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# Agency as a Cause of Crime

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Laub and Sampson's age-graded theory of social control posits that the greater is a person's agency, the less that person commits crime. But agency has a dark side as well. Some people choose to offend in order to transform their life; when this happens, agency is a cause of crime. In the present article we draw on the life course and rational choice perspectives to explore this idea. Our study is based on qualitative data obtained through interviews with and observations of offenders from socially disadvantaged areas in Cape Town, South Africa. Participants cited their offending as motivated by and effective in obtaining three kinds of status: belonging in a group, respect from peers, and wealth. Further research is needed to develop understanding of this relationship, especially in terms of how it is affected by structural conditions and culture.

Human beings make choices to participate in crime or not, and theories of the life course have been remiss to have left agency . . . largely out of the theoretical picture.

—Laub et al. 2006:328

The age-graded theory of social control holds that people become involved in, continue with, and desist from crime because of their social bonds, routine activities, and agency (Laub and Sampson 2003). For researchers working in this perspective, agency is the intentional and transformative decision to work toward achieving conventional success. Desistance occurs when offenders have agency because it moves them to adopt pro-social roles (see, e.g., Bottoms et al. 2004; Farrall and Bowling 1999; Gottfredson 2011; Healy and O'Donnell 2008; Maruna 2001; Sampson and Laub 2005; Vaughan 2007).

To put it plainly, the life course perspective sees agency as good. But agency can be bad by leading to or exacerbating offending (see, e.g., Gunter 2008; Sandberg 2008a, 2008b). While this idea has been largely ignored in the life course perspective, it fits nicely with an alternative approach to understanding crime: the rational choice framework (Bentham [1789] 1988; Clarke

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and Cornish 1985; Cornish and Clarke 2008). This theoretical lens emphasizes the role of intentional choice in lawbreaking (Cornish and Clarke 2008), including the motive to offend and the method of doing so (see, e.g., Jacobs 1999, 2000; Jacobs and Wright 2006; Wright and Decker 1994, 1997). Crime is explained as a mean to an end, such as paying bills, buying “party items” (e.g., drugs) or “status enhancers” (e.g., fashionable clothing), and exacting revenge (Anderson 1999).

There are three notable differences between the life course and rational choice perspectives. First is their temporal focus; the former perspective leans more toward understanding behavior over the long term (e.g., criminal careers) whereas the latter leans toward the short term (e.g., the commission of individual offenses). A second distinction is that the former perspective focuses on why people do not offend while the latter spotlights why they do. The third dissimilarity is that the life course perspective’s unit of analysis is the person but that of rational choice theory is more akin to the situation. Despite their differences, these two frameworks are similar in that both recognize structural conditions shape opportunities for criminal and conventional roles.

In this article, which is based on qualitative data obtained through interviews with and observations of offenders from disadvantaged areas in Cape Town, South Africa, we combine the life course and rational choice frameworks to examine the dark side of agency. Specifically, we suggest that some persons actively decide to enhance their status (i.e., intentionally transform) by beginning and continuing to commit offenses (i.e., embark on a criminal career) because it is practically the only rational option for achieving their goal since they live in a place and maintain a social position that offers few alternative paths (also see Sandberg 2008a, 2008b). Before turning to the data and our theory, we will now review, clarify, and modify the way agency has been presented in prior work.

## AGENCY

The meaning of “agency” is in contention and flux (Bandura 1982; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Ortner 2006; McAdams 1992; Paternoster and Pogarsky 2009; Sewell 1992). Most definitions of it include something analogous to “intention” and “transformation.” According to Laub and Sampson (2003), human agency is more than motivation. It is also the decision to engage in pro-social transformative action (also see Laub et al. 2006). They do not provide precise definitions of “intentional” and “transformative,” but we need to have a clear-cut understanding of their meaning to properly evaluate whether agency can cause crime.

We define *intentional choice* as an aware and directional decision. Aware in the sense the choice is conscious. Directional in the sense the choice is made with a certain goal in mind. “In considering purposive action, we are concerned with ‘conduct’ as distinct from ‘behavior’, that is, with action which involves motives and consequently a choice between various alternatives” (Merton 1936:895). Defined as such, a criminal act is intentional when the offender consciously chooses to commit it in order to achieve a goal. Felson (1993), for example, distinguishes between predatory- and dispute-related violence. Some acts of aggression are motivated by the desire to obtain wealth, but others are principally intended as punishment for the victim. Likewise, Wright and Decker (1994) show that while burglars are primarily motivated by the pressing need to obtain cash, they also do so for revenge (p. 59).

Transformative *action* is defined as a behavior that raises a person’s social status, meaning their position in the social hierarchy. As there are different hierarchies, there are different kinds

of status. A person may be wealthy but not employed, beautiful but not educated, and respected but imprisoned (Anderson 1999; Black 1976; Wilson 1987, 1996). Any behavior that raises any kind of status is, by definition, a transformative action. Transformative actions are often interlinked with each other. Being married (which is a kind of status), for instance, may motivate a person to hold a stable job and stay out of legal trouble (both are kinds of status).

### THE DARK SIDE OF AGENCY

Agency is the conscious choice to gain status. Not all status is “good,” however. This is true because conventional markers of status—such as wealth—can be earned through crime, and also because criminal involvement can infer status in some subcultures (see, e.g., Anderson 1999; Gunter 2008; Jacobs 1999; Sandberg 2008a, 2008b). Entrepreneurial and predatory crimes like drug dealing, fraud, burglary, and robbery are a way to earn economic status. In turn, illicit proceeds can be used to purchase other markers of status, such as fashionable clothes and jewelry (Anderson 1999; Wright and Decker 1994, 1997). Moreover, criminality can be a marker of status in and of itself. In some communities being bad is good (Topalli 2005): drug users are respected for using drugs (Maggs and Hurrelmann 1998; Moffitt 1993; Kreager et al. 2011); violent individuals are respected for being violent (Anderson 1999; Sandberg 2008a); thieves are respected for stealing (Sutherland 1937); and so on. All of this is to say that when an offense is motivated by the desire to gain status, then it is caused—in a loose sense of the term—by the offender’s agency.<sup>1</sup>

As already mentioned, the life course and rational choice perspectives are distinguished by their temporal focus (long versus short) and unit of analysis (the person versus the situation). These differences are important to consider in developing a theory of how agency facilitates crime. They suggest that agency may be broken into two distinct parts that differ in temporality. Drawing on De Certeau (1984), we term the two types of agency *tactical* and *strategic*. Tactical agency is the decision to transform one’s status in the immediate situation; this concept fits best with the rational choice perspective. Strategic agency is the decision to transform one’s status in the long run; this goes along well with the life course perspective.

When a single offense is motivated by the offender’s desire to gain status then this choice is deemed tactical agency. When an offender commits a succession of crimes for the same reason then strategic agency is at work. In other words, continuation in crime (i.e., a criminal career) *may* be a long-term strategy for gaining status.

Strategies and tactics are not intended to be mutually exclusive concepts. Although they lay at different ends of a temporal continuum, both can be at work simultaneously. With that said, the types of agency are distinguishable, at least so in the minds of offenders. Not all individual offenses are meant to be repeated, but rather are thought of as onetime attempts to gain status; these events are the product of tactical agency. But sometimes individual offenses are not thought of as merely singular events, but instead as comprising a unified push toward status; such a string of events are the result of strategic agency.

<sup>1</sup>In this article we focus on how crime increases the status of offenders, but of course the opposite happens as well. For example, being imprisoned for committing an offense lowers what is known as formal respect (Black 1976). Or, losing a fight can result in less informal respect (Anderson 1999).

In short, the concepts of strategic and tactical agency reveal that choices aimed at gaining status can be more or less transformative (cf. Hitlin and Elder 2007). Some choices are transformative in the short run; these are tactics. Other choices are transformative in the long run; these are strategies. Tactics that are repeated over time may be seen as part of a strategy. The distinction between tactics and strategies is useful because it helps to specify in what way, for how long, and to what effect intentional choices to commit crime are transformative. In turn, this may be used to explain why a person starts committing crime, continues along this path, or desists from it.

We now turn to an empirical illustration of these ideas. Before doing so, note that it is important to avoid culturally normative biases when evaluating agency as a cause of crime. Researchers must pay close attention to the sociocultural context of the offender as well as that person's social and personal identity. Consideration of such factors is especially important when trying to determine whether crime results from agency because structural constraints and opportunities as well as culture mold perceptions of status (Anderson 1999; Jacobs and Wright 2006; Sandberg 2008a, 2008b). An analysis, therefore, should try to determine if a person perceives offending as leading to their rise in the social hierarchy.

## METHOD AND DATA

Offender-based research has a rich history in criminology (see, e.g., Shaw 1930; Sutherland 1937), and in the study of deviance more broadly (see, e.g., Anderson 1999; Malinowski 1927). This method is premised on the notion that useful information is obtained by speaking with and observing persons involved in the phenomenon under study. Offenders possess uniquely first-hand information on the causes, mechanics, and consequences of crime commission (see, e.g., Copes and Vieraitis 2012; Copes et al. 2007; Jacobs 1999; Jacobs and Wright 2006; Miller 2001; Topalli 2005; Wright and Decker 1994, 1997). Thus, by keying in on the offenders' perspective—rather than relying solely on that of government officials and victims—it is possible to generate a broader, potentially more valid understanding of crime and deviance (Jacques and Wright 2012; also see Bernasco 2010).

To examine the role of tactical and strategic agency in the onset and continuation of criminal activity, we use qualitative accounts focusing on "change talk" and behavioral change (see Giordano et al. 2002). The data are derived from a multi-year ethnography of offending and safety among young persons living in townships of Cape Town, South Africa. Specifically, we draw on 76 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 19 young male offenders, as well as independent observations of them.<sup>2</sup> The study was carried out by the first author during three periods: six months in 2003; fourteen months in 2005 and 2006; and one month in 2008.<sup>3</sup>

The respondents all lived in Black and Colored township areas of Cape Town, South Africa; the imprisoned participants lived in these areas before incarceration. Township areas were designated for non-Whites during apartheid, and they are currently characterized by a concentration of social problems such as high rates of unemployment, poverty, violent crime, gang

<sup>2</sup>For a discussion on the value of employing interviews in tandem with observations, see Lindegaard (2010).

<sup>3</sup>The first author is White and of European origin, but she had lived and worked in Cape Town two years prior to the study. Her access to social networks in the townships and her identity as someone foreign to the identity politics of the country made her position toward the respondents relatively neutral (for details, see Jacques et al. 2011).

involvement, abuse, drug addiction, and HIV/AIDS (Besteman 2008). Ten of the nineteen offenders were incarcerated during the entirety of the study; three offenders moved in and out of prison; and six were out of prison during the entire time (for an overview, see Table 1).

At the time of the study, respondents were 16 to 24 years old. This age group was chosen with the idea of covering both the onset and continuation of criminal activities. Ten of the participants self-identified as Colored and nine as Black.<sup>4</sup>

The types of crimes committed by participants include burglary, car theft, assault, robbery, carjacking, rape, attempted murder, and murder. All respondents had committed at least one violent crime. Most of them had committed between ten and twenty crimes. Six of them had never been arrested. Among the ten incarcerated offenders, seven of them were involved in a prison gang. Two of the three offenders who moved in and out of prison during the study were involved in a street gang. Four of the six non-incarcerated offenders were involved in a street gang; two of them were killed during the study and one experienced an almost fatal shooting.

Sixteen of the nineteen respondents were recruited through workshops conducted at two different schools and in prison. The workshops lasted for about an hour and included themes such as safety, violence, and street credibility. At the end of each workshop, the offenders were asked if they wanted to sign up for a personal interview. They were informed about the content of the interviews, the duration, and confidentiality. One criterion for participation was that respondents were fluent in English.<sup>5</sup> None of the participants were remunerated.<sup>6</sup> Three participants were recruited through snowball sampling.

The interviews, which lasted between 80 minutes and 3 hours, were semi-structured and conducted in an informal manner. The structure of the interviews varied but all focused on the topics of violence, safety, and crime. Interviews centered on actual events and behavior of the participant in specific situations, as compared to general perspectives on the research topic. Respondents were asked, for instance, to describe recent situations in which they had committed offenses; to elaborate on the histories and circumstances of their life broadly; and to explain the role of offending in their life. All of the offenders were interviewed four times over a period of five years in order to confirm information, obtain missing details from earlier interviews, and gain information about their choices to commit or desist from crime. Therefore, the data covers participants' early involvement in crime, continued offending, and, for some, desistance from it.

The observation periods lasted between two and six hours. Some took place at an agreed-on time and place, whereas others developed out of interviews or previous appointments. Fieldwork notes were made immediately after the observations. The first phase of observations involved being shown around the township by respondents. Focus was on places and people that made them feel safe and unsafe. The second phase often involved accompanying them to visit friends or hang out in a local bar. During these activities the first author observed how the respondents interacted with peers, family and people in the street, including their quarrels, fights, and parties.

<sup>4</sup>During apartheid South Africans were categorized as White, African/Black, Colored, or Indian/Asian. Colored was a category constructed to include people who did not fit any of the other categories (Posel 2001).

<sup>5</sup>In practice, only one person had to be excluded from the study for this reason.

<sup>6</sup>The first author paid for activities done during observations, such as fast food and drinks in the shopping mall and at the beach, cinema tickets, and entrance fees to night clubs.

**TABLE 1**  
Overview of Participants

#	Pseudonym	<i>In or outside prison</i>	<i>Gang</i>	<i>Age</i>		<i>Offenses</i>	
				<i>Of 1st crime</i>	<i>Start of study</i>	<i>Ever</i>	<i>During study period</i>
1	Michael	In	None	14	23	AM; DD; BU	In prison
2	Damian	In	Street & prison	13	20	M; AM	In prison
3	Srybulela	In	None	16	18	AM; AR; BU	In prison
4	Devron	In	Street & prison	14	21	M; AM; R; AR; BU	In prison
5	Kyle	In	None	17	19	M; DD	In prison
6	Bonga	In	Prison	17	21	M; R; AR; BU	In prison
7	Byron	In	Street & prison	10	23	M; AM; AR	In prison
8	Kelvin	In	Street & prison	NK	23	M; AM	In prison
9	Gino	In	Street & prison	15	24	M; AM; CJ; AR	In prison
10	Kenneth	In	Street & prison	NK	24	M; AR	In prison
11	Ralf	In and out	Street & prison	16	23	AM	FP
12	Drégan	In and out	None	13	22	M; AR	AM
13	Zanezwe	Out	Street	16	17	AM; CJ; AR	AR; CJ
14	Thabo	In and out	Street	15	16	CT; CJ	CJ
15	Sipho	Out, died	Street	14	17	AR; DD	AR; DD
16	Kasief	Out, died	Street	16	19	M; AM; AR	M; AM; AR
17	Wandile	Out	None	16	18	DD	DD; FE
18	Buzwe	Out	None	16	18	AV; DD	AV; DD
19	Beka	Out	Street	22	19	AR	AR

Acronyms represent the following: “NK” is not known; “M” is murder; “AM” is attempted murder; “R” is rape; “AR” is attempted robbery; “CJ” is carjacking; “AV” is aggravated violence; “FP” is firearm possession; “FE” is fencing; “DD” is drug dealing; “CT” is car theft; “BU” is breaking-and-entering.

Collecting data through both interviews and observations fostered deeper understanding of the processes in focus. For instance, during interviews some offenders explained how being involved in criminal activities provided respect but also made them vulnerable in certain parts of the township. Accompanying them to those places and observing other people’s reactions toward their presence showed how involvement in crime had consequences for their status. Subsequent interviews with the same offenders provided the opportunity to probe them on their behavior and responses from others.

Data were analyzed manually. Transcripts of the interviews and field notes were read and hand-coded. In the process of coding we focused on (1) whether the offender described the onset and continuation of crime as an intentional choice, and (2) whether the way he talked about, behaved, and was perceived by others indicated that his status changed as a part of making those choices.<sup>7</sup> As seen below, the purpose of the data is to draw on the experience of offenders to gain understanding of how tactical and strategic agency affected their short- and long-term involvement in crime as well as change in their status. For brevity’s sake it is not always possible to

<sup>7</sup>Our coding differs from McAdams’ (1992) coding list for agency, which has been used by Maruna (2001) and Healy and O’Donnell (2008) in their studies of desistance from crime. The difference is that we include attention to not only offender stories but also offender behavior.

present multiple quotes for the same phenomenon, so the selective presentation of data is guided by its representativeness and illustrative ability. All names are pseudonyms.

## AGENCY AS A CAUSE OF CRIME

To understand how agency can cause crime, it is important to first situate our participants within their socioeconomic context. All of them lived in township areas characterized by a concentration of social problems, including poverty, unemployment, low levels of education, and violent crime. Based on a questionnaire conducted in 2002 in two of the biggest Black townships of Cape Town, Swardt and colleagues (2005) found half of all households (52%) generated no income from wages and almost two-thirds (64%) of adults were unemployed. Eighty-one percent of households reported that there was too little food available, and 43 percent of households experienced a food shortage during the previous year. And although the majority of adult residents (94%) are literate, only one-fifth of respondents completed "matric" (South Africa's final secondary school certificate).

A majority of the participants resided in the township of Gugulethu, which in 2006 had a population of 24,764 persons. The ubiquity of crime there is made apparent by the staggering number of crimes recorded by police: 154 murders (which equates to 621 per 100,000 persons); 110 attempted murders; 849 assaults with the intent to inflict grievous bodily harm; and 793 robberies with aggravating circumstances (SAPS 2011).

The socioeconomic disadvantage that characterizes township areas makes it difficult to improve one's standard of living through legal activities (also see Anderson 1999). Also, the absence of a reliable police force and inability to prosecute offenders creates an environment that stimulates criminal activities (Jensen 2006; Standing 2003). In such a context, crime is an alternative system for social mobility and social control (Anderson 1999; Jacobs 1999; Jacobs and Wright 2006; Sandberg 2008a, 2008b). Offenders living in townships do not have many opportunities for getting an education or job, which makes supporting one's family through legitimate means difficult if not altogether impossible. In such environments, crime was a path for offenders into "another league."

## BECOMING INVOLVED IN CRIME

Of the 19 respondents in the study, 16 described getting involved in criminal activities as an intentional choice.<sup>8</sup> In the descriptions provided by these 16 offenders, offending was cited as

<sup>8</sup>One of the three who did not see crime as an intentional choice was Kyle. He got involved in robberies and eventually killed someone because he felt provoked by the victim in a bar. He described his involvement in these criminal activities as a part of being a drug addict and therefore not something he consciously chose. This perception confirms literature suggesting that addiction presents an obstacle to the exercise of agency (Christian et al. 2009). Another offender who did not see his crime as agency, Srybulela, was convicted for manslaughter and described the situation as being present in the wrong place and time. Together with a friend he went to the friend's employer to pick up a salary, but unbeknownst to him his friend had brought a gun to rob the employer who was accidentally killed. The third offender of this sort, Ralf, went out one evening and got so upset about a guy who was flirting with his girlfriend that he ended up killing him outside the night club. He did not describe this as an aware choice but rather as the consequence of being messed up by emotions he could not control.



motivated by and effective in obtaining three kinds of status: belonging in a group, respect from peers, and wealth.

Inclusion in groups of friends was described as a crucial driving force behind beginning to partake in crime (also see Gunter 2008). Zanezwe, for instance, discussed how he increasingly stayed with friends and partook in criminal activities after his father died:

**Zanezwe:** At some stage I decided to stay instead of leaving when my friends got into trouble. Usually I would get up and leave when they became serious. That is why they called me a lightie. When my father passed away I did not care anymore; then I was doing hijackings [meaning carjackings] and robberies with them and I even shot a guy.

During observations of Zanezwe and his friends he was referred to as a ‘‘lightie’’: someone who is not willing to stand up for himself through the use of violence and otherwise uninvolved in crime. When Zanezwe and the first author left the house where the group was hanging out, one of them joked and said: ‘‘Now you leave as usual? When the fun [criminal activities] is going to happen you always leave.’’ When Zanezwe’s father passed away he allowed himself to become more exposed to and involved in criminal activities. The loss of family members through either death or personal choices may cut off the motive to go home and inspire a search for belonging elsewhere (cf. Laub and Sampson 2003). By the end of the research period Zanezwe was no longer involved in these activities, and had started college. When looking back, he emphasized that his desire to belong was the main reason for his involvement in crime.

Each crime committed to be part of a group is an example of tactical agency because it provides short-term rewards; doing so over and over again may be motivated by strategic agency focused on obtaining a stable and integrated place among others. Only 3 of the 19 offenders in our sample committed crimes alone. The other 16 did it together with friends or gang members. One offender described getting into an illegal bar frequented by gangsters; he saw this as a transformative act that gave him a sense of belonging and respect among peers:

**Byron:** First time, I actually go to the ‘smokkel yard’ [illegal bar] and then I see here is my life, because I don’t get the feeling of being so alone when I am there. And then I saw my brother and I tell him I want to be a part of the gang and then he tells me: ‘‘No.’’ Then he hits me. And then he hits me again. And then he says, ‘‘Yes, you can be a part of the gang [but] you must show me.’’ And then I show him. Like I go and kill someone. Like any kind of enemies. Nobody told me I must kill, let me make example, ‘‘I must kill Devon.’’ Nobody tells me that. Anybody I find in the night I must kill. I kill one person. He was the leader of the Homeboys.

Being in the illegal bar together with gang members and his brother relinquished Byron’s feeling of loneliness by giving him group membership. Acceptance in this group and social scene, however, required him to prove his worth. To do so he murdered a rival gang member; this tactical act provided an entrée into a group and its criminal lifestyle. The murder and each visit to the illegal bar were tactical actions; as a whole, they were motivated by a strategic agency focused on obtaining status, including belonging in the group and respect by its members, in the long term.

When offenders in our study explained why they became involved in criminal activities, respect among peers was a central theme (also see Anderson 1999; Jacobs 1999; Sandberg 2008a, 2008b). One offender noted that because he had a small physical build he wanted to prove himself; he did so by being a good shooter:

**Damian:** They said, “Who is going to do that?” and I said, “Hey, I am going to do it because I am like one height and I like to do things that makes my heart beat fast,” you see. That is why I went and shot that guy and from there that was when things started. We started getting guns and stuff; started shooting. I am just “trigger happy” so I started shooting.

This offender’s violent act was motivated by the desire to compensate for his small stature. Although height is not status in the social sense, being small can invite disrespect. When persons are on the negative side of this discriminatory treatment, they may make compensatory efforts aimed at raising their status in other ways, such as through violence (also see Messerschmidt 1999).

In the violent townships where these offenders lived, shooting people is a path to status. Each shot is itself an indicator of tactical agency that may exist alongside a long term desire for respect. In addition to the direct benefits for one’s status, a reputation for violence may come with the additional advantage of deterring potential victimizers who may otherwise view someone as weak and thus an easy target (also see Anderson 1999; Jacobs and Wright 2006). In the words of one participant, Drégan, “People started looking at me in a different way . . . . Some people were afraid of me. I liked it.”

Another reason for getting involved in criminal activities was to obtain wealth (also see Anderson 1999; Gunter 2008; Jacobs 1999; Sandberg 2008b; Wright and Decker 1994, 1997). Having money was essential for surviving difficult circumstances, and important for impressing peers. For persons who are pessimistic about their prospects for obtaining wealth through legitimate paths, crime may appear to be a particularly attractive strategy to gain status. One carjacker described the following circumstances as a motive:

**Thabo:** I was tired of asking my grandfather for money. It is not right to bother him. He is an old man and I should provide for him . . . I might be able to one day but what am I supposed to do in the meantime? How can I sit and wait for my life to get better? What if it never gets better? They say you must have patience but I do not know for what.

Asking for money from family members was uncomfortable for many of the offenders. They did not want to be a burden. Taking care of oneself was seen as especially important; providing for one’s family members is even better. Thabo wanted to support his loved ones, but he did not have legal ways to achieve that goal. During the research period, he moved between households of different family members in order to divide the financial burden of supporting him. When someone in the household lost a job he was moved to a place where someone had a job. Eventually, he came to compensate for his lack of legitimate pathways by carjacking—a tactical act that accomplished the goal of gaining wealth.

Wealth-based status may bring a person other forms of status, including group inclusion and respect from peers (Anderson 1999; Jacobs 1999). Offenders described involvement in crime as bringing them into “another league.” Consider the prestige and importance felt by one offender:

**Sipho:** When I decided to deal drugs my life changed. I became friends with that old guy and he brought me into another league. Like suddenly I had a lot of money; a lot of cash and people wanted to be friends with me and work for me. I mean come on. Work for me?! [Later] I could also see my son whenever I wanted.

Dealing drugs brought Sipho more than cash. During observations it became clear that he had gained more respect among peers, a more central place in his community’s network, and even

a closer relationship with his son. His first involvement in crime happened three years before the start of the project when his mother died from AIDS and his father got shot when returning from prison. He explained that a life on the street required income and respect from other street people, and that he gained those aspects of status by dealing drugs. Later on, Sipho became involved in a gang, started doing armed robberies, and was shot dead by a rival gang member.

## CONTINUING CRIME

When offenders first enter into crime it typically does not bring about radical changes in their social status. Crime has the potential to bring about significant changes in the long-term perspective *if* an offender successfully follows the “rules” of the field and manages to climb the social hierarchies in socially appropriate—albeit conventionally deviant—ways.

Of the 19 respondents in the study, 17 continued to commit crime after their initial involvement.<sup>9</sup> Twelve of these persons described continuation as an intentional choice, whereas five of them did not include any “intentionality talk” in their narratives.<sup>10</sup> As noted above, getting involved in crime is a transformative choice in the sense that it is a way to secure belonging, respect, and money. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, maintaining these aspects of status may require continued involvement in crime: a “cumulative advantage” rather than a “cumulative disadvantage” (cf. Sampson and Laub 1997).

One offender, for example, explained how he lived a certain lifestyle focused on a search for respect:

**Drégan:** It is almost like an operation. When you do a certain job, you live a certain lifestyle; you are prone to certain things. So I operated as a gangster without being a part of a gang and I was like more arrogant because I did not want to play in a gang. I was actually like this big man. I do not need a gang but I wanted to be a part of all these underground activities. I also wanted to have guns and knives and smoke drugs and drink alcohol and stuff like that. I also want to do that but I do not need a gang to take me up. So I was a certain person with a certain character. Always looking for trouble because trouble is what gives you respect. The more trouble I get, the more battles I win, the more respect I get. So do not play it safe. I never played it safe. I lived on the edge. Standing on the highway, two o'clock in the morning, stop a fast incoming car. You stop it in the middle of the road. Friends are like, wow, that guy is crazy and stuff like that. You do that; you play with your life; always . . . . One guy asks you, “Why are you looking [at me]?” and you ask, “Hey,

<sup>9</sup>Two offenders committed one or a few crimes and then terminated their criminal career during the period of the study. After Zanezwe had been involved in robberies and carjackings he shot a guy at close distance and never found out if he died. He did not get caught for the crime and continued with high school which he finished in 2008. In 2009 he started studying sociology at the university. Thabo hijacked a person and was caught. He was waiting trial for six months and was eventually released due to the lack of evidence. One of his co-suspects had bribed the judge to remove evidence from their files. Upon release he continued high school, became a peer educator, and got his diploma in 2009.

<sup>10</sup>Buzwe and Kyle continued their involvement in crime because of a drug addiction problem. Srybulela continued being involved after being sent to prison for manslaughter; he got involved in a few stabbing incidences described as self-defense and deterrence. Michael described continuation with crime as caused by him breaking and entering into homes as a consequence of becoming homeless after his parents died. John killed someone who was hitting on his girlfriend, which gave him a reputation for violence that dragged him into other types of crime both inside and outside prison.

what the fuck are you looking at?’’ but you know, if you are responding in that way, trouble is going to happen. And you know there will be a lot of trouble because there are a lot of people but you do not care because you are looking for points; you are looking for respect.

By behaving criminally and otherwise “crazy,” Drégan gained and maintained respect and belonging among peers. Each violent or wild action was itself a sign of tactical agency attached to the strategy of obtaining prestige through deviant pathways (also see Agnew 2006).

For some of the offenders, the most important outcome of continuing with crime was the protection it conferred on them. Initially, they had to prove themselves as streetwise and tough; they were constantly tested on their willingness to be violent. Once they had proven themselves, however, their status as a certified criminal insulated them from challenges and threats. One of the participants, Vernon, explained, “When a big man smack someone it is wrong . . . . When you are big you do not need to smack anyone. When you are big you can talk to people; like a big man should talk to a boy.” Another offender, Damian, made a similar comment: “I do not need to worry with nobody anymore because people know me from outside. I am famous so now I avoid trouble.” We see, then, that being “big” or “famous”—meaning a proven, high status criminal—according to the respondents deters victimization (also see Anderson 1999; Brookman et al. 2011; Farisa and Felmlee 2011; cf. Gould 2003; Griffiths et al. 2011; Jacobs and Wright 2006).

Some participants also described crime as a way to continually earn money, support one’s family, and thereby gain status as a “man.” Sixteen of our participants lived in homes where no father was present. In such households, the oldest man in the household had to either sustain the others or at least contribute economically. This expectation was described as a pressure and reason to continue being involved in criminal activities. Consider what one offender told us about committing crime to support his family:

**Bonga:** When we are going home [after being released from prison] my mother tells me, “No, you cannot do this thing [i.e., commit crimes].” And I say, “Ok, I will not do that thing again.” Then the rest of [the year] 2000, I do not do any housebreaking anymore. I attend school and my mother is working one day per month. Ok, I attend school and I pass. Then in 2002 I am again thinking, “How can I get money?” They [my family] do not understand what I am doing when I come home with a TV and a radio. They ask me where did I get this thing from and I say, “No, I got it from my friend,” and they say, “No, we do not want it. You are doing this thing again. You can go to jail.” But I am lying to my mother and I say, “No, I am not doing that.” Next time I come with money and they say, “Oh, your friend really likes you.” She does not want to take the money. I think, “Ok, they do not want the money then I will go and buy clothes and food.” When I bring the food they do not refuse. You cannot really refuse food. They ask, “Where did you get this food?” I say, “No, I do not know who brought this food. Maybe it was my older brother,” so they cook the food.

The above account shows that despite the family’s wishes, this offender continued to commit crimes to support their needs (e.g., food) and wants (e.g., a television). Participation in family life is no doubt a staple of conventional success, but providing for it is not always easy. One strategy for doing so is crime. Each theft is a tactical move potentially guided by a broader strategy.

At this point it is important to clarify that strategic moves toward high status are not always made or, when they are, successful. A few of the offenders mentioned how getting involved in

crime did not entirely change the conditions of their lives, but did have a short-term effect. Zanezwe, for instance, was engaged in crime “for just a short period” and “was happy they stopped calling me a lightie.” Another participant, Beka, told us that his life “changed a lot” once he “had money and could go to parties” but “in the long run [he is] still someone from a township without education and [a] job.” Echoing these two persons, Sipho felt that “[s]tealing cars was a way to get cash and a fast ride” but he “still had to go back to the shack of [his] friends” and “did not have money for a cell phone or nice clothes.” The importance of these three criminals’ narratives is that they make clear why it is important to distinguish between strategic and tactical agency: to make a long-term difference in status it is often necessary to persist, whether in criminal or legitimate pursuits.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although agency may lead people away from offending, it can also do the opposite (cf. Laub and Sampson 2003 with Nagin 2007). Our analysis demonstrates agency is a crucial factor for involvement in and continuation with crime. Despite being illegal, criminal actions can be a way to gain status (Anderson 1999; Gunter 2008; Sandberg 2008a, 2008b; Jacobs 1999; Jacobs and Wright 2006; Wright and Decker 1994, 1997). In situations where education offers little prospects, jobs are scarce, social welfare non-existent, and family structures disrupted, crime may be an important way to gain not only wealth but also belonging and respect. These are aspects of status obtained and maintained by committing acts such as murder, robbery, theft, and drug dealing. As individuals find themselves with fewer opportunities to gain status through legitimate means, crime fills the void (Anderson 1999; Sandberg 2008a, 2008b; Jacobs 1999; Jacobs and Wright 2006; Wright and Decker 1994, 1997). Despite the extreme structural barriers experienced by the respondents in our study, beginning and continuing crime were interpreted by them as choices intended to raise their status. Offending, in their mind, allowed them to re-define themselves in a manner that gave them self-esteem and power, rather than construct their identity as victims of their circumstances.

An important question is if we would have found a similar tendency among offenders living in other disadvantaged areas in South Africa and beyond. For example, and contrary to offenders in our study, active offenders in Maruna’s (2001) and Healy and O’Donnell’s (2008) studies portray themselves as victims of structural forces when they talk about their persistence. Our study differs from their studies by being based on not only narratives about offending but also on independent observations of behavior. Thus, the contrasting findings might be due to using different methods, but it might also have to do with the context of the study. More research is needed on both of these possibilities.

What makes life unique in urban disadvantaged areas of South Africa are the radical and recent changes of that country following the official abolition of apartheid. These changes have created struggles about identity, particularly among the non-White part of the population that currently experiences the most rapid changes (Bangeni and Kapp 2008; Besterman 2008; Dolby 2001; Robins 2005; Steinberg 2012). In the current political discourse, at least, non-Whites are presented as having equal opportunities to create a better existence. Why some non-Whites manage to become presidents or successful businessmen and others are trapped in the poverty and deprivation of the townships is constructed as a matter of talent. Whereas the older

generations of non-Whites tend to frame their problems as caused by structural deprivation, younger non-Whites tend to blame themselves rather than the circumstances of their lives; included in this latter group are participants of our study. This is a plausible explanation for why our participants spoke of their crimes as a choice rather than the effect of being society's victim (cf. Sandberg 2009a, 2009b).

It cannot go unstated that despite the harsh conditions that go along with living in a township, the majority of young men growing up in such areas still find ways to live their lives without getting involved in crime. What seems to differentiate the two groups is their ability to accept the deprived conditions and be what many of them referred to as "patient." Typically, the young men who do offend are the ones who want to change their lives quickly, and who do not expect to earn an education and job through hard work. They strive for better family relations and stable incomes but they do not expect to reach those goals through conventional means like earning a diploma and landing a job. Whether this is a matter of self-control (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990) or something else altogether would be an interesting line of research for cross-cultural studies down the road.

On that note, this article has limitations that future work should seek to mitigate. Most important, perhaps, is that all of the respondents in our sample were lower-class, from a single area (townships in Cape Town), and offending for a period of five years or less. A sample based on persons with different characteristics may reveal different findings. For instance, other forms of status beyond group inclusion, respect, and wealth may gain prominence. The above limitation calls for not only more qualitative but also more quantitative research. Although the former method is well suited for theory development, the latter kind is best for theory testing. We hope that quantitative researchers will take up the task of testing our theory.

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