Materialism and Illegal Enterprise: a Life Stories Analysis

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Materialism and Illegal Enterprise: A Life Stories Analysis
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ABSTRACT

The years of economic growth and concomitant personal prosperity and consumption of the 1990’s were mirrored by rapid growth in the U.S. prison population. Many of the crimes leading to incarceration were related to illegal enterprises that met consumption needs and desires. The researchers conducted depth interviews with male inmates at a minimum-security prison to examine the marketing characteristics of illegal enterprise, incorporating sociological and psychological theory to guide the interviews and interpret the data. Research conclusions provide insights into consumer misbehavior, and its antecedents and consequences.

In 2002, two seemingly unrelated trends were occurring in the United States. First, after the end of a recession in 1992, strong economic growth combined with productivity increases in the last five years of the decade (Jorgensen and Stiroh 2000) to produce an economic boom. The major stock market indices soared to unprecedented levels, and unemployment dropped significantly. Most American consumers enjoyed the fruits of their prosperity. Per capita income and household assets increased across all ethnic segments, resulting in high levels of disposable income and spending on luxury items.

During the same time period, however, U.S. prisons were full, reflecting two decades of sharp increases in both crime and convictions. The Department of Justice noted in its 2001 annual report that 3.1%, or 1 in every 32 adults in the U.S. was currently in the correctional system (www.usdoj.gov).

The contradictory patterns of increased consumer wealth and increased prison population growth suggest that not everyone benefits from economic growth in the same way. We follow longstanding sociological theory in suggesting a structural explanation for some consumption practices that casts doubt on the assumption of personal agency prevalent in marketing research. Specifically, we propose that while the salience of material acquisition and the desire to consume may have been commonly experienced, the routes for achieving personal consumption objectives differed widely among groups of consumers. In this paper, we describe research findings suggestive of a discrepancy between the desire to consume and the ability to consume which creates anomie, or perceived strain. We show examples of strain theory (cf., Merton 1957), in which divergence between the desires and opportunities of people in a society may motivate people to circumvent socially acceptable means of achieving socially desired goals.

This paper explores the specific motivations of criminals. We conducted depth interviews with inmates in a men’s minimum-security prison to examine the prisoners’ motivations, looking for the existence of materialism as a socially desired goal and of anomie, or strain, as a motivator for achieving the goal. Of particular interest were the specific mechanisms that criminals use both to address the disparities they see in their lived experience and to increase their chances of success in their chosen actions and lifestyles. Our objective is to provide insight into the lives and consumption practices of this under-researched set of consumers, as well as insights into consumer behavior through an enriched understanding of misbehavior.

This paper is organized as follows. First, we present the general research questions that motivated the study. These questions also guided the form and content of the interviews that served as the basis of data for this research. Next, we describe the research method, including the group studied, the setting, and the interview format. This description provides insight into the strengths and limitations of the study method, and it provides a context for the results discussed subsequently. Analysis and interpretation of the interview data is developed within the context of a general theoretical model. Key emergent themes and their relevance for illegal consumer behavior are also discussed.

RESEARCH MOTIVATION

While consumer behavior research has gained significant momentum in the past three decades, it has typically looked for mechanisms to explain how consumers generally behave. Research that tests the limits of this behavior, however,–what we will call misbehavior–has been nearly non-existent. Several consumer researchers (e.g., Albers-Miller 1999) have noted that consumer misbehavior is a subset of consumer behavior, and that insights about the broader topic of consumer behavior may be obtained by considering the forces and characteristics of behaviors that contravene societal norms. Holbrook (1987) includes consumer misbehavior in his cross-disciplinary constellation of consummation.

One purpose of our research was to develop a preliminary understanding of when and how consumer misbehavior occurs. Sociological research on deviant behavior and criminology suggests strain theory and its variants as one mechanism to explain misbehavior. A simplified description of strain theory is that strain occurs due to the inability to get what others have, and deviant behaviors serve as a means to reduce the strain.

Clearly, however, not all forms of perceived strain lead to the same expression. While some might react to strain by trying harder through legitimate means, others may be similarly motivated to use illegitimate means. For yet another group, strain may lead to attempts to minimize the perceived discomfort through such escapist behaviors as drug use or drinking. The latter two expressions of strain are the focus of this paper.

To investigate the antecedents and consequences of consumer misbehavior, we focused on the independent roles that materialism and the environment play in consumption-related behavior. Materialism was deemed important because the centrality of possessions can serve as a precondition for strain. Given their tangible, conspicuous nature, material goods are often a very salient indicator of success. The concept of one’s environment–both proximate and historical–was addressed because it may create a context that affects ability to consume. For instance, growing up in an environment in which education is neither valued nor facilitated may lead a person to undervalue the importance of educational achievement for attaining life goals, many of which may be consumption-related. Family structure may similarly affect the relationship between

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1One reviewer has suggested that changes in laws and in the degree of enforcement of laws would also explain the increase in crime statistics. We take the position that, prior to committing their crime, criminals are to some extent aware of changes in the legal system relating to laws and enforcement of those laws. Thus while both what is considered a crime and the probability of being caught may change over time, the existence of the decision to engage in criminal behavior remains constant.
materialism and strain. Rindfleisch et al. (1997) found that young adults that came from disrupted families (i.e., single parent families) were likely to be more materialistic and to participate in compulsive consumption behavior. We suggest that strain may have been the mechanism by which these results occurred.

Because we see consumption-related behavior as an interaction between materially focused goals and inability-induced strain, we focused our study on these behaviors, anticipating that different forms of consumption, such as consumption to meet short versus longer-term goals, might provide useful insights into the strategies used to reduce perceived strain.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Setting

The interviews used to develop the data for this research were conducted at a men’s minimum-security prison in southeastern Oklahoma. Permission to interview inmates was obtained from the Oklahoma Department of Corrections, following submission of a research proposal that delimited the scope, goals, and anticipated impact of the study on the participants.

This particular prison was selected for two reasons. First, the nature of crimes for which the inmates were serving time was commensurate with the marketing and consumption focus of this research. Prison statistics indicated that the majority of crimes involved the illegal transfer of property, such as burglaries, larcenies, and drug distribution. Second, the sensitive nature of the research topic created the potential for difficulty getting inmates to agree to be interviewed, as well as difficulty in obtaining detailed, open descriptions of their life events. Trust between the inmates and the interviewer had to be established. The interviewer’s mother was a teacher at the prison, and had worked with several of the inmates who agreed to be interviewed. Their respect and trust in her led them to recruit other inmates, and to willingly discuss incriminating, but not prosecuted, consumption-related activities. Several of the inmates commented either during or after the interviews that they would not have participated if they had not believed they could trust their teacher.

Participants and Procedure

The inmates interviewed for this research were twelve men who were serving time for a variety of crimes, including burglary, drug distribution, and manslaughter. The men volunteered their time and histories following an announcement by a teacher in the education program. Seven of the inmates were students in the program; four were friends or dorm mates of the students. The men ranged in age from eighteen to forty-two. Eight of the men were African-American, one was Native American, and three were Caucasian. The interviewer was a woman in her early thirties, and in her eighth month of pregnancy.

The men were interviewed individually. The interviews took place in a rear office in a mobile home on the prison grounds, while classes were held in the front room. The inmate sat facing the interviewer across a thirty inch table. On the table were two tape recorders, and pencils and paper for the interviewer’s notes.

Participants were escorted to the interview by a uniformed guard. The interviewer requested permission to record the interview, which was granted in all cases.

Data Analysis and Levels of Content Comparison

Data analysis post-interview was completed in stages. First, the interviews were transcribed and numbered, line-by-line. Next, the researchers read the transcripts, noting concepts representative of the three a priori research categories. Comparisons across the researchers’ notes and memos were conducted to ascertain whether the researchers noted similar concepts, and the extent to which the emergent concepts were based on the same interview material. In the next stage of analysis, concepts were abstracted to reflect categories of content related to the three foci of this research. One objective in this stage was to establish whether concepts that shared a category assignment provided insight into the antecedents and consequences of the illegal enterprises and other deviant behaviors.

CONCEPT CONSTRUAL AS EMERGENT THEMES

Content analysis of the transcribed data was conducted after the interviews were completed, although informal evaluation during the interview process enabled the interviewer to adjust questions and prompts so that later interviews explored areas of interest that had been uncovered in earlier interviews.

The focus on material goods was clear throughout many of the interviews, while a discrepancy between society’s emphasis of material goods and the lack of opportunities the prisoners had to acquire these goods became clear to the researchers independently during the analysis process. An additional theme, involving the acquisition and use of an intuitive understanding of the marketplace, emerged in the data analysis and interpretation process. These themes will be explored in the following sections.

Theme #1: We are living in a material world.

Richins and Dawson (1992, p. 304) cite Mukerji (1983) in defining materialism as “a cultural system in which material interests are not made subservient to other social goals,” and suggest that materialism includes acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness, and possession-defined success. Belk (1985, p. 265) sees materialism more specifically as the second dimension, and provides the term “happiness-seeking via consumption.” Historically considered incompatible with religion (Belk 1985), it is not surprising that social stereotypes exist pertaining to the types of products materialists value, as differentiated from non-materialists (Richins 1994).

Any discussion of materialism must also elicit the question of what role possessions play in our lives. Is materialism symbolic of a deeper, more important need or value? Bourdieu (1986) sees capital in general as “accumulated labor,” gained throughout generations of work, of which economic capital is one part. In this sense, then, it is possible to view materialism as the desire to attain economic capital in lieu of (or as an indicator of) other forms of
capital (i.e., social capital or cultural capital) particularly among groups who are disadvantaged in society. It may be that the desire for (and happiness derived from) possessions merely signals the attainment of this capital as a signaling mechanism.

The difficulty involved in identifying materialism derives partly from the existence of two types of meaning of possessions—public and private (Richins 1994). Private meanings result from the personal satisfaction of possessing, while public meanings consider the communicative function of possessing. Materialism is not acquisition per se, but rather an effect of the motivation for acquisition that includes a preference for possessions above the preference for other goals (Mukerji 1983). The prisoners interviewed in this study, however, showed clear indications of the desire for possessions over other types of capital. They may have seen the acquisition of possessions—economic capital in Bourdieu’s (1986) framework—as a substitute for the lack of social or cultural capital available to them.

Michael provides a clear example of the type of materialism encountered in the interviews. He describes his motivation not as need for money, but rather as a want for money. “I sold drugs for the money. Greed is what it was.” Interestingly, he shows a desire to follow the socially accepted route to achieving his material desires. As the manager of a clothing store, he describes going with his nephew to make a car payment, and

_They had this Cadillac. This 1988 Fleetwood Cadillac, and I saw it, and I said ‘that’s beautiful, man.’ It was champagne. I mean it was beautiful. It was beautiful!_

It seems clear that Michael is showing materialism for the goods themselves (the car), but is also exhibiting the type of materialism referred to by Merton (1957, p. 189) as a “heavy emphasis upon monetary success as a goal in a society.” This represents a situation where the focus has moved from an emphasis on the goods that money can acquire to an emphasis on the money as a goal in itself.

Throughout the interviews were references to material goods. Raymond remembers that he “wanted to dress nice” while in high school, and that his friends “had their own car [and]... dressed nice.” Numerous mentions of high-priced cars, such as Cadillacs and Lambourghinis were made across inmates. Comparison with others who had nice cars was evident in Leon’s comment: “They all out on the streets, you know, big Caddys... [and] I’m locked up, man.”

Other uses of material goods were seen. Some uses were symbolic. For instance, Michael received the gift of gold tooth jewelry in the shape of a dollar sign from one of his prostitutes. Leon, a gang member, discussed the use of gang colors to show allegiance to the gang, and his mother’s lack of awareness when he requested she buy him blue clothes to represent his gang. Possessions represented the achievement of material success for Carl Gene. His success consisted of “a three bedroom house, ... a cellar in my backyard, a two-car garage with a[n] apartment above it.” Lastly, Lloyd used his television as a mechanism to avoid becoming attached to friends. With two, twenty-year sentences, he avoided becoming “attached to ‘em [people], because they gonna, they gonna leave... That TV will be my friend. McGyver? I watch McGyver.”

Money also served as an ultimate rather than an instrumental goal (Richins & Dawson 1992). Raymond did “everything but murder and rape... Everything between those that you could call illegal to obtain some money.” For Leon, making money was a justification for his family moving to Oklahoma. “You know it’s alright. I don’t like it, but you know they making money, so [laughs].” Steven, discussing his motivation for selling drugs as opposed to stealing cars, says that the motive for car theft was the thrill, and to “get away with it,” while selling drugs was to “get more money.”

**Theme #2: You can’t always get what you want.**

Anomie Theory, also known as Strain Theory, was developed by Durkheim (1893, 1984) and popularized by Merton (1957). The theory postulates that strain occurs when wealth opportunities are not equally available to all members of a society. A segment which feels blocked from access may experience frustration at the divergence between its current level of wealth (for example) and that level valued by society. This frustration leads to the use of mechanisms to attain wealth that are not sanctioned as appropriate by the society—specifically, criminal activities. Merton suggested that the existence of anomie would be particularly evident among societies where there is an “exceptionally strong emphasis upon specific goals without a corresponding emphasis upon institutional procedures” (Merton 1957, p. 188). This characterizes the typical social surroundings of the inmates studied.

Sociological theories of deviant behavior are of two general types: those that emphasize social structure’s impact on behavior and those that emphasize the learned nature of the behavior (Clinard and Meier 1989). Strain Theory represents the structural approach, and explains criminal behavior as a logical result of a society that values wealth, but which also simultaneously prevents some segments of that society from achieving that wealth. Typical segments include “the poor, those who belong to the lower class, and persons of certain racial and ethnic groups who are discriminated against” (Clinard & Meier 1989, p. 81). In order to provide support for Strain Theory in the data, it is necessary to show that (1) the prisoners represent some socially disadvantaged segment of society, and (2) that they value the socially-encouraged goal of materialism to the extent that they are willing sidestep the socially accepted mechanisms for achieving it. The next section shows that the data support these criteria.

Social disadvantage among the prisoners studied comes from a variety of sources. Many of the subjects discussed either personal or family problems with alcoholism or drugs. Chris, when speaking of growing up in a single-parent household, mentioned his father’s death in 1980: “He was doin’ drugs and drinkin’.” Poverty was mentioned in a number of the cases. Chris describes working on an apartment, “because the place was in so bad a shape that they let us live there for a year [rent free] if we’d fix it up.”

Many of the inmates were brought up in single-parent households, and a number experienced the death of a parent early in life. One had a parent who also had a criminal history. Indicative of these early losses, a number of the prisoners mentioned the self-defense motivation as a reason for committing their crimes, although it wasn’t clear that this was not merely an attempt to avoid responsibility for their actions. For instance, one prisoner described his gang membership as “just protecting yourself” and describes the randomness by which he perceives the potential actions of others by describing people with “crazy moods.”

*Like, I could be sitting out there on a certain day or something and someone drives up and says ‘Hey, there’s a Crip. We ain’t got nothing better to do. Let’s shoot him’ (Interview, Steven).*

Socially acceptable mechanisms for achieving material wealth include working, saving, or sacrificing in order to purchase goods.

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3 The names have all been changed to preserve the anonymity of the inmates.
The prisoners showed the opposite tendency by acquiring desired goods in the short run. It is also apparent, in a number of interviews, that alcohol played a role in the sub-optimal decisions. For example, one prisoner describes the sequence of events leading to his capture:

I was out partying. Got into the car with some good friends at the time. We went out to take out some frustrations. Driving around, got hungry. We left our wallets back at the hotel that we were partying at. Walked into a store. I figured we’d just take what we wanted and he’d let us. But he didn’t. So we ended up robbing the place instead of just something to eat. (Interview, Chris)

Asked whether he would be attracted to drugs and alcohol after he left the facility, Chris pointed out that both “are very available here where I’m at.” Another pointed out “I couldn’t even honestly say that if I was to be let out today if I wouldn’t in a short time go back to [using drugs] again” (Interview, Morris).

Examples of alcohol and drug use also relate directly to the previous discussion of strain. Explaining how his life turned to crime, one prisoner discusses partying with a bunch of guys out at the lake. “Drugs. Then we started stealing, so we could party without having to worry about paying for it (Interview, Chris).

Another inmate mentions the role of other people in his criminal activities:

I was involved with five other people... I was pretty young then. And one of them had a circle that had a beer joint... a bar? And so we were out drinking and we wanted some more money so we went by his uncle’s bar and he got in a big argument with him and so we left and came back. And him and his friends went in there and robbed his uncle. They beat his uncle up and took the money for some beer (Interview, Morris).

While for some prisoners, the involvement in drugs provided an incentive for committing the crime, for others, the drug involvement was a more direct result of strain. For example, Morris put it succinctly: “Mostly pot. But I’m not opposed to dealing with anything else if I can... if I see that there’s a profit in it.”

Another prisoner, a cocaine dealer convicted of manslaughter, described his drug sales income as “at least $2000 a week” and, when asked about his future criminal activity, he described the probability of continuing when we got out of prison as a function of future employment opportunities not in line with his skill and experience level:

I wouldn’t do it if I could make some money. Like what an average person would make. Not no working at McDonald’s, then I wouldn’t take that kind of job (Interview, Rich).

It is apparent that Rich’s “average person” is not a minimum wage earner, as when he was later asked about a minimum wage job, he replied definitively, “I wouldn’t take that job.” His future goal was to get his GED and become an attorney. Again, however, he seemed to show expectations inconsistent with his skill and experience set. His expectations seem to indicate his continued willingness to go outside the social structure by committing crime, as he discusses his career goal:

If I can make that, then I wouldn’t do what I have to do. But then if I couldn’t, then I would probably go back to the same old thing [selling drugs] (Interview, Rich).

Motivations for selling drugs and stealing cars, jewelry, and money were different for Steven. For stealing, it was the pleasure of joy riding in someone’s car, and the feeling of getting away with it. He also mentions the process of selling the cars for a profit through the use of “swap shops.” It was possible to “just drive in and have everything redone,” to allow the sale of the car. For drug sales, however, the motivation was simply monetary.

An additional aspect of strain discussed by Rose (1966) is a “cultural apathy,” which implies withdrawal from the culture. At numerous points in the data there seems to be a lack of consideration for the personal and social consequences of the criminal actions undertaken by the criminals. It may be, however, that rather than a withdrawal from the culture in general, this strain is the result of an allegiance to a subcultural norm that is different from norms found in the dominant culture. For example, one nineteen year-old describes his rise through the ranks of the Los Angeles Crips as a “baby gangsta,” noting rituals and traditions that guide gang behavior. His information supports work by Rosenfeld (1989), who suggests that there must be conformity to some alternate norm for deviance to occur.

**Theme #3: Knowing your market, and satisfying it.**

Another theme that emerged during analysis was that of intuitive consumer marketing insight. The prisoners, typically with a low level of education, cited situations which indicated an understanding of effective business activities, describing techniques and processes with which they increased their efficiency and effectiveness in carrying out illegal enterprise and fostering illegal consumption. The prisoners employed practices that reflect commonly held business objectives, including understanding the psychology (e.g., needs, wants, desires) of the consumer; building the brand; developing customer loyalty; establishing reliable channels of distribution; and making money.

Iterative comparisons of concepts extracted by the researchers revealed groupings and linkages between the concepts that enabled concept categorization. The concepts consisted of three general types: (1) awareness of benefits deriving from the products/services provided; (2) awareness of the infrastructure involved in product/service provision; and (3) use of an opportunistic approach to maximizing the potential revenue stream of the market. These categories are consistent with commonly used criteria for gauging the potential efficacy of a business model. For example, Osterwalder and Pigneur (2002) characterize a complete business model as containing 1) a value proposition through product innovation; 2) a delivery infrastructure; and 3) financials.

Awareness of product/service benefits took a number of forms. One example is the adoption of a personal shopper approach in order to more appropriately meet consumer needs. Bobby describes the service he provided in acquiring previously demanded products:

I would already have somebody who’d want to buy it, and they would come to me and ‘Bobby, I need a screen door, I need a... ’ I’d go get it, or a TV. I’d break into the house and get a TV, a radio, whatever I could find.

Steven provides additional examples when recounting his transition from using drugs to selling them. “I sold drugs since I can

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4The authors also include a fourth component, customer relationships, which they believe attains additional importance for their focus on e-business. Other treatments of models in traditional marketing environments subsume relationships within the delivery infrastructure component.
remember . . . My friends tell me ‘Hey, I need such and such’ . . . . I give it to them.” Providing personal shopping services for friends was echoed later as well. Steven broke into a store because he “wanted something new to wear, and we missed the shops before they closed, and my girl wanted something.”

Recognizing the importance of providing benefits to the consumer was also observed in Michael’s description of the training process through which he put his prostitutes. He explains the technique involved in determining what the customer’s needs/wants are: “You analyze the situation. . . . You had to look at each individual situation . . . . I mean, what would work on him might not work on him.” Michael also indicates recognition of the importance of providing benefits through building the brand and maintaining the brand image. A prostitute was motivated to continue in his employ because, “she wanted that prestige that went along [with working for me] . . . because, you know, just like a good pimp is held high, a good prostitute is too.”

The second set of long-term practices involved an awareness of the infrastructure involved in product/service provision. Topics covered in this area include management of stakeholders and employees, relationship development and management, and issues relating to the distribution channel for the illegal products and services. Michael indicates a consideration for his employees and customers that borders on the romantic. “You know, although women may see it as love . . . . I sell dreams. You know, I sell a lot of dreams.” He reminds us that no matter what his employees think, he is in business for the money, in contrast with some of his prostitutes, who are in it because they like the pimp. His relationship with the prostitutes was characterized by an instrumental paternalism. “I take care of them, you know.”

The importance of relationship development was particularly apparent in the distribution channel for drugs. Rich describes the care taken to minimize the risk of arrest in the selling process by continuing a past relationship with a customer. “Sometime[s] I would [be scared to sell to the wrong person]. It [would] depend on who it was, and if I didn’t know him . . . . then I’d be scared.” Morris discusses the role of his past experience and intuition in determining whom was safe to sell to and in finding new customers. “I don’t have no difficulty. I can just go into like a city and within a very short period of time . . . I keep right on top of the drug network.” Michael discusses the importance of connections in the process of transacting call girl business with a new customer. He describes a hypothetical new meeting:


Steven shows a detailed understanding of the profit structure of a distribution channel in his explanation of “swap shops”—specialized operations that repaint and re-title stolen cars, representing the demand side of the channel. These shops buy stolen cars, paying as much as $15,000 or $20,000 for a $35,000 Cadillac. Value chain contributions are made as the shops “paint ‘em [and] change everything else back out [so the car is] legal. [Then] sell ‘em to the car lots.”

The third long-term goal relevant to the development of a business model revealed efforts to improve the efficiency or effectiveness of the revenue or profit stream in the business situation. For some of the prisoners, protection of the revenue stream simply meant putting practices into place to avoid getting caught for the illegal enterprise. Raymond describes how his drug addiction was the key factor in his capture and in the subsequent interruption of revenue. “I been selling [cocaine] since ’85, and [didn’t get caught] ’till ’89 [pause], till I started smoking cocaine.” Another drug dealer had two jobs in order to avoid raising the suspicion of police.

I was still [emphasis] servin’ dope . . . . I [worked] just to keep police off of me. ‘Cause they see me ridin’ around in a big Cadillac or something, this young, and I ain’t got no job, they keep sweatin’ it. But I had two jobs, so they can’t really sweat it (Interview, Leon).

TOWARD A MODEL OF ILLEGAL CONSUMPTION AND ENTERPRISE

Our analyses suggest the presence of a relationship between the social and economic context of the prisoners; their exposure to and awareness of the idea that the acquisition of material goods is a socially recognized, beneficial norm; and the resulting application of strain theory to explain participation in illegal enterprise. Specifically, we found that the lack of ability to achieve material goals resulted in strain that motivated the criminal activities. While it was clear that the prisoners were disadvantaged in some of the traditionally recognized ways, it was also apparent that they had an intuitive awareness for marketing mechanisms which increased the efficiency with which their material goals were achieved.

Crimes such as burglary and theft seem motivated directly by one of the dimensions of materialism hypothesized by Richins and Dawson—of the “pursuit of happiness through acquisition” (Richins & Dawson 1992, p. 304)—as indicated by the references to cars and jewelry in the data. The materialistic desires of the subjects were for particularly socially supported material items that would be used for public rather than private consumption.

Given that materialism was recognized by the prisoners as a “culturally defined goal,” (Merton 1957, p. 187) and that the prisoners were not able to use socially appropriate means to achieve this goal, we believe that a strain developed which served as a motivation to circumvent the traditional means of acquisition. A disconnect occurred between the acceptable means of achieving goals and the deviant means to doing so, such that the former lost their status.

It is important to note, however, that not all members of disadvantaged groups turn to crime as their solution, although one must expect that they feel the same strain as the criminals. Opportunity Theory (Cloward and Ohlin 1960) suggests that, given strain, differential opportunity for committing crime exists such that there must be some exposure to deviant behavior for the member of the disadvantaged group to adopt the behavior. This suggests that what is required for deviant behavior is not only strain between a socially desired goal and its achievement, but also the opportunity to participate in the behavior. We learned from the life histories of the prisoners studied that this opportunity, while presenting itself in a variety of ways consistent with the varied geographic, ethnic, and familial backgrounds of our subjects, existed in nearly all instances.

The inmates we interviewed had a clear, if intuitive, understanding of marketing practices for illegal enterprise, including the awareness of the importance of the benefits provided to their customers, the need for a delivery infrastructure, and the importance of a revenue stream and profit through the illegal sales activity. Experience with the consumption of illegal products, or with the distribution of such products, may not only obviate recognition that such activity deviates from social and legal norms, but may also provide incidentally acquired knowledge and expertise about how to manage illegal marketer-consumer transactions.
CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The concepts and categories extracted from the interview indicate that tendencies toward the major constructs of the study (i.e., materialism, strain, and context) are shown in the prisoners’ behaviors. In addition, the analysis and interpretation reveal the use of intuitive marketing practices as a means for managing perceived strain.

The interviewed prisoners were typically from disadvantaged backgrounds, growing up in single parent households, frequently with a tendency (either familial or personal) for alcohol or other drug abuse. Their backgrounds, however, did not prevent (and perhaps encouraged) their awareness that acquisition of material wealth plays a major role in social life in the United States. Significant in our findings are the role that materialism played in the prisoners’ lives in general and their crimes in particular, the strain that resulted from their lack of ability to achieve material success, and the use they made of what we have termed intuitive marketing practices to achieve material goals.

This study has several limitations. First, the somewhat small sample size of prisoners prevents the research from achieving the optimal degree of data saturation. Ideally, interviewing would continue until the researcher began experiencing redundancy in the data. In other words, when s/he began receiving only repetitive information without gaining new insights, the interviewing process would stop. In response to this limitation, we suggest that the insight gained from this unique access opportunity offsets the sample size concern.

Second, the compressed time frame of the interviews, due to the limited window of access to the population, did not allow the degree of immersion desirable of many qualitative research endeavors. Subsequent research, if access to a similar population is obtained, would ideally cover a longer time frame. Last, traditional procedures of data verification were not possible. For instance, the usual practice would be to attempt to triangulate interview data with other data sources such as prison records and interviews with family members in order to improve validity. To address this concern, time lines were constructed with the information from the interviews, and events occurrences were cross-checked for coherence and plausibility. In addition, descriptions of events within the prison environment were corroborated in discussions with the prison warden and other personnel.

A last limitation of the study results from the delay between the commission of the crime and the participation in the interview. It may be that the motivations for committing the crime are imperfectly accessible to the prisoner months or years later during the interview. Further, it is possible that the prisoner’s construction of reality may have changed between the crime and the interview such that events are recalled in a way inconsistent with their original construal. Given that one goal of incarceration is reform, we see this as a legitimate criticism. It may be that the incarceration process systematically changes the construction of prisoner’s reality such that their recollection of past events is though the looking glass of present reality. While impossible to quantify, we see the purpose of this research as providing insight into criminal behavior which may be expanded upon in subsequent study.

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