

“We Weren’t Like No Regular Dope Fiends”: Negotiating Hustler and Crackhead Identities¹

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We investigate how participants in the street economy of crack cocaine construct a “hustler” identity by contrasting their social behaviors and styles with a dialectically contrastive crackhead identity. For those who are proximate to, or involved in, the crack cocaine economy, effort is required to avoid being labeled a crackhead. Would-be hustlers construct boundaries that separate them from others on the street through talk and behavior. We draw on interviews conducted with 28 men convicted of committing violent street crimes to explore how they distance themselves from those exhibiting distasteful symptoms of crack addiction. By examining the boundaries between these two street-based identities we increase sociological understanding of the significance of offenders’ identity work for shaping their conceptions of self and other, as well as their interactions in everyday street life.
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In the 1980s, when crack cocaine began transforming poor, urban neighborhoods into even more socially distressed and impoverished areas than they were previously, it became clear to social analysts that the devastation wrought upon those in close proximity to crack addicts would be serious and lasting. Crack proliferation had effects beyond damage to souls and families, however. Its presence changed many distressed inner-city streets into busy open-air drug markets filled with violence and other forms of victimization (Williams 1992). The social settings of residents in places that would eventually be termed “crack alleys” were affected as citizens were divided, if imprecisely at times, into those who traded in crack and those who did not.

Law abiding citizens living near America’s crack corners took great pains to separate themselves socially from the conditions outside their doors, necessarily changing their attitudes toward and interactions with those who had fallen either into addiction or to the enticements of the drug economy. Those up close also saw adjustments under their language and interactions as enduring drug markets transformed relationships between dealers and customers, creating new social types (Anderson 1999). An emergent social identity—the “crackhead”—became almost universally recognized and derided. Not only were crackheads failures at achieving the “American Dream,” they also failed to project an image of “cool transcendence” that is admired by those embedded in street life (Katz 1988).

The label crackhead is commonly used in casual speech as a metaphor and illustration of personal failure and lack of responsibility. The crackhead serves as go-to material among a seemingly endless series of dark humored comics who make their living by portraying tragic

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characters in poor neighborhoods and making light of unpleasant, stereotypical interactions that might arise in dealing with them. The identity resonates with a wide audience because the physical effects of severe crack cocaine addiction are so apparent that they can be seen by the most casual observer, and because the spatial concentration of crack addiction allows for convenient allusion to the impoverished conditions and supposed moral failure in the inner city.

The devastating effects of local crack economies changed the behaviors and language of those in street life as well as their shared understandings of what the streets mean. Street identities and street language have adjusted to make sense of and arrange ordinary dealings in the illicit drug market. We contend that the resulting divisions between crack addicts and others engaged in street life entrench identity hierarchies by orienting offenders toward sub-culturally constructed criteria associated with the tough, capable hustler and away from those associated with the weak, incapable crackhead. Indeed, some of the most significant symbolic values prevalent in street life today are found in the meaningful distinction between hustlers and crackheads.

Hustler and crackhead identities are actively created through interactions among persons proximate to and distant from places where the categories are used in interaction. Each identity is imprecise and fluid and can have local variety. Yet, there is a more or less consistent ideal-typical form at the level of everyday use. These identities offer convenience when defining recurring interactional moments on the street and in making sense of the street scene. They encapsulate notions of what and who is valued and reflect what offenders are trying to be in the eyes of their peers. While mutuality functions to establish feasible identities, there is always subjectivity and some creativity in judging and using boundaries appropriately. Thus, to understand the social identity of the hustler it is necessary to examine how street offenders talk about themselves in terms of that identity category, as well how they construct relevant out-groups—in this case, crackheads.

In this study we employ a conception of social identity (Hewitt 2003; Jenkins 2004) to describe and examine two street identities in open-air drug markets. Drawing on interviews with 28 men who were convicted of committing violent street crimes, we explore how they identified themselves using distinct, contrasting social categories. Our analysis shows how contemporary street offenders construct meaningful identities that distance themselves from those exhibiting distasteful symptoms of crack cocaine addiction, which they see as a striking and noticeable form of street failure. We study how their identity work allows them to make sense of the social world they know best and to portray themselves in culturally relevant and positive terms. On the streets, the boundaries that hustlers use to separate the demonized crack customer from themselves are significant. These identity boundaries shape how self-defined hustlers behave, their beliefs about how others should view and treat them, and the extent to which they self-identify as respectable and noteworthy characters.

Classifications and Social Identities

The process hustlers use to identify themselves vis-à-vis crackheads is not an arcane sub-cultural ability. Rather, classification is a basic social process that shapes the minute details of people’s everyday lives (Zerubavel 1997). To make sense of their physical and social surroundings, human beings classify everything they encounter. People attach meaning to physical objects as well as gestures and words. In so doing, they shape their own and others’ beliefs about and behaviors toward them (Blumer 1969). Dichotomies such as “attractive” versus “unattractive,” “powerful” versus “weak,” and “valuable” versus “worthless” employ socially-constructed boundaries that may become culturally standardized and utilized routinely in interaction. Such distinctions can provide a great deal of information as culturally shared shorthand that individuals use to orient to situations.

Identities are social constructs that classify persons. While some social scientists reduce identity to psychologically-based personality traits or sociologically-based categories substantiated by racial, ethnic, class, or gender-based groups, others conceptualize identity as a robust, malleable, and intricate phenomenon (e.g., Hogg and Ridgeway 2003; Hogg, Terry, and White 1995; Stets and Burke 2000). The former obscures the fact that identity is enacted and purposeful. In accord with conceptualizations that portray identities as negotiated and situational, we shift the focus from the internal structure, functions, and cultural makeup of identity categories to the *processes* through which such categories become meaningful to people in their everyday lives. One of the most fundamental is found in the use of culturally bounded contrasts and comparisons to establish the scope of identities and to make claims to membership.

Social identity is a multivalent process through which individuals identify themselves in terms of similarity to some people and difference to others. Social identification occurs when people identify both themselves and others as members of social categories (Hewitt 2003; Jenkins 2004). These can be almost ubiquitous categories such as white or male or subculturally-specific categories such as "righteous dope fiend" or "sick addict" (Sutter 1966). To be someone, such as a hustler for instance, "is to identify with others who are perceived as like oneself and whose real or imagined presence evokes positive feelings" (Hewitt 2003:107). When identifying with a desired social category, people regularly describe their own actions in terms of positively-defined behaviors associated with its members. Those who see themselves as hustlers describe admirable characteristics of hustlers and relate stories of their own behaviors in the hope of convincing their audience that they are authentic. Jack Katz (1988) makes sense of the lure and form of much crime according to the dictates of offenders' desire to maintain "respectable" street identities. Moreover, he points out that many of the rewards and enticements of crime can be understood only by peering through the lens of these identities at potentially criminal situations.

To understand the social identity of the hustler it is necessary to examine how they talk about themselves in terms of identity categorization, as well as how they construct relevant out-groups. To the uncritical or uncaring eye, there may be little visible difference between hustlers and crackheads. One reason is that crackheads and hustlers inhabit the same physical environment, separated (by some combination of agency and structure) from legitimate means of achieving mainstream social prestige. Most participants in urban drug economies, and particularly in the crack trade, have fewer opportunities for the development of meaningful selves than mainstream Americans (Gubrium and Holstein 2000). Despite what is shared, the distinction is extremely salient in contemporary urban street life and is arguably more significant in offenders' thinking, self-concept, and daily interactions than the divide between law-abiding citizens and themselves. The methods through which individuals immersed in street life construct a positive self-concept while engaging the drug economy is one type of "going concern," which characterizes "relatively stable, routinized, ongoing patterns of action and interaction . . . that explicitly structure or reconfigure . . . identity" (Gubrium and Holstein 2000:102).

A going concern for those embedded in street life is the ability to stay close to the drug economy without succumbing to its debilitating effects. Slipping into uncontrollable addiction is antithetical to the hustler identity, and it can have many debilitating and dangerous costs; yet, that slippage is oftentimes unavoidable. Edward Preble and John Casey (1969) found that heroin users in New York used the drug to make their lives busy and meaningful. Heroin use and its accompanying activities provided gratification that came from successfully accomplishing the challenges of being an addict and acquiring drugs. It also distracted from ensuing and occurring damage. "Righteous dope fiends" admire those who can acquire and use hard drugs in stylistically appropriate ways, whereas they mock ordinary poor people and those who lack such wherewithal. The fact that heavy drug use can devastate only serves to reinforce the sense that those who can "take care of business" and successfully manage a

habit are admirable (Johnson et al. 1985; Preble and Casey 1969). Those who are capable of more than eking out an existence through crime and drug use garner special attention and accolades from their peers (see also Boeri 2004; Lewy and Preble 1973; Stephens 1991), and young hustlers learn that the ability to avoid the dismal fate of the crackhead, one form of the sick addict, is a mark of character and distinction that serves as essential proof of their social identity. In short, when constructing identities it is important for self-proclaimed hustlers to set themselves apart from those who have succumbed to drugs.

Discerning these going concerns through offenders’ talk means not simply taking at face value their claims of being hustlers rather than crackheads, but instead studying the identity-boundaries they construct through narrative. Such a focus leads to an understanding of the meanings that extend beyond the shorthand and labels and recognizes that the “critical focus of investigation [ought to be] the . . . *boundary* that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses” (Barth 1969:15, emphasis in original). This shift is pragmatic in the sense that it avoids reifying the cultural “stuff” (including identities) of population categories. It also encourages attention to the active construction of identity categories, and turns attention away from claims-makers’ constructions of identities as essential or natural. Hustler and crackhead are not objective identity categories; they are dialectically paired status symbols that are constantly being (re)negotiated.

For decades, investigators of street life and its dictates have recognized the prominence and power of the hustler identity and have described many of its behavioral and attitudinal components (Shover 1996). Less attention has been given directly to how identities valued by offenders are sustained interpersonally. Typically, interviews with offenders address neither meanings attributed to identities in depth nor precisely what hustlers have on their minds pertaining to relevant identities. In what follows, we describe how we struck upon the significance of the hustler/crackhead distinction while interviewing street offenders. We proceed to describe the distinction as street offenders presented it and show how interactions are used to reinforce these distinctions. We conclude by arguing that the salience of these identities and narratives highlights their significance for forming what contemporary offenders believe and how they conduct themselves. Such identity narratives therefore should not be neglected by any who would understand street crime, criminal decision-making, or related behaviors that otherwise might seem senseless.

Data and Methods

The current study is based on the accounts of 28 violent male street offenders gathered in semistructured interviews. At the time of the interview, these individuals were serving sentences for various offenses in two Louisiana medium security prisons. Like most prisons in Louisiana, the populations are overrepresented by those who are young and black; our sample reflects this population. To locate participants within these prisons we used a purposive sampling strategy. Clerks in the prisons collected the names of individuals convicted of carjacking, the initial type of crime that the study was about, and we solicited these individuals. Due to a low number of convicted carjackers in the prison we also asked correctional officers if they knew inmates who had forcibly stolen vehicles. We interviewed those individuals who admitted to forcible auto theft even if they were convicted for other offenses. Thus, our sample consisted of individuals who had engaged in carjacking regardless of whether they were convicted of it or not.

Respondents ranged in age from 21 to 40 (mean age = 25). Five participants were white and 23 were black. Most had long criminal records that reflected years of persistent offending. Crimes in offenders’ adult records revealed offenses ranging in severity from low-level drug distribution to robbery and attempted murder. The vast majority of them reported being involved in drug use and/or drug distribution around the time they were last arrested. The

bulk of the respondents were heavily engaged in and surrounded by the drug economy and street life in poor neighborhoods in mid-sized to large cities in Louisiana.

When we began interviewing offenders for this project our intent was not to explore the phenomenon of managing social identities, but rather to explore the social world of those who engage in violent street crime and, more specifically, how participation in street culture constrained the criminal decision-making process. Thus, in each interview we asked study participants about their educational backgrounds, families, occupations, criminal histories, drug use, and current lifestyles. The interviews were loosely structured to allow participants to elaborate on issues they thought relevant. These types of interviews are advantageous when investigators choose not to identify significant themes before research begins. Loosely structured interviews are often necessary when researchers suspect that their subjects' thinking and categorical schemes may be foreign or when discovery hinges on understanding how participants interpret and narrate their lives and actions. As interviews progressed, it became clear that fostering a view of themselves as hustlers rather than crackheads was significant to participants. Upon recognizing this trend we adjusted the interview guide accordingly to collect more identity-related data. At first, this was done informally simply because of the way the conversations were going and as the interviewer carried information across interviews.

Among other questions, we asked if they self-identified as addicts or heavy drug users. Sometimes this question led to specific probes about whether the participants considered themselves to be junkies, addicts, or crackheads depending on context in the interview. Another question asking offenders how they interacted with drug customers elicited additional data. As these questions became more focused, we were intrigued by the emergence of the symbolic importance of the crackhead and hustler identities and the maintenance of the boundaries between them. We subsequently asked offenders how those in their neighborhoods treated crackheads generally and how they personally treated such people.

The interviews took place in private rooms in the facilities' administrative wing. Only the study participants and the interviewer were in the room during the interview. While correctional officers were nearby, they were unable to listen in on the conversations. The interviews varied in length from 30 to 90 minutes. We transcribed all interviews verbatim and analyzed them with QSR NVivo 7 (Richards 1999). To ensure inter-rater reliability, the first two authors read independently each transcript to identify common themes. This was done midway through the research and again when interviews were completed. By the midpoint of the study, it was clear that the coding scheme should include offender concepts of self and others, and that the crackhead distinction would be an important subcomponent of the latter. At that point, an intentional decision was made to elicit more information on offenders' self-conceptions and specific identities. Of course, this allowed for greater elaboration by offenders when more questions on these topics were asked in the latter half of the study, but the coding scheme developed at the midpoint remained throughout the duration of the study. We should note that there were other self-concepts that were salient to offenders. For example, it was important for many to make distinctions between themselves and more violent offenders, whom they characterized as monstrous brutes or erratic madmen. The passages of interviews where offenders talk about themselves or others or spoke directly to the meanings of identities form the bulk of the talk included in what follows.

When interviewing inmates it is important to ensure that they are neither coerced into participating nor exposed to any undue harm by relaying information about crimes for which they have not been convicted. The potential exists that they may feel coerced into participating from either excessive prodding from staff or from the mistaken belief that they will accrue legal benefits (e.g., parole considerations). As Richard Wright and Scott Decker (1997) point out: "No matter how much inmates are assured otherwise, many will continue to believe what they say to researchers will get back to the authorities and influence their chances for early release" (p. 4). To address the possibility of coercion and harm we assured them of confidentiality and that we could not help their position in the prison or their case for release in

any way. We warned offenders not to reveal information so specific that it could help a prosecutor, which alleviated many fears about our motives as interviewers. In addition, we guaranteed that we would take all possible measures to keep their responses private. If prison staff did come into the room, which happened only a few times, we stopped asking questions until they exited. Additionally, before entering the prison we had promises from prison administrators that they would not ask for any information elicited during the interviews. As a way to assess whether they were coerced, we asked the offenders why they agreed to be interviewed. The reasons they gave—a chance to talk to new people, to help out, and to do something consistent with being on the right track—suggested that they were neither coerced nor reluctant to discuss their current and past lives (Copes and Hochstetler 2006).

One could argue that the accounts given by these self-proclaimed hustlers were designed to present positive images solely for us and that these presentations may differ from those given on the streets (Presser 2004). At times, common sense led us to be skeptical of some details in their accounts and we expect the reader may be as well. Some degree of dishonesty is expected and assumed (Jacobs and Wright 2006). Like others, we think that distorted facts and stories impart meaning, however. Exaggerations and fictions may reveal as much about people as “facts,” especially when they are discussing their self-conceptions in relation to others. We believe, however, that offenders’ talk gives us insight into more than just the situational construction of a personal “hustler” identity within the context of the interview. Their talk also represents some of the processes through which they construct meaningful social identities on the street. In what follows we describe the process through which individuals who self-identified as capable hustlers established boundaries between themselves and a social type that they perceived to epitomize those who are weak and unworthy of respect.

Semantic Boundaries of the Hustler Identity

To understand offenders’ self-identifications as hustlers we examined talk about who they refused to be. While they were not conventional hardworking citizens, this needed little consideration or attention as it was so far-fetched. After even short conversations or interactions with these men, few would mistake them for the ostensibly square and boring but legally employed citizens in their communities. Consequently, they made little effort to articulate this apparent division. The strongest and most adamant contrast they made was with crackheads.

Many offenders we interviewed reported using, though most denied being controlled by the substance. Despite their persistent use of crack, they insisted they could maintain their “style.” Others, they claimed, were not capable of handling their addictions. Those who failed to manage their drug use (i.e., crackheads) became an important symbol and antihero. Assignment to that category could be stylistically avoided despite heavy drug use. Almost all offenders rejected their membership in the crackhead category and those few who admitted that they shared much in common with crackheads described how the stereotypical identity resulted in an inadequate understanding of their position in the context of the local drug market. Some purported hustlers interviewed here found it humorous that someone might see them as a crackhead, but understood the confusion over appropriate labels among those with little or no direct knowledge of street life and were more than willing to correct it. Yet if someone from the street inferred that they were crackheads the response would not be so jovial. As Jarret stated, “That’s an insult. You insulted my character. I’m gonna deal with you, you know.”²

2. Names provided are aliases.

Hustlers took special care to establish boundaries between themselves and crackheads in their neighborhoods, especially during face-to-face interactions. Their narratives represent, therefore, the maintenance of social distance from those they defined as crackheads to audiences on the street, including peers, potential drug customers, and the crackheads themselves. The offenders we interviewed constructed their hustler identities along five semantic boundaries: being clean, having things, being cool, being criminally able, and having heart.

Being Clean

Hustlers viewed themselves as being cleaner than crackheads, both morally and hygienically. This perspective was linked to the credit given to unusual cleanliness in dress and appearance among those who wish to “create a look of cool transcendence” (Wright and Decker 1997:40; see also Katz 1988). Cleanliness has long been a noteworthy feature of criminal underworlds and of street life in general, most likely deriving from the importance of demonstrating that one has it together despite, or because of, criminal activity (Katz 1988). Indeed, clean is a word that offenders were fond of using in describing their style of dress and ostentatious displays. Shawn, a self-defined hustler, emphasized what he spent his money on: “I love to dress clean, you know. Clothes!” By contrast, crackheads were viewed as incapable of cleanliness—unkempt and dirty in every sense of the word. When asked to describe the defining characteristics of someone who had succumbed to drugs, Charles offered the following: “That’s somebody who is strung out and looks bad. Don’t keep they self up. Don’t do nothing with they self.” Whereas respectable street hustlers represented themselves with the latest fashions, they perceived crackheads as either oblivious to these fashion trends or as simply incapable of following them.

Crackheads disgust conventional citizens and hustlers alike and contact with them taints. Several offenders recalled that crackheads were so physically filthy as to be almost untouchables in the street criminals’ social hierarchy. The fact that the drug had taken them was too obvious. As Chantey explained: “It’s like they living zombies or something.” Jarrett echoed this sentiment: “Somebody come up to you with their lips all white and shaking. ‘Let me suck your . . .’ ‘Let me get this hit.’ Yeah, that’s at the bottom.” Shawn explained that the rules among his friends, for whom few other boundaries were inflexible, were fairly clear even when crackheads were otherwise attractive as sexual partners:

You don’t want to mess with them [sexually]. Like very few of the guys that I hang with will knock them down a cut. No. Uh-uh, that is a no no! I mean cluckers [crack addicts] do some wild things for their crack and you might catch a bad disease messing with them.

Three offenders mentioned that, to them, crack itself was dirty and crack use was not as respectable and clean a habit as heroin, but most made no such distinction. Generally, in the street offenders’ view the crackhead’s taint is not acquired directly from heavy drug-use or choice of drug, but through some stylistic reflections of heavy use or a particular set of apparent symptoms of severe addiction. Other distinctions interviewees made were rooted in the ability to secure a place to sleep, shower, and perform other hygienic behaviors, as well as the symbols of elevated street tastes.

Having Things

Fashion, consumption, and material display are often markers of identity membership. The “ostentatious enjoyment and display of luxury items” is vital to understanding street life and perhaps even the motivation to steal (Shover and Honaker 1992:283; see also Shover 1996; Wright and Decker 1994, 1997). In many of the hustlers’ portrayals, one could not be a crackhead and have things, or more precisely one could not be a crackhead and successfully accumulate material goods. It seems that while doctors and lawyers on their way down feasibly

can be crackheads, “successful” street criminals cannot. It is the ability to demonstrate appropriate tastes and to acquire and provide material goods at any given moment that separated hustlers from crackheads. Philip’s self-description exemplified this idea:

I never considered myself a junkie until I come to jail. I never was staring at walls and stuff like that. I always sold drugs so I always had money. I was never broke . . . I got money. I got nice clothes. I got a roof over my head. I go do this and that when I want.

Whatever the current street terminology—flossing, stunting, flashing, or shining—all of these professed hustlers claimed to enjoy the expensive styles and tastes of the successful street criminal. These tastes were exhibited in the right style of car, clothing, weapons, phones, jewelry, and other fashionable accoutrements associated with street life. Charles described why he and his partners were not true crackheads despite their drug-use:

We weren’t like no regular dope fiends though. You catch us with like five hundred dollars worth of clothes riding around in stolen luxury vehicles, man. [We had] beaucoup money . . . You gotta be presentable. You gotta come with some valued gifts . . . If you going after all this money to get this dope, believe one thing, you done got the money to keep yourself up too.

For Charles it was the availability of resources and material goods that separated him from other drug addicts. Being a good provider is part of what it means to be a man and a hustler and through proper hustling, Charles and others like him avoided the crackhead label because they were sufficient providers for themselves and those around them (Copes and Hochstetler 2003; Kersten 1996).

When street offenders like Charles and Philip spoke of “having things,” generally they referred to having the resources necessary to put on appropriate displays of criminal success, although they also needed a place to live, transportation, and other things that almost everyone wants. Material displays showed others that they were *not* facing tough times and were *not* becoming desperate. The hustler might have empty pockets, but he was sure that he could still provide adequately for his needs.

Another resource was the social connections that benefitted them in criminal pursuits. Most respondents liked to think of themselves in the center of a criminal network where there was some camaraderie or mutual respect based on one’s character. Some interviewees reported social relationships that provided resources and respectful deference. Most had an abstract understanding that nothing was dependable in the hustling life. Nevertheless, a modicum of street success and display of success meant that other hustlers included them in crimes and shared with them. Also, drug customers, friends, family, or lovers would contribute to their needs and tastes, supporting their lifestyles and their leisure interests.

I wasn’t stealing from my mom . . . I didn’t have to do none of that. I had money. I had friends. I had a girlfriend. She works two jobs and got a nice Mustang; a brand new car. I got a place to stay; a house. So, I bring her to work and she gives me money to go get my dope. Save her a bag or two. I use her car and her cell phone all day to run drugs . . . So I didn’t most of the time have to pay for my own dope. She was paying for my own habit. I just save all of my money. [Philip]

Interviewees tended to believe that crackheads, unlike hustlers, are incapable of maintaining possessions for a reasonable amount of time. Hustlers, like Thomas, believed and furthered the stereotype that “[crackheads] sell everything; sell everything in they house.” When asked if he feared retaliation from a crackhead that he robbed, John responded, “If he ever had a gun, he done sold it by now,” reflecting the extent to which crack addicts could not maintain possessions. Determining whether it was their addiction or some underlying flaw that forced crackheads to sell or trade away belongings was not important. The perception that crackheads possessed significantly less than hustlers and were viewed as beyond the position where they could turn things around was reason enough to categorize them accordingly. For hustlers, material well-being could be acquired and enhanced despite occasional

crises, slips, or setbacks if they only managed to make the right situational moves and fortune shone. The crackhead's trajectory was predictably and steadily downward. Temporary poverty was something the hustler might have to endure, but complete material failure was a problem to which only a crackhead was susceptible.

Being Cool

Hustlers appreciated a cool, detached persona, probably because they associated this with the ability to roll with punches, stay calm, and be ruthlessly cold when required. According to Katz (1988): "to be cool is to view the immediate social situation as ontologically inferior, nontranscendent, and too mundane to compel one's attention" (p. 97). This image is far from the erratic, paranoid, fast, and sketchy mannerisms of the ideal-typical crackhead. On the streets, crackhead mannerisms imply all of the wrong things about them. Although a great many of the valued mannerisms associated with respectable street styles might be viewed as those of the slightly numbed or sedated, no one emulates the disjointed walk or awkward mannerisms of the stereotypical crack addict except in jest. Shawn's description of a "clucker" certainly negated any sense of coolness:

A clucker is one who do drugs. The reason that we call them cluckers is when they don't have the crack they be clucking. They be like how a chicken will do because they nervous so we call them cluckers, or chews because they be chewing on their lips.

As shown in this pitiless description, it is nearly impossible to be seen as cool when one is in such a nervous affective state or when being compared with the least flattering features of barnyard poultry.

Another element of being cool that emerged was remaining calm in the face of imminent danger. Katz (1988) argues that putting oneself in perceivably uncontrollable and chaotic situations and coming out unharmed is one of the sensual attractions that lure people into committing robbery. Confronting adversity with unflinching resolve and handling the potential for chaos without being flustered is admired. According to our interviewees, the dope corner gave the hustler plentiful opportunities to show their mettle, but crackheads seldom displayed any sense of will of character. According to Jason: "See the ones that was on drugs, the drugs do something to them. They be spooked. They be scared." Those we spoke with made a point to emphasize that they could handle themselves with fearlessness and bravado no matter what situations they encountered. Unlike crackheads, they were seldom spooked, and if they were, it would be unperceivable.

Being Criminally Able

None of our interviewees talked about their moneymaking endeavors in the rational and calculable ways that approximate the deliberations and cost/benefit analyses that accompany corporate careers. Many did acknowledge, however, that they had a specialist's knowledge—a larceny sense—of how to navigate the drug and crime underworld and make something of the lifestyle that accompanied it (Nee and Meenaghan 2006; Sutherland 1937; Wright, Logie, and Decker 1995). The most derisive condemnations of crackheads centered on the theme that they had lost so much mental capacity and control of themselves that they could barely survive (let alone prosper) on the streets. When they were not begging others for drugs and money or searching the ground desperately for possibly dropped drugs, they relegated themselves to petty thefts and demeaning hustles. As Jarrett explained:

See people like us, we go big. Crackheads will go do what they gotta do like steal lawnmowers and shit like that. Might do that shit every day. I might go pull off an act everyday too . . . Whatever we do it's gonna be worth something, you dig?

On the streets and in prison, the status and prestige given to people based on the types of crimes they commit remains remarkably unchanged. There is little doubt that those seeking status and respect are aware of these distinctions or that they think that crimes of hardmen and hustlers can reflect positively on their character and repute. Michael recounted his rise from being a generally respected but ordinary sneak thief into a recognized neighborhood heavy:

[Carjackings] helped my reputation. People knew—“you’re jacking now.” [They] say, “You went from stealing cars to jacking . . . ah man!” All it takes is one person who tell a friend, who tell a friend you doing such and such. “Yeah, that Michael runnin’ around”; and everybody want to be with you ‘cause they know what you do on the street. They know how you done made out . . . You get more respect like that. Really, one time I was nothing man, but I done got my reputation.

When addicts did not act like respectable hustlers, others assumed their inability was due to character flaws, signifying them as unworthy of respect as well as being easy marks. Crack addicts carried out crimes and hustles that had low payoff and that were seen to be subservient. This portrayal of crackheads often emerged during discussion of “rock rentals”—the practice of renting out one’s vehicle in exchange for a small amount of crack—and the foolishness of the addicts engaging in these transactions (Copes, Forsyth, and Brunson 2007).

They should know one thing. I am going to take their shit [car] and sell it. But, they be stupid enough to give it to me. You wanted that to happen, you know what I am saying. I ain’t the one tweaking on rocks. You want something, I want something . . . See they gotta watch out for people like me. [Michael]

Interview participants recognized that crack addicts engaged in rock rentals in an attempt to avoid some of the stigmatizing behavior associated with being a crackhead. However, purported hustlers did not accept this interpretation. Instead, they saw it as a desperate attempt by an addict and as proof of crackheads’ inability to succeed.

If crackheads were judged harshly for their ineptitude, they are even more resolutely condemned for passively accepting their status in the street due to fear of confrontation.³ Open air drug dealing, for them, is out of the question for all the obvious reasons. Likewise, their habit of committing crimes so petty that they could not possibly provide meaningful thrill or bragging rights reinforced our interviewees’ beliefs that crackheads are not to be taken seriously. In this idealized distinction, real hustlers did what they wanted, but crackheads accepted their dismal fate, demeaned themselves, and scavenged scraps. The state of crack addicts and their inability to provide for themselves was perhaps best described by Brennon:

A crackhead . . . ain’t got a ride. They ain’t got a house to live in. [They] ain’t got no food to eat. You know I always had all that. A crackhead goes and suck dick for rock—now you know I ain’t about all that . . . I’d rob, that was my thing . . . Why you go and try to hustle a person at a gas station for a dollar or fifty cent to get a rock?

3. Crack users do engage in robberies and will target drug dealers (Jacobs 1999, 2000). And while the men we spoke with did recognize that they were prone to victimization, they did not think it likely that their victimizers would be “crackheads,” but rather other hustlers. On this matter and others, we were surprised at how firm the division was between crackheads and hustlers, and there is no way of knowing if offenders simply forget about exceptions to the rules and those who fall somewhere in the middle range on the boundaries. The point is not to describe a realistic division, only the boundaries constructed in interviews. Surely, pride means that no self-professed hustler can admit being robbed by a crackhead easily. Such an event is rendered highly implausible due to the limited but great freedom to assign labels in the streets and the unrestricted freedom in the interview. As Jason, who did worry over robbery, remarked about crackheads: “I didn’t fear none of them.”

Having Heart

As hustlers saw it, crackheads not only lacked the ability to commit noteworthy crimes, they also lacked the heart required to show courage when confronted. Hustlers knew that they inhabited a dangerous world but were confident that they would do relatively well in protecting themselves from victimization and demeaning nuisances (this went beyond criminal capability for acquisitive and respectable offenses). Self-identifying hustlers were confident that they would not be degraded by street-corner peers or rivals more than once. When asked why he did not concern himself with possibly being scammed by a crackhead, Thomas replied: "Reputation of what we could do to him." For Thomas, and others like him, vigilantly protecting one's reputation kept many would-be scammers, con men, and robbers at bay (Jacobs, Topalli, and Wright 2000).

Interviewees reluctantly admitted that when it came to protecting themselves from danger, their options were constrained by background and previous choices, but they pointed out that crackheads had no options at all. Failure in both the legitimate and criminal world left the crackhead vulnerable in every sense of the word. Crackheads were thought to lack the courage, physical capacity, and social connections necessary to intimidate others and protect themselves in the streets. They either could not or were unwilling to take up for themselves, and any meaningful alliances to help them do so were beyond their grasp. Even if they consumed crack, the individuals we spoke with made it clear they were different from "real" crackheads because they (as hustlers) were capable and in some instances eager to violently stand up for themselves. Derrick explained why he could always take from a crackhead: "They know the type of person that I am. They know that if they come mess with me it's gonna be trouble." Jason, an experienced carjacker, best explained the difference between crackhead behavior and his own:

See the ones that was on drugs you basically can do anything to them. They ain't about no trouble. The drugs done took their heart and courage and just make them feel like they ain't even nothin, so they don't even try to fight or nothin.

Thomas echoed this sentiment, but added that unwillingness to defend oneself also meant that no one else would or should come to their aid because the "weak get what they deserve":

They don't want no trouble. He's a clucker, man. You can beat the piss out of a clucker any time you feel like it. Hate them, you understand me? I wouldn't give a can of shit . . . I'd piss on a clucker right now.

Crackheads were thought to lack the mental fortitude to enact revenge, which meant they were unworthy of the aid of others. Indeed, it was too late to turn this state of affairs around. Once marked as this sort of street failure, significant challenges to those higher in status would surely be met with severe retaliation. Short of disappearing from the street scene or committing murder, there were few alternatives to continued degradation for crackheads, as no hustler could tolerate an affront from them that went beyond playful street banter.

The above references to prototypical hustler and crackhead behaviors highlight the boundaries that would-be hustlers constructed. Such boundary constructions consisted on the one hand of hustlers emphasizing the negative characteristics of crackheads, while on the other hand extolling their own accomplishments and importance as hustlers. Interviewees used these idealized descriptions as a form of symbolic mobilization to more neatly distinguish and distance themselves from the maligned category. For example, Gerald explained that he could not be a crackhead in his own neighborhood because he would not be treated as one. "I'm still a homeboy, I'm just a user." In his view, the slight respect garnered by being a homeboy made assigning him to the category crackhead difficult even though he admitted sharing more attributes with the crackhead class than did most of our other respondents.

Membership in the crackhead category was rejected using semantic strategies not unlike those described by Derek Edwards (1997). The potential member compares himself to a prototypical member on a list of category attributes and reasons out an explanation, of varying complexity, for how he is not one of “them” (see also Widdicombe 1998).

Disrespectful Interaction

The distance interviewees’ narratives emphasized between themselves and crackheads was not only maintained through verbal constructions but also enacted symbolically in face-to-face interactions. One way social boundaries could be maintained was by simply avoiding any but the most detached and short-lived interaction with those they defined as crackheads. To ensure that others did not inaccurately view them as crackheads, many of those with whom we spoke limited friendly exchanges and conversation with crackheads beyond what was necessary. Interactions and transactions were kept short, depersonalized, and business oriented. The point was illustrated by a diversity of comments about keeping social distance from the crackhead and maintaining the status division in dealer/customer relationship. Describing his interactions with addicts to whom he sold crack, Jason said, “Well, I never had no relationship with them, you know, except for dealings with the dope.” Michael echoed this sentiment: “[Crackheads] are out in the hood so you know who they are. I knew them, but they weren’t friends. They just people I conversate with, if you know what I’m saying.”

The social world of the open-air drug market requires and contains plentiful customers. Those addicted to crack must interact with drug dealers and others who may look down on them. Many crack addicts live in very confined social and geographic worlds and proximate to other street offenders, but manage their everyday interactions with little conflict. However, due to hustlers’ desires to maintain an obdurate boundary between themselves and crackheads, interactions had the potential to be degrading dramatizations of boundaries.

Crackheads fulfilled simple, and sometimes important, functions to hustlers on the street by providing cheap labor for routine, demeaning, or unchallenging tasks and services. Because the derided addict would do most anything, tasks described were wide-ranging. Typically, they required no assumption on the part of the contractor that the crackhead was reliable or criminally capable, simply that they were willing. In describing the nature of his prolonged interactions with those he considered crackheads, Shawn pointed out that crackheads provided services because of who he and his friend were (i.e., “real” hustlers).

We might hide in their house, lay low for a couple of days. We ain’t got to come out. Send them to run errands. You get whatever you need, bam! You can chill right there, especially if you are like all of us. I mean we jack cars and run to Houston and drop them off and we get a clucker that will come up and bring us back for two twenty dollar rocks. He’ll come up there and break the speed limit coming up for that, you know.

Others denied “clowning” or using crackheads but relayed thoughts as to why others treated crack addicts so poorly:

They use [crackheads] to go get sound systems, or to wash their cars. You know what I’m saying, you want to be a big baller standing out there with a bunch of jewelry on and watch them boys wash your car, wash and wax their car. Makes them look good; like they the big man around there. [Brennon]

Some hustlers frequently established boundaries through deliberate interactions that were one-sided, exploitative, and demeaning to others. We interpret these interactions as mechanisms that put crackheads in their “rightful” place in the street hierarchy—the bottom. These stories suggest that demonstrating power was important for establishing the hustler’s status at the top of the street culture hierarchy and that this could be done easily, almost without risk, against those at the bottom. Philip described one such interaction: “[We] made

one chick one time give a Rottweiler head . . . Man we used to call her Rottweiler from then on too." Shawn related an interaction he witnessed:

[They] made a couple of them [crackheads] stick their hand up in an ant pile—them red ants. They'd stir 'em up and stick their hand up in there and hold it down for so many minutes . . . They be seated there man and them ants be tearing them up.

Chantey reported a situation where he exhibited little compassion for the drug user:

We was up in the projects and everything . . . They got a rock head to climb a building, you know what I'm saying. Tell him if he jump off the building they'll give him ten rocks—his stupid ass jumped off of it and broke both ankles.

Despite the humiliation and physical pain caused to the drug users, Philip, Shawn and Chantey relayed these stories not out of concern for the crackheads but to prove that hustlers like themselves would not be subject to such degradation because of their street sense and command over those of lower social status.

Even offenders who saw such degradation as senseless clowning, or as behavior engaged in by insecure men still striving to gain their place in the street culture hierarchy, reported on similar interactions in ways that made clear the message that their social world required and emphasized certain attributes. Pragmatically, it is in these dramatizations that the axiom "some have what it takes and some do not" is obtained. Brennon recalled an instance of playing with a crackhead:

He was like out on the front where they sell all the dope and I was out there too. He come passing by and all them boys was laughin at him. I say, "Watch this. Watch what I do to this dude." And, I grabbed a tire out of my trunk and he come right there and I told him, I said, "look I'll give you twenty dollar stone if you let me hit you hard as I can across your ass." I say, "bend over and touch your ankles." He bend over and I hit him hard as I could with that tire. He did a whole flip. When he stood up, he wanted his rock. [I did it] just to make them boys laugh, to show them how much a crackhead he really is.

His account began by explaining that both men were hanging out on a crack corner where drugs are sold. Brennon then illustrated how he was sufficiently respected by the street corner dealers to afford security and safety, in contrast to the crackhead. In addition, he shows that he is sufficiently well positioned to dispose of a twenty-dollar piece of cocaine on a lark. Brennan concludes by noting that the message he intended to send was confirmed successfully in interaction. From the hustler's perspective, such interactions provide distraction from the business and long hours that many offenders spend sitting or standing on bleak street corners. They also function to exaggerate the hustler's status by setting up crackheads as a polar opposite and of being devoid of value and status. The following example suggests how common such practices were.

I'll give him some crumb if he will do something stupid. [I said] "Go to the back of that truck and take that man on. He got a refrigerator back there. Bet you won't take that refrigerator back there." [He asked] "What you gonna give?" [And I said] "I'll give you a twenty." He go back there to take the man's refrigerator and then I tell the man, "Somebody trying to steal your refrigerator." The refrigerator man come out and beat him up. Be out there trippin' out laughing. Because they will do anything. Go down and trip off them all day. [John]

To some degree, to be seen as anything other than posturing, hustler identities must be successfully enacted, and in the social world herein, empty posturing as a hustler is dangerous. When there is a supposed hierarchical arrangement where some are valued and others devalued, individuals can use enactments that draw on divisions to establish their place, and to sustain boundaries they perceive as beneficial. Exploitive interactions solidify the boundaries between the "legitimate" hustlers and the "weak" crackheads.

Conclusions

Through interaction, individuals actively construct boundaries and identities that separate them from others who they view as having lower status. Just as social elites differentiate themselves from members of the underclass despite being members of the same society, so too do hustlers differentiate themselves from others on the streets. In general terms, the study of social identity provides insight into the pragmatic links among structural conditions and individuals’ behaviors. Identities are not merely situational constructs. Rather, through their embeddedness in everyday interaction they accrete into culturally identifiable categories that become useful as markers of pride or disgrace. Identities such as the hustler and the crackhead are arbitrary (rather than essential) constructs that emerge from a finite range of going concerns that frame interactions. Those who engage in illegitimate drug economies on the street construct types to show status in the business and surrounding social structure.

The way one’s self is imagined, portrayed, and accepted by others, and the value she or he and others assign these conveyances, are important aspects for the study of social behavior. In his work on behavior in public places, Erving Goffman (1963) notes that individuals “give off” information about themselves simply by being present in a situation. On the street, those engaged in the drug economy give off a certain amount of information about themselves through their relation to that economy. Interviewees expressed some understanding that the label crackhead might be a tempting way for outsiders to sum up their lives as few seemed particularly shocked at mention of it in the context of interviews. Further, they were behind bars during the interview and were well aware of the stigmatized identities likely placed upon them by outsiders. While not particularly interested in denying or neutralizing their criminal exploits (Topalli 2005, 2006), including their use of illegal drugs such as crack cocaine, the men were active in constructing a clear boundary between themselves and the average drug users with whom they shared the street. The self-described hustlers in our research succeeded, at least in their own minds, in establishing an identity whose status is at the top of the crack economy rather than at the bottom. To the extent their reported behaviors are accurate, that identity must carry significant weight on the street as well.

Given that they are regularly in the company of stigmatized members of the “street society,” hustlers must remain constantly vigilant to avoid or minimize having low-status labels such as crackhead attached to them. This is true not only because they wish to maintain a positive self-concept, but because their financial future is at stake. Studying how street offenders construct a sense of self is therefore sociologically important inasmuch as these identities are directly linked to the interaction order (Goffman 1983) and to the obligations and expectations attached to social identities. For offenders proximate to, or involved in, the crack economy but who do not use crack, constructing a hustler identity is a convenient explanation for their abstinence. It comes with the reward of being confident in their place at the top of this underworld. Drawing on the power of societal condemnations of the crackhead in combination with the attributes defined as street success, hustling can be a comfortable identity in the face of adversity and the disapproval of polite society. Sustaining the identity also provides a coherent strategy for imagined success and perhaps helps avoid the temptation to imbibe in self-destructive habits (Furst et al. 1999; Jacobs 1999; Williams 1992). It also expresses free will and natural ability. For those who use drugs including crack, the ability to be identified as a hustler due to other attributes aids in managing the stigma associated with their drug use and criminal activities.

Giving off a successfully cultivated hustler identity makes it less likely that those in street life will need to deal with some of the ordinary shakedowns or half-hearted attempts to get them to balk in confrontation or in potential thefts. Our respondents did not believe that their violent reputations would universally protect them, at least not by reducing their overall chances of being accosted by others. They knew well the dangers of their lifestyles, and

that continued participation in crime would likely result in their victimization. A "heavy" reputation does mean, however, that those who have sufficient knowledge and ability to judge such things will not take them lightly or take from them without possibly incurring high costs. All those contemplating such a move will, in the hustler's mind, give due respect by considering the odds of retaliation (Jacobs and Wright 2006). Fostering the hustler identity affords a layer of protection from victimization that crackheads do not possess.

This insight sheds substantive light on the symbolic interactional construction of street-level power relations and inequalities. The men we interviewed constructed an image of the crackhead not only to frame their own sense of self, but more generally to frame the social reality of street life. This social reality is constituted by an ongoing "conversation of gestures" (Mead 1934:179) by which hustlers and crackheads come to define themselves, each other, and their social environment. Understanding how hustlers identify themselves and others thus sheds light on the dialectic ties between social relations and the criminal decision-making process, including target selection.

Assigning people to identity categories provides convenient justifications for choosing victims. Those who are surrounded by and participate in street crime have an increased likelihood of victimization. In attempting to explain this phenomenon some have pointed out that hustlers are ideal candidates for victimization because they are likely to have desirable goods (i.e., cash, drugs, or valued accessories) and they are unlikely to involve police (Jacobs 2000; Wright and Decker 1997). Our study suggests that there may be additional reasons why hustlers choose to rob or victimize other offenders. Part of what it means to be a hustler is the ability to take advantage of others. Confronting those with reputations as hustlers can send a message that respect is deserved. Hustlers seemed to believe that crackheads could not manage such a crime or deal with the repercussions.

Sociologists have long known that offenders justify their crimes by defining certain types of people as acceptable victims (Maruna and Copes 2005; Sykes and Matza 1957). It is remarkably easier to victimize someone when she or he is thought to deserve such treatment. Typically, this deserving status is assigned to those who have personally wronged the offender, but this is not always the case. The crackhead label conveniently places those defined as such into a deserving category for all those reasons previously described. Thus, when preying on crackheads, hustlers can more easily justify how and why they choose their marks. They can victimize without ordinary reservations about taking from the helpless and also can circumvent the subcultural dictates that crime should be done only for financial reasons and when insulted. In this sense, our analysis offers substantive support for other microsociological work on the reproduction of inequality through explicit and implicit processes of boundary maintenance and "othering" (Schwalbe et al. 2000).

In a review of a book about offender self narratives and endorsement of deeper analysis of offenders' assigned meanings, David Gadd (2003) asks of a quoted offender's account: "what depictions of him (a wimp, not a man, a pushover, a failure, or maybe a 'psycho,' 'trash,' an 'idiot?') were ruminating round in his head when he was lying in bed thinking" (p. 321). Gadd implies that offenders choose from a range of alternative selves. Some of these are more stable categories than others. While our analysis only scratches the surface of self and meaning, we show that consciously, culturally, and intuitively persistent street offenders incorporated crackhead into their categorical arrangements for self-definition. This hardens them to the plight of a certain type of addict and affirms the view that acts of violence, ruthlessness, and conspicuous pride in criminal accomplishments are the makings of good criminals. Interactions with and interpretations of crack addicts helped convince offenders that being bad, if done properly, is a worthwhile goal and that hustler identities should be adhered to except in exceptional circumstances (Topalli 2005). In all ranks, unforgiving and harsh condemnations of moral failure alongside the rigid categorizations that typically accompany them can harden the heart and result in destructive and oppressive behaviors.

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