

Theoretical Application of DVD Presentation: "Set It Off"

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Section 1: Movie Overview

Overview of "Set It Off"

"Set It Off" (1996), directed by F. Gary Gray, is a crime drama that explores the lives of four African American women—Stony, Cleo, Frankie, and T.T.—as they struggle to survive in an oppressive society filled with systemic injustice and socio-economic disparity. The women, all facing personal and financial challenges, form a bond and decide to take drastic measures to change their lives by resorting to a series of bank robberies. The film presents a powerful narrative about the consequences of poverty, the failure of the justice system, and the deep emotional toll of personal loss. It also explores themes of friendship, loyalty, and the desperation that leads people to commit extreme acts. At its heart, "Set It Off" is not just a story about crime, but a commentary on the lack of opportunities and the crushing weight of social inequalities that drive individuals to the brink.

Environmental Characteristics of the Neighborhood

The film's setting, an economically impoverished urban area, plays a significant role in the characters' decisions to engage in criminal activities. The neighborhood is marked by unemployment, poor housing, inadequate healthcare, and a lack of access to quality education. These factors create a vicious cycle of poverty and desperation. The residents of this community often struggle to survive, and crime becomes a means of survival for many. The area is devoid of opportunities that would otherwise allow its inhabitants to break free from poverty. The economic disparity and societal neglect foster an environment where crime, particularly violent crime, becomes normalized, and where some individuals believe that resorting to illegal activities is the only option available to improve their lives.

In addition to the socioeconomic conditions, the sense of community within the neighborhood is fragmented, and the social fabric is frayed. Families are disjointed, and the lack of support systems leads individuals to feel disconnected from society's norms and expectations. This disconnection is crucial in understanding why the four women resort to robbery as a way to regain control over their lives. The external conditions surrounding them are so overwhelming that crime seems like a viable means to an end. These environmental factors help explain why crime is so prevalent in the community and why the characters turn to criminal behavior as a solution to their problems.

Key Scenes That Increased the Likelihood of Bank Robberies

1. **Frankie's Firing:** A pivotal moment in the film occurs early on when Frankie, a bank teller, is unjustly fired after a violent robbery takes place at the bank where she works. Despite being a victim of the crime and displaying composure and professionalism during the traumatic event, Frankie is dismissed due to her background. This event is particularly significant because it highlights the deep-rooted discrimination that exists in society. Frankie, already struggling financially, is left without a job and with no means of supporting herself. This unjust treatment from the system creates a sense of betrayal and pushes her toward criminal behavior. Frankie's firing demonstrates how individuals from marginalized communities are often punished more severely than their counterparts, regardless of their involvement or intentions, leading them to feel alienated and desperate.
2. **Stony's Financial Desperation:** Stony, another of the main characters, faces a series of devastating events that drive her to join the group of women in their criminal activities. First, she is unable to secure financial aid for her brother's college education. When her brother is killed in a case of mistaken identity by the police, Stony is left emotionally shattered. Her brother's death, coupled with the lack of support from the system, drives Stony to seek drastic measures to fulfill her financial and emotional needs. Her desperation grows as she sees no other way out of her situation. This emotional toll and the systemic oppression she faces fuel her decision to engage in illegal activities. Stony's actions reflect the extreme pressures placed on individuals from disenfranchised backgrounds who feel powerless to alter their circumstances.

Overview of Each Female Character

Each of the four women in the film is uniquely motivated by personal circumstances, yet all are driven by a shared need to escape their difficult situations.

- **Stony** is the most morally driven of the group. A kind and resilient woman, she is motivated to join the bank robberies out of a combination of financial need and a desire for justice after her brother's death. Her involvement in the robberies becomes a means of reclaiming control in a world where she feels powerless.
- **Frankie** is a pragmatic and deeply disillusioned woman. Her life spirals after she is unfairly fired from her bank job. The injustice she faces at the hands of the system, coupled with her inability to find stable work, leads her to embrace crime as a way to regain control over her circumstances.
- **Cleo** is the most brash and outspoken member of the group. Unlike the others, Cleo is motivated by the desire for financial independence and empowerment. She views the robberies as an opportunity to escape the constraints of her life and achieve financial freedom.

- **T.T.** is initially the most hesitant member of the group. A mother, T.T. is driven to crime out of necessity. Her fear of losing custody of her child and her inability to provide for her family push her to make the difficult decision to rob banks.

Section 2: Theoretical Application of a Social Structure Theory

Social Disorganization Theory

Social disorganization theory, developed by sociologists like Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay, posits that crime is the result of the breakdown of social institutions in a community. In areas where social ties are weak, and where communities face poverty, instability, and a lack of cohesive social structures, crime rates tend to be higher. This theory emphasizes the role of ecological factors—such as poverty, residential instability, and weak community organizations—in fostering criminal behavior. When a community is unable to maintain social order, deviance becomes more common, as individuals are left without the guidance and support that would otherwise encourage conformity.

Application to "Set It Off"

In the case of the characters in "Set It Off," the neighborhood in which they live exemplifies the characteristics outlined by social disorganization theory. The women's decisions to engage in criminal activity can be understood through the lens of the environmental conditions that surround them. The lack of social cohesion, combined with the high levels of poverty and systemic discrimination, creates an atmosphere where crime is seen as an acceptable and often necessary response to their circumstances.

- **Scene 1: Frankie's Firing:** Frankie's firing demonstrates how the breakdown of social institutions leaves individuals vulnerable to criminal behavior. By firing Frankie for a crime she did not commit, the system fails to protect her, and she is left without resources. The absence of institutional support is a direct manifestation of the community's disorganization. Frankie's subsequent turn to crime is a rational response to this systemic failure.
- **Scene 2: Stony's Financial Struggles:** Stony's struggles highlight how a lack of community support systems exacerbates individual hardship. Her inability to provide for her brother's education and the failure of the justice system to provide accountability after his death push her into criminal activity. The social disorganization in Stony's life mirrors the broader disorganization within her community.

Through these examples, it becomes clear that the women's decisions to rob banks are a direct response to the systemic failures of their society. The lack of legitimate opportunities and the

widespread disorganization of their community leave them with few choices, reinforcing the core tenets of social disorganization theory.

Section 3: Theoretical Application of Social Process Theory

Application to Each Female Character

1. **Stony – Differential Association Theory** According to differential association theory, criminal behavior is learned through interactions with others. In Stony's case, her decision to join the bank robberies is influenced by her association with her friends. Her desperation, combined with the influence of those around her, leads her to adopt criminal behavior. The support and camaraderie within the group normalize the idea of robbing banks, making it seem like a viable solution to her problems.
2. **Frankie – Labeling Theory** Labeling theory suggests that individuals who are labeled as deviant by society are more likely to engage in criminal behavior. Frankie's termination from her job and the subsequent labeling of her as a criminal push her toward deviance. Her sense of injustice, coupled with society's rejection of her, makes her more susceptible to engaging in the very behavior she was labeled for.
3. **Cleo – Social Learning Theory** Cleo's decision to participate in the bank robberies can be explained by social learning theory, which posits that criminal behavior is learned through reinforcement and modeling. Cleo's involvement in the robberies is reinforced by the group's success and the financial rewards that come with it. Her loyalty to her friends and the reinforcement of criminal behavior through the success of the group solidify her participation.
4. **T.T. – Strain Theory** Strain theory, developed by Robert Merton, suggests that individuals engage in deviant behavior when they are unable to achieve socially approved goals through legitimate means. T.T.'s inability to provide for her child and her fear of losing custody create immense strain. The emotional and financial pressures she faces lead her to turn to crime as a way to alleviate the strain and secure a better future for her child.

Conclusion

"Set It Off" is a poignant exploration of the complex interplay between systemic inequality, personal struggles, and the criminal choices individuals make. Through the lens of social structure and social process theories, the film offers a powerful commentary on the structural factors that influence criminal behavior. The characters' decisions to rob banks are shaped by their environment, their relationships, and the societal pressures they face. Their stories reflect

the broader implications of social disorganization, labeling, differential association, and strain, highlighting the ways in which systemic failures contribute to the perpetuation of crime. Ultimately, the film underscores the need for structural changes to address the root causes of criminal behavior and to create opportunities for individuals to break free from the cycles of poverty and desperation.