

thrills and skills: a sociological analysis of poaching

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The focus of this research is to both describe and explain the activities of poachers. This research is based on interviews with 36 poachers. The authors explored the reasons given by some of these men for engaging in this deviant activity. Extensive quotations from interviews with poachers are presented. Primary motivation for this subgroup seems to be the pleasure derived from both the excitement of poaching and the outsmarting of game wardens through the demonstration of superior knowledge of the terrain and hunting skills. The specific intent of the article is to show how Walter Miller's (1958) six focal concerns (i.e., trouble, excitement, smartness, toughness, fate, and autonomy) of urban, lower-class culture parallel the value system of the poachers in this research. Socialization as a generating mechanism for deviance is discussed for further understanding of these crimes.

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the deviant practice of poaching. Researchers in crime and deviance have paid scant attention to the topic of poaching (Calkins 1971; Palmer and Bryant 1985; Green 1990; Reisner 1991; Curcione 1992). This research focuses on a group of poachers who primarily poach for pleasure. Most researchers view crime as instrumentally motivated, giving little attention to pleasure as a motivation for certain forms of deviant or criminal activity (Thrasher 1927; Tannenbaum 1938; Miller 1958; Matza and Sykes 1961; Becker 1963; Lofland 1969; Mayo 1969; Belson 1975; Parker 1976; Le-

jeune 1977; Allen and Greenberger 1978; Csikszentmihalyi and Larson 1978; Richards, Berk and Foster 1979; Watson 1980; Riemer, 1981; Nettler 1982; Samenow 1984; Katz 1988; Curcione 1992).

PLEASURE AS A MOTIVATION FOR CRIME

Mainstream theories about crime and delinquency have given relatively scant attention to the role of pleasure or fun as possible motivational underpinnings for certain forms of deviance and criminality. One finds that with few exceptions most social scientists have ignored the thrill dimension whereas others have treated it in an ancillary way (Curcione 1992). Many offenders seem to be motivated by the excitement, challenge, and relief from boredom that crime offers. These ideas will be explored briefly below.

Early theorists (Thrasher 1927; Tannenbaum 1938) characterized much of delinquency and gang behavior in the context of fun and adventure. Researchers on crimes by youth and adults (Mayo 1969; Belson 1975; Csikszentmihalyi and Larson 1978; Riemer 1981; Nettler 1982) found excitement to be a motive for some delinquents to violate the law. The research of Allen and Greenberger (1978) revealed an aesthetic element in acts of vandalism. Vandals apparently enjoy the auditory, visual, and tactile sensations that result from the destruction of material things, a process Allen and Greenberger (1978) called creative conversion. Lejeune (1977) discovered that for some criminals, adventurous deviance was more pleasurable because it involved risk. Richards, Berk, and Foster (1979) extended the research that explained middle-class involvement in delinquency as fun and adventure (Matza and Sykes 1961), claiming that most middle-class delinquency was a form of play. In a study of shoplifters, excitement was shown to be a primary motivation for repeat offenders (Klemke 1978). Samenow's (1984) research revealed that trying to beat the rap was exciting for the criminal. Katz (1988) and Lofland (1969) both demonstrated that many deviant acts were associated with and generated by excitement. The element of challenge is also important in many computer crimes. The challenge of an illegal act often overshadows the question of criminality (Parker 1976).

Becker's (1963, pp. 41–42) study of marijuana use reveals the central role of pleasure in time production of deviance. The phenomenon of general drug use as well as marijuana use has received much attention. Research has been mainly concerned with the reasons people give for using drugs. The most consistent answer has been escape and fantasy. Becker disagreed with such theories saying they did not adequately account for marijuana use. He suggested that the motivation for this behavior was actually developed in the course of experience with the activity. He thus concluded that instead of deviant motives leading to deviant behavior, it was the reverse. Deviant behavior in time produces the motivation for its own existence.

An implicit theme in much of the above research is the central role that culture plays in participation in crime and deviance. Walter Miller's (1958) typology of values or focal concerns of lower-class culture suggested that it was a generating milieu for delinquency. He proposed that lower-class culture contains a unique body of norms, behavioral expectations, and values that does not harmonize with middle-class culture. Miller identified six values of lower-class culture: trouble (involves run-ins with authority), toughness (the exhibition of physical prowess, masculinity, and fearlessness), smartness (the display of the ability to outsmart), excitement (thrill seeking and taking a chance), fate (a tendency to trust in luck), and autonomy (the need to feel independent and free from external authority). Conformity to these values puts a person in conflict with the dominant middle class. Miller contended that these class-specific concerns developed due to social, economic, and spatial isolation. It is likely that the length of exposure to a culture and its isolation will positively accentuate the values Miller described. Watson (1980) used Miller's typology as a device for understanding the subculture of outlaw motorcyclists. Hopper and Moore (1990, p. 384) did not explicitly refer to Miller's (1958) focal concerns, but most of the women in the outlaw motorcycle gangs they described "had limited opportunities in the licit or conventional world" before joining an outlaw gang.

The sociological connection between pleasure and deviance is culture. Socialization determines what is pleasurable or what gives someone pleasure. Numerous writers have

demonstrated the utility of Edwin Sutherland's (1939) concept of differential association as at least a partial explanation of deviant behavior. Differential social organization and differential association experienced through the valenced symbols of social and subcultural life are strong variables affecting behavior. Successful participation by individuals in various subcultures would therefore produce a degree of pleasure for them. This success is best expressed through adopting the focal concerns of each subculture of which one is a member. Cultural focal concerns or values then become a device for understanding the motivations or reasons for a particular behavior. The intent of this article is to show, in particular, how Miller's focal concerns parallel the value systems of the poachers in this research. In selecting this specific middle-range sociological frame in which to explain the illegal activities of these men, we indeed acknowledge that there are other possible theoretical explanations of this deviant behavior.

SETTING AND METHOD

The subjects of this study were French Acadian (Cajun) poachers in southwest Louisiana. Interviews ranged from 1 to 4½ hours. A total of 36 poachers were interviewed. All of the poachers were white men and ranged in age from 19 to 67. Poachers were identified through the personal contacts of one of the authors. Additional poachers were identified through a snowball method (Babbie 1992). Respondents were interviewed in their homes or in the rural home of one of the authors. Each respondent was questioned as to the reasons he engaged in poaching, what type of game he hunted, and how he started poaching. Additional questions were intended to elicit responses about the poacher's illegal activities and confrontations with game wardens, residents, and other hunters. Questions were always intended to be guides rather than generators of specific responses. All of the individuals interviewed were poachers of deer, alligator, and water fowl. Data for this project were collected between January 1991 and June 1992.

FINDINGS

All of the respondents were introduced to poaching by a family member, usually a father or grandfather. All continued to receive support from family and significant others and most continued to poach with them. Our findings indicated that five of Miller's six values were found among poachers as reasons for their illegal activity: trouble, excitement, smartness, toughness, and autonomy. The focal concern identified as "fate," as well be discussed below, was not detected.

Trouble

Miller (1958) interpreted trouble as being important to the individual's status in his or her community. Getting into trouble was important, but more critical to a person's status was not getting caught. Trouble was the major theme of the poacher's illegal activity and is implicitly expressed through all other focal concerns. Indeed, one said all of his poaching involved either actual or potential clashes with the game wardens:

If it were not for the game wardens I would not outlaw, [poach] . . . they make it fun I got pictures of boatloads of ducks, three deer in a night, and alligators.

Excitement

Many poachers commented on the pure excitement of illegal hunting. Excitement is generated by the challenge of not getting caught. The poachers also delighted in their ability to hunt illegal game any time they wished. Additional enjoyment came from eating illegal game. The eating of game was especially pleasurable because it was a finale to a hunting excursion. The poachers believed illegal game tasted better and viewed eating a meal of poached meat as a victory ceremony:

I like to eat fresh meat, but it's a real rush knowing that the game wardens are out there trying to hunt you. They never have caught me yet and I kill a deer whenever I want some meat or whenever someone wants some meat. You know when you headlight [the hunter uses a portable light to 'freeze' the deer—this practice is illegal] at two in the morning if you have a walkie talkie that is the best way to keep from getting caught. You and your partner can keep each other posted and keep from getting caught.

I like to do it because it gets to be exciting sometimes when the game wardens chase you.

It's more fun to outlaw than to hunt legal. I get my balls off and it tastes better too. You know if I would pay for your dinner you would enjoy the dinner better. The same is true outlawing and it don't take long on the river at night.

I hunt whatever is illegal because what is illegal is good to eat. I outlaw for the challenge of getting caught. The possum police never bother me too much. I know 'cause I get someone to call saying they heard a bunch of shots in one area then I go to another. I like to hunt the most dangerous places that are famous for being patrolled. The game wardens slack off an area like that because nobody goes.

Smartness

Poachers commented about the close calls they had and how they outsmarted game wardens. They enjoyed outmaneuvering the game wardens. The poacher matched himself against the game warden in a contest to see who had the greater knowledge of the terrain. Poachers also enjoyed exhibiting knowledge of guns, hunting tactics, and the use of special equipment. To them a game warden represented a field expert. Part of the gratification our subjects got from poaching was that they felt smarter because they had defeated expert wardens. The following quotations reveal the value of "smartness" among poachers:

I had them going all over the place one time. I spotted them before they spotted me. I knew the spot real good and my brother was with me. We divided up and made them chase us both but in two different directions keeping them about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile away. I would head off in one direction shining my light intentionally in their direction and then cut it off backtracking in another direction. When they got to where I was at last . . . my brother shined towards them from where they just left. In a little while they would head towards where my brother shined from but he was heading along a little shant [a pathway] back towards me. When they got to where he was, we shined towards them walking in opposite directions and they took off pissed off. We went and killed about six rabbits and they never bothered us. It's relaxing to go hunting and it reminds me of days when life was a lot easier . . . simpler.

One time I drove about 30 miles to the Whiskey Bay exit and got somebody to drop me off. I walked about a half mile in a soybean field when I dropped a big doe. I was about to start cleaning, I had my knife out, and I turned around. I don't know what made me turn around, but I'm glad I did. You know what I saw? A game warden truck with its lights on hightailing it across the field right to me. I ran across the field, swam across the old railroad pit [area between structural supports for a rail crossing over water] and was resting on the old railroad dump. I looked and there was another truck coming down the road over the railroad. There came another truck into the field. I swam back across the pit. I knew that it was a matter of time before they caught me, so I figured I better make my move. I took off across the field that the deer was in and ran till I got to a canal that crossed I-10 [Interstate]. I swam the canal under the interstate. When I got to the other side, I took a trail back to the Whiskey Bay exit. When I got there, there was a truck hiding . . . watching the Eastbound on-ramp. So I walked in the shadows of the pillars until I got near the Westbound exit ramp. I stashed my gear and snuck up the exit ramp. I got on I-10 and my partners picked me up.

One time I got caught with squirrels out of season, I cooperated very well. On the way to [the] courthouse . . . I asked the game warden to stop on the way to get some coffee at a cafe, when he was not looking I told the guy that ran the cafe that I left my door unlocked and to go get the squirrels in my bag in the back seat of the car. When we got at the courthouse they could not charge me because there was no squirrels. I told them that that game warden was crazy and I was glad when I made it to the courthouse.

I have killed over 500 deer in my life and probably killed a 16-foot gator already. When the alligator was outlawed I sold quite a few hides on the black market you know . . . I used to go hunting for weeks at a time at my camp. I had trails all over in there. I would build little screen cages up near some deer stands that I could sleep in if I wanted to. That was before the three-wheelers and four-wheelers, now you can travel the same distance in a few hours that it would take a day to walk to. Now with the tags on the gators it's hard to sell the hides. You can get a tag for a gator based on how many acres of land you have leased.

You go at two in the morning and one holds the light and the other has a calias [net] with a long pole. The guy with the light

shines the woodcock [temporarily blinds the bird with a portable light powered by batteries] and the one with the net puts it over the woodcock. The woodcock flies up and gets caught and you wring his neck and move on to the next bird. You can really mop up on them especially in fields at night. You just watch and see where they're going to at dusk and bingo. You don't even make a sound. You don't even need a gun.

The places I outlaw I know like the back of my hand and I always plan ahead even if it means spending a night in the woods. You know what works for deer especially in the winter is to hang apples on fish hooks. The deer go for the apples and the fish hook gets caught in the top of their mouths. You have to use a stout hook so that it won't straighten out because that deer is going to pull like hell to get away. You have to wait about three days for your scent to wash off . . . so you check your hooks every 3–4 days. You hang the apple kind of high so he can't get any leverage on the line. You got to be careful of the hoofs but you just shoot one shot and cut his throat and it's all over.

You know you can get a lot of woodcocks headlighting without firing a shot.

I lasso them [deer] and pull them with the boat until they drown. I am going Saturday night, the boys in the hunting clubs are going to be mighty sick but I don't care. I killed five deer in six shots with double-ought buckshot with my plug out. I don't like a rifle.

I hunt whatever is available. Grosbeaks [water fowl], I gig them with a frog gig out of the nest. They don't even squawk. Ducks, there has not been too much lately but there are a lot of bec-crosh, flamon, and blue herons [water fowl]. I kill as many as three deer on the river at night. If I'm lucky enough to see a buck crossing the river I catch it with a rope and drown it.

One time I shot an eight point that was breeding a doe. That buck jumped about 10 feet in the air and took off running. The doe just stayed there so I dropped her. My partner took off tracking the buck and got him. We field dressed both deer and carried out the buck and [then went] back to get the doe . . . talk about heavy.

One time I went on the river and I found a deer trail so I built me a tree blind nearby. I strung fishing line [monofilament line] across the trail in four strands about a foot apart . . . we

went back to the camp and slept until dark. We went back to the tree blind and strung a line on a branch to the lines across the trail. We climbed back up the ladder and waited until that branch started tugging then we turned on our headlights . . . we nailed three deer. Those deer never knew what hit them.

In Colorado I use a 7-mm Browning, but to outlaw around here I use a shotgun. Gators I use my pistol. Buckshot is best for deer at night.

One poacher described this relationship with the game wardens as "a game of wits . . . it's like the cat and the mouse." Poachers enjoyed telling stories of the simple techniques they used to win this game. The use of the term *simple* is important because it underscores the perceived differences between the poacher and the game warden. The game warden represents the modern, more complicated techniques of policing. Many poachers commented on how they outsmarted the more complex skills of the game wardens. In all the following accounts, the quick response of the poachers allowed them to get away:

They almost caught us one time . . . somebody must have called on us when they saw us go in; but we had stashed our birds in a cooler. We only had our guns but we saw the game wardens before they saw us. So we back tracked and stashed our guns in the bushes and we walked out. The game wardens jumped us . . . we said that we were on a little pleasure walk in the woods. They don't believe us so they back tracked through the woods but . . . never found our guns.

We killed about 15 grosbeaks, 5 flamons, 20 beccrosh, 3 herons bleus. We stashed the icebox where we can get to it with a boat. We played like we were boat riding and then we picked up the ice chest later on, drove up to the landing and rode back to the house. I had a lot of close calls but I'm not going to give up. I'll run, I'll hide, but I'm cautious about coming out. That's when they catch you. They might know you are in the woods but they are going to wait for you to come out or get you going to your car.

About 12 years ago I was headlighting [the illegal practice of using a portable light to 'freeze' an animal making the animal an easy target]. . . by my uncle's place. He used to raise goats and cattle out there. He would keep the goats locked up at

night in a little yard. Somebody must have called the game wardens because they were on my ass. I kept running, turning my light off and on. I needed to get to the house, but if I would go too straight I know they would catch me. So I kept tracking off this way and that until I passed by the goat cage. I used to feed the goats sometimes grass and feed so they liked me. I opened the gate and I grabbed a little ram. I put the headlight on the horns of the goat and made a noose with the wire to the batteries, turned the light on, gave a slap and let him go. I closed the gate and hid in the woods by the side of the pasture. The goat was hauling ass to the other side of the pasture when the game wardens passed by me. Every now and then the goat would look back, those game wardens were on foot and they would take after that goat. I saw my chance and I got back home. No telling how long the game wardens chased that goat.

In spite of their clever escape techniques, some poachers had been caught. When poachers were arrested, however, they attempted to explain it as the fault of the person they were hunting with, thereby keeping their own skills intact:

The time I got caught was because of stupidity; you see I always carry rope with me when I'm headlighting [portable light powered by batteries] deer to tie them up in the tree with after I clean them. I wash off my clothes, all the hair, and I even clean my fingernails. I dig a hole to put the skins, feet, and head in. Then I stash my gun in moss. We had killed two deer but my partner didn't clean his hands and pants off. The game wardens . . . checked us when we got to the truck that night and I told them that we got lost while hunting rabbits and were just getting back. My partner's pants were covered with blood spots and deer hair. He told them that he had killed an armadillo. Unfortunately the game wardens know that armadillos don't have deer hair. They held us and seven of them backtracked on our trail and one of them found the deer hanging in the tree when blood dripped on his hands.

One individual commented on the reasons other poachers got caught. In this statement, the poacher mentioned both their skills and knowledge of illegal hunting and their understanding of the patterns of game wardens:

One poacher had been caught spotting deer [same as headlighting] on the river at night twice this season. It seems that

he fails to recognize the Bell Jet helicopter. This puts the game wardens at a terrible advantage. All they have to do is position themselves hovering over at a great height . . . turn off the running lights . . . radio positions to ground or water-based units.

Implicit in the above statement is that it was the superior equipment used by the game wardens that allowed the capture of this poacher, not his better skills. This poacher also indicated that he would not have been caught in that particular situation.

Toughness

Some poachers expressed the dangers of illegal hunting, but others wanted to appear tough. They commented on the use of large-caliber weapons by game wardens and the times they were shot at:

Let's say that I'm not going to let them catch me and I'll do whatever it takes to get away.

I have been shot at and I shot back. They shot up in the air but I'm not going to let them catch me. I heard the bullets ricocheting in the trees above my head. It was a pistol. They weren't trying to hit me, just scare me.

If you shoot at a game warden you asking to get killed. The state aren't too bad but the Feds. . . . I saw some already, they had MAC-10s, AKs and M16s [large-caliber rifles] so if you do shoot you better roll because they will cut you down . . . it pays to be cautious. Now I've run away when they have said halt but I don't think that they will shoot you.

I image there is one or two [game wardens] still pulling pulons [buckshot] out of their ass. They cut me off headlighting rabbits on a levee a few years ago, so I cut loose on them with bird shot but I would not kill nobody intentionally.

In essence, these men saw poaching as a very rough game. They took pride in being tough enough to participate in it and being successful in evading the law.

Autonomy

Poachers also expressed the value of independence that was at least partially satisfied through illegal hunting. In poaching, these individuals were playing by their own rules. Their activi-

ties were a challenge to the laws of outsiders imposed on the turf that had been theirs for several generations. Like the lower-class culture described by Miller (1958), these men had a need to feel free of external controls:

I outlaw because nobody is gonna tell me what to hunt where to hunt or when to hunt. My daddy hunted like that and his daddy before him. Well I tell you, any species that comes within range of my shotgun and I think it's good to eat is a real endangered species. I like grosbeaks, wood ducks, doves, squirrel, and deer. I do very little fishing.

Fate

In Miller's analysis, to have the value "fate" meant to trust in luck. It was a rationalization used when one was outsmarted. We found no evidence of the expression of fate as a value among poachers. Given their emphasis on smartness, one should not expect poachers to emphasize fate, which is often a rationale of the unsuccessful. Poachers repeatedly spoke of outsmarting the game wardens; rarely did they say they were lucky.

DISCUSSION

This research has addressed the question of why violating the law is pleasurable for members of a particular subculture. For many criminals, violating the law is not pleasurable. Some thieves claim that stealing is very difficult with little or no excitement involved, and others say they are very tense during the course of committing crimes (Conklin 1989, p. 295). For certain others, however, fun and adventure offer benefits that compensate for the risks involved in crime. Poaching is pleasurable for some individuals because of a mixture of cultural and structural factors.

Socialization refers to the process through which individuals assume cultural traits; they obtain a knowledge of the ways and things that are appropriate in their segment of society. Research on woods-burning reveals the cultural supports for this particular crime (Bertrand and Baird 1975; Doolittle and Lightsey 1979; Bankston and Jenkins 1982). In the same way, the communities where poachers live are resistant to conser-

vation laws. They have a traditional orientation and remain isolated pockets of the past (Doolittle and Lightsey 1979, p. 5).

The cultural history of the French Acadian people who settled southwest Louisiana is one of both structural and cultural isolation (Clarke 1985; Gramling, Forsyth and Mooney 1987). The French settlers remained separate due to several factors: language, solitary occupations, a working-class heritage, and Catholicism (Clarke 1985; Gramling, Forsyth and Mooney 1987; Mooney, Gramling and Forsyth 1991). Indeed, it is only since the 1940s that cultural intrusion began to occur (Gilmore 1933, 1936; Parenton 1938; Smith and Parenton 1938).

The poachers we studied belonged to a group that had been isolated long before game laws became important. Miller's theory supports the idea that distinct values develop because certain groups have been segregated and divided from each other socially, economically, and spatially. The internalization of these values combined with the requisite skills and the opportunity to perform them results in actions consistent with cultural prescriptions (Swidler 1986; Mooney, Gramling and Forsyth 1991). The Cajun or Acadian culture has been unevenly affected by the intrusion of other cultures into the area. The more isolated the families have been, the more they have retained earlier cultural traits. The individuals interviewed for this project were all rural residents who have lived in the same area for several generations. They still retain many of the ideas from the isolated past of the area. They are constantly in contact with others who support an "us" and "them" orientation toward the larger society. Both game wardens and the laws they enforce represent outsiders. The conflict is similar to the city slicker versus the country rube. Although game wardens are not representative of sophisticated urbanites, they are in the same position. As Miller looks at lower socioeconomic subcultures, to Cohen (1955, p. 84), wardens would represent the "middle-class measuring rod" as would police, teachers, and public officials who by virtue of their position control access to the larger society. To violate these laws of others and get away with it is to reinforce sub-cultural elements. Poachers have needs to express autonomy from the authority of outsiders and to outsmart them. They fulfill these needs through poaching, a tough and dangerous activity. By most standards, these individuals could be consid-

ered failures; they are all poor and uneducated. They attempt to demonstrate their adequacy through poaching. Most of them are acting within roles that are justified by local standards. Indeed, within the lifetimes of many of these men, their actions were once legal.

Cultural supports and belief systems have continually reinforced and thus perpetuated poaching. Basic beliefs about poaching are formed quite early (Curcione 1992). Families as well as significant others serve as examples for justifications of and facilitators for poaching activities. They also serve as models for poaching skills. This research reaffirms the basic components of some rather classic arguments from the cultural deviance theory of Walter Miller (see Empey 1982, pp. 197–199 for an elaborate explanation of Miller's theory as one of several in the cultural deviance genre), the symbolic interactionism found in Sutherland's (1939) theory of differential association, and the "thrills and skills" ideas apparent in the writing of Becker (1963) and others. In summary, the ideas of these writers are useful in understanding deviance in general. Regardless of geographic setting, whether in the urban gangs from inner-city ghettos or in lower- or working-class cliques in the rural swamps of Louisiana, the force of these classic ideas survive.

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