

Chapter 4

Modus operandi and explanations of shop theft

4.1 Introduction

This chapter attempts to provide a detailed description of various aspects regarding shoplifters= methods, techniques (strategies and arts) and known trademarks. This chapter discusses the methods (that have been researched) of stealing and the items shoplifters prefer to steal or commonly steal. The significance different theoretical explanations regarding shop theft, will also receive attention.

Shoplifters use different methods of stealing, ranging from the simplest to the most advanced, depending of the category they belong to. They are classified as either the non-professionals (amateurs) or the professionals (boosters) because of the methods they employ to steal from stores.

4.2 *Modus operandi*

4.2.1 *Techniques and strategies*

Fischer and Green (1992:351) indicate that shop theft is carried out in a believable manner. Most thefts are simple and straightforward, and often involve that stolen goods are stuffed into pockets or carry bags. There also exist particular techniques, beyond the simple taking of goods that are in general use and will be examined in this section. Klemke (1992:29) refers to Cameron's works regarding the Arts and Crafts of shop theft as a point of departure, that indicates that shoplifters use a wide range of methods in the commission of their crimes.

Klemke (1992:30) notes that, although various techniques were identified, shoplifters may apply two basic methods. Some prefer to conceal goods, while others do not. The former

method involves hiding goods under clothing, in pockets and purses, or in reading materials such as books.

Brown *et al.* (1998:484-85) reveals that some shoplifters secretly plan to get arrested while in full view of store detectives. They then sneakily drop the goods, just before being apprehended. Afterwards they may file a lawsuit for damages due to false arrests; a planned action that can be used only a limited number of times.

Other shoplifters use more daring methods, whereby they do not conceal desired goods, because some feel this method will be less risky than someone who sneaks around and cautiously awaits the opportunity to steal. Professional shoplifters sometimes resort to particularly daring tactics, including a much-told story of a couple of thieves who hoisted a canoe onto their shoulders, in a packed New York department store, and marched out the front door with the goods.

Klemke (1992:30) also comments that shoplifters pretend to have broken arms or that they are pregnant, in order to have a hiding place for stolen goods. Some take the item and, without leaving the store, venture to the refund counter to claim a cash refund by declaring that they are returning an item they have received as a gift. Some omit to fabricate any pretence. They simply grab an armful of valuable goods and, depending on how fast they can move, run to the waiting getaway vehicle. Some shoplifters prefer to work on their own, whereas others operate in a group context.

According to Sennewald and Christman (1992:13) shop theft is committed in numerous ways, which are known as the mechanics of shoplifting. This chapter focuses on the different known methods, such as walking out with concealed goods, the grab and run method, crotching, which is the use of clothing or booster equipment, price fixing, grazing, fraudulent returns, distraction and collaboration. The various methods, as described by Sennewald and Christman (1992:14), will be discussed.

4.2.2 Walking out with concealed goods

Sennewald and Christman (1992:14) indicate that most goods that are taken out of stores are concealed under clothing, in shopping bags, fitting rooms, hand-carries and various other methods, as discussed below.

4.2.3 The bag technique

As indicated by Fischer and Green (1992:351) the use of shopping bags has been a popular method for removing stolen goods from department stores and shops that do not have a front-end checkout structure. Shoplifters have taken advantage of this method, with the popular belief that goods that are already in bags are considered as purchased, since customers can walk around from one shop to the next with unsealed bags, since the security personnel do not seal their shopping bags at the entrance. Inadvertently merchants also assist shoplifters by providing them with shopping bags, even if no purchase has been made, and they have no legitimate purpose for it. Shoplifters bring their own bags into stores, either carrying them under the pretence that they have bought something, or folding them and hiding them from view.

4.2.4 Fitting and dressing room technique

Fitting room and dressing rooms are well-known places that shoplifters are familiar with and use for their stealing activities, as they render rightful spots. There other customers, security personnel and staff cannot see them as these areas provide them with a feeling of freedom, so that they can take goods unobserved. Fischer and Green (1992:351) identified the fitting method of stealing - wearing appropriated goods under the shoplifters= own clothing. In these store areas most of the shop theft acts happen, such as crotching.

Cant (1991:151) mentions that the utilisation of fitting rooms is the most common method that shoplifters use. It is also the preferred method, as the items they intend to steal are usually small in size, and it becomes relatively easy for shoplifters to conceal stolen merchandise by simply holding them in their hands.

4.2.5 Clothing technique

According to Sennewald and Christman (1992:14) the best-known method shoplifters use when they steal goods from shops, are to use their clothes as instruments of concealment. Shoplifters specifically target desired goods and wait for an opportunity to present itself, then hide the goods in their pockets or under their clothes. They then leave the shopping environment unnoticed. They create a ball, about the size of a tennis ball, with the selected goods. This method has been used for the thefts of goods such as expensive silk dresses.

Most goods are removed from stores, either through the use of pockets or concealed under the thief's clothing. In the past, shoplifters would wear raincoats on sunny days, and thus appear suspicious when they intentionally wear raincoats in order to conceal goods. Thanks to the advancement of technology, this method is no longer used to its full extent. Shoplifters now use more advanced and sophisticated methods, namely the baggy coat tactics. It is considered a favourite for shoplifters who specialise in the theft of fur coats and hard goods like cigarettes and meat packages.

4.2.6 Other hand-carries

Sennewald and Christman (1992:15) indicate that, apart from the use of shopping bags as a method to conceal stolen goods, items are taken out of the store in a number of ways, using hand carried items. It has been noted that women's handbags were used in twenty-five (25%) to twenty-eight (28%) percent of all shop theft incidents (Griffin's 1985 report). The size of the selected item determines the method of concealment used by shoplifters, virtually any small item that has the capacity to conceal the desired goods can be used.

Small but expensive articles are thrown into closed umbrellas, and items such as compact discs, which have a flat design, can easily be placed between books and magazine pages, and then shoplifters make use of such hand-carries to conceal desired goods.

4.2.7 Grab-and-run technique

Sennewald and Christman(1992:15) describe the grab and run method as a thug-like technique. Stores, which are vulnerable to this blatant and less sophisticated method, are those located adjacent to the mall or shopping centre entrances and exits. Goods are grabbed from a display by a shoplifter who then runs out, using the nearest exit, to a getaway vehicle that waits outside the store. This type of stealing is regarded as an easy method used by shoplifters to take goods out of the store. They take the layout of the store and the area where such items are placed into account, and use this opportunity. Merchandise is suddenly and roughly snatched from the store, like a dog grabbing a bone and running off with it.

4.2.8 Crotching technique

Sennewald and Christman (1992:16) observe that shoplifters employ diverse and complex methods to steal different goods from shops. One such a method is to walk out of the store with the goods concealed between their thighs and legs. This is referred to as crotching.

According to Murphy (1986:244) females wearing loose dresses usually practise crotching. Fischer and Green (1992:351) regard crotching as a female method. An item is held in place, with the thighs, under a skirt or a dress. Goods are concealed beneath the dress and held tightly between their upper thighs. This method is used by some professional shoplifters and is not frequently encountered. It is reported that the so-called school in Los Angeles equips women with crotching tactics, and shoplifters practise with telephone directories.

4.2.9 Distraction technique

Hornby *et al.* (1974:251) define distraction or diversion as the act of turning something aside or giving it a different direction. This is a method used by shoplifters to divert the attention away from something that they do not wish others to see. The shop assistant's attention is drawn away from one place by a shoplifter, so that other helpers can remove goods from the now unsupervised area. Sennewald and Christman (1992:19) indicate that diversion is a shop theft tactic that can be executed in conjunction with other registered methods of shoplifting.

Shoplifters divert the store assistants' attention, with the intention to carry out their criminal activities, without any disturbance and with little likelihood of detection (if any). The applied methods range from obtaining assistance for goods outside the shoplifter's target area, to initiating unnecessary shouting and verbal confrontations and pretending to be sick. Cant (1991:154) uses the bad-tempered customer (grumpy shopper) approach as an example, where a woman cleared the floor for herself by acting the part of a disagreeable and bargain-hunting customer. As a result, shop assistants, who knew her unpleasant tactics, disappeared when they saw her, which was just what she needed. This afforded her the opportunity to carry out her stealing acts, unobserved.

4.2.10 The grazing technique

Sennewald and Christman (1992:18) comment on grazing, a concept that refers to customers who eat food articles while strolling inside the store, before paying for items. When items are paid for, only a few items remain and others are returned to the shelves. Most customers, upon entering stores, particularly the self-service type of stores, pick the desired items they want to purchase, while roaming from one shelf to the next. They tend to take perishable goods such as fruit, bread, or beverage drinks and eat or drink them before any payment is made, while they are strolling. Some are aware of their actions whereas some are not, a view advocated by Brown *et al.* (1998:484).

4.2.11 Price fixing technique

Sennewald and Christman (1992:17) observe that ticket switching is not seen as a form of shop theft, but as a method used to take items at a convenient price, as determined by the shoplifters, without paying the full amount for the merchandise. The customers remove the real tag that is attached to an expensive item, affix the price to a less costly but similar piece of merchandise, and then pay a convenient and lower price. Switching often occurs often in the fitting and dressing rooms.

Some individuals are not prepared to pay for desired but expensive merchandise and will change merchandise prices to suit their pockets at the expense of retailers. They perceive that the retailers are benefiting, at their expense, and resort to fixing merchandise prices. It must be emphasised that, sometimes, customers do not fix prices, as pricing errors can occur in the stores. If similar merchandise is priced differently, customers will always choose to pay the lowest price when items of the same quality are compared. Murphy (1986:244) refers to individuals who use this method as price-tag switchers, people who change or switch the price-tags from cheaper items to more expensive ones, and attempt to purchase the expensive merchandise at the reduced price.

4.2.12 Collaboration technique

Sennewald and Christman (1992:19) remark that shoplifters employ a variety of collaboration techniques, that not only involve people from outside the store, but also store employees, who then become accessories. People apply for work, with the intention to assist others in stealing from their work place, while they are employed and working there.

The actual shoplifter and the accomplice can be distinguished from each other when merchandise is stolen through collusive methods. The latter play an informative role and

provide relevant information to the actual shoplifter, such as warning him or her of the presence of the store detective or any other security officers or employees on a particular day. They actively participate by informing shoplifters and prepare merchandise to be taken away. Merchandise can then be found in a specific place, so that it is easier for the shoplifters to carrying these items out of the store. This method not only focuses on an outsider who colludes with store employees, but also includes instances where two or more non-employees collaborate. The shoplifter steals merchandise from the display and sneakily passes the stolen item to an accomplice, who takes it out of the store.

4.2.13 Booster technique

Sennewald and Christman (1992:16) describe booster apparatus as any type of instrument that can be used to assist shoplifters in committing their criminal acts. Boosters include items such as cages, coats, purses, booster boxes (which refers to a parcel or box, often wrapped in paper or string, with a hidden, spring-trap for placing over goods and concealing them) and booster drawers. Murphy (1986:24) describes booster drawers as bulky female knickers, with tight elastics at the knees, particularly designed to hold stolen merchandise that is deposited through an elastic waistband.

The professionals may use a booster box, which is a box that appears to be a wrapped package but it contains a disguised opening where the stolen items can be inserted. They may also use a parcel, often wrapped in a paper or string, with a hidden spring that allows the thief to reach inside and open the bottom, while it is resting on the desired merchandise. They also use a cardboard box, large enough to hide stolen items, wrapped in brown paper. The parcel renders the appearance of a securely wrapped package, and deceives people at the checkout points.

4.2.14 Fraudulent returns technique

Sennewald and Christman (1992:18) indicate that the refunding of goods is part of the obligatory retailing process. Customers, who are not satisfied with the goods that they have purchased, have the right to return such merchandise because it may be defective, stained, or damaged. Fraudulent returns are masked attempts by shoplifters to convert stolen merchandise into their full retail value, or receive credit on their accounts. It is a known method that shoplifters use to justify the return of appropriated goods. Fraudulent returns are popular techniques found among addicts, who, to support their drug habit, steal merchandise and then return the stolen items, claiming that it was a present when they have no proof of purchase or a slip.

Murphy (1986:245) perceives refunders as individuals who steal merchandise from one branch of chain stores and then attempt to obtain a monetary refund for them at another branch. Some shoplifters pick up receipts at the store and steal the listed merchandise, as part of a theft defence or refund plan. It should be stated that not only shoplifters or store employees commit fraudulent refunds. There are instances where recovered merchandise is sold to the wholesaler, or sold at cost by retailers, wholesalers and manufacturers. Damaged goods often end up in outlets that sell distressed items at low prices.

Next, shop theft will be explained in terms of an eclectic theoretical approach.

4.3 *Explaining shop theft*

4.3.1 Foundation

According to Williams and McShane (1994:2) theories are imperative commodities human beings require to understand life, they are required, as people, to know more about their surrounding. A theory may be described as an explanation or reasoned supposition, put

forward to account for the relationship between variables. In this case the theory addresses shop theft causation, with other identifiable variables, as far as research findings are concerned. Criminological theories are important, in order to provide answers to questions that were highlighted by the research process. Theories are explanations that answer the question: Why? They are actually generalisations, as they explain how two or more events are related to each other, and the conditions in which this association becomes operational.

In criminology, theories represent attempts to understand and explain criminal behaviour, including shop theft. Different theoretical explanations may be used to explain the incidence of shop theft. The causes and explanations of criminal behaviour and conduct are complex and diverse in nature. Criminologists try to study a broader range of human conduct and this cannot be accounted for by a single theory. This implies that, in order to account for situations of criminal conduct, these situations should be analysed from different points of view.

Maguire *et al.* (1997:394) mention that, in an attempt to explain why a particular offence occurred, the circumstances can be so diverse for a particular illicit act that it is probably appropriate to have various explanations for different types of crimes. In this regard, the researcher's focus is shop theft, and it also requires different approaches.

4.3.2 Anomie

The anomie theory places the emphasis on people who desire to attain socially acceptable goals, through illegal means, such as professional shoplifters. They consciously take merchandise out of shops to resell them on the black market, in order to live a socially acceptable lifestyle.

Morrison (McLaughlin & Muncie 2001:10) define the term anomie as a state of social normlessness, as experienced by either an individual or a society. These insufficient

normative measures of control leave people with no sufficient moral guidance for their behaviour, and undermine social unity. The theory itself is viewed as one of the foundational terms of the contemporary criminological school of thought.

Robert Merton, in his 1959 published work *Social structure and anomie* became influential in the history of sociology. Whilst this theory is perceived as that of a reductionist and provides offers of human agency, palatable ground is still seen in Durkheim's original late 19th century formulation of the theory of deregulation and normlessness. Merton mentions the basic perspective of modernist American culture as the success goal, which specifically focusses on material success. A decline towards normlessness emerges if a disjuncture between cultural and rightful means to acquire this goal exists.

The recent technologies used in the field of marketing, projects a cultural goal of financial affluence and social ascent, but for economically marginalised individuals in society, this means that such goals may or may not enable individual success because of the blocked opportunities in the mainstream economy. Whilst some may conform, others may devise, they may accept the cultural goal, but not the institutionally available means to acquire this goal.

4.3.3 Lower class delinquent sub-culture

People whose origins are perceived to be from the lower social structure, commission crime, particularly shop theft, as a means to attain goals like financial success, and therefore resort to unlawful means (Morrison in McLaughlin & Muncie 2001:11). A view advocated by Maguire *et al.* (1997:390) mentions that the 1960 work of Cloward and Ohlin, comments that most assumptions on juvenile delinquency assume that perpetrators emerge from the lower socio-economic setting. This line of reasoning argues that, because they cannot achieve universal goals of status and material wealth through the rightful channels, they are more likely to attain these goals in an unlawful manner.

4.3.4 Rational choice

Shop theft may also be explained in terms of the theory of rational choice perspective, which declares that humans will, as a predisposing factor, decide to take goods from shops. Illicit acts are deducted from a cost-benefit analysis, where the decision to steal from shops is the same as any other decision making process. Butler (1994:71) cites that the majority of customer shoplifters who were interviewed, calculated, prior to the commission of shop theft, the possible rewards (profit) from the criminal activity, and the risks involved in apprehension and prosecution.

Potential offenders assess opportunities and make rational decisions accordingly, based on what can be gained from stealing. The opportunity theory is a perspective which explains criminal behaviour as a function of the features of situations that present the opportunity, individuals who are willing to take advantage of this opportunity, and gain from unlawful acts. Historically, theories of crime took either a dispositional stance, with the focus on the individual offender, or a sociological perspective that directs the attention to the social factors that relate to illegal activities.

4.3.5 Routine activity

According to founders of routine activity perspective, crime is a concrete act and the result of the systematic rational, routine activity of everyday life. This implies that the possibilities for crime occurrences are unstoppable and constant. A different theoretical approach to crime emerged, following the work of Cohen and Felson (1979), in the form of the routine activity theory. The theoretical approach to crime, in terms of this theory, is that crime will happen when three closely linked variables come together: a particular circumstance, that is time and location, a target, and the absence of effective guardians. The combination of these elements creates new opportunities for crime to occur, through the increasing number of available merchandise.

The perceptions that relate to unlawful acts, based on routine activities and opportunities, are to be found in research that holistically focuses on milieu factors that correlates with crime. Such researchers are interested in particular milieu factors that might explain specific crime patterns. For instance: the escalating numbers of shop thefts may be explained in terms of the larger proportion of the stores, and the fact that security guards also assist with packing, therefore neglecting their responsibilities, and providing opportunities for crimes to go undetected.

The term opportunity resulted in different perspectives regarding the three important elements described in literature. Routine activity perspective uses the concept target rather than victim as it stresses that most criminal acts are aimed at acquiring property.

McLaughlin (McLaughlin & Muncie 2001:252) explains that suitability is characterised by four factors abbreviated as VIVA:

- \$ Value, rationalised from the motivated offender's view.
- \$ Inertia, the physical part of the property that hampers its suitability as a target.
- \$ Visibility, which singles out the property that is aimed at.
- \$ Accessibility, which increases the possibility of theft.

The target attractiveness has different dimensions: monetary value attached to the desired merchandise is the first dimension worth mentioning, but other factors such as the ease with which the articles can be transported and resold can be important in attracting potential offenders to the merchandise. It is in this case that some merchandise may not be equally attractive to shoplifters. Accessibility is also an important aspect and refers to the tangible qualities of the situations such as visibility, ease of access, and lack of observation at the crime scene. Lack of observation may also be associated with the third

perspective of opportunity, which refers to the absence of an effective guardian for the target, and therefore lures the potential shoplifter to the target.

4.3.6 Differential association

Hollin (McLaughlin & Muncie 2001:91-2) indicate that the theory of differential association may also be used to explain shop theft. Sutherland initially established this theory as a term that attempts to explain the acquisition and maintenance of criminal behaviour, through the interaction with specific external social groups. Earlier research studies and theories studied the causes of crime and focused on the individual features of the perpetrator. Individual factors, including biological and genetic, as presented by the positivistic school of thought, and the psychological and psychiatric aspects, perceived that the justifications for the commission of crime are found within the individual. The Chicago School argued that the causes of crime were not linked to the individual, but are the result of external factors. An example is the professional shoplifter who choose to steal in the context of a group, because of the influence the members of the group has on each other, and the reference group influence, as discussed in chapter 3. Young people, particularly those who live in areas characterised by relative deprivation and social disorganisation are more prone to participate in any form of anti-social behaviour and delinquency. Once the social environment becomes a place of delinquent culture then, through cultural transmission of delinquent values, other children increasingly run the risk of possibly becoming engaged in criminal activities, including shop theft.

Giddens (1989:738) defines the theory of differential association as an explanation for the advancement of criminal actions as mentioned by Sutherland. According to the exponent of this assumption, criminal behaviour is learnt through an association with others who consistently engage in misdemeanours.

Hollin (McLaughlin & Muncie 2001:92) emphasises several hypotheses, as spelled out by Sutherland:

- \$ Criminal behaviour is learned.
- \$ Learning takes place through association with other people.
- \$ Learning includes techniques to commit certain crimes, as well as attitudes and motives that support the committing of crime.
- \$ Learning experiences - differential associations - will vary in frequency and importance for each individual.
- \$ The processes involved in learning criminal behaviour do not differ from the learning of any other behaviour.

Clearly, all these elements are applicable in instances of shop theft.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has shed significant light on the known trademarks that shoplifters employ when they unlawfully and intentionally remove merchandise from stores. It can be concluded that, by the nature of their classification, shoplifters use diverse methods, which ranges from mere concealment of items to the most bizarre techniques, as demonstrated in this chapter. The researcher is of the opinion that in future, after a study of the data, shop theft research studies should focus on the unexplored or unknown methods of stealing.

Shoplifters operate as lone individuals and in a group context. In the group context every member is assigned a particular role. Accomplices from outside as well as internal accomplices, where the retail staff is involved, can also participate in shoplifting.

Shoplifters use different techniques when they take merchandise. Methods of concealment mostly depend on the targeted merchandise, the gender of the shoplifter as

well as the type of store. For example, female shoplifters prefer the use of their handbags and other related carriers and purses to conceal items, while male shoplifters conceal stolen items under their clothing or in their pockets and other boosters. Shoplifting is an offence where amateurs appear to be more prevalent than professionals.

The methods used to remove merchandise differ greatly and ranges from less complex to extremely advanced techniques. It can be mentioned that the act of shop theft involves the intention to acquire merchandise, a plan to leave the shop and, after the act has been committed, an intention to either use the merchandise for their own purposes or exchange the items. Even the non-professional shoplifters may plan the act of stealing prior to entering the shop.

Shoplifters- behaviour may be justified in terms of monetary aspirations and a decision-making process whereby the rewards are intentionally calculated and weighed up against the cons of taking the merchandise. A physical combination of three elements produces the opportunity for the commission of the shop theft to take place. Any type of crime, including shop theft, is most likely to happen when a motivated offender encounters the time and location (space) with suitable targets, in the absence of an effective guardian.

Next gender and its relation to shop theft will be discussed.