

Reflection Paper

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Intro to Criminology

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Section 1: Overview

Main Characters:

Stony (Jada Pinkett Smith): Stony's primary motivation stems from the loss of her brother, Stevie. He is wrongly killed by the police, and she feels financially powerless to help him live a better life. Her desperation deepens when she attempts to secure a loan for his college education and is rejected. After Stevie's death, Stony feels like she has nothing left to lose, and the need to escape her grim circumstances pushes her to join the heists.

Cleo (Queen Latifah): Cleo is primarily motivated by her thrill-seeking nature and a desire for power and respect. As a tough, streetwise character, Cleo is not interested in working within the system and sees the robberies as a chance to gain money quickly and prove her dominance. Unlike the others, Cleo seems to enjoy the high-adrenaline lifestyle that comes with the criminal activity and is less driven by necessity.

Frankie (Vivica A. Fox): Frankie's decision to join the robberies stems from her bitterness and frustration after losing her job as a bank teller. In the opening scene, she witnesses a robbery at her workplace and is later fired because her employers suspect her of being complicit due to her neighborhood connections. After this unjust treatment, she feels betrayed by the system and joins the others out of a desire for revenge against the institution that wronged her.

T.T. (Kimberly Elise): T.T. is the most reluctant of the group, but her main drive is to provide for her young son. Struggling with low-paying jobs and unable to afford proper childcare, T.T. feels the pressure to get money quickly in order to keep her son in a stable and safe environment. Her love for her child and her desire to secure a better future for him lead her to participate, despite her reservations.

Plot Summary:

The film begins with each of the women struggling in their low-paying jobs, facing racial and economic hardships. After Frankie is unfairly fired from her job as a bank teller, the friends discuss their frustrations and come up with a dangerous plan to rob a bank. Initially hesitant, they eventually agree, feeling that they have nothing to lose.

The first robbery is successful, and the group starts to plan more heists. However, as they continue, they attract the attention of the police, particularly Detective Strode (John C. McGinley), who is determined to catch them.

After the second heist the police, especially Detective Strode, begin to close in on the women after this heist. Their faces have been caught on security cameras, and they have started becoming more recognizable. This robbery sets off a series of events that increase the heat on the group, making their situation more desperate and dangerous.

Following the third heist, the women store their money in a safe deposit box held by Luther, their shady acquaintance. When they go to retrieve the cash, they discover that Luther has stolen all of it and fled. This is a major blow, as the group's hard-earned money, which they hoped would secure their futures, is now gone. The women eventually track down Luther in a seedy motel. During the confrontation, Cleo's anger boils over, and after a heated exchange, T.T.

accidentally kills Luther in self-defense. This incident further escalates the group's situation, as they are now involved in a murder on top of their bank robberies. Around this time, Stony also faces a personal tragedy when her romantic relationship with Keith, a bank employee she had been seeing, becomes strained. She has kept her criminal activities secret from him, but her growing guilt and the pressure of the situation lead her to push him away. The tensions among the friends rise sharply after the third robbery. While Cleo is still eager for the thrill and sees no way out, Stony and T.T. are increasingly conflicted. They begin to argue about what to do next, as they realize they are running out of options. Their friendship, which had been a source of strength, starts to fray under the weight of their choices. Despite the setbacks, the group decides to pull off one last heist to replace the money Luther stole. This decision is made out of desperation, knowing it will be their final attempt to escape their dire circumstances. They target a downtown Los Angeles bank. However, tensions are high, and they know that the police, led by Detective Strode, are already on high alert.

During the robbery, things go wrong. The bank's security alarm is triggered, and the police quickly surround the building. In the ensuing chaos, T.T. is shot by the police while trying to escape with the money. Her death devastates the group, especially Stony, who had always been the most protective of her. T.T.'s tragic death marks the beginning of the end for the group. After T.T.'s death, Cleo leads the police on a high-speed chase in a stolen car, determined to go out on her own terms. Cleo drives with her signature tough attitude, but she knows there's no escape. As the chase ends, Cleo steps out of the car, gun in hand, and is surrounded by police. She lights a cigarette and bravely faces her fate. The police shoot and kill Cleo in a hail of gunfire. Frankie is also unable to escape. As she tries to flee the scene, she is spotted by Detective Strode. In a tense moment, he calls out to her, pleading for her to stop. However,

Frankie refuses and attempts to run. She is tragically gunned down by the police as Strode watches, clearly frustrated that the situation has come to this. Stony is the only one who manages to escape the police. Disguising herself, she blends into a crowd of tourists boarding a bus to Mexico. As she looks out the window, she makes eye contact with Detective Strode and she witnesses the aftermath of her friends' deaths, particularly the intense police activity surrounding Frankie's death. The film ends with Stony in Mexico, alone, reflecting on everything that's happened. She has the stolen money with her, but the emotional cost of losing her friends weighs heavily on her. In the closing scene, she cuts off her hair, symbolizing a fresh start, but the pain and loss remain evident. She drives away in solitude, free but emotionally shattered.

Environmental Characteristics:

The environmental characteristics of the neighborhood significantly contribute to the commission of crime by fostering desperation, systemic disenfranchisement, and a lack of opportunity. The characters live in an impoverished area where poverty, scarce job prospects, and socioeconomic disadvantage create an environment that normalizes criminal behavior as a means of survival. Institutional racism and systemic bias exacerbate this, as seen when Frankie is unfairly fired after a bank robbery, reinforcing her distrust in authority and the system. The prevalence of crime in the neighborhood further makes illegal activity seem like an inevitable option, especially in the absence of adequate support networks or community programs. This environment is vividly illustrated in two key scenes that heighten the likelihood of the bank robberies. Frankie's firing not only strips her of her livelihood but also highlights the prejudiced assumptions and lack of support faced by the characters, planting the seed for her later actions. Similarly, Stony's desperation after the tragic and unjust death of her brother leaves her feeling abandoned by a system incapable of protecting her family, propelling her to join the others in

their plan. Together, these elements create a compelling portrait of how environmental and systemic pressures can drive individuals to crime.

Section 2: Theoretical Application of a Social Structure Theory

Social structure theory focuses on how societal and environmental factors, rather than individual traits, influence behavior, particularly criminal activity. One key perspective within this framework is social disorganization theory, which posits that crime is a product of structural factors such as poverty, residential instability, and weak social institutions in communities. According to this theory, crime flourishes in neighborhoods where social bonds are weak, resources are scarce, and formal social controls, such as law enforcement or effective community programs, are inadequate. The tenets of social disorganization theory include ecological characteristics, such as high population turnover, concentrated disadvantage, and deteriorating social cohesion, which collectively disrupt community stability and encourage criminal behavior. Additionally, the theory often references the "zones of transition" concept, where urban neighborhoods closest to economic hubs experience the most instability, fostering environments conducive to crime.

In *Set It Off*, social disorganization theory explains the rationale behind the female protagonists' decision to commit bank robberies by highlighting how the structural characteristics of their environment leave them with limited opportunities and pervasive feelings of hopelessness. The impoverished neighborhood they live in is marked by economic disadvantage, high crime rates, and a lack of access to legitimate opportunities, creating a context where crime appears to be the only viable option. For example, in the first discussed scene, Frankie is unfairly fired after being victimized during a bank robbery. This moment

reflects how systemic bias and institutional distrust reinforce the idea that hard work and conformity to societal norms do not guarantee success or stability in such environments. Social disorganization theory would argue that the failure of societal institutions to protect Frankie's livelihood pushes her toward crime.

Similarly, Stony's emotional breakdown following the wrongful death of her brother further illustrates how weak social controls and systemic failures exacerbate personal desperation. This tragedy, combined with the community's lack of protective resources, highlights the breakdown of social cohesion and institutional trust in their environment, key elements of social disorganization theory. These scenes depict how the instability and inequities of their environment align with the theory's tenets, explaining how structural conditions rather than personal immorality led the women to rationalize and commit the bank robberies.

Section 3: Theoretical Application of Social Process Theory

1. Frankie: Differential Association Theory

Differential association theory, developed by Edwin Sutherland, suggests that criminal behavior is learned through interactions with others. According to this theory, individuals learn attitudes, techniques, and rationalizations for crime from those they associate with, particularly if they value those relationships.

Frankie's descent into crime can be understood through her association with the other women after being unfairly fired from her bank job. Her abrupt termination not only alienates her from legitimate social networks but also pushes her into a closer bond with Stony, T.T., and Cleo, who are all struggling with systemic injustices. Through these relationships, Frankie begins to

rationalize crime as a necessary means of achieving financial stability and empowerment.

Differential association theory explains Frankie's participation in the robberies as the result of her interactions with the group, who collectively normalize and justify their illegal actions as a response to systemic oppression and economic deprivation.

2. Stony: Neutralization Theory

Neutralization theory, proposed by Gresham Sykes and David Matza, explains that individuals engage in criminal behavior by using techniques of neutralization to suppress feelings of guilt or responsibility. These techniques include denying responsibility, denying harm to victims, and appealing to higher loyalties.

Stony's choice to commit bank robberies is heavily influenced by her personal circumstances, including her brother's tragic and unjust death and her desperate need for financial security. She uses neutralization techniques to justify her actions, particularly the belief that her situation leaves her no other option. By framing her involvement as a means of securing a better life and avenging systemic injustices, she denies full responsibility for her actions, focusing instead on the failures of the system that forced her hand. Neutralization theory explains how Stony reconciles her moral conflicts, allowing her to proceed with the robberies while seeing herself as a victim of circumstance rather than a perpetrator of crime.

3. T.T.: Social Bond Theory

Social bond theory, developed by Travis Hirschi, argues that individuals with weak ties to societal institutions such as family, work, and community are more likely to engage in criminal behavior. The theory focuses on four elements: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. When these bonds are weakened or absent, the likelihood of deviant behavior increases.

T.T. is a single mother struggling to provide for her child, and her inability to secure a safe and stable environment for her son weakens her attachment to societal norms. Her desperation to improve her financial situation, coupled with her emotional connection to the group, leads her to prioritize the robberies over her traditional values. Social bond theory explains T.T.'s actions as the result of weakened bonds to conventional society and the prioritization of her group loyalty and maternal instincts over societal rules.

4. Cleo: Labeling Theory

Labeling theory emphasizes the role of societal reaction in shaping an individual's identity and behavior. Once labeled as deviant, individuals are more likely to embrace that label and act accordingly due to stigma and exclusion from legitimate opportunities.

Cleo, who is already marginalized as a masculine-presenting lesbian in a homophobic and oppressive society, appears to have internalized the deviant label assigned to her. Lacking access to legitimate opportunities and facing consistent discrimination, Cleo adopts a defiant, rebellious persona. Her involvement in the robberies reflects her acceptance of the outsider label, as she views society as hostile and sees crime as a way to assert her agency and achieve respect.

Labeling theory explains Cleo's participation as a response to societal rejection, with the robberies serving as both an act of defiance and a means of gaining power within a system that marginalizes her.