

SHOPLIFTING AND RESIDENCE IN COLLEGE

Ilyas Ba-Yunus
SUNY, Cortland College
D. E. Allen,
Oklahoma State University

INTRODUCTION

Causal factors for criminal behavior have been sought both in the social environment and in the make-up of the individual. Shoplifting, as a widely distributed type of offense, can be evaluated in terms of influences on the shoplifter. Comparing the effect on shoplifting in a college population of such variables as sex, type of college, size of college town and time in school contribute positively to shoplifting, and then criminogenic attitudes favoring shoplifting become more diffused among the students with time in school.

In the sociology of crime, it is generally recognized that criminal behavior, like any other behavior in society, is the end-product of a process (Becker, 1953, 1963; Matza, 1964; Cohen, 1965). This assumption calls for a sequential model considering the interplay among psychological and social factors in a process yielding criminal behavior as an end-product. Becher's study on marijuana smoking illustrates such a model (1963). This study applies a sequential model in which pressures or dispositions toward crime are seen as developing in the actor's associational milieu - the subculture - which surrounds and precedes the criminogenic situation. (See Sykes and Matza, 1957.) We believe that the criminal act is done not only to situational prompting, but also on the level of aggressiveness of the personality.

Attitudes favoring shoplifting are thought to be embedded in the college subculture. This subculture is not definable in terms of shoplifting attitudes of the student, but contains these attitudes in addition to attitudes toward conforming behavior patterns which characterize the subculture (Matza, 1965, Ch. 2). Subcultural attitudes related to shoplifting constitute the criminogenic attitudes. Through interaction between criminogenic attitudes and a favorable situation, selection of the shoplifting act becomes possible and the actor chooses to shoplift. The level of aggressiveness of the actor com-

bined with the level of excitement regulate the response to opportunity in the shoplifting situation. An aggressive personality leads to shoplifting only when supported by other factors in triggering a criminal act.

HYPOTHESES

The incidence of criminal behavior is affected by a combination of conditions in the social environment, and by certain relevant attitude sets in those individuals. Therefore, it is necessary to discriminate the factors, and to establish the direction of their effect. For this purpose, we have tried to isolate a low-order type of criminal act which is relatively widespread, and to relate it to some well-differentiated environmental conditions which seems likely to affect the incidence of the criminal act. The crime of shoplifting is suitable for this purpose because it is widespread in juvenile subcultures in urban settings, and because admission of such an offense is not likely threatening to the respondent (Cameron, 1968). The college campus provides a source of juveniles in late adolescence among whom the shoplifting offense may be assumed to be differentially distributed. Controls for size of campus town, type of college, length of time in the college subculture and sex of the respondent are readily applied.

The size of the campus town is expected to affect the extent of opportunity for shoplifting, if the magnitude of difference is on the order of 100 percent, starting with very small towns. In very small towns, specialized stores tend to be smaller, fewer in number, and more limited in passageways and exits. There is a higher degree of diffuse acquaintance among shopowners, clerks, and local citizenry. Shopping crowds are less dense, and the relation between the clerk and even the casual shopper tends to be more personal. Merchandise displays are less massive. These factors make the individual shopper more conspicuous, and the shoplifting opportunity less frequent. Therefore, we expected that students would shoplift significantly more in larger towns than in smaller towns.

Public colleges are open to a wider spectrum of students in terms of socioeconomic background and personal resources. Private colleges impose higher tuition and living expenses and draw stu-

dents from higher income families where the inclination to petty theft should be reduced. Therefore, we expected that the public college students would have a higher frequency of shoplifting.

As time in school increases, the college student shares more of the permissive attitudes of the students subculture, and becomes more accepting of the behavior of other students. Since shoplifting attitudes and behavior like other forms of delinquent behavior tend to become diffused among students over time, we expected that shoplifting behavior would increase with time in college.

It is believed that sex differences have no significant effect on shoplifting, attitudes of the student, and the personal aggressiveness of the student. It is predicted that strong criminogenic attitudes toward shoplifting will be associated with increased shoplifting. Since males tend to be somewhat more assertive and less conforming to cultural expectations, we expected a higher absolute frequency of shoplifting among college males.

METHOD

To test this model, the method of self report was preferred over the use of official records, because the statistics on criminal offenses do not treat shoplifting as a separate category, and because of other weaknesses in such statistics (Sellin and Wolfgang, 1964; Sellin, 1937; Conrad, 1942; Schwartz, 1945). Two state colleges were chosen from campus towns of 11,000 and 48,000 population in Illinois and Wisconsin. In each state, one private college was chosen in towns of 22,000 and 104,000 population. In each of the four schools approximately equal numbers of male and female students were randomly drawn from the undergraduate student cohorts representing each of the eight semesters of the four-year college student population. Black students were not included because they were severely under-represented in the private colleges. Slight variation in the numbers available resulted in a sample of 1509 respondents in a design which called for 64 cells of 25 each, totaling 1600. Cell frequencies ranged from 20 to 29, with a mean of 23.6.

The research instrument was a 41-item questionnaire incorporating identification data, a ten-element group of situations on

shoplifting to indicate attitudes, and a nine-element group from the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, to show aggressiveness, and four items on the respondent's own shoplifting behavior. The situational items were non-redundant shoplifting situations involving students, in which premeditation, money value, and sanction were systematically varied. A Likert scale of five levels of approval permitted aggregate scoring of attitudes favorable to shoplifting over 40 scale points. The shoplifting situation items developed gave consistent results on an independent sample (reliability coefficient = .79) and comparable results on the aggressiveness scale (reliability coefficient = .85).

FINDINGS

Personal characteristics of college students appear to have only a limited relation to frequency of shoplifting. The shoplifting attitude of the student is positively and significantly related to shoplifting frequency. About half of the students approved of shoplifting, and shoplifted five times or more frequently than students who disapproved of shoplifting. The sex variable has no significant relation to shoplifting frequency, although the females reported a slightly higher frequency than the males. Thus, the female students were not more conforming to conventional ethical standards regarding property rights and theft.

A similar outcome appears when we compare the public college to the private college. Contrary to the hypothesis that students from more affluent families would do significantly less shoplifting, the difference is too slight to be statistically significant, and the direction is reversed.

The incidence of student shoplifting is clearly affected by size of campus town, and by the number of years in school, and by the interaction of these two conditions. There is a steady increase in the rate of shoplifting per hundred students, from 13 percent in the freshman year to about 73 percent in the junior year, with a strong proportional increase, semester by semester in the interim. In the largest town, 88 percent of the seniors at the private school have shoplifted at least once. The annual increases in incidence of shoplifting appear in all four schools, which strongly suggests that the student subculture diffuses the

criminogenic attitudes among the college students over time.

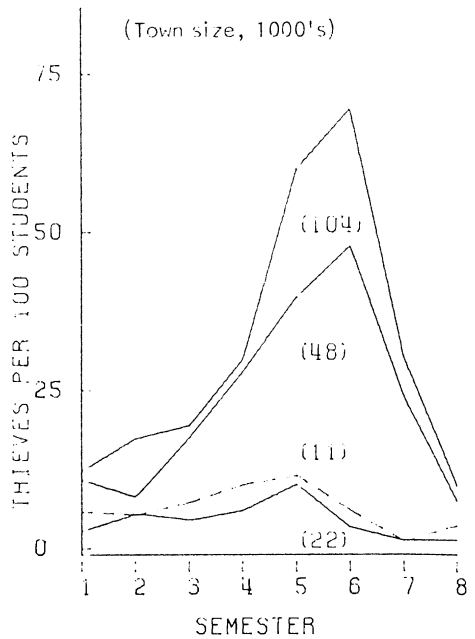
When the incidence of shoplifting in the current semester is examined, a rather different pattern of influence emerges. The strong effect of town size is very apparent, as shown in Figure 1, and there is a consistent maximizing of shoplifting in the third year of college, in either the fifth or the sixth semester, with a sharp decline in the seventh and eighth semesters, making up the senior or terminal year for most students. Since the proportion of shoplifters shows a large proportionate decline in the fourth year, it is suggested that the progressive detachment of the individual senior student, who is preparing to leave the student subculture, reduces the effect of these subcultural pressures toward shoplifting. The relationship between year in school and the incidence of shoplifting is curvilinear rather than rectilinear for the first six of the eight college semesters, and hence, is not a simple function of time in school. Instead, it appears to be a function of involvement in the student subculture, which peaks in the third year, and declines sharply in the fourth year. The fourth year withdrawal phenomenon is familiar in social clubs and campus activities groups.

The value of the average single theft is nearly identical in smaller and larger towns or \$2.07 and \$2.03 respectively. But the increased frequency of student shoplifting in larger towns approximately doubles the dollar value of stolen goods from \$2.93 in smaller towns to \$6.16 in the larger towns. In terms of student population, the average loss per student in small towns is \$0.38, compared to \$3.56 per student in larger towns. A force of 10,000 students in larger towns may be expected to shoplift about \$35,000. worth of merchandise per college term.

DISCUSSION

The three variables, namely, shoplifting attitudes, shoplifting situations, and aggressive traits have an effect on shoplifting by college students. The three factors become causally sufficient only when they are combined. When attitudes favorable to shoplifting operate in favorable situations, they yield a high frequency of shoplifting for those who possess high aggressive traits. The model provides an adequate

FIGURE I
INCIDENCE OF STUDENT SHOPLIFTING
DURING THE CURRENT SEMESTER, BY
TOWN SIZE AND TIME IN COLLEGE



(Computer plot by Samraa Houstafa)

explanation of shoplifting behavior of college students. Two questions may now be raised. First, as a situation becomes criminogenic, do subjective traits of students become momentarily accentuated? Second, in criminogenic situations, do students shoplift even though their attitudes and personal traits are not strongly predisposing? Simply to assert that attitudes and personality traits of students are involved in the process of the perception of the situation gives no clue as to how these characteristics of the actor interact with the situation. The two questions raised above are directly connected with this problem and in answering these questions we may determine how the perception of the situation makes the selection as well as the commission of a criminal act possible. It seems very unlikely that an individual would operate in a direction contrary to his subjective controls, unless he were under a condition of strain in the opposite direction. Strain may be a consequence of

direct social pressures from peers, or it may result from more subtle influences exerted on the actor in artificially simulated situations (Asch, 1951). Many kinds of strainful situations may create ambivalence on the part of the actor (Parsons, 1951). The social situation may contain strains which frustrate the actor, and cause him to deviate from his own subjective judgments, or he may quit the situation if he is free to do so. In Merton's terminology, this is the "strain toward deviation" or a negative strain and a negative situation (1938). On the other hand some situations contain strains which may reinforce the pre-existing tendencies of the actor. Following Sumner, we call this the "strain toward consistency," or a positive situation (1907). It should be emphasized that situations may be positive or negative not in themselves, but only relative to the subjective state of the actor. It follows that a situation may be negative for actor A but positive for actor B. The situation is judged as negative or positive because they are perceived as such by the individual actor.

The large town or city situation encourages shoplifting because it facilitates a positive perception of the situation on the part of the student. Since there is no evidence that shoplifting by college students is a gang phenomenon, strain toward shoplifting appear greater in large stores where items for sale are displayed on open racks in such a manner as to invite stealing. Over time the encouragement of shoplifting which appears to come from college peers tends to increase the probability that the student in the provocative situation will shoplift. Attitudes and situational strain only explain selection of objects and predisposition of students to interact with these objects. This is only one phase of the perception of the situation. The second phase involves the perception of situation as being good or not good for stealing the object.

CONCLUSION

Students shoplift as a result of momentary excitement and accentuation in their shoplifting attitudes. As a situation becomes highly favorable for shoplifting, students may do it in spite of their low aggressive personality traits. As Cohen puts it:

Human action, deviant or otherwise, is something that develops in a tentative, groping, advancing, backtracking, sounding out process. People taste and feel their way along. They begin an act and do not complete it. They start doing something and end up doing another. They extricate themselves from progressive involvement or become further involved to the point of commitment (1965).

The attitudes favoring shoplifting by college students are embedded in the student subculture, and the subculture plays an important role in crime. It predisposes members differentially toward crime and conformity. There is little doubt that college subculture also predisposes its participants toward very highly desirable and approved activities. When students with their shoplifting attitudes find themselves in shops, they become more inclined to shoplift than to pay for the items they want. Some of those inclined to shoplift still do not do so unless they have sufficient aggressiveness to defy the moral and legal codes, and are willing to take the risks. All those who are in the college subculture may not necessarily be predisposed to shoplift and all of those who are so predisposed do not necessarily shoplift. Likewise shops and big stores where shoplifting is possible are not shoplifting situations necessarily. They are primarily places of orderly economic exchange of goods and money. These situations are only conducive for shoplifting for those who enter these situations with a shoplifting disposition.

REFERENCES

- Asch, Solomon E., 1951. "Effects of group pressures upon the modification and distortion of judgments" in H. Guetzkow, (ed). *Groups, Leadership, and Men*. Pittsburg Carnegie Press.
- Ba-Yunus, Ilyas, 1970. *Shoplifting Among College Students: A Study in the Sociology of Crime*. Microfilm, Ann Arbor, Michigan. Dissertation.
- Becker, Howard S., 1953. "Becoming a marijuana user." *Amer. Jour. of Sociol.*, 59, 235-242, November.
- _____, 1965. *The Outsiders*. Glenco Illinois The Free Press.
- Cameron, Marry Owen, 1968. "Court

responses to shoplifting." *Deviance: The Interactionist Perspective.* (eds.) Earl Rubington and Martin S. Weinberg. New York Macmillan Co.

Cohen, Albert K., 1965. "The sociology of the deviant act: anomie theory and beyond." *Amer. Sociol. Review*, 30, 8. February.

Conrad, Frederick, 1942. "Statistics in the analysis of social problems." *Sociology and Social Research*, 26, 538-549, July-August.

Green, Edward, 1970. "Race, social status, and criminal arrest." *Amer. Sociol. Review*, 35, 476-490, June.

Hindelang, Michael J., 1970. "The commitment of delinquents to their misdeeds: do delinquents drift." *Social Problems*, 17, 502-509, Spring.

Kinsey, Alfred C., Wardel B. Pomeroy, and Claude E. Martin, 1948. *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male.* Philadelphia W.B. Sanders Company.

Locke, Harvey J., 1954. "Are voluntary interviews representative?" *Social Problems*, 143-146. April.

Matza, David, 1964. *Delinquency and Drift.* New York John Wiley and Sons.

Merton, Robert K., 1938. "Social structure and anomie." *Amer. Sociol. Review*, 3, 672. October.

Nye, F. Ivan, 1956. "Parent-adolescent relationships and delinquent behavior." *Research Studies of the State College of Washington*, 24, 160-169. June.

Parsons, Talcott, 1951. *The Social System.* Chapter 7. Glencoe Illinois The Free Press.

Reiss, Ira L., 1965. "A community experiment in the measurement of juvenile delinquency." *National Probation Yearbook*, 1945. Washington USGPO.

Sellin, Thorsten, 1937. *Research Memorandum on Crime in the Depression.* Chapter 4. New York Social Science Research Council.

Sellin, Thorsten and Marvin E. Wolfgang, 1964. *The Measurement of Delinquency.* New York John Wiley and Sons.

Short, James F. and Fred L. Strodtbeck, 1965. *Group Process and Gang Delinquency.* 77-101. Chicago University of Chicago Press.

Short, James F., Ramon Rivera, and Ray A. Tennyson, 1965. "Perceived opportunities, gang membership, and delinquency." *Amer. Sociol. Review*, 30, 56-67.

Sumner, William G., 1960. *Folkways.*

New York Mentor Books 1907, New York New American Library.

Sykes, Gresham M. and David Matza, 1957. "Techniques on neutralization: a theory of delinquency." *Amer. Sociol. Review*, 22, 664-670, December.

Wolfgang, Marvin E., 1958. *Patterns in Criminal Homocide.* Philadelphia University of Pennsylvania Press.

_____, 1961. "A sociological analysis of criminal homicide." *Federal Probation*, 23, 1, 48-55. March.

Whyte, William F., 1943. *Street Corner Society.* Chicago Illinois University of Chicago Press.

(Continued from p. 81. FRITZ)

ics." *Amer. Sociol.* 2, 93-95. May.

Petras, J. and J.R. Hayes, 1973. "How symbolic interactionists can practice what they preach." *Teaching Sociol.* 1, 3-12. October.

Pfeiffer, J. William and John E. Jones, 1969. *Handbook of Structured Experiences for Human Relations Training.* I-V. Iowa City Iowa University Associates Press.

Reichert, Richard, 1970. *Self Awareness Through Group Dynamics.* USA George A. Pflaum.

Robertson, Ian, 1977. *Sociology.* New York Worth.

Simon, Sidney, Leland Howe and Howard Kirschenbaum, 1972. *Values Clarification: A Handbook of Practical Strategies for Teachers and Students.* New York Hart.

Vaughan, Charlotte A. and Richard J. Peterson, 1975. "Introductory sociology: a behavioral objectives approach." *Teaching Sociol.* 3, 6-20. October.

Wahrman, Ralph, 1974. "Some observations on sensitivity training research." *Small Group Behavior* 5, 321-30. November.

Wallis, George W., 1973. "Improving the teaching of introductory sociology by an innovative classroom organization." *Teaching Sociol* 1, 25-37. October.