ADOLESCENT MALE OFFENDERS

A Grounded Theory Study of Cognition, Emotion, and Delinquent Crime Contexts

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Perspectives of adolescent offenders were examined, especially how they define, interpret, and in some cases justify their delinquent behaviors. Grounded theory methodology was used to examine the cognitive, affective, moral, sociocultural, and situational components that influence how and why adolescents commit crimes. A total of 24 adolescent males were interviewed. A theory of delinquent crime contexts emerged. This article focuses on three of these crime contexts: the emotion-driven violent assault, the belief-driven violent assault, and the mixed-motive mixed-crime contexts.

M ost theories of delinquent offending have not examined the criminal behaviors at the situational level. The research that does exist has tended to be quasi-experimental, with an emphasis on understanding aggression and dishonesty as opposed to understanding specific crime events. Recent notable exceptions include studies of

situational selection and the growing literature on rational choice theory. The purpose of this study was to add to the existing knowledge base of situational crime contexts by conducting an in-depth qualitative analysis of adolescent offender perceptions of crimes as influenced by cognitive and emotive processes.

Studies of Criminal Offending Events

Situational selection studies. These studies focus on how offenders use contextual cues to inform the criminal decision-making process. Researchers (e.g., McIntosh, 1975) have found evidence of a strong relationship between certain types of property crimes and large, densely populated urban areas. Other researchers have examined the planning aspects of crime. In one of only a few studies of adolescents, LeBlanc and Frechette (1989) found that a significant number of juvenile offenders do plan their crimes and that such planning is influenced by situational factors (e.g., unlocked automobile). This work, however, does not directly address the role of delinquent cognition and emotion in the planning aspects of criminal offending.

Symbolic interaction studies. In contrast to situational selection studies, symbolic interaction research emphasizes the individual's role in defining and interpreting situations. Athens's (1997) research in particular demonstrates the importance of the offender's subjective experience of criminal situations. By paying close attention to participants' subjective meaning of crime, Athens was able to demonstrate that the goals of violent offenders are more contradictory, less well developed, and more complex than researchers have commonly assumed. Carpenter, Glassner, Johnson, and Loughlin (1988) interviewed 100 nondelinquent and delinquent adolescents on their perspectives with regard to drug use and crime. The authors concluded that the linkages between drugs, alcohol, and criminal activities vary depending on time, place, and interactions with others. Other research using this perspective includes studies on murder (Katz, 1988; Luckenbill, 1977), rape (Felson, 1993), and robbery (Katz, 1991). Additional research is reviewed in Birkbeck and LaFree (1993).

DELINQUENT COGNITION AND EMOTION

Historically, delinquency theories have not considered cognition to be an active mediator between situational influences and behavior (e.g., Miller, 1958; Wolfgang & Ferracutti, 1982). When cognition has been mentioned, it has been defined narrowly in terms of values and attitudes (for a review, see Menard & Huizinga, 1994). A limitation of these theories is that they view the delinquent as a passive recipient and filter of his or her subculture and its delinquent values and attitudes. In contrast, more recent theories view the delinquent as an active agent who has a part in how he or she thinks about criminal offending events. Theories that have attempted to address the role of cognition in delinquent offending include social learning theory (Bandura, 1978), neutralization theory (Matza, 1964), and more recently, rational choice theory (Cornish & Clarke, 1986). Rational choice theory is especially relevant to the study of specific delinquent events in that it focuses on the individual's evaluation of costs and benefits in his or her decision to commit specific crimes. In contrast to other theories in which distal variables such as ties to society are thought to influence decisions to engage in crime, rational choice theory is based on the belief that offenders are rational and active decision makers. In this sense, an examination of delinquent cognition is critical for understanding why adolescents commit crimes.

The theories reviewed so far have not assumed any differences in information processing and decision-making abilities of delinquents compared to nondelinquents. However, a strong tradition within the field of psychology suggests that this is not true for some individuals. Moffitt and colleagues (Moffitt, 1993; Moffitt, Caspi, Dickson, Silva, & Stanton, 1996), for example, propose that a subset of life-course-persistent offenders have neurological impairments predisposing them to information-processing problems that may in part explain their severe conduct disorder type behaviors. Research has not, however, examined how life-course-persistent offenders define and interpret the criminal offending event. An integrated model of how cognition, emotion, and motivation influence the offender's perception of the situation would provide insight into why life-course-persistent offenders engage in acts of criminal offending.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study explored the viewpoint from which criminal offenders interpret the criminal offending situation and assign meanings to their behaviors. The following research questions guided data collection and analysis:

> *Research Question 1*: How does the adolescent offender define, interpret, and in some cases justify his actions and behaviors within the criminal offending situation?
>
> *Research Question 2*: Why do adolescent offenders appear to make seemingly irrational choices? Why, for instance, do they choose to commit crimes in the face of possible sanctions and/or personal disadvantage?
>
> *Research Question 3*: What are the cognitive mediators that influence the decision to engage in crime and how are they related to situational factors?

As data analysis progressed, the construct of crime context emerged as a central category to differentiate cognitions and behaviors associated with particular crimes. Emotions also emerged as a key construct associated with particular crime contexts. For that reason, a question was added:

> *Research Question 4*: What are the emotional mediators that influence offenders' behaviors within criminal offending situations?

METHOD

SETTING

This study was conducted in two settings: a residential treatment center and a halfway house. Referrals to both facilities are from the Texas Youth Commission (TYC). The TYC is the juvenile correction agency responsible for serving violent and seriously delinquent youth committed to the state's custody. The treatment center, located in a semirural Texas community, is a nonprofit agency that maintains a contract with the TYC to provide secure, community-based residential services to adolescent offenders who are in the beginning or middle stages of their incarceration terms. Treatment options at the center

include individual and group therapy related to such issues as sub-
stance abuse, social- and emotional-coping skills, family, and sexual
offending. All residents at the time of the study had been at the treat-
ment center for at least 6 months but not more than 1 year. The halfway
house is located in a medium-sized city and provides similar services
as the treatment center. Unlike the treatment center, the halfway house
is operated directly by the TYC. Youth at the halfway house are in the
final stage of their incarceration terms, and they are allowed to leave
the facility for school and work purposes.

The treatment center and the halfway house both average between
18 and 24 residents at a time. A resident's typical length of stay is
between 6 months to 1 year. All residents typically have received some
type of treatment prior to their current incarceration. Prior treatment
placements are extremely variable and include both correctional facil-
ities and treatment centers. Residents at both facilities are closely
supervised.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants consisted of 24 males, ages 14 to 20 years, who were in
residence at either the treatment center (9 participants) or the halfway
house (15 participants). Of the participants, 46% (11) were Hispanic,
33% (8) were African American, and 21% (5) were White. The major-
ity of the participants reported the age of onset of criminal offending
as being between 10 and 12 years old; 2 respondents noted that they
had begun their delinquent activities at ages 8 and 9. Sex offenders
were excluded from the study on the assumption that sex crimes are
qualitatively distinct from the more general and violent offenses typi-
cally committed by adolescent offenders. Participants presented with
a number of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disor-
ders* (4th edition) diagnoses and most had an extensive history of sub-
stance abuse. All participants were repeat offenders who had commit-
ted from 5 to 15 officially documented crimes.

At the treatment center, participants were chosen for the study by
the researcher based on the following criteria: (a) level of rapport with
the researcher, (b) verbal abilities, and (c) willingness to disclose per-
sonal information. The researcher approached each participant and

asked him if he would be willing to participate in the study. Of the 10 offenders who were approached by the researcher, 9 agreed to participate. At the halfway house, the program manager and counselors selected the participants based on their judgment of whether the participants met the above criteria. All 15 individuals chosen agreed to participate.

At both the treatment center and the halfway house, the researcher made it clear to the participants that they had the option of not agreeing to participate in the study. Staff at both facilities also emphasized this option. Thus, the participants at both the treatment center and the halfway house chose to participate and were highly motivated to be involved in the study. Issues of confidentiality and anonymity were discussed with all participants prior to the interviews.

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection included a 1- to 1½-hour semistructured recorded interview with each participant. In addition, information obtained from legal files and from case records was used when available. All interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim.

A semistructured interview was used to obtain information about the adolescent's perception of the delinquent event. All interviews took place in a private office or room; only the researcher and the participant were present. Each interview with participants began with the following instructions:

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

Once participants had told their stories, the 5-HW (who? what? when? where? why? how?) approach was used to probe further and expand on the initial description. This method, endorsed by McGuire and

Priestly (1985), allows the interviewer to find out much more about the event by asking questions.

Ethical considerations were of particular concern in this study due to the delinquent and adolescent status of the participants. Several safeguards, as mandated by the University of Texas Institutional Review Board and the TYC, were employed to protect participants' rights, including the use of code names to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

The analysis of the data throughout this study was guided by grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), a qualitative approach that is especially suited to exploratory research. The approach uses simultaneous data collection and analysis to develop an initial set of categories and then applies the constant comparative method to develop inductively an understanding of the data. Open coding of transcripts resulted in approximately 350 initial category and subcategory codes. Categories were then grouped based on obvious similarities (e.g., various types of crime rewards were grouped into the more inclusive category, Crime Rewards). Approximately 40 of these more inclusive categories formed the nucleus of the data after open coding. Examples of categories included Rationales for Choosing a Victim, Perceived Sanctions, and Inner Conflict between Beliefs and Behaviors.

Once initial categories and subcategories were established, the focus of the analysis shifted to making connections between categories using axial and selective coding. Interpretations were developed by examining a category (e.g., phenomenon of criminal offending) according to (a) the primary conditions that gave rise to it; (b) the context or set of contributing conditions that also influenced it; (c) action or interaction strategies by which it was handled, managed, or carried out; and (d) the consequences of those actions or interactions. Eventually, a conceptualization emerged of crime context, the central phenomenon around which most other categories were integrated and that serves as a statement or model of the conceptual relationships that were found to exist in these data, addressing the research questions posed earlier.

Credibility of the Analysis: Trustworthiness

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), it is the responsibility of the qualitative researcher to establish that his or her study is trustworthy. Pertinent techniques include triangulation, keeping a reflexive journal, prolonged engagement, and peer debriefing. Triangulation was employed for the 9 participants from the residential treatment center. Case history notes and legal records were used to corroborate interview data. The triangulation method was not pursued in the halfway setting because of restricted access to individual files. A reflexive journal was used to heighten researcher self-awareness and to monitor data collection and analysis. The researcher maintained notes detailing general reactions to the participants and the authenticity of their revelations. Cues that were used to ascertain whether the participant appeared to be lying or holding back information included body language (e.g., not maintaining eye contact) and inconsistencies. Several categories (e.g., Exaggerations, Inconsistencies) were used to keep track of suspect data. Despite the candor of most of the participants, 2 participants were suspected of being dishonest. These data were not used as primary support for the existence of any of the crime contexts. In addition to categories related to suspect data, categories emerged (e.g., Personal Confessions) that tended to support the integrity of the participant accounts. Prolonged engagement, which guards against superficiality and incomplete description, was accomplished by the first researcher spending a year working as a counselor in the residential facility. Finally, peer debriefing was used throughout the data analysis phase. The first researcher met frequently with the second researcher to review the analysis process, discuss categories, consider emergent relationships, and evaluate the developing theory. The stance of the second researcher was supportive but critical, as confirming or contradictory evidence was sought, interpretations were questioned, and the basis for conclusions was reviewed.

RESULTS

During the early stages of data analysis, after considerable open coding had been done, it became obvious that no unitary conception of

delinquent cognition was emerging, because the conditions surrounding the crime appeared to vary depending on the type of crime committed. Thus, for a while, it seemed that it would be sufficient to use crime type as the major category to distinguish different cognitive processes. It eventually became clear, however, that substantial disparities in conditions, interactions, and consequences existed within crime types. These variations appeared to be related to another property of crime events—motive. By combining the two properties—crime type and motive—it was possible to make sense of the disparities that had existed when crime type alone had been considered.

Four different crime types emerged from the data: violent assault, property theft, drug dealing, and gang crimes. Three types of motives also emerged: emotion-driven, belief-driven, and reward-driven. A motive was defined as primary or dominant if the respondent described it as such and his description of the delinquent event supported his assertion. Evidence of the primacy of a motive was inferred from the intensity of the participant's account and the number of lines of text devoted to the category and subcategories.

As previously noted, when analyzed conjointly, the categories of crime type and motive combined to form several crime contexts. The crime contexts that emerged from and were supported by the data include emotion-driven violent assault context, emotion-driven property theft context, belief-driven violent assault context, reward-driven drug-dealing context, reward-driven property theft context, emotion-driven mixed-crime context, and mixed-motive mixed-crime context. Each crime context was associated with different patterns of causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, action or interaction strategies, and consequences. These patterns and processes when analyzed together resulted in a model of delinquent crime based on crime context. Table 1 provides a summary description of these crime contexts. The remainder of this article focuses primarily on two of these crime contexts: the emotion-driven violent assault and belief-driven violent assault crime contexts. A third section briefly discusses the mixed-crime mixed-motive crime context as it pertains to the emotion-driven and belief-driven violent assault crime contexts.

TABLE 1: Crime Context Characteristics

Crime Context	Primary Precrime Condition	Contributing Condition	Action/Interaction	Consequence
Emotion-driven violent assault	Strong emotion-eliciting event (personal loss, conflict with significant other) Poor emotion-coping skills	Beliefs supportive of aggression Drug/alcohol use	Assault on victim (homicide, rape, aggravated assault) High violence level Minimum of planning	Emotional consequences (regret, distress, denial) Change in self-perception Legal and parental sanctions
Emotion-driven property theft	Opportunity (unlocked car, unmonitored goods) Boredom and absence of structured activity Belief that the crime is not serious	Lack of empathy for victims Presence and support of peers "We" identity with peers	Property theft and vandalism (auto theft, shoplifting, property destruction) Low violence level Usually only limited planning	Emotional consequences (euphoria, excitement) Minimal change in self-perception Usually minimal legal consequences Peer rewards (postcrime celebration, group solidarity)
Belief-driven violent assault (self-preservation, vigilante and gang crimes)	Perception of threat, harm, or insult Aggression-supportive beliefs (about right and wrong, about self) Sociocultural values and norms that justify violence	Blaming the victim Presence of peers in gang crimes Drug/alcohol use accompanying crime planning	Possible extreme levels of violence (homicide, assault, drive-by shootings) Extensive planning	Emotional consequences (satisfaction, lack of remorse or regret) Hero self-perception Possible legal sanctions Peer rewards for gang crimes (status, solidarity)

TABLE 1 Continued

Crime Context	Primary Precrime Condition	Contributing Condition	Action/Interaction	Consequence
Reward-driven drug dealing	Opportunity (social milieu conducive to drug dealing) Desire or need for material goods Value for immediate gratification	Belief that drug dealing is not a serious crime Lack of empathy for drug users Mentors to teach drug trade business	Drug dealing usually of harder drugs such as crack cocaine Absence of violence Moderate degrees of planning	Absence of regret or remorse Sense of self as a working person Possible legal sanctions Peer rewards: possible increased status
Reward-driven property theft	Desire to obtain material goods Perceived opportunity	Absence of alternative means of obtaining goods Presence of supportive peers	Burglary, theft Considerable planning usually present	Obtaining money and goods Emotional high related to amount stolen Absence of regret or remorse
Emotion-driven mixed-crime types	Dissatisfaction with current emotional state History of similar offenses to create arousal Perception of self as a nonoffender	Usually solitary Belief that these crimes are not serious Denial of substance abuse or associated negative effects	High frequency of drug use, shoplifting Various other crimes may accompany drug use	Intense emotional high Absence of regret Minimal legal sanctions Peer rewards usually are not present
Mixed-motive mixed-crime context	Preexisting motive (e.g., to obtain material goods) Preexisting beliefs about the victim	Volatile setting (victim resistance, emotional arousal) Intensified peer support Drug/alcohol use	Escalating violence due to altered perception of the victim or situation	Unanticipated and varied consequences Possible feelings of regret

EMOTION-DRIVEN VIOLENT ASSAULT
CRIME CONTEXT: EMOTION-COPING CRIMES

Crimes within this context were characterized as emotion-coping behavioral strategies. That is, adolescents committed the crimes to cope with negative emotional states such as anger, grief, confusion, and helplessness. Acts within this crime context were usually violent and aggressive in nature. Trigger events and/or personal conflicts typically preceded the crimes, which were characterized by an intense emotional state, limited or no planning, minimal relationship with the victim, and in some cases, a sense of remorse after the crime was committed.

That adolescent offenders can and do use crimes as a strategy for emotion coping is apparent in the words of Shorty, a 20-year-old African American male. At 16, Shorty was one of the youngest members of a gang. He was "mean back then" and considered himself to be a "cold-hearted" gang member. He was also very close to an older brother who was both a mentor and a best friend. At the same time, he was in a relationship with a girl who wanted him to quit the gang. Shorty describes how he felt torn between his older brother and his girlfriend:

> She wanted me to quit what I was doing. And I was willing to give it all up because I really liked her, and when I asked my brother, my brother, he was still into it. And he had gotten into a conflict with somebody he knew, and I was like, man . . . and she kept telling me to leave him alone, leave it alone or she was going to leave me, she was going to leave me. And I couldn't take it, I started drinking and doing marijuana.

On the night that Shorty committed homicide, he had been arguing with his girlfriend when some of his homeboys came by to tell him that someone had tried to kill his brother. Shorty describes how he was feeling in the hour immediately preceding the homicide:

> I had been drinking. I was drunk. I had a lot of anger. I was hurt because I knew M was going to leave me. And I was mad. Mad at him for putting me in this, and I was mad at my mom and dad for separating. I was mad at my dad for taking my little brothers. So I had a lot of anger built up not really at the person I was going to get. I just felt out of control.

For Shorty, the crime was about coping with his own emotions. The victim was not important in this crime. He existed only as a target for Shorty's pent-up anger.

Duck, a 17-year-old Anglo male, also experienced crime as a means for coping with emotions and loss as illustrated by the following passage:

> I seen him point it right at me. I'm looking down the barrel of a gun. I went to pull my gun out, but it got caught on [my] baggies. I looked once. Something struck me, and there was a boom and a big old flash. The next thing I knew, me and my homeboy both hit the ground. I got his forehead all over my chest. They was trying to shoot me because they [had] seen my face at the house. My homeboy was pushing me out of the way. And when he pushed me, they shot him. They hit him instead of me. They blew the whole front of his forehead off. He said, "I'm dying." I said, "You going to make it! You going to make it!" He said, "No. I know I'm dead. Get them for me." And he died, and I was holding him. I was all screwed up. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know who to turn to or what. . . . It started a big old conflict.

Duck experienced a great sense of personal loss at the hands of the rival gang member, and he subsequently dealt with that rage and confusion by committing a violent act.

Clyde, a 16-year-old Mexican American male, also talked about a loss and how he was feeling angry and sad. In this passage, Clyde describes how the death of his pet motivated him to commit a crime:

> I just basically messed up their car for them because they killed my dog. I was mad because they killed my dog. I was sad because they killed my dog. They know I love my dogs. All of them. They know I love animals. Always. I'd take a person's eye for an animal. I wouldn't kill for an animal, but I'd probably die for an animal just like I'd die for any other deserving human being. I was frustrated and angry because the cops wouldn't do nothing.

Although Clyde's belief that his actions were justified certainly motivated him, his emotions had a strong influence, as was apparent by his emphasis on how he was feeling before, during, and after the crime. Seeking revenge made him "feel better" about his loss. Thus, the sub-

sequent act of destruction helped him to cope with his own confusion, anger, and grief.

The above examples illustrate that crimes within the emotion-driven violent assault context are characterized by precrime states of intense anger and related emotions such as sadness and despair. The crimes, violent in nature, are typically directed against another person or inanimate object. In some cases, the victim is known, but this is not a necessary condition for the crime to occur. Usually the crime is committed alone and often results in an altered emotional state.

BELIEF-DRIVEN VIOLENT ASSAULT CRIME
CONTEXT: SELF-PRESERVATION CRIMES

As indicated in Table 1, three types of violent assault crimes occurred in the belief-driven violent assault crime context. Although this section's description is limited to self-preservation crimes, the conditions and consequences of violent vigilante- and gang-driven crimes were similar. In this type of crime, the offender identifies the victim's real or perceived actions as a threat to his own physical and/or psychological self. Self-preservation crimes can be either predatory or nonpredatory. The more common type of crime is the nonpredatory, reactive type of crime that is usually typified by a high degree of violence and aggression. Price and Dodge (1989) refer to this as "reactive aggression." Fighting to defend oneself is a common example. In the words of Stone, fighting is a way of life:

> Where I came up . . . I lived in the projects, low income. I mean it's like everyday you fight. You come outside. You fight. If you don't know how to fight, you don't come outside.

Fighting as a common outcome of beliefs supportive of aggression is illustrated by Underdog:

> And I was thinking in my head, "Should I do it? Should I lose my level and my radio and all this over him?" And then I said, "F this." I just started hitting him, and he fell on the table and then he was on the table like this. Then he got off the table, and I hit him. He stumbled into the wall like this. He hit the wall, and I hit him and his head hit the wall and he fell down. And then the staff came. But I didn't even go to security.

> He went to security because he touched me first. And I just defended myself. That's how I saw it.

When asked why he did not just walk away from the peer, Underdog stated that to do so would have been to admit that he was a "punk." It was a self-image that he was unwilling to incorporate into his beliefs about self. He also stated that the presence of other peers in the role of onlookers precluded his backing down from the victim. Thus, values supportive of aggression and beliefs about the self influenced his actions.

Twilight provides another example of violence committed to preserve a sense of self:

> He called us, and he said "spic," and when I turned around, he was looking at me, and my homeboys beat him down. He was like in his 40s. He fought back. That's what he gets for calling us a spic.

Gustavo also provides an example of how he committed a gang rape out of fear of "competition" based on his perception of the (male) victim as trying to show him up. When asked why he participated in this assault, Gustavo stated,

> I guess I was afraid of the competition. Because he had that look about him, you know what I'm saying. . . . I didn't feel like he was giving me respect . . . because he was just bumping, bumping. . . . I didn't appreciate [that] at all. I felt as if he were just trying to come up where he didn't belong. The stuff that I heard about him, I just wanted to make him look stupid.

In the above example, it is clear that Gustavo perceived his victim's actions (whether intended or not) as personal slights to his own view of the self. This passage also illustrates how important it was for Gustavo to be a "man." To him, the gang rape represented a theft of the victim's "manhood." (Although technically a sex crime, this crime was included here because it represented a onetime event committed by an individual with no history of sex offending.)

Clyde also describes how he assaulted a peer based on his belief system. In this example, a same-age peer was attacking Clyde's sense

of self. Thus, the wounds that Clyde experienced were of an intangible and psychological nature:

> I could have avoided it, but I chose not to because you know the racial thing that was going on and plus he was just trying to be bad, and it went against what I was taught. I was taught never back down from somebody. Don't be a punk. There is two ways to be punk. But the punk I'm talking about is like you know don't let nobody run you over. He called me a wetback. A spic. He knew I was half, 25% Native American so he called me a prairie nigger.

Like the others, Clyde's actions were motivated by a set of beliefs supportive of aggression in tandem with his need to protect himself. The rigidity of his belief system did not allow him to consider other coping strategies, for as he stated, there is a point where the line must be drawn.

The above examples suggest that beliefs do influence the offender's decisions to commit violent crimes. In the self-preservation crime, the offender operates on the belief that he should respond to perceived threats through violence and aggression. The offender believes that he is justified in his actions and does not feel any remorse or regret for his actions. No internal conflict is evident because the offender has acted in accordance with established rules and values.

MIXED-CRIME MIXED-MOTIVE CRIME CONTEXT

Several crime situations did not fit neatly into any single crime context. These mismatches occurred when one crime context changed into another type of crime context because of a change in conditions. An example occurred when Muppet and his homeboys sought revenge on a rival gang member. He discussed how gang-influenced beliefs and attitudes (e.g., "We don't like Bloods in the first place") motivated and justified his decision to participate in a drive-by shooting. Rather than acting immediately on these beliefs, however, Muppet and his fellow gang members used drugs to "make us crazier, psyche us up." This altered the crime context from belief-driven to emotion-driven. The saliency of emotion was also indicated by Muppet's revelation that he felt a "rush" because of participating in the drive-by shooting. The combination of being high in conjunction with the intensity of the

crime and the presence of peers gave Muppet a feeling of power and an intense emotional experience.

Another example of a transitional crime context is illustrated by Loco's description of how he initially set out to rob someone but became agitated and upset when the victim resisted. This change in conditions changed a reward-driven property crime context to an emotion-driven violent assault crime context. Scooby also described a transitional crime context. He and his friends were initially going to rob a Kentucky Fried Chicken to obtain money. In his description of the events leading up to the crime, he stated that they talked about how they could have anything they wanted—power, drugs, and money. They were certain that they could get away with the armed robbery and a "good deal of cash." During the commission of the crime, however, one of the victims fought back. The crime context instantly changed from being reward-driven property theft to being an emotion-driven violent assault crime context. These cases illustrate the sometimes dynamic nature of crime contexts.

DISCUSSION

Although the focus of this study was primarily on crime contexts, it should be emphasized that significant individual differences exist between offenders and that these differences also provide insight into why offenders commit crimes. As previously discussed, life-course-persistent offenders appear to be qualitatively different from their adolescent-limited counterparts. The logical explanation, and one that needs to be tested as a hypothesis, is that the life-course-persistent offender's perception of criminal offending situations differs significantly from the adolescent-limited counterpart. A larger sample selected on individual characteristics would provide much needed information about person-situation interactions. A larger sample would also result in more delinquent events to be analyzed, which would no doubt lead to an increased generalizability of the study's findings.

Emotion as a causal condition in the chain of events that precedes some criminal behaviors also needs to be more extensively examined particularly because of the generally prevalent view that emotion is a

consequence of information processing and other types of cognitive activity. Nowhere is this bias in favor of cognition more apparent than within the attribution literature. Although the thoughts-to-emotions-to-behavior sequence is well supported in the literature, several factors affect the robustness of these findings. First, the majority of research thus far has tended to focus on aggressive behaviors as opposed to other types of criminal behaviors. This focus on aggressive behaviors is by its very nature more likely to involve perceived intentionality. Given that perceived intentionality is a form of cognition (thoughts about the victim and his or her intentions), most such studies will be biased in favor of cognition. Second, because a great deal of research now suggests that aggressive children are less competent at social information processing than their peers (e.g., Dodge & Crick, 1990), the question is raised of whether aggressive children's thoughts, feelings, and actions are always consistent with the thoughts-emotions-action sequence outlined previously. To date, researchers in the areas of aggression and delinquency have not seriously addressed this possibility, with few exceptions (e.g., Grahm, Hudley, & Williams, 1992).

Our study's results also emphasize the importance of addressing cross-cultural beliefs and values. For example, some studies (e.g., Dodge, 1985) in the area of information processing have focused on differences in how aggressive children and nonaggressive children respond to a variety of hypothetical situations. The participants in this type of study are usually asked to respond to a situation based on their judgment of intentionality. A repeated finding is that aggressive children tend to have a hostile attribution bias when faced with ambiguous conditions. However, what this research fails to consider is whether the ambiguous situations are truly ambiguous within the sociocultural environment and experiences of the participants involved. An example of how an ambiguous situation may not really be ambiguous concerns the act of staring. For the middle-class person, staring (known in gang terminology as "mad-dogging") may be interpreted as a violation of good manners; however, from the perspective of the gang member, it may be seen as an attempt to demean the individual, thus requiring some form of aggressive retaliation (Sheldon, Tracy, & Brown, 1997). As Grahm et al. (1992) noted, until such sociocultural factors are accounted for, it will continue to remain unclear to what

extent being quick to assign blame or having a low threshold for retaliatory behavior might operate as genuine strategies for coping with situations and life in general, as opposed to deficits and/or distortions in information- processing capabilities.

As indicated elsewhere in this article, the dominant theories of delinquency have tended to neglect the importance of understanding the situational context of crime. In psychology, the emphasis has historically been on the antisocial individual, whereas in sociology, the focus has usually been on societal explanations such as poverty and lack of access to opportunities (e.g., Cloward & Ohlin, 1960). The majority of these theories as originally conceptualized fail to incorporate an explanation of those situational factors that may explain why offenders commit crimes in some situations but not in others. Fortunately, it is possible to make many of these theories more relevant to the explanation of delinquent events. Agnew (1990) discusses how theories can be modified to accommodate situational parameters in delinquent events. However, more work along the line of this study is needed on incorporating and accounting for the individual offender's point of view.

In conclusion, studying how the adolescent offenders in this study defined and interpreted the criminal offending situation, along with the attendant emotional states, provides insight into how they negotiate meanings that in turn influence their decisions and behaviors. In other words, this study provides useful information about possible emotions and cognitions that are associated with delinquent crimes. From a research perspective, these data are significant in that they facilitate the development of a theory of crime contexts as defined by crime type and delinquent cognition and emotions. These data also have implications for practice and policy issues. Such information can help educators, psychologists, probation officers, politicians, and other professionals to better understand the processes whereby adolescents commit delinquent offenses.

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