

Resurrecting an Abandoned “Standpoint”: An Exploratory Application of W. I. Thomas’ Abandoned “Four Wishes” and the “Definition of the Situation” to Adolescent Shoplifters’ Cases

J Forbes Farmer^{1,*}

¹Department of Criminal Justice, Franklin Pierce University, 40 University Drive, Rindge, NH 03461, USA

*Corresponding author: Department of Criminal Justice, Franklin Pierce University, 40 University Drive, Rindge, NH 03461, USA. E-mail: Farmerjf@Franklinpierce.edu

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Abstract

This is a novel, qualitative application of W. I. Thomas’ (1863-1948) historically significant ideas about human motivation to the study of shoplifters. Nineteen short cases of self-reported adolescent shoplifting are presented here under the organization of Thomas’ (1923) “Four Wishes” and discussed from Thomas’s symbolic interactionist perspective, the “Definition of the Situation.” While the “Thomas Theorem” (Merton, 1948) has long been abandoned as an action theory and is rarely used by sociologists, this researcher found Thomas’ “standpoints” useful in gaining an understanding of what was going on in the mind of the adolescents as they shoplifted and in explicating the meaning shoplifting had to them.

Keywords: Thomas Theorem, the four wishes, definition of the situation, shoplifting

1. Introduction

It is generally accepted that the work of William Isaac Thomas (1863-1947) significantly influenced the development of symbolic interactionism, micro-level criminology and theoretical approaches in other branches of the social sciences. He was a qualitative sociologist and based much of his work on self-reported data found in juvenile court documents, interviews, historical records, autobiographical material, case studies and ethnographies. In response to a criticism that self-reported data might not be truthful (Ritzer, 1983, p. 37), Thomas responded, “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572). This quote, attributed to him and his wife (Smith, 2001) or just him alone (Link, Monahan, Stueve & Cullen, 1999; Merton, 1995), reflects the simple theorem that behavior is a consequence of the interplay between objective situational factors and subjective meanings the individual ascribes to those factors. Based on this conviction, it seems plausible that Thomas’ motivational ideas, or “standpoints” as he preferred to call them (Haerle, 1991, p. 34), could be applied to shoplifters. After all, he wrote, “It is only as we understand behavior as a whole that we can appreciate the failure of certain individuals to conform to the usual standards” (Thomas, 1923, p. 3).

In America, each state has its own definition of shoplifting. The FBI’s Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program, however, includes shoplifting under its definition of larceny-theft which is “the unlawful taking, carrying, leading, or riding away of property from the possession or constructive possession of another” (FBI, 2015). It has also been defined as “the act of stealing merchandise offered for sale in a retail store” (Perlman & Ozinci, 2014, p. 685). While all shoplifting is theft, not all theft is shoplifting. Theft is the term used if someone breaks into a closed store and steals something. The adolescents researched here entered an open store legally and then stole something through deceit and concealment. Legally, this is theft, but this action is “shoplifting” for the purpose of this research and the research referenced below.

The extent of shoplifting is difficult to determine because about two-thirds of them go unreported (NCVS, 2012), but in the United States in 2015 there were 1,118,390 reported cases which accounted for 22.3% of all reported larceny thefts (FBI, 2015). This was a 1.3% increase over 2014. The National Association of Shoplifting Prevention claims that there are about 27 million American shoplifters today and that more than 10 million have been caught in the last five years (NASP, 2017). The NASP reports that the chances of getting caught are about one in 48 and only about half of those who are caught are even turned in (Manrodt, 2014). The financial lost to American retailers is around \$10-13 billion each year (Bamfield, 2010) and when combined with employee theft, costs American retailers \$32 billion each year (Wahba, 2016).

But the United States does not face this problem alone. It occurs in Pakistan (Rana, 2015), India, (Sharma, 2010), European countries (Banfield, 2004; Fraser, 2013), the United Kingdom, Australia (Thompson, 2015), Russia (Magnier, 2011), China (Chan, 2006; Liu, Yang, Zeng & Waller, 2015), Austria (Hirtenlehner, Blackwell, Leitgoeb & Bacher, 2014), Canada (Teevan & Dryburgh, (2000), Israel (Perlman & Ozinci, 2014) and Finland (Kajalo &

Lindblom, 2011). Clearly, people around the world are motivated for their own reasons to take something for nothing, and they do so.

This current study is an exploratory investigation into the usefulness of one old, abstract and simple sociological theory to understand the phenomenon of shoplifting as seen through the eyes of the shoplifter. While more advanced theories like Sykes and Matz's (1957) "Techniques of Neutralization," Akers and Seller's (2012) "Social Learning Theory and Cornish and Clarke's (1986) "Rational Choice Theory" have been used to study this crime, there is nothing in the literature to suggest that Thomas' basic ideas have been specifically applied to shoplifting. Thomas believed that it was no harder to comprehend the behavior of the delinquent than that of the normally adjusted person (Thomas, 1923). Even though some of W. I. Thomas' original ideas (especially "the four wishes") about motivation have mostly been abandoned, they are still widely cited for the important historical contributions they made to an approach known as *verstehen* (German for understanding) that originated mostly with Max Weber who believed that the sociologist "disbars himself from making external judgements about the people he studies" (Cuff & Payne, 1984, p. 134) and describes their circumstances as the people see them.

2. Literature Review

Thomas made an early symbolic interactionist assumption about the human capacity for thought and it was one of his major contributions. As Colyer (2015) and others (e.g., Merton, 1948; Ritzer, 1983) have pointed out, Thomas' (1923) abstract micro explanation of human behavior was a major break from the macro theorizing and social determinism of structural functionalism and positions itself between it and the free will and hedonism of Beccaria's classical theory of criminology. Although quite broad and basic, this way of thinking about the motivation for situational behavior, including theft, was of particular interest to Thomas who was curious about the development of the criminal mind and was no stranger to deviance himself having been arrested under the Mann Act, which prohibits "interstate transport of females for immoral purposes" (Bulmer, 1986, p. 60). Thomas was subsequently acquitted, yet he was fired from the University of Chicago in 1916 for adultery (Galliher, 2008) and his career was permanently damaged.

Thomas spent most of his prolific career developing a theory of human motivation. He struggled with it in *The Polish Peasant* (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918-1920) and he stated it most clearly in *The Unadjusted Girl* (Thomas, 1923, p. 4) where he spelled out his theory of "the four wishes." These were (1) the wish for new experience, (2) the wish for security, (3) the wish for response and (4) the wish for recognition. It was also here that he recounted numerous cases of delinquent girls and boys who had broken into closed stores at night and stolen (not shoplifted as defined for this research) such things as cigars, jewelry, pocket-books, clothing, cash, a butcher's knife and a gun (Thomas, 1923, pp. 5-6). Additionally, it was in this volume that Thomas introduced the now famous concept of the "definition of the situation." Thomas believed that before people make decisions they "generally examine and deliberate about consequences before they act" (Sands, 2014, p. 725).

The four wishes theory dominated sociological theory for many years, especially those created in the Chicago School that focused on individuals' personal orientations. These wishes have now "fallen into disuse and are virtually forgotten today" (Colyer, 2015, p. 249), but among the many theories influenced by Thomas were Edwin Sutherland's (1934) theory of crime, "Differential Association" (Ulmer & Steffensmeier, 2006) and the work of George Herbert Mead, Robert Park and Ernest Burgess (Ashley & Orenstein, 2001) and Margaret Mead's theories about culture (Murray & Darnell, 2000).

As his theorizing developed, Thomas and his wife wrote *The Child in America* (Thomas & Thomas, 1928) in which is found the frequently referenced quote, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" that Merton (1948) referred to as the Thomas Theorem. What follows here is an attempt to apply some of Thomas' ideas to several adolescent American shoplifters who, through responses to a questionnaire, statements made to an asset prevention detective, confessions made to a magazine writer and accounts given to a police officer, provided descriptions and explanations about their deviant situations. Thomas recognized that many definitions of situations come from family and community members (Ritzer, 1983, p. 310), but offered a distinctive position allowing that people can make spontaneous adjustments to their definitions as they interpret their situation and form their own meanings. He noted that "a moral code arises, which is a set of rules or behavior norms, ... built up by successive definitions of the situation" (Thomas, 1931, p. 43).

The use of Thomas' ideas about values, attitudes and situations is not new, but it is rare and "underused" (Maines, 2000, p. 581) in contemporary sociology. Goldfarb (2001) was guided by his work when he analyzed 1989 international political activity. Link et al. (1999) applied the Theorem in their challenge to stereotypical explanations of the association between the psychiatric diagnoses of mental illness and violence. Yu (2004) used Thomas' ideas on social reality and social construction to support his, and Knight's (1921), conclusions about economics being purposive, conscious human action that is connected to values and attitudes (Yu, 2004, p. 662). Marvasti (2012) relied on Thomas' "the four wishes", especially the "wish for new experiences," as he encouraged the diverse groups of homeless and Middle Eastern Americans to focus on the commonality of their human experiences. Cochran (2016), while never mentioning Thomas, tested Wikstrom's Situational Action Theory (2004) which is a theory of crime that is clearly modeled after Thomas's (1923) "Definition of the Situation."

3. Methodology

The data for this study came from four sources. First, and most significantly, professors from four different American colleges received completed IRB (Institutional Review Board) - approved Likert questionnaires from 250 students who had shoplifted. Most of the questions on the survey were intended to quantitatively measure the applicability of noted criminological theories in explaining shoplifting. Participation was voluntary and the complete anonymity of the respondents and the confidentiality of the responses were strictly guaranteed. One open-ended question, however, was included for the purpose of this

qualitative analysis. That question was, “What were you thinking when you shoplifted?” Of the 187 students (105 females and 82 males) who were between 10 and 19 when they shoplifted, 117 responded to this question. Fifteen of this group responded with some detail. Their cases are reported and discussed in this paper.

The second source for the shoplifting data came from interviews with a local police officer who for many years has been the first responder to calls from local businesses. One case offered by him is reported here. The third source was an asset protection detective who, for several years, has been catching shoplifters in the act. One case came from her. Both these sources were asked to comment on what the accused shoplifters told them at the time of apprehension. In some instances, the officer and detective had asked the juveniles, “What were you thinking?” The fourth source of data came from an internet search for adolescent shoplifters’ confessions that had been quoted in Teenage or Parenting magazines. Two of the following cases came from there.

The use of self-reports to study American shoplifting is common (e.g., Babin & Babin, 1996; Klemke, 1982; Lasky, Jacques & Fisher, 2015) and useful as it can capture the non-distorted essence of shoplifting behavior not measured in arrest and official court records, and they also uncover the attitudes, values and explanations that are crucial to Thomas’ theories. This is a method that allows for the distinct “angle of vision” that is vital to sociology and “locates intentionality and action to individuals’ character and personality, and to the actions that flow from them” (Epstein, 2005, p. 448). Cochran (2016) used self-report data in his study of academic dishonesty among American college students. Additionally, the use of self-reports by researchers around the world (e.g., Adib & El-Bassiouny, 2012; Hirtenlehner et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2015) have established that these measures are reliable and valid. It has been suggested (Link, et al., 1999) that misreporting is rare and that police records may represent a greater problem.

4. Results/Discussion

The four cases that came from the police officer, the asset prevention detective and the Internet are reported below in their original form. The categories of the original 171 college student responses to the question, “What were you thinking when you shoplifted?” are listed in Table 1 below. Because many of the college students did not elaborate with much detail on this question, context to some of their responses was found in their “very strongly agree” or “very strongly disagree” answers to 7-point Likert questions. Profiles, or cases, of 15 of this group who provided the most detail of their shoplifting were created by combining some of the personal data about the respondents to their Likert responses. For example, if a student had “very strongly agreed” to the Likert statement “Before I entered the store I thought I might shoplift,” then these words were used in the case as if he had actually written them. Only items that received “very strongly agree” or “very strongly disagree” responses were used here. The respondents’ actual words appear in quotes. Nineteen cases are presented below under the most appropriate of Thomas’s “four wishes.”

4.1 The “I want this” and the “Not thinking” Groups

As can be seen in Table 1, the largest response category was, “I want this.” In almost all these 38 cases, there were no further elaborations and there were not enough “very strongly agree” or “very strongly disagree” responses for these respondents to be selected for analysis under Thomas’ scheme.

It is interesting to note in Table 1 that many respondents claimed they were “not thinking.” They did not write, “Do not remember.” So is one really to believe that shoplifting is done without thought? Or is this only a clichéd excuse? According to Mahoney (2017, p. 2), the director of a Colorado Springs Teen Court reports that, “Most adolescents can’t explain themselves.” They did, however, report being aware of what they were doing. If they were aware, it seems reasonable to conclude that they were thinking. Three of these cases were chosen for analysis below.

Table 1. Categories of the Responses (N=171) to “What were you thinking when you shoplifted?”

Question: What were you thinking when you shoplifted?	N (%)
I want this.	38 (22.2)
This is thrilling, an adrenaline rush, and risky.	20 (11.7)
Nothing. I wasn’t thinking.	18 (10.5)
Hope I don’t get caught. Can I get away with it?	18 (10.5)
I’m going to meet the dare. I’m going to try this.	8 (4.6)
This will make me look better.	5 (2.9)
I’ll give this to someone else.	4 (2.3)
Now my friends will accept me.	2 (1.2)
I’m getting back at them.	2 (1.2)
How much can I get for this?	2 (1.2)

The first case, one of those college students who said he “wasn’t thinking,” was Mike (all names are pseudonyms). As can be seen in his definition of the situation, he certainly was aware of his environment and decided to act. He was, in fact, thinking. Mike was seventeen when he first shoplifted. He was living with his parents and had no siblings.

1. I knew I was going to shoplift before I entered the store. “I knew what I wanted...it was for personal use. When I got in I looked around, saw my opportunity and took it. I had money to pay for what I took. No one dared me to do it and I didn’t do it for the thrill. I didn’t think about getting caught. I’m not embarrassed about it.” I’d done it before and was never caught and I’d do it again.

Susan was 13 when she first shoplifted and had shoplifted four times since. Her family income was over \$70,000. She’d been arrested before for shoplifting. She claimed she

learned how to shoplift from someone else. She, too, was thinking even though she said she wasn't. One can see the intent, the planning and the rationalization.

2. The days before I shoplifted I was tense and anxious. The day I last shoplifted I was tired. I knew shoplifting was serious. "I tried to take advantage of an inexperienced store clerk. I didn't feel guilty. No one got hurt. I like to keep up with the latest fashions and trends in clothes." I know other people who have done it.

Christine had shoplifted over 10 times and had never been caught. When she was a child she had been taught that shoplifting was wrong. She was not frustrated or worried about anything when she shoplifted.

3. "I wasn't intending to do it, but it was right there and easy to take. After I took it I tried to decide how badly I wanted it. I know it is a serious offense and my family would be upset if they found out. I didn't need what I took. It was mostly for the excitement. It didn't matter what I took, I just wanted to take something. I knew it was wrong, but it didn't bother me at the time. I've told my friends about it."

4.2 The Four Wishes Cases

When writing about his "four wishes" in *The Unadjusted Girl* (1924), Thomas tried to account for "forces which impel to action" (p.4). People could be dominated by one or more of these at the same time, although if more than one was involved some adjustments would have to be made. And, people could waver between the wishes. According to Colyer (2015, p. 261), "The genius of the scheme was not in naming four arbitrary wishes, but rather in laying out a framework for certain types of desires to reign over or be checked by others." In discussing the significance of these wishes, Thomas claimed they were the starting point of behavior. "Any influences which may be brought to bear must be exercised on the wishes" (Thomas, 1923, p. 39).

The first of these wishes was "The Desire for a New Experience." This wish is the one "most frequently invoked by other sociologists of the 1920s" (Colyer, 2015, p. 260). "Adventure is what the young boy wants," Thomas (1923, p. 4) wrote. There is a contest of skill involved. There is the thrill of success. There is a deep curiosity and a yearning for freedom. He wrote, "It is impossible not to admire the nerve of a daring burglar or highwayman" (Thomas, 1923, p. 4). Thomas believed that this wish was emotionally related to anger and often expressed itself in courage. The person involved with this first wish often disregarded prevailing standards and was socially irresponsible. Delinquent behavior can be the result of an adventurous wish that is not fulfilled or the new experience could be one of deviant behavior in itself. Thomas found considerable evidence of this in juvenile court records and social service agency files.

One student who seems to fit this wish category is Peter, a first-time shoplifter. It is unknown how much he'd had to drink, but as he reported, he knew what he was doing. He shoplifted in a department store and reported that he went to church about 40 times a year. Peter brought emotion and vigilance to his situation.

4. In the days prior to my shoplifting I was angry and emotionally upset. I was having problems with another person and I was frustrated at school...things were out of control. "My father had told me that I wouldn't amount to anything. I didn't intend to shoplift, but it was right there and easy to take and I had been drinking. I'd shoplifted before." Everyone steals, but I know it is immoral. "I did it to save money, but didn't need what I took. I looked around to see if anyone was watching. I've done a lot worse things in my life than shoplift, but I take full responsibility." I'm embarrassed about this and don't want to be labelled a criminal.

Robert, Case 5, reported that he had shoplifted hundreds of times between the ages of 10 and 18 and had only been arrested once. Evident in his statement is his zest for excitement and his disregard for the seriousness of shoplifting.

5. I knew the last time, and in the past always knew, before I entered the store that I would shoplift. "My friends say that shoplifting was OK. They do it and don't get caught. It is easy and it is not a serious offense. I don't have much money, even for basic necessities. Someone dared me to shoplift and I like to take risks. It's more fun to steal something than to pay for it and it's exciting to get away with it." I would have been less likely to shoplift if I thought the store was doing spot-searches of clothes or bags. "I did it for the thrill, but I don't do it anymore."

And then there was Glenn who came from a family with lots of money and had four siblings. He had committed lots of criminal acts, but didn't know how many. He had shoplifted between 10 and 15 times from department stores and had never been arrested. Glenn consciously disregarded the law and persisted after a moment of doubt in the following case. This is a good example of what Thomas (1923) described as the inner struggle for definition where one value wins out. Here Glenn's moral propensity interacts with temptation and he justified shoplifting.

6. I knew the store would never miss what I took. I knew it was wrong, but did it anyway. "I looked around before I did it and wondered how badly I needed it. I was worried about being caught, but refusing to 'chicken out.' I thought hurry up and do it and get out of the store. I did it for myself, for the thrill of it, not to impress others."

Polly was another student who thought shoplifting was immoral. She was 18 when she shoplifted last, but had done it about 10 times before and has never been caught. She reported being committed to getting her college degree.

7. "I remember how badly I wanted what I took. The whole thing was an adrenaline rush. I remember thinking how fast can I swipe this, where can I put it, who is around and how fast can I get out of the store. I knew it was wrong, and my family would be upset, but that didn't cross my mind at the time. I really like to take risks."

Kathy, too, was looking for excitement. She reported having shoplifted from department stores over 20 times between 13 and 15 years old, and she had been caught before. There is clearly intentionality and a social element in this case. Also seen here is how Kathy changed her definition of the situation.

8. I thought I might shoplift. There was no guilt really. Everyone steals. The penalty for it isn't bad. "No big deal. I didn't even think about getting caught. Just for the thrills. I could have afforded the items but me and my friends used to do it for fun. I was always checking for cameras and employees. I thought it was like trying to do a mission. It was a thrill to see if you could accomplish your goal without getting caught." On another day she knew she had been seen. "I walked around the store and put the stuff back on the shelves...any shelves. They must not have seen me do that because they stopped me. But I had nothing. That was close."

Spoon (2017) identified Diana, a 19-year-old, as the most memorable shoplifter she had encountered in her years as an asset protection detective. While surveying a department store, Spoon watched Diana steal a cat toy. When Spoon asked Diana why she shoplifted, Diana gave the following response that resonates with Thomas's (1923) element of curiosity in his first "wish."

9. "I wanted to know what it felt like. I wanted to know if my heart would race or that I would feel guilty. It was an experiment...and my heart rate didn't go up. I didn't feel guilty either."

The second of Thomas' (1923) wishes was "The Desire for Security." Thomas thought this wish was based on fear. This person would be cautious, but also would be interested in the accumulation of property in times of hardship. There is a pursuit for self-enrichment and the desire to take something from the world. Sometimes this person wants to restrict someone else's freedom or accumulation of property.

Alex, the 10th case, was out for revenge. He wanted to hurt someone who he believed had hurt him. What he was committed most to in life was having fun. He claimed to have committed well over 200 criminal acts; at least 100 of them were shoplifting. "I would take as much as I could." He had never been caught and said he might shoplift again. "I don't get caught," he wrote. His family was very well off.

10. "I knew before I went in. No question. I knew it was wrong, but I stole from a place that treated me like shit." I hate it when people try to control me. "I said to myself that I was just getting even. Me and my friends would send in groups at a time, get bags from the clerk and just go to town. Hmm what do I need?" If someone stole from me though, I'd do everything I could to get it back.

Amanda was 15 when she shoplifted twice. She was never caught and she never did it again. In this situation, Amanda resolved a conflict of values. She feared losing her mother's approval and desired expressing her disapproval over some perceived injustice.

11. "I don't remember what I was thinking, but I didn't think it was cool. I shoplifted in an attempt to assert my condemnation of a particular chain of stores – bad idea. It's immoral and I feel guilty about it. I remember thinking Mom will kill me if I get caught." I'm a high achiever and I like to be in control.

The 12th case, Harry, is one of two college students who claimed he shoplifted to make money. He started out stealing and selling comic books to his friends. In high school he figured out a way to shoplift video games and DVDs. He couldn't remember how many times he had shoplifted, but he had never been caught. What he was most committed to in life was being happy.

12. "What I was thinking was I can probably get away with this again. Keep cool and look serious. I'd buy five or six DVDs and leave with them. All legit. Put them in my car and go back to the store with the receipt. I'd grab more of the same DVDs and leave with them. The alarm would go off. I'd stop and look surprised. They would stop me. I'd show them the receipt. They'd see that the bar codes matched. OK sorry, they'd say and bingo, off I'd go. Then I'd sell the extra DVDs on Craigslist or Facebook."

Alex, an 18-year-old high school student was addicted to pain killers and heroin. He mostly stole electronics and sold them to pawn shops. He knew exactly what he wanted before he entered the store. He got caught running out of a Wal-Mart with a portable generator in a shopping cart. This was the first time he had been apprehended. Seppala (2017), a local policeman, remembered Alex saying the following.

13. "I didn't have any money. I was shaking and desperate. I needed a fix. Get it and get out was all I was thinking."

Thomas's (1923) third wish was "The Desire for Response." This manifests in the tendency to look for and give love and/or appreciation to and from another person. This is the most social of the four wishes and has a gregarious component, as well as a sexual one. It is both egoistic and altruistic to want to be connected to others and have satisfying interpersonal relationships.

Brian was 17 when he shoplifted the last of four times. He was committed to school and had never been arrested. When he was a child he was taught that shoplifting was wrong. He could have easily paid for what he took.

14. "I was thinking this is easy. I don't have any money on me, but I need to get my brother a birthday present."

Niki was 16 and at Disney World. Relationships were very important to her. She had shoplifted six times, but only punished once. "I didn't intend to do it this time." She was generally a very happy and energetic person who claimed she had always been treated fairly.

15. "I was thinking, WOW, cool, a key chain for Amy...let's just slip it in this bag here."

The fourth and last of Thomas's (1923) wishes was "The Desire for Recognition." This is often expressed in finding one's place in a social group and seeking social status, sometimes through fashion or bravery or accomplishments. When finding social status from one group of significant others is lacking, people often do something that will gain them status in a different group.

Jennifer, the 16th case, fits this category. She was 13 and had seven siblings. She had shoplifted from a department store four times before and had been arrested once. She wasn't certain that she would shoplift the last time, and she didn't think about getting caught.

16. "I was always acting out as a teen. I was influenced by a girl who was an incredible thief. She elevated shoplifting to an art. She showed us the ropes. When I shoplifted I wanted to be one of the 'gang.' I wanted to seem daring, bold and fearless." Just prior to my shoplifting there were changes in my life that I could not control. I wondered if I should take it or not. "After I did it I told them it was unintentional. Not true."

Shannon was one of several females in the sample who, when they were between 14 and 18, shoplifted for clothes and cosmetics. She had shoplifted between 10 and 15 times and had never been caught, although it was close once. In general, her life was pretty boring. Her parents were divorced. Her sister gave her the most grief.

17. "I was thinking I'll probably do this, but hope I don't get caught. I know they won't search me. This is fun getting make-up for free, perfume for free, clothes for free...I like the clothes. I've done this many times....it is so easy."

The next case is Olivia, a 17-year-old who confessed (Teen Vogue, 2014) to a journalist who was writing about an increase in adolescent shoplifting being related to peer pressure and the desire for material goods.

18. "I started shoplifting with my friends because they told me how easy it was. Even in stores with alarms, they would just take things and never get caught. I was fascinated by that. After they went about a half dozen times and got hundreds of dollars' worth of makeup for free, well, I was jealous. I wanted everything they had, and it grew harder and harder for me to rationalize paying for stuff myself."

Kimberley (Moran, 2015, p. 2) started shoplifting when she was six years old. But in her teens she thought, "I would definitely be prettier, or happier, or more interesting if I could just have that lipstick."

19. "We went into small dressing rooms and pulled new clothes onto our nervous, sweaty bodies, then stretched our own clothes over the stolen ones. I developed my own method. After leaving the dressing room, I did not race for the door. Instead I wandered the aisles, looking at clothes, laying pairs of pants over my arm as if I were still planning to try things on. Sometimes I was even so bold as to walk right up to the cashier and ask her a question."

These cases show or suggest adjustments to the shoplifting-in-process situations as the shoplifters perceived them. For those shoplifters who had previously been caught, their definitions of the situation were undoubtedly learned from those past experiences and then adjusted to fit the later incidents. The case situations were expressed by them in common sense terms. On a few occasions, the shoplifters were apparently not paying much attention to the precise definition of what was going on. They were, however, aware of what they were doing. According to Collins (1988, p. 271), this is not unusual as long as the activity moves

along smoothly. Unlike some young children who shoplift and are unaware that what they were doing was illegal and wrong, all the people in this study knew they were shoplifting. Their intent was to shoplift and their actions were successful, whether or not they had been caught. One of the advantages of framing this research around Thomas' "four wishes" is that not only is the shoplifter's cognitive process revealed, but so is the contribution of emotions.

Implicit in the cases presented here is the influence of culture "in which a moral code arises, which is a set of rules or behavior norms" Thomas (1931, p. 43). Thomas spent much of his career concerned with the role of culture in societies. It was in *The Polish Peasant* that he illuminated this most clearly. Typically, culture not only includes rules and norms, it also includes attitudes, values, beliefs and objects that are common to the group or society. "By a social value we understand any datum having an empirical content accessible to the members of some group" (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918, pp. 21-22). In the case of the American adolescent shoplifters, there is frequent reference to the intersubjective values of the importance of clothes, popular music, wanting things "now," being spontaneous and involvement in risky behavior. "By attitude we understand a process of individual consciousness which determines real or possible activity of the individual in the social world" (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918, pp. 21-22). The shoplifters also spoke to attitudes towards stealing, the importance of an item to the store owner, attitudes towards making or saving money, attitudes towards revenge or attitudes towards peer acceptance.

5. Limitations

Most of the data for this research came from a small non-random sample and does not include a very broad distribution of other shoplifters (caught or not), such as those middle-aged or older, less financially well off or those less educated. All of these different groups, as Thomas would have noted, could easily have brought different values, interpretations and desires to the varied shoplifting situations, but he rejected the idea that different groups are driven by these differences (Colyer, 2015, p. 259). The breadth of the self-described attitudes and motivations presented here, however, are fairly broad and probably could cautiously serve as generalized rationalizations. Besides, the intent here was not to determine cause in the full social action theory sense so a fully representative sample was not needed anyway.

The other main limitation is that the author used a cross-sectional survey to collect most of the data. Only one open-ended question was asked, "What were you thinking?" Unlike the lengthy field observations and extensive interviews that Thomas (1923) used for *The Unadjusted Girl*, this cross-sectional method was done within a short time frame and the respondents were not offered extended time to elaborate. Consequently, the respondents' qualitative definitions of their shoplifting situation were limited in detail and description. This researcher had to fill in the situational descriptions with data, albeit accurately contributed by the respondents, from the Likert responses that were originally meant for quantitative analysis.

This relates to the last limitation of this shoplifting research. Thomas (1923) spent

considerable time in *The Unadjusted Girl* pointing out how people adjust their wishes (desires) as they prepare for action. He showed how a person is often conflicted with opposing wishes, the desire for adventure versus the desire for security, for example. He made the case by making his own interpretations of his subjects' intent. For example, he would place someone's case in the "Desire for Security" wish category when the person never used the word "security." This is not bad in itself; in fact it is the job of a good sociologist. After all, to paraphrase Max Weber's memorable aphorism, one need not have been a shoplifter in order to understand a shoplifter. But Thomas, through his personal interviews, court records and field ethnographies, had considerably more information to analyze than the researcher did here.

6. Discussion/Conclusion

It became evident during this research that "the four wishes" was, indeed as Merton (1948) had pointed out, an extremely broad concept. Each of the wishes has multiple elements which allows the researcher considerable discretion in matching the shoplifting situation to the appropriate wish. That is partly why they were eventually abandoned by Thomas (Colyer, 2015) and others. However, they were a very useful "standpoint" to use in the organizing of this shoplifting data. They were helpful in accentuating the important subjective features of shoplifting. "The four wishes" is not a criminological theory, but it is as Thomas accurately pointed out, a place to start. Once the cases for this study were placed under one of "the four wishes," they could be analyzed for the interplay between subjective aspects (e.g., perceptions and meanings) and objective conditions (e.g., the physical environment and social norms) of the situation. Thus, the later and more advanced of Thomas's ideas, "the definition of the situation" could be approximated. While the use of "the four wishes" might not be totally adequate by itself in gaining insights into the thinking of the shoplifter, when used in conjunction with "the definition" it seems to work. In most of the cases presented here, one can easily see that the shoplifters were bringing attitudes and values to their situation. The definitions of the situations contain both cognitive and emotional elements.

As Thomas (1923) wrote in *The Unadjusted Girl*, "It is impossible to understand completely any human being or any single act of his behavior, just as it is impossible to understand completely why a particular wild rose bloomed under a particular hedge at a particular moment" (p. 1). As Sutherland (1924) claimed about his "Differential Association" theory that was guided by his friendship with Thomas and by Thomas's writings, it doesn't explain criminal behavior any more than it does non-criminal behavior (Shonle, 1927, p. 599), but it does lead to a better understanding of it. On that, this researcher supports the hermeneutic thrust of Thomas' qualitative approach to the study of human interaction with raw descriptions of data describing the activity in question even though it does not address the positivistic search for cause and generalizability.

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