this process. Items that tend to attract the offenders' attention enjoy strong subcultural currency, and there is a robust market for them on the street.

[6] In any case, street criminals typically spend little time weighing up the pros and cons of crime *in the offending moment* because, as they put it, 'You think long, you think wrong.'

is not that the offenders are reluctant participants, but rather that the decision to commit *a carjacking* (as opposed to some other form of crime) is determined by the actions of someone other than themselves. Where this happens, the fear of consequences is reduced through a process of diffusion of responsibility, while the motivation to offend is enhanced by the presence of one or more co-offenders who can provide 'back-up' (see Hochstetler 2001).

In theory, one can imagine other reasons why offenders might choose carjacking in preference to some other type of crime. For example, they might decide to commit a carjacking to obtain a vehicle for use in another kind of offence, say, a liquor store robbery. But we had no such cases in our data. That said, all of the carjackings committed by our offenders are potentially linked to other crimes. Carjackings committed for monetary reasons may enable offenders to extend and intensify their partying, but this solution is only temporary. Ultimately, they will find themselves more desperate than before, and thus even more open to emergent criminal opportunities (see Jacobs and Wright 1999 for a full description of the partying/offending lifecycle). And carjackings designed to punish flossers may lead to violent retaliation, whereby the offenders end up as victims. This is especially likely when, as is often the case, the carjackers celebrate a successful offence by flossing the vehicle themselves. Indeed, it is processes such as these that reinforce the stubborn persistence of urban crime and violence, and promote its spread beyond the confines of any given criminal encounter.

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