“It takes skills to take a car”: Perceptual and procedural expertise in carjacking
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ABSTRACT
This article explores the crucial role played by criminal expertise in carjacking, a violent street offense that exhibits characteristics of both car theft and robbery. Specifically, it describes the manner in which an offender’s perceptual skills (aimed at discerning the suitability of a carjacking target) and procedural skills (aimed at enacting the carjacking offense itself) relate to one another in a process emanating from the interacting characteristics of the vehicle, driver, environment, and offender. The core assumption of this perspective is that carjacking requires considerable skill to identify an appropriate offense opportunity and carry out the same. This contradicts a prevailing notion within the criminological literature that offending is a largely unskilled enterprise. Drawing on ethnographic data both original and in previous research we demonstrate this not to be the case.

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1. Introduction
This article explores the crucial role played by criminal expertise in carjacking. Carjacking is unlike other violent street offenses in that occupied vehicles are uniquely mobile and seldom remain viable targets for long. A car is here one moment and gone the next. Typically there is little or no time for deliberation; potential carjackers must quickly decide if and how to proceed or the chance will be lost. In order to be successful, then, would-be carjackers have to rely on their perceptual and procedural expertise to recognize and seize inherently transient opportunities under extreme time pressure. How does that expertise express itself during a carjacking? How do prevailing dispositional and situational factors enhance or mitigate the application of expertise in real-world settings and circumstances? (See Fig. 1.)

The notion that criminal offending requires skill has been challenged in the past, most notably by Hirschi (1986) who famously declared that offenders “…are not very good at what they do” maintaining little or no proficiency particular to the committing crime in general or to specific types of crime. He further maintained that the offender career, “does not appear to be a career of increasing skill and sophistication…” but rather one that “…starts with little of either and goes downhill from there.” This would seem inconsistent with what we now know about the ways in which carjackings are contemplated and carried out in real-life settings and circumstances (see below), with the offenders employing a specialized body of knowledge and skills throughout such crimes. It also runs counter to prevailing research on offender decision-making.

Some of the most important early work on expertise among criminals can be found in research on non-violent offenses like burglary.
Perceptual Skills

Procedure Skills

Fig. 1. Interplay of perceptual and procedural skills in targeting and enactment of carjacking.

For example, Wright and Logie (1988) compared the perceptual skills of convicted juvenile burglars and adult, non-offender homeowners. They presented subjects with photographs of houses and recorded whether and how they would select them as a burglary target. These photographic stimuli were constructed to be identical except for a single visual characteristic that was systematically varied by subject (e.g., some photographs displayed the front door as having a dead bolt lock and others as not having one). As a group, young burglars largely concurred regarding the factors that influenced their target selection process, but their decisions differed significantly from those of the non-offenders.

In a subsequent study, Wright, Logie, and Decker (1995) compared burglary-relevant cognitive abilities of 47 active residential burglars to those of 34 non-offenders by exposing them to photographic stimuli depicting houses and asked whether the dwellings would be attractive and appropriate for burglary. This was followed by a surprise recognition test where, in some photographs, physical features of the setting had been changed. Results revealed that active residential burglars were significantly better than non-offenders at recognizing certain “burglary relevant” environmental changes. Moreover, offenders differed from controls in the mix of environmental cues they employed when selecting targets (see also, Decker, Wright, & Logie, 1993).

Since then, other researchers have taken up the challenge of studying criminal expertise. Some have continued to focus on burglars (see e.g., Nee & Meenaghan, 2006; Garcia-Retamero & Dhani, 2009; Bernasco & Luykx, 2003); comparing their assessments of defensible space to those of police officers (Ham-Rowbottom, Gifford, & Shaw, 1999), assessing their use of spatial dimensions in target searches (Hakim, Rengert, & Schachmurove, 2001), comparing the proficiency of incarcerated burglars in selecting appropriate targets (Nee & Taylor, 2000), explaining burglars’ and other offenders “determinability” (Nagin & Pogarsky, 2001; Pogarsky, 2002; Piquero & Pogarsky, 2002), and whether they are able to translate their burglary skills into breaking into cars (Michael, Hull, & Zahm, 2001). Additional work on expertise has moved beyond burglary to examine sexual predation (Ward, 1999), and the ability of offenders to detect law enforcement (Jacobs & Miller, 1998) and snitches (Jacobs, 1996).

1.1. Perceptual and procedural skills

Despite Hirschi’s contention to the contrary, these studies demonstrate that criminals possess expertise specific to offending, which differs from the knowledge base of non-offenders. However, they focused primarily, though not exclusively, on acquisitive, non-confrontational crimes and did not examine whether similar forms of expertise were applicable to violent offenses such as robbery. Topalli (2004) addressed this issue by examining the perceptual differences between active street offenders, demographic controls (those who live in the same neighborhoods as offenders but do not offend) and college controls (who neither live in such neighborhoods nor offend). Subjects were exposed to ambiguous standardized video displays of dyads engaged in simple, 9 second-long social interactions (one figure approaching and touching another) presented at varying speeds and asked to describe whether the displays were aggressive or friendly. Offenders consistently rated the displays differently than the control groups, often focusing on aspects of the interaction that suggested victimization or target vulnerability. This study expanded the notion of criminal expertise beyond the procedural aspects of crime (i.e., how to commit an offense) to include the situational cues that determine the suitability of a criminal opportunity, (i.e., the perceptual aspects of offenses).

Perceptual skills in offending are those used by would-be offenders to identify an attractive target and the situational characteristics that make it suitable for the execution of an offense. This combination of both the target and the surroundings is critical to our notion of perceptual skills. It assumes that the dynamic interplay of the victim and the surroundings provides offenders with information that makes them more or less prone to carry out the offense (see also Nee & Ward, 2015, discussion of situational awareness and selective preconscious attention in this issue). In this sense, the notion of perceptual skills would seem to be an underlying component in the interaction between suitable target, capable guardian, and motivated offender that is the cornerstone of routine activities theory (see Cohen & Felson, 1979). Such skills also are a key component of social ecological (or Gibsonian) theory, which posits the notion of directly perceivable complex social qualities such as vulnerability (Berry, 1998, 1999), friendliness (Good, 1985), or youthfulness (Zebrowitz-McArthur, 1988) in the optic array. This theoretical perspective on perception assumes that relevant physical and social information is contained within the environment itself and is directly observable and perceivable. This is in contrast to traditional social psychological theories, which view the perceiver as a collector and interpreter of physical and social information (see Fiske & Taylor, 2013, 1991). Ecological psychology has been used to investigate complex social interactions (including amorous advances, conflict, and care-giving) with success, validating its applicability to the study of perception in higher-order social episodes (see Baron, 1990; Baron & Boudreau, 1987; Baron & Misovich, 1993; McArthur & Baron, 1983) including vulnerability and criminal suitability (see Topalli, 2004; Topalli & O’Neal, 1995).

In later work, Topalli (2004) deconstructed the concept of criminal expertise to include the notion (borrowed from social cognition researchers) that, because perception conditions cognitive functioning (including decision-making and subsequent behavior), perceptual skills are most often implemented by the offender prior to employing procedural skills (see Berkowitz, 1988; Berkowitz & Troccoli, 1990). The key difference between early work on offender expertise and Topalli (2004) is that the former studies focused on non-confrontational property crimes (i.e., burglary) in which the targets (i.e., residences) were static and the offenses lacked a social component, whereas the latter study addressed the differences between offenders’ and non-offenders’ perceptual abilities regarding interactional cues present in interpersonal crimes such as robbery. This dealt with an important gap in the criminal expertise literature by acknowledging that social inferences and attributions related to violent offending are fundamental to understanding how interpersonal, predatory crimes are enacted. Just as offenders maintain specialized knowledge regarding the perception and execution of property crimes, so too do they maintain similar proficiency with regard to interpersonal, violent offenses. In the case of carjacking, the two components of criminal expertise (perceptual and procedural) are applied to an offense (carjacking) that maintains characteristics of both property crime (taking a car) and interpersonal crime (taking that car from a person by force).
2. Carjacking as a process

The process of committing a carjacking can be broken down into several closely linked but analytically distinct steps (see Topalli & Wright, 2003; Jacobs, Topalli & Wright, 2003). The process begins with an offender developing a motivation to take a vehicle and then selecting one specific vehicle to target. Once the target has been chosen, the offense must then be executed, which includes approaching the vehicle and commandeering it. Once in control of the vehicle, the offender is concerned with leaving the scene, making use of the vehicle, and finally disposing of it. In this paper, we will focus primarily on targeting (choosing a vehicle) and enactment (commandeering the car). We selected these stages of the offending event (see Bennett & Wright, 1984) because they are the most obvious stages to highlight the offender’s application of perceptual and procedural skills.

Perceptual and procedural skills are critical components of the carjacker’s decision-making processes. These skills on their own and the interactions between them operate just beneath the conscious awareness of offenders, but can be revealed through conversations with them in ethnographic studies. As such, our exploration of carjackers’ use of perceptual and procedural skills focus on semi-structured interviews we and others have had with them over many years (including, but not limited to, Topalli & Wright, 2003; Jacobs, Topalli, & Wright, 2003; Jacobs, 2012, 2013, etc.) These studies apply a similar methodological framework. They are quasi-ethnicographic nature, and focused on active (i.e., noninstitutionalized) criminals who primarily engage in carjacking as the offense of choice. Researchers engage offenders in in-depth, semi structured interviews about their past carjackings with particular focus on each stage of the offending process and how offenders engage in decision-making throughout these events. Our current treatment focuses primarily on studies that access active offenders rather than those in prison. Incarcerated offenders experience conventional institutional pressures that accrue from being interviewed in a correctional setting (i.e., a prison, with its constituent characteristics; walls, guards, etc.) who have been included in a study through the researcher’s contact with agents of formal social control (e.g., correctional administrators). Active offenders’ responses to the questions of researchers are not constrained or influenced by the salience of institutional forces (Wright et al., 1995). More importantly, at the time they are interviewed they are presently active in offending and meaning that their memories and recollections of past offending as well as the decisions that led to and governed such offending are recalled with far greater accuracy (for an in-depth discussion of these advantages see Topalli, 2004; Jacques & Wright, 2010).

2.1. Targeting: using perceptual skills to select a vehicle

Given that a would-be offender is motivated to carjack a vehicle (see Topalli & Wright, 2003), the first step in doing so is selecting a target. One consideration is a potential vehicle’s value and disposability, i.e. the ease with which it can be sold. Another is the risk associated with the driver, namely the likelihood of resistance to the carjacker’s demands. Resistance has many manifestations, including everything from “freezing up” to screaming, speeding off, or shooting at the offender. A carjacker named David,1 for instance, described a time he came “close to getting [his] head knocked off” by an armed driver (Copes, Hochstetler, & Cherbonneau, 2012: 261). Another, Shawn, was injured by a woman he targeted: “Before I know it she done upped the blade, man. And when she went and did this, she done hit. Boom! It stuck [in my leg,] I’m talking about to the bone. I felt it hit my bone” (p. 262).

To increase the odds of compliance, carjackers purposefully target individuals perceived as unlikely to put up a fight—figuratively or literally. Some carjackers reportedly select victims on the basis of their physical appearance. The carjacker just quoted preferred victimizing females because “a male is [more] difficult to deal with in a jacking than a female, […] he going to want to scuffle” (p. 255). Yet other carjackers report that women are less desirable targets because they are apt to scream; according to Thomas, “Females they, they stupid. They, they resist. You know you got a whole gun big ole.44 in their face—and they just hollering, I want your money. I don’t want you to holler. […] I did like two females and they acted the same way [so] I say man don’t fuck with the females” (p. 255). Carjackers also consider the victim’s age as a predictor of resistance. Kristy, a female offender, reasoned.

“A younger woman, they going to give a pretty good fight. You pick an older woman and you don’t have to [worry] too much.” (p.255–6). And Little D selected a target basis on that person’s physical size: “I seen that little person I know he was little and he looked like he was scared […] He was puny … I knew I could have took it from him. … He was like skinny […] He was just real little and looked like he was scared” (Jacobs, 2013: 531).

Other potential victims apparently have that inexpressible (to the offender) quality that deters trouble or attracts it. As Leroy said, “Sometimes you can judge a person. You can look at them and know that ain’t the one to mess with” (Copes et al., 2012: 256). And Playboy put it this way: “You can actually look at a person and tell what kind of person you dealing with.” (Jacobs, 2013: 530). C Ball described one of his victims as a “little punk. […] He don’t know how to fight, he don’t know how to do nothing. […] I said, ‘give me your car.’ He said, ‘all right,’ gave me his car … I punched him in the face and skirted off in his car” (p. 531). Perhaps these carjackers’ assessments were unconsciously based on the victims’ style. For instance, Michael explained, “I’ll run up to a nigga car [and] he got some gold in his mouth he going to do the same thing I’m going to do. He’s going to bust head” (Copes et al., 2012: 256). As inferred in the previous quote and in the following one, victim selection may be based on a victim’s style combined with another demographic factor—race. In fact, many offenders we have spoken to in the past hold stereotypical views of them and use this to their advantage. For example, Michael remarked,

“I see the three little white boys. They was looking at me, you heard me. … [They] look like the type that go to raves. So I’m like these some ducks right there. I got me some ducks sitting right here” (p. 256). He went on to explain that a “ducks” are “some stupid ass people who know nothing. You can just go ahead and get them.” (p. 256).

These descriptions of targeting by carjackers imply the use of perceptual skills; knowing which vehicles are appropriate to take and which drivers and situations will mitigate the potential for resistance or retaliation by a driver. In the above examples, there are a number of variables in the physical and social world that offenders must perceive and attend to before they can successfully initiate and carry out an offense. First there is the vehicle itself. Many seasoned carjackers are able to identify a vehicle within moments of seeing it as “good for the taking.” As Black2 put it, “I know how to pick a car man. I take my girlfriend with me to be a look-out some times and she can’t pick a car for shit. She just looks at the color or whatever. I’m looking at other stuff. I dunno, just things that make that car and that situation the right situation.” Butler, an experienced street criminal from the south side of Atlanta was more expansive:

“I don’t know man. I just stand on the corner and if I see the right car, I don’t hesitate. I go for it. I can tell a car that’s a right car to take just by glancing at it. I got all kinds of things in my mind when I want a car. How much money I need. If someone want that kind of car. If

1 All offender names are either pseudonyms or street names.

2 Quotes in this section were obtained from an ongoing project on carjacking by the first and third authors.
there ain’t no cops, no witnesses. If the car is driving fast or slow. If there’s a way for me to drive off where nobody can follow. But you know, I don’t think on all that. I don’t have to. I been doing this, you know what I’m saying? I been doing this forever. I don’t to think on it. I just need to see that right car and that right situation. I’m on it in a slit second.”

Quickie communicated a similar level of expertise in perceiving whether a car was the right car, referencing not only the vehicle but also its the driver:

“And it was like magic. This car pulled the corner. It was like a blue Accord with a lady in it. Nobody else on the street. An old lady, middle-age lady. It was a just right lick, you know. Right car, right driver, right place, right time. I didn’t really think on it. That car turned the corner and I was like. Yes! That is the one. That is my ticket. That car was like, a turn-on for me. I saw that car and I saw heroin on four wheels, ha ha!”

Viewing the target not simply as a car but rather as a car and driver was another perceptual skill exhibited by experienced carjackers. After all, the right car with the wrong driver (say, a tough customer instead of an elderly one) could prove to be disastrous as a target. As Pac put it, “I look for the car, but I look for the driver too. I can tell by looking if that driver gonna be a problem. I been doing this for a while man and I know who a bitch is and who a hardcase is right off the bat.” Binge, an older carjacker from St. Louis also understood this,

“I always need money. Shit I always need it, every day! When I’m looking for a car, I look at the car then the driver. See if he’s intoxicated, see if he might be a police or something. How he’s dressed. To see if he might have a pistol or something. That’s why I look for old people. They are easier. They don’t fuss with you.”

Finally, would-be carjackers also must consider the environment as part of the targeting equation. Cars do not exist in a vacuum. They are embedded within a physical world that presents strategic limitations, challenges, and opportunities to the carjacker. As such, potential offenders must consider the spatial logistics of the contemplated offense. As Black put it, “You can have the right car and the right driver, but if you ain’t in the right place, you ain’t doing no carjacking. You need to see that you in the right place to make it.” Dreads, a carjacker from Atlanta noted how such factors were important to the commission of the carjacking:

“I was walking down Ponce, and I seen this nice car pull up to the drive-through. It was at like a Church’s Chicken or a Kentucky Chicken or whatever. It was this little red car with some shiny wheels. There was like a car behind them and they was ordering their food at the window. So, I’m like shit, they can’t back up ‘cause there’s s car behind and there’s a car in front that they just got they food. Its like a sitting duck or whatever, you know? So, I know if I walk up on ‘em they can’t go nowhere. So, I had to make my move ‘cause the other people were gonna drive away, the ones in front of them. Shit, so I waited until they just got the food. They not driving off without they food, you know. So, I walked on ‘em and right when she handed the lady the bag of food I was on the window. Get out. Get out and give me the keys, don’t even think about going nowhere.”

2.2. Enactment: approaching and commandeering the target

Of course, perceiving the optimal car, driver, and physical space for committing a carjacking is only half the story. The other half is knowing how to take a vehicle. Perceptual skills are a necessary precursor to procedural skills. Without them, targeting would be haphazard, making the outcome far less predictable. But knowing how to take a car is just as critical to success. It is within procedural expertise that we see the application of the normalcy and blitz techniques mentioned previously. In the words of Pac, “You can know what car to take, but if you don’t know how to take it, you will get your ass killed or arrested every time.” Carjackers and other street offenders develop procedural skills over time that allow them to engage in their crimes with little or no hesitation. Over time they have acquired sophisticated scripts (see Fiske & Taylor, 2013, 1991) that can be accessed at a moment’s notice, thereby allowing them to offend without having to pause to “think the offense through.” (see Nee & Ward, 2015, this issue for a more in-depth discussion of automaticity). This is especially important for a crime like carjacking, which requires would-be offenders to make almost instantaneous decisions. After all, with the change of a traffic light a potential carjacking prospect can be lost forever. As Black put it, “Carjacking is a challenge. You ain’t got time to think. They can just speed off. You better know what car to take and how to take it. You better know how to deal with a driver. Because a car is there and then someone hit the gas and its gone man. It takes skills to take a car.” Speaking to carjackers revealed just how important such skills were. Kris Kris, a young carjacker from Atlanta relayed a story about how procedural skills varied across offenders:

“So we was walking along the street, me and my little cousin, and he always wanna do the shit I do. He was talkin’ a lot about doing a carjacking and I was like, no man, you need to practice or watch me do it if you wanna do it right. Anyhow, he seen this car go by and was like, is that a good car to get? I looked at it and I was like, well it’s a Honda and there’s a lady driving it and yeah its cool I guess, blah blah blah. And before I know it, he ran up on her on put the gun to the window. I was like, God damnit! Stupid ass. Because, you know, he put the gun up on the passenger window, not the driver window. And there was two cars behind her and we was at this intersection in the middle of all this traffic. And he was like give me the keys!! And she just took the keys out the car but the window wouldn’t open and the car was just sitting there with her screaming and shit. I was like, Oh Lord this is some bullshit. So, I ran up on the driver side, reached in and open the door and took her keys. I did it right you know? And I yelled at his stupid ass to get in. I had to back the car up and drive over a sidewalk to the parking lot to get outta there because the intersection had cameras. So stupid. I hit him in his face with the pistol I was so mad. He don’t know shit.”

Enactment of a carjacking starts with approaching the vehicle. Two broad ways of doing so are described in the literature: normalcy portrayals and blitzes (Copes et al., 2012; Jacobs, 2012). Both techniques are designed to allow the carjacker to gain close physical proximity with the victim without causing them to flee, defend themselves, or otherwise resist. Most importantly, these techniques are designed to create access to victims in as little time as possible, thus limiting the window of opportunity for a potential victim to resist or flee. As stated by Jacobs (2012), “normalcy illusions sacrifice celerity for more certain entrapment, while blitzes embrace celerity to enhance the certainty of entrapment through shock and force” (p. 475).

A normalcy portrayal involves an offender acting as though he or she is engaging in a non-threatening task to gain proximity to the potential victim without unduly raising that individual’s concern. According to Jacobs (2012), normalcy illusions are the modal technique of carjackers. Sleazy-E, for instance, “[w]alked up behind her and say, ‘Excuse me. Can you give me the time?’… I made her thought I was catching a bus… And she looked up to look at the time… And she turned around to look at her watch. I snatched the keys [out of her hand] and opened the door and I push her down (p. 476). And Corleone recounted:

[The victim] parked as he was going to a barbershop or something like that. … [When he came out, I] ask him for a cigarette… Most of the time it’s the same trick. Go to the passenger side. Take his
attention to the passenger side. “Hey, let me get a cigarette,” something like that. While he is looking [the victim says,] “I ain’t got no cigarette on me.” Next thing you know, [with my gun, I say] “get out the car. Get out the car.” (p. 477).

In addition to getting the jump on victims, another potential benefit of enacting normality is that it reduces unwanted attention from bystanders who if alerted may try to directly or indirectly to intervene (Jacobs, 2012). In this way, the normality illusion allowed offenders to manage not only the intended victim as well as those who may interfere with the offense in some way. Kow describes and offense which exemplifies this motivation;

“How did I get him? Walk up to the window [late at night], open the door, passenger side… Just mosey on around, stomp down low and mosey around to see if the door unlocked and if you touch it and it open, just hop in… You know, people don’t have they door locked. Hop in with ‘em, you know what I’m saying… you know what time it is...’ He didn’t have no choice unless you gonna take a couple of [bullets]... Keep your mouth closed and do what I tell you, you know what I’m saying? Don’t make no robbery turn into no murder… I’m like ‘shit, just get out. Go get your dash on, run. Don’t let nobody else outside see what you doin’” (p. 478)

A blitz has the same goal as a normality illusion (taking the victim unawares) but involves speed rather than cunning. In effect, the goal is to be so quick as to not alert the victim until it is too late to avert the attack. For example, C-Ball recounted a time when, “[the victim] was just riding through and he stopped at a stoplight… He probably ain’t paying attention […] and so we ran up to him and put the gun to his head, ‘get out of the car’” (Jacobs, 2012: 479). Snake described a similar incident: “Yeah, me and my partner, we saw him pull up to the lot… His partner was listening to the news. He couldn’t hear, they got out. We pulled up on the side of the road. He didn’t have no choice unless you gonna take a couple of [bullets].” (p. 480).

Once the carjacker has maneuvered him— or herself—into the physical space of the driver, their next task is to take control of (commandeer) the vehicle. Up to this point, a would-be carjacker has yet to commit a crime and could walk away an innocent man or women. But once an offender begins to commandeer a vehicle – a process that begins with them verbally threatening the victim to gain compliance and ends with them driving off with the car – the offense is objectively and legally underway. Essentially, the major choice they face at this point is whether to rely on threats or use physical violence to gain victim compliance (i.e., avoid victim resistance). It is here that procedural skills are at the forefront. Experienced offenders develop these skills over months or years of committing the same offenses repeatedly. As a result, we found that many of them reported using similar tactics to successfully enact carjackings. In all cases, force or the threat of force is used to gain compliance and prevent resistance during the enactment of a carjacking.

Some carjackers use physical force from the very beginning – a “shock and awe” approach – to expel the victim from the driver’s seat. For instance, Richard recounted: “I never said a word to [the victim]. I just walked up and grabbed him by the collar and jerked him through the window…. [He] didn’t have a clue what was going on.” (Copes et al., 2012: 257). Thomas told of a time when he was “getting close to the car [then] I just click. And I just pow! I just punched him… He was out.” (p. 258). And Gerald said, “I can grab you, and I know that I ain’t going to really hurt you. But I can punch you a couple times, hit you in your stomach [and] knock your wind out…. That’s enough time for me to get in the car” (p. 259). If properly executed, the benefit of this carjacking technique is that it jettisons both the need for victim compliance and the threat of victim resistance.

Another way of commandeering a vehicle is to threaten the driver with bodily harm. The goal is to create an illusion of impending death, or at least impending injury, which compels the driver to do what is asked of him or her (Wright et al., 1995). For example, Michael said to his victim: “Give me this car or I’m going to kill you and your baby right now.” (Copes et al., 2012: 259). To ensure the threat is taken seriously, carjackers may choose to pair their words with a visible firearm. As one carjacker explained: “ain’t nobody going to put up a fight with a gun!” (p. 259). And John put it this way: “How you gonna fight back? You got guns at your face. That’s not a good predicament to be in […] Nobody don’t want to be shot” (p. 259). Jacobs (year) relayed a more detailed account described by Little Tye:

Well we have a little.22 and a 9 [mm]. Me and my partner, we jumped out the van when I pulled up, I pulled up on the side and he automatically got the gun and pointed it to his head… on the driver’s side, the dude that was driving the car…. [We pulled up alongside because] if we had pulled up in front of them he’d have had time to do anything. He probably had a gun under the seat or something, or anything. [When we] pulled up on the side of him—“clack clack.” You [the victim] can’t do nothing… I mean he was scared. He don’t say nothing. His life is in another man’s hands. What is he going to say? He is too scared even to say anything. I mean if he even had the keys in his hands he’s gonna give them up. (p. 535–6)

When carjackers’ warnings are not taken seriously by victims, the offenders may escalate either the seriousness of the threat or mete out physical punishment. The intent of such escalations is to reaffirm the offenders’ dominance and thereby gain the victims’ compliance. This exemplifies the interplay between perceptual and procedural skills. As an offender threatens the victim they employ their perceptual skills to determine whether these threats are having the intended effect. They then adjust their implementation of procedural skills related to making threats to maximize the effect. Corleone described how he issued more serious threats when he encountered resistance from victims: “A couple of the guys wanted to be, you know, they wanted to be tough, you know. Like make mad faces like, ‘man, I don’t want to get out of the car,’ you know, looking all crazy or whatever. [I] just screamed louder, use a heavier voice, put the gun, you know, cock it back some, scare them. They all get out. They gonna get out” (Jacobs, 2013: 535).

And I Dog explained the usefulness of physical force to combat resistance: “Some people you’ve got to smack ‘em across they face cause they think you’re playing. Saying ‘oh man, oh man,’ they think you’re just playing with them…. He said, ‘Now you’re tripping.’ I said, ‘I ain’t tripping. Give it up!’ I said, ‘Either way I’m gonna get this car. You can make it easy or you can make it hard.’ … Yeah some you’ve got to hit,” (Jacobs, 2013: 534).

3. Discussion

Perceptual and procedural skills are two important facets of the carjacking offense specifically, but other offenses more generally. For the sake of parsimony, in this paper we have linked them (respectively) to targeting and enactment phases of carjacking. But this does not mean that perceptual skills are exclusively applied during targeting (choosing the vehicle) and procedural skills only during enactment (commandeering the vehicle). Within each stage, perceptual and procedural skills are applied to promote the goals of that stage. For example, offenders in the enactment phase must employ perceptual skills to know when their efforts are having a desired effect (e.g., are their verbal threats engendering the proper amount of fear in the victim?) as well as related procedural skills to execute that effect properly (e.g., screaming obscenities and pointing the gun at a victim in the most terrifying manner). It is important to note that within offense stages we see the recursive interplay between perceptual and procedural skills that often
takes place in the foreground of an offense; the offender's perceptual skills let them know exactly how effective their efforts are and help them to adjust, in real time, the application of those skills. Subsequently, their employment of procedural skills provides information to the offender to inform the further application of their perceptual skills, and so on. This recursive process is critical to reacting and responding in rapidly changing, dynamic environments (see Kleinmuntz, 1985) in which carjackers find themselves, and may occur multiple times during the execution of the offense. Such dynamic, cognitive feedback loops (see Brehmer, 1990) allow offenders to refine and alter the decision-making processes as they engage in each phase of a decision-making process that occur under extreme duress and in very short periods of time.

Consequently, perceptual and procedural skills operate at two levels during a carjacking. First, we note that perceptual skills precede procedural skills as the offender moves from targeting to enactment. At the same time perceptual and procedural skills operate in recursive fashion within each stage of carjacking, essentially nested within each stage in recursive fashion, guiding more incremental decisions that occur in real time.

Understanding the interplay of macro patterns in perceptual and procedural skills (between targeting and enactment) with micro patterns (within enactment) will require more systematic quantitative and qualitative explorations of offender behavior. We would argue that carjacking provides an apropos offense to base such research.

Finally, it is critically important to note that the implementation of these skill-sets by carjackers often is conditioned by strong internal environments within which they operate. Offenders who resort to such a paradigm, perhaps) than one who is not under such pressure. Desperation is a factor among active residential burglars: A research note. Crime, 31(1), 135–147.


References


