

Consumption in Crime: Fashion as the Construction of a Criminal Self in Society

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Abstract

The overarching aim of this article is to explore criminal recidivism. Criminal recidivism is one of the largest problems for correctional institutions and thus ambition in Western countries. In particular, we aim to provide a partial explanation as to why some correctional ambitions worldwide frequently have such a low success rate in dealing with recidivism in general. The objects of analysis in this study are criminals as a distinct group of citizens, outsiders if you will, a *them* in an *us-and-them* dichotomy. The results of the study then become an explanation that can be portrayed in terms of a trajectory of meaning in a process over time. Here we consider the consumption of crime as being similar to the consumption of fashion recognized in a personal role and identity. Fashion is chosen as an example of consumption that pertains to desire and hence to longing for a better life.

Introduction

The overarching aim of this article is to explore criminal recidivism, specifically with regards to Sweden. Criminal behavior in Sweden is very different from other countries in terms of origin and historical influences. However, criminal recidivism is one of the largest problems for correctional institutions and thus ambition in Western countries in general. In particular, we aim to provide a partial explanation as to why some correctional ambitions worldwide frequently have such a low success rate in dealing with criminal recidivism in general.

The idea that periodic involvement in abnormal networks—two such examples being the prison environment and criminal networks—leads to increased levels of criminal activity has been widely studied by criminologists, (e.g., Akers 1985; Hagan 1993; Hagan and McCarthy 1997; Haynie 2001; McCarthy and Hagan 1995; Thornberry and Krohn 1997; Thornberry et al. 2003; Warr and Stafford 1991; Bernburg and Krom 2006; Pyrooz 2013). Certainly, the causal effect of associating with criminal peers and their behavior has been well documented empirically, (e.g., Elliott, Huizinga, and Ageton 1985; Jessor and Jessor 1977; Kandel and Davies 1991; Thornberry and Krohn 1997). Further, the criminal network links can consist of corrupting family members, peers, or other acquaintances. The important point is that these other individuals—be they family, peers, acquaintances, or others—compose a network of which an individual is a more or less active member of and that the particular set of relationships are oriented toward criminal acts and values (dreams and

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wishes, if you will) that in themselves create opportunities for certain behavior (Bernburg et al. 2003). Recently there has been a sort of backlash, at least in terms of returning to the postmodernist view of crime studies. One such pronounced example is the study of Victor L. Shammass and Sveinung Sandberg entitled “Habitus, Capital, and Conflict: Bringing Bourdieusian Field Theory to Criminology”, (2015). The focus is on Bourdieu’s key conceptual tools, including the different forms of capital and the habitus concept, that have recently come to be deployed with greater frequency in criminological research. By developing the concept of the “street field” as a tool for research, crime scholars draw attention to the nature of the social relations they study: the skillfulness of agent, and the transformative effects of remaining within semi-enclosed domains of social networks over extended periods of time, very similar to a Bourdieusian perspective. The significant term is the *habitus* concept, an individual pattern of behavior that is taught and learned, and that induces an individual to make specific choices that lead to the reproduction of power hierarchies. One important aspect is that habitus is durable and cannot be remade instantaneously, which is what makes rehabilitative criminal justice interventions less likely to succeed, (Shammass and Sandberg 2015, p. 11).

In contrast to the Shammass and Sandberg study, we introduce fashion and the consumption of fashion into the criminal adaption of the environment in terms of people and attire. Fashion is chosen as an example of consumption that pertains to desire and hence to longing for a better life. However, emphasis here is on Herbert Blumer’s (1969) *Symbolic Interactionism*, elaborating dynamic changes that the individual, and probably the supporting groups, undertake over time (as a trajectory). Between this dynamic view of consumption and the Bourdieusian durable, and somewhat static, form of habitus there is a gap in the understanding of the process of change (as a trajectory) that constitutes the reason why rehabilitative criminal justice interventions have a low success rate.

In sum, the postmodernist reason for why rehabilitative criminal justice interventions do not succeed is the durability itself of the second nature of habitus (Bourdieu 2008:85) whereas the problem of recidivism, as we will argue in this paper, concerns the individual exposure to environmental changes and the similarities with consumption of fashion. To consider this gap of knowledge between the personal durability in habitus and personal change consumption of fashion, we use the thick description approach in an empirical case to raise awareness of what personal involvement consists of.

Fashion and Crime Consumption

This particular approach is chosen because of the characteristics of fashion consumption which can contribute to the understanding of criminal recidivism as a function of consumption in society. In our view fashion revolves around a human desire for happiness, it invites us to cross a fantasy bridge to a place where we can become likable, if not attractive. This is based on the ability of fashion to be new or innovative, as *avant-garde* to the followers of trends, which creates fashion followers who are expected to be *neophiliacs* (desire for novelty), people who are novelty seekers and thus they need the ability to adapt rapidly to extreme change, (Koenig 1973:77). Second, fashion has to do with social change in its own meaning, (Polhemus 1994). Third, fashion is public and communicated by groups or by an identified group of consumers in society, (Perrot 1994). Finally, fashion is a performance art that pertains to artistic communication, i.e., the capacity of fashion to transform a person into a *genuine being*, although it is made up of textiles and garments, in effect, to express the body itself. This *genuinity* is an appropriate response to a certain mode of dress which, according to Wilson (2003, p. 231) always hides a wound that we take to mean *emptiness*, i.e., a driving force in the self-construct, in its turn a desire or longing for esthetic experiences, sensations, In this sense, brands and attire can resonate with the desire for a specific life, reflecting this desire as a kind of translation, transferring meaning content from the unexpressed feeling to the concretely expressed, (Schiller, 1801).

Thus, fashion and the utilizations of its artifacts—the attire—can be taken as an esthetic activity that caters to the need of becoming. Isochronous to this becoming process is the meaning process, which can best be described as a *make-believe* game, thus attire becomes an artifact of

playing. This toying with artifacts can be said to function like camouflage, efficient because the toying within the fashion game results from an effort to increase the attractiveness of oneself, (Sapir 1931). Add to this that fashion also creates meaning in our life by a process of involvement identified by Blumer (1969) as “symbolic interactionism”, which means that meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he or she encounters. Ownership of memories can for example be of a material nature in the form of a souvenir or abstract nature, which can be explained by past experiences in life or important events throughout life. In this way it creates memories and possibly a purpose in life, and even a certain sense of immortality. Therefore different forms of ownership give individuals a sense of the past and help create a clearer picture of the identification process by answering questions like who they are, where they come from and maybe even where you are on the road, (Belk, 1988). In fashion trends there is always a visible rise, flattening and decline which can be used to illuminate movements of groups of people in society. In this study, the focus is on criminals and their movement between different categories of identities as criminals via their consumption of fashion. Furthermore, it is notable that the power of fashion to both hide and express personal, as well as social, issues, highlights the trouble that fashion can give as well as the benefits it offers a human being in hiding and expressing things that are needed or longed for. Hence, brands and attire can be said to resonate with *Sensus Communis* (Gadamer 1960/1990) desire and with the longing for a specific life as a conception (image) of that very lifestyle. Consumption then reflects this resonance based on desire. In this article, light is shed on this phenomenon in the context of criminality, and in the comprehension of criminality by studying criminals and dress associated with the society that we live in, in terms of the processes *into* and *out of* criminality. With this background, these two research questions are formulated:

RQs: Why do criminals frequently fall back into criminality after their release from prison and what role does fashion consumption play in that process?

These research questions are our approach to the empirical observations made, which might lead to some new ideas on how the recidivism problem can be construed.

Theorizing the Practice of Criminals

From an amalgamation of indicators suggested by Durkheim (in Hamilton 1995) and Foucault (2003) a platform emerges for a view that crimes consist of an act that offends very strong collective sentiments without which social solidarity would be lost in society. In this sense, collective sentiment mirrors society as a whole. In those terms, criminality serves as a balancing point either side of which citizens distinguish themselves from an *other* category. If one is to identify oneself as something, Sartre (1943) argues that this is done through a process of separating oneself out of the other, i.e., by referring to others that one is not. This separation of one from the other is also apparent when trying to explain a concept, thus not only the concept of oneself. For example, Lévi-Strauss (1966, 2003) argues that the concept of “evil” is explained through its obvious opposition, in this case “good.” Thus, oppositions play a vital role in our thinking and perception of ourselves and the world in which we live. This opposition-fashion way of relating to oneself and the world may be termed *mythological*, (see for instance Egan 1997). If this is true, then not only can law-abiding people identify themselves as non-criminals, but criminals also can identify themselves in such *non-terminologies*, a *mythical identification* of oneself, if you will; *myth* because these dichotomies make up the tale of a self. Self-identification may then be said to be a social, if not a linguistic practice, that has to do with experience. In his 11th letter on aesthetics, Schiller (1801) maintains that personality in this same way is based on experience. Schiller makes a difference between a person (a being) and personality (being someone specific). A person is only finite in terms of dispositions and out of these dispositions the personhood flows infinitely. This personhood is only preceded by a sensuality, part of the dispositions. The flow then is based upon the experiences a person makes. A person, then, is basically empty apart

from dispositions; a person is made into a personality through their specific experiences. One might say that there is no core in a person, rather dispositions upon which experiences are projected, interpreted as it were, i.e., transformed into models of the world and of the self in the world—understandings. The disposition screens are the area upon which experiences becomes visible into a specific condition that the person is in, and thus make up their phenomenological personality. A person's personality in this way can be said to be based on esthetic experiences with esthetics taken to mean, first, sensations of any kind and, second, following Schiller, sensations that build a personality. So, one could say that personhood precedes personality, *being* precedes *identity* and thus, of course, self-identification. This, to us, is in part congruent with Thomas Metzinger's view on the human mind when he presents his metaphor the *Ego Tunnel* (2009). The concept of the "ego tunnel" is a visualization aiming at making the idea of the self as a process more accessible to a wider audience than those specifically engaged to the philosophy of mind and cognitive science. Metzinger presents his most developed theory of self-as-process in his seminal work, *Being No One* (2004) where he makes a philosophical account of recent developments in cognitive science. As Graham Harman (2011) points out, Metzinger not only makes the case for self-as-process but also for philosophy basing itself in science, much like ancient philosophy. Harman writes, "If you agree with Metzinger that up-to-date empirical work should replace a priori intuitions into the nature of the human subject, then you too will feel surrounded by widespread reactionary resentment on topics pertaining to the mind", (ibid.: 11). Harman obviously does not wholly agree but at the same time explains that what Metzinger is confronting are a priori assumptions regarding the existence of an independent self. In *Being No One*, Metzinger presents his theory of mind; he writes (somewhat polemically) that,

[t]ransparency is a special form of darkness. With regard to the phenomenology of visual experience transparency means that we are not able to see something, because it is transparent. We don't see the window, but only the bird flying by. (Metzinger 2004: 169)

Likewise, we don't see the silver or ink dots; we see what the photograph depicts. Metzinger follows by arguing that we don't see the "representational character of the contents of conscious experience", (ibid.: 169). This is to say we cannot see or experience the basis for our conscious experience, just the resulting consequence, and this consequence is, to Metzinger, the felt self—the phenomenal self—and it is this feeling that Metzinger visualizes as a tunnel with walls that consists of a self-model and a model of the world. The self-model that has as its prerequisite (materially conditioned) dispositions for creating such a self via the experiences a person has, experiences that thus make up a model of the world in which we live and act, but the self has no material existence, in fact it has no substance in itself. Metzinger states that the self can be portrayed as an illusion (a cozen played out by no one to no one) but to say that is problematic and he says that

"[...] if one looks a little closer the first question one would have is, who is *having* this illusion? So this illusion talk itself is conceptually problematic. If I had to stay with it I would rather say is an illusion that is *no one's* illusion, or something like that. I think it's pretty obvious that there is no such thing as a self. As you know, philosophers all disagree all the time but there's pretty strong consensus in my discipline that the self has no substance, that is not a provocative claim. It's actually something almost trivial. For philosophers, a substance is something that could hold itself in existence. It is "ontologically self-subsistent" as we say; it could maintain its own being in the absence of a living brain, or something like that. The self is not a thing in the brain or a thing outside of this world. That seems pretty obvious to most of my colleagues. What is very robust and very real is what we call the *phenomenal self*. Of course, there is a self that appears in conscious experience; for example, I feel like I'm someone, but that is not a thing but a process." (Tippet et al 2011: 5) (Italic in original.).

The visualization earns its vividness from the fact that the transparency is best described as emptiness, at least emptiness at its core, since there is no core; no material core self is to be found, only projections in terms of a self-concept made up of experiences, (Gallese & Metzinger 2003). For the time being we will, therefore, stick with the visualization Metzinger presents. Thus, in Metzinger's

view, the ego is a transparent self-model, portrayed as a tunnel with walls that function as a transparent model of a world—a re-presentation but with no prior *presentation*. There is no such thing as a core, rather the tunnel stays empty; the walls, however, not at all. In this way the ego is a construction on the esthetic level, through sensations that build up the personality in relation to an experienced world. Esthetics then play a vital role in the making of a personality—which might seem an obvious conclusion—where the dispositions, or personhood in Schiller’s terms, are what makes the wall into a transparent area: and this is the area where possibilities for a personality can be realized. The not-so-obvious point is that the tunnel is empty and will remain so, thus allowing for new sensations to be added and hence expanding the transparent walls, and in this way allow new esthetic experiences to configure the content of the walls—the self progresses in a process. This content then becomes, in effect, the momentary situation that the person is in, consequently conditioning the personality.

Following Metzinger, there is no “self” before experiences, and hence no “self” before objects are taken into service as *self*-constructing devices. This means that there has to be a world to experience before there is any such thing as an “I.” This is in congruence with ideas that Martin Buber presents in *I and You* (1923, 1996). He argues in a similar way that the “I” is a consequence of the world, not the other way around. So objects and experience precede personality; one can even say that objects and experience make up the personality. In a way, this can be said to be connected to Russell Belk and the argument in his landmark article “Possessions and the Extended Self” (1988), even though Belk’s position is that it is the actual possessions that make up the self, he speaks of an extended self where the object’s center around a pre-existing person, so to speak. (The importance of Belk’s concept has been thoroughly investigated by Ladik et al., 2015.) Belk’s aim is to explain consumption, not to explain the self in itself and he hence speaks of an extended self, the extension being the objects that people surround themselves with; the objects become extensions, hence extended self. In short, a person, so runs Belk’s argument, defines themselves in terms of the objects with which they surround themselves, thus the possessions become part of their personhood. This can easily be understood when considering what objects create in terms of doings—i.e., with things like pens, cameras, paintbrushes—whereby we can do things that we otherwise could not. The same goes for limbs: arms and hands enable reaching and grabbing; legs and feet enable locomotion; then adding a pen to the arm–hand extension enables writing, and so on. And if what a person writes in some sense can be said to define what and how they think, then pens can easily be understood as extensions of our bodies, and so it follows that if our bodies incorporate the self, then the pen is an extension of the self. Belk gives other examples but in essence this is what he proposes. Belk further argues that by viewing objects in this way it is easier to understand consumption. Belk’s theory is then a theory of appropriation. However, what Belk does not do is construct a theory of esthetics, of experience, rather a theory of the role of objects and places. Belk postulates a self and builds from there. Belk concludes that...

“The construct [of the extended self] offers a way to account for gift-giving without necessarily resorting to the cynical premises of exchange paradigm, and also offers perspectives on the relatively unexplored consumption areas of pets, care and maintenance of consumption goods, product loss and disposition, organ donation, sharing, collective consumption of objects, and collection of consumption objects. It raises important issues concerning the role of possessions at each stage of the life course.” (Belk, Russell W. 1988, p. 139–168)

Still, Belk’s theory does not help understand the self in itself, even if it does help to understand consumer life, and his concept becomes instrumental in viewing consumption practices. We would like to characterize Belk’s theory as a theory of the self-as-build, where the foundation of the self is a given so that objects and places can be extensions from something previously given. Our aim here is not to explain consumption practices in themselves, as a consequence of a given self, as expansions or extensions, rather the “self-as-process” made up from esthetic experiences, thus addressing the recidivism problem rather than a consumption phenomenon per se. But consumption is anyway vital in

that it is a central part in forming experience, thus personhood, which we will subsequently show. In this sense, we follow Belk's notion of "self-as-build" complemented with the notion of "self-as-process", where the latter is at the fore in our reasoning, understood as a "self-as-esthetic"-process. The gist of our discussion is then that the self does not have substance and thus does not exist as a thing, rather as a process progressing, in our understanding, through experiencing the world and in this way creating a model of the world and a self-model that will form a first person experience (a phenomenological "I") and a world and a self that forms intentions, goals and actions—desires that forms themselves into drivers for action, a model that we will take to capture resonances in the world, more precisely society.

So, following the above, identity can be said to be a play performed through transparent walls, the tunnel, with no center, only periphery. This play constitutes the personality, but it is dependent upon the sensations from without the organism, thus forming itself into an phenomenological *outside–inside* dichotomy. Then, as much as the inside is a play, so is the outside offering itself for esthetic experience. The outside may be seen as something factual, seeping (oozing) into the person and thus forming the personality, but there is reciprocity in that when an "I" is so constructed, when a history and a personality are there, that same personality projects itself onto the world. Many have focused on these projections (Freud for one and Heidegger is another obvious example), but we will just point to one here that has bearing on what we discuss in this paper: Kendal Walton's theory of mimesis. In his seminal book from 1990, he sketches out a *make-believe* relationship between fantasy and factuality, in effect what a person needs to agree to in order to understand art. For instance, if one is looking at a painting, one needs to agree to certain ways of portraying, i.e., that two-dimensionality can portray a three-dimensional reality, or that an actor is the character they are portraying, not just the person they are—the actor is the person they are not. This is, in Walton's terminology, a *make-believe* play. He explains further that this *make-believe* play also takes place when we play fantasy games, such as when two people imagine things to be what they are not: a stick being a horse; a dress being the dress of a queen or a king. Schiller also speaks about play, e.g., when in letter 26 he explains that the reality of things is of their own making, but their resonance—aura or gist would be other ways to express the idea—is made by humans, and if you embrace this resonance, if you rejoice at what you experience with things, then you rejoice over what things do. In our context we can say that a brand or attire becomes not just a mark of origin (manufacturing for example, like a mark of reality) but a mark of excellence, or a dress belonging to a certain kind or a certain type of life. We need to agree on this in order for this to be an actuality, and this agreeing to a certain kind of object being what it is in a social context we here propose to call *make-believe* in the same Waltonian sense. We need to agree to a specific, socially constructed, mode of understanding that makes a thing into what it is perceived to be, and thus relate to it in this *make-believe* fashion much in the same way that language functions: we need to understand the *make-believe* game we play for communication to work in the way it is intended and, of course, if this is true for sticks to be horses then, likewise, it is true for brands and attire. Brands resonate in a play-like way in the everyday consumption network of interactions between actors (agents) in the game of brands as costumes (in the form of attire). (For more on resonating, see Belk and Kozinets 2005, 2007.) What will become apparent later is that brands resonate with desire. The *make-believe* game might have a whole host of rules and regulations connected to it, just like any game; you cannot do just anything with a stick if it is a horse and your game is a game of cowboys and Indians, but you can certainly do many things. Likewise, you better follow the rules of language if you want to be understood, and if you break the rules you need to know exactly how you can break them for the breaking to be effective; hence you need to be an expert player if you seek to break the rules. So, playing a *make-believe* game does not just have to do with esthetics, it also pertains to conduct and morality.

Whatever the role of the individual in esthetic terms, the problem of recidivism can here be identified by the display of identity in terms of the outfits worn, the drugs taken, and the type of criminal activity undertaken over a period of time. There seem to be two parallel processes that together mold the identification of how a person *drifts into* recidivism. They are both associated with the exposed identity, here connected to the relationship with drugs (such as cocaine, amphetamine and heroin) and personal clothing over a sequence of time. These two processes, which identify the

individual as a criminal over time, are in this research made to exemplify the period of the *drifting into* crime. This period is for some individuals realized as going into a normal social life outside of crime. Crime is here simply defined in legal terms as “misdemeanor” where the problem of criminality is viewed in terms of existential matters drawing on a method that has the observation of processes as the leading point—the processes *into* and *out of* crime, as such.

It is here argued that clothing becomes like a *make-believe* costume, because first its function is to give access to the world of partying in the case of our study, and second, because fine clothes define a lifestyle giving access to a life otherwise unattainable, to become one of *them*—the crowd aspired to. Thomas Metzinger (2009, p. 166 ff) writes about empathy and our ability to mirror other people. He maintains that,

“[A] conscious self thus not only is a window into the internal workings of one’s own Ego but also a window into the social world. It is a two-way window: It alleviates to the level of global availability the unconscious and automatic processes the organisms constantly use to represent one another’s behavior. This is how these processes become part of the Ego Tunnel, an element of our subjective reality. They lead to an enormous expansion and enrichment of our inner simulation of the world.” (Ibid.)

In *The Ego Tunnel*, Metzinger argues that the world is a construction based on perceptions. Our brain creates a sensual model of the world so vivid that one easily mistakes it for the real world; then the brain creates an “I” that is a perfect image, not only containing your body, but also your memories, your inner conditions. This self-model then becomes the “I” to which you connect your experiences; your world revolves around this “I.” The “I” then basically is an image without substance, at least a creation. Others have put forward similar ideas of the “I” as a creation but from other starting points and for other aims, Mary Parker Follet (1924) for one, when she writes, “I never react to you but to you-plus-me; or to be more accurate, it is I-plus-you reacting to you-plus-me” (p. 62). She suggests the notion of me + you, which means that an autonomous “I” does not really exist, but a social “I” does, and it is a construction contingent upon a you + me (Parker Follet 1924). Hence, she proposes a view that in effect the “I” is social, rather than individual. Metzinger, however, goes further when he maintains that the tunnel that is the ego is a transparent image; the tunnel itself is empty, and there are no actual walls in the tunnel, just transparencies. Blumer (1969) argues that initial illusions and dreams come to be real in social interaction on the basis of the meaning things have for a certain person.

From a fashion theory starting point, Wilson (2003) touches upon ideas of personality when she argues that fashion always hides a wound, which is here treated as emptiness, and taken to mean desire, a longing-for experiences in order to fulfill a quest for a specific personality. Blumer (1969), likewise, draws on the symbolic interactionism perspective when he speaks of the personality as “a becoming” via a movement into fashion explained here via criminals’ consumption of clothing. So then, the gist of this is that personhood does not have any physical existence, no substance, rather a build with no specific starting point and no specific purpose in itself. Purpose and strive grows as a consequence of confronting the organism with the world, hence esthetic experience form the build, likewise desire as a driving force is an outcome. This understanding of the self is then the basis for our analysis—a phenomenological self, a feeling: the self-as-process and esthetic experience with no materiality of its own, esthetic experience as reciprocity, the world and the “I” as re-presentation with no prior presentation, comprehension (grasp) as reverberation of the re-presentation.

Heuristic Approach

The objects of analysis in this study are criminals as a distinct group of citizens, outsiders if you will, a *them* in an *us-and-them* dichotomy. However, all of us are influenced by fashion to a greater or lesser extent, whether we are aware of it or not; this means that we are a part of society and the ever-changing circumstances that surround us. Fashion theory is one of the tools to explain and visualize

social relations and social associations, criminals in this case. Thus, attire is used as an indicator for esthetic experiences and manifestations of the “I.” The RQ is: *Why do criminals frequently fall back into criminality after their release from prison and what role does fashion consumption play in that process?* That question justifies the thick description approach as an overall heuristic approach (Geertz 1973), even if not a hands-on one. This overall approach serves to illuminate the self-anchored consumption of crime also visible in terms of fashion consumption. In contrast to what is termed a *thin description*, such a *thick description* in itself has the aim of “cutting down culture to size,” as Geertz (ibid.) puts it. In short, this means that the approach aims to reveal meanings and meaning networks in a cultural context. The researcher then has to use their own perceptions as a tool for teasing out these meanings. The results of such a study then become an explanation that can be portrayed in terms of a trajectory of meaning in a process over time. Normally though, one would associate thick description with an observational type of method, i.e., the researcher would partake in the goings-on in a culture that the researcher is trying to understand, and in this ambition searching for the structures of meaning shown in behavior. This, however, does not mean that interviews are excluded. The *thick description* mode of conducting research does not exclude methods; it mainly says something about the ambition of the description. Hence, when the researcher utilizes any method it can be brought into the field of thick description as long as the researcher is searching for the profound meanings and its structure, not just the description in itself or for its own sake. The researcher is then obliged to make interpretations of what the researcher encounters. This brings to the fore the problem of interpretation, how it can be viewed, and how interpretations in themselves function and, more specifically, what their limits are. This latter problem has been investigated by Umberto Eco (1990): consider two texts, alpha and beta, and another text, sigma. When asked which text sigma is a misinterpretation of, a random person X says that sigma is a misinterpretation of text alpha. Would we deem that person correct, and hence wrong, if they had answered beta instead? By this example, Eco shows that the original text controls its interpretations and hence that there are limits to interpretations (ibid: p. 61). The subject of our study, Essie, gives an interpretation of her earlier life which we in turn retell. If this story is true, so are the meanings associated with it, because it is possible to say just that, if the meanings pertain to the story or not. And, congruent to this, the analysis is an interpretation and thus a retold story. So if the story controls its own interpretations, the storyteller does not. More important is another qualitative element in the story told, one that Paul Ricoeur points to (Ricoeur 1981). A story and a storyteller, in cooperation with a listener-speaker—*interlocutor* in Austin’s words (Austin 1962)—create their own world to which they relate, a “proposed world” (ibid., p. 142). This means that the world in the story is a created one to which the story itself relates ostensibly. So, when analyzing the story told, the task for the researcher is to reveal as clearly as possible the *proposed world*. In just this sense an analysis is a *thick description*, separate from a *thin description*, since we are looking for the meanings that are operating in the world described, or rather *proposed* in Ricoeurian terms. The term “thick description” was first proposed by Gilbert Ryle in 1949 to denote a description that has as its aim not only to describe the immediately observable but also the meaning structures within a culture. The anthropologist Geertz (1973) then further developed the concept into a working heuristic approach. In short, this means that the aim of the approach is to reveal meanings and meaning networks in a cultural context. The researcher then has to use their own perceptions as a tool, based on a thorough analysis of the proposed world being revealed to them. The result of such a study becomes an explanation that can be portrayed in terms of a trajectory of meaning in a process over time. The concrete method applied in this research is then best described as interpretation. So, in conjunction with this, we turn here to Essie’s story and ours.

The Construction of a Criminal Self: Essie’s Story

Introduction

Our informant, who we will call Essie, told us that she could easily recognize a person in the criminal world. The obvious question, then, is how? Essie told us that a whole host of different cues together

signal that a person is part of the criminal world. Women—just as men, for that matter—are interested in dressing smartly, Essie states, but the smartness has a twist to it when it comes to criminals. When asked to elaborate, Essie is not quite so clear and it becomes harder to understand what she means; Essie instead talks about herself and how she found herself in the criminal world. She started her career in her late teens and continued through until her early thirties, when she and her then-to-be husband found a way out of criminality and drug abuse into a more normal life. She is now married and has a daughter, thus living a normal family life, dividing her time between work and family. She is well dressed but not conspicuously. If you met her she would probably not come across as a former criminal, although she sports a somewhat weathered face, perhaps only visible to those who know of her previous life. Apart from this, she shows no apparent signs that reveal anything of her past. Essie says that she has always been interested in clothes and fashion, and this has apparent consequences when she speaks of herself in the past tense. Essie tells of a time when she admired other criminals for the partying, for dressing smartly, for living a wonderful life (in her eyes), and for having a wonderful time. She tells of the longing she had to belong to that crowd, so much so that she ventured into that type of life and volunteered to become one of them—the smart-looking.

The identification of process into crime

Essie describes the process of falling into the use and abuse of drugs and in terms of three stages: first, you go to parties with these people and there you access the drugs; then you go to the parties just to access the drugs; and finally, you need the drugs so much you take them anyway. Essie wound up using heroin, also known as *shooting horse* (the term Essie uses, *horse*, aka *smack* in English), and at times also amphetamine (aka *speed*; if you are a speed addict then you are a *Tjack-pundare* in street lingo, the term Essie uses). The drugs Essie started taking were so-called party drugs, such as cocaine etc., then she moved onto the stronger, harder stuff. The process shows three distinct periods in Essie's story of herself and her development into a full-fledged criminal, following a trajectory in her ego tunnel. For her, each period lasted for about five years. She describes her development as typical of the process that most criminals of her kind experience: a trajectory that in its earlier part is driven by a desire to become; a phantasm leading the way in the *becoming* process. The same informs her sense of dress and her outfits as an identification of her inner self. As mentioned, Essie has always been interested in clothes. This has the effect that she not only aspires to the partying, but also to dressing in fine clothes, i.e., expensive brands. Essie can access these clothes not primarily by buying them, but by stealing them. She thus moves around in the streets where high-fashion vendors have their boutiques and showrooms and there steals whatever she wants. Essie is then also able to sell clothes and other fashion items in order to support herself and to sustain her drug abuse. Essie tells us that this was surprisingly easy for her in the beginning; if she was on drugs, she would lose her fear of being caught, whereas this would not at all be the case were she not on drugs.

Furthermore, in the beginning, in the first and for the best part of the second stage, she was not known to boutique owners and showroom personnel, but it became increasingly difficult for her to sustain this way of getting the clothes she wanted for herself and that she needed for selling. When asked why she would want to take such risks anyway, since her stealing led to repeated incarceration, Essie says that she was “turned off” mentally and emotionally—she just did what she felt she had to do in order to maintain herself. Essie says,

“I came to need these garments not only because they were fancy and gave me a ticket into the partying life with access to drugs and fast living with exciting people, whom I looked up to, they also covered my body and the ever increasing emptiness I felt, emptiness in myself and the life I lead. I came to realize that this was a trip to the bottom.”

Essie says that her dressing became more and more of a cover-up. The clothing was very superficial and in a sense phony—artificial, in short, Essie says. In the last stage, which is stage three in this case, she was homeless and did not bother with the partying life to take the drugs; they became a necessity

in themselves. Clothes then, even more than before, had the function of a disguise—turning away from the use of fashion—to conceal the bruises and the damage her life inflicted on her body. By this third stage she was widely known in fashion boutiques and showrooms, which naturally led to an increasingly difficult life as a thief. At the beginning of her career she had a lot of money, lots of drugs, and went partying in fancy restaurants. In the latest stage of her career in criminality she had to seek shelter in places for the homeless and her clothes were in tatters. In Essie's words,

“I went from the high life to the utmost misery, financed through stealing, accompanied by longer or shorter periods in prison. In prison, however, we wore the prison clothes, they were quite different, so for me as a woman prisoner not only took away the high life, it also took away my ability to dress the way I wanted. I could not do so much, and if I tried the prison guards would correct me, I could fix a bit here and there, but not much. It was just the same for everyone.”

So life in prison, as far as clothing goes, was quite different from being a free citizen. “But I'm out of it now,” Essie says, and asks if we would like to see a picture of her daughter, a beautiful little girl. Essie is all smiles. At the end of her career, when she could no longer steal things from fancy stores and consequently not come across the fancy brands that she used to wear, she had to steal street fashion from stores like Zara, Mango, H&M, and Gap. She wears such clothes now, but with a different feel to them. “We have left the old,” Essie says. Street fashion is okay, and she wears these clothes with a sense of pride. The feeling of emptiness is gone, she says, and she lives a full life as a proud mother, together with her husband, the father of her child. This period is here coined as the fourth stage in the process of drifting into and out of crime. The interview took place during the fourth stage in her criminal life, the process of drifting from the glory life of early criminality, via the other two stages of more or less misery, finally to a situation where she lives as a free citizen, recovering from the wounds of the past.

Analysis of the Construction of a Criminal Selfhood

The story of Essie is a story of empathy, and it is a story of the forming of an “I.” The re-telling is of course an interpretation, since we formulate her story with words other than those she used herself. But the underlying story, the story she told, is her interpretation of her life. This might seem a bit trivial, the observation might seem to have as its basis the notion of the author not controlling the readings of a work (cf Ricoeur 1981) and each reading is an interpretation (cf Eco 1990). Nevertheless, the original teller of the story is Essie, and it is a story; her story. The importance of this is not only that it shows her development into and out of criminality, it is also a story of sociality in the forming of a world and in the “I” that this world revolves around—a feeling of a center, if you will—and the emptiness of this feeling of a center, an emptiness or blankness in desperate need of a content, and this content is also formed socially in the Metzingerian ego tunnel. The implications from her story are that it is a sought-after life of luxury that drives the processes—the drug process as well as the process of fashion and dressing up—and the behavior that binds these processes together is criminality. She believes she gets and she experiences luxury, which hence fills her life and gives it meaning. Two parallel processes into criminality can then be seen in her story of herself: the process of drugs and the process of fashion and dressing, leading to an easy life with friends and acquaintances with whom she wants to be seen. These experiences fill her life with meaning and purpose.

As she tells her story, it is possible to divide it into three phases, followed by a fourth that in a way forms itself as a kind of leap of faith. The first being one of success and future prospects: she fills her experience with pleasurable esthetic sophistication, and she parties because it is fun to party. She also gains some importance since she can provide others with clothing from sophisticated brands: her knowledge on how to achieve that has value. Drug abuse enhance and uplift her esthetic perceptions; she becomes Essie, the sophisticated party-goer and businesswoman, making business with the stolen

goods. Where others might shy away, she does what is necessary to uphold her life; it also lends itself to a justification for doing what she is doing.

The second phase is one of continuation; she needs the drugs rather than uses them for reasons of enhancement of esthetic experiences. She goes to parties, not for fun, but to access the drugs—she steals because she has to. Her experiences slowly slide into a situation where necessity rather than positive esthetics become important. As she moves into the third phase she experiences an emptiness; her tunnel walls no longer display the positive experiences that filled her earlier life. Her *becoming* takes on a whole new meaning, a new direction, a meaning maybe best described as drought, paucity, even mental famine (to put it metaphorically). The make-believe game of luxury that she played before no longer seems to be accessible or, described in a Blumerian idiom, the people you interact with socially become inaccessible. Where before, brands, clothing, and partying with people gave her the esthetic fulfillment she was looking for, now it has become more a game of hide-and-peek, so to speak—she can no longer play the high-flying party game of luxury. When stealing, she targets more modest brands found in less luxurious stores, like street fashion, and she herself “dresses down” in that sense as well. She maintains her interest for fashion and fine clothing but it is simply no longer possible to uphold that kind of make-believe play. She becomes homeless, seeking shelter wherever she can find somewhere to stay for the night. In this stage she uses increasingly heavy drugs, not taking them for pleasure but in order to satisfy a whole other need. At the onset her need was to fulfill a desire for esthetic experiences and to act in a make-believe play of brands and luxury and to be part of an in-crowd, play the game with them. But at the end it becomes a game of hiding the misery she feels, a game of deception, which of course is akin to the game of make-believe, but different qualitatively in terms of the brands and clothing taken utilized for the purpose of concealment.

During these three stages she spends more and more time in jail and becomes known not so much for her partying as for her criminal misdemeanors; she becomes a juvenile delinquent, later a young criminal adult. Finally she meets another person, also criminal, who shares the same experiences as hers—the loss of a beautiful life and events—and shares the same step-by-step trajectory into homelessness. Together with him, Essie can find a new goal and new things to fulfill her need for esthetic experiences, and hence a new moral, i.e., conduct and justification for her former behavior, only this time without criminality. Her pride gains another focus: her family and her daughter. It is no longer important to wear high-profile brands, even though she is still interested in clothing and dressing smartly.

The fourth stage has some important features that it is worth emphasizing. First, just as Essie played her make-believe game with other people during the first three stages of development, she now plays another make-believe game with people, this time with her husband and other people that she interacts with from the KRIS group. KRIS (Kriminellas Revange i Samhället) is a group formed by former criminals to function as a self-supporting association for people who want to get out of criminality; former criminals who share experiences and who know what the make-believe play of luxury amounts to, just as they know what a new game of make-believe must contain in terms of the materiality of toys. They also know in what way the toying must be done, rules and regulations surrounding toying with a new set of toys, not the high-profile brands of yesterday’s life, but the new way of constructing the game and all its necessities. The deeper insight of the KRIS group is that, in order to change the game, you do not necessarily need to change the people around you but you must engage in a new game altogether otherwise you will just end up playing the same game. A new game requires new norms, and of course, in conjunction, new toys to play with, toys that are part of building up new esthetic experiences.

So, in effect, we have four stages that in different ways relate to make-believe things, toys, and rules and regulations for playing with these things, and how they function as part of the make-believe game. Each step leads to the next, even if the connection between them is indistinct. There is not a distinct endpoint, either: Essie is case in point to the trajectory but not to every actual (instantiated) trajectory. Following Metzinger, there is no pre-existing ego hence no stable, once and for all, given person. Following Schiller, the person present at the onset has dispositions and possibilities and forms a personality through esthetic experiences. And, as Blumer (1969) points out, this personality is formed through the interplay (interaction) between people over time. According to

Schiller (1801: letter 24), there is a sensitivity among the dispositions that precedes the esthetic experiences and this sensitivity is at play in this interplay, a sensitivity towards fellow human beings, but more importantly a general sensitivity that makes the esthetic experiences possible.

Returning to recidivism, as long as the make-believe play continues in a specific way with specific people, then recidivism will likely continue rather than be curtailed. The make-believe game needs to be curtailed and changed into a new set of rules and regulations, a new set of events that make up the esthetic experiences, a new set of toys for playing, and the people partaking in the game, in short, a new phenomenal selfhood needs to be constructed, hence a new understanding that creates new intentions, goals and actions, and desires. This, however, may not be so readily achieved.

Conclusion

When considering criminals and recidivism it is vital to also look at their consumption, coordinated to visual social changes, and we see that as fashion consumption which is the main issue in the operating RQs: *Why do criminals frequently fall back into criminality after their release from prison and what role does fashion consumption play in that process?* There are characteristics of consumption which can contribute to the understanding of recidivism as a function of society and the self, as evidenced by empirical observation and Essie's case in this study. The same characteristics of consumption also inform fashion theory: brands, and their associated attire, reflect contemporary desires and are thus part of an esthetic experience to build a personality, a selfhood; the personality then echoes their meanings within a context of desire, things, and people in society.

Some lessons can readily be learned from our study. It seems that, for individuals like Essie who are in the first and, possibly, second stages of development, there is a strong connection to criminality, which due to the inherent experience of living in crime for those individuals, and the desire to live the fantastic, far-out life of joyful party people. Another conclusion might be that it appears that criminals are trapped in a system of resonances due to the use of brands and attire similar to that of fashion consumption. When, as it is brought up here, consumption, especially fashion consumption, is almost similar to crime consumption. In this study such a similarity is likely to exist, which give a situation that both the game and its accompanying toys are the underlying ground for such type of consumptions in crime and in fashion. To bring changes or to move the direction of such act of consuming there is a need to change their values as well as the rules and norms, but not necessarily the people playing. That is, the network brought up by fashion shoppers or by criminal linkages is not necessary to be damage to change the direction of consumption of fashion or crime.

Each participant can fill their experiences with new meanings, hence the becoming process continues and a new "I" is formed, an "I" with a new meaning and value to it, but with a history, thus traveling onwards. Essie's testimony demonstrates some of the specific problems of her passage through three successive steps (each lasting approximately five years), finally emerging as a non-criminal, the fourth step. However, this is not done by isolating the individual from former criminal friends and networks, quite the opposite in fact; it is done by making those criminals within the network itself fill their lives with new meaning, i.e., fill the self with new content that forms a new tale of the "I" based on a new esthetic experience, thus forming a Schillerian person able to play a new Waltonian game of make-believe with a new set of rules, i.e., a new moral consciousness.

It is interesting to note that with an esthetic (Schiller, Walton) and a theory-of-mind (Metzinger) perspective on the individual as part of society, having the role the criminals have (Durkheim, Foucault), one can see how a destructive personality can be formed and also how a non-destructive personality can be formed, meaning that the criminal network itself has very little impact on the individual as criminal, rather the dreams that becomes the outcome of a specific selfhood formed into desires, manifested through the games people play. Belk's theory of the extended self is a theory of appropriation (in our context this might be taken as an appropriation of the toys needed to play the games people play). However, what Belk does not do in his study of consumption is construct a theory of esthetics, of experience, rather a theory of the role of objects and places, but his theory

clearly pertains to an idea of self-as-build. The idea proposed in this article is that consumption plays a more vital role in meaning content constructed with others (Blumer); and consumption becomes a play in a context of people and things (Walton) that forms a personality based on prior disposition (Metzinger, Schiller). Brands and attire are formed into toys that reverberate in such play-contexts of people and things to form a consumption play where the consumption is an esthetic process in the ego and the world formed into a transparency—self-as-process. This is the gap of knowledge that is flanked by *Bourdieuian field theory to criminology* and Blumer's *Symbolic interactionism* as fashion consumption reflecting social change. Taking this into consideration, rather than removing the individual from their criminal network as is postulated in most extant crime literature, an alternative way of curing recidivism is to strengthen the boundaries of social networks and behaviors and convert those behaviors into something else—a new selfhood.

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