

# Intimacy with Outlaws

## The Role of Relational Distance in Recruiting, Paying, and Interviewing Underworld Research Participants

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The past quarter century has witnessed the emergence of a substantial literature devoted to the mechanics of recruiting, paying, and interviewing currently active offenders. Absent from that literature, however, is a theoretical framework within which to understand, test, modify, and further develop efforts to locate such offenders and gain their cooperation. This note, based on the authors' research with active drug sellers in Atlanta and St. Louis, explores the ways in which *relational distance*, that is, the nature and degree of intimacy between recruiter, interviewee, and researcher, affects the behavior of active offender research. The note concludes with theoretically situated, practical advice for (1) recruiting active criminals, (2) cost containment, and (3) maximizing the quantity and validity of data produced in interviews.

**Keywords:** *active offender research; pure sociology; relational distance*

Interview-based research with active underworld participants has a long history in criminology, but it has enjoyed something of a renaissance in recent years, with a new generation of criminologists coming to see the importance of studying crime in situ (see, e.g., Cromwell, Olson, and Avary 1991; Jacobs 1999, 2000; Jacobs, Topalli, and Wright 2003; Mullins, Wright, and Jacobs 2004; Topalli 2005; Wright and Decker 1994, 1997). The process of interviewing unincarcerated<sup>1</sup> lawbreakers presents serious challenges because they have strong incentives not to identify themselves

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to researchers or to talk about their illegal activities (see, e.g., Jacobs 1998, 2006; Wright et al. 1992). Challenges notwithstanding, the value of field-based interviews with active criminals has been demonstrated repeatedly; among other things, such interviews are not subject to the influence of the prison, probation, or parole setting, and they are much more likely to reflect respondents' current cultural commitments and pursuits (for a comprehensive review, see Jacobs and Wright 2006:9-22).

Obtaining information from active offenders is a multistep process (see, e.g., Dunlap and Johnson 1999; Wright et al. 1992) that can be broken down into three basic parts: recruitment, payment, and interview. In any given population there are only so many active criminals and, as already noted, they have good reasons to remain hidden from view, so the first step is to find and inform them about the research (see, e.g., Jacobs 1998, 1999:12-14). Once that has been accomplished, the voluntary cooperation of the offenders still must be obtained, something that often requires the expenditure of resources (see, e.g., Dunlap and Johnson 1999). That is followed by perhaps the most important stage, namely, the interview itself, during which the offender communicates to the researcher what he or she knows about the subject in question.

The past quarter century has witnessed the emergence of a substantial literature devoted to the mechanics of recruiting, paying, and interviewing various types of unincarcerated criminals (see, among many others, Adler 1990; Dunlap and Johnson 1999; Glassner and Carpenter 1985; Jacobs 1998, 2006; Mieczkowski 1988; Williams et al. 1992; Wright et al. 1992). Taken as a whole, this literature has identified a wide range of strategies that have successfully been used to locate active criminals and convince them to cooperate with researchers. Absent from this literature, however, is any sort of *theoretical* lens through which the process of penetrating the underworld can be viewed. Without such a lens, this literature amounts to little more than an interesting collection of anecdotes in the sense that it is not amenable to scientific testing, falsification, and refutation (Popper 2002a, 2002b). This not only precludes the development of a theoretical understanding of criminological research; it also has practical implications for planning and implementing real-world studies of active criminals, especially when it comes to matters like efficient recruitment, cost containment, and ensuring data quality. To be sure, recruiting, paying, and interviewing offenders is first and foremost a means of knowledge production, but it is also a social behavior that can be quantified and, thus, theoretically explained.

In this research note, we use pure sociology's concept of relational distance (see Black 1976, 1998), defined as the degree of intimacy between

actors, to explain variation in subject recruitment, resource expenditure, and the quantity and validity of interview data. In doing so, we draw on our experiences in studying low- and middle-class drug sellers in St. Louis and suburban Atlanta, and from those of our longtime field recruiter in St. Louis, Smoke Dog. We supplement this information with studies of street-based drug dealers in various urban locales across the United States, including Detroit (Mieczkowski 1988), Denver (Hoffer 2006), and New York (Bourgois 2003). We conclude with theoretically situated, practical advice for recruiting, compensating, and interviewing underworld participants.

## Pure Sociology

Pure sociology is a paradigm concerned with the science of social life, and the epistemology is unique in what it is *not* rather than what it is (Black 1995). Purely sociological explanations are formed without reference to three staples of contemporary mainstream sociological thinking (Black 1995): First, pure sociology is “pure” because its explanations do not rely on nonsociological concepts, such as emotions, motivations, or testosterone. Second, pure sociology is without teleology; it does not recognize a goal set of social life. Last but not least, pure sociology is not anthropocentric (i.e., focused on persons) but instead holds that “social life behaves and people are merely its carriers” (Cooney 2006:53; see also Black 2000a). The question is not, “How do people behave?” but instead, “How does social life behave?” The scientific benefit of nonsubjective, nonteleological, and nonanthropocentric approaches is that they increase the value of theory by making it more testable and falsifiable, general, simple, and original, all of which are common and important measures of scientific value across fields (Black 1995; Kuhn 1977:320-39; Popper 2002b).

Theories of behavior cannot precede classifications of behavior (see Cooney and Phillips 2002), and perhaps the most fundamental aspect of pure sociology is the idea of *social space* (Black 1976, 1995, 1998). Social space divides social life into five broad dimensions: (1) *vertical space*, defined by wealth and rank; (2) *horizontal space*, defined by the nature and frequency of interaction; (3) *corporate space*, defined by the number of actors working together; (4) *symbolic space*, defined by what is considered “good, true, and beautiful”; and (5) *normative space*, or “respectability,” defined by the application of social control. In any given social interaction, or *case*, every actor has a relative *social status* and *social distance* in social space. Actors gain social status as they elevate their wealth (*vertical status*),

community involvement (*radial status*), organization (*corporate status*), and knowledge or conventionality (*symbolic status*); and actors lose status as more social control is applied to their behavior (*normative status*). Actors reduce social distance as they become more intimate (*relational distance*) and culturally similar (*cultural distance*). The social statuses and distances of every actor involved in a case define the *social structure*. Social structure is the explanatory factor in producing various forms, styles, and quantities of social behavior (Black 1995, 1998, 2000b). In short, as any aspect of social structure changes, such as wealth, integration, organization, culture, or respectability, so too should the form, style, and/or quantity of social life.

Past work in pure sociology has mostly been concerned with social control (see Black, 1998; Horwitz, 1990), that is, behavior that “defines and responds to deviant behavior” (Black 1976:105), such as law (Black 1976, 1980, 1989), self-help (Black 1983; Cooney 1998; Phillips 2003; Phillips and Cooney 2005), avoidance (Baumgartner 1988), lynching (Senechal de la Roche 1997), therapy (Horwitz 1982; Tucker 1999), and terrorism (Black 2004). Beyond social control, the paradigm has also been applied to economic behaviors such as welfare (Michalski 2003) and predation (Cooney 2006; Cooney and Phillips 2002), and to cultural behaviors such as ideas (Black 2000b), medicine (Black 1998:164-65), and art (Black 1998:168-69). Whatever the social behavior concerned, whether related to wealth, community, organization, culture, or social control, it may in some way or another change as a consequence of social structure. The task for pure sociologists is to find the connections between social structure and social behavior and state them as testable propositions that can be falsified or supported through testing.

## Active Offender Research and Relational Distance

This research note applies pure sociology to a new arena of social life—criminological research on active offenders. We provide a series of principles that together form a social theory of active offender research that explains and predicts (1) recruitment, (2) recruiter and subject payments, and (3) data quantity and validity, or “quality.” Although all aspects of social structure may have an effect on research, our theory is restricted to one form of social variation: *relational distance*, defined by the nature and degree of intimacy between actors and their associates (Black 1976:40). “It is possible to measure relational distance in many ways, including the scope, frequency, and length of interaction between people, the age of their

relationship, and the nature and number of links between them in a social network” (p. 41). The relational distance between actors decreases as the quantity of social interaction between (1) themselves and (2) those they are associated with increases.

All else equal, for example, two persons who have traded drugs are closer in relational distance than two people who have never traded, two persons who have produced marijuana together are closer in relational distance than two people who have never done so, two people who have formed a drug cartel together are closer in relational distance than two loners, and two persons who have talked together about drugs are closer in relational distance than two persons who have never communicated. Beyond direct interaction, the concept of relational distance also accounts for indirect relationships, such as “mutual friends” or “middlemen” in drug trades. The relational distance between “indirect ties” is a function of the relational distance between direct ties. All else equal, for instance, *strangers* who have bought drugs from the same dealer, or have manufactured drugs for the same cartel, or have spoken with each other’s business associates are closer in relational distance than strangers who do not have those indirect social connections. In short, relational distance decreases as the quantity of social behavior in a social network increases.

The question to be addressed here is: How does relational distance between researchers, recruiters, and criminals affect subject recruitment, resource expenditure, and the quantity and validity of data produced during interviews?

## Recruitment

Recruitment is the process of locating criminals and convincing them to provide data. Most researchers rely on criteria-based sampling to locate active criminals, which involves recruiting only those individuals who possess the social, psychological, or biological characteristics relevant to their interests. Although sometimes disparaged as sampling on the dependent variable, purposive sampling has the advantage of saving time and money while increasing the probability of successful recruitment (see Jacobs and Wright 2006).

To use purposive sampling successfully, of course, researchers must first be able to identify individuals with the relevant characteristics, which can be extremely difficult when those characteristics involve lawbreaking. To do so, many researchers have turned to snowball sampling, a subtype of purposive sampling whereby initial participants are called upon to identify

others of the same ilk and close the relational gap with them. "Such a strategy begins with the recruitment of an initial subject who then is asked to recommend further participants" (Wright et al. 1992:150; also see Watters and Biernacki 1989; Wright and Stein 2005).

## Atlanta and St. Louis Projects

For a study based in suburban Atlanta, Georgia, we sought to recruit and interview a sample of 25 unincarcerated middle-class drug sellers. The first 18 such sellers were recruited using a straightforward purposive sampling strategy; we approached and asked for the cooperation of drug sellers who the lead author already knew to be involved in this activity, largely as a result of interactions in social venues, such as sport and school. Then, knowing no further drug sellers who met the participation criteria, we turned to snowball sampling, using two prior interviewees to recruit 7 more middle-class drug sellers. Although we cannot precisely quantify our relational distance from each participant in this study,<sup>2</sup> we can say that the first 18 participants were closer to us in relational distance than the last 7 were, because the former group had direct interaction with the lead author, whereas the latter group did not.

For a separate but related project, we sought to locate and interview currently active drug sellers residing in poor, inner-city neighborhoods in St. Louis, Missouri. The recruitment of such individuals was made possible through the second author's long-standing relationship with Smoke Dog, a former street criminal who, for a fee, has helped criminologists at our university find and interview various sorts of active offenders during the past decade (see, e.g., Jacobs and Wright 2006). In effect, Smoke Dog served as a relational tie to the dealers.

In an in-depth, semistructured interview with Smoke Dog, we asked him a series of questions about the process of recruiting criminals. The answers given by Smoke Dog revealed that relational distance plays a pivotal role in the selection process. For instance, most of the criminals recruited by Smoke Dog are friends, a few are acquaintances or "friends of friends," but strangers are nonexistent:

Interviewer: How often do you try to recruit strangers? People you don't know at all?

Smoke Dog: I don't recruit them.

Interviewer: Why not?

Smoke Dog: I don't know them, and I don't know how to come back to them about this shit, so no, I don't get strangers.

Interviewer: Do you ever try to recruit people that you just kind of know through someone?

Smoke Dog: Yeah, I've done that a couple times.

As an experiment of sorts, we asked Smoke Dog a hypothetical question<sup>3</sup> that required him to list the 25 drug sellers he would be most likely to try to recruit for one of our future studies. After he had done so, we asked him about his relationship with each individual on the list. Twenty-three of the drug sellers were defined as friends, and 1 he considered an acquaintance; the remaining person was Smoke Dog himself. We also asked Smoke Dog how long he had known each of the persons listed; the average was 17.13 years, with a range of six months to 27 years (Smoke Dog's entire life). Also relevant is the fact that Smoke Dog shared a gang affiliation with all of the persons listed. When asked how often he interacts with each of the individuals, he reported hanging out with one dealer about once a month, with another once every two weeks, with another once a week, and with yet another "on weekends." He interacted with 10 of the remaining dealers every other day or so and saw the rest nearly every day. In broad terms, then, it appears that the likelihood of Smoke Dog attempting to recruit any given drug seller increases as his relational distance from the dealer decreases, and thus, our likelihood of interviewing a dealer increases as Smoke Dog's relational distance from that person decreases.

Although we were unaware of the theoretical implications at the time, our experience with recruiting drug sellers followed a clear pattern: the likelihood of an active offender being recruited for one of our studies increased as our relational distance from that person decreased. Stated in the form of a proposition:

*Recruitment to a study increases as the relational distance between researchers, recruiters, and criminals decreases.*

Thus, as relational distance between the researcher, recruiter, and potential research participant decreases, the probability that the cooperation of the potential research participant will be sought increases.

## **Mieczkowski's Detroit Project**

Research on active drug dealers in Detroit undertaken by Mieczkowski (1988) is a case in point. Initially, he had no ties to active drug sellers and realized that "a plausible and non-threatening entrée was needed. As in any

analogous social situation, my goal was to find a person who would be able and willing to facilitate my entrance into the field” (p. 40). The question for him was, “How does one go about identifying and locating such a person or persons?” (p. 40). Mieczkowski describes the answer he came up with as a matter of “sheer luck,” but it is more scientific to explain it as a function of relational distance:

The problem was solved by sheer luck. In every research activity involving the establishment of social relationships, serendipity plays a part. Attempts to establish an initial contact with Young Boys operatives [i.e., heroin sellers] came about through the voluntary work of a contact named Dave (a pseudonym). Dave was a student in a criminal justice course who became familiar with my research ambitions. He said that he could put me in touch with numerous drug operatives of the Young Boys type. Dave was able to help me for several reasons. First, he was a resident in the Jeffries Housing Project, a major center of heroin activity. He was not only a resident but had lived there since birth. Second, although Dave was not a drug dealer or user, his two brothers were both drug dealers. Third, he knew nearly all of the major dealers in the Jeffries. (p. 41)

Although Mieczkowski did not know any drug sellers in Detroit, his student did, and this made it relatively likely that he would ask for the cooperation of a particular group of dealers, namely, those tied to his student. Relationships are oftentimes determined by employment and educational structures, and the case of Mieczkowski demonstrates that researchers working in academic settings are relatively likely to interview drug sellers who have a relationship with others participating in that setting. Given that college students are probably the most likely individuals on campus to have relationships with drug sellers, academic researchers are relatively likely to use students as recruiters and are relatively likely to recruit drug sellers who interact with students (Jacobs 2006; also see Wright and Decker 1994).

## Resource Expenditure

A taken-for-granted aspect of convincing active criminals to take part in a social science research project is the ability to provide remuneration for their participation. As experienced street ethnographers Dunlap and Johnson (1999) pointed out, “A key element [in research] . . . is the availability of funds to pay respondents for interviews” (p. 130). Although the payments involved are often relatively modest, they are important to criminals, as the

idea of doing something for nothing is anathema to many of them (see Wright and Decker 1994, 1997).

## Atlanta and St. Louis Projects

Payment for participation may be ordinary in this type of research, but in our own studies of active drug sellers in Atlanta and St. Louis, the price per interview has ranged from zero to \$125. The initial 18 recruits for our study of middle-class drug sellers in Atlanta—who had relatively close ties to the lead author—received no monetary compensation for talking to us. The seven middle-class sellers who were recruited with the help of prior interviewees—essentially friends of friends—were paid \$20 each.

Compared to our relational distance from the middle-class friend-of-friend participants, the dealers recruited by Smoke Dog were relatively far from us. Although it is true that the second author has a long-standing relationship with Smoke Dog, the relationship between the lead author and the two middle-class recruiters is even closer in relational distance.<sup>4</sup> Because we have closer relational distance with the middle-class recruiters than with Smoke Dog, we are closer in relational distance to the last 7 middle-class participants than we are to the 25 St. Louis participants.

The price expended per interview, including recruiter and interviewee payments, appears to be affected by relational distance. As already noted, the original 18 middle-class sellers were closest in relational distance and were not paid for participation; the seven middle-class dealers recruited through friends of the lead author were compensated \$20 for cooperation; and the low-class sellers in St. Louis—who are strictly “business associates” known through another “business associate,” that is, Smoke Dog—were paid \$50 per interview. Similar to the pattern for subject payments, we gave the two middle-class recruiters \$20 for each successful referral, whereas Smoke Dog charged us \$75 for exactly the same service.

As with the probability of recruiting one seller or another, price per interview appears not to behave randomly but instead varies as a function of relational distance. Our experience suggests the following proposition:

*The price per interview decreases as the relational distance between researchers, recruiters, and criminals decreases.*

In other words, the further the relational distance between respondents, recruiters, and researchers, the more it costs to interact and obtain information.

## Hoffer's Denver Project

The power of the above proposition is best evidenced by the fact that in some cases the respondents themselves choose to be paid less (as compared to when the researcher makes the decision). In a study of heroin dealers in Denver, for example, Hoffer (2006) initially met his two informants, Kurt and Danny, when they were respondents in a separate project on the behavior of heroin users:

I [had] interviewed [Kurt] on many occasions for several studies. . . . My interactions with Kurt, and to a lesser extent Danny, continued regularly over several months. . . . Kurt and I worked together several times per week for six months. During those months, Kurt was as much my coworker as he was my research subject. . . . One day I was getting ready to leave their apartment and go back to my office. I started filling out the obligatory paperwork to authorize paying their subject fees when Kurt told me to stop. He said very matter-of-factly, "Don't worry about it. We don't need the money." . . . I was stunned and a little disturbed. I told both of them that I was interviewing them and verified that they did not want the payment for their time. I told them that it was not my money; it was the project's money and it was intended to be compensation for their participation. Kurt was adamant and could not be dissuaded. . . . At this point in our relationship Kurt felt that payment was out-of-line socially. Kurt no longer viewed our relationship as researcher and subject; *we were friends* [emphasis added]. (Hoffer 2006:12-15)

The relatively small relational distance between Hoffer and Kurt and Danny made it possible for him to study them in-depth, but it also had the effect of reducing the cost of doing so, in this case to zero.

## Data Quantity and Validity

While the successful recruitment of active criminals is a necessary first step in research of this type, the effort and expense required to do so is wasted if the data obtained in the resulting interview are sparse or false. The basic purpose of an interview is to obtain information about how people behave, and this is a quantitative variable measurable in two ways: data provided varies both in quantity and in its congruence with actual events, or validity. Consider, for example, the difference between a 10-page-long narrative and a one-sentence synopsis, and how either of those descriptions can be entirely accurate, partially so, or completely false. Moreover, the quantity and validity of data provided varies both between and within interviews;

some interviews produce more valid information than others, as a whole or per topic, and, within interviews, various topics (e.g., murder versus supplier selection) can be discussed in lesser or greater detail and in a more or less honest manner.

## St. Louis Project

Some of the active drug sellers interviewed at the state university where we work have been involved in past projects and others have not. Smoke Dog, our field recruiter, suggests that whether or not a criminal has been involved in past projects has an effect on the quality of information produced in interviews thereafter:

Smoke Dog: Nobody is going to tell you everything they do. Or what they did. They'll let you know most of it, something to make you feel good and put in your book. Like shit though, you can't ever expect them to tell you the whole truth. . . . They'll tell you some shit, and some of it might be mixed up or something. They ain't gonna tell you exactly how it happened, but they'll tell you. That's how it is.

Interviewer: And do you think people do that less the more often they come up here?

Smoke Dog: I say people who would do it would be people who I don't know better, but the people who have been up here [at the university to do interviews], then the shit they tell you real shit, for real. They been there. 'Cause we've been doing this 10 years man, 96 or 97—it's 2006 now man.

Smoke Dog's experiences as a recruiter of unincarcerated offenders suggest that the more a researcher and criminal have interacted, and the more third-party ties they share, the greater the validity and quantity of data provided by that criminal.<sup>5</sup> Thus, we propose the following:

*Data quantity and validity increase as the relational distance between researchers, recruiters, and criminals decreases.*

This proposition predicts that as relational distance decreases, the data provided by an active criminal will become more plentiful and more congruent with actual events. For instance, active criminals who have been interviewed before should produce higher quality information than criminals who have never been interviewed (between-person variation), and the more times any given criminal is interviewed, the more plentiful and truthful the data will be (within-person variation).

## **Bourgeois' New York Project**

In Bourgeois's (2003) study of crack sellers in a lower-class neighborhood in Harlem, New York, access to the knowledge of drug sellers was zero until he was able to close relational distance with them:

I was painfully aware of my outsider status whenever I initially attempted to access any street-dealing scenes. . . . I was primarily concerned with how to persuade the manager of the crackhouse on my block that I was not an undercover police officer. I remember vividly the first night I went to the Game Room [which became the central locale of the study]. My neighbor Carmen . . . brought me over to the manager of the Game Room and told him in Spanish, "Primo, let me introduce you to my neighbor, Felipe; he's from the block and wants to meet you." Excited at the possibility of finally accessing a crackhouse scene, my heart dropped when Primo shyly giggled and turned his back on me as if to hide his face. Staring out into the street, he asked Carmen in English, loud enough for me to hear clearly, "What precinct did you pick him up at?" . . . I had a good sense not to impose myself . . . and slunk back into the background. . . . Despite my inauspicious first evening, it took less than two weeks for Primo to warm up to my presence. I was aided by having to pass the Game Room literally every day, and usually several times a day, in order to reach the supermarket, the bus stop, or the subway. Primo would usually be standing outside his pseudo video arcade. . . . At first we just politely nodded to each other, but after a week he called out, "Hey guy, you like to drink beer, don't you?" and we shared a round of Private Stocks. (pp. 29-40)

From that point onward, Bourgeois gained greater and greater access to information about drug selling. In the beginning, however, there was a great deal of relational distance between himself and the criminals he wished to study, and as a result, access to data about their behavior was practically zero. One of the relational ties Bourgeois did have, his neighbor Carmen, closed the relational gap between him and the crackhouse employees, allowing him to get a foothold in the information gate.

## **Conclusion**

Taken together, the propositions outlined above suggest a preliminary theory of how research with active criminals "behaves": The more a criminological researcher has interacted with a criminal and his or her associates, the more likely a criminal is to be recruited for an interview, the less it will cost to do the interview, and the more valid and plentiful will be the data

obtained. Each of these propositions is testable because it states empirical, quantifiable, directional relationships (see Black 1995:831-33), and each is general because it applies to criminology in various times, places, and social classes (Black 1995:833-37).

Because the role of research is to test—and thereby falsify or support—theory, we strongly encourage researchers to take up the challenge of determining the limits of our proposed theory<sup>6</sup> and add to it as appropriate. Surely, there will be instances in which our propositions are not accurate, but it should be remembered that relational distance is but one part of social life. Other aspects of social structure may prove to have an effect on the behavior of research and serve to offset the effects of relational distance. For instance, the quantity and validity of data likely behave as a function of the quantity of law applied to the behavior in question; all else constant, an admittance and discussion of murder would seem less likely to occur during an interview than an admittance and discussion of assault. The likelihood of studying a particular group of criminals may also depend on their social status (Black 2000b); it is perhaps more difficult and expensive, for instance, to recruit and interview criminals who are wealthy than those who are poor, and this could explain the almost complete absence of studies on “elite,” or high-status, criminals (but see, e.g., Adler 1993).<sup>7</sup> Culture may play a role in the “behavior of method” as well; as noted by Wright and Bennett (1990; also see Douglas 1972), a “key” element in active offender research “involves ‘fitting in’ by dressing appropriately and, more important, learning the distinctive terminology, phrasing, and so on used by the offenders. Several commentators have stressed that researchers should modify their dress and language to accommodate those they are studying” (p. 146). In short, all aspects of social structure must be examined to fully understand the effect of each aspect of social life on recruiting, paying, and interviewing active offenders (see Black 1995:851-52).

Beyond pure sociology, we fully support the use of other theories in explaining the behavior of recruiting, paying, and interviewing active criminals. For instance, Granovetter’s (1973) notions of “weak” and “strong” ties likely have important implications for obtaining data; a researcher with a few strong ties—persons very close in relational distance—to criminals may enjoy a great amount of access to cheap and valid data, but without any weak ties, the “information trail” is relatively likely to end or become more expensive to travel. Other scientists could explore the role of motivation in interview-related behavior. What role, for example, does rational choice (Clarke and Cornish 1985) play in recruitment, subject payments, and data quality? Does self-control (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990) affect the knowledge

production process?<sup>8</sup> How do subcultural beliefs and norms, such as the “code of the street” (Anderson 1999), influence cooperation? These are but a few of many conceivable theoretical questions and directions; we leave to other criminologists the task of exploring the potential of those and other theories for explaining and improving the process that produces much of the data used in criminological research.

Of course, the most valuable asset to the development of theory is data that can be used to test and reformulate explanations and predictions. For every study of active criminals attempted, the behavior “behind” the study could facilitate unique insights into the behavior of criminals and criminologists. But without a more conscious documentation of *our own* behavior and characteristics, these insights will remain hidden. In future research, we will make a more cognizant and systematic effort to record theoretically relevant factors surrounding the process (e.g., our own social status), and we urge that other criminologists do the same (also see Brenner and Roberts 2007). If this research note stimulates a series of studies that verifiably disprove our theory and demonstrate others to be more valuable to science, or vice versa, then criminology will benefit.

The theory we have proposed should be of more than theoretical interest to criminologists; it constitutes a beginning point for the development of a practical framework within which to plan and interpret research involving active criminals. Let us conclude, then, by noting that, at this early stage, the theory suggests at least three pieces of practical advice for criminologists who want to interview active underworld participants:

1. Success in recruitment will increase in tandem with the quantity of social interaction between researchers, recruiters, and criminals;
2. The price of interviews does not need to be held constant, as criminals who are closer in relational distance to the researcher will do interviews for a smaller payment; and
3. The criminals who are closest in relational distance to the researcher, especially those who have done previous interviews, are the ones most likely to produce the greatest amount of valid data and thus are the most appropriate persons with whom to discuss the most serious crimes.

## Notes

1. As any desistance researcher can attest (see, among many others, Maruna 2001), the difference between “active” and “inactive” criminals is somewhat arbitrary. Here we define “active offender” as a person who has engaged in crimes without or since going to jail or prison. We prefer the term *unincarcerated* criminal over *active* criminal because, empirically

speaking, the line between active and inactive is much more difficult to draw than the one between unincarcerated and incarcerated. For stylistic purposes, however, we will use the terms interchangeably in this research note.

2. We did not systematically record this information but, even if we had, our ability to disclose it is restricted by the promises of confidentiality we made to participants. The problem of confidentiality, however, need not preclude the collection of relevant information in future research, provided that appropriate protections are put in place.

3. For reasons of confidentiality, we could not ask Smoke Dog who he recruited for our St. Louis project, nor who he had recruited for previous studies conducted there. In listing names for this hypothetical exercise, Smoke Dog used pseudonyms to protect the identities of his drug-dealing associates.

4. Unfortunately, we cannot disclose specifics of our relationship with the middle-class recruiters because such details would compromise their confidentiality as research participants.

5. Of course, the quantity and validity of information provided to us by Smoke Dog also are quantitative variables that can be explained.

6. The underlying logic of our propositions—closer relationships increase cooperation in research—has received statistical support in studies of social behavior in Kenya (Weinreb 2006) and Thailand (Entwistle et al. 2007).

7. This may be especially relevant to interviewing unincarcerated, white-collar criminals.

8. See Hirschi and Gottfredson (1993); Piquero, MacIntosh, and Hickman (2000); Watkins and Melde (2007).

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