

STORIES OF VIOLENCE: A NARRATIVE CRIMINOLOGICAL STUDY OF AMBIGUITY

SVEINUNG SANDBERG*, SÉBASTIEN TUTENGES and HEITH COPES

Violence features in human life, not only as actual physical confrontation but also as stories. Stories of violence are particularly important in violence-prone subcultures and among those partaking in the illegal drug economy. Drawing on narrative analysis, this study examines stories of violence among a population of incarcerated Norwegian drug dealers. Four widespread story types are identified: business narratives, intimidation narratives, moral narratives and survivor narratives. We explore the content of these stories and the work they do for tellers while keeping a keen eye on their ambiguous nature. We argue that stories and storytellers plurivocality is often missed when stories of violence are described within established criminological traditions.

Keywords: violence, drug dealers, narrative, story, narrative criminology, ambiguity

Introduction

Stories of violence abound in contemporary society. Media outlets continually bring reports about war, terrorism and crime. Cinemas across the world release a steady supply of action movies filled with aestheticized brutality. The computer game industry markets action-packed first-person shooters to both adults and children. Book publishers capitalize on tales of physical and psychological confrontation (Collins 2008). Folk tales, myths and religious narratives are plotted with stories of characters hurting or killing one another. Undoubtedly, violence is a crucial part of human storytelling, and in effect, those having experienced violence or the threat of violence always have a story worth telling. The popularity of violent stories suggests that it is connected to existential issues of great importance.

Yet paradoxically, actual episodes of violence are relatively rare. While most go their whole lives without throwing or receiving violent blows, personal narratives about violence feature prominently in many people's lives. This is especially true of people involved in street culture and underground economies who often have a significant stock of personal narratives about fights that they have heard about, witnessed or been involved in. This abundance of violent stories does not mean that the narrators' lives are marked by incessant fighting (Zaitch 2002). Rather, as we will demonstrate here, the stories are so prevalent because of the multiple symbolic meanings and the many interactional functions that they take in people's everyday lives.

With this ubiquity of violent stories, it is not surprising that they are so widely referred to in the research literature. However, a reading of research from various traditions can create the impression that when violent offenders discuss their crimes, they do so

*Sveinung Sandberg, Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law, University of Oslo, PO Box 6706, St. Olavs plass 5, 0130 Oslo, Norway; sveinung.sandberg@jus.uio.no; Sébastien Tutenges, Centre for Alcohol and Drug Research, Aarhus University, Artillerivej 90, 2 building 7110, 2300 København S, Denmark; Heith Copes, Department of Justice Sciences, University of Alabama, Birmingham, 1201 University Blvd., Birmingham, AL 35294-4562, USA.

in uniform, consistent ways. By contrast, we argue that offenders' stories are complex, even contradictory, and changeable according to the situational circumstances of their telling—a fact hidden by analyses guided by most sociological and criminological traditions. Our aim is to explore the ambiguity in stories about violence by studying the role of these stories in the lives of a group of imprisoned drug dealers. Working from the assumption that biography and society can be connected through the 'close analysis of stories' (Riessman 2008: 10), we identify four widespread stories told by drug dealers and discuss their part in contemporary street mythology and conventional life. By highlighting the polyphonic and ambiguous characteristics of stories, the aim is to expand on an emerging field of narrative criminology (Presser and Sandberg 2015). Our study is inspired by Frank's (2010) dialogical narrative analysis. Drawing upon the work of Bakhtin (1984; 1986), and much in line with post-structuralist ideas (e.g. Derrida 1978), Frank views storytelling as a dialogical process, one that always involves multiple voices, the negotiation of viewpoints and hence ambiguity (see also Polletta 2006).

Our aim is to explore the polyphonic character of narrative by studying stories about violence as told by a group of imprisoned drug dealers. Specifically, we show how ambiguity in narratives is reduced in four well-received theories of violence. The four main stories of violence we find in our interviews coincide with four theoretical traditions scholars frequently draw from to explain violence. We theorize that this overlap is due to scholars in each tradition interpreting narratives in light of specific theories rather than focussing on and acknowledging the ambiguity in storytelling. We argue that by using a narrative criminological framework, scholars may be able to bring the complexity of stories back into the analysis. In so doing, we argue for a more attentive and nuanced interpretation of offender's narratives in criminology.

Interpreting Stories of Violence

Stories of violence have been taken up in several theoretical traditions. Four traditions are particularly relevant for the stories told by those we interviewed: rational choice, subcultural theory, neutralization theory and narrative psychology. These traditions emerge from different theoretical, methodological and scholarly contexts, but they all use stories as data. The rational choice and subcultural traditions are not narrative traditions in the sense that they do narrative analysis (neither is neutralization in a strict sense), but offender's stories are still often the empirical evidence for their conclusions. Although our presentations are simplified, viewing these traditions in light of narrative theory can therefore shed some light on the conclusions they present.

Drug dealers' stories of violence have been understood within a rational choice framework. Such research assumes rational, or at least reasoned, offenders who weigh the costs and benefits of crime before acting (Cornish and Clarke 2014). Often, this research highlights decisions to use violence that result from strategic considerations and concerns about financial or reputational outcomes. Much of these descriptions of violence present it in a mechanical and cold way. That is, dealers claim to use violence to increase rewards and minimize risks rather than for purely emotional rewards. In the subculture tradition, other interpretations of violent stories are more prevalent. Those writing in this tradition emphasize stories of violence that are often more elaborate and detailed. These stories portray the protagonists as dangerous people who always

will strike back when challenged (e.g. [Anderson 1999](#); [Bourgeois 2003](#)). The emphasis is less on outcome than on embodied patterns of behaviour and subcultural codes, and violence is seen as a means of living out cultural expectations.

At the same time there is a long tradition for interpreting offenders' stories as tools actors use when excusing or justifying their actions ([Sykes and Matza 1957](#); [Scott and Lyman 1968](#)). As opposed to rational choice and subcultural interpretation, the emphasis here is on the story itself rather than on what it reports. This tradition tends to emphasize moral stories of crimes and the offenders' evaluations of their own actions. Finally, and very much as opposed to the singular emphasis on the evaluation of stories, narrative psychologists are concerned with how stories are integrated into larger life stories that provide purpose and meaning in the lives of individuals (e.g. [McAdams 1993](#); [Crossley 2000](#)). Narrative psychology is the only truly narrative tradition of the four mentioned here and compared to the others is more open towards narrative ambiguity (e.g. [Maruna 2001](#)).

The stories of violence told by violent offenders in this study can easily be grouped and interpreted in light of these four traditions. That is, we could have interpreted stories in ways consistent with each theory to make sense of the participants' violence without elaborating on the ambiguity. Doing so would be consistent with previous research but would down-play the open-ended character of stories and the multifaceted narrative repertoire of violent offenders. It would also obscure knowledge about violence more broadly. The ambiguity of stories, and the variety of sometimes opposing stories violent offenders tell, makes clear-cut theoretical conclusions about the nature of violence difficult.

Narrative Theory

The social sciences have seen a narrative turn, which is reflected in recent developments in sociology (e.g. [Polletta et al. 2011](#); [Holstein and Gubrium 2012](#)) and criminology ([Presser and Sandberg 2015](#)). This has in part been inspired by structural narratologists and their emphasis on how humans classify and make sense of the world through storytelling ([Leach 1970](#)). Binary oppositions and narratives, for example, are among the most important forms in discourse ([Lévi-Strauss 1972](#)). These binary pairs are carriers of meaning and bestow order upon the otherwise perplexing mutability of lived experience. They shape the collective conscience on which we base our knowledge, judgements and decisions. However, they do not tell us what to do next ([Smith 2005](#): 17). This is where narratives come in. Following [Propp \(1968\)](#), [Ricoeur \(1967\)](#) and [Greimas \(1990\)](#), we argue that narratives 'place actors and events into plots, allocate moral responsibility, causality, and agency', and not the least 'provide exemplary models for action' ([Smith 2005](#): 14). They give stories to categories, which then guide behaviours and beliefs.

The narrative turn is inspired by the post-structuralist emphasis on interpretative openness and ambiguity. [Frank \(2010\)](#), for example, follows [Bakhtin's \(1984; 1986\)](#) emphasis on intertextuality and heteroglossia or the many voices and layers of a text. This connects well with a post-structuralist emphasis on the multiple meanings of narratives ([Derrida 1978](#)) and a plurality of small local narratives ([Lyotard 1984](#)). [Butler \(1990: 40\)](#) sums up post-structuralism as being a break with 'claims of totality and

universality and the presumption of binary structural oppositions that implicitly operate to quell the insistent ambiguity and openness of linguistic and cultural signification', that is the insistence on complexity, local social context and the multitude of possible interpretations.

Storytellers speak in 'borrowed words' (Frank 2012: 35), and each of these words may be considered dialogical and polemical because they are expressed with a 'sideward glance' to an audience (Bakhtin 1984: 196). As opposed to other discursive forms such as chronicles, reports and arguments, stories invite the audience into the conversation by opening up an imaginary space for dialogue. The meaning of stories is always marked by some degree of 'undecidability', which is part of the reason that we are drawn towards them (Barthes 2004: 177). Indeed, audiences expect good stories to be interpretable (Polletta et al. 2011). For controversial issues such as the use of violence, this ambiguity is particularly important because it makes 'it possible for audiences to identify with experiences quite unlike their own while still recognizing those experiences as different' (Polletta and Lee 2006: 718). The ambiguity of stories makes it possible for narrators to explore existential issues without having a clear answer and to continuously adjust evaluations and content.

Following these theoretical influences, we believe that stories are fragmented and plural attempts at understanding events and circumstances people experience. They reflect not only a narrative repertoire of a particular social context but also the creative agency of the storyteller (Sandberg 2013). By studying stories, we can thus access the manifold life world of participants and explore the various stories by which they live. Because values and identities are subjective, ambivalent and ongoing constructions, this is not simple categorizing work, but continuous dialogical interpretation.

What Stories of Violence Do

Personal stories of violence can relate to past as well as possible future confrontations (Shuman 2005). They play a particularly important role in violence-prone subcultures. Violence and stories about violence are central in many street cultures and have been shown to contribute to organizing social networks and relationships (e.g. Anderson 1999; Bourgois 2003). Certain individuals and groups put high value on having personal fight stories—to the extent that they will take considerable risks and go through considerable pains to obtain them (Jackson-Jacobs 2004). Fighters may act in a stylized manner so as to amplify the narrative potential of their fights.

Research points to several reasons behind the cross-cultural preoccupation with personal narratives of violence. A number of studies show that fight stories can serve to transfer information that people need to navigate their everyday lives (Shuman 1986). Through the exchange of stories, people can keep themselves updated about ongoing conflicts, alliances and power relations. The exchange of stories can also be a way for people to make sense of significant events, actors and personal experiences, something that may help them in their decision making about whom to avoid, whom to trust and whom to side with. Furthermore, stories on violence provide people with a better understanding of complex subcultural values, aesthetics and ideas (Sandberg 2009a; 2009b). Accordingly, the telling and retelling of violence stories has been described as a way to discuss 'elements of street culture' and negotiate rules of fighting, while

clarifying ‘the meaning of manhood, little boy, respect, real nigga, imposter, killer, and love’ as understood on the street (Lauger 2014: 2).

Other studies show that fight stories can be used for identity-building (Morrill et al. 2000; Jackson-Jacobs 2004). The telling of stories allows violent offenders to present themselves in the best possible light and aids in contextualizing their acts (i.e. stories can excuse or justify violence). The narrators may strategically exaggerate the capacities of their opponent to glorify their own involvement in the fight (Labov 1972: 364) or they may emphasize their own courage or violent skills so as to build up a reputation of toughness. This can have practical implications such as intimidating potential opponents to avoid future victimization (Collins 2008: 274–7), obtaining recognition from peers (Jackson-Jacobs 2004) or gaining access to money and other resources (Anderson 1999). Fight stories can also be told to create an impression of being honourable men while creating distance to others who engage in inappropriate forms of violence (Hochstetler et al. 2010; Copes et al. 2013). Fight stories can be used for constructing gendered (Andersson 2008) and racialized identities (Bucholtz 1999), perhaps most typically that of the ‘heroic man’ who exhibits ‘bravery, physical toughness while at the same time the ability to keep calm’ (Andersson 2008: 152). Indeed, for some men, fighting and talking about fighting may be one of the only perceived strategies for expressing masculinity (Hochstetler et al. 2014).

Studies of a folkloristic bent show that stories of violence can serve immediate interactional purposes such as entertaining, capturing the attention of others, enlivening discussions, creating intimacy and strengthening friendship bonds (Coupland and Jaworski 2003). By contrast, psychologically oriented studies suggest that narrating about traumas can be a coping strategy (Pennebaker and Seagal 1999). When a person tells about a violent experience, that person no longer lives the experience in passivity, but actively engages with it, modifies its meaning and shares the burden of it with others (Tutenges and Rod 2009). Across a variety of populations it appears that forming a story about one’s negative experience is associated with positive physical and mental health (Pennebaker and Seagal 1999: 1252).

Stories are particularly important in studies of crime because the phenomenon we study is relatively rare and often hard to observe first-hand. Both researchers and actors in the field must rely on the narrative structure to grasp it. In criminology, scholars have traditionally analysed stories as neutralizations (Maruna and Copes 2005). Accounting is one thing they do, but it is crucial to notice that they do other things as well. Indeed, stories of violence report, educate, transmit meaning, create order, construct identity, uphold culture, integrate and deal with experiences, explore taboos and entertain both storyteller and audiences.

The four main stories of violence identified in this study come from a social context characterized by illegal drug dealing and participation in street culture. In the current analysis, we describe the work they do for storytellers in these social environments. The story types cross previous categorizations made in sociology and criminology between the subculture and the neutralization tradition and between narrative psychology and rational choice approaches. We explore how these stories are ambiguous and invite interpretation and how they have been simplified to fit existing theoretical frameworks. Doing so shows the complexity of stories that is often missing when examining it within a single theoretical framework.

Method

The present study is based on interviews with 40 male incarcerated drug dealers aged 20–49 (mean age 35) in six prisons throughout Norway. All interviewees had experience with drug distribution, from lower-level heroin dealing to large-scale, international trafficking of cocaine, amphetamine or heroin. Following the guidelines from the Norwegian Director General of Public Prosecution, 10 per cent of the sample can be categorized as low-level, 65 per cent as mid-level and 25 per cent as high-level dealers. Most participants also had long histories of drug use, typically involving several drugs. The main drugs used were amphetamines (60 per cent), cannabis (22.5 per cent) or opiates (10 per cent). Most were socially and economically marginalized (Shammas et al. 2014), and culturally they identified with what can best be described as a street culture (Bourgeois 2003) or the ‘code of the street’ (Anderson 1999).

Interviews lasted between 1.5 and 2.5 h and were carried out by a team of four male researchers with previous experience in qualitative interviewing with hard-to-reach populations. We followed a general interview guide, but interviewers were free to follow up themes that emerged in the course of interviews. Interviews focused on the social world of drug dealing in Norway and included data on the use of violence, which is what we focus on here. When analysing interviews, we broadly coded for several key themes. The violence code was a straight-forward code and included all incidents and descriptions of violence in the data. We identified four main story types: (1) business narratives, (2) intimidation narratives, (3) moral narratives and (4) survivor narratives. Distinguishing between these stories is a simplification and an analytical decision. Importantly, these four narrative types are meant as heuristic devices that we are formulating to bring order to the complexity of our data. That is, none of the stories told by our interviewees conform fully to any one of the narrative types. It was not always clear which category each narrative fit into.

Some have criticized the validity of statements coming from inmates. These critics argue that inmates may not be forthcoming (or even be deceptive) for fear of further criminal justice consequences. But deception occurs in all stories. Our interest in their stories was not so much in the specific events they depicted, but more in the ways participants presented them and the meanings they attached to such facts. We believe that distorted facts and stories impart meaning. Stories about violence give us insight into more than just the event. They also represent the processes through which people make sense of themselves and their world. Some of these stories may be tailored for the prison system, others for social workers and some for the interview itself (Presser 2004). However, people do not create stories out of the blue. When telling stories people draw on pre-existing ones that they have heard in their social environments. There is therefore reason to believe that the stories told in our interviews reflect other stories circulating among other inmates and in society more widely.

Stories of Violence

In the following, we outline the four main stories we identified in the data. Some of these are only presented in fragments, which is how they frequently appear in interviews. These story types are so well known among drug dealers that themes of the stories only need to be alluded to for the audience to catch the whole story. The names

we have chosen for these narrative types reflect some of the work they do and the kind of message they convey.

Business narratives

Business narratives involve protagonists who execute violence in a calculated, controlled and competent manner to accomplish specific tasks. The violence in these stories is purposive and driven by a sense of necessity. It is presented as a step on the path to a well-defined goal such as collecting debts or making statements and made after a weighing of options. The violent action is not marked by fear or confusion, but by intention and meaning—the violence is ‘cold’ (Arendt 1964). Accordingly, statements such as ‘it’s pure business’, ‘I had to’, ‘there was no way around it’ and ‘it’s part of the game’ were common in these stories. These stories are underpinned by a bureaucratic logic in which violence is presented as consequence of instrumental and rational actions. The object of struggle is local and motivation is mundane. Actors cannot change the situation they are in and must act in accordance with what is expected of them, and actions are constrained yet pragmatic. Business narratives bear resemblance with ‘rational tales’ in which violence is presented as a premeditated strategy to resolve tensions coming from a normative violation (Morrill et al. 2000).

The business stories told here typically emphasized violence as unpleasant but unavoidable part of the illegal economy. Knut, a mid-level amphetamine dealer, described violence in this everyday tone:

The problem isn’t to get the drugs out. The problem with selling is getting money in. Those who try to sell for cash don’t last ... at least not with heroin. It has to be sold on credit. And then it’s about who you can trust. Evaluation all the time. So you got to count in a loss ratio. You got to calculate that in. I’ve always decided to count that high, because I don’t like walking around hitting people. It’s unnecessary. At the same time, if you don’t hit anybody you won’t get any money in. That’s the balance. Sometimes you’ve got to get rough ... You got to shake up people ... you got to knock around a couple so that the others will pay. Unfortunately, it’s like that no matter what business you are in.

In this account, violence emerged as a rational solution to a practical problem. Violence was executed so as to get transactions to flow smoothly and to prevent theft and disrespect. There were few emotions described, other than the irritation over having to use force when this could have been avoided if buyers were reliable. Also typical of the business narrative is the abstract description of the violent action. Graphic details are sanitized or seldom included in these stories.

Much violence in some drug economies is connected to drug debts. In the absence of legal institutions, violence and the threat of violence are disciplining factors that pressure actors to act respectfully and repay their debts. These stories therefore describe expected violence in drug areas. David, a mid-level amphetamine dealer, described having been involved in the *Lindorf* (a debt collection agency) of the illegal drug economy. When asked whether he found this exciting, he answered: *No. It’s no fun watching people getting beaten up. But it helps. It really does. They [the debt collectors] never break arms or legs. It’s just a slap in the face.* Here in David’s account, we see again how rational calculations take precedence over emotions. Violence comes across as a necessity in a world of unreliable actors. David justifies his own acts of violence while avoiding a personal definition as a violent person. In other words, violence is not a sign of a deviant personality

but part of being of a good business person who is operating in an illegal economy that is persistently on the verge of anarchy.

This distancing from the truly violent is reflected in Peter's story who described an episode where he had to retaliate against someone owing money:

It was two people messing it up, really. Two who couldn't pay their debts. The way it turned out, we had to take one of them to find the other. Then it turned into kidnappings and a lot of violence, weapons. They got a rough beating, because we owed that money as well.

In a measured voice, Peter explained that his violence was necessary because he himself owed the lost money to a third party. In some stories in the business genre, representations of rational calculations regarding the use of violence concluded that violence was inefficient and not rational. Johnny, a high-level cannabis dealer told a story about a big-time dealer he knew who had gotten a three-year prison sentence for 'destroying' someone who owed him money for drugs. He thought it was a completely irrational decision:

You have to take into account the risk of drawing attention to yourself, right ... I mean, if someone owes you 20,000 kroner [approximately 3,000 US dollars] and has been dealing for you for two years—like five kilos a week, for example—then there is no reason to get all upset about him owing you some thousands. Then you should consider it as a loss, and don't fret about it.

Johnny thus weighed the pros and cons of violence, arriving at the conclusion that in this case, violence would be bad for business. Such cost-benefit analysis is typical in business narratives, which have to be understood as part of a social context with a high tolerance of violence.

The violence in business stories is generally portrayed like a mechanical process, which is triggered by a set of specific circumstances and carried out coldly and competently. An important part of the work these stories do is to convey that in the world of drug dealing, violence is unavoidable and justified in a wide range of situations. It is simply a part of the game (Jacobs 2000). The violent agent is not necessarily a bad person but may be someone who does what must be done to make a living and survive in the illegal drug economy. Moreover, business narratives explore and discuss important issues in the drug economy. These stories tell how to strike a balance between gaining respect through violence without drawing the attention of the police. They also allow the protagonists to build identities as rational individuals who are capable of using violence, but only when required.

Intimidation narratives

Intimidation narratives are stories that involve one or several protagonists who come across as inherently dangerous, volatile and ready for violence whatever the cost may be. In these stories, the violent act is rarely premeditated, rational or controlled, but spontaneous and marked by strong emotions. The descriptions are often graphic with detailed description of moves, verbal exchanges and other details. Our category of intimidation story covers what has formerly been referred to as both 'action tales' and 'expressive tales' (Morrill et al. 2000) and are also akin to 'hero legends' (e.g. Beck 1971). These stories exaggerate the violent capacities of the protagonist and serve among other things to intimidate potential opponents and build a reputation of

ruthless toughness (Collins 2008). The stories typically start out by portraying a situation of intersubjective imbalance: There has been a breach in trust, a show of disrespect or a reversal of roles. In line with subcultural expectations, this imbalance is subsequently revenged and, eventually, put straight by the violent action.

Jakob, a mid-level cannabis dealer, described in great detail an episode where he severely beat up his former friend Kim. His account included passages such as: ‘I hit him three-four times in the mouth’ then ‘I ended up jumping on his entire face, with my legs together’. Jakob took to these extremes because Kim had humiliated him to the extent that Jakob ‘felt like a whore’. It started with Kim coming out of prison. To celebrate this, Jakob threw a big party and covered Kim with money and drugs. Afterwards, Kim stayed in Jakob’s apartment. But then Kim started stealing from Jakob. It culminated with Kim locking Jakob out of the apartment. The feelings of shame and humiliation were devastating for Jakob. He concluded his story by giving his actions sense and direction:

I’m not going to let word get around that, “You can just rip that guy off, and nothing will happen.” Right? That’s out of the question. It’s probably a stupid idea, you should believe more in yourself and your own name, but it’s the ego, at least for me, it’s about pride. Hell, you can’t just start stealing from me.

Jakob took to violence to protect his reputation as a dangerous man. As opposed to business narratives, intimidation narratives do not claim to have a positive outcome, although they can in terms of reputation and increased respect on the street. The violence in the stories come from an emotional explosion, not from careful cost–benefit estimations. Jakob used violence and did not give any thoughts to the risks he ran, such as getting a long prison sentence, losing money or getting into conflicts on the street.

Per, a mid-level amphetamines dealer, described an episode where an old friend stole from him.

Yes, but it’s fucking sad! To see that they’ve sunk so low that they’re stealing from me, instead of just asking to borrow money or... Just because they’ve become such junkies that they are stealing from their oldest friends. That’s been hard to swallow, it’s been really awful. I remember I was so mad once, he stole an iPhone and some other stuff from me, I beat the crap out of him. I’ve never used violence my whole life, not personally, but that was... I was so annoyed and disappointed as hell.

Although conveying a similar kind of message as Jakob, Per expressed sadness that he had to go to this extreme. He had to put his foot down and mark that there was a limit to what he could accept. It is not a question of rationally calculating pros and cons of violence but rather on reacting emotionally on feelings of being disrespected.

An important part of the intimidation narratives is the portrayal of the protagonist as dangerous, violent and sometimes ‘crazy’. Tim, a mid-level amphetamines dealer, told about his reaction in an episode where someone snitched on him:

I got someone to go get him, to put it like that. I don’t like being violent. I scare myself, scared of what I can set myself up to. Because I have discovered the rage I have in me, you have both the warm and the cold anger, right. And when things have been serious, when I have been mixed into stuff, then I get the cold anger. Then I don’t like myself.

Tim’s story highlighted different facets of his violent capabilities. He can mobilize people to retaliate for him, and he reports having a rage that scares him. This split between

an ordinary, composed self and an unordinary, raging self is very typical of intimidation stories. The unordinary, raging self is like a demon slumbering inside of the protagonist. Once stirred awake, nothing can stop the demon and its evildoing. Stories about struggles with dark forces abound in many cultures. In traditional cultures, it was the Djinn, Trolls and Kali, and in contemporary Western culture, similar struggles can be seen with the ‘dark forces’ of illegal drugs and psychological problems (Sandberg and Tutenges 2015).

The work done by intimidation stories is above all to help establish the storyteller as someone to be feared. They transfer important meaning about the values and norms of different cultures. They are like warning signs: They send out the message that the storyteller and his allies will retaliate when maltreated, no matter the costs. They also educate about values and norms in a particular social context. Intimidation stories also entertain, not as funny stories, but rather as stories told to fascinate and scare (Jackson-Jacobs 2004). People in different cultures and societies appreciate stories about dangerous people and their violence. Finally, although it is not their main interpretative work, these stories also justify and legitimate the violence. Stories place violence within the context of particular cultures and expectations.

Moral narratives

Moral narratives explore, educate and transmit meanings of a moral character and they do this based both on values that prevail in mainstream society as well as in violent subcultures. In the research literature, stories are frequently described as coming with well-defined moralities or points, but in moral narratives, they are just as often used as vehicles to explore moral dilemmas. Stylistically, they often only allude to acts of violence (Morrill et al. 2000). The importance is not violence as such or its function in a social or economic context, but the ethical concerns involved in the act. The hero in moral narratives ‘is motivated by high ideals and overcomes a series of obstacles, challenges and enemies associated with powers deemed evil’ (Smith 2005: 26). The tone in moral narratives is often marked by self-satisfaction and the protagonist exhibits a high degree of agency and will power. The drama is toned down and the ending is often a happy one, at least for some. There are, however, always important issues and values at stake. As opposed to the cold violence described in business narratives, the violence in these stories tends to be passionate and imbued with feelings such as ‘love, solidarity and compassion’ (Cottee and Hayward 2011: 975). Violence is committed for someone else or for the larger good. It may come with a cost but is evaluated positively as a necessary solution to a given problem.

Moral narratives typically depict the protagonist as a moral agent who engages in a series of actions to restore a situation to moral harmony. Lars Erik, a mid-level amphetamine dealer, told a story in which he took action against a man reputed for paedophilia who was trying to seduce a friend of his.

I knocked on the doorframe, standing there in the door, and he sees me and he gets nervous as hell. Then I say “How are you?” “Yeah, I’m fine” [he says], like that. “How are you, then?” he asks me, and I say “I think I’m doing a lot better than you, to put it that way”. And then I tie his head with a thin nylon string to the headrest of his chair. He tried to get loose there for a while. He had lots of marks here, up in his face here, had been tied up for quite a while. If nobody had come around there he’d

probably look a lot, lot worse than he did. But, that's my point, after that thing... he lied so much in court that he [only] got three months in prison. I got 60 hours of community service.

Lars Erik expressed no remorse about the way he had handled the alleged paedophile. Instead, he seemed proud that he had been able to make use of his violent expertise to protect a friend and punish a man repudiated for maltreating children and women. The fact that the penal system gave Lars Erik a small sentence while sending 'the paedophile' to jail serves to underline that he was right in his judgement: 'the paedophile' deserved punishment. Lars Erik took a risk and got a penalty in the service of the higher morally good. In this sense, the penal system supported Lars Erik's evaluation of the moral standard of the two main characters in the story.

David, a mid-level cannabis dealer, told about an incident where he used force to 'educate' a friend:

He stole a lot [that friend], very short-tempered guy. [He] yelled a lot at his mother, and I didn't like that at all. I'm like, family is the most important thing in the world. He was screaming and calling his mother various things and I didn't like that. I fought quite a bit with him to teach him.

The violence in this story served to teach a lesson and is accounted for through the 'appeal to higher loyalty' (Sykes and Matza 1957). Peter similarly stated that: 'if somebody harmed my family, I would be ready to kill [...] [Family] is of tremendous value to me'. In this statement, and many other moral narratives, the offender-victim roles are reversed: someone who caused harm is then harmed. In Peter's case, the family was the potential victim. In other cases, the issue is to protect friends or vulnerable individuals or to support a generalized sense of justice. Erlend, a high-level cannabis dealer, told a story that includes the rational cost-benefit concerns of the business narrative as well as typical concerns of the moral narrative.

We're really quite calm, so they don't know what they're up against. There are always some idiots who come and play cocky. Sometimes we'll just let it pass, if it's not a lot of money involved. But if they hurt our friends we'll never let it pass (...) If they take the stocks, let them take it, it's not a lot of money, but one shall not hurt our friends, that's "family" right, we're together, we cry together and laugh together, celebrate birthdays together, everything.

When it comes to material valuables, some loss can be accepted, but quarter will not be granted to those doing harm to friends.

In some moral narratives, violence is not presented as just, but the narratives still include ethical considerations. Jonas, a low-level heroin dealer, stated that snitching typically causes severe reactions and that when he got out he would personally retaliate against those who snitched on him, but then he added: 'But one of them is so old, or not that old, but so fucking pathetic, I wouldn't bother giving him a beating. But the other one will [get a beating], because he's a real asshole'. Here violence is moralized in two ways. Retaliation was described as a legitimate punishment for snitching and it was distinguished between legitimate victims. The 'asshole' gets a beating, while 'old pathetic' man gets mercy.

Some moral narratives are highly ambiguous: These stories do not make any definite point but put moral dilemmas up for discussion. Moral narratives often do not come with a clear moral point but are instead used to explore moral dilemmas. Vidar, a mid-level amphetamine user, reflected on the violence he had inflicted on his father:

It's not fair play by me—see, the most miserable person I've hit is Dad. He'd always beaten the shit out of me (laughs) when I grew up, so I felt that he could get some in return. But still it is ridiculous to hit someone I know I'll beat.

The storyteller here balanced two moral concerns, one regarding what the victim had done to him, which justified the violence, and the other that the opponent should be able to defend himself and that it was his father. He used storytelling to explore this dilemma without having a clear answer. Stories are more open for interpretation and exploration than other discursive forms (Polletta and Lee 2006), and this goes for both the storyteller and the audience. More than justifying the violence, there is a reflexive morality in many stories of violence.

In many moral stories of violence, the point is clear, and the moral righteousness of the storyteller is at the core of the story (Presser 2004). However, other stories of violence are more ambiguous and question more than answer moral dilemmas (Jackson 2002). Vidar's story about beating up his father is one example. He initially laughs when telling it, but as it develops the laughter stops and the telling turns into an exploration of the limits to justifiable violence. Also, moral and ethical considerations are evident in the distinctions between legitimate victims in Jonas' story as well as the considerations of protecting family over material valuables in Erlend's account. In storytelling, moral points do not necessarily represent the final opinion of the storyteller. Moral points are sometimes expressed to put them up for debate and explore whether they are tenable or they may be expressed to clarify the listeners' standpoint.

Survivor narratives

Survivor stories often take the form of life stories and tend to be longer than the other narrative types. These stories involve protagonists who go through rough times and are brought to the brink of destruction, often at an early age. The protagonists survive but are physically or psychologically marked by the hardship they have endured. Typical themes include domestic violence, substance misuse in the family and growing up in 'tough' neighbourhoods. These stories often link significant events that have taken place over long periods, sometimes a whole life, and they bring direction, meaning and a sense of unity to these events, something which is typical of the life-story genre (McAdams 1993).

Kristian, a high-level amphetamines dealer, described an episode where he was beaten by staff at a psychiatric facility at a young age:

It was over the top. The [seven social workers] were just out of control. I was locked up in there. Locks on the windows and locked doors. I had an experience there for three days that changed my life. That's where things started. That's where violence, for me, became accepted. Like, seven adults jumping on me and holding me down for hours.

Kristian argued that this experience had corrupted him and put him on the track of a violent career that had ended only recently. In this way, he established a cause for his violent ridden life. Namely, he was harmed and then started doing harm to others.

Others told stories about growing up in tough neighbourhoods, where residents had to be able to themselves. Failure to do so would lead to continuous victimization. David explained:

Everybody thinks like that, at least in this small town. That's how it is, there are people who are very good at fighting, right? When you can't fight yourself and people have been doing Thai boxing and MMA for 15-16-17 years, then you don't approach that person without your own weapon, because they got a weapon, right? So you got to have a weapon too. It's like that [snaps his fingers], on alcohol and some pills you get into a fight like that [snaps his fingers]. You don't want to lose that fight no matter what condition you're in. It's not easy to walk away from a fight. Either there are three guys beating the shit out of you so you can't say your own name for years afterwards, or you're the guy who stabbed him and just ran off. Don't have to run off, but just set an example. I don't know what to say, it's been very hard at times.

David's story rationalized his behaviour, explored a moral dilemma and had an intimidating edge to it, but above all it put events in his life in a certain order and gave them meaning, suggesting that he turned to violence because he grew up in an environment where this is required. As such, his story had a romantic element to it.

Another type of survivor stories has the narrative structure and tone of a tragedy evoking 'powerful sentiments of moral empathy, pity and terror' (Smith 2005: 25). These are survival stories without a happy ending. Thomas, a mid-level amphetamines dealer, for example, stated that he had attempted to stop being violent but that he then turned to large-scale drug dealing instead:

Then I gave up violence because I realized that with this I'll just end up doing time for murder or get killed myself, right? Because then I was doing time for attempted murder on the police. I tried to shoot the police. Then I realized that I have no limits. I've got to get my act together here. And so I did, and it was good that I did. In the end, when I got out in 2006, I began selling large amounts of dope.

The irony of moving from one crime to another is intended and makes the life story a tragic one. He seems trapped in a spiral of negative events reinforcing each other without having any way out.

Survivor stories are typically framed as life stories and summarize individual lives through a series of related storied events. These stories provide meaning and direction for the storyteller and give sense to events that would otherwise be senseless by integrating them into a larger sequence of events. Violent experiences are something most people need to deal with narratively (Briggs 2007), and they are important elements in life stories partly because of their dramatic nature. All narratives reflect on the identity of the storyteller, but life stories do this in a more fundamental way. Even though they often are elastic (Presser 2008), life stories are probably the closest we can get to a self or a unified perceived identity.

Discussion

All narratives are enmeshed in interests and told to perform certain tasks. However, storytellers as well as listeners are rarely aware of the exact aims of a story, and they will never know the full range of effects that the story may have. This is because any one story does many kinds of work, and a story and its effects will change according to where, when, how and to whom it is told. The violent stories explored in this study were multifaceted and told for a variety of reasons—some of which inevitably eludes us. We consider the main stories we have constructed as 'ideal types'; they are, to quote Frank (1995: 29), nothing

but ‘puppets: theoretical constructions designed to describe some empirical tendency’. The importance of these ideal types—beyond our categorization of them in empirical data—can be seen in the way each of them dominate different academic traditions.

We have emphasized the kind of work stories do for the storyteller. Stories of violence, however, also do work for scholars. Researchers are storytellers. We pick and choose which stories to tell when presenting, interpreting and evaluating data. What we describe as business stories, for example, is present in many of the traditions studying criminal offenders, but they seem to dominate in economic studies of illegal drug markets and rational choice approaches to crime (see e.g. [Jacobs 2000](#); [Desroches 2005](#)). This is probably because these stories fit assumptions about actors based on the theoretical models dominating these traditions.

Similarly, intimidation stories reveal a culture different from the mainstream and these stories are therefore often taken up in the voluminous literature studying the ‘code of the street’ (e.g. [Anderson 1999](#)) or street culture ([Bourgois 2003](#)). They ‘fit’ the stories told in these studies. Writing about the importance of violence in street culture, [Vigil \(2002\)](#), for example, described the *locura* attitude (from Spanish meaning madness or insanity) often portrayed by Mexican-American gang members, and Anderson similarly described the reputation and self-image based on ‘juice’ ([Anderson 1999](#): 33). Such reputations are fuelled by committing acts that can be told about and upheld by being in a narrative environment where these stories are valued.

Moral narratives are stories that have emphasized the just or legitimate character of violence, and these have typically been interpreted within the tradition of neutralization theory. Stories of violence are here characterized and grouped as excuses and justifications ([Scott and Lyman 1968](#)) or as techniques of neutralization ([Sykes and Matza 1957](#)). Violence can, for example, be justified narratively by denial of victims (‘he was a real asshole’), appeal to higher loyalties (‘I did it for my family’), denial of responsibility (‘it wasn’t my fault’) or denial of injury (‘they didn’t really get hurt’). The main argument in the neutralization tradition has been that offenders have conventional moral concerns and that despite their violent behaviours, they should not be seen as violent people.

Finally, survivor stories are typically reported in narrative psychology (e.g. [Polkinghorne 1988](#); [Crossley 2000](#)) and traditions dealing with treatment of offenders and drug users. Life stories are an ‘evolving cognitive structure’ that ‘provide some degree of meaning and purpose while often mirroring the dominant and/or the subversive cultural narratives’ ([McAdams 2006a](#): 11). In treatment, the work of the therapist is often to transform a scattered life story into more a coherent and meaningful whole ([McAdams 2006b](#)). Episodes of violence in these cases will often be interpreted within the context of other episodes in life, everything from upbringing to traumatic experiences, and stories of ‘surviving’ a harsh upbringing and a tough social environment are therefore particularly relevant for why they eventually turned to violence. They integrate different aspects and dimensions of individual life that needs explanation, especially between past traumatic events and present problems.

Theorists from different traditions emphasize different stories and interpret them according to their theoretical and substantive assumptions. The problem is that most stories of violence exceed the established theoretical traditions they are typically represented within. Stories of violence do manifold narrative work, crossing the different

genres and theoretical traditions they are interpreted within. Take for example, Lars Erik's story about attacking an alleged paedophile. This story is both humorous and serious and at the same time it entertains and explores a dilemma, describes the values of a certain culture and makes his actions seem rational. Seen in the context of his entire research interview, he not only clearly distances himself from most of his violent acts but also justifies the violence and describes himself as a figure to be feared. This amount of complexity is often ignored in studies of violent crime and offenders (Jacobs and Copes 2015).

Stories of violence are ambiguous in several ways. First, they are generally open-ended and do multiple kinds of work (Polletta et al. 2011). Moral stories of violence, for example, serve to excuse certain behaviours, but they do much more as well. They also form a platform for scrutinizing issues that otherwise tend to lie hidden in the dark. Like so many other narratives, stories of violence are not always making clear-cut points or presenting the narrator in a positive light or a negative light for that matter. The stories are oftentimes cyclical, involving the repetition of themes and the preservation of uncertain evaluations. They probe the darker sides of existence, but often in a manner that shies away from final truths. Much of the interpretive work is left to the listeners. The stories invite the listener in, precisely because they lack a finalized coda or conclusion. Indeed, stories are 'good at being several things at once' (Frank 2012: 349) and the different voices in stories of violence illustrate the ambiguous and open-ended nature of storytelling. In the same story, some will hear entertainment, some morality and some intimidation. The storyteller may also be ambiguous and use storytelling as a way to deal with possible meanings with wider consequences for his or her life.

Second, both single interviews and aggregate data sets usually contain a narrative repertoire that is fragmented and incoherent (Sandberg 2010). All qualitative researchers will recognize the multitude of stories in a data set and the decision about what story to examine. Although unavoidable, the simplification of ambiguous stories and repertoires of stories in scholarly analysis is problematic. It leaves out some of the ambiguity in both single stories and in narrative environments, thereby risking producing stereotypes of drug dealers and others, either as rational businessmen, violent 'gangstas', conventionally oriented citizens or as changing selves in treatment. More than being the one or the other, a detailed study of the drug dealers in this study reveals that they are all these things at the same time. Storytelling may be the way they deal with this complexity. Polletta and Lee (2006) describe how stories are particularly useful for marginalized groups and their opinions. We can add that they seem to be important for groups with extreme experiences. They have something tellable (newsworthy, storyable) and need a discursive form that does not alienate the audience. Stories are flexible, open-ended and multi-voiced and therefore good for such purposes.

Conclusion

It is due to the plurivocal nature of violent stories that violence researchers have so many hooks to latch on to for their work. It is relatively rare that researchers point out the complex and often contradictory stories violent actors tell. Instead, most of us highlight one aspect of the story and leave the others hidden. Those interested in street codes 'hear' tales of respect and retaliation just like those interested in accounts 'hear' excuses and justifications. It is easy to see why this can happen. One of our jobs as

researchers is to take the messy and detailed observations and interviews and organize them in ways that can be easily digestible. Presenting ideal types is a long-established pattern in social science research. Ideal types are not meant to reflect perfect types. They are ‘thoughtful pictures’ to help reduce the chaos of the social world. However, the ideal types that scholars create—our own included—are products of the theoretical tradition they are working in, and narrative complexity and ambiguity is often left out.

People tell many different, sometimes contradictory, stories, and many stories are themselves ambiguous. This can of course be an indication of incompetence or confusion, but narrative is a discursive form where ambiguity is tolerated (Polletta 2006). Ambiguous stories are powerful because they invite the audience in, can forge agreement and can be used to tell stories in new ways. In fact, the most efficient stories or repertoires of stories might be those that point in different normative directions (Polletta et al. 2011). Presser (2013), for example, argues that all harm doers, from mass murderers to penal institutions, project both power and powerlessness, weaving the logics of capability and compulsion together. This, which she describes as the power paradox, is made possible by the inherently ambivalent and dialogical nature of storytelling.

To leave out the full repertoire of stories in a sample or downplay narrative, ambiguity is not an indication of bad science or sloppy research. It is a product of research. However, not being aware of the complexity of people’s stories may be presenting a too clean version of their lives. Instead, being aware of narratives multiple meanings and work can help ‘discern topics of interest well beyond what is topical in any single narrative or text’ (Gubrium and Holstein 2009: 226). Inspired by Bakhtin (1984; 1986) and in line with the post-structural insights (Derrida 1978; Lyotard 1984), recent developments in the narrative tradition have emphasized stories ambiguity and open-endedness and the multiple stories in narrative repertoires. Using a narrative framework can thus be a way to bring the inherent complexity of the stories we collect back into research.

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