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**Towards a criminology of**

**structurally conditioned**

**emotions: Combining**

**Bourdieu’s field theory**

**and cultural criminology**

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According to Edwin Lemert (1967: 52) choice tends to be a “compromise between what is sought and what can be sought”. How can we in criminology account theoretically for both what social agents seek and for the socially given limits to what they can seek?

“What can be sought” refers to how social conditions enable or constrain actions, or what most sociologists would lump under the term “structure”. Structure will in this article refer to socioeconomic and cultural conditions. “What is sought” refers to individuals’ actions. Explaining such actions, or social agency, is perhaps the most basic sociological question there is, but the term “agency” is from a philosophical perspective a very complex term, which in sociology has maintained, as Emirbayer and Mische (1998) point to, an elusive vagueness. With agency, sociologists do not necessarily refer to the same thing: Emirbayer and Mische point to three clusters of understandings; accentuating respectively routine activity, goal-seeking and deliberation. While i agency does not have exactly the same content in all theoretical approaches presented in this article, I will not go into depth with these distinctions. To start with the term agency will roughly be used as synonymous with motivation, but later I will be more concrete in how I think agency may be understood.

The gross part of criminological theorizing - as presented in standard textbooks - seeks to answer *why some people commit crimes while most do not* (or, if we include non-reported crimes, at least do not commit serious crimes). Traditional theoretical approaches answer the question with emphasis either on structure or on agency, while some more recent contributions seek to bridge the two. A particularly interesting theoretical development was made by Jock Young (2003) who in his version of cultural criminology integrated Robert Merton’s strain theory with Jack Katz’ account of emotional rewards provided by criminal acts. Katz thus connects emotions to agency. Of course criminological explanations should deal with emotions: Emotions are at the basis of all forms of relationships and communities. They are also omnipresent in our criminological classics – as anger, status frustration, humiliation, lust, excitement … - but they are usually not theorized. There would be some good work for criminologists to do in creating a “criminology of emotions” building on the achievements within the sociology of emotions (i.e. Burkitt 2014) and also in discussing the interplay between emotions and rationality (Exum 2015). Young has, building on Durkheim’s insight that emotions are collectively coded even if they are experienced individually, started this work. His most important contribution is, in my eyes, to connect *theoretically* emotions to structural conditions. This work is continued in Ferrell, Hayward & Young (2015), which includes more elaboration on different emotions involved.

Young has not, however, gone so far in explaining *how* emotions and structural conditions are linked. Why do some people experience specific conditions as frustrating, for instance, while others don’t? This is where Pierre Bourdieu’s approach may bring us a bit further. While Bourdieu is among the most cited social scientists, even within research fields far from his own, his influence on criminology has remained limited. This article advances that Bourdieu’s field theory may complement the cultural criminological tradition with a better grasp on how structural conditions influence agency.

Many criminologists are less interested in the “why-question” than in understanding punishment and social control. Here, Bourdieu has had more influence, first and foremost through prominent scholars like Wacquant (2008) and Garland (2001), who have relied on Bourdieu in analyses of the expansion of crime control in the Western world. Bourdieu has also been used to analyse specific fields, like NGOs and moral panics (Dandoy 2015) or police reforms (Chan 2007). Different studies of subcultural crimes have drawn on his capital or field metaphors (Thornton 1995, Jensen 2006, Sandberg 2008, Shammas & Sandberg 2016).

Bourdieu would probably prefer not to be involved in answering the old “why”-question of criminology. The question takes for granted a social construction of “crime” that already, through the criminal law’s definitions, reflects this world’s injustices and unequal distributions. Here Bourdieu would be aligned with the critical criminological tradition, combining constructivist and Marxist perspectives, actually just like Jock Young. Furthermore, Bourdieu was far more puzzled by the sociological mystery of why people conform and maintain social order than by rule-breaking (Bourdieu 2001: 1): “(…) the fact that the order of the world as we find it, with its one-way streets and its no-entry signs, whether literal or figurative, with its obligations and its penalties, is broadly respected; that there are not more transgressions and subversions, (…) that the established order, with its relations of domination, its rights and prerogatives, privileges and injustices, ultimately perpetuates itself so easily, apart from a few historical accidents, and that the most intolerable conditions of existence can so often be perceived as acceptable and even natural.” Actually, when Bourdieu occasionally writes about traditional crimes – a couple of thefts in a Kabylian village (Bourdieu 1972, not included in the English 1977 version) – he does not seek to explain the crimes, only how social order is re-established.

As there is no universal agreement on what is “acceptable and natural”, and as rule-breaking occurs quite often and cannot be explained simply (and structurally) with deprivation as most deprived people do not recur to illegal means, the question of why some do is still pertinent. A good answer should have a decent grasp on empirical realities and therefore provide an explanation that is specific enough to tell why some people commit criminal acts while most don’t, and also why some desist, but not all. I will give a brief review of classical criminological approaches to both agency and structure, and thereafter turn to some attempts that bridge agency and structure, with particular interest for cultural criminology. As Bourdieu’s theoretical approach aimed at overcoming the agency-structure cleavage, his possible contribution to criminology will then be discussed.

The aim of this article is theoretical, which is why there is no methodological section. Following Bourdieu, however, theorizing without connecting to the empirical world is futile. The last part of the article will therefore discuss empirical examples of how a cultural criminological approach from Young and a field theoretic approach from Bourdieu may be connected. Finally I will discuss the limits of applicability of this approach: As the examples given all relate to subculture, one has to ask whether this approach only work for subcultural forms of crime or also for some other forms. I will argue that it may also work for some other forms, but not all. Exaggerated ambitions may, however, be a problem for criminological theorizing: The aim at explaining all forms of crime makes theories so abstract they end up losing explanatory power.

**Five clusters of explanatory factors**

As my aim is to make theoretical argument about agency and structure related to crime I will start with an overview of how traditional theories deal with this issue. Standard criminological textbooks group the theoretical approaches somewhat differently, but they will include more or less the following approaches. With the aim of simplicity in mind I have (brutally!) reorganized them in only five different clusters of explanatory factors.

*1.* *Motivated actors*: This thread, running from the classical school’s (Beccaria, Bentham)[[1]](#endnote-1) ideas about rationality and deliberation over to rational choice as in G. Becker’s work and in the routine activity approach as well as in situational crime prevention, provides explanations of crime as basically rational individuals’ acts (even if their risk perception may be impeded). Hirschi’s control theoretic approach departs from the same fundamental understanding: Everybody has a natural propensity for seeking pleasure and gains, but social control can make them abstain from doing this in illegal or harmful ways. Across their differences these approaches have in common to explain crime through the actor’s motivation, putting the accent less on what might motivate for crime than on what might demotivate, as crimes are seen as rewarding acts. Katz (1988) keeps within a motivational paradigm, but adds emotional satisfactions to the more utilitarian and economic rewards presumed to be guiding actions in the previously mentioned approaches. A branch of control-theory emphasize self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990), thereby drawing personal dispositions into the model (Moffitt et al. 2013), and/or opening for the interaction with morality (Wikström & Treiber 2007).

*2. Predisposed or damaged actors*: Even if the positive school’s (Lombroso, “the born criminal”) search for physical traits explaining crime proneness is outdated, individual explanations thrive today, as in the search for antisocial personalities, rooted in environmental factors (for instance pollution), genetic factors, brain damages or psychological disturbances. Contemporary versions are, however, far less deterministic in that a destiny also depends on social environment, in particular on families (for instance Moffitt 1993, Moffitt et al. 2013, where early determination is combined with environmental factors, or Ellis’ 2005 combinations of biology and environment).

*3. Primary groups, peer groups and normative guidance*: The Chicago school combined a micro-sociological thread (from Cooley and G. H. Mead), where the self is formed by social interactions and other people’s perceptions, with a Durkheimian concern for the moral erosion caused by social disintegration. As peer groups might take over for the family in the formation of an individual’s norms, the subsequent subcultural tradition has put accent on normative differences between criminal and non-criminal cultures (*cultural deviance explanations*, as Kornhauser 1978 termed them). This is also a premise for Sutherland’s learning theory, where criminal behaviour comes from the learning of criminal norms in interaction with peers who have these norms. A. Cohen connected to more structural issues with the concept of status frustration, providing subcultures with a compensatory function for young men of lower classes, all while pointing to non-utilitarian purposes of delinquent acts. While integrating structural perspectives differently, labelling approaches (Becker, Goffman, Lemert) share the interactionist view that self-perception and social norms are formed in primary groups (families or peer groups). Labelling theory invert, however, the control theoretical view on social control with an assumption that even if the original deviant act may have had other causes, persisting deviant acts would be provoked by control efforts that have limited the actors’ opportunities, pushed them into subcultures and changed self-perceptions. With studies of, for instance, how police perceptions led to unequal dealing with juvenile offenders according to socio-economic and racial background (Cicourel 1976), labelling approaches gained a more structural and conflict-oriented perspective accentuating the imposition of definitions of deviance.

*4. Structurally caused strains*: For Durkheim, both crime and punishment were, in reasonable amounts, functional for society, as they permitted communication of social norms. Rapid social transformation weakens the normative grasp on individuals, whereby they may get unrealistic expectations to life. Shaw & McKay illustrated Durkheim ideas empirically (even if they never mentioned him); showing the effects of institutional breakdowns on crime rates, and making assumptions about how individual motivation was influenced (where they actually, as Bursik 1988 points to, apply a more control theoretic explanation). In Merton’s reworked anomie-theory a discrepancy between social goals of success and individuals’ opportunities, together with less social emphasis put on the means to achieve success than on the goal of (economic) success, would lead some disadvantaged to seek success through illegal means. Merton thus coupled individual motivation and social structure, but without demonstrating the linking mechanism, which is why he could not tell why some responded to strains by using illegal means while others did not (cf. Kornhauser 1978).

*5. Structural inequalities*: Within conflict and deprivation theory as well as critical and radical criminology, delinquency is first and foremost explained with poverty and discrimination; with an unequal distribution of resources and/or to unequal social control practices (heavier sanctioning and police attention towards the poor and/or towards certain ethnic or racial groups). The influence from Marxism is strong, as in Spitzer’s (1975) analysis of capitalist deviance production. Within feminist criminology gender inequalities would account for gendered patterns of victimization and offending, and later developments include both intersectional approaches and queer criminology, as well as important contributions from critical race theory. While having statistical distributions on their side, works within these traditions have less to say about individual agency.

So while the two first clusters pay little attention to structure and the two last hardly try to account for agency, the one in the middle combines the levels, but with an emphasis on the micro-level and with norms as the only coupling mechanism. Norms undoubtedly serve as retrospective justifications, but may have less value as causal factors behind acts (cf. Bourdieu 1977), which is one of the insights behind role-theory’s decay in sociology. I hold that a usable theory ought to account both for individual choices; for the motivation or the pull factors on one hand, as well as for structural causes or push factors on the other – both the choices and the limits to them, to stay within Lemert’s terminology.

**Bridging through complexity**

Within this simplified overview over explanatory factors it was not easy to keep the approaches separate and under only one headline. Already the Chicago School transgressed this scheme, drawing both on Durkheim’s structural approach (4) and on a micro-sociological understanding of actions as steered by norms (3). Actually, most criminological researchers today seem to agree that the classics’ simple explanations do not work (cf. Kornhauser’s devastating critique published already in 1978). Today’s researchers usually work with theoretical combinations (leaving applications of the classic approaches to frustrated students, who cannot figure out why we teach them these theories if they are not supposed to use them). Several more recent approaches have, however, combined explanatory factors from different clusters into genuinely new theoretical approaches that fit better with current knowledge about the complexity of crime. The space does not permit a complete overview, so I will only point to some of the most influential.

Agnew’s (2005) reworked strain theory both broadens the scope of possible crime-inducing strains and questions why only some people will respond to them with crime. Agnew’s answer is complex, involving alternative options, costs of crime and individual dispositions combined with a demonstration of how crime can reduce strains, provide revenge or alleviate negative emotions. This complexity illustrates the theoriser’s dilemma, as it is both an advantage and a disadvantage: it provides a better fit with empirical realities than a simpler theory does, but some simplification is needed for a theory to be handy.

Life course and developmental approaches bridge different traditions keeping a sound respect for the empirical world’s complexity: There cannot be one single explanation for all patterns observed. Arguing against deterministic accounts, as so many different life events may influence the route, these approaches try to answer not only why people start committing crimes but also why most desist, even most of the recidivists (something a labelling approach never could explain), while some persist. The frequent gaps between predictions and outcomes are acknowledged by Laub & Sampson (2003), but they are attributed simply to “agency”. The term agency becomes then simply a black box for all that cannot be sociologically explained.

Integrated theories (for instance Thornberry 1987) also refute any simple explanation for crime, as several factors will influence the outcome. Earlier approaches have a good point each – learning, strains, control, labelling etc. all have some explanatory power. When combined, the explanatory power increases. Besides these approaches’ problem of complexity, I do not see much concrete linking to individual agency in them. This is where I think cultural criminology has an important contribution.

I could have chosen other paths. For instance, combining life course theory and self-control theory, as Pratt (2016) does, may be one way to put a bit more content into what actually happens at the individual level. Another path is the one Paternoster and Bushway (2009) develop when they add a theory of intentional self-change to a life-course theoretic perspective on desistance. To compare these approaches with the one I have chosen to develop would, however, go beyond the scope of this article.

**Bridging attempt: Cultural criminology**

Ferrell (1999 p. 396) explains the term cultural criminology as « …less a definite paradigm than an emergent array of perspectives linked to sensitivities to image, meaning, and representation in the study of crime and crime control». Hayward & Young (2004), drawing on British cultural studies, advance that cultural criminology’s contribution is to see crime and control as cultural products and creative constructions to be understood from the meaning they carry. They contrast this approach on the one hand to a positivist tradition looking for causal explanations in quantitative data, without paying attention to the actors’ motivations, and on the other to rational choice theory, considered having a thin narrative of this motivation. Young (2011) claims late modernity with its social disembeddedness requires theoretical approaches that can grasp a heightened emphasis on identity and other existential issues.

Young (2003) seems to follows Merton in seeing culture primarily as cultural goals, and also in seeing these goals as more salient than cultural means. According to Young, Merton has a good grasp on structural issues, but not on motivation (or *energy*, with Young’s term), while Katz (1988), emphasising the emotional rewards, or sensual pleasures, crimes provide, has a good grasp on motivation . Katz claims he does not disregard structural explanations; only claims also poor people have sensual experiences when stealing. Young still holds that Katz’ account for structural factors is too weak. Young introduces Carl Nightingale’s (1993) ghetto study from Philadelphia. Ghettos are often seen as spatially and socially segregated places where people also have different moral values, but Young objects. The Philadelphia ghetto residents share a general American consumption culture to which they are just as exposed as everybody else, for instance through TV commercials. Applying Merton, Young claims ghetto residents share dreams and aims with people outside the ghetto, but lack opportunities to fulfil them. Applying Katz, Young asks which emotions this discrepancy between aims and opportunities leads to. His answer is *humiliation*, for not getting what other people get, and for being subjected to a stigmatizing discourse on ghetto residents. Humiliation is a structurally produced emotional force – or energy – behind crimes. This is therefore a theory about how social structures enter people’s minds, and push some of these people toward some forms of crimes. Motives do not spring fully fledged from certain material or biological determinations, but need a “connecting narrative” (Young 2011: 100) forming subjectivity and perception. In an affluent society, poverty is perceived as an act of exclusion (p. 108).

The Mertionian framework is Young’s addition to Nightingale’s story. Nightingale himself termed the structural part as (1993 p. 144) “the twin burden of racial humiliation and agony of poverty in an affluent age,” arguing that the importance of consumption increases with poverty. He met kids who played truant from school because they were ashamed of their clothing. In order to keep up with the stream of new models boys should have new trainers at least once a month. Most girl fights seemed to be over jewellery. Police reported significant increase in clothes and shoes related robberies. Given this consumption pressure local drug dealers gained status as successful. They found “a sense of pride dressing fly on the drug corner” (p. 165), until getting arrested or shot down.

To me, Katz’ point that the emotions involved in an act should be part of an explanation is crucial, and Young’s Mertonian way of explaining the emotions with structural circumstances is indeed a creative way of coupling agency to structure. It would be hard-core structuralism to claim such difficult emotions were structurally *caused* or *produced*. Considering them *structurally conditioned* is slightly softer, as there can be no strict determination. The point is simply that the living conditions and stigmatization the kids are exposed to *fuel* the mentioned emotions - provides the energy in Young’s terms - and that these emotions in turn serve as motivations or justifications for some criminal acts.

While Young summed the energizing emotion up as humiliation, Nightingale actually painted a somewhat broader picture of the emotions involved (p. 40): “Feelings of sheer humiliation and embarrassment, disappointment and frustration, grief and loneliness, and fear and anxiety (especially concerning suspicion, rejection, and abandonment) have filled inner-city black kids’ emotional memories to extraordinary depths.” At the end of the day it is an empirical question which feelings or emotions are involved and how. It remains to be shown that the emotions are experienced by those who commit crimes, and that those in the same situation who do not recur to crime do not have the same emotions to the same degree. Or is the triggering emotion, like humiliation, to be seen as a group experience rather than as individually felt? Then the term energy is less appropriate, and the connection between structure and individual agency becomes opaque. As O’Brien (2005) points to, this is a particularly problematic point in Young’s theory: Why would, for instance, mainly *young men* feel the humiliation?

O’Brien (2005) criticizes representatives of cultural criminology, particularly Ferrell, for an inconsistent use of the term culture, for a romantic view on subcultures, and for a seemingly more politically than analytically founded ejection of some criminological traditions. Webber (2007) adds to the critique claiming that the cultural criminological tradition tends to neglect “the pain, tragedy and even tediousness of much crime” (p. 115). Webber suggests instead combining Runciman’s relative deprivation theory with Bourdieu’s understanding of the relationship between the social agents’ aspirations and their perception of the objective possibilities in order to understand how inequalities are experienced.

I agree with O’Brien that what is referred to as culture remains somewhat opaque in cultural criminology. This makes the structural part of the equation somewhat unclear. In a recent textbook by cultural criminology’s founding fathers, Ferrell, Hayward & Young (2015) hold that crime should be understood as an expressive human activity, while culture should be understood as follows (p. 3): “Culture is not simply a product of social class, ethnicity or occupation – it cannot be reduced to a residue of social structure – yet culture doesn’t take shape without these structures, either. (…) Cultural forces, then, are those threads of collective meaning and understanding that wind around the everyday troubles of social actors, animating their situations and circumstances in which their troubles play out.”

The wording seems to betray some uneasiness with structure: it is something one should not reduce to. Structure apparently only provides a frame for culture, while culture is what links between actors and structure. Throughout the book metaphors of foreground and background are used: structure belonging to background and practices to foreground.

To me, there is something missing here, concerning how structure enters the minds, and therefore something that is still not explained. This is where a Bourdieu-inspired field approach may add something important to cultural criminology with an explanation of the linking mechanisms.

**A field-theoretical approach to crime**

For Bourdieu, the social world is a space organized by the distribution of different socially valuable resources. While traditional class analyses depicts one-dimensional social hierarchies, Bourdieu paints a complex picture of how economic and non-economic assets work together or against one another in the formation of social groups. He shows how non-economic assets, especially cultural capital, work when social groups acquire status and indulge in practices of domination and exclusion. Another main point is that the perception of the social world depends on position in the social space, which, working through a person’s *habitus*, will influence everything from social aspirations to moral judgments. So Lemert’s saying that choice tends to be a “compromise between what is sought and what can be sought”, might be reworked by Bourdieu into seeing choice as a compromise between what is sought and what is perceived as possible to seek and as desirable to seek, or as appropriate for oneself to seek. This shaping of aspirations and judgments is how structural conditions work through the social agents’ minds.

As Emirbauer and Mische (1998) point to, Bourdieu belongs to the theorists who accentuate habit and routines in the understanding of agency, or social practice, as he would rather term it. But, as they stress, the employment of routines is not mechanical, as it implies selection from “practical repertoires of habitual activity” (p. 980). These repertoires are influenced by different formative experiences, both collective experiences such as gender, class or ethnicity and more individual experiences. The repertoires “shape the web of cognitive, affective, and bodily schemas through which actors come to know how to act in particular social worlds” (Emirbauer and Mische 1998 p. 981).

Symbolic capital is an overarching form of capital in Bourdieu’s framework. In traditional societies, like the Kabylian villages Bourdieu studied in his earliest works, honour was the symbolic capital all (men) strived for. Honour equals social recognition. For Bourdieu (2000, chapter 6), the basic drive for human beings is the quest for social recognition or symbolic capital. The justification of one’s existence is to be found in the judgments of others. Faced with the contingency of human existence we grab all kinds of signs of social recognition (p. 240): “To be expected, solicited, overwhelmed with obligations and commitments is not only to be snatched from solitude or insignificance, but also to experience, in the most continuous and concrete way, the feeling of counting for others, being *important* for them, and therefore in oneself, and finding in the permanent plebiscite of testimonies of interest – requests, expectations, invitations – a kind of continuous justification for existing.”

Modern, differentiated societies are composed of different fields or sub-universes (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). A field is a space of forces, where social agents in different positions strive to gain recognition from other participants, struggling over a field specific symbolic capital. For instance for social scientists our symbolic capital is the recognition from peers through publications, citations etc. – signs of recognition that seem meaningless and valueless for people outside our field, but for insiders the evaluation from peers within the field matters far more than the evaluation from outsiders. Therefore, understanding agency means understanding the agents’ particular outlook on the world: why they see the world as they do and make the evaluations they make. In a literary field - one of Bourdieu’s (1998) own examples - recognition from other authors is what matters the most, and recognition from an external public of readers may actually hamper recognition within the field, as authors who sell many books are deemed “commercial”. The pursuit of the others’ recognition is motivated by strong emotions: A symbolic capital *counts* for the participants in a field, who therefore may be willing to all kinds of sacrifices.

Fields are arenas for struggles over both definition and distribution of the forms of capital that are specific to them. Participants with different positions and trajectories will have an interest in either maintaining or challenging the distribution of symbolic value and patterns of recognition. To be working truly according to this logic a field needs to be relatively autonomous from the outer world. The definition of the specific capital and attribution of positions should be decided by the fields’ participants and not by external actors. This autonomy is frequently limited or threatened. In the academic field this might for instance be in situations where religious or political powers have influence over the attribution of academic positions.

A few scholars have brought field-theory to criminology through the use of capital metaphors. Bourgois (2003 [1995] p. 135) puts simply ‘cultural capital’ in quotation marks in his impressive ethnography about East Harlem crack dealers. His references to Bourdieu are scarce, but his approach seems close, especially in his thorough contextualisation of the crack dealers in general social and economic conditions in East Harlem and in his historical analysis of the Puerto Rican immigration to the US. Bourgois sees the destructive subculture as a compensation for the lack of access to traditional sources for masculine pride among Puerto Ricans, when they cannot even provide for their families. The outlook from Bourdieu makes him able to account for why people inside this field make choices that from the outside may seem illogical, destructive and self-destructive. The crack dealers’ daily lives are full of deceptions, abuse and violence, among them as well as against women and children. Bourgois seeks to understand as repulsive acts as gang rapes (Bourgois 1996: 425): “While all of the crack dealers are victims from a social structural perspective, they are also agents of destruction in their daily lives.” The challenge for him is to keep the structural perspective without denying the dealers’ agency. They have a space of manoeuvre, which they use in destructive and self-destructive ways – understandable to Bourgois as these acts provide them with a sort of masculine pride. The book’s second edition (Bourgois 2003) contains an update on the main participants. Most of them have actually moved out of the drug economy. Bourgois explains this first and foremost with an improved national economy, which has provided some new opportunities also for the poorly qualified. Drug fashions have also changed, with crack becoming less popular, reducing the economic gains from dealing. In Bourdieu’s terms, these external forces have impeded on the field’s autonomy.

If we reread Nightingale’s (1993) study in the light of Bourgois’ study, the inner-city kids’ culture appears also to be a compensating culture, providing access to respect and self-respect. Money and consumption goods are values in themselves, but have also an added sign value (“conspicuous consumption”), being inseparably both aims and means (making Merton’s distinction somewhat problematic). Adding Bourdieu’s field-theoretic approach explains why the kids’ quest for respect is oriented towards each other, and how their self-respect emanates from the respect gained from their peers.

Thornton (1995) coined the term ‘subcultural capital’ to account for observations made at British techno and house music clubs, where certain competences and stylistic features served as a capital recognized by other participants. This capital is linked to being “underground” and opposed to being “mainstream”, paralleling Bourdieu’s (1998) French poets who distinguished themselves by inverting the outer world’s evaluations. As Jensen (2006) points to, Thornton has, however, a limited interest for the more structural conditions for the subculture, like class, ethnicity/race and gender. Jensen’s own use of the concept subcultural capital when analysing subcultural practices of marginalized young men of immigrant descent in Denmark seems closer to Bourdieu. Their style and acts are understood as ways of gaining respect from each other through expressive masculinity and bodily capital, within the frame of a society providing them few opportunities and even fewer sources of positive recognition.

Building on extensive fieldwork among drug dealers in Norway and on Bourgois’ conception of ‘street culture’, Sandberg & Pedersen (2009) coined the term ‘street capital’. The concept not only connects agency and structure, but also bridges between economic and cultural explanations of poverty and crime (Sandberg 2008 p. 157), and gives a meaning to the violence Sandberg witnessed or heard bragging tales about during his fieldwork. A reputation for violence provided respect and thereby also a certain protection from robberies and assaults. Fraser (2013) uses instead the concept ‘street habitus’ in order to highlight how marginalised young men in an inner-city area of Glasgow are adapted to the space they live within, while Ilan (2013) opts for ‘street social capital’ in a quite parallel analysis from Dublin.

These works may explain why people may make choices that are difficult to understand outside the field, but seem perfectly rational, logical and natural for peers within (as these choices respond to the agents’ “focal concerns”, as Miller (1958) put it). The subcultures may have specific forms of capital and criteria for recognition that may differ sharply or even invert the judgments in the surrounding society. A subcultural capital (or whatever term is chosen) is linked to specific capacities (like physical force, street smartness), a specific style (clothes, jewellery, tattoos …), specific positions (within a gang or a drug economy) or specific resources. This capital has usually a limited value outside the field, but may in some cases be convertible (as when ex-drug users find employment in drug desistance projects or graffiti artists in advertising agencies).

The mentioned works vary in how systematically they apply Bourdieu’s field theoretic approach, particularly in how thoroughly they account for structural conditions; for how the agents are situated within a space or a field, and for the alleged field’s limits and autonomy. Their analyses might also have benefitted from more explicit accounts of the criminal events, in particular of the emotions involved in them. The last part of this article presents some empirical examples where I combine the field perspective from Bourdieu with the emotional perspective from cultural criminology.

**Tales from the streets: combining fields and emotions**

*Illegal art*

An underlying question in Cecilie Høigård’s (2002) study of Norwegian graffiti writers – which was based on extensive fieldwork, including observations and interviews, as well as analyses of police reports and statistics in Oslo - is what makes them persist in spite of the problems they expose themselves to. They risk arrests, prison sentences, fines and astronomic damage claims; they are exposed to public campaigns against them; their works are deemed ugly and usually rapidly removed or painted over. Add expensive spray-cans, hours of (nightly) walking and physical risks when painting at places with a difficult access. Some get tired, some get deterred, but many persist. Why?

Høigård’s first answer concerns aesthetics: The writers regard their works as pleasing to the eye and wish to embellish the urban space. As other artists they see themselves as driven by a vocation, a wish for expression. Their aesthetic standards put strong demands on technique, style, originality, diligence and visibility.

Another answer is that risks are stimulating rather than deterring. Writers report getting a high from the risks and the illegality. Paradoxically, more policing or supervision may make illegal painting even more attractive, as challenges will increase. Even if the writers approve of legal walls for street art, such walls will not stop them from seeking illegal thrills. In their evaluations, the difficult and illegal ranges over the easy and legal. Continued painting after an arrest provides high respect as it proves true commitment.

Høigård’s analysis parallels Katz’ (1988) analysis of the thrill from stealing and Lyng’s (1990) analysis of *edgework.* There have been several studies supporting the idea of crime as linked to sensation seeking. Miller (2005) provides an overview, and reminds that for deprived people crimes can provide more accessible sources of sensation than risk sports do. Next step is, paralleling Ferrell (1999 p. 409), to connect edgework to identity: In the first place an identity connected to skills, representing a positive alternative to the immediately available identities, in the second place control efforts that only enhance the joy and excitement of the illegal activities. As Lyng & Bracey (1995) have shown analysing bikers’ style: a stigmatized identity as losers, filthy, overweight etc. can become an asset among peers, and police attention only contributes to positioning them as rebels. Commercialization is therefore a more important threat to the culture than persecution is.

Høigård’s framing is, however, different. She draws on Bourdieu’s analysis of the French literary field: The driving force for street artists is the quest for recognition from other street artists. Lay people’s judgments do simply not count: they cannot decipher the letters or decode the messages. Only other graffiti artists will value competently a difficult access, a tight time pressure and a high risk for arrest. The challenges and difficulties of performing street art (well) create a scarcity needed for a symbolic capital to come to existence: Success and subsequent recognition is not for everybody.

So the emotions involved in illegal graffiti have to do with aesthetic satisfaction, as well as with joy, excitement and pride. Sometimes the art works express other emotions, like love (usually for a girlfriend or a mother) or rage and defiance (towards authorities or other “crews”). The communication with other writers is crucial, as it is their recognition they strive for. The spirit of competitiveness fuels street art.

Structural aspects are also present throughout Høigård’s analysis, explaining how artists see the world. Graffiti is likened to a guerrilla war over urban space about the right to decide what this space should look like. This is to some extent a generational conflict, where some young people, most of them males, oppose adult society. The majority of her research subjects came, however, from relatively poor areas and had had a difficult relationship to schools and work life. Through graffiti these marginalized young men won a rare victory over authorities (p. 211): “That is good for self-confidence and straightened necks.” A writer told Høigård (p. 367): “It is important to get through that this is about poor people who suddenly meet a lot of respect. That was the case for me, too. You don’t get respect for anything elsewhere when you’re poor, and then you find an area where you get a lot of respect. That has saved many people.”

The reference to how respect may “save” people is probably an implicit reference to suicide. A writer respected among the others, named Bits, stopped painting after a conviction: a conditioned prison sentence with heavy damage claims. An interviewed friend blamed the suicide partly on this conviction (p. 317): “I mean, before the graffiti Bits was nobody. He was bullied and had no respect from other people. He had nothing. With the graffiti he became famous and good, and got respect from young people all over the Nordic countries. Then the sentence came and he could not continue as before. He had to go back to what was before the graffiti, to all that was hopeless. He had nothing once again.” This may be read as a tragic illustration of Bourdieu’s earlier mentioned point about social recognition as what justifies existence. Graffiti gives the writers a name and brings them out of the anonymity and indifference of their usual existence.

*Clever thieves*

In a fieldwork in the outskirts of Mexico City, living in a house that served as a gathering place for homosexually oriented young men, I observed many breaks of laws, even if my research focus was elsewhere (on gender constructions) (Prieur 1998). Situated in a poor and rough neighbourhood with a bad reputation, most of those who came to the house were cross-dressing and feminine looking homosexual men, among themselves termed *jotas* (a pejorative word for male homosexual put into a feminine form). Most were between 15 and 25 years old; had left school at an early age, lived without a regular income and were on bad terms with their families. The house was a welcoming place, where there always would be a bit of food and some joints to be shared, possibly a bed, too. It was also a place for sexual encounters, as quite a few young men who were curious about sexual encounters with *jotas* also were hanging around here. The *jotas* regarded such ordinary, masculine looking young men, who did not self-identify as homosexuals, as the most attractive sexual partners.

The duration of the fieldwork was in all six months, over a period of three years and with some shorter follow-ups in the years after. Based on friendship with the host, I was allowed to hang around and share the daily lives of those who lived in the house (shopping at markets, cooking, socialize with people dropping in, go to discos, dancing at street parties, visit sex work zones etc.). Observations were supplemented with 11 in-depth interviews with *jotas* and seven with their more traditionally masculine-looking partners. As the aim of the research was to understand gender constructions, the following analysis of thefts is a kind of by-catch.

The atmosphere among the *jotas* was friendly and joyful, but with a rude humour approaching bullying. Looks and sexual encounters were the most frequent subjects of conversation. Hierarchical relationships were quite explicit, expressed in order of seating and serving and in who might command and who should receive orders, run errands, clean up etc. The host (a somewhat older homosexual man) was at the top, and the others were attributed positions first and foremost based on whether they were able to provide for themselves, maybe even for others, or whether they were dependent on others’ generosity. Analysed as a field, economic independence seemed to be the most important source for symbolic capital. But sexual appeal and street smartness were also important, and both were actually helpful as sources of economic independence. The most successful sex workers were, together with those running their own hair dressing parlour, at the top of this hierarchy, and the glue-sniffing, 15 year old run-aways at the bottom. To sell sex was perceived as risky, demanding, but also as a business requiring competences and talent: the ability to capture good clients, judge them well in order to not be cheated or assaulted, protect oneself against other sex workers as well as against the police and last, but not least, to not waste the gains on drugs and partying. There was nothing shameful about sex work; on the contrary being a successful sex worker was a source of pride and respect.

I heard about or witnessed many thefts, which was not surprising from a more structural perspective. Why should these poor guys not steal? With Merton, they just used other means to attain the goals everybody else was also aspiring at. Besides, when sex workers take advantage from physical intimacy to steal from their clients, it may be because earnings from selling sex may come at a high price all while the risk for police prosecution are low, as clients usually want to avoid attention. I noticed, however, that *jotas* not only stole from clients, but also from other sexual partners, and they seemed to enjoy telling stories about these thefts, as these stories always incited a lot of laughter. I do not know which emotions they felt at the moment of the stealing, but the laughter might indicate stealing itself was experienced as joyful, as both Cohen (1955) and Katz (1988) have pointed to. The way the stories were told made me, however, think the meaning of the stealing surpassed not only the gains, but also the thrill and amusement of the act itself.

The storytellers typically positioned themselves as smart and the victims as stupid. For instance, Patricia (a pseudonym, and I use female pronouns about *jotas* who used female pronouns about themselves) told about a Saturday night’s raid at a discotheque, where a man paid her some drinks. She had spotted his thick wallet, but then observed another transvestite passing the table, giving the man a hug and picking the wallet. Patricia chose an in her eyes rather unattractive man as her new target. He was drunk and bragged about his earnings. Embracing him, Patricia put a hand into his left pocket and found the first wad of bills, which she hid in her wig – an ideal hiding place for hot goods. He did not notice, drove her home, and when embracing her again, lost another wad from his right pocket. Everybody laughed as Patricia told the story.

In an interview, Gata described herself a kleptomaniac: “I say to myself ‘why shall I accept that we touch each other?’ - and zip!That it costs him something! I charge.” Sometimes *jotas* reported stealing useless objects, only stolen because the stealing was perceived as joyful. Stealing seemed to be a kind of risk sport, demanding skills, training, audacity and nerves, or “edgework” with Lyng’s (1990) term. In addition to gains, stealing provided entertainment and the satisfaction of having proved to possess the required skills. A “Katzian” (1988) analysis fits well.

I follow Bourdieu, however, in holding that a proper sociological explanation ought to include structural aspects. The thefts should be understood in light of the unequal relations between thieves and victims. The latter are positioned above the former due to money and social status (employment, perhaps education and marriage), usually also age and last but not least due to a vision of masculinity. The *jotas* embody a highly stigmatized identity as feminine and homosexual men, supposed to have the passive position in sexual encounters. Thefts serve to compensate and regain dignity: The victim may be richer and socially more respected, but the thief proves to be the smartest. The thief gets the money, the peers’ admiration and also self-respect.

Flaca’s story is also told several times, as more people arrive, and they all get a good laugh. Flaca, at the time 16 years old, tells she met a man who bragged about working for the prosecution authorities at a disco. He was wearing a suit and Flaca noticed a wad of bills in a packet of cigarettes in his pocket. Flaca followed him to a hotel. While penetrating him, Flaca reached out to grab the wad, but it fell on the floor. The sound made the man jump up, grab a bottle, threaten Flaca and search her, but he did not find anything. While he searched the room, Flaca retrieved the wad and hid it in the foam-rubber padding covering her skinny hips. Their quarrelling alerted the proprietor, and the client asked him to call the police because “this whore” – *puta* – had stolen his money. Flaca indignantly responded he ought to know Flaca was a *puto* - whore in male gender - as he had just been penetrated. Embarrassed, the man pulled Flaca out of the hotel and into his car, telling her they should wait for the police. But Flaca knocked him down with one of her high-heeled shoes and ran away. Not only had she robbed him, knocked him down, penetrated him (without a condom, although she believed herself to be HIV-positive) and exposed him to the proprietor’s contempt; she also placed some hickies in his neck, enjoying the thought that the man’s wife would discover the marks. A whole series of aggressive acts toward a man who represented everything that Flaca was not herself: adult, masculine, married and well-off – in short: respected. Also a whole series of acts that may seem irrational as they exposed Flaca to more dangers than the gained wad of bills would merit.

*Violence as image defence*

During this fieldwork, I heard a lot of stories about quite serious violence, , where the story tellers were either victims or perpetrators, sometimes both. Ranging from battering by parents and jealous lovers over gang rapes and police brutality to street fights, armed robberies and random shootings, it would not give sense to search for a common explanation for all these violent episodes. Violence was everywhere, and the ability and willingness to use it to protect one’s money, health or reputation was not only accepted, but also expected. From a structural perspective, when violence could be so omnipresent and “natural”, it had to do with poverty, lack of education as well as lack of social and legal protection, together with a cultural acceptance of male assertiveness and belligerence.

I also observed some violent episodes among the *jotas*, usually related to positions in the pecking order. Usually someone had lacked in deference towards someone more respected (due to age or economic independence) and was put back into place. My host once tried to put a pestering teenager down, but ended up receiving a serious beating himself. He claimed he had had to correct the teenager to keep up his own status, but I asked whether his status really deserved the shiners he got. He answered: “If I don’t defend myself in that kind of situation, I get into a vicious circle, and will get a lot more trouble later. Everyone will try to assert himself.” In such situations violence seemed more premeditated than emotionally driven, but built on an underlying experience of humiliation in the judgment that appropriate respect had not been paid..

Status and respect seemed to be key words to understand much of this violence, with pride and humiliation as triggering emotions, just like in Nightingale’s and in Young’s work. The structure of inequalities acted as a background. Gata claimed to have been teased and bullied so much growing up that now just a slightly staring glance could enrage her: “I put up a fight for all kinds of foolish things. I’m like that, whether it comes from my character or from everything that has happened to me, I’m always like ‘Oh, don’t you do that to me, ‘cause I’ll get you …’” Six feet tall, with huge breasts and a flashy style, Gata received many staring glances, and actually wanted to be remarked in public – but in the right way, with admiration, lust or even fear, while any sign of disgust or ridicule would provoke her.

In another study (AUTHOR 2) of mine, some male interviewees justified their use of violence in quite similar ways. This study was based on 52 life-historical interviews with children of immigrants in Norway, all in the beginning of their 20’ies but in different life situations. The aim was to understand why some had ended up in marginality or isolation while others were well integrated. 16 male the interviewees had a criminal record, and most had been involved in violence. They usually told they had felt provoked either by expressions of contempt (for instance racist comments) or by advances towards their girlfriends. They explained violence as a defence of themselves or of their friends; in the latter case it could for instance be revenging an alleged attack on a friend. In hindsight they sometimes regarded the violence as an overreaction, which in some cases had had severe consequences for the victim or for themselves. Their overreaction may have had to do with the structural inequalities that got small hassles to be felt as deep provocations.

**Concluding discussion**

In these examples some rather different criminal acts are understood against a backdrop of structural factors that put perpetrators in deprived positions and limit their opportunities for achieving social success following socially desirable routes. Economic deprivation, possibly supplemented with discrimination and stigmatization, is a source of a series of emotions, like humiliation or frustration. Emotions are the energy, as Young put it; they fuel the acts. Crimes become compensatory acts providing access to positive self-images through recognition from peers. Subcultures have their own forms of symbolic capital or sources of recognition, operating to a certain degree as fields in Bourdieu’s sense . These fields are, however, not perfectly autonomous, and may be altered for instance by a changing economy, as in Bourgois’ case. Participants are also parts of other social universes, like their families, which at a certain moment may succeed in pulling them out of the subculture (the ‘aging out’ described in life-course criminology).

But what does this field-theoretic approach achieve that is not already achieved by cultural criminology? Cultural criminology made the great achievement of putting emotions in as the linking of agency and structure, but the structure, or culture, remained rather unclear. The framing within a Bourdieusian understanding of social space and fields provides a stronger account of structural aspects, and also of how social structure enters people’s minds: through their evaluations and perception of what is possible or not and desirable or not for themselves. And these evaluations and perceptions are emotionally loaded.

Is this then a theoretical model that only explains subcultural crimes? I think we may stretch it a bit further. With Goffman’s (1959, 1963) basic anthropological insight that people strive to protect their dignity in social interactions in mind, the observations give good sense also on a more general level. We strive to present a positive image of ourselves to others, also in order to maintain a positive self-image. People go to extremes to maintain their dignity, as known for instance from the literature about imprisonment (cf. Cohen & Taylor 1972). In the cases presented above, the image of the self is threatened by social and economic conditions, by discrimination and stigmatization. What is at odds is to keep up a sense of dignity in a vulnerable position.

Similar interpretations will probably work well in some quite different cases, too, like illegal hacking or hooliganism, where the perpetrators also are part of a group and their acts get known by this group. Other kinds of law-breaking acts may also be source of some (masculine) pride, like speeding or illegal gambling, even if they do not occur within a peer group and the acts do not get known. If a real audience is not needed, an imagined audience is: people who would be impressed, if they knew... The imagined audience counts for a self-image: “I’m a daredevil”, or “I’m smart”. This explanation works then not only for subcultural crimes, but for crimes that are or could be bragged about (perhaps explaining perpetrators’ sometimes quite irrational bragging that police investigations frequently benefit from).

Perhaps this goes for a wider range of crimes, too. Sutherland (1983) reports how frauds became sources of pride for vendors in different businesses, and quotes a repentant from the used car business (p. 242): “The thing that struck me as strange was that all these people were proud of their ability to fleece costumers. They boasted of their crookedness and were admired by their friends and enemies in proportion to their ability to get away with a crooked deal: it was called shrewdness.” It will, however, not give sense for all forms of crime, for instance not for sexual offences or wife-battering. Pointing to these limits is not a severe criticism, as criminological theorizing probably suffers from being too ambitious: What a society has chosen to label criminal acts, are a range of extremely different acts that cannot all be explained by the same factors.

The value of this approach needs, however, to be shown by empirical challenges: new studies with open eyes for what the triggering emotions actually are as well as for how the linking of emotions to structure is made in a concrete practice.

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1. I have chosen not to boost the list of literature references with proper references to all these standard sources, which one might find in almost any criminology reader or textbook (for instance Cullen & Agnew 2011 or Williams III & McShane 2014). I only give complete references to more recent elaborations. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)