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UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENT PROPERTY CRIME USING A DELINQUENT EVENTS PERSPECTIVE

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The perceptions of adolescent offenders’ involvement in property crimes are the focus of this paper. These youthful teenagers provided information regarding the various situations in which they committed their criminal activity, and their thoughts and emotions during the property offense itself. Multiple motives and interactions that were related to the youthful offenders’ interpretive meaning for their involvement in property crimes was explored.

INTRODUCTION

Property crimes committed by adolescents represent a significant economic and societal problem in the United States. Indeed, although Property Crime Index arrest rates, which include burglary, larceny-theft, auto theft, vandalism, shoplifting, and arson, have been declining in recent years (Snyder 2004), adolescents still continue to commit property crimes more often than any other types of crimes (Klaus 2006). To the extent that adolescent offenders choose to engage in property crime, it becomes important to examine the events and conditions leading up to the decision to commit crime as well as the subjective (offenders’ perceptions) and objective (e.g., presence of peers, drug/alcohol use) characteristics associated with the offending situation, otherwise known as the “immediate setting” in which criminal behavior takes place (Birkbeck and LaFree 1993:115). Ultimately, such offender-based and offense-specific explanations can play a significant role in the development of crime theory and prevention.
**Approaches for Studying Crime from a Situational Perspective**

**Criminal or Delinquent Events Perspective**

Researchers have, in recent years, begun to adopt a more integrated approach for the study of crime situations resulting in the development of the criminal events perspective (CEP) (Meier et al. 2001; Sacco and Kennedy 2002). The CEP challenges the offender-based focus of most criminological theories in favor of an integrated perspective, which includes simultaneously examining the offenders’ perceptions and characteristics, the victim, and the situational correlates and context of specific offenses associated with the criminal event, or what I refer to as the “delinquent event” in the current study.

Criminal and delinquent events, unlike criminal acts, involve a beginning, middle, and an end (Kazemian and LeBlanc 2004; Sacco and Kennedy 2002), and have been alternatively referred to as the precursor, transaction, and aftermath phases (Sherley 2004). The beginning or precursor phase involves what was going on prior to the commission of the crime and includes an examination of the preexisting offender—victim relationship, interactions with peers, and emotional and cognitive states. The transaction phase, in turn, involves examining what occurred during the commission of the crime. Understanding the interactions as how these interactions are influenced by contextual and situational dynamics is crucial at this stage. Finally, the aftermath phase involves what happened after the crime, including what the offender did afterward as well as any resulting short-term and long-term legal or social consequences.

**Study Purpose**

The purpose of the present study was to expand on the situational crime literature by using the criminal events perspective (Meier et al. 2001; Sacco and Kennedy 2002) to guide an examination of male adolescents’ subjective interpretations of delinquent events characterized by the commission of property crimes. Symbolic interactionism in conjunction with a cultural studies approach (Dotter 2004) provided the theoretical backdrop for the study. Although the major focus of this study was to explore how male adolescents define, interpret, and justify their actions within criminal offending situations and how cognitions and emotions influence decisions to commit property crimes, it was also recognized that their narratives represented idealized accounts, which in turn were shaped and influenced by larger cultural idealizations centered on youth, offenders, gender, and in some cases, race and ethnicity. Finally, it should be noted that my interpretation of the adolescents’ narratives were also influenced and shaped by larger cultural idealizations and discourses pertaining to offenders, youth, gender, and race/ethnicity. In particular, social science research, most notably dominant criminological theories steeped in modernist traditions, influenced my own thinking about the adolescents’ narratives. Thus, when appropriate, I refer to, and ultimately critique these theoretical approaches when discussing the narratives.

**Methods**

**Study Participants and Recruitment**

Twenty-four male adolescent offenders, ages 14–20, participated in this study. All youths were under the supervision of the state juvenile correction agency. Eleven of the youths were Mexican American; five were white; and eight were African American. Eighty-five percent came from midsized or larger cities, and 15 reported a previous gang affiliation.

In an attempt to maximize the number of accounts and variation in responses, youths were recruited from two settings: a residential treatment home and a halfway home. Youths across the two settings differed with regard to length of stay. Residential treatment youths had completed half their stay whereas the halfway home youths were in the process of being transitioned into the community. Despite this, youths across both settings were similar in terms of age, race/ethnicity, inner-city background, and gang affiliation.

**Data Collection**

A semistructured interview was used to obtain information about each adolescent’s perceptions of his delinquent acts. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed in a private setting; therefore, only the participant and I were present during the interview.

Although information was obtained on other types of crimes, this study specifically focused on delinquent events characterized by the commission of property crimes. To accomplish this, I asked each adolescent to discuss all crimes that he could remember committing in his lifetime. I then asked each adolescent to:

Think back to a time when you committed a crime. Can you remember that time? Okay, now I’d like you to
tell me a story about that time. I want you to tell me everything you can remember beginning with what you were doing several hours before, during, and after the crime. I also want you to tell me what you were thinking and feeling at each of these points, just as if you were telling me a story about what happened that day.

**Analysis**

Working inductively, I coded each delinquent event according to what I thought was the primary motivation as well as the participant’s thoughts and feelings prior to, during, and after the commission of a property crime. Additionally, I coded for the degree and presence of planning, peer involvement, and drug/alcohol use. I focused on these three aspects of the delinquent events accounts for two reasons. First, most of the adolescents mentioned these three components in their narratives. Thus I wanted to determine if, from the adolescents’ perspectives, these three aspects influenced how they viewed their participation within the delinquent event. Second, previous delinquent events research suggests that planning, peers, and drug/alcohol use play a prominent role in the commission of delinquent acts (see Kazemian and LeBlanc 2004). Finally, I developed codes focused on feelings of remorse and regret as they related to the victim as well as whether thoughts about getting caught influenced the decision to commit a property crime. However, because the majority of the adolescents failed to discuss any feelings of remorse/regret, I was only able to code whether they expressed remorse/regret or not. A colleague independently coded the transcripts based on my previously established coding categories. We cross-classified our results and found substantial reliability in our categorization of these events.

**Results**

The sample of 24 adolescents described 60 delinquent events characterized by the commission of a property crime. Property crimes included any act of destroying or stealing property even when the primary motive was to “get back” at an actual person(s). Examples of such crimes included theft, shoplifting, auto theft, arson, burglaries, vandalism, and drive-bys (only when directed against property, without the specific intent to directly harm someone).

Four motive/interpretive strategies emerged as a result of the data analysis. That is, each motive was associated with a certain set of events and conditions, which served as cues to guide the adolescents’ interpretive process and eventual meaning construction. Put another way, motive/interpretive strategies were closely associated with the situational context. Qualitative accounts of each delinquent event context, as characterized by one of these motives—thrill seeking, coping, defending the gang’s honor and obtaining material goods—are presented in what follows. However, because delinquent events are characterized by complex interactions between individual offenders and situational contexts and dynamics, I present only the most “popular” scenarios, that is, those that were most often reported, for each motive-driven crime type.

**Crime Motives**

**In Search of Thrills**

Thirty-one (52%) of the 60 delinquent acts involving property offenses were committed primarily for “kicks,” “fun,” or “thrills.” Different property crimes, including theft, shoplifting, burglary, vandalism, and auto theft characterized this type of delinquent event. Although most of the crimes in this category were committed in the presence of peers, some youths also reported committing crimes alone. The most salient aspect of these events, irrespective of whether only one youth or more than one youth participated, was the degree of risk involved: the higher the risk, the more attractive the crime. Despite these similarities, delinquent events characterized by a group of offenders versus a solo-offender were distinct on a number of qualitative dimensions.

**Group Crimes.** Twenty-one delinquent events were committed either in pairs or in groups of three or more adolescents. The following example demonstrates a delinquent event characterized by the search for thrills and the presence of “co-conspirators,” as narrated by an 18-year-old African-American male:

…We had just come back from a party… and everybody was real hungry. So they said, “Let’s go to Denny’s and run out.” We all went to Denny’s. I didn’t order a whole lot. I didn’t want them [Denny’s employees] to get suspicious. If we ordered all this food,
they might get suspicious. But my friends ordered a lot of desserts and stuff. Then the lady brought us the ticket. All my friends, they walked to the car. I played it off like they was giving me money for the meal. So I walked up to the counter and they [friends] were already in the car. And told the person [Denny’s employees], “I need to ask my friends something.” And she said, “Hold on sir.” I ran out, went through two doors, and jumped in the car and took off. It was a thrill.

This account provides an illustration of a crime that was committed with a high risk of getting caught. That is, the youth was readily identifiable to many witnesses and the crime was in a public setting. Nevertheless, the youth decided to participate, indicating that the crime was not “overly concerned” with getting caught because he figured he could “outrun the lady [Denny’s employee].”

Other adolescents also reported committing property crimes primarily for fun. A 19-year-old Mexican-American male described how he and his friends broke into a neighborhood “mom and pop” store. According to this adolescent, he was feeling bored when he and his friends came across a store that had an unlit storefront on the way home from a night of drinking and partying. When asked why he committed the crime, the youth responded, “I didn’t break in the store for money. I had a pocketful of money. I was bored. I did it just for the fun of it, the excitement I guess.”

At other times, adolescents admitted that they were motivated by both a desire to obtain stolen goods and to “put excitement in [their] day.” However, their accounts of these delinquent events tended to focus primarily on the fun they had while committing the crimes, as opposed to their ill-begotten material goods, as illustrated by the following account from an 18-year-old white male:

...We robbed this dude’s house. And we found a little ounce of weed underneath his bed in a little tin tray and a little bong, a green one. It was tight. We hit it hard... put a porno flick on the TV... had a good time...

Although the youth initially decided to break into the house to steal, it became clear that he also enjoyed the process of committing the burglary. Again, the high-risk nature of the crime, as indicated by the youth staying in the home and “smoking [a] bong” and watching TV may have added to the dangerous allure of the delinquent experience.

As the previous narratives illustrate, group crimes, at least from the perspective of adolescents, are often characterized by a sense of risk-taking and camaraderie. Indeed, peers played a number of salient roles in these delinquent events dramas. They served as “co-conspirators” who not only participated in the decision to commit the crime, but also helped carry it out by partaking in a number of supporting roles ranging from decoy to lookout. Additionally, they served as audience members to the individual offenders antics. And, of course, they always stayed to celebrate the successful completion of the crime, as illustrated by a 16-year-old Mexican-American male who described what happened after the commission of a group theft:

When we was done and at the house, we were mostly ragging on [friend's name] for going down the candy aisle and almost getting us busted right then and there. We were laughing at him and laughing at us, saying, “Yeah, we got away!” even though we tipped the sensor off!

Another youth, a 15-year-old African-American male, described what happened after participating in a joint shoplifting spree with peers:

We ran out to the car, and almost got caught; it was a close call. But we made it. We all ran out, drove off in our cars, and met up at the school. We got out, jumped up and down, hollering, just acting a fool, clowning, and laughing... cheering like we'd just accomplished something good.

Not surprisingly, alcohol (and more rarely marijuana) played an important role in postcrime celebrations with groups of young men often meeting up afterward to drink and laugh about their close calls. Sometimes, as in the case with the store theft described earlier, youths reported drinking or smoking marijuana prior to committing the crime. However, what was absent from these accounts was any insight into the role that drugs/alcohol might have played in their decision to commit crimes. Although the youths generally acknowledged that the alcohol or drugs (usually marijuana) made them feel good, rarely did they report a belief that drugs/alcohol influenced their decisions.

As the aforementioned narratives illustrate, adolescent offenders like other groups of offenders commit crimes for fun and thrills (Copes 2003; Hochstetler 2002; Jacobs et al. 2003; Katz 1988) with little precrime planning beyond an agreed upon decision to commit
the offense (Kazemian and LeBlance 2004). The intent was to engage in a group crime for the primary benefit of having fun in a highly risky context (Copes 2003; Katz 1988; Jacobs et al. 2003; Jacobs and Wright 1999). Thus, from an interpretive perspective, the adolescents approached and continued to view their participation in these delinquent events as inconsequential, harmless fun. They did not express remorse or regret and did not view their participation as problematic from a personal viewpoint even if they did acknowledge that it was problematic from a legal standpoint.

**Solo-Crimes.** Ten thrill crimes were committed alone. A 16-year-old white male provided an example of a solo-crime committed for thrills:

> ... The best house I ever broke into? It was this security guard's house. ... I know 'cause he had his uniform in there. I went in and checked under the bed first to see if he had guns or anything. And I opened up some drawers and he had stacks about this high (holds hand about 2 feet off the ground) of Playboys and Penthouse and I flipped through them. ... I then started looking through other drawers and stuff and I found a .22, an old-fashioned .22, yeah! And I also found a Crown Royal bag and it was just like a Christmas present. I opened it up. It was a chrome .25 and I was feeling powerful. Like I had some power. ... That was my best house!

Although the youth clearly enjoyed the items he stole, his reaction to the guns went beyond a utilitarian desire for money. An 18-year-old white male described a similar depiction; he also compared the process of committing burglary to Christmas:

> It does give you a rush. ... Once you crack that window and you're inside the house, it's like Christmas Day. Anything in this house is yours and you never know what you are going to find. Guns, jewelry. ... You always gonna find jewelry. Anything you see. It's just like Christmas. That's the best I can explain it. It's yours.

Solo-crimes lacked the celebratory component associated with the group thrill crimes. Instead, adolescents derived their enjoyment primarily from the “power” they felt when sorting through other people's belongings. This was particularly evident with burglaries, as illustrated in the aforementioned narrative. The youths also seemed to be very in-tuned to the material objects they accrued, as illustrated by the second example. The stolen goods represented objects of affection as opposed to generic items that could be easily pawned for money and drugs (Katz 1988). Such a relationship between the offender and the stolen goods was not evident in the group crime situations.

**Coping With Frustration, Anger, and Hopelessness**

In 10 (17%) of the 60 property crime delinquent events, adolescents committed acts of vandalism, theft, and arson primarily out of an extreme state of frustration, anger, or hopelessness stemming from what they perceived as an injustice done to them by another. In each instance, the adolescent reported either trying to initially address the perceived injustice in a conventional manner, only to be met with failure, or he reported a belief that alternative noncrime means for solving the problem would most likely meet with failure. As a result, these adolescents coped with their feelings of frustration and anger by taking matters into their own hands. In seven instances, they reported destroying or, less commonly, stealing the property of their perceived perpetrator(s). Alternatively, in three instances, they destroyed property that was somehow associated with the perceived perpetrator, as illustrated by the following narrative from a 17-year-old Mexican-American male who described how a school fight led to a negative encounter with the school principal, which in turn, precipitated the destruction of school property.

> And the principal started taking his side. He [the principal] started raggin' on me and talking all this mess about my negative attitude and stuff that already had happened in the past. He suspended me! I didn't start the fight, the other dude did and he didn't get nothing. ... I was so mad, mad that the principal and the teachers always blame everything on me. That's why I went back after school and busted up all the windows with a baseball bat. I made sure to especially get the principal's office windows. I didn't think it was fair what he did to me. And I showed him what I thought of it. ... As this narrative illustrates, the youth did not believe that the school principal had treated him fairly. Thus, he decided to take matters in his own hands by committing a property crime characterized by aggression. He planned when and where to commit the crime and waited until after school to carry out his plan. Thus, this crime instance was not an impulsive response, but rather one that was thought out. The school represented a symbolic representation of the principal, thus making it the ideal target for the youth to release his pent-up frustration and anger at a perceived injustice. Not surprisingly, instead of feeling
remorse or regret, the youth instead reported a “feeling of accomplishment” and a belief that justice had been established, or in his own words that the “the principal and the teachers got what they deserved.”

In another example, a 17-year-old white male, described why he decided to steal from an ex-girlfriend:

I went to her [ex-girlfriend] house . . . and I asked her if she wanted to come drink with me . . . and she was like, “Nah.” So I was like, “Then, can I get a cup of ice?” She gave me the ice and I went back drinking. I wasn’t even buzzing, but I went back to her house and told her can I get another cup of ice and she had this attitude with me and I was like, “Whatever.” And then she said, “Is that all you come to my house for is a cup of ice? All you doing is coming up to my house for a cup of ice, you don’t even want to talk to me.” I was like, “Man, whatever, fuck you bitch! I don’t give a fuck!” And I just left. And I knew where she kept her key, she kept it under the stairs . . . so like a couple of weeks later I told my homeboy [peer’s name], “know this really easy hit we can pull fool, make some easy money. Buy some dope . . .” And we just broke in. I stole money out of her room. I think 20 out of her sister’s room. I stole all her mom’s jewelry.

When asked if he was trying to get back at his ex-girlfriend for slighting him, the youth at first responded, “It was all about easy money.” But then he went on to state:

I didn’t really care about the bitch anymore. I was happy when I did it. I just didn’t give a fuck about her anymore. She was getting a funky ass little attitude with me, talking trash and stuff. And she slammed the door on my face. I was like, “Fuck that bitch if she wants to be a stuck up little bitch!” I don’t care.

Although he professed that the crime was “all about easy money,” it was clear that his ex-girlfriend was targeted in large part because she had displayed an “attitude” and had slammed the door in the youth’s face.

Some youths indicated that they participated in property crimes as a way to cope with life stressors. However, they spoke in general terms as opposed to describing specific delinquent events. Nevertheless, their narratives provide further insight into the link between coping and property crimes as indicated by the following passage from a 16-year-old Mexican-American male:

My life was fucked up . . . . We didn’t have no food, never had nothing nice like other people have. Shit . . . Life was just totally fucked up. Ever since we were growing we lived in shelters and all that shit. That shit was stressful . . . You didn’t know what the fuck to do . . . So whenever we got the chance to get away and have fun, we did crime. We stole things, destroyed things . . . That was just something to do to get our minds off things.

Although youths sometimes used drugs/alcohol as a means for coping with life stressors, such usage was not consistently associated with coping crimes. Only 4 of the 10 coping crimes involved drug/alcohol use at some point in time. These data, although limited in scope, indicate that committing crimes served as a way to deal with problematic situations above and beyond the use of drugs/alcohol.

From an interactionist perspective, adolescents mentally processed problematic situations and arrived at the conclusion that they themselves were the true victims. As a result of their interpretations, they became angry and incensed. To cope and deal with these feelings, they engaged in an emblematic attack against their perceived oppressor characterized by either destroying or stealing his or her property. Such an interpretive outlook is consistent with Agnew’s (1992, 2001) General Strain Theory (GST), which refers to strains as “relationships in which others are not treating the individual as he or she would like to be treated” (Agnew 1992:48). Under such circumstances, according to Brezina (1996), strains or stressors increase the likelihood of negative emotions like anger and frustration, which in turn create pressures for “corrective action,” with crime being a particularly appealing coping response for some individuals. However, unlike Agnew’s GST, an interpretive framework emphasizes how the offender’s interpretation of the situation results in his decision to engage in the delinquent act. In this respect, the individual is an actor with agency, not just a person who reacts to a problematic situation with anger. Additionally, a cultural studies perspective would take this analysis one step further by asking why these adolescent males interpreted the event in the way that they did and why they ultimately decided to participate in the emblematic attack against their victim.

Defending the Gang

I coded six (10%) of the 60 property crime delinquent events as gang crimes committed because the individual believed that his gang had been affronted in some way. Two types of property crimes, vandalism and drive-by shoottings, typified this context. Precrime feeling of “nervous energy” and “adrenaline highs”
along with negative thoughts about the victim2 (i.e., victim as the oppressor) characterized these crime contexts. Other characteristics included the presence of “co-conspirators,” drug/alcohol use, and the use of weapons, as illustrated by the following narrative:

...Me and a bunch of my homeboys
found out this [rival gang name] was talking noise
about jumping [fellow gang member's name] so we was
upset so we went and got a bunch of zay, you know,
embalming fluid on weed ... and we smoked to curb
those feelings ... it [zay] made us even more crazier.
Psyched us up and we planned it out. We got together
and we drove by the house and shot it up and then we
took the back streets until we hit [name of freeway] to
[name of club]. If the police come around ... they
[owners] would say, “Hey, they were here the whole
night. And they never left.”

When asked to state the primary reason why he engaged
in the drive-by, the youth indicated, “Because I wanted
to hurt or scare him [enemy] for what he did to [gang
member's name] and to show him up for messing with
[gang name].”

Youths also reported tagging over other gang mem-
bers' markings or tagging in a rival gang's territory as
a way to display dominance, as indicated by the follow-
ing quote from a 16-year-old Mexican-American male:
“We do it to mark our territory ... we mark out other
gang signs and write ours. We show them what's up, let
them know we mean business.”

As the previous example illustrates, peer solidarity
represented an enduring facet of gang crime. Indeed,
many of the gang members reported that “being down”
for their “homeboys” was of utmost importance to
gang life. When describing gang crimes, the youths
often emphasized the importance and value of their
friendships, as illustrated by the following quote from
a 16-year-old Mexican-American male:

I ain't no faith in God's ass. I ain't got no faith. I mean I
can't trust Him ... you can't see the motherfucker. I can
see my OG over there, if I need help, he gonna pull me
off the ground. He can reach out and pull me up and I
can see him do it. Can't see God doing that for me. I can
see them walking down the street. They see me on the
ground with no money in my pocket. They gonna give
me some money. I can see that. I have faith in that.
Maybe one day ... they say faith is the size of a mustard
seed, I ain't even got that. It shouldn't be that way, but I
got no faith. I got no faith in God, but I got my faith in
my people.

Despite exulting their peers, youths still tended to
downplay their influence, as indicated by the following
quote from a 16-year-old African-American male:

I ain't got friends that try to peer pressure you. You don't
want to do it [commit crime]. They ain't actually going
to make you do it if you don't want to. You don't want to
do it; you don't do it.

Yet, another youth, a 16-year-old white male, dis-
cussed the ramifications of refusing to follow peer-
initiated gang directives:

We'd have our meetings.... We ask you to do something
and you want to be down with us, we expect you to do
them. Shit it'd be like that. You ain't got to do it you
know.... It's just when you violate our [gang] laws, then
we do something to you. But then, shit, it's cool. It's like
unity. We're all together. There ain't no reason to go
against each other. We got loyalty. You just know who is
the leader and who is not and you respect them
[leaders] for that.... I mean if you're asked to do
something and it's in the law, you do it.

As this quote indicates, youths, at least on the sur-
face, are pressured to act in accordance with gang rules
and norms. Failing to do so results in a number of social
consequences, including decreased status in the gang.
Despite this, the youths still presented their narratives
in such a way as to indicate that they bought into the
gang rules and norms. That is, when faced with conflict
with rival gang members, they interpreted the situation
through the lens of existing gang rules and norms.
Thus, from a cultural perspective, subcultural values
and norms have a tremendous influence on the indi-
vidual gang member's interpretive process and eventual
meaning construction with respect to those situations
involving conflict with a rival gang or its members. A
number of theoretical frameworks, most notable
Anderson's (1994, 1997) discussion of the “code of the
streets” and the gender role strain-conflict model
(O'Neil et al. 1995) provide a useful backdrop from
which to speculate about these findings. According to
such perspectives, when inner-city males are unable to
live in accordance with idealized conceptions of mascu-
linity, they may suffer from psychological problems or
strain, which leads them to partake in “codes” or “dark

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2The author uses the term “victim”; the adolescents did not.
behaviors” of masculinity such as aggression and violence, behaviors that are valued within certain cultural contexts and settings (Anderson 1994, 1997; Brooks and Silverstein 1995). That is, in certain situations males may engage in delinquent or criminal behavior as a mechanism for demonstrating their masculinity (Copes and Hochstetler 2003; Messerschmidt 1993).

Going After Money, Goods, and Drugs

Thirteen (22%) of the property crime delinquent events were committed primarily to accrue some material benefit, usually to obtain money for drugs. Crimes in this category included a wide array of property thefts characterized by some degree of planning. Furthermore, adolescents sought to minimize risk, and peers when present operated as “co-conspirators” only. The intent was to commit the crime and reap its benefits, not to have fun. For example, an 18-year-old African-American male described how he would steal jerseys and then sell them to an “established customer”:

Some guy that lived in my apartments. . . . I’d steal jerseys for him and he’d pay me. And so I went to the mall to Champs where they had jerseys for his kids. And I’d steal them.

A 17-year-old white male provided another example of this type of delinquent event, only this time the youth confided that he wanted to steal in order to sell the stolen goods for drug money:

I was at my house and it was around Thanksgiving and I wanted some drugs and I didn’t have no money so I ran over to this house and I broke into my neighbor’s house. I just walked into her house and robbed her.

A 16-year-old white male also described burglaryizing a house in order to obtain material goods, which could then be sold for drug money:

We took the microwave, the stereo, the black-and-white TV. We took whatever we could get. These people, they didn’t live in no good neighborhood, so we didn’t get no good stuff.

When asked what he was feeling during the burglary, the youth responded:

I was nervous. I don’t know about the other dudes, but I was nervous. We didn’t have a good time, we didn’t sit on the couch and smoke, we done stuff like that at other times . . . but not this time. We didn’t have a good time.

For one, what we needed wasn’t there. We wasn’t getting no money off no microwave, a black-and-white TV and a little stereo. So wasn’t no good time.

As this example illustrates, youths who participated in economically driven crimes tended to report being “nervous” and “scared” during the commission of these crimes. They were concerned with getting caught and wanted to be as covert as possible. Youth who committed burglaries were particularly nervous about owners walking in on them, as illustrated by the following narrative from a 17-year-old African-American male:

. . . Somebody could be in the room and we don’t even know about it. Somebody could shoot you. It’s like you’re scared, you’re creeping up to the room. Like a book will fall, and you’d just have a heart attack . . . .

Because adolescents approached these crimes with the intent to accrue material goods, planning beyond an initial decision to carry out the crime characterized these delinquent events, as illustrated by the following quote from an 18-year-old African-American male:

I was thinking about exactly what I was going to need to do to get the jerseys. Watch the store to see who all was watching, See if it was busy or not. And just walk up to the store and get what I needed. To play it off, I’d ask them a question. Ask them if they had something I knew they didn’t sell. They would tell me they didn’t have it and I’d say thank you and move on. I’d say [for example], “Do you have such and such whatever?” And they’d say “no” and I’d say “All right.” And I’d walk out the store.

Similarly, a 16-year-old white male described a ploy he would use to burglaryize homes:

I knock on the door on a street that don’t have many cars on it . . . streets that don’t got that crime watch and all that. And I knock on the door and if somebody answers, I say, “Is James Epstein here?” I try to be very sincere . . . Like a nerdy kid . . . That’s the kind of image I try to portray to people. I’ll say “Is James Epstein here?” If they say, “Nah,” I act like I’m looking at something. “Oh I must have the wrong address!” Just go on about my business. If they [homeowners] ain’t there, I go to the back. Check the windows first. If the windows are open, I just go through them or break them.

The decision to include peers as “co-conspirators” was also influenced by the desire to minimize the possibility of getting caught. Indeed several youths stated
that they would prefer to “work alone” because they were afraid that the peers would “snitch” if they “got caught.” For example, a 17-year-old Mexican-American male stated:

I commit most of my [crimes] by myself. Because if I go alone . . . with some other person and we get caught, they will snitch. And if he gets caught, he’ll snitch on me and then me and him will go down for it so I’d rather just go by myself.

This is not to say that youths never included peers in economic crimes, but rather that they recognized the potential for problems if they did so. For example, one youth who involved a peer later came to regret his decision:

I grabbed some CDs and I walked out and I stuck them in my pocket. And the damn beeper thing went off. And he [co-conspirator] was right behind me and I just broke off and I was already gone. And I was waiting for him down the road, but he stayed there. The big dummy . . . I don’t know what was up with him. He stayed there. And his parents got called and all this other stuff. And he told on me . . . and it was my mistake for trusting him . . . should have never trusted him in the first place.

In terms of drug/alcohol use, most youths agreed that it was not a “good idea” to be under the influence while committing economically driven property crimes. Indeed, several adolescents noted that they intentionally stayed away from drugs or alcohol because “you get so messed up you don’t know what you’re doing and sometimes you get caught . . . .” On the other hand, one youth described both advantages and disadvantages to using drugs when committing property crimes:

It’s better not to do them [crimes] at all. But if you do, it’s better not to [do drugs] so that you can know what you are doing. On the other hand, when you high, you don’t think about it as much. It don’t ride your mind as much.

Despite this, most youths reported that they were not under the influence when committing economically driven crimes. On the other hand, most also acknowledged that they were committing property crimes in order to obtain stolen goods that could then be sold for money to support a drug habit. Thus, the role of drug/alcohol use appeared to take on a different form for economically driven property crimes than it did for thrill crimes. In economically driven crimes, the goal was to obtain money to supply a drug habit whereas in thrill crimes, drugs/alcohol use served primarily to enhance the celebratory nature associated with carrying out the crime.

In contrast to crimes committed for other reasons, youths sometimes expressed remorse or regret for their delinquent actions. However, the only time youths tended to express guilt or remorse was when they broke into someone’s house and were confronted with pictures and deeply personal objects belonging to their victims. Nevertheless, even in these instances, the youths tended to quickly displace these unpleasant feelings with a “fuck it who cares” attitude, as illustrated by the following example narrated by a 16-year-old white male:

Seeing the pictures [after breaking into a house]. Yeah it does kind of bother me, but you know how I used to feel, I didn’t care about nobody else but myself and or my homeboys or my family or whatever. That’s just how I felt, so didn’t let it bother me too much. That was just me . . . .

A 16-year-old Mexican-American male also shared how he felt remorse/regret after a burglary, only to quickly displace these feelings:

I felt bad this one time . . . we saw this lady’s graduation ring and I felt bad about it. And then we drank a 40 and I was thinking, “Man, I’m going to leave this [graduation ring] on her [lady’s] doorstep. Then I said, “Fuck the bitch!” and threw it in the bayou.

Youths also rarely expressed concern for getting caught prior to committing their offenses. Again, however, the exception to this was when the youths were committing economically driven crimes. In these instances, youths reported that they did not want to get caught, they just wanted “To get the job done.” However, at other times, youths reported that it was unlikely that they would get caught. For example, an 18-year-old African-American male stated this when asked if he had thought about the possibility of getting caught after shoplifting:

No. I guess I didn’t even think about it. I had done it so many times and had never gotten caught. I was at the point where I couldn’t believe that I would get caught.

At other times, youths expressed a lack of concern for getting caught:

There wasn’t a lot going through my mind. I knew that I had gotten caught. I wasn’t too concerned about it. They would just take me to juvenile and I would end up going home anyway so I wasn’t too concerned. It was just another day.
Crimes committed primarily to obtain money, material goods, or drugs provided the most clear-cut examples of delinquent events that I studied. Economically motivated crimes generally involved fewer co-offenders, planning, and a tendency to select anonymous victims (Kazemian and LeBlanc 2004). Adolescents approached these crimes in a rational manner, considering the costs and benefits, with an intent on minimizing the possibility of getting caught (Clarke and Cornish 1985; Cornish and Clarke 1986). In contrast to crimes committed for thrills, youths were usually not on drugs/alcohol during the commission of economically driven crimes.

**Summary and Discussion**

An integrated symbolic interactionist and cultural studies approach (Dotter 2004) was used as the overarching framework of this study. This theoretical approach, with its underlying postulation that actors construct meaning through an interpretative process based on their interaction with others as well as their position within the larger society, was particularly relevant to an explanation of adolescent involvement in delinquent events.

Stories specific to each of the four motive/interpretive strategies were presented in different ways. For example, when discussing stories centered on fun and postcrime celebrations, the adolescents tended to emphasize the thrills and adventurous nature present throughout the delinquent events, often laughing and smiling as they recalled and shared their exploits. They did not express remorse or regret, except fleetingly, nor did they discuss any negative aspects related to their participation in those scenarios characterized by a desire for thrills. Overall, their stories suggest that crime, in some instances, serves as a means for adolescent males to engage in a mutually satisfying and shared experience. In contrast, their portrayals of the economic crimes were much different. The adolescent cast himself in the more serious role of the economically driven chief, an individual who was not interested in fun and games, only in obtaining the economic benefits of the crime.

Another aspect that the adolescents tended to emphasize, irrespective of the specific motive/interpretative strategy used, was the saliency of their involvement in comparison to their peers and in relation to drugs/alcohol. They were the “stars” of their dramatizations, whereas their peers, when present, served as a supporting cast. As such, they did not rely on peer pressure as an explanation for their involvement nor did they blame their involvement on drugs/alcohol. Again, their willingness to place themselves front and center may have had to do with the degree to which they believed me to be a sympathetic listener with no vested interest or power to harm them. Some aspects of their stories might have differed had they been forced to share them with police or other authority figures. In particular, they might have been tempted to downplay their own role while simultaneously enhancing the role that peers and drugs/alcohol played. On the other hand, they might have been more open to sharing different, perhaps less appealing aspects of the delinquent event, with a trusted friend than they were with me. This is not to say that any of these possible versions represent the absolute truth or even that an absolute truth, at least as represented by postevent narratives, is possible, but rather to emphasize that adolescents, like all individuals, construct meaning within interactions with others.

Understanding the adolescent’s perspective is crucial if we are to gain a more balanced view of the delinquent event. Social science interviews, because of their supposed nonjudgmental nature, offer one stage upon which the individual can share his story without threat of repercussion. In such settings, the adolescent’s voice is valued and he is allowed to speak for himself, to share his interpretations of the delinquent event. This is essential given that the adolescent offender, as a consequence of his age, gender, and perhaps, race/ethnicity, is not often afforded such opportunities. Thus, the current study represents an attempt to provide such a platform. Nevertheless, the delinquent event’s meaning, despite its concrete aspects, cannot be understood from one view alone. Hence, it’s essential that future researchers consider a number of voices and perspectives when examining the delinquent event. Dotter’s (2004) use of the “meaning scenario” as a way of describing and critiquing mediated meaning-generation processes represents one avenue for engaging in such work. In short, Dotter proposes that an examination of the links between deviant events, media reconstruction, and the “stigma movie” is necessary in order to understand the multilayered meaning construction process. Stated another way, multiple perspectives, including those of the actors involved in the original event in addition to journalists and other meaning constructors, must be accounted for, with an emphasis on understanding how this process leads to the deviance label and the distancing of society from those who engage in deviant acts. Although this process initially seems best suited for highly publicized deviant events, it can be applied, in part, to any delinquent event for which the offender has been caught. Doing so would entail conducting multiple interviews with actors, reading police reports and court accounts.
transcripts, talking to lawyers and judges, and reading existing newspaper accounts. This process would allow the researcher to gain access to various viewpoints and ultimately be able to understand the delinquent event at multiple levels of meaning construction.

In sum, the current study utilized a symbolic interactionist/cultural studied framework to further understand why and how adolescents commit property crimes. The unique contribution of the current study is that it provides insight into a number of different motive/interpretative strategies used by adolescents when faced with certain situations, thus allowing for a deeper understanding of how adolescents interpret and construct meaning in relation to the delinquent event. Finally, this study recognized that the adolescent offender constructs meaning in relation to the larger culture. However, the larger culture as represented by popular media and discourses often does not consider the adolescent offender's perspective in turn (Young 1996). Thus, it is recommended that future researchers interested in delinquent events research and meaning construction consider the adolescent offender's perspective in addition to those of the other actors and the media. Doing so would lead to a more balanced meaning construction process that is based on all voices and interpretations.

References