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'Violence is completely normal': Managing Violence Through Narrative Normalization

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This article introduces the concept 'narrative normalization of violence' as a theoretical framework for exploring the interplay between crime and marginality in street culture. Drawing from 4 months of ethnographic observations and 24 qualitative interviews with young men involved in a violent street culture in Oslo, Norway, the study identifies three prevalent narratives. The first, 'Part of the game', minimizes the danger of violence; the second, 'It's all about respect', internalizes violence as part of a desired subcultural identity; and the third, 'We come from concrete', emphasizes the importance of belonging. In distinctive and important ways these narratives shape collective energies that influence beliefs, attitudes and aspirations, which work to narratively render the exceptional nature of violence manageable and mundane.

KEY WORDS: street culture, narrative normalization, violence, harm, marginalization, narrative criminology

INTRODUCTION

Much of contemporary research on violence among street-oriented young men has relied on the concept of 'street culture' to better understand the high prevalence of violence and crime in poor urban neighbourhoods (Bourgois 2003; Ilan 2015; Kalkan 2021). This literature provides descriptions of motivations, decision-making processes and culturally specific behaviours, especially those that precede criminal activity. But although scholars most often agree that street culture is transmitted through street socialization (Vigil 2002; Lauger 2014; Fraser 2017), important gaps remain in the understanding of the specific socialization that constructs and transmits normalizing perspectives of violence in street culture.

First, although researchers often assume that the process of street socialization transmits cultural ideas (Oliver 2006), scholars who examine non-street socialization argue that cultural transmission occurs during social routines, such as daily conversation and storytelling (Blum-Kulka *et al.* 2004; Kyratzis 2004). While previous research has examined the impacts of street culture on violent action among young men in urban areas—with many scholars arguing that

respect functions as a powerful mechanism that encourages violence (Anderson 1999; Bourgois 2003; Kalkan 2021)—few studies have paid specific attention to how stories provide fruitful insights into the way members of street cultures understand the meaning and consequences of their own and others' violent behaviour (but see Lauger 2014), and fewer still have examined the narrative dimensions of how violence become perceived as normalized in inner-city street contexts.

Second, and at the same time, research on the normalization of violence (Ng-Mak *et al.* 2002; Delaney 2021) has almost exclusively focussed on changes at the macro level. One reason may be that the contexts where violence happens are hard for researchers to directly observe. Moreover, the common macro-focus in the existing literature may also in part stem from methodological and thus conceptual constraints, resulting from reliance on quantitative research into these issues. While such approaches are great for capturing and highlighting who violence is justified for and in what contexts violence is accepted, they do not allow for an analysis of how the process of normalizing violence ultimately is bound to language. Nor do they reveal how stories told and retold by street-oriented young men are fundamental in shaping their beliefs, attitudes and aspirations, as well as enacting and intensifying their collective culture. By zooming in on street-level processes of narrativization, I argue that one may arrive at a more in-depth understanding of the social mechanisms that transmit elements of street culture that guide young men to commit, accept and manage violence in their lives.

In this article, I introduce the concept of the 'narrative normalization of violence' as a theoretical framework for exploring the meaning of violence in street cultures. Drawing from 24 in-depth interviews and 4 months of ethnographic observations involving over 40 young men actively involved in a violent street culture in Oslo, this study explores how storytelling is utilized to cope with violence. The findings shed light on how harm and harmdoing are understood and experienced through narratives that normalize the physical, psychological and emotional strains inherent in street cultural settings. While the focus is on the normalization of violence within street culture, it is crucial to recognize that similar narrative strategies occur in other contexts. Hence, the concept of narrative normalization may hold scholarly relevance beyond narrative criminology, potentially offering fresh insights into the nexus between crime and marginality more broadly.

VIOLENCE STORIES IN STREET CULTURE

Most studies on street culture focus on the subcultural expectations that compel violent behavioural responses (e.g. Anderson 1999; Bourgois 2003; Kalkan 2021). This literature offers much data, and many insights, to theorize about the social dynamics in street contexts. One of the main arguments in this literature (e.g. Cohen 1955; Cloward and Ohlin 1960) is that street-oriented young men collectively enact an alternative street subculture as a cultural solution to their structural problems. However, cultural ideas about violence and crime are often described in relation to things outside the individual, as either a reaction to external groups or as a solution to structural conditions. As such, this perspective offers little more than a weak gaze on the internal dynamics and narrative processes that goes on within the culture under study.

As Sartre (1965 [1938]: 61) famously argued, humans exist surrounded by the narratives they create for themselves and absorb from others and interpret their experiences through these stories. In an important sense, crime is therefore always a story (Dollinger 2019; Maruna and Liem 2021). In the study of crime, the narrative dimension of violence has been addressed most directly by narrative criminologists (Presser 2009; Presser and Sandberg 2015). For example, Brookman *et al.* (2011) have examined how using 'the code of the street' (Anderson 1999) in narratives reflects people's ongoing construction of identity that situates their actions within a

subcultural context of respect. While they agree that street codes affect the way people interpret and respond to situations, their focus is primarily on how participants use the code as a 'formula story' (Loseke 2007) when discussing their own participation in violence. Their participants' stories are thus seen to connect personal identity narratives to generally accepted subcultural identities.

Similarly, in a study about how personal stories about violent events shape and transmit street culture among active gang members and street-oriented youth, Lauger (2014: 195) argues that the understanding of violent events develops from the first exposure to violence stories at an early age, but that youth do not become storytellers before they start to witness and participate in violence themselves. According to Lauger (2014) the meaning of violence evolves with new experiences and new conversations, because when people tell stories they also creatively interpret and employ new cultural understandings of their world and themselves.

In other words, narratives help people understand their world and their place in it (Presser 2018). Sandberg *et al.* (2015) claim that although violence is central in human life, it is particularly important in violence-prone subcultures and among street-oriented young men taking part in underground economies. Based on interviews with incarcerated drug dealers they have identified four widespread story types, which they call business narratives, intimidation narratives, moral narratives and survivor narratives. Sandberg *et al.* (2015) identify how these types of stories are used separately from one another and evoke different moral evaluations, in effect illustrating the ambiguous nature of violence stories to provide nuance to the understanding of street culture and the ways violence is experienced and used to construct meaning in these kinds of cultural settings.

These studies, and narrative criminology in general, represents a call for criminology to take stories seriously when studying human lives. Although narrative criminology have been criticized over different domains, such as its imprecise measurement of self-narratives, the instability of narratives over time and space, the influence of social factors in storytelling, the unreliability of narrative accounts and about causality in what stories actually do (see Maruna and Liem 2021), the aim of this article is to show the relevance of the narrative concept in attempts to understand how marginalized groups, such as street-oriented young men, give meaning to and cope with violence.

THE NORMALIZATION OF VIOLENCE

Whilst the literature on the normalization of violence stretches over a vast variety of contexts, from violence in wartime (Gupta 2019), to parental violence (Kotanen 2022), to fighting in college (Woods *et al.* 2018), the impact of narratives has still not undergone comprehensive examination. While this may stem, at least in part, to the predominance of quantitative research in this area (e.g. Ng-Mak *et al.* 2002; Delaney 2021), it seems like the limited qualitative research on violence normalization in street contexts has not fully engaged with the narrative concept either (e.g. Dunlap *et al.* 2009; Heerde and Pallotta-Chiarolli 2021).

The analysis of the relationship between narratives and normalization is mainly found in feminist critiques of men's violence against women (e.g. Stanko 1990; Miller 2008; Kessel 2022), which mostly demonstrates how heteronormative discourses and practices form an interpretive framework that normalizes (sexual) violence. However, there is no reason to believe that narrative normalization processes are exclusive to women's domestic experiences. As such, this literature may provide important analytical tools to grasp how narrative forms make violence meaningful.

As a case in point, Henriksen and Bengtsson (2018) view violence as embodied, accumulated events that shape spatial and temporal modes of being in the world. They propose the concept of

'trivialized violence' as a sensitizing framework for exploring the accumulated everyday violence that marginalized young people experience. This conception offers a new way of understanding how violent events become verbally trivialized. Likewise, my data suggest that both violent actions, and the stories spun out from such encounters, play a crucial role in governing the social life of individuals affiliated with street culture and crime. Moreover, these stories contribute significantly to the self-representations of individuals and groups who enact street subcultural elements to make violence into something they can handle.

In this article, I propose the idea of the narrative normalization of violence as an operative pattern of thought that centres on the micro-level narrativization going on within street cultures. The idea should, however, not be taken to mean the process where stigmatized or deviant individuals, groups or behaviours become included in as many features of 'normal' life as possible (Parker *et al*. 1998). Rather, these stories should be seen as nodal points in discourse (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) or as tools in symbolic boundary work (Lamont and Molnár 2002) that aid young street-oriented men in reconceptualizing violence as something manageable in their lives. While this bears similarity to Sykes and Matza's (1957) neutralization techniques in some respects, it extends this analytic by illustrating how the intersection between crime and marginality create a space for a specific kind of meaningful storytelling.

Narrative normalization should be regarded as the process where marginalized groups, like street-oriented young men, attempt to make the extraordinary seem ordinary and manageable. As such, narrative normalization does not denote genuine normalization but rather the narrative tactics used to alleviate the effects of violence. The idea that the normalization of harm is narrative driven also transcends issues of street violence and may thus serve a broader scholarly purpose among criminologists interested in harm, power and marginality.

METHODS

Although semi-structured interviewing represents one of the most applied avenues for accessing a person's self-narrative, Kirkwood (2016) contends that identity narratives should be studied in situ to prevent the decontextualization of identities. This advice has guided the methodology applied in this study, where data come from both 24 qualitative semi-structured life story interviews[1] and 4 months of ethnographic research in which I talked with, observed and got to know more than 40 young men associated with a violent street culture in the inner and Eastern parts of Oslo, Norway. This article specifically examines common violence narratives in the interview data about the men's youth and early adulthood, however, observations from the participants' social milieus have been instrumental in shaping the interpretations.

Most participants hailed from ethnic minority backgrounds, predominantly East African and were in their mid-twenties[2] at the time of the interviews. All reported experiences with police from an early age, and all but six had served time in prison, between one and four times. Their convictions were mostly due to violent offences and drug dealing. Jointly the participants had engaged in drug dealing; drug trafficking; drug distribution; assault; attempted homicide; homicide; robbery; burglary; kidnapping; illegal possession of firearms; distribution of illegal firearms; fraud; and theft. Importantly, many had also been the victim of serious violence themselves.

Initial access to the field was obtained in 2021 through referrals from three key 'gatekeepers' (Silverman 2001: 57) who held a high social status among their fellow peers. These men were also acquaintances of mine from childhood, having grown up in the same area. From October 2021 to September 2023, data collection alternated between interviews and fieldwork.

1 15 interviews were held in 2021, and the remaining interviews and fieldwork was conducted during the first half of 2023.
2 The participants' ages ranged from 20 to 34, with a mean and median age of 26.

Throughout this period, the gatekeepers played a crucial role in facilitating contact with new participants. Establishing these more personal connections has also been pivotal for fostering trust, which became evident in various scenarios, including instances where participants openly discussed their challenging childhoods, mental health, involvement in crime, their drug dealing strategies or shared potentially incriminating photos and videos.

With the aim of enabling a safe environment for the interviews, all interview sessions were carried out in an informal manner at a private location chosen by the participants—often at their homes, other apartments or in city parks. The typical duration of these meetings were around 2 hours, which provided ample time to discuss various topics from the participants' lives. Apart from interviews and fieldwork, numerous informal follow-up conversations were also had with key participants at different times. The purpose of these interactions was to elucidate unclear information, seek feedback on emerging interpretations and convey to the men that their input was valued.

This methodology is not unmatched and many previous investigations into street culture have adopted similar approaches to delve into the inner self-narratives and social dynamics of urban groups associated with street crime (Bourgois 2003; Venkatesh 2008; Sandberg and Pedersen 2009; Kalkan 2021). For instance, in their examination of prison social life, Crewe and Maruna (2006) supplement interviews with ethnographic observations to assert that these two methods are highly complementary in social research. They further emphasize that relying solely on one method without incorporating the other may overlook crucial insights achievable through methodological triangulation.

Still, most studies of criminal populations, either within or outside of confinement, are conducted by male researchers (but see Adler 1993; Bucerius 2014; Goffman; 2014). This may stem from the common belief that an ethnographer's ability to gain the trust of group members hinges on their similarity to them. In criminological circles, this constitutes a widespread assumption that male researchers have an advantage in studying the often violent, male-dominated realm of street crime. Consequently, being different from one's research subjects is often seen as a disadvantage, especially for a woman conducting ethnographic research in the world of street criminals. However, as demonstrated by Bucerius (2013), being a trusted outsider can facilitate a deeper understanding of a group, and being a woman is not necessarily the biggest obstacle in researching male-dominated groups involved in illicit activities. Rather, it can provide unique perspectives and access points that male researchers may lack.

My own experience illustrate that I developed a nuanced understanding of my subjects while maintaining an outsider status. Crucially, this status encouraged the men to confide in me, sharing insider information that they might not have disclosed to a male researcher or even to 'real insiders' (Fonow and Cook 1991). Notably, the distinctive aspect of the work presented in this article lies in my entry into these environments as a woman of approximately the same age as the participants, which some of the men also were acquainted with prior to this project. By eliciting unique statements, especially about emotion work, this have generated data that sets this work apart from much of earlier ethnographic research on violent street culture. Moreover, it may have fostered the men's collective interest in the project, where many participants unsolicited invited themselves to be interviewed, called to provide contact information to peers who wanted to participate, and invited me to join for social gatherings that they thought would be relevant for the project. Several conversations about being part of the project as a collective practice were also had with different groups. Nonetheless, my gender, ethnicity, level of education and social background are both obvious and important characteristics that distinguish me from the all-male groups. While I would never suggest being a true 'insider' in these environments, cultivating close relationships with some of the men during these years might explain

why the men tended to treat me as a 'buddy-researcher' (Snow *et al*. 1986) and allowed me to be viewed both as a friend while also maintaining a clear professional distance (see also Bucerius 2013; 2014).

This research design does not come without possible limitations. Concerning the validity and reliability of the data, some participants may have embellished on the truth to seem tougher or exaggerated details about certain events. Others may have done the opposite and tailored their stories in a manner that would be easier to accept. This would not be strange considering that all narratives are tailored to social conventions and general normative standards (Mills 1940), making statements consequently designed to manipulate outcomes (Presser 2009). In any case, my positionality is worthy of note. Although I did not challenge any masculine ideals, being a young woman may have invited other manipulated statements. While addressing the balance between personal friendship and professional distance is important, the in-depth interviews, and my relatively prolonged immersion in natural interactional settings in the field, did facilitate the observation of behaviours, social interactions and language use. As such, the research design has provided access to a group that is otherwise challenging for researchers to get close to, and prepared the ground for the primary goal of this article, which has been to observe how stories about violence are used within street culture.

Regarding ethical challenges with research participants who are actively engaged in crime and hold marginalized positions in society, it has been a concerted effort to adhere to the commitment of confidentiality throughout the project. It has therefore been crucial to ensure that participants understand the implications of their involvement in the project, reminding them of their control over what information to disclose and their rights to withdraw consent at any time. All participants thus gave their active informed consent, both prior to and during interviews. Consent obtained during fieldwork has been somewhat inconsistent, but individuals who did not explicitly express their willingness to be observed have not been included. To further protect the participants' identities, pseudonyms have been created and other information which might identify them has either been altered or left out. The project has also received registration and approval from the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (Reference number 145649).

NARRATIVE NORMALIZATION OF VIOLENCE IN STREET CULTURE

Many individuals harbour a fascination with violence. This is evident in the widespread appeal of action films, thriller movies, true crime podcasts and literature. However, in street culture, violence transcends the mere intrigue, and constitutes a fundamental element in regulating social life. This article focuses on the lived experience of violence in street culture as narrated by active participants who recounted their experiences through three primary narratives. Firstly, violence was framed as 'part of the game', minimizing it as an everyday occurrence. Secondly, it was portrayed in terms of 'respect', becoming internalized in the men's identity projects. And lastly, 'we-narratives' depicted violence as a collective group characteristic. The analysis highlights the importance of taking narratives seriously in efforts to understand the relationship between crime and marginality in street culture.

'PART OF THE GAME': COPING WITH THE CONSTRUCTION OF DANGEROUS LIVES

As drug dealers and buyers in the street economy, the young men regularly face violence. In their stories about violence as 'part of the game', violence was often downplayed as 'nothing special', but despite violence being narrated as a natural part of life, the participants also frequently

related how the constant possibility of being the victim of violence is stressful and difficult to cope with. Their stories about violence as part of the game thus rests on the intricate relationship between crime and marginality, where telling stories that minimize the meaning of violence in their lives is an effective strategy to cope with the many physical, emotional and psychological harms violence invites.

Like 'street life', the term 'game' conjures images of a romantically mysterious and independent environment, where events that are dangerous and undeniably alluring take place. Despite the fact that the analogy of street life as a game often only appeared in fragments or as 'tropes' (Sandberg 2016) instead of entire stories, like 'It [violence] is just part of the game' (Dalmar), or 'You have to be tough and be a badass to make it in this game' (Ibrahim), the game analogy was fundamental to the way the men talked about how they navigate social life. As Yasin explained,

> Things have big consequences, so you need to learn to think on your own and get shit done. I mean as a teenager I had millions of kroners in drugs that I was responsible for and sold and if you lose that kind of money, it doesn't matter if you're 17-years-old. If you lose millions of kroners[3], it will go badly for you… First of all, you could get exposed to a lot of violence, and then get exposed to extortion for a long time, and still get exposed to violence, and get forced to commit other crimes to cover your debt, and even after you've covered your debt you're still in their pocket. Kidnappings are common. People get cut up and hanged and beaten. So, you have to become tough. Violence is just a part of that.

Yasin narrates how violence is an ever-present risk as a young drug dealer. This experience is not unique. Nor is this even remotely shocking. Most of the men involved in this study were, or had been, active drug dealers and to a greater or lesser extent, they had both committed violence and been the victim of it during their drug dealing careers. Although violent experiences often was talked about as a frequent and natural part of the social world they lived in, violence is also scary (see Collins 2008) and can have massive consequences, as Chris recalled,

> A friend of mine owed 100,000 kroners for amphetamine, and he had ten fingers broken for it. They [debt collectors] came and snapped all ten of his fingers, snapped one finger at a time and just said "hey you can think ten times." So, he managed to come up with the money afterwards. But it was pretty fucking brutal!

This story indicates how part of the game narratives often cited what I call 'normalization efforts' as a response to the streets' intimately connected nature of offending and victimization (Lauritsen *et al.* 1991), or in the game analogy, between winning and losing (Ilan 2015). This type of narrative strategy is thus both deliberate and driven by a sense of necessity, which bears similarity to what have been termed 'business narratives' (Sandberg *et al.* 2015: 1174), explained as narratives that involve protagonists which engage in calculated violent behaviour to accomplish specific tasks. Like Kenneth explained, the men in this study often minimized violence as a way of trying to manage fear,

> The thing is, if you have a "brick"[4] or half a brick or something, you usually owe a lot of money, and that doesn't come without threats. Most likely your family will be threatened, most likely you'll get a photo of your little brother walking to school. Like "Hint, hint, we can get you

3 'Kroner' is the Norwegian currency (currency code NOK). 1 USD = 10.92 NOK (April 2024).

4 The word 'brick', which is 'kloss' in Norwegian street lingo, typically refers to one kilo of cocaine. One gram of cocaine usually has a street value of 1,000 NOK, which approximately is 92 USD. However, anything starting with a 'K' indicates 'kilo' when talking about amounts of drugs on the street in Oslo.

> when we want to". So, to think about beating someone up and taking their money, watches whatever, and maybe spending six months in jail outweighs that they take your little brother. You take those six months right, you rob that guy. You don't think about it being criminal anymore, you think "How am I going to fix this?"

This description illustrates how the motivation to acquire skills and build a 'rep' as competent to commit violence is tied to a pre-emptive tactic of coping with personal fear, rather than the aspiration to be feared by others. There is a resonance here that hints at how people surrounded by adversity create meaningful narratives that not just neutralize but make harmful answers to difficult situations manageable. Like Kenneth describes, involvement in drug dealing often leads to indebtedness, which, in street cultural settings, translates to threats of violence. Furthermore, statements such as 'maybe spending 6 months in jail outweighs that they take your little brother' provide both a rationale for and validation of resorting to violence.

Kenneth also describes a necessity of possessing a distinctive morally insensitive will demanded by situational practicalities.[5] In this landscape, violence stories shape strategies for coping with danger on the streets by providing guidelines that help individuals to accept and normalize harmful action in ways that make it less daunting to engage in. With time, violence becomes minimized as simply a part of life, as expressed by John,

> I mean I'm not going to make it sound like it was something special. It was just, I don't know, a part of life. It wasn't like we thought about doing something criminal or beating someone up, it was just part of the life we lived, a part of the lifestyle, or of daily life, really.

The way John frames violence as a daily routine explicitly indicate what I call the narrative normalization of violence, a narrative process that allows violence to be seen as something ordinary, as Khalid explained, 'It's a lifestyle, but at the same time it's so fucking normal, people don't even know'. In effect, these stories resonate with, and support, a process that constructs violence as morally justified within this socio-cultural context. Storytellers may thus (re)tell stories about violence which continue to (re)create a set of intersubjective and collectively reproduced stories and practices that individuals use to assign normalizing attitudes and interpretations of violence. In the words of Jaali, 'Violence is, has always been a part of life. Violence has been about being the toughest, and I've seen it being the solution for many situations where it can even be more dangerous for you to not use violence'.

Statements like these not only speak to how the meaning of violence evolves with new experiences and new conversations (Lauger 2014), nor that violence stories are part of a social learning process (Akers 1998), but that telling stories of violence includes making creative interpretations that are used to enact new cultural understandings of oneself and the social context in which one is embedded. As such, the men's stories about violence as 'part of the game' does several kinds of work; they both aid cooperative constructions of a dangerous life-world where violence is common, and minimize the meaning of violence by reducing it to a normal part of life. Combined, this allows narrators to overcome the psychological stress and harm associated with violence more easily. Accordingly, these narrative are about more than business (Sandberg *et al.* 2015) and the accumulation of violent experiences (Henriksen and Bengtsson 2018). Rather, they constitute active strategies that enables one to cope with the myriad dangers of harm in marginalized social contexts such as street cultures.

5 For a similar analysis, see Jack Katz (1988) analysis of 'Stick ups'.

'IT'S ALL ABOUT RESPECT': IDENTITY WORK, CRIME AND MARGINALITY

An important part of the men's motivation to engage in street violence has to do with the specific forms of identity work taking place in street culture. In these environments, violence is crucial to imbue membership in the group with a seductively glorious, rather than an ordinary or indifferent significance (see Katz 1988: 128). As have been thickly described in earlier ethnographic studies on street culture (e.g. Anderson 1999; Bourgois 2003; Sandberg and Pedersen 2009; Kalkan 2021), the men in this study would often tell violence stories aimed at internalizing a desired street identity characterized by being hard, tough and a protector of those around you. Tariq put this simple, 'The thing is, it's all about respect. You don't want to be seen as a pussy. So, you either stand up and fight, or people look down at you. It's that simple'. Similarly, Ibrahim explained,

> You want to be good at fighting, you want to stand up for the guys. That's it, if you're good at fighting, and people think you're crazy, then you got a higher status, you know? It's all about what people need right, and everyone needs a guy who can fight. If you're a guy who can fight, then you're a protection, and that gives you respect.

These descriptions show how respect often was talked about as an external entity—something to want, to demand, to cherish. However, they also highlight the fear of losing one's social position, and the humiliation this might invite. In these operative patterns of thought, violence become a means to an end. Like Tahiil explained when talking about his first conviction which was the result of him attempting to avoid being humiliated by backing his rep with violence,

> What happened was this guy pushes me down in front of two of my friends and this girl, and I fall! So, I feel embarrassed within my heart right. So, I get up and say, "What do you want?" and just "Bap!" Bap-bap-bap!" [Tahiil punches the air while making noise]. You know, I feel like I can't lose a fight. It's not possible, you have to be a man! There's nothing that's called backing down.

The importance of not losing a fight, being a man and not backing down carries significant weight in narratives like this, serving to reinforce adherence to a subcultural ethos advocating for violent retribution. For that reason, Tahiil's story might be interpreted as employing techniques to neutralize his wrongdoing by appealing to a higher loyalty (Sykes and Matza 1957: 669), such as 'the code of the street' (Anderson 1999). Still, I want to make the point that there is something more fundamental going on here.

Unlike social control theorists (Reiss 1951; Nye 1958), who attribute crime to weak family bonds, early subcultural theorists (Cohen 1955; Cloward and Ohlin 1960) proposed that deviance arises when entire groups break away from mainstream society, embracing deviant values and conforming to alternative norms. Early subcultural theorists thus emphasized the influence of peer groups in promoting criminal behaviour (see also Ashton and Bussu 2023), suggesting that deviance is a collective response to marginalization.

Reacting to this literature, Sykes and Matza (1957: 665) published their classic work on 'techniques of neutralization', which emphasized that although their participants were thoroughly committed to a deviant subcultural system, they still recognized the moral validity of the normative system in the mainstream culture. According to Sykes and Matza (1957: 666) a significant portion of delinquent behaviour stems from an often-overlooked extension of defences to criminal acts, which is manifested as justifications for deviance by those who commit crimes.

This allows those who offend to remain committed to the dominant normative system by qualifying their deviant acts as acceptable.

However, the identity work played out among the men in my research, differs from this analytic in two important ways. First, although the men do draw on the larger culture and its moral framework to construct their own street subculture and identity formations, there is a very present narrative element of segregation in most of their stories. Like Ahmed carefully formulated in an account of why he got involved in violent crime, 'For me at least, it was almost encouraged, like a fuck-you-finger to society and I was on purpose parted away from that'. Like Ahmed, many of the participants would claim to commit violence, knowing that it was wrong, but doing it anyway. One reason seems to be that engaging in physical confrontations is what makes them known as a group, both to outsiders and to themselves. Harmdoing is thus not neutralized as attempts to conform to the normative system of society. Rather, it is socially constructed as a practice that makes the group who they are. So, while Sykes and Matza (1957: 666) argued that demands for conformity 'cannot be ignored as part of an alien system of values and norms', in this study, that seems to be precisely the case.

Second, the men seem to be articulating a certain veneration of violence because they feel like they are fundamentally different from the mainstream society. This is depicted somewhat pathologically, but particularly the men base it on their social background and knowledge of street crime. As Rafa explained,

> We kind of have this nihilistic mindset, like nothing really matters. And other people don't know shit. They haven't lost their friends in that way, they've never been in the environments we're in, they haven't seen the violence we've seen, they haven't been attacked their entire damn childhood, you know. So, people around us have no understanding of the reality we live in. Not at all! Completely distant from everything.

By taking the narrative concept seriously in accounts like these, the aspect of normalization starts to materialize and the narrative normalization process may be grasped as a strategy, not only to neutralize harmdoing, but to make it an essential part of a dangerous social structure, at the same time constructing it as something manageable. Like Alex explained, 'Many are trapped in circles of violence. They cannot live a normal life, because wherever they go, there are always someone out to harm or kill them. And in turn, they are out to harm and kill others. It's just the way of life here'.

The normalization effort to narratively reconstruct violence as 'the way of life', moves beyond mere reflection of encounters between individuals and structural barriers (Cohen 1955; Cloward and Ohlin 1960) in this socio-cultural context. Because, when street-oriented men narrate their lives and life circumstances by internalizing violence, they also establish connections between their own experiences, actions and aspirations, linking their lives to those of others in the group. This collective identification allows them to navigate their daily existence through identities that can endure the frequently tumultuous and violent dispositions they have created.

'WE COME FROM CONCRETE': THE IMPORTANCE OF BELONGING

When talking about violence, the men were often concerned about reinforcing collective borders around us and them. Their stories about a collective 'we' did not only portray violence as a common group characteristic but was an important part of how they described the collective dimensions of their subcultural practices. Like respect-narratives work to internalize a desired subcultural identity, we-narratives are based on mirroring belonging to the street collective. The relationship between crime and marginality is thus inherently present in these stories as well,

where the men's weak ties[6] to the mainstream culture makes belonging to the street collective a feat prioritized above almost anything else.

When telling stories about their group, the men often talked about feelings of alienation elsewhere. This collective consciousness seems to be deeply embedded in how they have come to navigate the social world around them. Carlos elaborated on this,

> Crime and violence? I mean, that's where you felt success, respect. That's where you felt capable, that's where the economy was, that's where the opportunities were. And I mean status, belonging, all these things, but mainly just that feeling of succeeding at something. As opposed to like school and work that has always told you "You will never make it here." I mean then you need to find another arena to be good at … I mean we are human; we need something to be proud of, something to succeed at … Something to be part of.

As Calos argues, the motivation to commit crime and violence were partly based on the lack of recognition from other social institutions. Such narrative strategies seem to bolster the men's definitions of a reality where this group purposefully separates itself from conventional society. This tendency to create collective borders around belonging to the street community, harks back to Katz (1988: 119) ideas about 'street elites', where adolescent forms of collective deviance are committed to an artificial construction of segregating geographic boundaries.

This is evident in Carlos's story, where he reveals not just why, but how young street-oriented men find alternative ways to enact meaning and a sense of belonging. Moreover, using violence stories about belonging to the group as a form of 'boundary work' (Lamont and Molnár 2002) also creates collective energies that reinforce each other. Like Usman explained, 'We thought that to be a man was to be tough, to be a gangster. To be a G was to be man. But really it was just about fitting in'. Narratives like this reveal what one should value, know and how one should behave. In this collective embeddedness, the tension between having marginal positions and limited access to mainstream arenas and the desire to be accepted as a full-blown member of the street culture invites seductive narrative normalizations about violence. This is partly due to how identifiable phrases often relate to familiar people, in this case violent offenders or gangsters, and thus to familiar behaviour, in this case, violence and crime. In fascinating ways, such categorizations are used to construct a collective street identity. Like Abdi expressed it,

> [Laughing] We were all just a bunch of gangsters really, just crazy. I mean others didn't get it, they've never, they couldn't even think about snorting cocaine at 16, do you understand? Or smoking joints at 12 or stabbing someone who owes you money, right? While we, we come from concrete, among killas and heavy, heavy criminals.

Abdi's self-identification within offender categories is interesting in part because it contradicts what is usually assumed about how stigmatized groups maintain symbolic boundaries (but see Topalli 2005). For instance, Hochstetler *et al.* (2010: 497) explored the 'criminal selfhood' in non-violent violent offenders and noted that these individuals, aware of mainstream society's condemnation of their violent actions, attempted to differentiate their core identity from their behaviour, portraying themselves as 'basically good people, despite their violent acts'. Similarly, Green *et al.* (2006), in their examination of 'dangerous individuals', found that participants offered 'good at heart' narratives that worked to separate their essential self from their crimes.

6 Very few have conventional jobs or have gone into higher education. Instead, many have grown up with drug-abusing parents and currently belong to the street economy, and most have previously been incarcerated. As such they share feelings of being alienated from mainstream society.

Their analysis suggests that neutralization served the overarching purpose 'to disavow deviance and to stress the inherent normality of the individual' (Green *et al*. 2006: 304).

The participants in the current study, however, did not mainly portray themselves as 'good people despite their violent acts' (Hochstetler *et al*. 2010). Nor did they really offer 'good at heart' narratives (Green *et al*. 2006) when constructing their personal and collective identities. Instead, they used narratives about belonging as a resource for identity construction where the narrators stressed the normality of the deviant acts within their socio-cultural context. As a result of normalizing the acts, they also narratively accepted the perpetrators.

Because categories often are viewed as the basis for how people are spoken about in everyday life (Hall *et al*. 2006: 25), they also become tools that provide information about who people really are and how they should be classified socially. Yet single categories can be used to illustrate entire stories, which Abdi's placement of himself and his group within offender categories like 'killas' and 'heavy criminals' is an example of. By portraying violence as a normal aspect of his group identity, Abdi describes what he thinks him and his group ought to be like. In effect, he emphasizes how *we* are better and tougher than *them*. The spillover of this acceptance of violence thus inherently influences the men's behaviours, which gives violence a transformative power to show commitment and belonging to the street collective.

This should not be understated. When asked if it was important to be accepted, Ivan said, 'It's about belonging. Belonging to something, no matter what it is, no matter how negative it is. I will seek belonging anyway, that's the point. Everything is about belonging. You must belong to something'. The feeling that 'you must belong to something' no matter what the consequences of that bond may be is true even at times when it means breaking personal moral (and legal) codes. As Omar elaborated on when explaining why he chose a criminal career in the first place,

> From the start I never liked crime or violence. But I think I accepted it more because… shit this is something I've never actually said to anyone before, but I think I accepted it more because of belonging. It's like the place I came up in, I tried to be more like them [the group] and hang out with them. And that's what dragged me into this shit. Because of belonging.

Accounts like these illustrate the narrative normalization work involved in the men's efforts to belong to the group. As shown by Ivan's explanation that it is all about 'belonging to something' and Omar's recollection of how belonging to his group is what 'dragged him into this shit', a heavy weight is placed on the importance of being part of the group. Portraying violence thus become narratively normalized because the alternative may result in isolation. It is therefore important to see that the border between us and them in the young men's use of these narratives help them to agree upon a definition of a reality where violent behaviour is morally justified and part of the social characteristics that construct the collective 'group'.

By 'cutting up the world' (Zerubavel 1991: 1) based on engagement in the same deviant social practices, these men's violence stories enforce collective borders. Proving that one is part of the group by acting out and portraying violence may be understood as part of a narrative normalization process that makes violence into something a young man living amid adversity is able to control and cope with. So, contrary to Topalli's (2005) argument that people who approve of unconventional behaviour like violence do not need neutralization (Sykes and Matza 1957) to engage in offending, I argue that they do need to narratively normalize it, and that talking about violence as 'normal' is part of the work these young men do to fit in. Instead of simply normalizing being bad—or as Topalli (2005) argues 'neutralizing being good'—they describe a need to prove that they belong. Their way they do this is embodying what the street collective deems its most important characteristic. In the meantime, the power and meaning of violence as a 'collective intensity' (Schiermer 2023) is portrayed as 'normal' for, and among, in-group

members. Stories of violent participation can thus be interpreted as a way of constructing both personal and collective identities which serve to jointly contextualize, shape and enact the narrative normalization of violence.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Although narratives have specific purposes and interests, storytellers and listeners often remain unaware of the exact intentions behind a story. This is because each story serves multiple functions, and its impact varies depending on context, timing, delivery and audience (Sandberg *et al*. 2015: 1180). The narratives examined in this study should therefore be viewed as 'ideal types' that represent theoretical constructs aimed at capturing empirical tendencies (Frank 1995: 29). Consequently, these narratives hold significance beyond merely categorizing the empirical data presented here. While I have emphasized the normalization of violence as a function served by certain narratives within street culture, it is essential to recognize that these narrative strategies occur in other contexts as well and thus that the concept of narrative normalization may have scholarly relevance beyond the realm of narrative criminology.

First, the participants in this study skilfully used the narrative termed 'part of the game' to downplay or minimize violence to an everyday experience, at the same time portraying themself as authentic 'players' which provided a means to manage harm and stress in their social milieus. Similar patterns of narrative normalization are evident across multiple domains. For instance, studies on individuals who purchase sex have revealed that 'John's' often narratively downplay their violence against women (Jovanovski and Tyler 2018; Alves and Cavalhieri 2021). Moreover, young women who face societal pressures to be in relationships have been shown to create narratives that work to overlook, excuse or discursively construct sexual violence as a normalized experience (Ismail *et al*. 2007; Hannem *et al*. 2014; Sinko *et al*. 2021). And even narratives of self-responsibility have been found to induce feelings of shame and failure among those affected by poverty, at the same time as being narratively naturalized and normalized by the individuals themselves (Thomas *et al*. 2020). The process of linguistically minimizing the meaning of harm to better cope with hardship is thus not exclusive to street culture.

Second, the participants in this study would use narratives about 'respect' to internalize violent traits as part of a desired identity. While this highlights the relationship between narratives of violence and identity in street culture, research in various fields have revealed similar themes. For example, violent men's narratives during wartime have been identified to include the emulation of violent role models, and contextual barriers to attaining valued or respected masculine identities (DiPietro 2019; Massa and Anzera 2023). This has also been observed in sport, which sometimes serve as a platform for the transmission of masculine values, where common narratives illustrates both acceptance and encouragement of player violence and 'violence against the self' (Tjønndal 2016). Aligning with different prevailing definitions of normalization as a social process, the idea of narrative normalization emphasizes the intricate connection between the normalization of harm and language, or storytelling specifically.

Finally, the third narrative called 'we come from concrete' is about the importance of belonging, and the participants used these types of stories to portray violence as a collective group characteristic. It is important to note that narratives about belonging usually have a clear emotional component, and that in such narratives, harm and harm-doing is often justified on merits of being part of a specific group. Because humans possess a fundamental need for belonging, similar tendencies to those presented here occur in many other fields. For example, scholars researching far-right radicalization have argued that radicalization concerns the need for belonging and meaning-making (Miller-Idriss 2022). Previous research on street gangs have also emphasized the importance of belonging, arguing that street gangs provide a sense of belonging by offering support, friendship and loyalty, that may be missing from family ties (e.g.

Vigil 2002; Herrman and Silverstein 2012; Fraser 2017). Combined with the findings outlined here, it is evident that narrative normalization may be used to reinforce collective borders that work to generate collective energies that play a fundamental role in shaping beliefs, attitudes and aspirations about belonging to a group.

However, the concept of normalization also calls for certain interpretations that might be confusing within the analytic presented in this article. First off, normalization indicates that something deviant or out of the ordinary becomes embedded as 'normal' within the larger culture (Parker *et al*. 1998). This would mean that street violence also was accepted by outsiders, which is not the case. Secondly, normalization of violence suggests an ease associated with engaging in violence. However, as argued elsewhere (e.g. Zaitch 2005; Collins 2008), violence is hard and difficult to cope with, and therefore people typically seek to avoid involvement in it.

As such, there are alternative interpretations that merits attention. For example, Topalli (2005) have argued that individuals engaging in harmful behaviour may not necessarily employ neutralization techniques (Sykes and Matza 1957). Others have demonstrated that violence narratives serve to trivialize harm by portraying it as a common occurrence (Henriksen and Bengtsson 2018). And additionally, violence, whether internalized as part of an individual's identity or portrayed as a group characteristic, has also been attributed to peer pressure which normalizes and fosters social offending (Hochstetler 2001; Ashton and Bussu 2023).

Nonetheless, the concept of *narrative* normalization should be understood as the phenomenon wherein marginalized groups (like street-oriented young men) seek to render the exceptional (like violence) mundane and manageable in their lives. Narrative normalization, therefore, does not signify actual normalization but rather refers to the narrative strategies employed to mitigate the impact of violence and harm more broadly. This conceptualization underscores how narratives about violence can shape both individual and group identities, facilitating collective understanding and fostering a normalizing perspective. By highlighting the centrality of narratives in shaping perceptions and attitudes towards violent behaviour, the conceptualization of narrative normalization emphasizes the 'collective intensity' (Schiermer 2023) that narratives create.

In this article, I have shown that street-oriented young men employ various narrative strategies to normalize violence. These processes not only minimize, internalize and portray violence, but also serve as active strategies that empower storytellers to navigate stress, manage risks and affirm a sense of belonging. By recognizing these narrative processes as 'social forces in their own right', rather than mere information about social forces (Presser and Sandberg 2015: 133), this analytic adds depth to the understanding that the normalization of violence is narratively driven. Although I have illustrated how this process unfolds among young street-oriented men in Oslo, it is pertinent to recognize that these dynamics extend beyond street culture and may include harm more broadly. The concept of narrative normalization reveals how marginalized individuals utilize storytelling as an active strategy to manage or cope with adversity. As such, it may serve as a useful theoretical tool in future research aiming to uncover the complex interplay between harm and marginality.

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