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The natural history of street-level criminality: Self-perceptions of vincibility and a persistent offender's motive for desistance

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Abstract

This article examines a persistent offender's desistance narrative through a criminological case study. It is argued here that the motive for desistance is rooted in self-perceptions of vincibility and fear of predation, as opposed to positive life-course turning points or benevolent alterations in identity. The case study subject is compelled to desist because he perceives himself as aging and increasingly vulnerable to predation. In this analysis, past experiences of both violent crime victimization and offending illuminate the etiology of the subject's attitudes towards physical vulnerabilities, as well as the effects of physical weakness on safekeeping. This paper demonstrates the importance of the lifestyle-exposure framework in efforts to explain street-level crime, violence, and desistance.

Key words

Desistance; Case Studies; Life histories; Lifestyle-exposure theory; Narrative criminology; Street crime

Introduction

Victimology and desistance are typically addressed as separate and distinct areas of criminological study. This article draws from both theoretical domains in its examination of a persistent offender's own story. This criminological case study examines the narrative exhibited by an individual who desires an end to a long and ostensibly successful criminal career. The analysis of the subject's account illuminates the etiological role of perceptible physical vulnerabilities in street-crime victimization, while also dramatically demonstrating the tragic nature of an impoverished lifestyle replete with criminality. This paper argues that elements of Hindelang, Gottfredson, and Garofalo's (1978) lifestyle-exposure theory—particularly the precipitating factors of victim *convenience*, *desirability*, and *vincibility*—capably assist in explicating the study subject's victimization and offending experiences as well as his emerging desistance narrative.

This study reveals how formative past events shape emerging attitudes toward discernable physical frailties, particularly in regards to how such vulnerabilities precipitate victimization. After forty years of chronic poverty, and a decades-long career in street-level criminality, the subject of this analysis begins to see in himself those same antecedents to predatory violence, thus informing a fatalistic outlook regarding his own ability to successfully pursue a criminal career into later life. Building on a subset of Shover's (1985) findings on aging criminals, this paper examines the relationship between self-perceptions of age-related physiological deterioration and an individual's motive for terminating a decades-long criminal career. This argument illustrates the continued relevance of Hindelang et al.'s (1978) theoretical propositions in the study of street crime victimization and desistance.

Victimization, street crime, and homelessness

Opportunity theories recognize that crime and violence disproportionately affect certain individuals, groups, and locations, positing that victimization is the product of a criminogenic merging of circumstances (see Fisher, Reyens, & Sloan, 2016). This ecological perspective includes the frequently cited routine activities theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979), as well as Hindelang et al.'s (1978) more victim-centric lifestyle-exposure framework, a central tenet of which argues, inter alia, that variations in lifestyle are associated with differential exposures to victimization (Garofalo, 1987; Gottfredson, 1981; see also Tyler & Beal, 2010). Delineated within the lifestyle-exposure framework are the postulates of Hindelang et al.'s (1978) theory of personal victimization,¹ which primarily describe how routine behaviors and personal associations increase risk of encountering predatory offenders. According to this opportunity perspective, the probability that a person will cross paths

¹ Hindelang et al.'s (1978) theory of personal crime victimization lists eight propositions. The first seven concepts describe victim behavior, while the eighth and final proposition views the selection of a victim from the perspective of the offender:

- (1) The probability of victimization is directly related to the amount of time spent in public places.
- (2) The probability of being in public places, particularly at night, varies as a function of lifestyle.
- (3) Interactions occur disproportionately among individuals who share similar lifestyles.
- (4) An individual's chances of personal victimization are dependent upon the extent to which the individual shares demographic characteristics with offenders.
- (5) The proportion of time spent among nonfamily members varies as a function of lifestyle.
- (6) The probability of victimization, particularly personal theft, increases as a function of the proportion of time that an individual spends among nonfamily members.
- (7) Variations in lifestyle are associated with variations in the ability of individuals to isolate themselves from persons with offender characteristics.
- (8) Variations in lifestyle are associated with variations in the *convenience*, the *desirability*, and the *vincibility* of the person as a target for personal victimization.

with such an individual—or group of offenders—is associated with the nature, timing, and location of chosen activities. Although the lifestyle-exposure perspective primarily views victimization through the lens of correlating factors associated with victim behavior and social life, this theoretical perspective also acknowledges the importance of offenders' subjective assessments of target attractiveness (Hindelang et al., 1978). Robbery is a quintessential example of a street-crime where time, place, and victim-suitability are integral to victim-offender interactions.

The fundamentally violent interpersonal crime of robbery involves the taking of another's possessions by means of either force or the threat of imminent physical harm (Cook, 1986); violence is therefore applied either reactively or preemptively (Lejeune, 1977). Offenders may prudently limit the application of physical violence, particularly during armed robberies (Cook, 1986; Wright & Decker, 1997), where fear of death or serious bodily injury is often sufficient to ensure a victim's acquiescence (Luckenbill, 1980, 1981). However, victim conduct will not, in and of itself, control the degree of violence applied (Katz, 1991). This is a particularly relevant concern in strong-arm robberies, where control is often established by means of overwhelming or incapacitating force (Cook, 1986; Luckenbill, 1981; see also McCluskey, 2013). Additionally, the decision whether or not to physically harm may include a variety of motives beyond the mere acquisition of valuables (see Bennett & Brookman 2009; Katz, 1988). Such an inherently dangerous behavior frequently results in physical injury (Cook, 1986).

In-the-moment observation factors importantly in an offender's target selection process. Street-robberies are typically spur-of-the-moment events, occurring when likely victims cross paths with opportunistic offenders (Jacobs, 2010). However, as MacDonald (1975) argued, "it is not chance alone that leads to" robbery victimization (p. 174). During the initial phase of a street robbery, the offender will often attempt to minimize risk by selecting what Lejeune (1977) referred to as the "right victim" while minimizing exposure to witnesses and the police (p. 134). During this initial encounter, offenders have the opportunity to subjectively determine the degree to which a prospective victim is vulnerable to attack, what Hindelang et al. (1978) refer to as *vincibility*: the likelihood that a prospective victim can be physically dominated and thus controlled. Consistent with lifestyle-exposure theory's eighth proposition (Hindelang et al., 1978), Jacobs (2000) indicates that those who engage in street-robberies are utilitarian offenders, seeking "the most visible, valuable, accessible, and perceptibly easiest" victim to overcome (p. 47).

Eminently vulnerable populations, such as the elderly, are targeted by predatory offenders when opportunity arises (see Katz, 1988); however, in the aggregate, the elderly are not typically associated with higher rates of victimization (Gottfredson, 1984; Lanier & Dietz, 2009). From the perspective of opportunity theories, such vulnerable populations are more likely to limit their exposure to those places street crimes commonly occur, consequently reducing the probability of encountering offenders (cf. Cohen & Felson, 1979; Hindelang et al., 1978). In accordance with the lifestyle-exposure framework, individuals who either fail to avoid criminogenic environments or are incapable of removing themselves from the purview of predatory offenders, and who are perceptibly less capable of defending themselves, suffer increased risk of victimization (Hindelang et al., 1978). Two populations epitomizing these characteristics are those who engage in criminal behaviors and the homeless.

High rates of victimization occur among those who engage in crime related behaviors (Jennings, Piquero, & Reingle, 2012). Participants in street-level crime are exposed to social environments inhabited by other predatory or opportunistic offenders; as argued by Hindelang et al. (1978), "the nature of the vocational activity in which an individual is involved—an important component of lifestyle—itself affects the freedom to isolate oneself from persons with offender characteristics" (p. 263). This phenomena has also been observed among those who remain

criminally active into later life (Reisig & Holtfreter, 2018). Notably relevant to the present analysis are findings suggesting that those who engage in a “chronic offending lifestyle” increasingly suffer negative health effects, and that the harm associated with such a lifestyle increases “as the fifth decade of life approaches” (Piquero, Shephard, Shephard, & Farrington, 2011, p. 198; see also Piquero, Daigle, Gibson, Piquero, & Tibbets, 2007). The physically dangerous lifestyle associated with criminal offending is an especially relevant concern given the prevalence of petty or low-level criminality among the homeless (Fischer, 1988).

Homelessness, like criminality, increases risk of victimization (Ellsworth, 2019). The totality of injurious factors affecting the homeless result in a lifestyle inimical to both physical health and safety; as homeless persons age, a “constellation of health problems” emerge, including deteriorating perceptions of “health status, functional disability, numerous chronic diseases, and social isolation” (Gelberg, Linn, & Mayer-Oakes, 1990, p. 1228). The homeless suffer elevated rates of traumatic injury (Deck & Platt, 2015), substance abuse (Dietz, 2009), as well as mental illness (Fischer & Breakey, 1991). Furthermore, an unsheltered lifestyle is an inherently dangerous, criminogenic, and victimization-prone life circumstance (Fischer, 1992; Fischer & Breakey, 1991; Fitzpatrick, La Gory, & Ritchey, 1993).

The homeless are also disproportionately exposed to street crimes, particularly robbery, theft, and physical assault (Ellsworth, 2019); and as the homeless age, the dangers associated with living on the streets increase (Cohen, Teresi, & Homes, 1988). The multiple lifestyle-related stresses experienced by marginalized populations are associated with a physiological weathering effect (cf. Geronimus, Hicken, Keene, & Bound, 2006), a significant concern for unsheltered adults, who age as much as ten to twenty years faster than members of the sheltered general public (Brown et al., 2017).

Desistance

According to Laub and Sampson (2001), termination of a criminal career occurs when offending is abandoned, while desistance is defined as “the causal process” supporting termination (p. 11). Positive life changes, such as marriage or joining the military, may effectively sever criminality from the life-course (see Laub & Sampson, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Encountering such life-altering events may lead to the emergence of a prosocial identity (Maruna, 2001), what Paternoster and Bushaw (2009) describe as the adoption of a “positive possible self” image that replaces the “identity of the criminal offender” (p. 1149).

Maruna and Farrall (2004) delineate two phases in this desistance process, the first being primary desistance, which takes “the term desistance at its most basic and literal level to refer to any lull or crime free gap in the course of a criminal career” (p. 174). This temporary absence of criminality contrasts with “secondary desistance: the movement from the behavior of non-offending to the assumption of a role or identity of a non-offender” (Maruna & Farrall, 2004, p. 174). Researchers studying the termination of criminal careers from the perspective of offenders indicate the importance of altering self-identities (Maruna, 2001; Maruna & Farrall, 2004; Shover, 1983); for example, Paternoster and Bushway (2009) suggest desistance occurs when a person becomes dissatisfied with the self-image of a criminal offender. Although it is difficult to pinpoint the moment in time this process begins (Laub & Sampson, 2001), recent qualitative research indicates that offenders’ identities begin to change early in the desistance process (King, 2013).

Any shift in identity inspiring the onset of the desistance process manifests in the form of an internal script, a narrative that researchers may seek access to through ethnographic methodologies. However, the nascent elements of this narrative may not necessarily reflect the adoption of a new, positive identity. Change may be instigated by, as Baumeister (1994) states, a

crystallization of discontent, the “forming of associative links among a multitude of unpleasant, unsatisfactory, and otherwise negative” aspects of “one’s current life situation” (p. 282). For offenders who fail to experience benevolent life-course events or turning points, desistance may be compelled by negative perceptions, including fear; for example, persistent property-crime offenders indicated that the ever-present risk of imprisonment was sufficient motivation to end long-term criminal careers (Shover, 1996).

In his study of aging offenders, Shover (1985) suggests that those individuals who continue offending into their late 30s and early 40s eventually “confront the realization that (1) their criminality has been an unproductive enterprise, and (2) this situation is unlikely to change” (p. 80). In conjunction with the ever-present threat posed by the criminal justice system, older persistent offenders who participated in Shover’s (1985) study also indicated their belief that continued criminality risked serious bodily injury or death; offenders “must deal routinely with other people who may prove unreliable or treacherous”, an individual “known as a successful thief or hustler may appear as a desirable target of the criminal designs of others” (p. 89).

Physical weakness, a concept intrinsically connected with vincibility, incidentally emerged within Shover’s (1985) analysis when one subject explained that he ended his criminal career in part because age made him feel not only tired, but also “weak” (p. 90). The present study approaches desistance as a process where individuals “creatively and selectively appropriate elements in their environment” as catalysts for change, rather than a singular highly influential event, leading to “fundamental shifts in identity and changes in the meaning and desirability” of criminal behavior (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002, p. 992). One goal of the present analysis is to further develop theoretical concepts described in Shover’s (1985) study of aging criminals.

Narrative criminology

As a method of inquiry, narrative criminology is capable of adroitly analyzing complex and evolving accounts while remaining sensitive to unconscious motivations (Brookman, 2015; Gadd & Farrall, 2004). Narrative criminologists are concerned with “what stories *do*—specifically, how they affect crime” (Presser, 2016, p. 139). An individual’s narrative is neither prewritten nor static; as people’s lives change, their stories evolve: “there is no once-and-for-all life story” (Presser & Sandberg, 2015, p. 3). Each person’s narrative provides insight into major or cataclysmic life-altering events, while also revealing an ever-accumulating number of small, though no less formative, experiences encountered throughout life. Narratives precede behavior, including criminal acts; as Tognato (2015) suggests, the “stories offenders tell” shape their behavior (p. 261).

Individual stories “need to be analyzed as agency conditioned by culture and context” (Sandberg, 2013, p. 69). From the perspective of narrative criminology, illicit behavior is influenced by, and embedded within, a person’s milieu (Tognato, 2015). The analysis of an offender’s own story is, therefore, an investigation into the causes of criminal behavior (Presser, 2009). Stories contain scripts, which in turn organize culturally reinforced “expectations for when to engage in violence, the intensity of violence to be used, and the consequences for inaction” (Lauger, 2014, p. 195). In regards to desistance, narratives instigate, sustain, or otherwise affect decisions to terminate criminal careers (Presser & Sandberg, 2015; Presser, 2008).

This project examines one individual’s crime-related experiences, self-perceptions, and the evolution of his motive for desistance. As Presser and Sandberg (2015) instruct, narratives are the unit of analysis, the “foundational objects of inquiry” (p. 1). The narrative approach towards criminology is a constructivist process (Presser & Sandberg, 2015), where “the presentation of the self can be seen as signaling the reshaping of the self” (O’Connor, 2015, p. 174). Lives change as experiences accumulate, largely because events and interactions, the substrate of experience,

influence self-perceptions. Narratives provide a window into how individuals understand their own lives, illuminating the process by which self-identities evolve. However, a narrative analysis is not limited to uncovering the manner in which past events affect present self-perceptions; how people frame their present-realities may in turn provide clues as to what they wish or desire of the future.

Methodology

This criminological case study emerged from a larger qualitative project investigating street crime victimization within a small Midwestern American city's homeless population. The in-depth analysis of a single subject was inspired by methodologies primarily employed in early 20th-century life history research.² Both the initial larger study and the case study presented in this paper were institutional review board-approved research projects. The present study initially sought to record the life history of the research subject as it pertained to victimization, poverty, and homelessness. The emergence of a desistance narrative was not an initial project goal, but rather an unexpected finding.

The case study subject, referred to throughout the remainder of this article by the pseudonym Joe, was identified in the larger project as a person whose victimization experiences appeared directly connected with his lifestyle. The research subject was recruited from within a population of homeless adults who sought the services of a local outreach center. Joe stood out as one of several respondents who developed rapport with the researcher. He also routinely provided well-articulated and thorough responses to open-ended questions. Additionally, many of the earlier project participants, including Joe, stated they enjoyed having someone to talk to and found the interview process therapeutic.

This case study employs the life history technique, a methodology "grounded in a pragmatist approach to knowledge in which the ultimate test of truth is experience" (Faraday & Plummer, 1979, p. 779). This project uses a hybrid of what Denzin (1970) described as *topical* and *edited* life history methods of data collection.³ Multiple semi-structured interviews were conducted (see Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Mason, 2002), each designed to address a period of the subject's life, initially in ten-year increments. As the interviews progressed, this decade-by-decade structure became increasingly difficult to maintain; regardless of the researcher's schedule, Joe often ventured into areas of his life he either felt important, or in some cases, as he remembered them. Over the course of this weeks-long project, trust broadened between researcher and subject, resulting in increasingly detailed responses. Eight audio-recorded interviews resulted in approximately ten hours of digital recordings. Each recording was transcribed, anonymized, and then verified for accuracy before being manually coded for emergent themes (see Burnard, 1991).

The present study seeks from the research subject his subjective attitudes toward crime- and victimization-related experiences, not as generalizable historical evidence, but rather to inform

² Examples of early sociological case studies depicting variations of the life history approach are exemplified by Sutherland's (1937) *The Professional Thief*, in addition to Shaw's seminal series of criminological life histories: including (1930) *The Jack-Roller*, (1931) *The Natural History of a Delinquent Career*, and (1938) *Brothers in Crime*.

³ Denzin (1970) describes three approaches to collecting autobiographical data, the second two of which informed the present study: (1) *The complete life history* attempts to examine the entirety of a subject's life, including all relevant experiences, for example, Shaw's (1930) extensive study of the life of a juvenile delinquent; (2) Sutherland's (1937) examination of a professional thief is an example of *the topical life history*, which limits its scope to one aspect of the subject's life or career; (3) lastly, an *edited life history* intersperses the scholar's analysis, comments, and explanations throughout the written report. Denzin (1970) argues that "for purposes of theory construction ... some degree of editing and interspersion of observer comments must be present" (p. 223).

our understanding of what it means for him to have lived an inherently dangerous lifestyle. Complex processes, ambiguities, indecisive moments, and contradictions permeate life; the ethnographic nature of such a focus “orients the criminologist to the ongoing, symbolic construction of meaning, and to the shared emotional environments in which such meaning is made” (Ferrell, 2009, p. 16). Drawing from the tradition of symbolic interactionism, the current project examines Joe’s attitudes, definitions, experiences, feelings, and perspectives (see Blumer, 1969; Ulmer & Spencer, 1999). As Faraday and Plummer (1979) suggest, life history methods are congruent with the interactionist approach. As a theoretical orientation, symbolic interactionism focuses on the “emergent and interactive nature of social reality” (Faraday & Plummer, 1979, p. 775).

Through Joe’s narrative, we are privy not only to his tumultuous life, but also his attitudes regarding formative past events—both victimization- and offending-related—which in turn inform his present desistance-narrative. Although Joe stated he was successful throughout his criminal career, he has in more recent years come to see his ability to remain safely active in the shadowy marketplace of the streets as increasingly untenable. This individual’s rationale for desistance emanates from a belief that he is no longer as physically capable of competing in the dangerous world of street-level criminality. Joe’s motive for desistance is placed at the forefront of the theoretical analysis. What follows is a presentation of formative victimization- and offending-related experiences, situated among applicable scholarly literature.

Findings

A street-level offender’s motive for desistance

Joe is an African-American man, born in the mid-1970s, and at the time of his initial interview, was over 40 years of age. He was chronically poor throughout his life. For decades, Joe had been unstably housed, and had experienced increasingly longer periods of homelessness, particularly so during his late 30s and early 40s. Joe did not, however, present as someone who might be described as a stereotypical homeless person; Joe never appeared unwashed or disheveled, and his clothes were consistently clean. At the time of his interviews, Joe appeared of average height and unremarkable weight; therefore, from the perspective of the researcher, Joe was not perceptibly unwell. Nonetheless, Joe felt he was getting older, weaker, and thus less capable of withstanding the physical toll immanent in a dangerous lifestyle:

Joe: I'm getting older. As time goes on, you know, when you get older, your health fails. Everything starts to go down. I don't want to be out here hustling in the streets when I'm 50, 60 years old, because these young kids that are out here today, man, they'd kill me. Because they might want to see what I got and take it from me and this time I might not be lucky if I get jumped or attacked. I might get shot or stabbed or killed or anything like that. I don't want to die that way I don't want to be out there and have some young punk roll up behind me because they think that I have ... a small bag of meth or spice ... and they run up behind me and shoot me. Do you see what I'm saying? I don't want to die at the hands of some young punk or drug dealer or gang member.

When asked about specific health problems, Joe stated he suffered from poor dental health and minor gastrointestinal ailments that prevented him from eating as much as he felt he should. He stated he rarely drank alcoholic beverages, however, he frequently used illicit drugs, particularly methamphetamines, synthetic cannabis, known as “spice”, as well as marijuana. Joe was typically gregarious and talkative; however, when he spoke of his health, age, or future, his demeanor would become sullen or morose. This was especially so when Joe described his keen awareness of his own advancing age.

Professional identity

Joe's fatalistic attitudes emerged from the context of chronic poverty as well as a crime-prone lifestyle. At the time of the interviews, Joe had continuously engaged in various criminal enterprises over a nearly thirty-year period—his entire adult life. Throughout that time span, Joe adapted to an ever-changing criminogenic landscape. His ability to evolve, survive, and avoid conviction for serious or felony offenses helps to explain, at least partially, how he defied the odds and remained criminally active for such a long period. Joe is an example of a life-course-persistent offender (see Moffitt, 1993). Typically, offending is limited to adolescence through young adulthood; however, approximately 5–8 percent of offenders will pursue longer criminal careers (Piquero et al., 2007). Joe's involvement in street-level criminality, as well as his exposure to victimization, began early in life, and continued throughout adulthood.

At various points during Joe's criminal career, he could accurately have been described as a gang member, a car thief, a burglar, an armed robber, or a drug dealer; however, Joe resisted any such labels. He saw himself as a person who does what is necessary to survive on the streets. This characterization captures Joe's view that successful offenders—those that are not caught or killed—learn to respond to an ever-changing and exceedingly dangerous environment. From Joe's point of view, he is a jack-of-all-illicit-trades, an individual who instrumentally and dispassionately employs whatever criminal behavior best fits a given opportunity. Joe is, in his own words, a "street hustler":

Joe: [A hustler is]⁴ a person that has a chance to make money off anything that passes his way. He knows how to push it off, or what to do with it. That's my definition of a hustler; somebody that can do or mess with different things and profit off of it. To make it work for him so he can stay alive If you was put in the situations that I was in and you had to survive, you would figure it out real fast, and you would hustle.

Early life

Joe was born in a large Midwestern American city, and was raised in a predominantly black, low-income inner-city public housing project. Throughout his childhood, Joe had a problematic home life and difficulty at school. Early life influences include the high crime environment in which he was raised, as well as his older siblings' prolific criminality and gang activity. Joe was exposed at a young age to drug dealing, theft, violent street-robberies, assaults, and shootings. In the early 1990s, he followed his brothers into a street gang, a decision precipitated by the killing of a friend. On the day of the murder, Joe was sitting with two other teenagers, one of whom was selling marijuana:

Joe: One day my friend came over. We decided to walk across the field to go get my best friend, cuz he had some liquor that he wanted to drink before class and smoke some weed... On that particular day, this dude was walking up the street. [After] he walked up to us, my friend said, "what you need? What you want? I got you"... when my friend hopped off the wall to serve him, the [dude] shot my friend in the face. ... My friend died right there on the spot.

Gang life and drug dealing

Shortly after the shooting, Joe joined his deceased friend's gang. Joe often spoke nostalgically of the camaraderie and personal relationships he found within the gang, social connections he stated were otherwise largely denied him. Joe also spoke of the tutelage he received in street crime from older

⁴ [Bracketed] words or phrases are either intended to clarify meaning or protect the research subject's anonymity.

and more experienced gang members. Gang participation carries with it social pressures to conform to group norms (see Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Lauger, 2012, 2016). In Joe's experiences, violent street crimes, such as robbery, in addition to drug dealing, were integral aspects of gang participation. Being a low-ranking gang member came with violent crime-related obligations, what Joe referred to as "paying your dues":

Joe: Paying your dues, means you put in work. ... Whenever you put in work, [you] get out there on the block and get on the grind, make some money. Get it how you get it. You know what I'm saying? Get on the grind. Whatever you could show them. Whatever you do to get money... [Including] robbing people, masking up.

Joe's experiences are consistent with prior literature suggesting the criminogenic nature of street gangs, both in regards to their association with offending (Pyrooz, Turanovic, Decker, & Wu, 2016), as well as victimization (Taylor, Peterson, Esbensen, & Feng, 2007). Such experiences instructed Joe in the importance of appearing strong, and by contrast, the dangers associated with being seen as weak:

Joe: They come tell you [that] you gotta be the one to go do it, you gotta do it. You know what I'm saying? If you don't do it, there's punishment You either keep up or get left behind. You get left behind then that means you were weak. [The gang] has no room for the weak.

This concern for the appearance of physical weakness reemerges repeatedly throughout Joe's narrative. From the study subject's perspective, a recognized lack of masculine toughness or strength is a failing worthy of victimization; weakness is therefore perceived as tantamount to inviting predation, or as Joe states:

Joe: [On the streets] it's survival of the fittest ... If you're weak, you better learn how to get strong real fast because they're going to eat you up out here.

Adaptation

For the street-level offender, perceptible vulnerabilities are a notable hazard when reflected in the self, and a potential opportunity when perceived in others. This is an important consideration for low-level street hustlers, such as Joe, who are displaced from one criminal enterprise to another because of factors beyond their control. The once lucrative crack cocaine market of the 1980s and 90s eventually evaporated. Many surviving low- or street-level dealers, such as Joe, found themselves forced to evolve with the changing economic landscape (see Contreras, 2013). From Joe's perspective, impoverished street-level offenders who are displaced from formerly profitable illicit ventures find other, often more violent, sources of revenue:

Joe: They take away your source of income. ... you just gotta find another hustle. If you take [drug dealing] away from them, a person is gonna go to their last resort, which is stick ups ... They gonna get it how they get it, whether they rob you for it, or break in your house for it.

Following the crack-cocaine era, Joe sold a variety of illicit substances, including MDMA or ecstasy, methamphetamines, marijuana, and spice. Joe also intermittently engaged in a variety of property crimes, most notably burglary and car theft, criminal ventures he described as predominantly small in scale. Although Joe would continue to engage in a multifarious array of criminal pursuits, he consistently returned to street-level drug dealing. Generally, Joe found law enforcement an avoidable hazard; he was occasionally arrested, but never successfully prosecuted

for a major felony, thereby avoiding lengthy periods of confinement. However, predation at the hands of criminal offenders was a vastly more problematic concern.

Drug robberies

Like any other commodity, illicit drugs are bought and sold within a marketplace (Jacobs 1999). The process of street-level drug dealing is dangerous for both buyers and sellers; dealers frequently double as opportunistic thieves, swindlers, and robbers, often victimizing customers who are perceived as “soft targets”, frequently addicts or other individuals “deemed unwilling or unable to do much about the mistreatment” (Jacques, Allen, & Wright, 2014, p. 254). Joe’s experiences are consistent with findings suggesting that street-level dealers often rob peers or rivals (Jacobs, 2000; Jacobs & Wright, 1999; Jacques, Wright, & Allen, 2014; Wright & Decker, 1997). Robbers who prey on drug dealers are a pervasive factor on the streets—what Contreras (2013) referred to as the “hyenas of the drug world”. Drug robbers prowl in packs “searching for opportunities to take hard-won drug earnings”, causing “fear and panic among dealers” (Contreras, 2013, p. 114). According to Joe, drug-robberies and -thefts are an unavoidable element of street-level dealing. For street-hustlers, predation could come at the hands of strangers, acquaintances, or even those considered friends:

Joe: [That is] just how it goes. I've been robbed before. I've been set up before by own friends ... So, I mean, [robbery] is just part of dealing drugs.

Offenders who target those involved in the drug trade frequently prefer “street-level dealers who sell small quantities” of drugs (Wright & Decker, 1997, p. 63), sacrificing larger rewards for more vulnerable, albeit low-level targets (see also Jacobs, 2000). Throughout his life, Joe experienced all manner of predatory street crime, including drug robberies, both from the perspective of the victim and the offender. In regards to the etiology of street-crime victimization, Joe’s experiences illustrate the importance of serendipity (see Jacobs, 2010) coupled with the risk-enhancing nature of being known on the streets as a hustler. Those engaged in the street-level drug trade make attractive targets due to the perception that drug dealers are in near constant possession of something of value (Jacobs, 2000; Wright and Decker, 1997); as Jacobs (1999) argued, drug dealers “are out in the open, have ready cash, hold valuable and portable contraband, may be wearing expensive luxury items, and generally will not report crimes to the police” (p. 76):

Joe: You see who's out there being flashy. You just gotta pay attention, [look] for the one that has the high priced clothes on, the shoes, the cars, the jewelry ... Let's say I was trying to rob somebody and I'm in this group and I hear this one guy over there saying, "Oh man, I got like four pounds of weed ... You're thinking in your head, "Dude, I'm sitting over here and I'm making a little bit of money, but I ain't really got squat." First thing in my mind is, you got four pounds of weed. Okay. I'm gonna take that.

For street-level drug dealers, reputation is an additional risk-enhancing element. The following story illustrates this point: Shortly before Joe’s first interview, he was walking alone late at night. While passing through a series of darkened and interconnected alleyways, he came across two men. One was a stranger, while the other was a drug-addicted acquaintance who knew that Joe hustled drugs:

Joe: I was walking down the alley, and I knew something was going to happen because it felt funny. ... I seen the dude come from around the corner and was following me. ... He was at a good distance. ... They had set it up. They had followed me and they split off [from one another]. One followed me up the alley. ... And the other one came around. ... met me as I was coming out the alley. They robbed me. ... I got kicked in

the face a couple times. I got punched and while I was down and the ground, they went in my pockets and took my money and my backpack.

Drug robberies have potentially grave consequences for both offenders and victims (Jacobs, 2000). In the previously described incident, Joe was robbed of his money and belongings. Fortunately for Joe, he was not carrying a sizeable quantity of drugs. The consequences of being robbed are not limited to physical injury at the hands of a robber. Street-level drug dealers often work on a consignment system, where mid-level distributors are paid only after hand-to-hand dealers sell their product (Contreras, 2013). In response to loss, suppliers may respond violently, even kill. The victimized dealer may also be forced to settle outstanding debt by selling “drugs for several months with no profit” (Contreras, 2013, p. 146). To reduce losses, victim-dealers may respond by engaging in retaliatory violence (see Jacques, Wright, & Allen, 2014; Topalli, Wright, & Fornango, 2002):

Joe: Yeah ... straight up retaliation ... You just stole my way of making money. You think I'm not gonna do nothing about? Of course I'm gonna put my ear to the street. And I'm gonna hear things ... and go after the person that went after [me] ... Let's say you get robbed and you found out who robbed you and you don't do nothing about it. What's that tell the next person? ... That they can do whatever they want to you and get away with it, 'cause you ain't gonna do nothing about it. You just gonna let it happen. So, in order to prevent that, it's best to make people fear you. [So that they say to themselves], 'I know that if I go take this from him, he gonna come after me, and he either gonna take everything that I got or he gonna hurt me.' You see what I'm saying?

Although drug robberies are exceedingly dangerous, Joe explained that it is preferable to enrage rival drug dealers than risk exposure to law enforcement by robbing commercial businesses or members of the general public. Targeting drug dealers also better fit Joe's moral code, which indicated that targeting drug dealers is more acceptable than mugging innocent members of the public. However, when asked to elaborate on why drug dealers are preferable targets, Joe replied in purely pragmatic terms:

Joe: [It is] easier and more efficient to rob a drug dealer because nothing's gonna happen to you unless they know who you are and they retaliate. But that's why you always mask up ... You can make more money robbing dealers ... If I rob you for your drugs, you ain't gonna go call the police. You can't because I stole drugs from you. You'll go to jail just as me.

Shover's (1985) observation that offenders eventually regard their criminal careers as a collection of petty and unrewarding accomplishments is an accurate characterization of Joe's crime-related experiences. The realization that he has failed to transcend an impoverished existence informs the growing sense of despair permeating Joe's narrative. After nearly three decades of criminality, even Joe's most lucrative criminal enterprise, drug dealing, was ultimately seen as unrewarding:

Joe: I'mma tell you right now, there has never been one drug dealer in the history of drug dealing that has retired and has been successful. None. That's just the way it is. You ain't supposed to take drug dealing and make it a life. Drug dealing is a way of surviving until your next comes around. You ain't supposed to keep doing it forever. [Some drug dealers continue] because they don't have no other way of life.

Lifestyle and vincibility

Substance abuse is pervasive among the homeless (see Fischer and Breakey, 1991; Schutt and Garrett, 1992.) and is strongly correlated with victimization (Felson & Burchfield, 2004). The long-standing practice of stealing from or robbing inebriates—individuals who may appear perceptibly incapable of protecting themselves—exemplifies the vincibility-enhancing nature of physically diminishing or incapacitating drug and alcohol use.⁵

A significant characteristic of Joe's life is his persistent drug abuse, including the use of methamphetamines, as well as incapacitating substances, such as spice.⁶ From Joe's perspective, letting your guard down, whether by means of substance abuse, what he calls "nodding out", or by simply falling asleep in an unprotected location, both facilitates and attracts predation:

Joe: Happens more times than you can count. ... As we sitting in this room, there's somebody out there right now, nodding out, getting robbed, and it happens like every minute. Sometimes you can't sleep because if you close your eyes, [and] you got something on you that's valuable, you liable not to wake up with it. It's just how it is. I had my shoes stolen from me a couple times. My shoes and my clothes if you're sleeping outside, man, and you got drugs on you, you're a prime target. You might as well just walk around with a big bullseye on your back.

Alcohol and drug abuse are not the only means of exacerbating physical vulnerabilities. A diminished physical stature, including a reputation for weakness, may also communicate vulnerability. On the streets, vincibility is also conveyed by the appearance of advanced age; according to Joe, older persons are perceived as weaker and thus more convenient, desirable, and eminently vincible:

Joe: If I see you out there and you were standing on the corner, and you're 60, 70 years old trying to hustle some drugs ... You an easy target. I'm gonna rob you. I mean, some people can defend themselves, some can't. [Old men are] too old to be out there anyway.

The latter career of a hustler

Joe claimed he still had the same contacts on the streets, but also stated he sought out less opportunity. At the time of the study, it was more important for Joe to minimize risk than it was to increase income. Joe's seemingly successful criminal career has led to a reputation as a capable street hustler, which, for reasons already discussed, caused him no small degree of anxiety. In addition to low-level drug dealing, Joe explained that he now alternates between mendicancy, seeking odd jobs, and committing petty crimes, including opportunistic robberies:

Joe: [In addition to selling drugs] there's different things you could do. Like you could walk around here and panhandle, hold a sign, beg people for money ... you can ask [people] do they have odd work. Just walk around and just basically talk to people.

⁵ Colloquially referred to as "rolling a stiff" (London, 1907, p. 232), "jack-rolling" (Cohen et al., 1988; Shaw, 1930; Sutherland & Locke, 1936), or being "rolled" (Vance, 1995), this theft or robbery related behavior illustrates the manner in which intoxicating substances serve as an antecedent to robbery or theft victimization.

⁶ See Harris & Brown (2013) in regards to the ability of synthetic cannabinoids, such as spice or K2, to render users unresponsive.

He still considered street hustling lucrative, and maintained that he was adept at finding ways to make money on the streets; however, Joe also indicated that the rewards for hustling seemed diminished or mitigated by what he saw as an ever expanding risks of injury or death. Joe concluded that a poor, street-level offender simply remains poor, no matter the energy or effort expended, all the while growing older, weaker, and thus more vulnerable.

Discussion

This criminological case study postulates that an offender's lifestyle is not only etiologically related to interpersonal crime victimization, but also that past offending experiences associated with such a lifestyle may ultimately inform emergent desistance narratives. This study reinforces the notion that individuals who fail to encounter benevolent turning points or positive identity reformation (e.g. Laub & Sampson, 1993; Maruna, 2001; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Shover, 1996), or who have not been incapacitated by means of imprisonment or death (see Blumstein & Cohen, 1987), may yet engage in the desistance process. As Shover (1985, 1996) theoretically indicates, such persistent offenders may ultimately abandon crime-related-behaviors due to growing anxiety surrounding the dangers inherent in such a perilous lifestyle. However, unlike the subjects of Shover's (1996) analysis, who primarily reference a general fear of the criminal justice system, the present study illustrates a motivation for desistance rooted in the fear of violent crime victimization.

The desistance process illustrated here fits within the parameters of Shover's (1985) framework of "specific orientational contingencies" (p. 80). Street-level offenders who engage in the desistance process are developing either "(1) a new perspective on the self; (2) a growing awareness of time; (3) changes in aspirations and goals; [and/or] (4) a growing sense of tiredness" (Shover, 1985, p. 81). This case study illustrates the sagacity and continued relevance of Shover's framework. Although there is no indication that the present study subject's short-term goals have changed, his self-views have certainly evolved. He is now acutely aware of time, aging, and a growing sense that he is not the man he physically once was, illustrating a variation of Shover's (1985) desistance-related concept of *tiredness*.

Changes along the life-course often evolve in accordance with subtle yet numerous and undeniably powerful influences (Matza, 1964). In the present analysis, no single event effectively compelled the subject to desist from future criminality. Joe was, as Shover (1996) previously found in persistent property-crimes offenders, successful "in the metric of thieves and hustlers" (p. 139). Yet, despite avoiding imprisonment or death, Joe remains entrenched in an ever-worsening state of chronic poverty, spiraling downward socioeconomically, not only because he lacks opportunity—as Maruna and Farrall (2004) suggest—but also because he perceives himself increasingly incapable of competing in a street-level black-market economy.

Joe encounters no positive life-course altering events to act as turning points, yet desires desistance nonetheless. If physical predation were not endemic within the workplace of street-level criminality, Joe would be free to continue selling drugs, or to engage in whatever opportunistic crime-related enterprises were to present themselves. However, Joe perceives himself as aging and physiologically deteriorating, thus rendering his career as a hustler increasingly untenable. This subject's experiences, attitudes, and perceptions inform the supposition that street-level hustlers are steeped in hard-earned victimization- and offending-related experiences, an intimate education in vulnerability that culminates in desistance narratives when offenders begin to see connections between themselves and factors associated with victimization.

In light of this observation, the onset of Maruna and Farrall's (2004) concept of secondary desistance is therefore situated at the moment in time persistent street-crime offenders realize they will inevitably become too old or too physically inept to continue in their current lifestyle; or, if foresight is absent, the moment the offender looks in the mirror and sees a person with victim characteristics gazing back at them. It is suggested here that the natural history of street-level criminality has an endpoint tethered to an offender's self-perceived degree of physical competency.

An offender is therefore likely to remain willingly active as a street hustler only so long as self-perceptions indicate an ability to remain effective in a dangerous illicit-marketplace.

Conclusion

This paper's analysis of a persistent offender's own story, situated within a diverse body of scholarly literature, demonstrates the continued functionality of the case study in empirical research. In the present study, the life story of a chronically impoverished street-hustler was approached with an open fluidity, a process of inquiry that allows the subject's worldviews and self-perceptions to inform our understanding of his attitudes and behaviors—as Ferrell (2009) states, a noteworthy characteristic of ethnographic study. Criminology is particularly well-suited for the application of both case studies and the venerable life-history method, particularly in regards to the examination of a criminal career (Burgess, 1966b). The illuminating example dramatically exhibits the causes of crime, the effects of violence, and the contexts in which criminality emerges (Geis, 1991). Through such a study, we are permitted access to the experiences of people dramatically different from ourselves, and “become acquainted with those far removed from the sheltered routine” of our own existence (Burgess, 1966a, p. ix). What Charles Frazier argued in the 1970s regarding life-histories remains true today with respect to criminological case studies; its strongest endorsement “comes with the recognition of its unique capability for tapping the essence of social psychological processes” (Frazier, 1978, p. 138).

“We can assume that the victims, more than their audience, will have a deeper understanding of the plight that has brought them to our attention” (Lejeune & Alex, 1973, p. 261). Yet, Joe's perspective is not only gleaned through the lens of his victimization-related experiences; he is also informed by his past crime-related behaviors, thus allowing this research subject a multifaceted perspective on how physical vulnerabilities are related to the etiology of instrumental crime. This empirical study into the life of one chronically impoverished and persistent offender has revealed an individual who, when first encountered, appears successful in adapting to an ever-changing criminogenic landscape. He avoided both prison and debilitating injury, and seemed adept in his pursuit of illicit enterprises. However, close scrutiny of the study subject's account revealed a different reality; for Joe, the successful navigation of multifarious instrumental crimes failed to translate into an improved lifestyle. Joe has aged, and now perceives his body as weakening, a self-perception informing his belief that he is increasingly incapable of competing in the dangerous workplace of street-level criminality.

This study posits that the natural history of street crime as a social problem is inherently tragic. Even when avoiding the direst of consequences, the subject ultimately deteriorates economically and physically. For those who attempt to exist on the streets, advancing age and the deleterious effects of an unhealthy lifestyle lead to the early onset of vincibility-enhancing characteristics. For the street hustler, experience will provide ample evidence that physiological aging will negatively affect the ability to remain safe in a crime-prone lifestyle. It is suggested here that such a self-perception is sufficient motivation to end a criminal career. In this analysis, Hindelang et al.'s (1978) lifestyle-exposure theory informs the further development of Shover's (1996) conception of “desistance as choice” (p. 138), resulting in the theoretical postulate that many street-level offenders may be compelled to desist due to evolving self-perceptions of physical vulnerability.

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