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On the Edge of Reason? Armed Robbery, Affective Transgression and Bounded Rationality

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Based on 14 interviews with convicted commercial armed robbers in Australia, this paper explores various self-reported facets of motivation, with the usual suspects such as anticipated monetary reward and drug-fuelled crime represented. In addition, the findings from the study unveil some of the distinctive alluring qualities of armed robbery, including hedonic thrills, sensory stimulation, fear arousal, power and control that foreground this crime. The concept of 'crime as defibrillation' is introduced to account for the sensory surge craved by these men to counter a life of systematic structural exclusion, dysphoria and lack of prospect. Suffering from sensory asystole, it is only the most extreme and risky behavior, in the form of serious violent crime, that can revive a life otherwise flatlining and out of control.

Introduction

> Sociological and psychological studies of robbery rarely focus on the *distinctive* attractions of robbery, even though research has now clearly documented that alternative forms of criminality are available and familiar to many career robbers.
>
> (Katz 1988: 3, emphasis in original)

Sammy was just 12 years old when he carried out his first hold-up. Having chosen the target, an out-of-town betting shop, his uncle and older acquaintances planned how they would go about committing the robbery. Sammy was delegated the task of 'crowd control' and, being the smallest of the group, would need to jump up on to the counter in order to take command; 'because I was so young, I had to jump the counter and twist my body to fit through the Perspex and get over the other side'. The robbery gang set up a makeshift booth in the garage from piled-up cardboard boxes and 'set up a few mattresses' to break the fall. Each day Sammy would practise the jump, clipping his feet on the boxes, sending them, and him, crashing to the floor. He worked hard at it, eager to please his older companions. Two weeks later he finally cleared the boxes, and described how he 'sort of felt confident enough', and they knew the time had come.

Storming into the bookmakers the next day with a .22 pump-action rifle, Sammy made the jump. High up on the counter, his hands shaking violently, he shouted the words he'd practised alone in the mirror: 'Fill the bags up', trying hard to control the quiver in his voice. The stunned manager was 'in shock, looked like he couldn't believe what had just happened'. He was motionless and, according to Sammy, pretended that the safe was inaccessible behind a locked door. Sammy, now aged 31, recollects how he escalated duress, knowing that the success of the robbery and, perhaps more importantly, his status and reputation among his acquaintances, hinged upon coercing the manager to follow his instructions.

> I turned to [the manager] and said 'Open the safe', you know, like very dramatically, and I was shaking; you know, I was petrified … The boys told me if they're not doing what you say, just let one off, 'BANG', and see where it goes from there … If he doesn't do it, then hit him, you know. And, if he still doesn't do it, hit him with the gun, you know, and shoot him in the foot, you know, or – whatever, you know; like just try and get as much money as you can before you shit yourself and have to leg it, you know? The manager looked up, looked at the door, [gestured] that the door was locked, and that's when I just went 'BOOM' [discharged the firearm at the manager's feet] and yeah, then he went to the safe because the safe was behind the counter, not in a separate room or anything. And yeah, he just knelt down and filled the bag up.

The fear subsided, giving way to exhilaration, as Sammy realised that the robbery had gone as intended:

> I felt awesome, you know? I think at that – like, in that instant, I sort of felt in control, powerful. But, you know, now, when I think about it, I was very scared at the same time … But I sort of had something to prove.

Sammy went on to commit a further two armed robberies, but was eventually convicted of all three, and was serving five and a half years in custody at the time of interview.

Sammy's story is by no means unique, but articulated here to reveal the cocktail of emotions beyond the anticipation of monetary reward that can be experienced before, during and after armed robbery; fear, anxiety, excitement and adrenaline surge through the veins of the armed robber as if administered arterially. Similarly, Lindegaard et al. (2013) have identified five

different emotions that robbers experience over the course of a robbery: happiness, challenge, shame, anger and fear. Drawing upon interviews with 14 men convicted of armed robbery in Australia, this paper seeks to expound upon the heightened sensory experiences that are part of the appeal of this crime type. It explores the multifarious motivations of offenders, with the usual suspects such as monetary reward and drug-fuelled crime represented, but also begins to unveil the distinctive hedonic thrills, sensory stimulation, fear arousal, power and control that armed robbery provides.

Beyond Rationality: Affective Transgression and Armed Robbery

Some studies portray armed robbers as rational actors pursuing substantial financial reward for relatively little time and effort (see Feeney and Weir 1986; Gill 2000; Morrison and O'Donnell 1996). Morrison and O'Donnell (1996:183) assessed their 88 incarcerated interviewees as making 'logical calculations' on 'reasonably well-founded, balanced and accurate appraisal of the odds'. However, others dismiss the rational choice theorising. Matthews (2002:37) suggests that it 'reduces a complex process of motivation into an unrealistic dichotomy of rational/irrational action', pointing out that many of his interviewees were under the influence of drugs during the robbery (although, arguably, this could be seen as part of a rational calculation in order to increase confidence and dampen inhibitions), were desperate for money, had little awareness of how much money was available and lacked much prior knowledge of security arrangements.

Wright and Decker (1994:36) noted that criminal behaviour often germinated following a period of 'intense self-indulgence', situating the offences of their participants in a commitment to a street culture that celebrates transgressive acts, gambling, excessive alcohol and drug use, overt consumerism, casual violence, disdain for deferred gratification and a fast-living hedonistic lifestyle – a far more nuanced and complex pathway to armed robbery than the rational and reasoning offenders depicted by, for example, Gill (2000) and Morrison and O'Donnell (1996). Furthermore, several scholars (Cornish and Clarke 1986; Cromwell et al. 1991; Taylor 2014) have suggested that offenders often impose reconstructed or 'fictional rationality' (Matthews 2002:38), on post hoc explanations of their offences, where in reality the offences are more viscerally compelled, impulsive and chaotic.

Criminology's continued emphasis on rational cognitive reasoning and the background

structural factors of crime has long been critiqued (De Haan and Loader 2002; Katz 1988). Despite emotional arousal being 'deeply and intimately implicated' in criminal activity, 'the emotions remain a somewhat peripheral topic within theoretical criminology' (De Haan and Loader 2002: 243; see also Van Gelder et al. 2014). Broad social and cultural conditions provide vital clues to the etiology of criminal engagement, but in addition to the background factors often associated with a propensity to crime (low educational attainment, poor socioeconomic status, violent upbringing, and so on), the situational dynamics and foreground moments of armed robbery elucidate why it is that certain crimes are pursued over others. As Ferrel (2007: 3–4) declares, 'rational choice theory and similar criminological theories founded on assumptions of instrumental rationality miss … the very essence of much everyday criminality: pleasure, excitement, anger, and risk'.

This paper aims to reveal some of the more affective and emotional aspects of armed robbery, alongside the more familiar cognitive considerations that often feature in theories of criminal decision making. Drawing upon interviews with 14 convicted armed robbers, the paper seeks to excavate the cultural, situational and emotional dynamics that drive their offences. In doing so, it reveals the ways in which commercial robbery is experienced, thus unveiling clues as to the etiology and continuance of this crime type beyond the more established criminological paradigms of instrumental rationality and the reasoning criminal.

Methodology

Findings presented are drawn from 14 interviews with individuals who had been convicted of armed robbery. The interviews took place in one prison between October and November 2013. Participants had a 'most serious offence' (MSO) of 'armed robbery' and had been convicted within 18 months prior to interview. Their records were reviewed to select those who had targeted commercial premises (rather than street robberies; although some had engaged in both). Interviews were semi-structured and explored a broad range of topics, including target selection, items stolen, perceived reasons for the onset of criminal behaviour and possible avenues for desistance. Respondents were also asked to talk about the most recent commercial robbery offence that they had committed, verbalising the process from conception to spending the proceeds (if any). This revealed the peculiarities of the performance of armed robbery, including the words chosen to utter in order to take command, and the roller-coaster of emotions experienced.

For the most part, interviews flowed fluidly and developed organically, covering themes in varied orders and with different depth of focus: from planning and reconnaissance to drugs and alcohol, from choice of weapon to family background. There was the occasional request for reassurance from some participants that the findings would be reported anonymously and intermittent queries along the lines of 'should I tell you that?',[1] but on the whole the interviewees appeared open, unreserved and truthful. Access was not provided to detailed individual criminal records, but accounts tallied with the overview of each individual given and accounts provided by the prison officer assisting with the project.

Initially, participants were asked to choose a name by which to be referred to in any publications, but all were happy to use their real name or be allocated a pseudonym. It was decided to draw all pseudonyms from an online source of 'popular Australian names'. The age provided is the age of the individual at the time of interview. All interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewee (and prison) and fully transcribed. While the small sample size limits the ability to generalise, the strength of the study lies in accessing a 'hard to reach' population and exploring in depth their pathway to armed robbery and beyond. It became apparent that, while rewards in the form of material gains certainly featured, the act of armed robbery furnished a number of other latent goals.

Banks to 'Bottlos': The Changing Profile of Armed Robbery in Australia

There have been several ethnographic and interview-based studies with armed robbers, in the USA (Wright and Decker 1994), the UK (Gill 2000; Matthews 2002; Morrison and O'Donnell, 1996) and Australia (Nugent et al. 1989). However, it is important to recognise that these studies are becoming perceptibly dated. In Australia the last piece of research published that involved engagement with offenders reports on interview data collected in the 1980s (Nugent et al. 1989). Importantly, this means that the findings mostly predate the significant changes in target selection and level of financial gain that have become apparent in recent years. As Willis (2006) observed a decade ago:

[1] Participants had been asked not to reveal the specific details (times, names, locations) of offences they had committed but had not been convicted of. Researchers are obligated under section 316 (4) of the Crimes Act 1900 (NSW) to report any crimes an offender confesses to but has not been convicted of should sufficient detail be provided.

> [D]iscussion around offender decision making processes is drawn from material that is now 10 or more years old. This suggests that new research is needed in this area, especially in view of advancements in security technology and possible changes in the armed robber offender profile.

Although, overall, armed robbery has been declining in Australia since a peak in 2006 (Borzycki and Fuller 2014; Taylor *forthcoming*), disentangling the multifarious different behaviours, situational dynamics and modi operandi that comprise this crime category reveals more complex and nuanced trends. Recent data suggest that 'softer' commercial targets such as service stations, hotels, pubs, clubs, supermarkets and restaurants are now more likely to be victimised than banks or financial institutions (Borzycki 2006; Willis 2006; Taylor *forthcoming*). For example, between 1993 and 2000, the incidence of armed robbery of service stations in Australia increased by 214 per cent (AIC 2002), and this trend continued, with a 31 per cent increase in the number of incidents in 2004–6 (Smith et al. 2009). Correspondingly, the financial yield of armed robbery has become less lucrative. In Australia, more than half (57 per cent) of armed robberies for which property value was available resulted in losses of less than $500; only 4 per cent caused losses over $10,000. Even the most 'lucrative' incidents, usually involving firearms and a level of planning, resulted in the following average returns: unspecified retailers ($6,335), banking and financial locations ($6,917), licensed premises ($7,362). Internationally many studies have reported the financial gains of robbery to be 'surprisingly low' (Baumeister 2001; Katz 1988; Matthews 2002:33).

Over the past two decades this shift in target selection has been partly attributed to new security measures and situational crime prevention strategies, resulting in displacement to softer targets such as liquor stores ('bottlos') and service stations (Mouzos and Borzycki 2003). Indeed, the comparative ease with which these targets can be held up have earned them the label 'stop and robs' among some offenders (Petrosino and Brensibler 2003). How this change in target selection has instigated a parallel change in the conduct and performance of offences remains poorly understood. Wright et al. (2006:1) point to 'increasing evidence that the situational dynamics of robberies in Britain are changing, with offences becoming correspondingly more spontaneous and desperate'.

Not only has the situational profile of armed robbery shifted dramatically; so has the profile of offenders. Hobbs (1995:9) observes that armed robbery, once regarded as having a

measure of professional conduct, has descended 'into haphazard, essentially amateur excursions featuring minimal planning, a low level of competence, and a lack of commitment'. Similarly, Matthews (2002:22) attests:

> Contrary to popular opinion, the largest group of known commercial robbers are not the sophisticated career robbers who meticulously plan and execute their crimes but a motley group of amateurs and novices who engage in little planning and often seem unaware of the consequences of their actions. These amateurs are generally characterised by their low level of organisation, their selection of more accessible targets, their lack of experience, their relation to violence and their use of weapons. They will tend to operate alone, they aim for relatively small amounts of money and they have had a history of 'failed' or 'attempted' robberies. In many cases the robberies appear as little more than acts of desperation, usually because the person needs money quickly to pay off debts, to buy necessities or to support a drug habit.

The displacement of armed robbery from banks and financial institutions to 'softer' targets can be considered a largely rational response by offenders (see Repetto 1976 on displacement), as can committing robbery when there is a perceived need to obtain money more quickly than legitimate means of income generation would provide (to pay debts, buy drugs or other pressing needs), even if the returns are not substantial. However, while for some, the low rewards and high-risk nature of an impulsive robbery still resonates with rationality, it also exposes that, for other offenders, there are gains in the offing beyond financial reward. Disentangling these offenders from the broad taxonomy of 'armed robbery' brings into sharp relief a cohort of opportunistic and amateur offenders that typically commit this high-risk serious violent crime for what most people would consider very little reward and raises some pertinent issues for offender decision making, not least a need to explore phenomenological, visceral and emotional drivers in addition to monetary gains.

On the Edge of Reason: Motivations for Armed Robbery in Australia

The shifting profile of target selection was explicit among the interviewees: several stated that they would never target a bank due to the elevated risks and likelihood of getting caught. As Ben (19) explained, 'a lot of banks these days have too high security'. Jesse (22) calculated that he would 'never be able to get away with' robbing a bank:

> They've set up a lot of plans, you know, and they've got the fly-up thing and it's just too high a risk. If you get caught for doing a bank, you'll get a lot more [longer sentence] than you would for doing a pizza shop.

Exemplifying the more reasoning offender, Chris had been convicted of conspiracy for the detailed planning of a robbery and was serving up to six and a half years. Below he explains his process of conducting a 'risk assessment', as he termed it:

> Basically, if you're doing risk assessment, you pick the location, the police station, the estimated response time from a panic button or a phone call and for them to get to you and you to get to somewhere where you can get away. So there's a lot of planning that goes into it in order to make sure [of] your success ... So, when I do a risk assessment, you have to weigh up the chance of getting caught, the money you're going to get from it and whether it's worth doing; so there are those three things. So, if you look at it – in the conspiracy that I got done for, I did a risk assessment so I could get out of doing the actual crime; I thought, 'Oh, well, I'll do this and then you guys can go for it.' The robbery never took place, but we got sentenced for the planning of it.

It was his 36th birthday on the day of the interview and he'd been ruminating about his sentence, feeling particularly resentful that the robbery had never actually taken place yet he was still given a lengthy custodial sentence. Chris was aggrieved, more specifically, that the planning he'd put into it, he claimed, resulted in his conviction; meanwhile, echoing Hobbs's description (above) of incompetent 'amateur excursions', he lamented the way in which drug-affected offenders were undermining the skill of armed robbery:

> Look, most of the servos [service stations] are done by little ice junkies that have no concept of time, so they think it up and they say, 'Let's do it,' and it's done. And most of the time they aren't prepared and they go with whatever they can get: a pocketknife or a pair of scissors or a syringe … All the runabouts, all the users: they'll do it just for a free hit; and that's where the idiots come from that give [us] a bad name.

This reveals that offenders themselves are aware of the disjuncture in modus operandi between drug-affected amateur offenders and those who engage in meticulous planning in the

hope of elevated rewards. Chris was, however, the exception in this sample. His professional approach and rigorous planning singled him out from the other participants; indeed, he had a background in retail loss prevention. For most, the motives for and performance of robbery existed closer to the edge of reason.

Material Gains

Of course, monetary gain featured highly in the self-reported reasons for committing armed robbery among the cohort of offenders, and for some the rewards could be substantial. For example, the robbery of the betting shop described by Sammy above yielded $33,000 (although it was split three ways); and Liam (31) reported getting 'seven or eight thousand' dollars (split between two), but these were exceptions. Often the rewards for amateur opportunistic offences that involve little planning are low: typically, the non-professional armed robber will simply 'take whatever's in the till and three bottles – whatever you can carry – and out you go. It's not a lot…' (Chris, 36). Billy (20) was succinct in describing what he looked to get out of a 'rob': 'cash and grog and smokes'. Josh, aged 29 at the time of interview, was serving seven years, having committed 'probably four or five' hold-ups; he described the allure of quick and easy cash as his motivating factor;

> Money. It was fast money, like easy … You don't have to sell merchandise or, you know? … It's really all about the money, you want to get as much as you can. You don't want to walk in there and get 200 bucks or something, you know.

Ben (19) pursued armed robbery for 'money, heaps of money' and had set his threshold of the acceptable minimum amount as 'at least a minimum of two grand'.

Other interviewees had particularly modest hopes, given the risks involved. For example, Jesse (22) was quite happy with the relatively low rewards that a liquor store rather than a bank might yield, even though this meant having to commit more frequent crimes:

> Some people do say, 'Go out the back, I want the money out of the safe', but I personally would never do that. [It's] too much stuffing around, you know? Like, I'd rather just – because I don't need that much money – I don't want $20,000 or $10,000; it'd be good, but I'm only after a thousand or two, maybe $500.

Kai (27) stated that he 'wasn't expecting nothing [anything]' from the robbery, but after just 49 seconds found himself with 'fifteen hundred dollars', 'bottles of liquor' and 'about eight cartons of smokes' and reported that he would have been pleased with that had he not been caught at the scene. Similarly, Cameron's (27) first hold-up resulted in 'under a thousand' dollars: while he 'wasn't ecstatic' or 'over the moon', he was on the whole happy that he 'was a thousand dollars richer'.

Thus, while materialistic reward certainly featured in the motivations for armed robbery, it appears to be just part of the picture. The non-utilitarianism of many offences suggests that other factors are woven into their etiology. As Chris (36) reflected:

> You've gotta think why [not] do a burg? [Why not] plan to go back after-hours and ram raid and steal as much alcohol as you can and as many smokes as you can?

Chris reveals through his rhetorical questioning that there may well be other drivers in play, since other types of crime would provide greater financial return for, in all likelihood, less risk. Perhaps there are, as Katz said in my opening quotation, some '*distinctive* attractions of robbery' (1988:3). As the numbers of professional armed robbers dwindle, the opportunists targeting low-yield stores are thrown into sharp relief. Focusing on this cohort reveals some of the more nuanced aspects of motivation and decision making among armed robbers.

Drugs and Alcohol

Not surprisingly, drugs and alcohol featured heavily in the offenders' discussions about how they came to commit an armed robbery. Matthews's (2002) research in England found that the relationship between drugs and armed robbery takes two major forms: in some cases the need to get money to buy drugs was the causal factor, whereas in others the offender's intoxication disinhibited them to the extent that they committed the crime. This latter group was further divided in this cohort between those who had decided to commit the robbery beforehand and used drugs or alcohol to give them confidence or calm their nerves and those who had imbibed substances which triggered a desire to commit the robbery.

Committing armed robbery for money to buy drugs

Individuals who reported committing armed robbery to buy drugs often described their situation as 'desperate'. This desperation often accrued as part of a broader set of highly arousing emotions, including anger and fear, that influence judgement and decision making (Topalli and Wright 2013). Typically, offenders in the present study would be starting to withdraw – 'hanging out' – and would become increasingly frantic about generating the cash for their next hit. Kenny (56) was one of only two interviewees who admitted to being a heroin user; he attributed his armed robbery to 'total desperation' for drugs. Billy (20) smoked crack, to which he ascribed some causality for his offences:

> If I never started smoking that [crack], I probably would have never done a crime in my life. But, you know, you start smoking, you pick up an addiction and then you need to feed that addiction … If you're hanging out for it, that's when you think, 'I've got to do this so I can get on', you know? Like you give yourself no other alternative; there's no other choice so you have to do it. You're pretty well telling yourself you have to do it.

Most drug-affected offenders in the sample were using methamphetamine, referred to colloquially as 'ice'. Jayden (25) described commercial robbery as a 'junkies' crime' with the cognitive process limited to 'I've got no money; I need to get a fix; I'm going to rob a servo straightaway'. Other respondents agreed:

> If you go on ice every day, you just become desperate for it 'til the day you'll do something like that. (Murray, 32)

> Well, with the ice, because it costs so much and it takes you out of the normal normalness, like, inside your head. You think crazy thoughts and that. So I started to look for more money. (Jesse, 22)

Using drugs/alcohol to boost confidence

Another cohort decided they were going to commit the crime – although they had not necessarily progressed any details such as the target – and consumed drugs and/or alcohol in order to give them the confidence to do so.

> Sometimes [I'd take drugs before a robbery], only if I had it. It would be good because it does build your confidence, especially ice. If you have a whole lot of ice before it, you think you're invincible. (Jesse, 22)

Armed robbery after consuming drugs/alcohol without previous intention

Nick, 37, had 'hit the heroin' after splitting up with his wife. He claims his one and only criminal offence was the armed robbery he was serving time for at the time of interview, and explains that it was drugs, but not heroin, that was the causal factor:

> I was waiting for my dealer and I was hanging out [withdrawing] and one of my mates said to me, 'Fucking take a few of these pills', and I took a handful of pills. Yeah, I was smashed off my face on Xanax and went and did an armed robbery … I didn't know until my mates told me that night that I actually did it. (Nick, 37)

Similarly, Josh reasons that taking ice gave him a 'drive' to commit robbery, whereas Ben outlined how excessive alcohol impaired his decision making and resulted in him doing 'silly things' like armed robbery:

> Like, there's no way I would have done it if I wasn't on drugs. Like, I'm just not that sort of person, but the drugs just gave me that drive, I guess. (Josh, 29)

> I reckon robbery's a stupid, silly thing to do but when I drink, I think stupid and silly things are good to do … you don't even know if there's money there or not, and, um, you could get hurt; a person could hurt you or you could hurt someone and the police take it very seriously. (Ben, age 19)

The robberies committed by the drug-affected individuals in this study were largely impulsive, chaotic, involved very little, if any, planning, and resulted in comparatively low yields. Problematising the rationality doctrine, it can also be temporal: what can appear to be a rational decision at one moment becomes illogical the next. As Matt (27) in the present study reported, contrary to the common after-the-fact rationalisations in offender interviews, he experienced the inverse. He was serving four years' custody followed by two years' parole for six armed robberies. He explained that all of the robberies he'd committed 'were for

different reasons', but that 'It's nothing that really makes sense, if you know what I mean? Like, at the time they made sense; but, when you sober up and look back, you think "you idiot".'

Thrills, Spills and Stick-ups: Armed Robbery and Affective Transgression

Several participants revealed the adrenaline rushes and thrills that were distinctive to this crime type as a contributory factor in their offending and explained how the pleasure derived from the crime becomes as addictive, if not more so, than the drug habit they are robbing to feed. As Kenny (56) explained:

> **Kenny:** It was like – um – not only did I have a heroin addiction to feed, I also had a criminal addiction to feed. It was like – um – because my day wasn't complete unless I did a robbery of some sort, yeah. Just like the heroin, you know: you've got to have that every day; I've got to do a robbery every day as well, you know, yeah.
> **ET:** So you were getting a buzz from it?
> **Kenny:** Oh, yeah; geez, yeah; yep, yep, yeah.

In a similar vein to Kenny, Billy (20) stated, 'I prefer armed robbery [to other types of acquisitive crime]', due to 'the thrill I get from it', thus clearly revealing some non-instrumental motives underscoring his criminal activity.

Developing a sociology of risk-taking, Lyng (1990) borrowed Hunter S. Thompson's terminology to introduce the concept of 'edgework' – the voluntary pursuit of risky behaviours in order to fulfil a need to order one's existence through excitement and thrills. This perspective explains how individuals derive intense sensual experiences from high-risk pursuits. Edgeworkers possess:

> [T]he ability to maintain control over a situation that verges on complete chaos, a situation most people would regard as entirely uncontrollable. The more specific aptitudes required for this type of competence involve the ability to avoid being paralyzed by fear and the capacity to focus one's attention and actions on what is most crucial for survival. (Lyng 1990:859)

A characteristic of edgework is that the 'individual typically feels a significant degree of fear during the initial, anticipatory phases of the experience … But as one moves to the final phases of the experience, fear gives way to a sense of exhilaration and omnipotence' (Lyng 1990:860). Encapsulating this transitory phase from fear to exhilaration, Josh (29) described robbery as being 'intimidating; an adrenaline rush, but scary at the same time'; similarly, Murray (32) said, 'My adrenaline was going really fast and my heart was going fast and things like that'. When asked what he thought of armed robbery, Sammy described being 'pumped up on adrenaline and fear'. Perhaps reflecting to some extent the 'entrepreneurialism and consumption' (Hall et al. 2008:13) that underpins a new wave of consumer-driven criminality, he declared:

> It's addictive … It's like a universal sort of tool you can use to get yourself out of a jam, you know? Like, if your bills are running high or you want to treat yourself to a nice new car or something, how are you going to go about it?

Reference to 'adrenaline' was common throughout the interviews, and it was apparent that the word was used to capture a specific corporeal feeling that was perhaps ineffable to those who had not experienced it. For some, the high delivered by an armed robbery was so seductive that they immediately craved the sensation again, as Matt (27) elucidates:

> The person I was with was just driving past and I said, 'pull in here', and I did that [armed robbery], and then got a big buzz out of it and then drove down the street and did another one four minutes later … And about an hour later, I robbed another servo.

It has been shown that many violent acts may be enjoyable for perpetrators, not due to sadistic tendencies, but rather for those, particularly undersocialized male adolescents, who seek out thrills and excitement to counter a sense that most of life is boring (Forsyth and Marckese 1993; Larkin 1979; Pfefferbaum and Wood 1994). Baumeister and Campbell (1999) recognise that 'acts of violence and aggression can provide such thrills, and therefore, in an important sense, evil acts can be fun'. In this way, armed robbery offers 'the criminal an opportunity for a passionate, intensely authentic experience' (Lyng 2004:361). Countering an otherwise mundane lifestyle characterised by boredom and the banality of unemployment and a lack of prospects, armed robbery delivered a hit. The money gained would be used to transcend the dullness of everyday life and enter a euphoric haze of excessive drug and

alcohol use and partying. Typical purchases included clothes, alcohol and drugs. Ben (19) explained: 'First you got to get away from there [scene of robbery], get out of the car and then, um, get rid of your clothes and count your money and party …'. Billy (20) had similar objectives:

> **ET:** What do you do straight afterwards?
> **Billy:** Go get on [score drugs] and then go back to my place, charge up for a bit, and then go out and do the same thing that night.
> **ET:** So 'charge up': is that—
> **Billy:** Get on the ice or get drunk.

Alluding to the carnivalesque and hedonic spills of crime, on the rare occasion that a substantial amount of money was acquired, the robbers in this sample reported that it would be spent immediately, usually all of it in just a few days.

> **ET:** How long would $17,000 last?
> **Billy:** Two days at the most.
> **ET:** Seriously?
> **Billy:** Yeah … I just can't help it; I can't help it. That's why I'm back out there doing it again that night.

Topalli and Wright (2013:43) describe the 'intensity and grim determination' that often characterises the post-stick-up partying: pure hedonic indulgence, but of such intensity, such reckless abandon, that it transcends pleasure and becomes self-destructive. Indeed, during this complete surrender of inhibitions, further crime is often committed.

Katz (1988:198) describes how some 'stickup men' construct their lives so as to be dominated by action; but their participation takes on a 'temporal form', episodic and cyclical 'so that they can get into the action more or less spontaneously and with an air of indefinitely extended commitment'. The men in the present study, similarly, set in motion a cycle whereby the profits would be almost immediately spent on 'partying', thus requiring further criminal activity just a few days later. This cyclical behavior of boom and bust creates 'an environment of pressures that guide them back towards crime' (Katz 1988:216).

While the proceeds of robbery enabled the offenders to be 'high-rolling big shots for a few days' (Baumeister 2001:110), funding a spending spree mainly on hedonistic pursuits including drugs, alcohol, women and gambling, for many of these men an offence well executed is currency enough, providing things of value that money can't buy. Another of Katz's '*distinctive* attractions of robbery' is that it elevates status among peers. It is regarded as a hyper-masculine pursuit; to men suffering from what Cohen (1955) would describe as considerable 'status frustration', part of the appeal of robbery was the prestige that couldn't be accessed through legitimate means. Jayden (25) stated that he progressed to armed robbery, committing 'four or five', because he was 'trying to impress people'; similarly, Cameron (27) 'thought it might be cool to be bad'. Compared to other crime types:

> Robbery's an A-class crime, like you know – like it's a proper crime instead of like, you know, breaking and enters and shit like that. Like, yeah; robbery puts you on a whole different scale… yeah its silly the way it all works; but yeah – like the more violent the crime is, yeah, the more respect you get. (Nick, 37)

> In here, it's different: you actually get respect for higher crime. Like, I'm in here for armed rob and people are like, 'Oh yeah,' and they think – they don't think that a little guy like me would do that. And yet, when I tell 'em the story, they just think, 'What?!' They think that I don't really – would have had it in me, so they know – I'm not a tough guy, but obviously mentally I am, sort of, because I did it by myself; yeah. (Jesse, 22)

Clearly, for some the sensations experienced before, during and after a robbery, and the status and respect it brings to one's identity, enabling them to transcend feelings of being a 'nobody', are delectable and compelling.

Hall et al. (2008:83) cite a 'dedicated' criminal, Tony, who dismisses the view that the thrill and excitement can provide a causal explanation: 'These fuckers who say people do it for the buzz, for some sort of jolly, what a load of shit. You don't fucking risk your liberty for a buzz'. This is probably true for most 'rational' criminals, but, as has been demonstrated, overstates the motivation of money as the sole driving factor for many criminals. He goes on:

> You do it to get things you couldn't get any other way. Fair enough, it is exciting sometimes, I've been on a couple of ram-raids, getting chased and stuff, of course it's a buzz… But that's like an extra, it's not the reason you do it, though. There's fuck all excitement in spending weeks planning something and not getting it…

Tony, like Chris in the present study, is a more professionally inclined criminal, able to defer gratification and plan his offences in the hope of elevated rewards. And therein lies the distinction between the professionals and amateurs: the amateur, particularly the drug-affected, doesn't spend *any* time planning or on reconnaissance; it's an immediate impulsive decision. Among this cohort the impetus becomes inverted – the crime is committed in part for the phenomenological foreground rewards of excitement, feelings of self-determination, control and adrenaline; the money, smokes and grog become the bonus.

Discussion: Crime as Defibrillation

Interviews with armed robbers in Australia reveal a compound of complex reasons for the offence, ranging from instrumentalism to hedonism. At times rationality appeared fallacious – the expectation and acceptance of low rewards (although sometimes accompanied by a glimmer of hope akin to one playing the lottery) for committing a high-risk serious crime exposed additional less rational reasons for robbery. Apter (1992) described the seductive appeal of risky behaviour as an escape from boredom, and the alleviation of the mundane reality of everyday life. Reflecting this, Billy (20) shrugged off armed robbery as just 'something to do'. Similarly, Liam (31) described his pathway into crime: he committed his first hold-up at the age of 12 to alleviate the boredom associated with long days just kicking about with friends: 'It started off out of boredom, you know, not going to school or anything. So it was just that, all day, boredom and, you know, money, grog...'. Poor or non-existent school attendance followed by the sheer ennui of low-paid routine employment, or long stints of unemployment, as was often the case, characterised the lives of many of these men. The days merged into one continuous blur, punctuated only by the highs of illicit drug taking, or numbed by excessive alcohol use. The absence of sensory stimulation propagated a thirst for hedonic pleasures satiated only by the extremes of criminal activity.

An exchange with Billy, a 20-year-old crack and speed user, who admitted that he was

committing 'spur of the moment' street and retail robberies 'at least once a week' until being imprisoned, revealed that, in addition to wanting 'quick cash', self-medicating his depression was a primary etiological factor in his offences:

> **ET**: So, money… Are there any other reasons?
> **Billy:** Depressive.
> **ET**: How does the robbery help?
> **Billy**: I don't know; it makes you *feel*. Makes you feel more alive; makes you feel better about yourself. More…
> **ET**: More…?
> **Billy**: Yeah, in control; more confident of yourself, knowing that you can do stuff, yeah.

Suffering from sensory asystole, it is only the most extreme and risky behaviour, in the form of serious violent crime, that can revive a life otherwise flatlining and out of control. For Billy, armed robbery could resuscitate, as if through defibrillation, a life otherwise devoid of responsivity due to excessive drug use, depression and lack of prospect, even if only temporarily. The crime was self-actualising, able to penetrate the fog that had descended over his life, and made him feel alive. In a bid to alter his emotional state, Billy engages in extreme and risky behaviour. Leith and Baumeister (1996:1250) explain how unpleasant emotional states can instigate self-defeating and risky behaviours:

> [N]egative affect causes people to make choices in a way that leads to nonoptimal courses of action: Specifically, one that may indeed hold out the chance of some highly positive outcome but also carries substantial risks or costs. More precisely, when people are upset, they tend to choose high-risk, high-payoff options.

In other words, they become focused on the 'gains rather than the immediate pains when getting involved in robberies' (Lindegaard et al. 2013:74). Armed robbery delivered the sensory surge craved by these men to counter their otherwise bleak everyday life in a 'bulimic' society, 'that choruses the liberal mantra of liberty, equality and fraternity yet systematically in the job market, on the streets, in the day-to-day contacts with the outside world, practises exclusion' (Young 2003:395). Crime can provide offenders with an opportunity to construct an identity of bravery and competency as well as asserting control over a life that is otherwise stagnating. Thus crime can be 'viewed as everyday responses to lives lived out within deprived, brutalized and often lonely social locations' (Presdee 2004:279). Given the sheer tedium and fatalism described by some offenders, it was apparent

that crime provided a shot of exuberance and pleasure and, when committed with others, a sense of companionship and belonging, enabling them to reach an affective state of euphoria, however temporary.

Conclusion

Clearly the pathways that lead to committing an armed robbery are multiple and varied. Monetary gain featured heavily in the self-reported accounts of why these men were incarcerated for serious violent crime in Australia. However, a review of their accounts illustrates that financial reward alone does not provide insight into the distinctive characteristics of armed robbery that make it more appealing to acquisitive criminals than other property crimes. This paper has outlined the relationship between drugs and armed robbery, highlighting how, at times, being under the influence of illicit drugs or alcohol is in itself a rational decision (countering Matthews 2002) in order to surrender all inhibitions and transcend social and behavioural conventions. In addition, it has identified the numerous ways that armed robbers derive pleasure, enjoyment and satisfaction from the offences.

Drawing upon a 'hard to reach' population, the findings provide a rare opportunity to explore, from the perspective of robbers themselves, the visceral feelings and emotions that accompany the performance of the crime. The concept of crime as defibrillation has been introduced to account for both affective transgression and bounded rationality. Sometimes a direct injection of high-risk adrenaline is all that can penetrate the haze that descends over a life of long-term drug abuse steeped in a lack of stimulus and long-faded motivation to try and get by via institutionally approved means. Limiting understanding to the dialectic of risk-and-reward rational calculations cavalierly overlooks phenomenological considerations that also influence the decision-making process, producing a rather naïve and simplistic account of offenders. The findings from the present study of armed robbery in Australia suggests that the perception of offenders as rational thinkers motivated solely by anticipated financial rewards is largely inaccurate for this cohort.

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