



It's a War Out There: Contextualized Narratives of Violent Acts



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To examine how individuals operating in violent environments draw on cultural and personal narratives of place and self to make sense of routine preparations for violence.

Methods: Data are based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 17 individuals involved in street crime and assaultive violence in St. Louis, Missouri. Participants had engaged in violence within the month prior to being interviewed. We used chain referral methods to identify and recruit them.

Results: Participants portrayed their neighborhoods as warzones and themselves as people who succeed in these environments due to preparedness for violence and personal capacity for violence typified by street soldiers. They used this situated identity to explain preparations for violence including: readiness to see threats and respond quickly, selecting allies for fights, and arming themselves.

Conclusions: The implications of our findings for the study of narrative criminology are discussed including how place and identity narratives facilitate an understanding of self in action that is both after-the-fact sense-making and crime conducive.

1. Introduction

Criminology's ethnographic pioneers laid bare the alluring life histories and accounts of events provided by marginalized actors embedded in street life by collecting their stories. What these scholars observed and heard served as data for developing, illustrating, and testing theories of crime and criminality. The narratives of jackrollers, gang members, burglars, stickup men, pickpockets, grifters, whiz mobs and other misfits taught us much about the lives of ordinary criminals and how their backgrounds and understandings shape their prospects and decision-making (Bennett, 1981). Despite this ethnographic heritage criminologists are often at odds as to how investigators should use stories as data and whether they can only explain past behavior or if they are evidence of future actions as well (Presser, 2010).

Early work using stories relied on ethnographic methods to articulate and support theories about the cultural, structural, cognitive, and interactional causes of crime (Cohen, 1955; Shaw, 1930; Sutherland, 1937; Thrasher, 1927). Others meanwhile have used retrospective narratives to detail people's excuses and justifications for crime, sometimes with the goal of explaining how people psychologically surmount moral interferences before they offend (Sykes & Matza, 1957). More recently, criminologists have borrowed concepts and methods from narrative theory with the aim of discerning other

connections between stories and criminal and harmful behavior (Presser, 2009; Presser & Sandberg, 2015; Sandberg, 2009a, 2009b). These insights have expanded the way we use stories to understand crime and deviance.

Narrative criminologists argue that stories for framing the context of crime, as well as linguistic devices to situationally make sense of past behaviors, are vital for understanding behavior (Presser & Sandberg, 2015). They contend that the stories people tell can be constitutive and are more complex than mere rationalizations or factual recounting of the past. Stories contextualize past behavior into acculturated and sequentially plotted understandings and by doing so they can also reflect and construct identities and guide future behavior. Theorizing narratives in this way offers new ways to understand why people engage in crime and how cultural beliefs and values shape behavior.

One way to see the connection between crime and stories is through the lens of narrative identity. The narrative identity framework suggests that people make sense of their lives and behaviors through storytelling. Identity stories allow people to show consistency in their lives even when there seemingly is none. Fully understanding someone's personal identity narratives requires contextualizing their stories within larger cultural narratives (Loseke, 2007). As such, narratives often relate positions relative to others and explain constraints on action and choices available from the perspective of identifiable social positions in

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recognizable settings. Speakers construct and present personal narratives drawing on linguistic riffs and generalizations provided by available cultural stories and expectations for how particular sorts of people behave. For example, people who define themselves as functional drug users draw on cultural images of addicts and junkies when forming their personal narratives. By showing how they differ from those who have lost control of their lives to drugs people can gain a sense of self-worth. Additionally, these stories of functional users can shape decisions about drug use, including acceptable drugs and routes of administration (Copes, 2016). As such, narratives not only make sense of the past but they can act as guides for the future. While it is possible to analyze narratives solely at a single level (e.g., cultural or personal), analyzing them across levels may be more fruitful (Loseke, 2007). Thus, to fully understand personal narratives it is important to view them in the context of cultural narratives.

Borrowing from the frameworks of narrative criminology and narrative identity, we seek to understand how people's narratives of place and of self are interconnected and how such narratives are used to account for violent acts and preparations for violence. We then theorize how these narratives correspond with routine preparations and precautionary behavior, which mediate and potentially contribute to continued violent behaviors. Specifically, we use interview data to examine how self-defined, violent actors in high crime urban environments tell stories of neighborhoods as warzones and articulate situated personal identities based on readiness for violence. Their stories of particular violent criminal acts explain that strategy and preparation derived from projective expectations shape the acts. Findings contribute to the developing field of narrative criminology by emphasizing the significance of context in narrative identities and highlight one way (i.e., narratively consistent strategic preparation) that crime related identities may facilitate harmful outcomes.

2. Place, culture, and identity narratives

The connection between place and crime has been a central concern in criminology for more than a century and arguably is increasing in importance today (e.g., Weisburd, Bernasco, & Bruinsma, 2009). Opportunity structures, demographics, and community disadvantage may be root causes of crimes' spatial concentration, but cultural differences are also important (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003). Models explaining connections between place, culture, and crime have become increasingly nuanced, less deterministic, and sensitive to individuals' cognition and strategic decision-making (Berg & Stewart, 2013; DiMaggio, 1997; Harding, 2010; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; Sampson, 2012; Small & Newman, 2001). Rather than determining action, cultures provide frames for bringing certain concerns, elements of situations, and interpretations to actors' attention (Benford & Snow, 2000) and thereby support situationally circumscribed possibilities for action (Harding, 2010; Lamont & Small, 2008; Sampson & Bean, 2006).

This movement toward understanding culture as an implemented guide for action is consistent with theoretical developments in narrative sociology (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Those working in this tradition argue that narratives tap into culture as they allow people to explain sense-making, situational interpretation, decision-making, and action from their own perspective. Narrative researchers examine the way people use stories to understand social context, identity, culture, and meaning, arguing that people rely on common understandings, social arrangements, and cultural practices when relaying a reasonable and coherent explanation for complex decisions (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). This assumes that people draw on pre-existing stories when creating personal identity narratives, and that analysis should strike on parts of the presentation that reveal motives endemic to character projects (Katz, 1988). Rather than using text to show what a study participant *did* in a purely factual sense or as an indicator of simple opinions or excuses, narrative analysts attend to what a participant *said* and what the selected words impart. The framework of narrative

criminology, while akin to phenomenology, symbolic interaction, and interpretive psychology, is unique in its attention to language and in viewing "crime and other harmful action as a function of the stories that actors and bystanders tell about themselves" (Presser, 2012, p. 5). That is, narrative criminologists believe that stories can shape storytellers' future actions, reveal imagined expectancies, and provide templates for action (Presser & Sandberg, 2015). Viewed in this light, narratives can both make sense of and be constitutive of action.

Narratives can be told at cultural and personal levels. Cultural narratives have widely applicable but recognizable shape but tend to offer tales of disembodied people and places (Loseke, 2007). At this level of abstraction, narratives provide broad generalizations about others who are portrayed as lacking agency. For example, cultural narratives of those who use drugs reflect the larger assumptions about drug addicts as solely controlled by substances and are reflected in terms such as junkies, crack moms, stoners, and dope fiends (Copes, 2016). Cultural narrative identities are social classifications or collective representations of abstract types of actors. These narratives are the means by which people render themselves intelligible through comparisons (Loseke, 2007). Personal narratives help people make sense of the confusion of practical experiences by constructing coherent connections among life events and larger cultural narratives. People take abstract, depersonalized narratives (i.e., cultural narratives) and make them their own by adding complexity and personal perspective to the stories (Loseke, 2007). People form identities by connecting abstract cultural narratives to personal narratives of self. By adding details to the story, people can weave a coherent narrative of particular actions while keeping a formula for action in specific situations and contexts intact. As such, it is necessary to view personal narratives as individual attempts at coherency that draw on a wide repertoire of cultural narratives and discourses, but that are made to fit for the storyteller, and that suit the concrete details of a life or event (Sandberg, 2013).

Speakers often craft narratives purposively and with attention to situations beyond the immediate presentation. For example, immigrants who deal drugs in Oslo, Norway, used two dominant personal identity narratives when discussing their illegal behavior (Sandberg, 2009b). In one, they call on stories about the welfare state and frame themselves as oppressed refugees. In the other, they draw on images of their past (and ethnicity) to portray themselves as dangerous, hardened gangsters. Both narratives feasibly enable crime but reflect different interests that are beneficial in specific contexts, thereby revealing that narratives can be forms of cognitive preparation for various situations and audiences that a speaker may confront. Actors can also "flex" their stories to fit specific audiences or situations in ways that allow them to tell different stories, but still maintain a consistent personal narrative (Hammersvik, 2016). Narratives often are shaped situationally, say by the interview setting or purpose, but retain practiced and preparatory components.

While the pool of available narratives is restricted by position and one's past, seldom do people adhere to a single narrative about place, self, or behavior. Indeed, narratives are plurivocal and can be nuanced or even contradictory (Sandberg, 2013). With acknowledgement that the stories people tell are mutable and complex, we focus on a recurring, consistent narrative among residents in high-violence neighborhoods. We show that characterizations of local environments frame the personal identity that these people reference to explain their violent behavior. We link their identity projects to specific actions (i.e., mental and material preparations for violence).

3. Methods

Data come from 20 in-depth interviews with 17 individuals—13 men and 4 women—actively involved in various forms of street crime and assaultive violence. Three follow-up interviews were conducted with two participants one month after the initial interview. To be eligible, participants had to: (1) support themselves by proceeds gained

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