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Posterior Gains and Immediate Pains: Offender Emotions Before, During and After Robberies

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ABSTRACT

When addressing affect, studies of criminal decision making have tended to focus on a limited number of negative emotions such as shame, regret and guilt. Instead of being felt at the time decision of whether or not to commit crime, these emotions actually regard expectations of future emotional states. Positive emotions such as thrill, joy or pride that do operate in the moment of decision making have received far less attention of researchers. The present study aims to contribute to the existing literature by examining both positive and negative emotions and how they operate on criminal choice. Specifically, it examines which emotions operate prior, during and after committing a robbery. The study is unique in its approach as it examines these emotions among a sample of incarcerated street offenders using in-depth interviews. In doing so, the study contributes in an additional important way to the existing literature on emotions in criminal decision making as this literature largely uses scenario-based analyses. The findings shed new light on the role of emotions in street crime.

Introduction

When addressing affect, studies of criminal decision making have tended to focus on a limited number of negatively valenced emotions, such as shame, regret and guilt (e.g., Grasmick & Bursik, 1990; Svensson et al., 2013; Wikström, 2010). As mentioned in this volume’s introduction, these emotions regard anticipated affect: expectations of future emotional states, instead of feelings actually experienced at the time of the decision to engage in crime. Some authors, however, have hinted that positive emotions may also play a role in criminal acts (e.g., Jacobs & Wright, 2010; Katz, 1988; Wright & Decker, 1994, 1997). In the present chapter, we examine both negatively and positively valenced emotions of robbers and address both anticipated and immediate affect. We do so using a multi-method approach that includes both in-depth interviews and survey material among a sample of incarcerated robbers.

Immediate and Anticipated Affect in Criminal Decision Making

Most studies on criminal decision making have largely ignored how immediate affect might influence involvement in illegal activities (Van Gelder, in press). Instead, studies have tended to examine emotions as part of a cognitive calculus in which costs, such as the expected regret or shame following a criminal act, are weighed in order to arrive at a decision (see e.g., Bachman et al., 1992; Bouffard et al., 2000; Cornish & Clarke, 1986; Grasmick & Bursik, 1990; Nagin & Paternoster, 1993; Piquero & Tibbetts, 1996). Another characteristic of these studies is that they have largely been quantitative in nature employing vignette-designs among non-offender samples. For instance, Bachman et al. (1992) demonstrated in one such study among male students that anticipated moral emotions and formal sanctions decreased the likelihood they expected to engage in sexual assaults.
A different strand of literature, which focuses on the criminal lifestyles of actual offenders (instead of non-offender samples), suggests that people involved in a criminal lifestyle may experience their offences and emotions that can go with them differently than non-delinquents (Brezina et al., 2009; Decker et al., 1993; McCarthy & Hagan, 2005; Topalli, 2005; Wright & Decker, 1994). Street offenders have, for example, reported feeling only a limited sense of guilt or shame about the crimes they committed, or not experiencing these emotions at all (Topalli, 2005; Shover & Honaker, 1992; Wright & Decker, 1994, 1997). As Wright and Decker (1994) remarked in their book on burglars: “the important point is that during their offenses [they] could not be constrained by a guilty conscience; they simply did not have one” (p. 135).

Instead this literature on criminal lifestyles has drawn attention to the importance of emotions as they operate in the moment of decision making or, in other words, on immediate affect. In a study on shoplifting, for instance, Cromwell, Parker and Mobley (2003) showed that some of their respondents explained their involvement in crime as triggered by emotions such as thrill. Jacobs and Wright (2010) argued that street offenders described anger as a triggering factor for their crimes, that limited their rationality. Topalli and Wright argue elsewhere in this volume that street offenders tend to be desperate to earn quick money. Emotions such as fear and anger are experienced against the backdrop of such states of desperation (Topalli & Wright, this volume). Previous studies of robbery also found that anger and fear were related to the choice to offend (Indermaur, 1996; Katz, 1988; Paes-Machado & Levenstein, 2004; Novaco & Welsh, 1989).

**Positive and Negative Emotions in Criminal Decision Making**

Apart from focusing primarily on anticipated emotions, quantitative criminal decision making studies tend to focus on the cost side of the equation, in particularly shame and guilt (Grasmick et al., 1993; Grasmick & Bursik, 1990; Grasmick et al., 1993; Grasmick & Kobayashi, 2002), rather than examining the potential benefits of crime (but see for exceptions Nagin & Paternoster, 1993; Piquero & Tibbetts, 1996; Piquero et al., 2011). In addition, scholars have argued that shaming of offenders can prevent future offending (Braithwaite, 1989) and that strengthening moral emotions among offenders might prevent future crime from taking place (Svensson et al., 2013; see also Tibbetts, this volume).

In contrast, offender-based qualitative studies have argued that positively valenced emotions may also influence offender decision making. It has, for example, been argued that happiness and pride can result from “making money” through crime (Feeney, 1986; Wright & Decker, 1997) and that doing something “bad” may lead offenders to experience joy (De Haan & Vos, 2003; Hochstetler, 2002; Rankin & Wells, 1982).

Furthermore, studies of violent crime have shown that crime can be a means for improving one’s self-esteem (Athens, 1989; Gilligan, 2000; Jackson-Jacobs, 2013; Katz, 1988; Luckenbill, 1977), for providing status (Anderson, 1999; Garot, 2009, 2010; Kubrin, 2005; Stewart & Simons, 2010; Wilkinson, 2001), experiencing thrill (De Haan & Vos, 2003; Feeney, 1986; Katz, 1988), and generating a sense of belonging (Lindegaard & Jacques, in press), all of which are related to the experience of positive feelings. For instance, Gilligan (2000) argued that homicide offenders with an extremely violent history engage in violent acts in order to transform
feelings of worthlessness, embarrassment, weakness, powerlessness and failure into feelings of pride and self-respect. Similarly Katz (1988) proposed that offenders transformed humiliating situations to situations of power through the use of violence. Criminal acts might therefore bring about not only emotional costs but also benefits.

**The Present Study**

As reviewed above, different strands of criminological literature have revealed the importance of different types of emotions, both positive and negative, and both anticipated and immediate in nature. Quantitative vignette studies find a relationship between crime commission and negative and anticipated emotions such as shame and guilt. Qualitative studies in contrast find that street offenders experience little to no shame and guilt, and even experience positive affect as a consequence of their delinquent acts. In the present study we intend to integrate and extend the findings from previous studies by examining how robbery offenders describe their emotional experiences in retrospect, looking back at robberies they committed. Instead of examining criminal events as a holistic act, we divide it into three different phases under the assumption that different emotional experiences characterize each phase and that the emotional experience of offenders changes over the course of the event. Specifically, we examine what type of emotions the offenders experienced just before they committed their robberies, while they were in the process of committing them, and right after their completion. This approach helps to distinguish between a general emotional experience related to robbery and the more specific experiences during the course of events.

We use a mixed-methods approach drawing on semi-structured interviews with incarcerated males in the Netherlands who described robberies they had committed prior to the interview. Our specific focus is on what positive and negative emotions robbery offenders experience before, during and after they committed a robbery. In the discussion we reflect on the extent to which the emotions qualify as either immediate or anticipated affect. Before turning to our results, we will now describe how we approached offenders and how we conducted and analyzed the descriptions of their emotional experiences.

**Methods**

The present investigation forms part of a larger study of situational factors of robberies in the Netherlands. The robbery offenders interviewed (N=76) for the present chapter were all male and incarcerated in a juvenile or adult prison. Altogether the 76 respondents reported on 155 committed robberies. Most respondents were minors and young adults. Before being incarcerated, 29 of the respondents were attending school; 21 held a legal job and did not attend school; and 26 neither had a legal job nor attended school. Most of the respondents who attended school were enrolled at the lowest level of secondary education. Those who were employed typically worked in lower-level service jobs such as in supermarkets, clothing shops, or in pizza delivery. Fifteen of the respondents were born in the Netherlands and had parents that were also Dutch-born (“autochtoon”); 61 of the respondents had one (8) or both (53) parents born outside the Netherlands (“allochtoon”). Forty percent of the
respondents had committed more than six robberies in the five years prior to incarceration; 10 percent had committed 3-5 robberies; and 24 percent had committed 1-2 robberies (2 percent unknown). About one-third of the reported robberies regarded shops; one-third regarded private houses (half of them from other criminals); and one-third regarded street robberies.

**Interviews**

Inmates were approached in person by the first author and asked if they were willing to participate in a study about their experiences with committing robberies. In this first encounter, they were informed about the research project, the financial compensation for participation (€30), and their right to withdraw at any point during the study. Of all offenders approached, 60 percent agreed to participate in the study.\(^1\)

Interviews were held between November 2011 and June 2012 by the first author. They were conducted one-on-one in a private room inside the prison, lasted between 40 and 150 minutes, were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The first set of questions focused on the background of the respondent and his amount of experience with robberies, which was defined as theft with the use of violence. The interview then turned to questions about specific robbery situations. We asked respondents to focus on the first and second most recent robbery they had committed as we assumed that recollection of emotional experiences during more recent events would be less distorted compared to temporally more remote ones. When they had identified the most recent robberies, the specific crime location and time were written down in order for the respondent and interviewer to be able to focus on the specific situation. Each robbery event was described and discussed first through open and later closed questions about what happened before, during and after the robbery. ‘Before’ the robbery was defined as the one-hour period leading up to the robbery; ‘during’ the robbery was the period in which the robber had contact with the victim; and ‘after’ the robbery was between completion of the robbery and one hour thereafter.

**Analysis**

Our analysis is based on both open and closed questions about emotions. The closed questions measured three types of negative emotions: anger, fear and shame in the entire sample of 76 respondents reporting on a total of 155 robbery situations. The open questions inquired how a random subsample of 30 respondents explained in their own words how they experienced committing their robberies (a total of 59).\(^2\) With the closed questions, respondents were structurally asked to rate the extent to which they experienced anger, fear and shame on a three point scale (not at all, just a bit, very much) in each phase of the robbery event (before, during and after). As respondents tended not to distinguish between ‘just a bit’ and ‘very much’, we later dichotomized their answers into ‘not at all’ versus ‘just a bit and very much’.

With the open questions, respondents were asked to describe their emotional experiences during each phase of the robbery without inquiring about specific emotions. In the analysis of these open descriptions we applied the eleven categories of affective states suggested by Smith and Ellsworth (1985) as a coding scheme: happiness
and pride; interest and hope; challenge; surprise; boredom; shame and guilt; disgust; anger and contempt; frustration; sadness; and fear. Smith and Ellsworth (1985) developed this typology based on an analysis of how people described their emotional states in real life situations. They differentiated these experiences along six cognitive appraisal dimensions (see also Introduction chapter): pleasantness; effort; certainty; attention to activity; self-versus-other responsibility/control; and situational versus human control. We found these dimensions useful as a coding scheme for the open descriptions because they did not limit the analysis to semantic categories of emotions but acknowledged that respondents might experience a certain emotion without necessarily using the semantic word commonly applied for this emotion.

Once descriptions had been categorized according to Smith and Ellsworth’s (1985) typology, we counted the extent to which each emotion applied to the period before, during, and after the robberies. Eventually, five of the 11 emotions defined by Smith and Ellsworth proved applicable. They are summarized in Table 1 and can be described as follows: 1) Happiness: an extremely pleasant state involving little effort, a high level of certainty about the situation, and a strong desire to pay attention. Happiness is associated with a sense of personal control and responsibility. 2) Challenge: less pleasant than the other positive emotions, and involves an extremely high level of anticipated effort. People experiencing challenge describe feeling fairly certain about the situation and have confidence about their ability to reach a desired goal and a strong desire to attend to it in knowledge that reaching it would require a great deal of effort. 3) Shame: an unpleasant state of self-blame requiring a relatively large amount of effort, a moderate certainty about the situation, and a strong desire not to attend to the situation. 4) Anger: an extremely unpleasant state, associated with a considerable amount of anticipated effort, and a fair degree of certainty about the situation. 5) Fear: an extremely unpleasant state, demanding extreme amounts of effort, and maximal uncertainty about the situation. This uncertainty is not accompanied by a strong desire to either attend to or shut out the situation. Fear is associated with whether or not one will be able to escape or avoid an unpleasant situation.

Table 1 Dimensional characteristics for five emotions as described by Smith and Ellsworth (1985)

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<th></th>
<th>Pleasantness</th>
<th>Effort</th>
<th>Certainty</th>
<th>Attention</th>
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<tr>
<td>1) Happiness</td>
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<td>2) Challenge</td>
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<tr>
<td>3) Shame</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td>4) Anger</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
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<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td>5) Fear</td>
<td>-</td>
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In the next stage of coding we focused on 20 robbery situations and inductively developed a coding scheme for the reasons respondents provided for why they experienced particular kinds of emotions. This coding process was open in the sense that we looked for patterns and discontinuities in the reasons respondents provided for their experiences. This scheme gradually became more specific and was subsequently applied to the 56 robbery situations in the subsample. The entire coding process was done by the first and fourth author independently of each other.

**Findings**

The coding of the subsample revealed that the five most frequently described emotions were: happiness; challenge; shame; anger; and fear. The extent to which respondents described a particular emotion varied depending on the phase of the robbery. Through the closed questions we structurally inquired about three of those emotions in the entire sample (i.e., anger, fear and shame). Frequencies for the closed questions are summarized in Figure 1.

Since positive emotions were not included in the closed questions, we base our findings regarding the frequency with which these emotions were experienced on the subsample. These are summarized in Figure 2. Our analysis suggests the following tendencies: Anger plays a role in all phases of the robbery but is mentioned most frequently during the robbery. Challenge is predominantly related to the period before the robbery and decreases during and after it. Fear is the emotion most frequently described in all phases of a robbery, with a slight increase during its execution. Happiness increases slightly from before to during the robbery but is most prominent after the robbery is committed. Shame increases over the course of a robbery and is most prominent after it is committed. However, in the period after the robbery, fear and happiness are more commonly mentioned emotions than shame.

In order to evaluate the extent to which the different types of emotions referred to by respondents can be qualified as immediate or anticipated, we draw on their explanations for why they experienced a particular emotion during a specific phase of the robbery. In the analysis below, we focus on the three most frequently described emotions in the phase before, during, and after the robbery. For each emotion we describe the reasons provided by the respondents for why they experienced these particular emotions. From those reasons the extent to which the emotion can be classified as immediate or anticipated will become clear. Below, for each phase, the most prevalent emotions is discussed first, followed by the second- and third-most prevalent emotion.
**Emotions Before the Robbery**

**Fear**

Fear was described as an emotion related to the prospects of a non-cooperating victim; uncertainty about whether the victims could be criminals; the risk of being caught by the police; and a lack of previous experience with doing the particular type of robbery. For example, a 23-year old respondent who had never had a legal job in his life but was able to earn a decent income by robbing other criminals. He described this as dangerous because such victims tended to possess guns and were not afraid to use them:

I: and what are you…because it must be because you somehow worry about something? 50: you go do crime, you are going to do, you know, you go steal, you go rob someone. It is already for this, you know, it is dangerous, of course it’s dangerous

I: and it’s dangerous because they can rob you or shoot you? Or is it dangerous because you can get picked up by the police? What are you afraid of?

50: no, I don’t think about police, maybe somebody…I don’t know, it’s just haha, you have always, always you know, [a] chance that something goes wrong, maybe they put you… You know, they do drugs, they don’t give a fuck, they’ll shoot you, and that’s it.

**Challenge**

During this phase, challenge was usually described as not yet experienced but expected, i.e., anticipated, once the robbery would take place; in a few cases it was caused by drug use. The anticipation of challenge was explained as related to the prospects of being able to control the situation and with having extensive prior experience with committing robberies. For instance, a 21-year old respondent who had committed a variety of ‘successful’ robberies on gold smiths before getting caught explained anticipating challenge because he felt confident in himself and knew what he was doing:

60: I am just really confident in myself then but that is because I know what I am capable of doing. Let me put it this way: I know what I am able to do, I know what I have to do in some situations. You know, if something goes wrong for me, I do not get stressed immediately. Some people just… they just panic. They do not know what to do and then they make mistakes. You have to work out everything in such a way that you know exactly ‘this and that has to happen, then this and that has to happen. If that person does that then I have to do this. If that person does not cooperate, then I have to do this.’ You need to know exactly…

A feeling of control resulted from reflecting on one’s own capabilities and having thought through different scenarios for what might happen over the course of the robbery. According to the respondent quoted above, this was an important reason for why he anticipated positive emotions.
Asked about whether he anticipated experiencing shame after the robbery, another participant said:

65: yeah, if I want to...how do I, let me find the right word...yeah, I can say: “you know, I feel ashamed”, but come on, when I trouble you, you know what you do, why you feel... (?) what if you make a bad decision... you cannot think [...] All right, if somebody die accidentally, or something bad happened... then you can feel sorry, but when I come trouble you, I know what I’m doing.

The respondent quoted above was 36-year old and earned a living by being hired to do high profile robberies in different countries, which were planned in detail. In his opinion potential claims about being ashamed were just attempts to come across as a nice person. In reality, he conjectures, one is aware of his choices and anticipates positive outcomes, not negative ones.

Anger

The reasons respondents provided for why they were angry prior to committing a robbery indicated that anger was an emotion mainly related to conflicts prior to the robbery. However, in half of the cases the robbery was committed against people unrelated to the anger evoking conflict and respondents described the robbery as a means for releasing tension caused by their anger. For instance, a 18-year old respondent explained that his girlfriend had broken up with him and he tried to dispel his anger towards her by robbing a restaurant.

In the other half of the cases the robbery was committed in retaliation against people who had been involved in the conflict that had triggered their anger. A 20-year old respondent who had committed four robberies explained how in one case he was provoked by youngsters on the street. He had not anticipated doing any robberies that day but because of the provocations he decided to retaliate through robbery:

36: and yeah, it was in the evening, so school was out and yeah. We walked along. Three boys were sitting smoking and being loud in front of a building. And then they started saying something to us. I think they were swearing towards us like: “hey this and that”. And we did not accept that you know what I mean […] When they talked, I stopped and looked them in the eyes and then I knew they spoke to us. They were saying things like 'gay fuckers'. This is it, I thought. They were, they had been drinking, you know. So then we went right towards them and pulled a knife. ”Hey, pockets empty now!” And the other one was being difficult but then my friend of mine grabbed him by the neck and pushed him against the wall[and said] ”Hey, now empty your pockets”

Emotions During the Robbery

Fear

When fear was experienced during the robbery, it was described as caused by the possibility of getting caught by the police; by lack of experience; and by the potential reaction of the victim(s). A 19-year old respondent, for instance, needed money for his annual vacation to Morocco. He therefore decided to rob a supermarket,
despite his total lack of experience with robbery. He described how he tried to escape when the police showed up:

41: Also, the money, I threw away. I just wanted to go home, I was scared, I heard sirens, dogs ... the police shot twice, twice. And I ran, I was scared, I wanted to go home.

An 18-year old respondent who had committed at least fifteen robberies during his criminal career, described being overwhelmed by fear while he was robbing the local supermarket where he did his grocery shopping. As an experienced robber, he would normally use a gun, but in this situation he was particularly desperate and only had a knife, which made him feel insecure and uneasy during the robbery:

47: therefore I was afraid that day when I went with the knife. I was alone, that man had quite a bit of stature, and I only had a knife. So therefore I panicked a bit, [I was] a little anxious, but when I have my gun in my hand, then I just go for it!

Together with two friends, a 17-year old respondent described robbing people in their home after receiving a tip that they kept much valuables in their house. He had previously committed several home, street, and shop robberies without being arrested, and explained that his fear during this particular robbery had to do with not knowing whether the victims would resist:

I: what were you afraid of, what would be the worst that could ...?

37: yes, let’s say, yes, you do not know what, you do not know what type of guy it is, imagine that it is suddenly a kick boxer, or whatever, that you suddenly get beaten up there

I: yes, so you do not know if he is going to offer some kind of resistance?

37: yes, that we did not know, we did have a bit of ... "oh, what is going to happen," yes, I do not know, yes, you do it yourself but you do not know what might happen. Or they suddenly grab, before we get there they grab a knife or something like that, and go on stabbing like crazy. So a bit, you go with fear, but less than with a robbery, a shop robbery.

**Anger**

Anger was primarily related to the reaction of victim(s) and the relationship with co-offenders. A 23-year old respondent who was convicted for one robbery but had committed more than twenty, predominantly on other criminals, described how he got angry with a victim who refused to cooperate during the robbery of a drug house:

51: Hey, you better tell me where the money is now” [loud and angry voice] – “no, there is no money”. KLANG [hit him], “now you’re going to tell me where the money is”. In his pocket he had a pile of money man, hundreds. But I knew it is not everything, I knew there was more money. I grabbed him, I
put it in my bag. I say: “where is the rest, man?” – “there is no rest, man, you know who I am?!”. So he stands up, I say: “mister”, I also stand up, I say: “sit down, we can talk, sit down”. The guy attacks me, attacks me, and then bang-bang [shoots him], the guy falls on the ground.

An 18-year old respondent who had been a part of an organized crime group since the age of eight and had been involved in a variety of different violent crimes, described becoming angry with his co-offenders during the robbery of a restaurant because they suddenly backed out unexpectedly:

38: you know, but I say, but you know, I look around because I see someone there. So I swear, I looked at those customers and I think, “what the fuck”, I think like,” why is no one there?” So I look back, I see those guys [co-offenders] standing there, completely outside on the other side of the street. And I got so angry, huh, I really looked at them ... they were ... they were really afraid.

The co-offenders were supposed to follow him into the restaurant but decided suddenly to stay outside, which infuriated the respondent. He described that his anger towards the co-offenders made him merciless towards the victims in the restaurant. One victim was hit unconsciousness and he locked the rest up in the freezing room.

**Challenge**

During this phase challenge was described as an emotion caused by drug use and a general feeling of self-confidence. A 29-year old respondent who earned a living with drug dealing but who had also committed more than ten robberies explained that using a gun in the situation of robbing a night shop made him feel confident of himself:

62: No, but look, if you have a weapon in your hand, yeah, I don’t know, but at that point you just feel confident, you know. There are many people who carry a gun and yeah, just shoot around or whatever, but there are also many people who simply have the intention to use it, you know. And yes, if you just have such a weapon ... if you have a gun in your hand, a gun, then you just, no matter what, you feel powerful.

The respondent did the robbery with a friend who was seeking retaliation towards the owner of the night shop. When the owner tried to grab the gun, he was shot and killed.

**Emotions After the Robbery**

**Happiness**

When respondents explained why they felt happy after the robbery, the emotion was described as caused by a general feeling of success, having earned a good income, and being able to ‘party’. The criteria for success slightly varied across respondents, but generally success was defined as obtaining a large amount of money,
without having had to resort to violence, without conflicts with co-offenders, and avoiding apprehension. A 21-year old respondent usually planned his robberies in detail. He described feeling happy after he and two friends robbed a jewellery store following the kidnapping of the store owner for a night to obtain information about the alarm system:

I: 225.000, ok, that was indeed a good business, right?

60: everything together [the plan worked out], that was indeed really good business. It was also one of the, yes, one of the most successful ones for me. So therefore I was proud of it, in a strange way, but a bit proud.

Despite hitting one of the employees unconscious with a gun, the respondent did not consider the robbery as violent because none of the victims, according to his standards, were injured. None of the offenders was arrested for this robbery. Considering these circumstances, he defined the robbery as a success and therefore felt happy and proud afterwards.

A 17-year old respondent, who had committed 25 robberies and had been convicted for three of them, planned his robberies for months. He explained being relieved after he and two co-offenders robbed a cannabis farm for a value of 36,000 Euros:

I: yes, and how did you feel afterwards? 44: happy

I: happy, relieved?

44: yes, because you know that for a month, or two months, you do not have to do anything, for a while no problems

I: and what did you do with the money?

44: yes, just everything, booze, drugs, parties, yes, just living

**Fear**

After the robberies had been committed, fear was described as primarily related to the possibility of being caught by the police; in a few cases it was related to the possibility that people other than the police might find out about the robbery. The respondent who robbed and killed the night shop owner previously described explained that fear of the police was not only present right after he committed the robbery but that it lasted for a long time afterwards:

I: So you could not really relax?
62: no, no, not a single day I was able to relax. It is just constantly watching out for the police to arrive, or when will that or that happen.

I: yeah, were you able to sleep? 62: no, very bad.

A 25-year old respondent had not been involved in criminal activities prior to killing and robbing his girlfriend’s grandmother in retaliation for her criticism of his inability to find work. He described how he was afraid that his girlfriend would find out:

48: [I had a] heartbeat, anyway, yeah. That seemed to continue, that ... I remember that at some point, with my girlfriend, we were watching TV in the evening, I think. We lay in bed, and then she put her head on my chest and at one point, she says: "your heart beats really fast?". Then I am just ... then you’re just afraid she will find out, that is ... I say "you are probably right", I would have given that kind of reaction [...]  

I: yes, but ok, after you had done this, towards the grandmother of your girlfriend, how did you feel afterwards? You said you panicked? So the panic actually struck, or how to say, after it happened?

48: yes, there was continuous panic that she would find out.

**Shame**

Shame was described as an emotion related to a feeling of having had legal alternatives to doing robberies that afterwards seemed more attractive than before the robbery; telling about the robbery to family and friends and being confronted with their disappointment; or regretting having used violence towards the victim. A 17-year old respondent who had committed four robberies and been convicted for one described robbing a family after being tipped about values in their home. He tied up the parents in the living room while their child was sleeping upstairs. He regretted the robbery afterwards because he then considered alternatives to a criminal lifestyle:

I: Did you feel ashamed? 37: yes, a bit, yes

I: Why?

37: Yes, you anyway did something stupid again… yes, I feel ashamed, yes, I feel ashamed about myself when I do stupid things again, a robbery, or something like that. I feel ashamed, to put it in that way. Because it could also have been different. You can also just, yes, I could also just have gotten my certificates and just earned an income with a normal job. Like my brother. He is 17 and earns 1000 Euro per month, through welding.

Before committing the robbery the respondent mainly focused on the possible benefits whereas he afterwards realized there were costs to it as well.
A 26-year old respondent, who had committed more than 50 robberies and been convicted for six of them, described his mother’s disappointment after he robbed a liquor store while he was on parole:

63: so I am sitting at the police station. I am smoking, you know, I was allowed to smoke, it was before six PM, you know. I was allowed to smoke the last cigarette, with difficulty. I came out of the smoker’s area, suddenly I saw my mother right there in front of me, in the cell complex. But they never do that. Nobody is ever allowed in the cell complex. Only suspects. So I just see my mother in the cell complex. She hugs me, you know, did not let me go. That really touched me, yes. It is a strange feeling, strange feeling. But I cannot turn back time ... what can I do?

I: No. But then, before that happened, before you got caught by the police, I assume that you were pretty tense? Because you were afraid that they, you actually knew that they would come and get you?

63: What really, what really just, what I was really worried about, when my mother, when I came home and my mother said, "Hey, I hear a helicopter, are they coincidentally coming for you?" I thought, I thought to myself, "Oh, you have no idea, but I could not say that, right. I say: "No, do not worry", you know, you know. And suddenly that happens, and then you lie to your mother, you know, you know, it is a very strange feeling, man.

I: So you got a bit ashamed, actually?

63: Yes, actually I did, at the police station I did, you know, when she was hugging me and stuff, she did not let go, you know, she was crying and stuff. Yes, that was strange man.

The respondent described above who mentioned feeling happy after robbing a cannabis farm, reported feeling shame after he had robbed a supermarket with two friends. They were followed by one of the supermarket employees afterwards and had hit one of them with a gun in order to escape:

44: (...) And afterwards when we left you anyway regret that you have beaten someone but yes, that is the risk when you do stuff like that. You cannot give up, of course

I: No, so afterwards did you feel, did you feel ashamed afterwards? 44: I was ashamed, regretted it, yeah

I: Did you think about him?

44: Yeah sure, I hoped he would be ok. That is weird to hear from someone who does these kinds of things, but yes, of course you think about that, that is how it works […] I: And not relaxed?

44: No, it was a kind of failure actually, you got the money, but yes, you would rather not have done it. Of course you hope that everything goes ... without violence, everyone who is doing this hopes for that.
When violence happens, it is because of themselves. It sounds harsh but if they cooperate, then nothing happens, that is how it works.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Our findings indicate that robbers experience five different emotions over the course of a robbery: happiness, challenge, shame, anger, and fear. Except for challenge, these emotions have been mentioned in previous studies of offender decision making: shame as an anticipated emotion; and happiness, anger and fear as immediate emotions. In the phase before the robbery, fear was the emotion most commonly described. The most frequent explanations for fear were related to the prospect that (something during) the robbery might go wrong: a victim fighting back or the police showing up. Challenge was the second most often described emotion during this phase.

Respondents described anticipating challenge because they expected to be able to control the situation and expecting the robbery to become a success. Anger was the third most common emotion before the robbery. This emotion was described as a trigger for the robbery in two ways: in some cases respondents were angry because of conflicts with people unrelated to the robbery; in other cases they robbed people in retaliation and hence their victims were also the causes of their anger. Interestingly, this latter finding hints at the possibility that anger does not only lead to crime in retaliation for prior wrongdoing, as it is normally portrayed in the crime literature, but that it may actually trigger criminal behaviour in normatively unrelated situations. This finding of course directly contradicts rational choice-based perspectives of offending as this type of affect can not plausibly be modelled as a cost or benefit in a criminal decision maker’s calculus (see also Van Gelder, in press).

Just as prior to the event, during the robbery fear was the most commonly experienced emotion. It was associated with the possibility that the police would (or actually did) show up; that the victim would or did resist; and a lack of experience with committing robberies. The experience of anger was also common during the robbery, principally caused now by the reaction of the victim or the behavior of co-offenders. Challenge was the third most commonly experienced emotion during this phase. Whereas in the phase prior to the robbery it was primarily anticipated instead of actually experienced; during the robbery it was experienced as an immediate emotion.

After the robbery happiness was the emotion most commonly described and was caused by the knowledge that the robbery had been successful. Fear was the second most commonly cited emotion during this phase. It was caused by the possibility of getting caught, and by the prospect that family and friends might find out about the robbery. Shame, which was not mentioned during prior phases, was the third most commonly experienced emotion after the robbery was committed. Respondents reported feeling shame because they realized they could have earned a living through legal means; because of disappointing family members and/or friends when they learned about the robbery; or because of having injured the victim(s). Fear of the reaction of the victim
and of apprehension by the police seemed to be replaced by shame when the victim was actually hurt or after being caught.

By focusing on different phases of the robbery, our data suggests how emotional experiences change over the course of a criminal event. Because of the lack of comparison to potential offenses which were eventually not committed by the respondents, our data does not indicate whether the emotions described influenced the decision to commit the offense. Therefore an important limitation of our analysis is that we did not link the experienced emotion to the actual acts described, for instance by analyzing if experiences of fear or anger lead to more or less use of violence. We assume that emotional experiences do exert an influence but the exact way this happens begs more analytical consideration. Our results confirm previous findings from quantitative studies of affect and criminal decision making that show that moral emotions, such as shame and guilt, determine whether someone chooses to commit a crime (Grasmick et al., 1993; Grasmick & Bursik, 1990; Grasmick & Kobayashi, 2002; see also Van Gelder et al., this volume). These studies suggest that if people claim to anticipate shame and guilt before a potential crime has taken place, they may choose not to commit it. In light of these previous findings, it is not surprising that none of our participants anticipated shame before committing their robbery. When focusing on the phase before and during the robbery, questions about shame provoked responses like: “Why would I feel ashamed?” and “Shame [surprised tone of voice]? No! You just focus on your goal.”

The only emotion our respondents anticipated was positive, e.g., challenge. Prior to the robbery they expected to experience challenge during act of committing the robbery. Experiencing thrill was not mentioned as a cause for their criminal acts by the offenders in our sample. They did, in other words, not commit robberies because of the emotional benefits they anticipated but because of other kinds of benefits.

Furthermore, our findings suggest that offenders also experience moral emotions such as shame but that the role these emotions have in their decision making processes is different from non-offenders. The respondents in our study tend to focus on the gains of their crimes while being less concerned about the immediate ‘pains’ experienced during the process of doing the crime.

Shame only emerges in their discourse after having committed the robbery, hence as an immediate emotion. Because offenders in our study are not occupied with posterior emotional experiences but focus on the here and now, shame and guilt lose their potential deterrent effect as anticipated emotions. This finding nuance the idea that street offenders lack shame about their crimes altogether (e.g., Wright & Decker, 1994; Topalli, 2005). This difference in findings might be related to the fact that respondents in previous studies were asked to reflect on their motivation for doing crime in general rather than about their experiences during different phases of specific crime events. Conversely, it could also be that respondents in previous studies were more embedded in street culture than the respondents in our study and therefore experienced less moral emotions.
Future studies on the role of anticipated affect in criminal decision making would benefit from including attention to other emotions than shame and guilt, in particular positive emotions such as challenge and happiness. Also, the role of immediate affect such as anger and fear needs more consideration in studies of criminal decision making. Fear was the only emotion described throughout the entire process of committing a robbery. The way this emotion influences different phases of the decision making process needs more attention. Furthermore, analyzing the actual moving picture of robbery events from a perspective of emotional experiences might be a way to overcome certain limitations of retrospective studies.

We conclude by reiterating the comment made by one of the respondents of Feeney (1986) who claimed that “[doing a robbery] was an emotional thing more than anything else” (p. 58). The picture our respondents painted of their robberies is characterized by major ‘pains’ and minor pleasure. Conflicts, fear, and ambiguity are common ingredients of their experiences. The potential of earning quick and easy money stands in sharp contrast with the difficulties of keeping victims under control and being able to trust and rely on co-offenders; to the insecurities of apprehension; and to the ambiguities concomitant with facing oneself and significant others afterwards. Robbery offenders tend to focus on posterior gains rather than the immediate pains when getting involved in robberies.

References


**Footnotes**

1. Persons who declined participation were asked to provide reasons for that decision. Their reasons could be categorized in the following way: too painful to talk about the crime (45 percent); uncertain about anonymity of the conversation (10 percent); not prepared to speak to ‘institutional’ people (15 percent); experienced internal pressure (from lawyer or peers) not to discuss the topic (15 percent); claimed innocence (10 percent); and other reasons (five percent). 

2. We limited the coding of the open descriptions to 30 respondents as it is common in qualitative research (Guest et al. 2006); in our case the main reason was time limitation.