

# GENDER, SOCIAL NETWORKS, AND RESIDENTIAL BURGLARY\*

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*Criminological researchers have devoted substantial attention to the nature and dynamics of residential burglary, but the role played by gender in shaping this offense remains largely unexplored. Feminist ethnographers have documented the fact that streetlife is highly gendered, and that this typically serves to marginalize women's participation in criminal networks and activities. Therefore, it appears likely that residential burglary—a prototypically social offense that requires good network connections—will be strongly influenced by gender dynamics. In this study, we analyze in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 18 female and 36 male active residential burglars to examine the ways in which gender structures access to, participation in, and potential desistance from, residential burglary. In doing so, we aim to provide an insider's view of how gender stereotypes are expressed, reinforced, and exploited within streetlife social networks, and how these networks shape the lived experience of men and women engaged in residential burglary.*

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Criminological researchers have devoted substantial attention to the dynamics of residential burglary in both Great Britain (e.g., Maguire and Bennett, 1982; Bennett and Wright, 1984) and the United States (e.g., Cromwell et al., 1991; Wright and Decker, 1994). Taken as a whole, their research has established that residential burglary is a prototypically social

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offense, shaped by ongoing relationships and interactions set in the broader world of streetlife. For example, residential burglars typically offend in groups, routinely use inside information gathered during their daily rounds to select promising targets, and frequently dispose of stolen goods through established networks of buyers (Wright and Decker, 1994; see also Steffensmeier, 1983). As Shover (1972, 1973) has observed, one of the key characteristics of the "good burglar" is an ability to get along well with others.

Given the highly social nature of residential burglary, it is striking that the potential role played by gender in shaping commission of the offense has received little attention from researchers. Feminist ethnographers have documented the fact that streetlife is highly gendered and that this often serves to marginalize women's access to, and participation in, criminal networks (see, e.g., Laidler and Hunt, 2001; Maher, 1997; Maher and Curtis, 1992; Maher and Daly, 1996; Maher et al., 1996; Miller, 1998, 2001; Phoenix, 2000). It is only reasonable to assume that residential burglary is not immune to these patriarchal forces. Indeed, Alarid et al. (1996) found that women who engaged in serious street crimes, including burglary, tended to do so within the context of predominately male offending groups (see also English, 1993; Haynie, 2002).

The paucity of research on gender and residential burglary is all the more striking because the proportion of female arrests for this offense exceeds that for any other Index crime except larceny/theft (Steffensmeier, 1995; Uniform Crime Reports, 2001), having risen from about 8% of all burglary arrests in 1991 to almost 15% in 2000 (Uniform Crime Reports 1992, 2001). Thus, a full understanding of the dynamics of residential burglary requires that attention be paid to the potentially important role of gender in facilitating and constraining participation in, and accomplishment of, such offenses.

In the only large-scale study to look directly at women involved in committing residential burglary, Decker et al. (1993) compared the offending styles and criminal histories of currently active male and female burglars. They also looked at the work roles typically adopted by the female burglars during the commission of their residential break-ins. Drawing on a typology developed by Ward et al. (1979), Decker et al. identified two distinct work roles played by the female burglars in their sample: accomplice and partner. Accomplices were clearly subservient to others—usually men—during their burglaries, whereas partners participated as equals in their offenses. However, Decker et al. did not examine the range of work roles adopted by the *male* burglars in their sample, so it is difficult to assess the extent to which gender situates and shapes the accomplishment of residential burglaries. Perhaps men also frequently play submissive or accomplice roles in such offenses; without an explicit comparison, this

remains a matter of speculation. Furthermore, Decker et al. did not explore paths of initiation into, or continued involvement with, burglary crews. Because such crews emerge out of social networks that appear to be heavily gender stratified, it is likely that gender also influences factors other than work roles.

This study explores how gender structures residential burglary networks, opportunities and meanings, using in-depth interview data to make direct comparisons between male and female offenders. It seeks an insider's understanding of how the gendered social networks characteristic of streetlife influence male and female participation in, and accomplishment of, residential burglary. We begin by providing a brief overview of research into female participation in offending groups and male attitudes toward female participation in such groups, establishing the patriarchal nature of criminal networks. We then discuss recent feminist work that addresses issues of agency and "doing gender," thereby laying the groundwork for later discussions of the ways in which men and women negotiate the gendered structures inherent in criminal networks. Next we present our findings, concentrating on how patriarchal attitudes and behaviors frame initiation into, participation in, and potential desistance from, residential burglary. We conclude with a discussion of the ways in which gender differentially structures experiences for men and women in *both* criminal and non-criminal social networks. Our overall aim, following Miller (1998:42), is to advance the ongoing debate "about women's place in the contemporary urban street world."

## GENDER AND CRIME

Early work on female criminality linked offending by women to their broader social network relationships. Pollak (1950), for example, explained females' lawbreaking in terms of their relationships with men, while Cameron (1964) explored the ways in which women's in-group relationships functioned to deter recidivism. More recent work on female criminality has emphasized women's marginalized status in street crime networks. While this marginalization has been shown often to push women into female-dominated crimes (see Daly, 1989; Maher, 1997), it is clear that some women *do* manage to penetrate male-dominated streetlife networks. Where this occurs, researchers have pointed to the strong overlap between community social structures and the structures of criminal networks located in these communities (see Maher, 1997; Miller, 2001). Thus, a fuller understanding of female criminality requires an examination of the ways in which gendered structures in the broader community—especially those involving peers and family—shape women's (and men's) entry into, and participation in, offender networks.

Steffensmeier (1983:1012) attributes the marginalization of women in street crime networks to the masculinized homosocial reproduction of deviant peer groups, observing that women "are more likely to be solo perpetrators or part of small, relatively non-permanent crime groups." In a study based on interviews with 49 male offenders, Steffensmeier and Terry (1986:306) also found that "the large majority of thieves had, at one time or another, committed crimes with women. . .[although] their involvement with women was sporadic and situational" and when men did work with women, the women were either romantic partners or acquaintances used temporarily for a specific crime. While this work called needed attention to the gendered nature of criminal social networks, it did not consider how female offenders themselves perceive their place and participation within such networks.

### GENDER AND AGENCY

Feminist scholars have long recognized that gender is accomplished and reinforced through socially situated behaviors and interactions (West and Zimmerman, 1987; West and Fenstermaker, 1995). In carrying out even the most mundane daily activities, men and women "do" gender by taking account of, and orienting their conduct with reference to, prevailing normative beliefs about masculinity and femininity. This, in turn, serves to perpetuate a highly gendered status quo dominated by patriarchal notions of appropriate masculine and feminine behavior that can constrain the range of opportunities available to both sexes, but especially to women. As Miller (2002) has pointed out, however, gender-situated behavior need not *necessarily* be limited to the fulfillment of traditional role expectations; for some women it also can be called upon as a resource to negotiate patriarchal social networks in pursuit of decidedly non-traditional activities such as street crime.

Social actors seldom remain passive in the face of constrained opportunities, but rather actively work within and around structural and cultural constraints in a dialectical attempt to achieve desired goals. Feminist criminologists have explored how women negotiate gender constraints in the context of female criminality. Research on the role of agency in female criminality has tended toward one of two general interpretations 1) women are dependent upon men and are only involved in crime due to their connections with men (e.g., Pollak, 1950); or 2) women are wholly in control of their offending opportunities and actions (e.g., Adler, 1975). According to Maher (1997:1), this tendency to "dichotomize agency" either "denies women any agency" or else "over-endows them with it." We too see these approaches as reductionistic in so far as we can understand much of female (and male) offending as the action of an individual

attempting to meet personal short-term goals and, in the process, capitalizing on available resources. In two recent studies, for example, Miller (1998, 2001) has carefully documented the ways in which women involved in robbery or gang delinquency operate within the broader constraints of male-dominated streetlife. Her research highlights both the women's awareness of these pervasive constraints and their ingenuity in surmounting them. Previous research on female participation in property crime has not fully explored how gender both constrains and, via the exercise of personal agency, facilitates opportunities for females and males involved in committing residential burglaries. This paper examines how gender structures women's—and men's—perceptions and expectations of their co-offenders, especially focusing on how female offenders negotiate the patriarchal perceptions of their male co-offenders (as well as those of their non-criminal peers) and, in doing so, expands our understanding of these important processes.

## DATA AND METHOD

The data for our study were drawn from a larger sample of 105 active residential burglars—18 females and 87 males—interviewed by Wright and Decker (1994). From this larger sample, we extracted all 18 of the female offenders and 36 of the males, matched approximately on age. To avoid sampling bias, the males were chosen as follows: both the males and females were grouped into three broad age categories: 17 and under, 18 to 25, and 26 and over. Within each of these categories, a random number generator was used to select twice as many males as females. The offenders included in our final sample ranged in age from 15 to 51, with a mean age of 25. Half of the female offenders were African-American, with the other half being non-Latina whites. Twenty-six of the males (72%) were African-American, and the remaining 10 were non-Latino whites.

The active residential burglars included in our sample were recruited in the early 1990s on the streets of St. Louis, Missouri. They were located through the use of a snowball sampling technique, whereby an initial respondent was asked to refer others who, in turn, provided further contacts, and so on. The recruitment process was initiated by a specially trained field ethnographer, an ex-offender who retained close ties to the St. Louis underworld. Trading on his connections, the field ethnographer began by approaching former criminal associates and expanded his network of referrals outward from there. He explained the research to potential interviewees, stressing that it was confidential and that the police were not involved. He also told them that eligible participants would be paid \$25 for their time. If they agreed to take part, he scheduled an interview and, when the time came, accompanied them to the research site (see

Wright et al., 1992 for a full description of the snowball sampling procedure).

In order to be considered an active residential burglar, potential interviewees had to meet three basic inclusion criteria. First, they had to have committed a residential burglary in the recent past, typically within the two-week period prior to being interviewed. Second, they had to define themselves as currently active. Third, they had to be regarded as active by other offenders in their social circle. Virtually all of the interviewees reported that they had committed crimes other than residential burglary at some point in their lives, and many had done so in the recent past. These offenses included, among others, robbery, assault, drug selling, and auto theft. Thus, while it may be convenient to think of the offenders as "residential burglars" for the purposes of the present study, it is important to remember that they—males and females alike—are more criminally versatile than such a label implies (for more on this issue, see Wright and Decker, 1994).

The representativeness of a sample drawn from criminals at large in the community can never be determined conclusively because the parameters of the total population are unknown (Glassner and Carpenter, 1985). But as Miller (1998:43) has noted, studying active offenders "overcomes many of the shortcomings associated with interviewing ex-offenders or offenders who are incarcerated." The fact that Wright and Decker purposely had over-sampled female residential burglars (that is, made a special effort to recruit as many women offenders as possible rather than trying simply to construct a sample that reflected the gender composition of local burglary arrest statistics) was crucial to the success of our research; it ensured sufficient cases for comparison with the males.

The racial make-up of our sample—64.8% African-American and 35.2% white—mirrors the population of arrested burglary suspects for the City of St. Louis at the time the data were collected. The St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department's Annual Report for 1989, for example, reveals that 64% of burglary arrestees were African-American and 36% were white. Remember, however, that the racial composition of our female and male samples varied somewhat, and that this represents a potentially important—if unavoidable—limitation of the present research. Overall, the African-American offenders were more criminally involved than their white counterparts. African-American men were more likely than white males to report drug sales activity, and African-American women were more likely than white females to report having committed serious violent crimes such as armed robbery.

The interviews, which were tape-recorded by mutual consent and transcribed verbatim, were semi-structured and conducted in an informal manner, thereby allowing offenders to speak freely using their own concepts

and terminology. The offenders were asked to report as much as they could about their most recent residential burglary. Throughout their description of the offense, they were prompted with further questions centering on its temporally sequential stages: motivation, target selection, gaining entry to the dwelling, and searching for valuables. For each of these stages, the offenders were asked whether it was "typical" of the way they committed their residential burglaries. If they answered that it was not, the offenders were requested to describe a more typical situation. The aim was to get a richly detailed overview of how the offenders carried out their break-ins. In addition, the offenders were questioned about broader matters concerning their initiation into, and hypothetical desistance from, residential burglary. Finally, the offenders were asked directly about matters relevant to gender and crime, such as their experience of committing residential burglaries with members of the opposite sex, and/or their attitudes to doing so (for a comprehensive discussion of the interview process, including matters related to internal validity, see Wright and Decker, 1994).<sup>1</sup>

## FINDINGS

### INITIATION

Most of the offenders in our sample, male or female, were initiated into residential burglary via interaction in intimate groups. With few exceptions, they committed their first burglary with older friends, family members, or street associates.

[M]e and my brother, we wanted, you know, he came and got me and say he know where a house at to break into. And, uhm, we go there and uh, we just do it. . . me and my brother, he and some more friends. (Jeffery Moore)<sup>2</sup>

A couple of friends of mine, we had been drinking some beer and we decided we needed some money. A couple of friends of mine said well, come on let's go break in this house. . . I said well, I'm a try it. (Robert Johnson)

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1. While the interviews on which our study is based are extraordinarily rich, there is no gainsaying the fact that they were generated roughly a decade ago. Much has changed on the streets of St. Louis in the intervening years. Crack use has declined markedly from its peak in the early to mid-1990s (Jacobs, 1999), as has criminal violence, especially homicide and robbery (St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department, 1997). And burglary has continued a steady decline that began in the 1980s (see Uniform Crime Reports, 1981, 1986, 1991, 1996, 2001). However, there is little evidence that these changes have dramatically altered gender relations among the city's street criminals, the focus of our concern here.

2. To preserve their anonymity, respondents are identified by self-assigned aliases throughout this article.

I was young and a guy I knew sold weed. He had been in the [target's] house before and we knew the guy very well and knew that he left his back door open because he didn't have a lock on it. We was young and he didn't give us much. He just said I'll give you a few joints if you go in there and get his stereo system. (Andre Neal)

But there was one key difference between the male and female offenders: the men typically were introduced to burglary through same-sex peers, whereas the women often came to the offense through their boyfriends (see also Alarid et al., 1996).

Okay, [on my first burglary] me and my boyfriend, my kids' father, we was together and he was way older than I was anyway. He was into breaking into houses and stuff so it was me, him and his brother. (Sharon Adams)

Many of the women said they were coerced by a boyfriend into their first, and sometimes their subsequent, residential burglaries.

Well, it was one like, 'If you love me, you'll do it'. . . He was saying, 'If you love me, you'll do it.' So I was really in love with him, so that's how it really got started. (Nicole)

I had to go by his rules cause I was living with him. He told me if I wouldn't do it that he would do something to me. I guess drug me up or something. (Yolanda Williams)

Some of the female offenders claimed not even to know that their boyfriends were planning to do a burglary until they arrived at the would-be crime scene—when it was difficult to back out.<sup>3</sup>

I was living with my boyfriend. He didn't exactly tell me we was going to do a burglary, he told me that we was going somewhere. So next thing I know, he just broke into the house and he told me to come with him and take things out. (Yolanda Williams)

Well I met this guy and he was doing it and, the first time, it was him and his friend and they came and picked me up with a stolen automobile. . . We went out there to this house and they got out. . . I didn't know what was going on at first. . . one of the men came back out and told me to come in and keep an eye out to see if anybody was coming. . . I'm not stupid, so I put two and two together. . . I was scared.

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3. Significantly, none of the male burglars reported being coerced into offending or being kept in the dark about it until the last minute. That said, many of the men called attention to the impact of peer pressure on their entry into, and continued involvement in, residential burglary. One of them, for example, was arrested on his very first burglary, but nevertheless went right back to it because he did not want to be seen as a coward by his male peers. Such behavior can best be understood as a form of traditional masculinity construction, wherein the object is to assert your daring and bravery by not backing down in the face of adversity.

As a matter of fact we got in a big argument. . . I made a big scene, but I went in anyway. (Tammy Smith)<sup>4</sup>

Males, by and large, act as gatekeepers to the social world of residential burglary. Reflecting the gender segregation that characterizes much of day-to-day streetlife, they bring male peers and family members into their offending networks, while remaining generally resistant to including women in their residential break-ins, save for the rare exception of a girlfriend or female relative (for a general overview, see Warr, 2002). Even when they *do* include women in such offenses, they tend to marginalize them and to limit their participation to secondary or subservient roles.

### MOTIVATION

In her study of active robbers, Miller (1998:44) found that the reasons such offenders give for committing their stick-ups represent “more a case of gender similarities than differences.” Consistent with this finding, the male and female burglars in our sample differed little when it came to the reasons they offered for their offenses. Most said that they committed residential break-ins to finance a “party” lifestyle centered on illicit drug use, and incorporating the ostentatious display of various status-enhancing items like designer clothing and jewelry.

It's usually, say we'll be doing some coke and then you really want more, so we'll go and do [a burglary] and get some money. (Sasha Williams)

[I commit burglaries mainly] to get high. And buy clothes, buy me two buttons of heroin and one button of girl (cocaine). When I get high off that, I go buy me some clothes. (Jon Monroe)

[I spend the money from my burglaries on] odds and ends, sometimes I get clothes or something real fancy. [But drugs], that's my first stop. (Karen Green)

Despite this overall similarity, there were a few notable differences in the reasons that the men and women gave for their burglaries. For example, a number of the males reported using some of the proceeds from their break-ins to pursue sexual conquests while, perhaps not surprisingly, none of the female burglars did so. By contrast, the female burglars were far more likely than their male counterparts to say that they used a portion of the money from their break-ins to buy necessities for their children (see also Daly, 1989).

I needed money, cause I needed a roof over my head, food to eat and

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4. While some of the women in our sample reported that this coercion continued into subsequent burglaries, it frequently faded—or at least became implicit instead of explicit—as the women's criminal careers progressed (see also Richie, 1996 for a discussion of the role of coercion in female offending).

things for my baby. . .cause I needed diapers and I was broke and, you know, my hours had been cut and I didn't have the money to pay rent plus to get the baby what it needed. You know, it's gonna be cold soon, I need winter clothes for my kid, I need clothes. (Lynn) <sup>5</sup>

Although a few of the men also mentioned using some of the money from their burglaries for child support, most emphasized the need to protect their status by looking after their *own* needs.

I like to stand on my own two feet as a man, you know what I'm sayin'? I like to pay my way and I don't like to ask nobody for nothin'. Don't want nobody talkin' about me like I won't pay my way. I ain't freeloadin' off nobody. I'm a man, so I take care of myself. (Jeffery Moore)

Taken as a whole, the differences outlined above offer considerable insight into the gendered nature of streetlife in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. The neighborhoods from which the offenders in our sample were recruited contain an extremely high proportion of female-headed households in which women bear sole or primary responsibility for supporting their children. Men in these neighborhoods are expected to look after themselves and, as a consequence, often come to place a premium on maintaining their independence and autonomy (see Shover, 1996: Ch. 2). As Miller (1998:45) has observed: "Masculine street identity is tied to the ability to have and spend money, and included in this is the appearance of economic self-sufficiency." In such circumstances, men and women are largely isolated from one another and, for this and a host of other reasons, often find it difficult to form stable, mutually supportive relationships (see Anderson, 1990). This seems to be particularly true in disadvantaged African-American neighborhoods (see, e.g., Wilson, 1987). Indeed, we found only one thing to distinguish the African-American and white offenders in terms of the ways in which gender shapes their participation in residential burglary: African-American men were less likely than their white counterparts to report ever having committed a residential burglary with female co-offenders (see Anderson, 1989 for more on sex roles and attitudes among African-American males).

## TARGET SELECTION

When asked what they were looking for in a prospective residential burglary target, the male and female offenders expressed similar preferences; both wanted to find a dwelling that was (a) unoccupied, and (b) contained

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5. While women in our sample were far more likely to discuss using the proceeds of their crimes to buy things for their kids, none commented on whether and, if so, how being an active criminal influenced her relationship with her children.

something of value (see Wright and Decker, 1994: Ch. 3 for a comprehensive discussion of the situational factors that influence offenders' choice of targets). Breaking into a residence while the occupants were at home was almost universally regarded as being too risky, and no level of risk was acceptable in the absence of a compensating reward (see also Bennett and Wright, 1984). Accordingly, neither the men nor the women were willing to burglarize a residence without first knowing something about the people who lived there (especially their day-to-day routine) and the kinds of things it contained.<sup>6</sup>

Some clear gender differences exist in the strategies the offenders used to obtain such information. A number of the male offenders, for instance, had legitimate jobs as home remodelers, cable television installers, or gardeners that allowed them to scout potential burglary targets without attracting undue suspicion. None of the female burglars had a licit job that gave her access to a comparably wide range of residences. Thus, while some of the male offenders could identify promising burglary targets in the course of their work, the female offenders could not. As a result, the women in our sample often had to rely on information generated by the men in their immediate criminal social network. This strategy is exemplified by Stacey Jones, who explained to us that she let her boyfriend select their burglary targets because "he works in construction. . .so he goes all over and sees all different houses and stuff."

Although the legitimate jobs realistically available to the female burglars offered little scope for gathering information about promising targets, a few of the women found a way around this problem by using sex or the appearance of sexual availability to gain access to the homes of gullible men.<sup>7</sup>

I was with my lady friend and we was coming up on this liquor store. This fellah started talking to us. He was asking us did we want to go over his house. He wanted to date her. So while they was in the back, I took his door key he had sittin' in the front room. So after I got the door key I was sittin' in the front room drinkin' beer. So when they got through, they came out and we left and I had the door key.

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6. These concerns are highly practical in nature. This, in itself, could account for the gender similarities in target preferences. However, as we have noted, female initiation into burglary typically occurs via men and it could be that women acquire these preferences in that context.

7. This is a derivation of a classic robbery strategy known as the "Murphy Game," whereby a prostitute lures a potential customer into a secluded spot, ostensibly for sex, and then robs him (see Katz, 1988). Feminist criminologists also have drawn attention to this phenomenon as a form of resistance to patriarchal criminal social networks (see, especially, Maher, 1997; Miller, 1998).

The next day we went back by his house and did [the burglary].  
(Janet Wilson)

[Our burglaries] are usually set up or it usually be a guy that we've met or something like that. Then we stick around with him for about a week. Then slip his key off his ring. That's how we do it. . . . Most of the time we like, one without the other, then we not going. So a guy see us, he's like, 'Wow! I'm getting' me a treat, two of them.' They'll fall for that. See what I'm saying? (Karen Green)

These women were capitalizing on their femininity and sexuality to exploit opportunities available to them in a gendered social structure (also see Maher, 1997). We can see women using sex to gain access to targets as a rather straightforward use of available resources in the face of constraint. Alternatively, we can follow Emirbayer and Mische (1998) in speculating that this strategy arises from the contradictions inherent in border crossing activities—those without highly developed practical-evaluative skills will tend to deal with problematic situations by falling back on deeply held, traditional schemas. The fact that Karen Green and her partner refused to work alone (e.g., “we like, one without the other, then we not going”) highlights the tension and uncertainty in the activity.

The effectiveness of strategies based on the appearance of sexual availability is attested to by the fact that some mixed gender burglary crews employed them as a means of luring men out of their residences so that they could be burglarized. The difference is that, in these cases, the female offender charged with getting the man out of his dwelling was not in full control of the operation and thus risked being exploited by more dominant male members of the crew.

My guy knew what girl to pick to go over there [and get the potential victim out of his residence].. . . She was supposed to do her thing. . . .to get in the car and give him head and drop him off. That's what she was told to do. She said she did it, but our guy could care less because she got him out of the house one way or the other and he didn't throw a fit about it. (Candy Johnson)

A male burglar described a similar situation.

We were over to this guy's house, me and this other person. She went in the house. She knew the person better than I did. She had been going to see him quite often. So she told me what was in the house. We decided that she go in first and talk to him and just leave the door open. . . . So during the time she was distracting him, I was taking stuff out of the house. . . . she still knows him and she goes to see him all the time. (Maurice Ross)

The male burglars' answers to questions about the strategies women typically use to choose targets brought the gendered nature of streetlife

into sharp relief. Although a few of the women in our sample *did* sometimes rely on sex or the appearance of sexual availability to gather information about potential targets, to hear the male offenders talk one might conclude that they used this strategy much more often than was actually the case. Far more men than women mentioned the use of sex as a way in which female burglars located potential targets and, in doing so, they made broad generalizations rooted in traditional beliefs about feminine deviousness and sexuality.

They (women) get in the house and then say, 'Hey, I'll have sex with you.' Then once they get in the house they check everything out and then they find out what's going on and then if they know that person is going to leave or something like that they find out where the keys are and get the extra set or take the set that the people have. . . a few of them call they male friends and say, 'Come on with the car.' (Maurice Ross)

See what they (women) do, I've seen 'em do it lots of times, what they do is they'll be talking to this guy and they'll say, 'Let's go to your place,' you know, and get them all drugged, put a few tablets in the drinks, you know, they'll pass out, they'll take the stuff and they're out. I've seen them do it about four or five times. (Dan Ford)

Taking traditional notions of femininity a step further, one male burglar insisted that female offenders had little choice but to use their sexuality to gain access to potential targets because they were too weak to break into buildings.

They (female burglars) ain't got the strength to do that (kick in windows). They probably meet an old man or something and lonely and then go kick it (party) with him while he in there they take what they want and be gone and he subject not to see them no more. You know how women is man, they up with you and beat you. (James West)

These male understandings of female criminality reflect the misogynistic prism through which femininity is refracted so as to reduce women's participation in crime to stereotypically sexualized roles.

Although both the male and female residential burglars wanted to ensure that prospective targets were unoccupied and contained items worth stealing, they frequently adopted different strategies to obtain this information: men capitalizing on gender-specific employment opportunities or social network connections with other men involved in streetlife and women capitalizing on the appearance of, or actual, sexual availability. In doing so, the men and women were exploiting the divergent pools of potential resources inherent in a gendered social structure that favors males in the realm of legitimate employment and females in the realm of informal interaction. Further, in mixed-gender crews, men and women

freely drew on the others' advantages in information gathering and target selection. A similar process can be seen in the commission of residential burglary.

### COMMISSION

While some of the men in our sample claimed that they preferred to commit residential burglaries by themselves, mostly because they did not trust their colleagues and were unwilling to share the proceeds,<sup>8</sup> none of the women expressed a desire to work alone. The female burglars, even those working in all-female crews, routinely reported that they lacked the knowledge or skills needed to break into a dwelling on their own. Perhaps for this reason, the women were much less likely than their male counterparts to dwell on the negative aspects of working with others.<sup>9</sup>

In a sense, the fact that the women appeared to find working with others to be less problematic than did the males is surprising because our data indicate that females often are limited to secondary or subservient roles in mixed-gender burglary crews (also see Decker et al., 1993). They seldom participate in planning the crime, and frequently do not even enter the residence, acting as lookout or driver instead.

All I had to do, all I ever do, is drive. I just go, like he'll (her boyfriend) go, him and his friend. . .during the day and he'll look at a house and he'll find one and then he'll tell me about where the house is and stuff, and all I have to do is drive to the place and wait for them to start bringing the stuff out and then drive off. (Stacey Jones)

That said, some of the women *did* enter dwellings to unlock a door for their male co-offenders, but from then on their participation in the offense was limited.

I'm mostly the helper because I'm small enough to get in places and I'm light on my feet. I can't be heard easily. . . . Either I'm looking out or they (her co-offenders) are looking out, . . . but by me being the lighter and the shorter, it's easier for me to get in. (Jade)

Although it is stereotypical to focus on issues of size (or strength), the fact remains that when women such as Jade discussed being the first person in her crew to enter the residence they specifically attributed this assignment

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8. See Wright and Decker (1994:154–157) for further discussion of the motivations for working alone expressed by the men in this sample. While nine (24%) of the males in the sample expressed a *preference* for working alone, *all* of the burglars in the sample reported that they frequently worked with others.

9. As suggested by a reviewer, an alternative explanation for this finding is that women, compared with men, are socialized to place more value on and to pay more attention to interpersonal relationships, and thus also may be more positive about working in groups.

to their smaller and slighter physique. This represents yet another example of women capitalizing on limited resources at their disposal. Thus, although not all women are small, those in our sample who were petite found this to be an advantage during offense commission, a fact reflected in their somewhat more central role in the activity, even in mixed-gender burglary crews.

A subtle division of labor emerged when the female burglars discussed the goods they focused on inside the house. Those women who typically entered a structure while working in mixed-gender crews claimed expertise in finding so-called women's items. One of these women described what happened when she and a girlfriend, accompanied by male co-offenders, entered a dwelling with no female resident.

I didn't do nothing to this house at all. I just sat there and watched a video. . .It was mostly the guy's shit. We knew there was no girl there. . .me and a girlfriend of mine, we just sat there and watched a video, drank a soda and that was it. (Candy Johnson)

Overall, then, the roles available to females during offense commission were limited, both by personal choice and by others in their crew.

Many of the men in our sample admitted to performing functions similar to women during their burglaries, but (a) not when female co-offenders were present, (b) typically of their own volition rather than at the behest of a more dominant co-offender, or (c) in the early stages of their burglary careers. There was no stigma attached to these roles in such situations, with the male offenders generally adopting the attitude that this was a necessary "apprenticeship" in their craft. This contrasts markedly with the situation that prevailed for the female burglars, who often were solely engaged in secondary roles. And there was quite a bit of disparity in how men and women perceived this division of labor. Many of the male burglars claimed that the exclusion of women was necessary because they were too soft and emotional to handle the pressures inherent in the offense.

That's (burglary) something I never discussed in my life with any women I was involved with. I really wouldn't discuss it with a woman who told me she did a burglary. Cause I talk about that with a women, I couldn't trust a woman. . .Wouldn't no matter how good she was, I wouldn't. . .I just have a certain feeling about women. Women break down under pressure. If we got into a certain situation, they probably wouldn't be able to handle it. (Eddie Cagen)

Even when men made statements that would seem to indicate egalitarian relationships and work roles, they quickly backed off of them.

[Women] do just as much as you do. But really, a woman may normally watch. Or y'all could be working at the same time. She'll go

take care of this while you go down here you know. They specifin' in knowing what jewelry is and what things are being hid that a women would hide and stuff like that. (Andre Neal)

John Black's response betrays a similar sentiment: "[They do the] same things. She be a lookout sometimes. Or she set the person up." While both Andre Neal and John Black initially claim that the roles played by female co-offenders are equal, the examples they offer clearly qualify this assertion. Indeed, it was rare to find women assuming true partner roles in burglary crews. Only in all female crews did they attain truly egalitarian status.

Within mixed gender crews, some women appeared happy to accept marginal involvement in the offense, believing that this would mitigate their culpability in case they were caught.

I guess we basically let him do all like the kickin' the window and all that kind of stuff. But it wasn't nothing that we couldn't have done on our own. I guess the fact was we thought, 'Well, let him do it. If he's the one that does all that, should we get caught [he'll be the one who has to take the consequences].' (Bonnie Williams)

I think down in my mind, when I first started doing burglary I saw a show and in it the women claimed mental incompetent; that she'd been brainwashed. And I guess I felt like if we ever got caught that I could blame it on him. That's a pretty shit attitude, but. . . I don't know, I kind of feel like I'm smarter than they (the male burglars) are. (Darlene White)

Comments such as these indicate that female offenders are well aware of the fact that street crime is widely perceived as a masculine activity and believe that their femininity may offer them some protection from legal sanctions, especially if it appears that they were coerced by their male co-offenders (see also Laidler and Hunt, 2001; Miller, 2001).

[If I got caught, all I'd need to say is], he made me do it, you know, I'm just a feeble little woman. He said he had to go in his friend's house for a minute. I don't know what he's doing, you know. I'm out here waiting for him. . . They don't suspect women as much as men. If I was a black man or a white man it does not matter. If a man came running out of a house and a woman came running out of a house, someone might automatically think, 'What's wrong with that woman? Did someone attack her? Is she okay?' A man comes running out of the house, what do you first think? 'Hey man, what did you steal?' You know, that kind of thing. (Darlene White)

There may be some truth in this belief (see Simon and Landis, 1991). But as Wright and Decker (1994:152–153) have observed, it hardly matters

whether the women are correct in believing that the criminal justice system operates in a chivalrous manner: “[T]he important point is that [they are] convinced this is the case, and thus [are] able to mentally discount the threat of arrest and punishment.”

#### HYPOTHETICAL DESISTANCE

Because our study is based on interviews with male and female residential burglars who, at the time, considered themselves to be *currently active*, their responses to questions about desistance are necessarily hypothetical, and should be interpreted as such. But this does not mean that active offenders have nothing important to tell us about desistance (see, e.g., Maruna, 2001). They are the ones we are trying to persuade to desist, and their views about how this might best be accomplished are worthy of our consideration. Moreover, such information, though hypothetical, may offer insight into the ways in which gender mediates offenders’ perceived attachments to the conventional moral and social order.

When asked what would have to happen to make them stop committing residential burglaries, both the men and the women identified imprisonment. Here, however, they were referring solely to the incapacitative effect of incarceration, not to its deterrent or rehabilitative potential. This answer failed to address the underlying issues that the question sought to tap, which had to do with the conditions that might make the offenders stop *wanting to* commit burglaries. When asked to speculate about that, the male and female offenders offered strikingly different responses.

Many of the male offenders claimed that a good job, by which they meant one that paid well and involved little or no disciplined subordination to authority, might cause them to reduce their offending or give it up altogether (for a detailed discussion of this issue, see Wright and Decker, 1994). Beyond rewarding employment, a majority of the men also identified a stable and supportive relationship as something that might convince them to stop committing crimes, speculating that they would probably give up burglary once they “settled down” and started a family (also see Shover, 1996). Indeed, many of the males claimed that they had stopped offending altogether during periods in the past when they were happily married.

When I first got out of the service, I didn’t do nothin’ wrong cause I had money. Had a little job, plus I had a wife. You know, I didn’t want to do nothing. . . [But] after me and my wife broke up, hey, knock on your door and, if you don’t answer, I’m comin’ in. (Jon Monroe)<sup>10</sup>

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10. When asked what it would take to get him to give up burglary, this respondent answered: “Maybe a good woman in my life.” He quickly added, however, that there

I got into the Bible and stuff with my old lady. . . My old lady is pretty religious and I started watching it with her and I got interested. We got really close to God. So I quit doing all of that. I quit stealin', didn't rob nobody. . . Then we split up for a while and I went back to doing it. . . I started drinking, smoking, stealing, robbing, burglaries, whatever. (Earl Martin)

One of the male burglars reported that his *current* girlfriend was trying to persuade him to give up crime, and that his upcoming marriage made it important for him to do so.

My girlfriend. . . is trying to get me to stop doing it. Sure, she would like to not have to pay for a box of soap, but she's a good girl, she don't like that. . . I mean, I'm supposed to get married soon and there ain't no way I'm going to make it doing stuff like that. . . It's not the way I want to live. It's not right, it's scary. (Matt Detteman)

Along with marriage, some of the men also felt that, as fathers, they should stop offending so as to provide a law-abiding role model for their children. One male burglar said that he currently was trying to give up crime and support his children "the right way."

I feel that now, since I have two kids, I'm more responsible to get out here and get me a job and hold up as a father. Provide for my kids the right way. . . I feel my obligation is to take care of [my daughter]. My responsibilities are to take care of her and see that she grows up the right way and not doin' nothing wrong. (Howard Ford)

Comments such as these demonstrate the powerful influence of gendered social structures on the male offenders' thinking about their eventual desistance from crime. They have incorporated the traditional male role of "breadwinner" as something to be accomplished through lawful employment. Enacting mainstream "head-of-the-household" masculinities, therefore, involves a retreat from deviant and criminal behaviors; adult masculinity (as opposed to adolescent masculinity) is actualized through legitimate work, not criminal activity.<sup>11</sup>

Whereas the male burglars identified finding a rewarding relationship with a woman as something that might cause them to turn away from crime, the situation was quite different for the females; their offending was driven by ongoing relationships with the (mostly male) co-offenders who

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"ain't no good women out there so I think I'm goin' to be doin' it (committing residential burglaries) from now on."

11. This is not to suggest that men are immune to informal social control, but rather that they are subject to different forms of control manifested largely in peer—as opposed to familial—networks. Often this pushed the men toward, not away from, lawbreaking.

initially introduced them to residential burglary. Because burglary networks are dominated by men who, as a rule, are reluctant to co-offend with women, once those relationships broke down, it was unlikely that the females would be initiated into another crew and, as a consequence, they refrained from committing further break-ins. Put more bluntly, the female burglars needed to sever their relationships with criminally-involved males in order to reduce their offending. Tammy Smith, for example, was introduced to residential burglary by her boyfriend and committed all of her offenses with him. When asked why she had been able to go for substantial periods of time without offending, she explained: “[It’s] times when I am away from [my boyfriend]. Since he has been arrested, I don’t want to be a part of them. It’s not a way of living, I’ll tell you.” Conversely, males were likely to find another group to offend with or to offend alone once their original burglary crew dissolved.

Many of the women in our sample expressed strong concerns about how their parents and other close family members might view their criminal behavior.

It’s like my mama be making me feel guilty at times, you know. She be telling my kids, you know. She be getting old, I got enough stuff in my house that she ain’t paid for and stuff like that, you know. . .She telling me to go talk to somebody, some psychiatrist or something. (Marie Spencer)

I was not scared of being in the house, but scared that somebody would find out in the family. I was [more] worried that somebody in our family would find out and we would be the black sheep of the family than [about] actually getting caught. (Darlene White)

I was worried about if I would be recognized. If I did get caught, how am I going to get up from under this? My most worry was my Mom. What would she say? Now that’s the biggest hassle with anything I do. What would my mother say or what she thinks. So I learned a lesson from that, what ever I did I would always tell my mother. She’s my best friend. She’s my wife, my husband, my son, my daughter, but first and foremost, she’s my worst nightmare. (Running Wolf Woods)

Men never expressed this form of guilt or concern about how family members might perceive their criminality. For instance, when asked what would happen if his parents discovered his involvement in crime, Anton White simply said, “Well, they’ll just find out.” One offender did say that, when he was much younger, he used to worry about the prospect of his parents finding out about his criminality, but only because he did not want to be punished.

I didn’t want no one to tell on me because I knew I would get into more trouble if somebody told that I done it. Cause then, I wasn’t

raised to do this and I knew I would get in trouble. We was brought up as, if you did wrong, you got punished. Not no staying in no room and watching no TV, you got the strap put on you. . . Those whuppings just wasn't no fun cause not only did you get whopped by your parents, you had your uncle, your aunt, all of them. (Joe Outlaw)

Indeed, rather than worrying about what their families might think about their criminal activities, some men actually expressed contempt for their relatives' conformity. One of the male burglars cynically capitalized on his aunt's babysitting job as a way to gather information about potential targets without her knowledge.

My aunt keeps her (the would-be burglary victim's) little baby. We just dropped my aunt off. I had used the bathroom, so that's how I got a chance to see their house. . . I didn't take [the valuables] then because she kept the baby at night while they went out. If anything came up missing while they out, they would have thought my aunt did it. Which now I don't give a shit about the bitch for real. (Charlie)

Taken as a whole, these data suggest that the female burglars are more sensitive than the males to conventional informal social control—especially potential and actual shaming and ostracism at the hands of their relatives (also see Decker et al., 1993).<sup>12</sup> This is understandable in light of broader gender norms. Compared with men, women are socialized to pay substantially more attention to the maintenance of interpersonal relationships (Beutel and Marini, 1995; Broidy and Agnew, 1997; Hagan et al., 1985; Kessler and McLeod, 1984), and this may be especially true in communities dominated by female-headed households. Most of the women in our sample were worried that knowledge of their lawbreaking would be a bitter disappointment to their mothers and other female relatives.<sup>13</sup> If communities dominated by female-headed households truly are knit together by informal ties between women, then female offenders should be more conscious of their social position in relation to other women. The women interviewed here seemed aware that their criminal behavior could jeopardize their network of conventional social relationships. While this did not stop them from offending, it did produce a level of guilt and

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12. Only one female respondent, Darlene White, mentioned entry into a normative relationship as a reason to stop offending: "If I ever had children or get married or something actually, you know. I can't imagine myself being married right now because I am living a kind of lifestyle that would not allow for children or would not allow for the regular kind of home life, you know. Mommy steals for a living, you know, that kind of thing." As with many of the men, Darlene's speculation about the possibility of a law-abiding future draws heavily on normative gender schemas.

13. The female burglars did not mention the possibility of letting down their male relatives, further highlighting the female-dominated social networks that background their lives.

unease that far exceeded that expressed by the male residential burglars, and may help to explain why fewer women than men engage in predatory street crime in the first place.

## DISCUSSION

Our findings demonstrate that residential burglary is a significantly gender-stratified offense; the processes of initiation, commission, and potential desistance are heavily structured by gender norms. Women engaged in residential burglaries do not confront all of the gender issues that females face in violent offending, especially with respect to face-to-face impression management with targets (see Miller, 1998), but they *do* have to negotiate male-dominated networks and landscapes in accomplishing their crimes. It seems to us that gender plays the strongest role in shaping opportunity (e.g., initiation) and the events leading up to residential burglaries (e.g., information gathering), while playing a lesser, but still important, role in molding actual offense commission.

The powerful sexism that structures streetlife serves to constrain the opportunities available to women to engage in residential burglary. Male offenders typically do not like to work with women, seeing them as physically and emotionally weak. This perceived weakness undermines women's potential utility in the eyes of their male co-offenders so that, when females *are* drawn into a male-dominated burglary crew, their participation often is limited to an accomplice role. Perhaps this helps to explain why females are much less likely than males to participate in residential burglary, and why those women who *do* participate appear to do so with less frequency (see English, 1993).

Once women successfully gain access to residential burglary networks, they tend to adopt accomplishment strategies very similar to their male counterparts and co-offenders. Whether this is due to the innate appeal of these strategies or to the socialization experiences of female offenders is impossible to determine from our data. However, it is significant that when offending in female-only groups, the women interviewed here discarded these strategies in favor of more gender specific techniques that served to reduce the uncertainty inherent in residential burglary. By gaining access to male victims' residences via the appearance of sexual availability, the two all-female crews in our sample used potential targets' gendered blind spots (e.g., patriarchal attitudes that define women as sex objects) to gather inside information and thereby facilitate their offending. Thus, in their engagements with property crime, the women in our sample proved to be active negotiators operating in a constrained social environment.

As other feminist ethnographers have shown, social actors are not

blindly internalizing and recapitulating gendered social structures (e.g., Maher, 1997; Miller, 1998). Both the men and women in our study were cognizant of prevailing gender norms. Men called upon them to cement their own positions in burglary crews, apparently freely using the advantages that women might bring to the enterprise, while limiting the overall level of participation and integration these women enjoyed within such crews. As seen in other studies (e.g., Laidler and Hunt, 2001; Maher, 1997; Miller, 1998, 2001), the women were well aware of the male-dominated nature of streetlife and attuned to their tenuous position within it. Most of the women took advantage of opportunities presented to them, while playing the significance of their gender up or down in a highly situational fashion. Whether motivated by the financial demands of heading a household or by their involvement in street-corner partying and drug use, the majority of the women were not transforming or redefining gender roles so much as they were creatively operating within the constraints that those roles imposed upon them. Overall, we suggest that for female offenders the boundaries of traditional femininity represent both opportunities and limitations, which the women interviewed here experienced and negotiated to varying degrees. While such activities do not erase the powerful disempowerment women experience in streetlife, they do provide pathways through gender hierarchies that may allow them to accomplish their short-term goals.

In addition to negotiating male-dominated criminal networks, the women in our sample also had to be mindful of their position within female-dominated domestic networks. The neighborhoods from which most of our subjects were drawn exhibit distinctly overlapping social networks segregated along gender lines. Male-dominated criminal and party networks predominate as a key aspect of streetlife. Adult men in these networks lead lives largely separate from adult women. Female-dominated social networks of friends and relatives comprise the core domestic space and activity for the women in these neighborhoods. While there is quite a bit of overlap between networks, they remain distinct social arenas (Anderson, 1990; Stack, 1974). Thus, for men, discovery of criminal activities by family and non-criminal peers caused little concern and probably did not jeopardize these already tenuous relationships. On the other hand, for women, such a revelation could generate substantial shame and potentially trigger outright ostracism. The risk of this happening clearly carried considerable emotional force for the female burglars in our sample, albeit not enough to deter their offending altogether.

Although unanswerable from our data, this raises broader questions about the nature of delinquent peer group participation for women. Involvement with criminally active men will not only increase women's

exposure to criminal values, potential criminal opportunities, and victimization, but may also become self-reinforcing, as engagement in streetlife networks serves to weaken ties to family groups—the set of peer influences available to the women most likely to promote criminal desistance. As other feminist ethnographers have concluded (e.g., Daly, 1992; Gilfus, 1992; Maher, 1997; Miller, 2001; Richie, 1996), female criminality arises out of a combination of romantic relationships, victimization, and streetlife connections. Such lived experiences dialectically engage each other, thereby serving to embed women in criminal networks. The women in our sample entered streetlife networks through their male associations, while those who lessened their involvement in streetlife did so through the severing of those same relationships, whether voluntarily or involuntarily.

Traditional gender norms constitute the foundation on which street-based social interactions occur. Those norms, however, are intensified, or refracted, through street networks so as to become almost caricatures of their mainstream counterparts. The male offenders, compared to the females, expressed far more antipathy toward conventional norms and values, which is hardly surprising given their deeper criminal embeddedness and stronger commitment to streetlife. This is why the female offenders believed that, in order to go straight, they first needed to sever ties with their male associates (see also Richie, 1996). Interestingly, it is only when speculating about the possibility of a law-abiding future that the males adopt a more traditional stance than the females do; they see their best hope of going straight as lying in the establishment of an enduring relationship with a “good” woman. Perhaps both the males and the females are essentially correct in their assessment of the social mechanisms most likely to bring about their reform, but it is clear that they are working at cross purposes—the men talk about the need to *make* a tie, the women about the need to *break* one.

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