Chapter 3

Feminist Theories of Women’s Crime:
Robbery as a Case Study

Jody Miller

ABSTRACT

This article is a good example of the type of feminist research that Flavin talks
about in chapter 2: women-centered theory and research that simultaneously
appreciates the need for understanding the intersectionalities of race and class
with gender, in-depth qualitative interviews with women (and men) involved in
crime, and a deep respect for the study participants. Past studies designed to un-
derstand women’s participation in violence have had a tendency to either
overemphasize gender differences or to downplay the significance of gender.
This chapter tries to reconcile these approaches through an examination of the
lived experiences of female and male street robbers in an urban setting. Miller
provides two theoretical approaches to explain women’s criminal behavior, us-
ing a case study of street robbery. On the one hand, she describes women’s crim-
nal networks by showing how gender stratification shapes the nature of women’s
involvement in crime. On the other hand, she uses gender as situational accom-
plishment to understand how men and women use crime in different ways to es-
stablish their senses of masculinity and femininity and points out how gender
varies across race and class inequalities.

Miller conducted in-depth interviews with 37 active offenders and compared
women’s and men’s accounts of why they commit robbery, examining how gen-
der influences robbery. Miller reports that a clear gender hierarchy exists on the
street, where many robberies occur. Men use physical violence when commit-
ting robbery whereas women do not; men target other men whereas women do
not. Men, in short, view robbery as one means to accomplish their masculini-
ty—a situation in which men compete with each other for money and status
through the use of guns, physical contact, and violence. Women, in contrast, take
into account the gendered nature of their environment by robbing other
women, who are less likely to be armed and are considered to be weak and eas-
ily intimidated. When women do rob men, they often use their sexuality to ma-
ipulate men into being easy targets.

n=37
Motivation for robbery is the one aspect of the crime that women and men appear to share in this study. They both rob to obtain money to buy things and for the excitement it brings. These motives remind the reader that class and race as well as gender are critical to understanding crime, because the relative deprivation of offenders in urban poor communities provides a powerful pathway to street crime. In fact, Miller warns, one must distinguish between motives and etiology (causes) of crime. Thus, she outlines the underlying structural conditions (deindustrialization, unemployment, poverty, and existence of an underground drug economy as well as racism in the economy and racial segregation in residences) that provide the context within which robbery occurs in this urban St. Louis neighborhood.

Finally, it is important to understand the role of race in any research such as this. At the same time, Miller alerts us to the fact that the reason that all but two of the women robbers were African American is because of the way the sample was derived: from a key informant who was a black man. That robbing tends to be racially segregated should come as no surprise. What should not be lost from this picture, though, is that whites are a much greater proportion of robbery arrestees in St. Louis than is reflected in this sample (N = 37; 14 women and 23 men), nearly all-black sample. Each study should be appreciated for what it tells us about the specific population’s experiences. Other studies are needed to learn more about robbery in different communities.

Feminist scholarship emerges from rich and diverse theoretical traditions. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the field of criminology. Feminist criminologists draw from a number of schools of feminist thought that often begin with very different premises about the nature and root causes of female oppression (for overviews, see Daly and Chesney-Lind, 1988; Simpson 1989, and Flavin, chapter 2). Nonetheless, there are a number of central beliefs that guide feminist inquiries. Daly and Chesney-Lind (1988:504) list five aspects of feminist thought that distinguish it from traditional forms of inquiry:

- Gender is not a natural fact but rather a complex social, historical, and cultural product; it is related to, but not simply derived from, biological sex differences and reproductive capacities.

- Gender and gender relations order social life and social institutions in fundamental ways.

- Gender relations and constructs of masculinity and femininity are not symmetrical but rather are based on an organizing principle of men’s superiority and social and political-economic dominance over women.

- Systems of knowledge reflect men’s views of the natural and social world; the production of knowledge is gendered.

- Women should be at the center of intellectual inquiry, not peripheral, invisible, or appendages to men.

In addition, contemporary feminist scholars strive to be attentive to the interlocking nature of race, class, and gender oppression, recognizing that women’s experiences of gender vary according to their position in racial and class hierarchies (Daly and Stephens 1995; Maher 1997; Schwartz and Miklanovic 1996; Simpson 1991; Simpson and Elise 1995).
Several key issues have guided feminist inquiries of gender and offending. First is the issue of generalizability. For nearly a century, theories developed to explain why people commit crime have actually been theories of why men commit crime. Feminist scholars have been keen on the question of whether (or the extent that) these theories can explain women’s participation in crime. If not, then what alternative explanations can account for women’s offending? Second is what is called the “gender ratio” problem: what are the reasons behind men’s much greater participation in crime as compared to women? Traditional approaches explained these differences drawing on stereotypical images of women’s supposed inferiority (Smart 1976:chaps. 2–3) and viewed gender as an individual trait. By contrast, feminist scholars offer theoretical accounts that draw on the recognition that gender is a key element of social organization (Krutschnitt 1996:136).

A third issue, which has received less attention, is how gender inequality and stratification within criminal networks shape women’s patterns of offending. For example, how do perceptions of women shape the criminal opportunities available to them? Are they excluded from particular types of crime? How do they overcome or resist the blocked opportunities they face in primarily masculine criminal enterprises? These are the issues I explore in this chapter. Using street robbery as a case study, I compare female and male robbers’ accounts of their crimes to examine how gender shapes the accomplishment of robbery. First, let me provide more background on each of the feminist themes I have just described.

THE ISSUE OF GENERALIZABILITY

Theories about the etiology of crime have been quite diverse. One thing they have routinely shared, however, is a primary orientation toward explaining men’s (or boys’) crime. Thus, feminist scholars have posed the following questions: “Do theories of men’s crime apply to women? Can the logic of such theories be modified to include women?” (Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988:514). Scholars who have attempted to test whether these theories can be generalized to women have focused on things such as the family, social learning, delinquent peer relationships, and (to a lesser extent) strain and deterrence. For the most part, these studies have found mixed results (for an overview, see Smith and Paternoster 1987). As Krutschnitt (1996) summarizes, “It appears that the factors that influence delinquent development differ for males and females in some contexts but not others” (p. 141).

Feminist scholars have posed two critiques of the generalizability approach. First, racial and economic inequalities often are overlooked in this work. Given that women (and men) live in diverse structural conditions—conditions that are shaped especially by racial inequality—approaches that seek to find general causal patterns in women’s and men’s offending beg the question of how these factors differentially shape offending across race, class, and gender (Simpson 1991). For example, research suggests that urban African American females are somewhat more likely to engage in serious crime than are their female counterparts in other racial groups or settings (Agerton 1983; Hill and Crawford 1990; Laub and McDermott 1985; Mann 1993). Specifically, there is evidence of a link between “underclass” conditions (Wilson 1996) and urban African American women’s offending. Hill and Crawford (1990) report that structural indicators appear to be most significant in predicting the criminal involvement of African American women, whereas social–psychological indicators are more predictive for white women. They conclude, “The unique position of black women in the structure of power relations in society has profound effects not shared by their white counterparts” (p. 621; see also Baskin and Sommers 1998; Richie 1996). Thus, theories that attempt to generalize across gender often miss the importance of racial and class inequalities in the causes of crime.

A second critique raised against the generalizability approach is that whereas theorists in this tradition look to find out whether the same processes are at work in explaining women’s and men’s crime, they cannot account for the gender ratio of offending, that is, men’s disproportionate involvement in most crime.
Moreover, as I noted earlier, feminist scholars recognize gender as an important feature of the social organization of society and, consequently, of women's and men's experiences. Theories that attempt to be gender neutral are unable to address this pivotal issue (Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988). For example, in much of the generalizability research, it is often taken for granted that variables or constructs (e.g., "family attachment," "supervision") have the same meanings for males and females, but in fact this is an empirical question (Heimer and De Coster 1999).

THE GENDER RATIO PROBLEM

This brings us to the gender ratio problem. Scholars who address this issue raise the following questions: "Why are women less likely than men to be involved in crime? Conversely, why are men more crime prone than women? What explains [these] gender differences?" (Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988:515). These questions have led scholars to pay attention to gender differences and to develop theories that can account for variations in women's and men's offending (Hagan, Gillis, and Simpson 1985; Heimer and De Coster 1999). Moreover, attention to gender inequality has led feminist theorists to examine the impact of women's victimization as an explanatory factor for their crime (Arnold 1990; Chesney-Lind 1997; Daly 1992; Gillis 1992; Richie 1996). As such, these works have allowed feminist scholars to move beyond a gender ratio approach to an understanding of "gendered lives" (Daly and Maher 1998).

One such theoretical perspective has been to focus on gender as situated accomplishment (West and Fenstermaker 1995; West and Zimmerman 1987). Here, gender is recognized as "much more than a role or [an] individual characteristic; it is a mechanism whereby situated social action contributes to the reproduction of social structure" (West and Fenstermaker 1995:21). Women and men "do gender," or behave in gendered ways, in response to normative beliefs about femininity and masculinity. The performance of gender is both an indication of and a reproduction of gendered social hierarchies. This approach has been incorporated into feminist accounts of crime as a means of explaining differences in women's and men's offending (Messerschmidt 1993, 1995; Newburn and Stanko 1994; Simpson and Els 1995). Here, crime is described as "a resource for accomplishing gender—for demonstrating masculinity within a given context or situation" (Simpson and Els 1995:50).

This approach can help to account for men's greater involvement in particular types of crime (e.g., violence) and also for women's involvement in crime in ways scripted by femininity (e.g., prostitution). In addition, this approach can help to account for differences resulting from racial and class inequalities, with the recognition that constructions of femininity and masculinity vary across these important contexts (Simpson 1991; Simpson and Els 1995). For example, Simpson (1989) notes that some of women's participation in violent street crime might stem from "the frustration, alienation, and anger that are associated with racial and class oppression" (p. 618). When violence is an extensive part of their lives and communities, urban women might be more likely to view violence as an appropriate or a useful means of dealing with their environment (Simpson 1991).

GENDER STRATIFICATION IN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

Regardless of women's position vis-à-vis racial and class inequalities, they also remain in a society that is inextricably shaped by gender inequality. Consequently, feminist scholars recently have focused on how gender stratification within criminal networks mirrors gender stratification elsewhere in society, shaping women's experiences. This work has provided overwhelming evidence that gender inequality is a salient feature of urban street scenes—something with which women involved in these networks must constantly contend (Campbell 1984; Jacobs and Miller 1998; Maher 1997; Maher and Daly 1996; Miller 1986; Miller 1998a; Steffensmeier 1983). Thus, this scholarship is concerned with examining both the nature of gender stratification and women's responses to it.
Gender Stratification in Criminal Networks

Steffensmeier (1983) was the first scholar to detail the institutional nature of gender inequality on the streets, examining how homosocial reproduction, gender segregation, and "sex typing" limited women's participation in street networks. Male street offenders often view women as unreliable, untrustworthy, and weak, shunning them as would-be criminal associates (Steffensmeier and Terry 1986). Consequently, women "continue to find themselves with a deficit of 'criminal capital' [Hagan and McCarthy 1997]—the connections, ties, and pull that come with extensive and enduring involvement in street networks" (Jacobs and Miller 1998:554). As a result, they face limited options, restricted participation, and victimization in these settings.

Perhaps the most sophisticated analysis of gender stratification on the streets is Maher's (1997) ethnography of a drug market in Brooklyn, New York. She documents a rigid gender division of labor in the drug economy, shaped as well along racial lines, in which women are "clearly disadvantaged compared to their male counterparts" (p. 54). Describing the three spheres of income generation on the streets—drug business hustles, non-drug hustles, and "sex work"—Maher details the ways in which women are excluded from more lucrative opportunities and found sex work to be one of their few viable options for making money. [See Maher, chap. 7.]

The current study is housed in this tradition of examining how gender stratification shapes women's involvement in crime. In this chapter, I examine a crime for which the gender ratio problem I described earlier is striking. Robbery is one of the most gender-differentiated serious crimes in the United States; that is, the proportion of men who commit robbery as compared to women is greater than that for nearly every other serious crime. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (1996) Uniform Crime Reports for 1995, women accounted for only 9.3 percent of all robbery arrests, whereas men accounted for 90.7 percent of those arrested for this crime. As you read my discussion of women's participation in robbery, therefore, it is very important to keep two things in mind. First, women are only a small percentage of street robbers.

As such, I am studying a very unusual behavior among women. Second, my discussion of the crime is not meant to suggest that women's participation in robbery is increasing. Instead, I am interested in comparing women's and men's accounts of why they commit street robbery and how gender organizes their commissions of the crime.

WOMEN'S VIOLENCE AS RESISTANCE TO MALE OPPRESSION

Feminist scholars who address the use of street violence by women often suggest that women's violence differs from that of men's—women use violence in response to their vulnerability to or actual victimization in the family and/or at the hands of men (Campbell 1993; Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995; Maher 1997; Maher and Curtis 1992; Maher and Daly 1996). In her ethnography of a Brooklyn drug market, Maher notes that women adopt violent presentations of self as a strategy of protection. She explains, "Acting bad" and 'being bad' are not the same. Although many of the women presented themselves as 'bad' or 'crazy,' this projection was a street persona and a necessary survival strategy" (1997:95; see also Maher and Daly 1996). These women were infrequently involved in violent crime and most often resorted to violence in response to threats or harms against them. She concludes that "unlike their male counterparts, for women, reputation was about 'preventing victimization'" (Maher 1997:95-96; see also Campbell 1993). In this account, even when women's aggression is offensive, it can still be understood as a defensive act, because it emerges as resistance to victimization.

Maher's research uncovered a particular form of robbery in which women involved in the sex trade rob their clients. Although the phenomenon of prostitutes robbing tricks is not new, Maher's work documents the proliferation of viccing as a form of resistance against their greater vulnerability to victimization and against cheapened sex markets within the drug economy. Comparing viccing with traditional forms of robbery, Maher and Curtis conclude, "The fact that the act [of viccing]
itself is little different to any other instrumental robbery belies the reality that the motivations underlying it are more complex and, indeed, are intimately linked with women's collective sense of the devaluation of their bodies and their work” (1992:246). However, it is likely that not all of women's street violence can be viewed as resistance to male oppression; instead, some women may be motivated to commit violent crimes for many of the same reasons some men are. In certain contexts, norms favorable to women’s use of violence may exist, and they are not simply about avoiding victimization, but also result in status and recognition.

GENDER AND STREET ROBBERY

The Study

One way in which to find out how gender shapes patterns of offending is to talk to female and male offenders and to compare what they have to say about their crime. As Daly and Chesney-Lind (1988) point out, feminist scholarship often involves interviews because this approach provides “texture and social context” (p. 518) that allow us to present more nuanced accounts of women’s involvement in crime. Using this method, I draw from in-depth interviews with active male and female robbers. The findings I discuss come from a larger study of urban street robbers in St. Louis, Missouri (Wright and Decker 1997). Respondents were recruited from impoverished urban neighborhoods in the city. St. Louis is typical of a number of midwestern cities devastated by structural changes brought about by deindustrialization. The city is characterized by tremendous economic and racial segregation. Deindustrialization has exacerbated these conditions, also resulting in population loss, the social isolation of many urban dwellers, losses in community resources, and a deepened concentration of urban poverty among African Americans in the city. The neighborhoods from which respondents were drawn are characteristic of what some scholars have called “underclass” conditions (Sampson and Wilson 1995; Wilson 1996). Although I do not discuss these structural conditions further, they are important contexts to keep in mind as I discuss the activities of urban street robbers.

The sample consists of 37 active robbers, a matched sample of 14 women and 23 men who were approximately the same age and who reported committing their first robberies at the same age. Respondents ranged in age from 16 to 46 years, although the majority were in their late teens or early 20s. Criteria for inclusion in the sample included the following: the individual had committed a robbery in the recent past, defined him- or herself as currently active, and was regarded as active by other offenders. Though it is not possible to determine the representativeness of this sample of active offenders (see Glassner and Carpenter 1985), the approach nonetheless overcomes many of the shortcomings associated with interviewing ex-offenders or offenders who are incarcerated (see Agar 1977). In fact, in the current study snowball sampling allowed for the purposive oversampling of both female and juvenile robbers. The vast majority of participants were African American—all of the men and all but 2 of the women. This is one of the greatest limitations of the sample. Whites were a much greater proportion of robbery arrestees in St. Louis than is reflected in the nearly all-black sample. This bias in the data was the result of the snowball sampling techniques used. One individual, an African American ex-offender, was hired and given the charge of locating his former criminal associates to get them to participate in the study. These respondents then referred their friends and associates to participate, and the process continued until the sample was built. Nearly all of these contacts yielded African American robbers. Despite the fact that there were a number of white robbers in St. Louis, “successfully making contact with active black armed robbers proved to be of almost no help... in locating white offenders” (Wright and Decker 1997:11).

Data were gathered by using semi-structured in-depth interviews. Interviews lasted one to two hours and included a range of questions about the respondents’ involvement in robbery. Respondents were asked to describe why they committed robbery, their typical approach when committing robbery, and the
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details of their most recent offenses. The goal was to gain a thorough understanding of the contexts of these events from the respondents' perspectives. Now, I turn my attention to the two questions that guide my inquiry: situational motives for committing robbery and the accomplishment of the crime.

Motivations to Commit Robbery

Because many of the respondents in the sample were young and had begun committing robberies as teenagers, their descriptions of the reasons why they committed the crime resonate with the typical desires of adolescents and young adults. Most of the participants, both female and male, said that they committed robberies to get things such as jewelry and spending money and also because they found the crime exciting. My study cannot address etiological factors, that is, those factors in individuals' lives that led them to commit crime. Instead, my discussion is of motivations that are situational or that emerge in the context of their decisions to commit robbery.

Perhaps what is most striking in their discussions, as I have noted, is that women and men give very similar descriptions of their motives. For example, T-Bone said that he decides to commit robberies when he is “tired of not having money.” When the idea comes about, he typically is with friends from the neighborhood and, he explained, “we all bored, broke, mad.” Likewise, CMW said that she commits robberies “out of the blue, just something to do. Bored at the time and just want to find some action.” She explained, “I be sitting on the porch and we’ll get to talking and stuff. See people going around, and they be flashing in these fancy cars, walking down the street with that jewelry on, thinking they all bad, and we just go get’em.” For both males and females, robbery typically was a means of achieving conspicuous consumption.

If anything, imperatives to gain money and material goods through robbery appear to be stronger for males than females, so that young men explain that they sometimes commit robberies because they feel some economic pressure, whereas young women typically do not. Masculine street identity is tied to the ability to have and spend money, and included in this is the appearance of economic self-sufficiency. Research has documented women's support networks in urban communities, including among criminally involved women (see Maher 1997; Stack 1974). This may help explain why the imperative for young men is stronger than for young women: Community norms may give women wider latitude for obtaining material goods and economic support from a variety of sources, including other females, family members, and boyfriends; whereas the pressure of society’s view of men as breadwinners differentially affects men’s emotional experience of relying on others economically. This may explain why several young men specifically describe that they do not like relying on their parents in order to meet their consumer needs.

As I noted, why they commit robberies instead of other crimes with similar economic rewards, both women and men said that they chose robberies, as Cooper explained, because “it’s the easiest.” Libbie Jones reported that robbery provides her with the things she wants in one quick and easy step:

I like robbery. I like robbery 'cause I don't have to buy anything. You have a herringbone. I'm gonna take your herringbone, and then I have me a herringbone. I don't have to worry about going to the store, getting me some money. If you got some little earrings on, I'm gonna get 'em.

Often they targeted individuals whom they believed were “safe” victims, usually older street-involved individuals who were less likely to go to the police. Most robberies, whether committed by females or males, occurred in the larger contexts of street life, and their victims reflected this. Most also were involved in street contexts, either as adolescents or young adults who hang out on the streets and go to clubs or as individuals involved (as dealers and/or users) in the street-level drug economy (for more on target selection, see Wright and Decker 1997: chap. 3).

In addition to the economic incentives that draw the respondents toward robbery, many also derived
an emotional thrill from committing robbery. Little Bills said, "When my first robbery started, my second, the third one, it got more fun. . . . If I keep on doing it, I think that I will really get addicted to it." Likewise, Baby noted, "You get, like, a rush. It be fun at the time." In particular, when they perceived individuals as "high-calling" or showing off, both female and male robbers viewed these individuals as deserving targets. For example, Treason Taylor described a woman he robbed at a gas station: "Really, I didn't like the way she came out. She was, like pulling out all her money like she think she hot shit." A few respondents even specifically targeted people they did not like or people who had insulted or hurt them in the past.

For both women and men, then, motivations to commit robbery were primarily economic—to get money, jewelry, and other status-conferring goods—but also included elements of thrill seeking, attempting to overcome boredom, and revenge. Most striking is the continuity across women's and men's accounts of their motives for committing robbery. As the following subsections show, there are clear differences in the accomplishment of robbery by gender. However, these differences apparently are not driven by differences in motivation.

Men's Commission of Street Robbery in Context

The men in my study committed street robberies in a strikingly uniform way. Their descriptions of robberies were variations around one theme: using physical violence and/or a gun placed close to (or touching) the victim in a confrontational manner. This is reflected in Looney's description of being taught how to commit his first robbery at the age of 13 years by his stepbrother:

"We was up at [a fast-food restaurant] one day, and a dude was up there tripping. My stepbrother had gave me a .22 automatic. He told me to walk over behind him and put the gun to his head and tell him to give me all his stuff. That's what I did. I walked up to him and said, "Man, this is a jack, man. Take off all your jewelry and take your money out of your pockets, throw it on the ground, and walk off." So that's what he did. I picked up the money and the jewelry and walked away."

The most common form of robbery described by male respondents was to target other men involved in street life—drug dealers, drug users, gang members, or other men who looked "flashy" because of their clothes, cars, or jewelry. Only seven men (30 percent) said they robbed women as well as men. All of the men in the sample used guns when they robbed, although not everyone used a gun every time. The key was to make sure, as Syco said, that the victims know "that we ain't playing." They conveyed this message by positioning the guns close to the victims' bodies or by physically assaulting the victims. For example, Bob Jones confronted his victims by placing his gun at the back of their heads, where "they feel it," and saying to them, "Give it up motherfucker. Don't move or I'll blow your brains out!" Explaining the positioning of the gun, he said, "When you feel that steel against your head . . . [it] carries a lot of weight."

Without guns, and sometimes even when they used guns, some men reported using physical violence to ensure the victims' cooperation and the robbers' getaways. Cooper said, "You always got to either hit 'em, slap 'em, or do something to let them know you for real." Likewise, Mike J., said, "You might shake them a little bit. If there is more than one of you, you can really do that kind of stuff like shake them up a little bit to show them you're not messing around." When male robbers did not have guns, they typically used more physical violence to make sure that the victims did not resist. Taz explained,

"If it's a strong-arm [a robbery without a weapon], like, I'll just get up on them and I'll just hit 'em, and [my partner] will grab them or, like, he will hit them and I'll grab 'em, and we keep on hitting them until they fall or something. . . . Then, we just go in his pockets, leave him there, we gone."

As I already noted, seven men said that they robbed women as well as men. However, male respondents, including those who did not rob women, said that they believed that robbing women was different from robbing men. They felt that robbing women was less dangerous because women were less

*Editor's note: 96 percent of the men robbed other men.
likely to resist. Looney explained, "Men gonna act like they the tough guy... but a lady, I just tell them to give it up and they give me they whole purse or whatever they got." Whereas physical violence often was used routinely when men robbed other men, these men said that they rarely used physical violence against women and did so only when the women resisted. Although violence often was deemed necessary to establish a credible threat with male victims, it was not seen as necessary with women victims. Perhaps what is most ironic is that although male robbers were in agreement that women were "easy" victims, as a rule, these men did not target women. Perhaps this was because they did not believe that women would have the kind of money on them that men would (particularly criminally involved men), but it also was because they viewed robbery as a prototypically masculine endeavor, best carried out in male–on–male encounters (see also Katz 1988; Messerschmidt 1993).

Male robbers, then, clearly view the act of robbery as a masculine accomplishment in which men compete with other men for money and status. While some rob women, those robberies are deviations from the norm of "badass" against "badass" that dominates much of men's discussions of street robbery (see Katz, 1988).

In sum, males' robberies were characterized by the routine use of guns, physical contact with the victim, and (in some cases) physical violence. Men's descriptions of their robberies were strikingly similar to each other. By contrast, women's descriptions of their robberies revealed much more varied techniques and provided a telling contrast about the nature of gender on the streets.

Women's Commission of Street Robbery

Women in the sample described the predominant ways in which they committed robberies: targeting female victims in physically confrontational robberies, targeting male victims by appearing sexually available, and participating with males during street robberies of men. It is noteworthy that most women described participating in two or more types of these robberies. Thus, as we will see, they committed robberies differently depending on the circumstances and on who their victims were. In all, 10 women (71 percent) described targeting female victims, usually on the streets but occasionally at dance clubs or in cars. In addition, 7 women (50 percent) described setting up men through promises of sexual favors, including 2 women who did so in the context of prostitution. Among the women, 7 (50 percent) described working with male friends, relatives, or boyfriends in street robberies, with 3 (21 percent) reporting this as their exclusive form of robbery.

Robbing Females

The most common form of robbery reported by women in the study was to rob other females in a physically confrontational manner. Of the 14 female respondents, 10 reported committing these types of offenses. Typically, women's robberies of other females occurred on the streets, although a few young women also reported robbing females in the bathrooms of public restrooms, and 1 robbed women in cars. These robberies sometimes were committed alone and other times were committed with another woman or several additional women. But they were not committed with male robbers. In fact, Ne–Ne said that even when she is out with male friends and sees a female target, the men do not get involved: "They'll say, 'Well, you go on and do her.'"

Most robberies of females either involved no weapons or involved knives. Women rarely described using guns to rob other women. Female respondents said that when they chose women victims, it was because they believed that the other women were not likely to be armed and also were not likely to resist or fight back. DMW explained, "See, women, they won't really do nothing. They say, 'Oh, oh, okay, here take this.' A dude, he might try to put up a fight." Likewise, Libbie Jones said, "I wouldn't do no men by myself," but she added that women victims "ain't gonna do nothing because they be so scared." Typically, women felt that it was not necessary to use weapons in these robberies. Quick explained that she sometimes used a knife, "but sometimes I don't need anything. Most of the time it be girls, you know, just snatching they chains or jewelry. You don't need nothing for that."
On occasion, female victims belied the stereotype of them and fought back. When that occurred, several women described stabbing their victims. Janet Outlaw described one such encounter:

I walked up to her, and I pulled out the knife. I said, “Up that purse.” And she looked at me. I said, “Shit, do you think I’m playing? Up that purse.” She was like, “Shit, you ain’t getting my purse. Do whatever you got to do.” I was like, “Shit, you must be thinking I’m playing.” So I took the knife, stabbed her a couple of times on the shoulder, stabbed her on the arm, and snatched the purse. Cut her arm and snatched the purse. She just ran, “Help, help.” We were gone.

However, stabbing female victims was a rare occurrence. Instead, women’s robberies of other women routinely involved physical confrontation such as hitting, shoving, or beating up the victim. Describing a recent robbery, Nicole Simpson said, “I have bricks in my purse, and I went up to her and hit her in the head and took her money.” Kim Brown said that she will “just whip you and take a purse but not really put a gun to anybody’s face.” Libbie Jones said that she has her victims throw their possessions on the ground, “then you push, kick, whatever. You pick it up, and you just burn out.” Describing why this type of physical force was necessary, Janet Outlaw explained, “It’s just a woman-to-woman thing, and we just, like, just don’t just letting them know like it is, we let them know we ain’t playing.”

As will be seen below, this approach is vastly different from women’s approaches when they rob men or when they commit robberies with males.

To summarize, notable elements of women’s robberies of other women are that they most frequently occur within street-oriented settings; did not include male accomplices; and typically involved physical force such as hitting, shoving, and kicking rather than the use of weapons. When weapons were used, they were most likely to be knives. In these contexts, women chose to rob other females rather than males because they believed that females were less likely to fight back. They typically did not use weapons such as guns because they believed that female targets were unlikely to be armed.

Robbing Males by Appearing Sexually Available

Women’s robberies of men almost always involved guns and rarely involved physical contact. Janet Outlaw, who described using a great deal of physical violence in her robberies of other women (see previous subsection), described her robberies of men in much different terms. She explained, “If we waste time touching men, there is a possibility that they can get the gun off of us. While we wasting time touching them, they could do anything. So we just keep the gun straight on them. No touching, no moving, just straight gun at you.” The circumstances of these robberies were different as well. When women robbed men, the key was to pretend to be sexually interested in the male victim, who then drop their guard, providing safe opportunities for the crime to occur. Two women, Jayzo and Nicole Simpson, robbed men in the context of prostitution. The other five typically chose victims at clubs or on the streets, flirted and appeared sexually interested, and then suggested that they go to a hotel, where the robberies took place.

Nicole Simpson prostituted to support her drug habit, but sometimes she “just don’t feel like doing it” and will rob her trick rather than complete the sexual transaction. She chose tricks whom she felt would make safe victims and would be unlikely to resist. Typically, she waited until the man was in a vulnerable position before pulling out her knife. As she explained, “If you are sucking a man’s dick and you pull a knife on them, they don’t gonna too much argue with you.” Jayzo’s techniques paralleled those of Nicole Simpson, although she used a gun instead of a knife.

Young women who targeted men outside of the context of prostitution played on the men’s beliefs about women to accomplish these robberies, including the assumptions that women would not be armed, would not attempt to rob them, and could be taken advantage of sexually. Quick explained, “They don’t suspect that a girl gonna try to get ‘em. You know what I’m saying? So it’s kind of easier ‘cause they, like, ‘She looks innocent, she ain’t gonna do this,’ but that’s how I get ‘em. They put them guard down to a woman.” She said that when she sets up men, she parties with them first but makes sure that she

Most of the time they can go to a hotel without a problem. They think they’re too smart—sex. But we little bitches can fool ’em. We led them to which hotel.

Except when they have their guns, then the robbes will not waste time on us. We decreased the numbers of men, and the numbers of women, who thought of us. She picked a hotel together her weapon.

We get a little skid, what’re ya saying? “Shit, I pulled a gun with you and you think you can think your slick. I fired me. He was in the house. He didn’t have a gun. We got a weapon.”

Women, but some could accompany each other, because we could. The strikingly
sure that she does not consume as much as them. "Most of the time when girls get high, they think they can take advantage of us, so they always, 'Let's go to a hotel or my crib or something.'" Janet Outlaw said, "They easy to get. We know what they after—sex." Likewise, CMW said, "They thinking we little freaks . . . whores or something." Men's assumptions that they could take advantage of women led them to place themselves at risk for robbery, on which these women acted.

Except for the two women who robbed tricks when they were prostituting, women typically held their guns at a safe distance from the victims rather than pressing the guns up against them as the male robbers did when they robbed men. Doing so decreased the risk that a victim could resist, grab the gun, and use it on the woman. This was necessary precisely because the women chose male victims who thought that they could take advantage of the women. Janet Outlaw encountered one such man. She picked him up in a nightclub, they went to a hotel together, and then his resistance led her to fire her weapon. She explained,

We got to smoking a little bud, he got to taking off his little shit, laying it on a little table. He was like, "Shit, what's up, ain't you gonna get undressed?" I was like, "Shit, yeah, hold up," and I went in my purse and I pulled out the gun. He was like, "Damn, what's up with you, girl?" I was like, "Shit, I want your jewelry and all the money you got." He was like, "Shit, bitch, you crazy. I ain't giving you my shit." I said, "Do you think I'm playing, nigger? You don't think I'll shoot your motherfucking ass?" He was like, "Shit, you crazy, fuck that, you ain't gonna shoot me." So then I had fired the thing, but I didn't fire it at him, shot the gun. He was like, "Fuck no." I snatched his shit. He didn't have on no clothes. I snatched the shit and ran out the door. Hopped in my car.

Women often committed these robberies alone, but sometimes they did so in pairs or even had male accomplices follow them to the hotels for backup. In each case, however, the woman always used a weapon and avoided physical contact as much as she could. Thus, the women's robberies of men were strikingly different from their robberies of women.

Street Robberies with Male Robbers  As the previous two subsections illustrated, women commit robberies in very different ways depending on whether their victims are female or male. As a rule, women described that they did not rob females with male accomplices but did sometimes work with male accomplices to set up and rob men. In addition, half of the women in the sample described committing street robberies of males with male accomplices. The difference between these robberies of men and those I described previously is that, with street robberies, women did not act sexually available so as to rob men. Instead, in conjunction with their male partners, they conducted these robberies in much the same way as the male respondents described robbing men on the streets. Three women in the sample—Buby, Tish, and Lisa Jones—described working with males on the streets as their only form of robbery. Each of these women described her participation as secondary. By contrast, other women who engaged in street robberies with males engaged in other forms of robbery and did not distinguish their roles from those of their male accomplices in these robberies.

Lisa Jones and Tish both assisted their boyfriends in the commission of robberies. Buby went along with her brother and cousins. Lisa Jones said, "Most of the time, we'll just be driving around and he'll say, 'Let's go to this neighborhood and rob somebody.'" Usually, she stayed in the car while he approached the victim, but she was armed and would get out and assist when necessary. Describing one such incident, she said, "One time, there was two guys, and one guy was in the car and the other guy was out of the car, and I seen that one guy getting out of the car, I guess to help his friend. That's when I got out, and I held the gun and I told him to stay where he was." Tish and Lisa Jones were the only white respondents in the study, and each robbed with an African American boyfriend. Both described their boyfriends as the decision makers in the robberies—deciding when, where, and whom to rob.

It is striking that all of these young women routinely committed armed robberies wielding guns on victims yet rejected the view of themselves as criminals. In fact, during her interview, Lisa Jones was
adamant, telling the interviewer, "I'm not a criminal." Lisa Jones and Tish were the only respondents who downplayed their involvement in armed robbery. It probably is not coincidental that they were young white women who used their beliefs about race and gender to minimize the implications of the serious nature of their crimes.

These respondents were at the far end of the continuum of women's involvement in robbery, clearly taking subordinate roles in the crime and defining themselves as less culpable as a result. For the most part, other women who participated in street robberies with male accomplices describe themselves as equal participants. Robberies with male accomplices typically involved guns and came about when a group of people were driving around and spotted a potential victim. They committed the crime using the same techniques as male respondents described, that is, using physical contact and, when necessary, violence. In fact, Ne-Ne said that she preferred committing street robberies with males rather than with females because she viewed her male accomplices as more reliable. She explained,

I can't be bothered with too many girls. That's why I try to be with dudes or whatever. They gonna be down. If you get out of the car and if you rob a dude or jack somebody and you with some dudes, then you know if they see he tryin' to resist, they gonna give me some help. Whereas a girl, you might get somebody that's scared and might drive off. That's the way it is.

In fact, Ne-Ne was the only woman interviewed to report having committed this type of street robbery of a male victim on her own. Her actions paralleled those of male-on-male robbers described earlier. She explained, "I just turned around the corner, came back down the street. He was out by himself, and I got out of the car, had the cap pulled down over my face, and I just went to the back and upset him. Put the gun up to his head." Importantly, Ne-Ne told the interviewer that this robbery was successful because the man she robbed did not realize that she was a woman. Describing herself physically, she said, "I'm big, you know." In addition, her dress and manner masked that she was a woman. Being large, wearing a ball cap, and committing the robbery in a masculine style (e.g., putting a gun to his head) allowed her to disguise the fact that she was a woman and thus decrease the victim's likelihood of resisting. She said, "He don't know right now to this day if it was a girl or a dude."

DISCUSSION

Feminist scholars have been hesitant to grapple with the issue of women's violence, both because a focus on women's violence draws attention away from the fact that violence is a predominantly male phenomenon and because studying women's violence can play into sensationalized accounts of female offenders. Nonetheless, as this and other studies have shown, "gender alone does not account for variation in criminal violence" (Simpson 1991:118). A small number of women are involved in violent street crime in ways that go beyond "preventing victimization," and appear to find support among their male and female peers for these activities. To draw this conclusion is not to suggest that women's use of violence is increasing, that women are "equals" on the streets, or that gender does not matter. It does suggest that researchers should continue developing feminist perspectives to address the issue.

Perhaps what is most notable about this study is the incongruity between women's and men's motives for committing robbery and the ways in which they go about conducting the crime. Although the comparison of women's and men's motivations revealed gender similarities, when women and men actually committed robbery, the ways in which they went about doing the crime were strikingly different. These differences highlight the clear gender hierarchy that exists on the streets. Although some women are able to carve out a niche for themselves in this setting and even establish partnerships with males, they are participating in a male-dominated environment, and their actions reflect an understanding of this.

To successfully commit robbery, women must take into account the gendered nature of their environment. One way in which they do so is by targeting other females. Both male and female robbers
held the view that females were easy to rob because they were less likely than males to be armed and because they were perceived as weak and easily intimidated. Janet Outlaw described women’s robbery of other women as “just a woman-to-woman thing.” This is supported by Ne-Ne’s description that her male friends did not participate with her in robberies of females, and it is supported by men’s accounts of robbing women. Whereas women routinely robbed other women, men were less likely to do so, perhaps because these robberies did not result in the demonstration of masculinity (West and Zimmerman 1987).

At the same time as women articulated the belief that other women were easy targets, they also drew on these perceptions of women to rob men. Two of the women described committing robberies much in keeping with Maher’s (1997) descriptions of “viccing.” In addition, a number of women used men’s perceptions of women as weak, sexually available, and easily manipulated to turn the tables and manipulate men into circumstances in which they became vulnerable to robbery by flirting and appearing sexually interested in the man. Unlike women’s robberies of other women, these robberies tended not to involve physical contact but did involve the use of guns. Because they recognized men’s perceptions of women, the women also recognized that men were more likely to resist being robbed by females, and thus they committed these robberies in ways that minimized their risk of losing control and maximized their ability to show that they were “for real.”

West and Zimmerman (1987) note that there are circumstances in which “parties reach an accommodation that allow[s] a woman to engage in presumptively masculine behavior” (p. 139). In this study, it is notable that both women and men recognized the urban street world as a male-dominated one. Nonetheless, a few of the women gained access to male privilege by adopting male attitudes about females, constructing their own identities as more masculine, and following through by behaving in masculine ways. Ne-Ne and Janet Outlaw both come to mind in this regard as women who completed robberies in equal partnerships with men and identified with men’s attitudes about other women. Other women, such as Lisa Jones and Tish, accepted not only women’s position as secondary but also their own positions as secondary. Whereas Ne-Ne and Janet Outlaw appeared to draw status and identity from their criminality in ways that went beyond their gender identity, Lisa Jones and Tish used their gender identity to construct themselves as noncriminal.

In sum, the women in this sample did not appear to commit robbery differently from men so as to meet different needs or to accomplish different goals. Instead, the differences that emerge reflected practical choices made in the context of a gender-stratified environment in which, on the whole, males are perceived as strong and women are perceived as weak. Motivationally, then, it appears that women’s participation in street violence can result from the same structural and cultural underpinnings that shape some of men’s participation in this type of crime. Yet, gender remains a salient factor shaping their actions as well as the actions of men.

Though urban African American women have higher rates of violence than other women, their participation in violent crime is nonetheless significantly lower than that of their male counterparts in the same communities (Simpson 1991). An important line of inquiry for future research is to assess what protective factors keep the majority of women living in underclass settings from adopting violence as a culturally legitimate response. While research shows that racial and economic oppression contribute to African American women’s greater participation in violent crime, they do not ensure its occurrence. Daly and Stephens (1995:208) note: “Racism in criminological theories occurs when racial or cultural differences are overemphasized or mischaracterized and when such differences are denied.” Future research should strive to strike this balance and attend to the complex issues surrounding women’s participation in violence within the urban street world.

There are a number of additional questions about gender and robbery that this study cannot address. Although I have noted the striking gender ratio with regard to the commission of robbery, the data I have
presented cannot allow me to address the question of why so many more men than women choose to commit robbery. Moreover, as I noted earlier, my discussion of motivation is not the same as discussing the causes of women's and men's crime. Although the women and men in this study gave similar accounts of why they committed robbery, this does not mean that they became criminally involved for the same reasons. However, it does provide an additional layer to our attempts to understand the gendered lives of female offenders by focusing on the ways in which women participate in the urban street world. I opened this chapter by suggesting that gender is a "complex social, historical, and cultural product" and that "gender and gender relations order social life and social institutions in fundamental ways" (Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988:504). Hopefully, seeing how women and men talked about their commission of robbery has helped to bring to life these important insights of feminist theory.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Feminist research, including this study, raises a number of important issues that should be considered in the development of policies for dealing with female offenders. First among these is the recognition that both women and men really do lead gendered lives. That is, in very complex ways, gender has an impact on our experiences at all levels of interactions with others as well as within the social structures of society. The unique features of women's lives need to be taken into account in developing and implementing policies in gender-specific ways. For example, women often are the primary caregivers in their children's lives, and policies for dealing with female offenders should assess the impact of various strategies not just on women but also on their children. Gender inequality and the victimization of women are important causal factors for crime that need to be considered in understanding female offenders. In addition, it is important to recognize that gender inequality constrains the types of opportunities women have available to them. This is especially true in poor communities and even is true when it comes to the commission of crime.

However, as this chapter has highlighted, it is important to strike a balance between recognizing the significance of gender and gender inequality but not to reduce everything to gender. This is important for at least two reasons. First, we have a long history within both our criminal and juvenile justice systems of treating women offenders differently from men offenders, often to the detriment of the women (for an overview, see Chesney-Lind 1997). This often plays itself out through an overemphasis on controlling young women's independence and sexuality (Alder 1998) and through treating women in particularly harsh ways when they do not conform to traditional notions of appropriate femininity (Visher 1983). In fact, Baines and Alder (1996) suggest that notions of girls' "difference," particularly tied to an overemphasis on girls' victimization, negatively affects the treatment that girls receive within juvenile justice.

As important is the second reason for not paying exclusive attention to gender, that is, the need to consider the importance of racial and class inequalities for understanding women's, as well as men's, offending. As this study has documented, many of the motivations both women and men described for why they committed robberies were responses to the relative deprivation they face as marginalized members of an urban underclass community. Paying attention to the broad spectrum of factors that lead to women's offending—both gendered and those they share with their male counterparts—is necessary to create effective solutions for female offenders and society. The important insights of feminist scholarship have led to the recognition of the need to strike this important balance in developing policies to both empower women and create a more equitable society.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does Miller mean when she describes gender as "situated accomplishment"?
2. How do women and men "accomplish" robbery differently? What role does race and gender play in this analysis? How
does Miller explain these differences? Do you agree or disagree with her analysis? Why?

5. What does Miller mean when she says that there is "gender stratification" in criminal networks? How does it play out in this study of male and female robbers?

4. Why is it important to separate motivation from situation in a study of crime?

5. Discuss the implications of gender-based differential behavior during the commission of robbery: What are the implications for the victim? What are the implications for the sanctioning process?

NOTES

1. I limit my discussion in this chapter to feminist work on the question of female offending. However, it is important to note that feminist scholars have focused on several additional important issues in criminology. These include (1) violence against women (e.g., rape, domestic violence, sexual abuse), (2) the impact of gender on women's processing and experiences in the criminal and juvenile justice systems, and (3) how gender shapes women's experiences in law enforcement and criminal justice careers. These topics are beyond the scope of this chapter, but there are a number of sources available for further information. See Belknap (1997), Chesney-Lind and Shelden (1998), Daly and Maher (1998), Dobash and Dobash (1992), Merlo and Pollock (1995), and Price and Sokoloff (1995).

2. This discussion is a condensed version of Miller (1998b).

3. Wright and Decker's (1997) study was funded by the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation and the National Institute of Justice (NIJ Grant 94-IJ-CX-0030).

4. The names I use are pseudonyms provided by the respondents to disguise their identities.

REFERENCES


