Chivalrous Masculinity among Juvenile Offenders in Western Sydney: A New Perspective on Young Working Class Men and Crime

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Much juvenile crime, particularly motor vehicle related crime, is a logical continuum of the cultural imperatives that hegemonic masculinity places on young working class and unemployed men, especially when legitimate avenues for achieving manhood have been closed off. The vast majority of literature on masculine gendered crime among this group places a heavy emphasis on aggression, violence, rule-breaking, racism, the contempt for women and non-machismo men. It is argued here that the hyper-machismo subcultural form is not in any way a direct cause of masculine gendered youth crime. Rather, it is a series of discursive practices that is but one strategy for the achievement of a satisfying masculinity among working class men, in situations of economic marginality. It is likely to co-exist with other patterns of masculinity that have been down-played in the deviance and subculture literature. Crime is also used as a vehicle for the achievement of a nurturant and protective masculinity, as the life history of a young man interviewed in a juvenile detention centre will illuminate.

Young men and masculine-gendered crime

Internationally, there is a substantial cross-disciplinary body of literature outside of mainstream criminology that theorises the well-established links between the construction of what may be labelled a hyper-machismo masculinity among young impoverished and unemployed working class men, and educational failure, delinquency and later serious crime. In the USA, studies in the sociology of education implicated schooling in the creation of deviancy. Educational failure, brought about through the process of stigmatisation and labelling in the school system, caused lower class youth to turn towards the hyper-machismo values perceived to be dominant in poor, especially black, communities (Sugarman 1968; Polk and Schafer 1972; Ogbu 1974). A number of more general ethnographic studies on

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marginalised black communities illustrated the ways in which young and older men turn to the streets and to street crime and violence as a site for the production of a sustaining masculinity when this is denied them through the legitimate avenues of schooling and the labour market (Leibow 1967; Hannerz 1969; Keil 1970).

In the UK in the 1970s, a group of neo-Marxist sociologists and radical criminologists analysed mainly white working class machismo subcultures, not as social deviance, but as resistance to capitalist social relationships. The most well-known of these works is Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (1977). Willis describes an anti-school counter culture developed by a group of 'lads', the elements of which were drawn from their fathers' experiences of manual labour and their understanding of the equally machismo culture of the shop-floor. This counter culture allowed the lads to 'partially penetrate' the ideology that upward mobility would be the reward for cooperating in the formal teaching paradigm. According to Willis the lads realised that not all of the working class could be upwardly mobile so they made a collective decision to indulge in delinquent behaviour as an act of sabotage against the capitalist system and to alleviate the boredom of school. Following the theories developed at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Willis, along with a number of other ethnographers (Robins and Cohen 1978; Willis 1977; Corrigan 1979; Frith 1978), viewed the working class subculture as a winning of space on the social landscape. Rather than consider themselves as oppressed, young working class men celebrate their masculinity as being superior to that of the masculinity of the middle class teachers and of conformist working class students whom the lads called the 'ear'oles'. The term 'ear'oles' denotes passivity, equivalence to the feminine and homosexual, and mental labour, that is, they are weak, stupid and ineffectual.

There are a number of problems with these accounts of working class masculinity. In the first place there is an uncritical acceptance of a singular normative model of masculinity, that is, what is known in the literature as 'the male role'. The dichotomisation of gender into two sexes, imports the biological assumptions that violence and aggression are natural in males and that therefore the social role of the male as husband, father, brother and so on, incorporates these natural characteristics. So when analysing the failure of young working class men to achieve 'normal male adult maturity', their delinquency is seen by the deviance theorists to be an arrested expression of their masculinity. The neo-Marxist scholars cannot escape this criticism either for, although they view this delinquent behaviour as a rational expression of masculinity within terms of capitalist social relationships, the male role itself is not questioned. Even Willis (1977), while having a glimmer of the idea that there are multiple masculinities (Connell 1996:208), did not question that violence and aggression are part of masculinity. Biological determinism underlies these analyses.

From another perspective, as well, biological determinism implicitly frames these theories. It is presumed that there is a 'natural' and therefore universal progression of the *individual* from infancy to normal adulthood that the majority of the population passes through without falling by the wayside. It assumes a 'pre-social self' (Wyn and White 1997:25) which, over a given number of years, will mature, like the larva to the butterfly, into a social adult. 'Adolescence' is like the chrysalis stage before the pupa emerges resplendent as a butterfly. Wyn and White's recent critique of this linear theory of universal stages of physical and psychological development has exposed its serious flaws. In *Rethinking Youth*, they demonstrate not only the inherent biological determinism but, also, that it is ahistorical, individualist and empirically inaccurate. The theory of developmental stages is based on a masculine model, is wrong for women, and through its incorporation into the policies and practices of the mainstream 'helping professions' (Edelmann 1977) and

institutions, especially the education system, it systematically marginalises working class youth, Aboriginal youth, young people of colour and many young people of non-English speaking backgrounds (Wyn and White 1997:62ff).

The legacy of this all-pervasive biologically determinist youth development model, in combination with sex-role theory, leads to the failure of these authors to problematise and thematise the construction of 'normal masculinity' itself. This is despite the fact, as has long been recognised, that men commit the vast majority of crime. The work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies has been important in placing social forces at centre stage. It has demonstrated that *collective practices*, played out within the context of the social-structural constraints of social class, are heavily involved in the constitution of gender identity; in this case, of particular masculinities. Gender is constituted in socially structured action as well as in the personal choices of individuals (Messerchmidt 1997); it does not inhere in the fertilised ovum awaiting adulthood to fully emerge. The subculture studies stress that members of youth cultures are not simply passive 'victims' of the dominant culture but negotiate their own meaning systems within the play of social forces, including popular culture, educational institutions, the labour market and the community. However, what Ngaire Naffine calls 'gender neutrality', still pervades thinking in mainstream criminology, including the work of the radical criminologists (1997:24).

In viewing masculinity as a complementary role to femininity and the female role, these authors, writing on the relationship between masculinity and crime failed to understand the relational nature of gender and the power differentials between men and women. This led them to the opinion that women were irrelevant to understanding masculinity and crime either as key players in the construction of masculinity or as victims of men's violence. Paul Willis makes little comment on the effects of the 'lads'' attacks on the subjectivity of their victims (McRobbie 1980:37–49). The sexism, racism and interpersonal violence perpetrated by working class men, and its consequent effects on working class women, ethnic minorities and many other members of the working class, are not taken seriously. Although he notes that these forms of oppression create divisions within the class he does not explain how these divisions can be overcome. Willis does not explain, either, why it is that some young working class men join violent hyper-masculine subcultures and commit crime while apparently the majority does not. He even goes so far as to claim that this oppositional subcultural style has potential for ameliorative social change, but again, beyond vague notions of capitalist crises and 'structural shifts' (Willis 1977:123), does not say how this may come about.

The failure to explain the conforming majority of working class youth, the inability to see beyond the 'naturalness' of the equation of masculinity and violence, the masculinist bias demonstrated in the neglect of women's role in the family in the construction of consciousness and formation of identity, an over-emphasis on the male peer group, and the absence of a theory of social change, are criticisms that apply to all of the theorists on masculinity, crime and delinquency. For this reason, although they offer many useful insights, these theories are both impotent and politically dangerous for they lead to the belief that the problem lies with 'delinquent' male youth and, therefore, coercive social control measures by the state are justifiable and necessary. The real issue is not that crime is an expression of an inadequate masculine development but that the social discourses of masculinity are in themselves distorted. Masculinities are not achieved once and for all, rather, like housework, the job is never done. Crime[1] is but one resource used to make a masculinity within the specific social, historical and cultural parameters that frame the individual's life.

The following case study throws a different light upon our understanding of masculine gendered crime. The case comes from a pilot project on young men and motor vehicle related crime that was a precursor to a larger ethnographic study on the relationship between masculinity and motor vehicle microcultures among working class youth in Sydney's western suburbs. This small qualitative study on male juvenile offenders was important in highlighting the very different kinds of masculinities that young men on the fringes of the labour market construct in situations of economic marginality. However, it also threw into sharp relief what Connell calls the 'layering' of masculinities, that is, more than one version of masculinity may co-exist, giving rise to different and often contradictory logics and desire in subjectivity (1996:210). The logics and desires that dominate at any one point in time are context dependent. It is here that the body of literature on masculinity and crime is most suspect. Before focussing on the case study it is necessary to consider the issue of the gender of the researcher.

Women researching men

It has often been observed that mainstream criminology is overwhelmingly male dominated in its authorship and subject matter. The body of literature discussed above fits this description: the authors are all middle class men, mostly white, studying working class men, black men and marginalised minority ethnic group men. But, as Naffine observes, the fact that the authors themselves are constituted as men in an historically specific class location and embodying a particular kind of masculinity is overlooked:

> They have not considered the fact that their own sex might have something to do with what and why they study, and what they have come to make of it: that the identity of the inquiring subject might influence, even constitute the meaning of the object of inquiry (Naffine 1997:9).

Naffine is correct to question the relationship between gender and interpretation. During question time after the presentation of a conference paper on masculinity and motor vehicles, a male delegate suggested that perhaps it was illegitimate for a middle class female academic to be carrying out ethnographic research into the working class male arena of car culture. This was especially so since I appeared to find much that was humorous in what I had described as a 'love affair' with motor vehicles. He believed that such an interest should be taken seriously, as he too was an enthusiast of cars and motor bikes. This question led me to reflect on the nature of his objection. In the first place he did not like my interpretation of motor vehicle culture, in particular, the use of humour in questioning and elucidating the construction of a particular form of masculinity using the medium of motor vehicles. Related to this, there was the suggestion that my class and sex invalidated the results. He clearly recognised that a feminist consciousness had been brought to bear on a subject of strong emotional import for him. My feminist reading of the discursive practices of car culture is certainly different from the accounts of subcultures in the neo-Marxist literature undertaken by male researchers, most of which have been celebratory of the hyper-masculine oppositional style among young working class men. As discussed above, this work is not conscious of the gendered nature of their findings. Nonetheless, I was being told that I had 'no right' to apply a feminist analysis to working class men. It was clear that had the interlocutor been researching the same subject area he would have produced results fundamentally different and opposed to mine.

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1 The discourses of crime are in themselves problematic. See Becker 1963.

The male inquirer fully understood that my gender and feminist subjectivity influenced the results yet he was not prepared to problematise the social and gender location of men researchers. But even if it were possible, which it is not, to eliminate observer bias from the field of study, and leaving aside the question of authorial power (on this issue see, for example, Hondagneu-Sotelo 1988), there is another more important side to this question: ethnographic research is directly relational. The researcher carries with her an identity for the subject. How they respond to the researcher, both in terms of what they believe she will understand, and in their presentation of self, will be dependent upon what role they assign to the researcher. For a woman researcher, the most common and critical of all roles in the ethnographic research experience in western cultures, is gender identity. Doing fieldwork is for women a totally different experience than it is for men, if, for no other reason, than the expectations of informants, for whom being a woman takes precedence over other identities (Golde 1986). The researcher is readily incorporated into the nurturant mother-helpmate role particularly if the subjects are young people. They have no trouble in assuming a superior, if protective, status and of asking for services women commonly provide, from advising on love affairs, to borrowing money and using her as a taxi-service. The position of men and women in society is not equal and a female researcher retains the inferior status of women even while doing a job which in social class terms is structurally superior to that of her male informants. Although working class, these young men are also the bearers of the privileges attaching to hegemonic masculinity. They will give different explanations, share different confidences and will draw on different discursive practices when interrelating with a female rather than with a male researcher.

The violent forms of masculinity described in the aforementioned studies are also forms of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is the form of masculinity that is culturally dominant in a specific situation and subordinates other masculinities. It is 'highly visible' in media depictions of 'tough men' such as the motor cycle racer, Mick Doohan, or film characters, such as Rambo (Connell et al 1997:14). An essential component of hegemonic masculinity is competition between men and it is likely that much of what researchers observed could well have been exaggerated to gain the admiration of their middle class male researcher.

Although Peter's story is unusual in the extent to which he situated himself as what is best described as a 'gentleman', it is not unusual to find this chivalrous symbolic code in the discursive practices of many young working class men who, however, more often draw on the discourses of male aggression and violence to achieve masculinity than does Peter. Peter's story is told not only because he is a convicted car thief but because of the insight it allows into the symbolic order and emotional structuring of his mind: the reasons for his fascination with particular kinds of motor cars and the hold they have over him. The extremes in his life show clearly the formation of desire within the specific circumstances that have framed his life. Peter has made choices about what kind of person he is and how he will behave from the repertoire of cultural meanings and action available to him, but these choices have been continually eroded and his options closed down. He is aware that his love of 'great cars' will in all likelihood condemn him to a life of penal servitude in the 'big people's jail', Long Bay Prison in Sydney, of which he had a great fear but can see no alternative.

The family, the state and the inculcation of car culture

Peter, who was 18 years old, was interviewed on three separate occasions in a juvenile detention centre in the early 1990s by myself and two pretty female students. (This statement, as will be shown in context, is neither sexist nor irrelevant.) We were there to interview 10

young men in detention because of motor vehicle related crimes. There were many to choose from and one of those chosen by the prison authorities was Peter because he had no visitors. That he had no visitors was typical of Peter's whole life. His life history is unusual and narrates like a black comedy. He has suffered great emotional cruelty inflicted on the one hand, by kin who loved him but could do no better, and, on the other hand, by the agencies of the state which were there to protect him, and could have done no worse.

Until he was nine, Peter lived in the country on a small farm in western New South Wales with his mother and her brother. He recalls being very happy on the farm and much of this happiness was associated with machinery. The happiest day of his life was when his grandmother sent him a two-wheeler bicycle for Christmas when he was four years old. He remembers with pleasure his uncle allowing him to sit on his knee and steer the tractor. At eight years old he drove it by himself while his uncle fed-out hay to the cattle off the back of the trailer. There was a number of motor vehicles on the farm but at any one time most were not working, Peter enjoyed immensely spending evenings helping his uncle carry out repairs on these vehicles and sometimes working for other people in the district for a cheaper price than the local garage charged. These were also occasions, when the work was finished, for the men to drink beer and discuss cars. By the age of nine he knew how an internal combustion engine worked and could fix simple mechanical problems.

His mother was a somewhat remote figure. He said that she had been to university and was an artist. She spent her leisure time painting pictures and talking to friends on the telephone. Sometimes she cooked the evening meal but his uncle was just as likely to do this. He said his mother was beautiful but took little interest in him, although she was always kind. It was his uncle who was the boss and although he was fond of him, he feared a beating if he misbehaved. He desired from his mother more love and affection than she offered. His uncle, in comforting him, advised that it was 'sissy' anyway to 'hang around' with women. One morning he found his mother unconscious in bed. His uncle could not be located and the telephone had been disconnected so he ran 2 kilometres to the nearest neighbour to get help. The neighbours were not home but their daughter's bicycle was available. Peter took it and cycled the 7 kilometres to the township to procure the services of the doctor. He left the bike outside the doctor's surgery but when he accompanied the doctor to retrieve it, the bike had been taken. Peter rode home in the doctor's car without reporting the lost bicycle.

His first brush with the law occurred a few days later when the local constable arrived at the farm, as Peter thought, to question him about the missing bicycle and to issue a dire warning about the consequences of theft. He was too frightened to explain the circumstances. The real reason for the visit, however, was that the local hospital had not remained silent about his mother's admission and the police officer had a search warrant for the house. His mother was charged with possession of heroin and Peter was confined with her in a cell until his uncle arrived a few hours later to provide bail. At the time, Peter believed that they were both incarcerated because he had stolen the bicycle. His mother feared that 'the welfare' would take Peter from her because of her heroin addiction, and, because of the bicycle, would argue he was 'uncontrollable'. She sent Peter to his father in New Zealand.

While in New Zealand his education involved minimal schooling, but he acquired considerable expertise in 'break, enter and steal', in houses and in factories, as well as in car theft, for the resale of parts. Mostly his father stole Fords, Holdens and Mazdas that he disassembled in the garage at the rear of the house. In exchange for the parts from the stolen cars and a cash adjustment, Peter's father was supplied by the wreckers with later model cars, especially luxury vehicles, BMWs, Jaguars and Mercedes, which had been written-off by insurance companies. He was a certificated mechanic and during periods of legitimate

employment, had specialised in repairs of vehicles at the luxury end of the market. Peter helped in all aspects of the work and with some pride recalled his father's approval of his high quality work, 'better than another man'! His father worked on these vehicles and brought them up to a roadworthy standard and, since he could 'pass them off' as legal, this was a major source of income. His father too was a heroin user and thus needed a great deal of cash although usually the biggest share of the profits went to the wrecker who had supplied the cars.

Peter spent many memorable and happy hours helping his father with the cars. He especially loved the first ride in the finished cars when his father would 'take him for a burn', a very fast ride on the motorway to test out the completed vehicle. He loved, too, the smell and feel of the luxury cars, the leather upholstery and wooden panels, the myriad of switches, knobs, buttons on the red-glowing dash panel, all of which his father allowed him to operate. He said it was 'fantastic' when his father used the total power of the car to accelerate to top speed. For Peter and his father, these cars were 'not like ordinary cars — it was as if one had nothing to do with the outside world, it was more like flying and he and his father were free to do what they liked'. Above all, Peter felt very important sitting alongside his father cruising in a prestige vehicle. They would stop at a hotel and Peter would sit in the car with a soft drink and a packet of chips. He particularly enjoyed the envious looks of the hotel patrons who came up to the car 'just to look at it', and to 'feel the smooth, beautiful, metallic paintwork'. Some of the cars were professionally enamel-baked but if funds could not be found to do this his father did the paintwork himself and was proud that he had the skills to sand and polish to a glassy surface. Peter told the admiring viewers about the mechanics of the car and the work that had gone into it. Sometimes his father took a 'lady' back to the house for the night and on these occasions Peter was 'allowed' to sleep in the car. On other nights he slept in his father's bed, since the spare bedrooms stored car parts.

But his father had a greater love than cars, and invariably they were sold for money to buy heroin. When the money ran out the business became burglary. First a car had to be stolen to transport the goods; panel vans, utilities and station wagons were preferred but any car would do at a pinch. Peter learned to break into a car and start it in less than 10 seconds. His record was 3 seconds. His job was to keep a lookout, and occasionally to climb through windows that were too small for his father to enter. Usually he started the car for a fast getaway. His father stole mostly televisions, videos, cash and jewellery, and sometimes other electrical goods that were easy to off-load to a fence or at the local hotel. He learnt all aspects of the 'trade'; the best times to burgle houses, which houses and areas to choose, how to stake out a victim, what tools to take, how to deal with radio-controlled roller doors and the electrical circuitry upon which the electronic ignition of modern luxury cars is dependent, which cars to steal and, above all, not to carry a weapon. 'Break, enter and steal' was one thing but if caught and weapons were found in your possession then this could send you to prison for a very long time. These 'tools of trade' were not taught deliberately; for, indeed, his father always encouraged him to 'get a good education' so that he did not have to follow that lifestyle. Obviously these were mere platitudes to Peter because his education was continually disrupted. As soon as he started to settle in and make friends at school, he was obliged to leave because of circumstances beyond his control.

At 11 years of age, Peter returned to Australia to his maternal grandmother in western Sydney because of his father's imprisonment. Although he missed his father a great deal he loved his grandmother whose major concern was for him to do well at school. In New Zealand he had liked his school, 'even the teachers were okay'. But he hated the new school saying that it was too big and full of 'aggros', and that the teachers would not help him because he was too far behind in his work. His grandmother was widowed, old and sick, and

had little money. Peter wanted to please her by succeeding at school. This seemed beyond his reach but at least he did not need to be a burden on her financially. On the farm he had helped his uncle and in New Zealand he had helped his father, but in the unit he shared with his grandmother in Bankstown there was nothing to do. His uncle always said that you had to make your own way in life and not rely on other people. Women had to be supported.

His knowledge of motor vehicles enabled him to acquire a part-time job after school and on weekends at a local panel-beating shop and car-wrecking yard. He gave the majority of his wages to his grandmother. This job lasted about six months. He was laid off and replaced by the owner's son, who also wanted a part-time job. Too ashamed to tell his grandmother that he could not pay her, he resorted to another trade in which he was expert — housebreaking. On his 12th birthday he was arrested for a number of offences and was sent to a state institution. Peter was caught because he bragged to a friend about his exploits. He said that this is the one good lesson he has ever learned — 'tell no one what you do and work on your own'.

Two months after he was admitted to the institution Peter's grandmother died. He was allowed out to attend her funeral and divulged with some pride that he had stolen the most beautiful bunch of yellow roses for her coffin. On his return to the institution a staff member told him that his bad behaviour was responsible for his grandmother's death. He remained at the institution another two years and near the end of that time located his mother. He telephoned her and they arranged for him to travel to southern Queensland by train for a long weekend. She was to meet him at the station. When he arrived she was not there. He hitched a ride to where she lived, but she was not home. A neighbour advised that 'they' had gone away for the weekend. This was the start of Peter's life of car theft. He stole a late model Ford from the manager's park at the RSL (Returned Servicemen's League) and 'struck it lucky', for there was $3000 in the glove box. With this money, he made his way to his uncle's farm where he had spent the early years of his life with his mother. His uncle did not welcome him with open arms. It was only when he realised that Peter had a considerable amount of cash that he agreed he could stay. First he had to dispose of the stolen vehicle. Peter remained with his uncle until the money ran out, about six weeks, and was then asked to move on. His uncle did not want any trouble with the police. Peter's lifestyle became itinerant and he lived by car theft and stealing cash, food and clothing mostly from houses. If this sounds as if he was a common thief stealing from common people — he was not!

Criminal ethnography and living the dream

Peter had a well-worked out *modus operandi*. He confined his activities to the elite areas of big cities, Toorak in Melbourne, Double Bay in Sydney and Toowong in Brisbane, and worked these areas exclusively. There were many reasons for this decision. In the first place he regarded it as essential to have a thorough geographic and social knowledge of the suburbs he operated in. He needed to know escape routes, entrances and exits, one-way streets and car parking spaces that were unlikely to be over-looked. He needed a knowledge of the social habits of the residents, what time they went to work and came home, the number of occupants in each residence, when they retired to bed, the kinds of locks on the doors, and the general dress codes for the men in the area. In casing his victims he first chose the area and then selected the vehicle. However, he excluded potential victims if there were children in the house or a woman alone.

When Peter was ready to carry out a burglary, he stole any available vehicle and travelled to a friend's place to secure his kit. The 'kit' was a suitcase which stored a business and an evening suit, clean ironed business shirts, ties and 'shiny black shoes', and a briefcase

containing house-breaking tools, a torch, and false identity papers including a number of fraudulent driving licenses and stolen credit cards. (He used the credit cards for identification only and not to pay for goods.) He then changed into the appropriate suit and drove to where he was to carry out the burglary. He took his briefcase and watched the house from a secure position, sometimes from the street but usually from the seclusion of a neighbouring property. He liked best to enter the house about an hour after the bedroom lights had gone out, by which time, he reasoned, the occupants should be asleep. He first looked for money and often took food from the refrigerator. If he could not find any money, Peter was unlikely to take the motor vehicle because it was of no use unless he had cash. If all went according to plan, he found the car keys, and drove the car from the garage. He prided himself on being able to de-activate and defeat most sophisticated security systems. Once on his way, he collected his suitcase from the first stolen car and headed directly for the State border. He aimed to steal cars around midnight reasoning that most people in 'upper guppy' suburbs retired to bed about 11 p.m. and would be sound asleep by midnight, thus lessening his chance of being caught. As most people leave for work around 8 a.m., this gave him an eight-hour start before the car was reported as missing. He also worked on the premise that the police did not contact other States for minimally three days.

It was now that Peter changed worlds: a metamorphosis occurred in his physical surroundings and his psychic state. No longer is he a 'nobody', an illiterate, impoverished, homeless, unemployed thief. He has become a substantial businessman, a man in control of the world travelling interstate on business. He feels important and turns the radio up loud but resists the desire to take the car to its limits when he reaches the freeway, that can wait until he is over the border. When he arrives at his destination, he books into one of the better class hotels where he is called 'sir', where a valet may even park the car for him and where he can share a bottle of champagne with a high-class callgirl until the money runs short. He then parks the car on a meter in the inner city and makes his way to a mate's place for a few days. There he lends a hand with fixing their cars, drinks (mostly coca-cola), talks, watches videos, plays pool, pinball machines and generally 'hangs out', until he either overstays his welcome or, for some other reason, decides to move on. Then the cycle begins again. Peter had been convicted of the theft of 54 cars over a three year period but he assured me there were many more. He gave up counting after 250.

Locked up

On the first visit to the detention centre we entered the compound where Peter was imprisoned. It was a cold winter's day with a chill wind blowing and the sun shining only intermittently. The scene was desolate. Some of the inmates and a prison officer were kicking a soccer ball around in the small grassed courtyard, surrounded on the perimeter by a high barbed wire fence in contravention of the terms of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights on youth imprisonment. Others were standing around alone shivering, or huddled in groups — all were dressed in standard prison garb, which fitted no one. Peter was watching for us. At first glance nothing distinguished him from his surroundings, except that he was taller than average, over 6 foot. He was apathetic and moved slowly, seemingly since he was not going anywhere there was no need for haste. We introduced ourselves and offered him the cigarettes and sweets that we had been able to bring in. At first he was shy but as interest was shown in his life and he worked up enough courage and perhaps a measure of trust to respond to our questions, there was a rapid transformation. We were sitting on chairs on the veranda. He was slouched forward looking at the ground but, soon, he sat up straight, and leaned towards us when he wished to emphasise a point. His voice became animated and he began to appraise the young women, clearly liking what he

saw. He became conscious of the furtive and envious glances of the other inmates. He was enjoying himself. But he looked different too, and what we saw was an attractive young man with blond curly hair, flashing blue eyes, an impish grin, in command of the situation, confident of his charm, flirtatious and disarming. When he began talking it was something of a shock to realise that the cultivated voice and language used was that of the middle class. He was humorous and ironic in recalling his life history and very concerned that we understand that he was not a 'real' criminal. He did not deny that he had made mistakes, nonetheless, he justified his actions by what is commonly known as situational morality, a philosophy more commonly used to excuse the ethics of the business world and made popular by Ann Rand in the USA in the 1970s. Circumstances were such that 'he had no choice'. He 'had to live' and Peter had very definite ideas about what was both necessary and desirable to make one's mark as a 'proper man'.

Hegemonic masculinity

i. Women: Peter had no doubt about the meaning of masculinity and how one must behave to be a 'real man'. The first principle of manhood is that one must protect and provide economic support for women and children. His uncle, who looked after his sister and Peter himself, had laid down the ground rules. The rewards for caring for women were love and affection, physically and emotionally: in good times his mother used to sing to him, tell him stories, read to him and teach him to paint and draw. (Unfortunately, she did not teach him to read and write.) But there was still a problem with women, they were not stable and would love you and leave you. His mother disappeared and when he finally located her she did not want him, and his grandmother died. Peter is not at all sure in relation to these events that he was blameless. If he had been more lovable perhaps his mother might have stopped using heroin and the children's home had already told him that it was his fault that his grandmother had died. Overall, women were a risky proposition and it was safer if one used high-class callgirls. When we asked him why they had to be 'high-class', his reasons were, that he simply 'liked them better'; they were educated, often students, and they 'spoke properly' like his mother. There was the additional factor that 'they were clean, weren't dirty, they wouldn't give you AIDS or the clap' (gonorrhoea or other venereal disease). High-class callgirls were also sexier — presumably like cars, the more high class the sexier they are.

ii. Cars: The discourses of car culture and the discursive practices of his particular microculture are the major component of Peter's masculinity. Cars, unlike women, are very reliable, at least the ones he steals are, but, in any case, he is able to fix them, in contradistinction to his relationships with women. Beatrix Campbell (1994:262) reports on a group of joy-riding motor vehicle thieves named the TWOC'ers in Britain. They, too, stole luxury vehicles because unlike the vehicles that belonged to their own (working) class, these cars were reliable. In the British case, a strong element of nationalism combined with social class protest was evident. Young men stole the same model cars that in past generations their fathers had been employed to manufacture. Prior to the Thatcher era they too could have expected employment in the automobile industry.

As for the TWOC'ers, cars are the central, controlling and most enduring feature of Peter's life. They are the meaning of his existence; he lives for his coveted and converted automobiles. There is one great moment of shame in Peter's life, and that is the memory of the occasion when he stole a new Mercedes for money to be delivered to professional car thieves, who destroyed a 'perfect' vehicle even if to recreate it anew. The thought of the destruction of the vehicle is more than he can bear and he still has nightmares about the 'injury' to this car. He is also concerned, though, that he broke his own rules, one of which is

that when he converts a vehicle he does it no damage. In many instances he has repaired stolen vehicles before 'returning them to their owners'. This he does by either leaving them on an expired meter in the central business district just before the onset of rush-hour traffic, or, he may even take the more daring, albeit satisfying, option of leaving them on a zoned police car park.

Peter's rules of theft incorporated his relationship with women. There were instances of him accidentally stealing women's cars. One such incident involves a 'stranger than fiction' coincidence. One evening, not too long before he was apprehended, he stole a Mercedes from a house in Double Bay in Sydney. There were children's beds in the house although no children home at the time. He took the car and cash in any case but before he was too far down the road, he realised first, that there was something wrong with the car's motor and, second, that the contents of the glove box, revealed that the car belonged to a woman. He felt very bad about stealing from a woman, especially one with children, so he took the car back to his mate's place. They spent the night fixing the problem with the car and the next afternoon he drove to the police station in a nearby suburb, parked the car outside, and ever mindful of the possibility of car thieves, real car thieves, that is, removed the keys from the ignition and locked them in the boot. The police telephoned the owner to say that they had 'found' the car. The car belonged to a friend of the author's who, on reading a draft of this paper, identified the incident.

iii. Earning a living and self-respect: This was Peter's major problem. Ingrained deeply in his psyche was the notion that men had to support themselves financially and support women. Peter refused also to accept Government 'handouts', he was not a 'dole bludger'. Changes in economic forces away from national to international economies, new technologies, and new forms of communication have led to a fundamental restructuring of the labour market, resulting in an unprecedentedly high level of youth unemployment. Government policies, now dictated by economic rationalist philosophies, have deprived a significant proportion of working class youth of even more of their already limited resources for consumption, and have devalued their labour power further (Wyn and White 1997:49). Nonetheless, paid work remains hegemonic ideologically at the social level, and, consequently, is reproduced in the emotional framework of masculinity, as Peter's story demonstrates. (For further discussion see Donaldson 1991.) His problem was to amass sufficient resources to put manhood into practice.

Peter has developed a culturally middle class hegemonic masculinity within the material social relationships of the working class. His masculinity precludes theft. In his essay entitled, 'I Decided To Be What Crime Made Of Me' Jean-Paul Sartre discusses Genet's conscious decision that, if the world has forced him to accept that he is a criminal by ascribing to him an evil nature, then he will 'proudly ... confer upon himself an infinite guilt' (Sartre 1988:68) and he will be as evil as he possibly can. This way, as Genet sees it, he is able to realise his own being. Since society has made him an object for others, a Being-for-the-Other, then he will change this necessity into a Being-for-Himself. What Peter has decided is that society has conferred upon him an identity that is not his 'essential nature'. He 'knows' his essential nature is good and proves this by obeying strict rules in the practice of thievery. He incorporates into this practice, philanthropic deeds, especially for the protection of women and children. For example, he broke into the house of a single mother, albeit in a wealthy suburb, and realised that she was impoverished. When he looked in the refrigerator for food and found it empty, Peter decided that she needed assistance and returned the following night to place five hundred dollars in the letter box. Peter must steal to live as a 'man'.

Analysis

In his early thought provoking work on the relationship of masculinity to capitalism, Andrew Tolson (1977) comments on the 'lower middle class image of patriarchal authority' that is based on the values of 'respectability' and moral dignity. However, in the working class, where material conditions of existence are characterised by physical and emotional insecurity, brought about by their own or their families' experiences of poverty, this 'nostalgia for Victorian provincial life' is a distant memory. In discussing Tolson's work, Newburn and Stanko (1994:3) argue that 'working class masculinity is characterised more by an immediate, aggressive style of behaviour, than a vision of personal achievement.' Yet, in similar material circumstances, Peter's life mission became the support and protection of women and children. He hoped one day, to marry and have his own children, who, he informed us, would have 'everything they wanted', especially, they would always have their own home to return to, where, in Peter's dreams, he would have 'a good kind of a job' and 'his woman' could also 'do what she wanted'. Nonetheless, he hoped that she would choose the housewife-mother role. Peter wished to own his own motor vehicle repair workshop. Farming was too insecure an industry to base one's life on.

Peter's greatest desire was to have a lasting and fulfilling relationship with a woman. He knew, however, that this was not a goal he was likely to achieve. His biggest hurdle was getting a job. As he explained this, he could not even obtain his driving license because this required a level of literacy he did not possess. While in detention, he arranged with the education department for a teacher to come a half day per week since he was 'too old' for the school in the jail. She came three times and Peter believed that he was making progress. On the fourth week she failed to appear. She did not turn up on the fifth week, either. He used his telephone call allowance to contact the department. He was informed that she had gone to America and that they were sorry, but there was no replacement teacher available. Yet again, a woman had let him down. One might speculate that Peter had just cause to reject women and to hold them in contempt, but this was not his choice. Rather, he believed that he is not yet worthy enough to gain their affection. He can see no option but to return to his life of car theft, even though this will put his one passionate goal farther out of reach, for he firmly adheres to the principle of making one's own way in life. It is possible, however, that his refusal to apply for social security benefits is compounded by his illiteracy. He was ashamed of this and avoided telling us directly. It was only when one of the students offered to help him, that he admitted the extent of the problem.

There is no space for an in-depth psycho-social analysis of the origins of Peter's construction of masculinity. However the broad parameters are obvious. The challenge of masculinity was, for Peter, not how to achieve manhood, but how to connect to women, as an essential component of this manhood. He was driven by the need for women's love, which had been offered only in fleeting moments in his life, but which always, ultimately, had eluded him. Peter's father and uncle were the direct teachers of hegemonic masculinity. When we examine Peter's construction of masculinity, although much of his cultural practice and emotional construction of desire has been learned from his uncle and father, he has also rejected many facets of their lives. Peter refused to be like his father in relation to trading stolen vehicles. To him this was reprehensible, an understanding which came from his grandmother. He endeavoured to improve on his father's behaviour. His father frequented down-market pubs, Peter frequents five-star hotels. His father brought home working class women from the pub, Peter pays high-class callgirls. His father drank beer, Peter drinks champagne. His father is a drug addict, Peter is straight and so on. The building of Peter's masculinity incorporated moral dimensions that came from his mother and grandmother. His masculinity was formed as much through the desire for his absent mother and her

rejection of him (and through his love of his grandmother and his subsequent grief on her death), as it was by the direct teachings of his father and uncle (compare Chodorow 1978). Peter's was not a 'protest masculinity' although there were strong elements of social protest within his construction of masculinity (see Connell 1995). He drew on the non-discursive practices of the discourses of our formal institutions. In other words, in all circumstances where he could he adhered to a traditional morality. For Peter, the dominating desire was his love of women, but the coercive and violent power of the state in the hands of men prevented him from carrying out his mission. Violent and aggressive discursive practices were a hard reality of life that continually thwarted his goal. He had been beaten in prison, placed in solitary confinement and had been deprived of his freedom throughout his life. From the first confinement by 'the law' at the age of eight, to the bullying at school when he was 11, and then to his life in institutions, Peter has been subjected to male violence. The explanation for Peter's construction of masculinity requires that both individual factors of his life history and personality, and the collective processes formed through his network of social relationships, be taken into account. This complexity cannot be reduced to a singular dominating force, such as the discursive practices of the peer group, a dominating mother or an absent father, for a multiplicity of discursive practices are involved.

Conclusion

Peter's life history provides a compelling reason to move beyond analyses that treat gender as sex differences, implicitly, a natural consequence of being born either male or female and clearly shows that the causes of his criminal behaviour are complex. The combination of the prescriptions of hegemonic masculinity in its chivalrous mode, the social practices of motor vehicle microcultures, his class location, the woeful inadequacy of many government departments charged with child protection, and his individual choices, initiatives and circumstances, are all involved in Peter's path to crime. It has nothing to do with testosterone or the desire to be wicked. This case study illuminates the cultural formation of desire and the building of a masculine identity using the discourses of car culture to live his chosen masculinity, and to indulge, just momentarily, in what he perceives to be the privileges and rewards of hegemonic masculinity. The categorisation of 'criminal' is less than helpful. 'Individual moral responsibility' and 'rational action' are equally bankrupt in explaining Peter's criminality. As a man, Peter is doing what he should be doing. He is driven by a moral imperative to live his masculinity both for himself and others. He justifies his theft in that the people he steals from can both afford it and, in his view, are more criminal than he is. He supports this claim by pointing out that many of the thefts of cash are not reported although the theft of a car always is. This implies to him that the cash has either been illegally obtained or hidden from the taxation department. That he converts 'any old car' to carry out his real mission is explained as being necessary, and, in any case he borrows these for a short time only and leaves them in a 'safe' area.

Peter was capable of using violence. He told me of a situation when the owners caught him in the act of burgling their house. While the male occupant of the house attempted to restrain Peter, the female occupant seized a camera and began taking pictures. Peter threatened the man with a screw-driver and escaped. His explanation was, to us, astounding. He said that he was 'not worried about being caught', as this was 'fair enough', an acceptable risk in his business. The problem was the camera. He was terrified that the photographs would appear on the front pages of the local daily newspaper and that he would be publicly denounced as a common thief. For Peter, this was a fate worse than the penalty of a heavy prison sentence for robbery with violence.

The construction of masculinities in their specific youth microcultures need to be the starting point for the production of effective crime prevention and deterrence programmes aimed at young men. Not all of these working class microcultures are characterised by violence and aggression. In some situations violence may be a rare and unintended consequence, whereas, in others, an essential component for membership of the group. But, even when dealing with the latter, there are still sites for ameliorative intervention, because for the vast majority of young, including criminalised men, their masculinity is not settled but layered and context dependent. There is an urgent need for women to become involved in research on masculine-gendered crime. I doubt that Peter would have told his story in the same way to a man researcher. The truth of Peter's account of his philanthropic deeds, of course, could not be wholly substantiated, although his criminal history and the coincidence of my friend being one of his victims gave some substantiation. Of as much importance, however, is his image of himself as chivalrous and heroic, a Robin Hood type character, through which at least, he could achieve respect in his own eyes. But he was also concerned to impress us, in the same way that young working class men wished to impress the men researchers by stressing their 'toughness', for competition between men is an essential component of hegemonic masculinity.

Logically, Peter is doing precisely what the culture demands. Hegemonic masculinity oppresses all men who cannot approximate its ideals in the same way that the global gender order allows a dominance of all men over women (Connell 1995:199ff). As Jean Henderson (1994:24) points out, a gender conscious practice for deconstructing hegemonic masculinity is essential, for it is heavily implicated in masculine gendered crime. It follows that men researchers need to problematise their own masculinity for they have provided at best, a partial account. This discourse of silence on the relational nature of gender has led to non-reflexive and unscientific accounts of men and crime.

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