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Street talk and Bourdieusian criminology

Bringing narrative to field theory

Abstract:

The work of Bourdieu has increasingly gained interest in criminology. This theoretical framework is rich and arguably the most sophisticated approach to social inequality and difference in sociology. It has however, been criticized for bias towards the structural aspects of social life, and for leaving little space for the constitutive, and creative role of language. We argue for the inclusion of narrative for understanding street fields. Based on qualitative interviews with 40 incarcerated drug dealers in Norway, we describe the narrative repertoire of the street field, including stories of crime business, violence, drugs, and the 'hard life'. The narrative repertoire is constituted by street capital, but also upholds and produces this form of capital. Street talk is embedded in objective social and economic structures and displayed in the actors' habitus. Narratives bind the street field together: producing social practices and social structure.

Keywords: Bourdieu, Street Capital, Narrative Criminology, Stories, Street Culture, narrative habitus

Introduction

Anders was a mid-level amphetamine dealer with a long history of drug use and crime. He was in prison and committed to drug treatment at the time of the interview. Although he was motivated to end his criminal lifestyle when he got out, he explained that it was not easy: “I have so many years of ingrained routines. How to talk, how to think, how to *be*”, he said. In Pierre Bourdieu’s terms, Anders’ long experiences in the street field profoundly shape his habitus. Anders also makes clear that this embodied knowledge includes talk. Henrik, a mid-level cannabis dealer with a similar life-story, also stated: “What the fuck am I going to talk about? The last years have been all about crime, drugs.” Henrik continued, “You lose control over what to say, what you can talk to people about.” Social networks, formal and informal competencies all play for reintegration from a criminal lifestyle, but talk is pivotal too. Narratives connect past, present and future selves, as well as between the self and one’s group. Anders and Henrik possessed a wide repertoire of stories and vocabularies— their *street talk* – borne of, and belonging to, the street field. Although these had been invaluable in the street, they formed an invisible barrier to mainstream society.

Sociologists of crime, deviance and control have long employed Bourdieu’s conceptual toolkit, which considers how “wider cultural and social structures such as poverty, unemployment and class interact at the individual and group level to shape unconscious behaviours and dispositions” (Moyle and Coomber 2016). A contemporary literature has emerged developing Bourdieu’s concepts (habitus, capital and field) in studies of juvenile delinquency, crime, drug use and gangs (e.g. Sandberg and Pedersen 2009, Parkin 2013, Fleetwood 2014, Harding 2014, Fraser

2015, Ilan 2015). Scholars inspired by Bourdieu have tended to downplay the significance of talk. As interviews with drug dealers like Henrik and Anders demonstrate, narrative and language are not ephemera, or ‘icing on the cake’ of social practice, but have important functions: they establish the boundaries of the field, and are closely bound up with habitus and capitals.

In this study we use interviews with mid- and high-level drug dealers in Norway to identify the narrative repertoire of the street field. We outline the various ways in which talk is produced by, and produces the street field, and suggest that stories about crime business, violence, drugs, and the ‘hard life’ are core components in what can be described as the street field elsewhere as well. Throughout we argue that these stories are embedded in objective social and economic structures and actors’ habitus, and that discursive practices – most importantly stories – are the glue that binds the street field together: narratives re-produce social practices and therefore social structure. Including a narrative dimension to Bourdieu’s conceptual framework not only reflects the importance of stories and talk in the street, but can overcome the problem of over-determinism arguably present in Bourdieu’s theory.

Bourdieu, Social Structure, Social Practice – and Narrative

Bourdieu’s theory of social practice is well known. In brief, habitus, field and capitals, are ‘thinking tools’ for studying the ways that social fields and individual social practices are mutually constituting (Bourdieu 1990). Individual actions are generated by the habitus: the internalisation of the social field entrenched through experience and socialisation. Furthermore, an individual’s position within fields shapes and is shaped by their access to social, cultural and economic capitals (Bourdieu 1990).

Bourdieu's work on language echoes his ongoing concerns with the reproduction of social inequality. He understands language as the product of social space: representations of the social world reflect the individual's position in the field (1989). The inculcation of social space via the habitus generates 'common schemes of perception, conception and action which are the precondition of all objectification and apperception' (Bourdieu 1990: 60). This relationship is unilateral: material social inequalities prefigure, and impact upon, an individual's point of view. This is clear in his notion of symbolic violence: those with capitals impose language and definitions on others, naturalising social inequality (Bourdieu 1990). Read sympathetically this can be seen as a reminder for cultural and language analysis not to lose sight of inequality and socio-economic difference. It can also be seen as rejecting the importance of language for "the constitution and classification of social relations" (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 2000: 402).

An alternative reading of Bourdieu brackets what he says explicitly about language, and emphasizes instead what he says about other aspects of social life (Hanks 2005: 69). In *Masculine Domination* (Bourdieu 2001), oppositions between male and female, both in habitus and in culture, are mainly described through their representations in language. At one point, Bourdieu also defines the field as '...a language game in which certain ends are pursued with certain discursive resources according to established guidelines', and as '...a set of beliefs and assumptions that undergird the game' (Hanks 2005: 73, Bourdieu 1985). In describing the *habitus* as common schemes of perception, Bourdieu comes close to offering a more subtle understanding of language use as a form of 'regulated improvisation'; social action which can be creative, but within the limits proscribed by the habitus (Bourdieu 1990). Still, while Bourdieu sometimes acknowledges the creative force of language

(Bourdieu 1991: 41; 1989), he tends to end up with the same point of reference—objective fields and structures outside language (i.e. Bourdieu 1989).

Bourdieuian criminology and narrative

Bourdieu's theory has been widely used in sociological and criminological studies of criminal justice, for example in studies of the police (Chan 2003), bouncing (Hobbs et al. 2007), the penal system (McNeill et. al 2009), and youth crime prevention (Bowden 2014). Studies of offenders also draw on Bourdieu's conceptual framework. Sandberg and Pedersen (2009) initially conceptualized Norwegian street drug dealer's skills and competencies as street capital, and Grundetjern and Sandberg (2013) explored the importance of gender for this capital. This was further elaborated by Ilan's (2013) emphasis on street social capital and Fleetwood's (2014) comprehensive use of this framework in a study of drug mules. At the same time, Winlow and Hall (2010) employed the notion of habitus to capture the historical influence of industrialisation on working class men, and Fraser (2015) further utilized the notion of a street habitus to offer a critical account of gangs. Drawing on this emerging Bourdieusian criminology of the street, contemporary criminologists have sought to develop his concepts in relation to the street as a distinct field in the Bourdieusian sense (Shammas and Sandberg 2015, Moyle and Coomber 2016).

There have been attempts at including more constructivist dimensions in contemporary Bourdieusian criminology of the street. Sandberg and Pedersen (2009) concept of street capital synthesizes Bourdieu's logic of practice with a Foucauldian concern with discourse (Sandberg and Pedersen 2009). Fleetwood (2016) proposes the notion of a narrative habitus, another synthesis that locates narrative in social structure, but also understands narrative as constitutive of it. Still, no research has

systematically combined narrative and field theory. Doing so is necessary to reflect the importance of both the social structures and cultures that reciprocally shape street culture and street talk.

We build on research demonstrating that street culture continuously shapes, forms and constitutes the street as a field. Most of the values, norms and competencies that influence behaviour in the street field and that make up street habitus are transmitted through language, and confirmed over and over again in talk. Jimerson and Aware (2006) demonstrate that the ‘code of the street’ (Anderson 1999) is a conversational resource that can create and solve conflicts. Lauger (2014: 182) show that personal stories about violent events “shape and transmit street culture” and Brookman and colleagues (2011) that street codes can be likened to formula stories reproducing widespread cultural interpretations.

Our aim is to advance Bourdieusian criminology by drawing on narrative criminology. This perspective has been summarised effectively elsewhere (Presser and Sandberg 2015). Narrative criminologists are interested in how particular stories motivate and sustain harmful action. In brief, a narrative is a story that draws selectively on events. Although researchers often focus on individual narratives and what they say about the self, narratives can also be collective. Narrative has an ontological quality; events are experienced and understood narratively and so there is no clear distinction between experience and narrative interpretation (Atkinson and Coffey 2003).

The present study examines how field, habitus and capital work in and through narratives. In our analysis of the shared narrative repertoire of drug dealers in Norway, we demonstrate the various ways in which the street field and street talk are mutually interdependent and co-constituting. We depart from existing

Bourdieuian criminology by considering how talk and language play a central role in reproducing the street field. Where scholars inspired by Bourdieu tend to imagine a one-way relationship (field shapes language), the following research demonstrates a more dialectic relationship.

Method

The present study is based on interviews with 40 incarcerated male drug dealers aged 20-49 conducted in six Norwegian prisons. Interviewees were all drug distributors, varying from lower-level heroin dealing to large-scale, international trafficking of cocaine, amphetamine, and heroin. Previous Bourdieusian research has typically studied those at the lower levels of the street field. Most respondents were middle or high-level dealers, providing a unique insight into the symbolic and linguistic capital dominating this field. Still, most participants had long histories of drug use, typically involving several drugs, and were socially and economically marginalized. They identified with the stronger end of street culture (Ilan 2015). In some respects Norwegian street culture bears similarities to that described by North American researchers as “the code of the street” (Anderson 1999) or “street culture”, Bourgois 2003), but it also has distinctively Scandinavian characteristics shaped by the context of a benevolent welfare state and a history of social democracy.

Interviews lasting between 1.5-2.5 hours were carried out by a team of four experienced male researchers (including the lead author) roughly following an interview guide on topics including drug dealing, substance use, violence, socio-economic marginalization and social background. Respondents’ stories were inevitably shaped by the context of the interview: being in a prison and being interviewed by individuals who could be seen as representatives of the welfare state.

Respondents talked about many different themes, including drug addiction, personal problems and marginalization. Nonetheless, the significance of street talk extends beyond the street field, into prison.

The stories told in these prison interviews were forged in the street field. Whilst these stories are undoubtedly infused with braggadocio and even exaggeration, they are no less efficacious in how they shape the respondents sense of self, their field and in motivating participation in the street field (for a discussion see Copes et al. 2015a). While it can be questioned whether these stories are “true” and how much influence the prison context have on them, we are content to analyse them as representative of street talk for two main reasons: Firstly, ten years of ethnographic research on Norwegian street culture and drug dealing with active offenders, done by the first author, has identified stories genres very similar to those collected in these prison interviews (author cites removed). Secondly, similar stories are often found in studies of street culture and active offenders internationally as well (e.g. Bourgois 2003, Bucerius 2014, Ilan 2015).

The original aim was to understand drug distribution in Norway, but our interest soon turned towards storytelling. The analysis that follows revisits this data to examine the typical narrative repertoires of dealers, and their importance for the street field. A wide array of stories appeared in data that could have been categorized as street talk (sexual bragging etc), but here we focus on those we consider to be most important for the street field. Many of the interview excerpts below have a classic narrative structure (beginning, middle, end), however, narratives also include fragments of narratives, as tropes (Sandberg 2016). Whilst narrative analysis often asks what work the story does for the individual (i.e. their self-presentation), we

consider the work they do for individuals and groups in defining and reproducing the street field, as a form of structured action.

The Narrative Repertoire of Street Fields

An important part of street habitus is having a repertoire of stories to tell and being able to tell them in a convincing way. These stories in themselves, have value as street cultural capital. Tim, a high-level cannabis dealer, stated in a rather typical way:

If one of us gets threats or... there are a lot of people that are not happy about losing their money because we're there, right. So if some idiots appears and says something, then it's like family right, you go in there with warm bullets.

Street fields include a broad cultural spectrum, ranging from relatively 'innocent' delinquent subcultures to the cultures of organised crime (Ilan 2015). Tim's story reflects some typical or shared values: the importance of retaliation, the metaphor of family for friends and the emphasis on the occasional necessity to use violence. Such stories flourish in street fields, communicating values and establishing norms (Lauger 2014). Reflecting the male dominated nature of crime, such stories reflect implicitly masculine values; they tend to dwell around violence, crime, sex and drugs, but there are also important stories about vulnerability and exclusion (Sandberg 2009).

Bourdieu (1989) would understand this body of knowledge pertaining to the field as doxa.

The following analysis presents the repertoire of stories individuals embedded in street fields often have. The four types of stories we emphasise are *crime business*

stories, violence stories, drug stories and *'hard life' stories*. The two first can be seen as decisive for the street field, and we therefore go more into detail on these. The next two demonstrate the ongoing struggles of the boundaries of fields and illustrates stories that, given a certain twist, also can be important in the street field. This repertoire, generated by the narrative habitus of the speaker, establishes values, upholds and advances the positions of individuals involved. In these various ways, street talk reproduces the street field.

Crime business stories

Narratives about criminal 'business' typically demonstrate the competencies, skills and smartness of the storyteller. They are a narrative display of street capital which also uphold the values of the street field. Johnny, a high-level heroin dealer, said this about his drug business:

J: Like, I could have a million in cash [Norwegian kroner] and many hundreds grams of heroin, even a kilo, at the same time. I've had many good contacts because in that environment you know quite fast who to trust, who's good and bad, who it pays off knowing. The ones behind this are thinking *money*.

I: You mean the ones bringing it in?

J: The ones bringing it into the country. They pass it on to another person, and maybe splitting it up if it comes in 10 kilos and giving something to the guy smuggling. He gets a certain amount of money to drive that car with the stuff, then it gets to someone, he gets paid for the job, then it gets split up into

maybe 3 kilos and 4 kilos. Then the guy selling it sells it for one price per kilo, and he sells it back out again in 100 and 100 grams.

The interview continued with a long section with detailed calculations of prices and organization of work. Like all narratives, talk about successful crime business conveys messages about the speaker: here, that good drug dealers are rational and smart. It also establishes his position in the field. Johnny was one of the clever ones and good at what he was doing. Similarly Arvid, a high level cannabis dealer, talked about smuggling expressing similar competence and skills. The following quote was part of a longer story about how he organised a large smuggling conglomerate. He claimed it was “easy”:

A: At least when things run by themselves. If you suddenly get a hundred kilos and a question about if you can get this out. Then the boys at home are always ready, as well as the transportation, so it's only business as usual, and everything runs automatically. Looking at it this way, there were more advantages than challenges for me. I could just sit down and just relax in Denmark.

He ended the long story of three different smuggling routes he had been using for years with how he had stashed a lot of money in the forest that was just waiting for him. Arvid's story expresses his capability and skills at running a large network of smugglers and dealers, always being ahead of the police, and sorting out conflicts between different actors. Simon, a mid-level amphetamine dealer described his business ideology in this way: “We're talking about a *store*. That's why I've survived

selling drugs for so many years, because I am good at running a business. I have a merchant in me". Crime business stories sometimes came with very explicit business metaphors and language (Dwyer and Moore 2010).

Johnny, Arvid and Simon were high-level dealers, but the same genre of business crime stories was also iterated by those at lower levels of the drug hierarchies, by those with much less street capital. Jakob dealt at the mid-level when he could, but most of the time he was a street level heroin dealer:

I: Would you say that the sale had a certain volume? Or did you sell heroin mostly on street level?

J: No, it got big... We only bought hectos [hectograms] of heroin and sold it (whistles)

I: Do you then sell in grams, or how....?

J: Yes, we sold grams and half-grams, bags and everything there was. So we... We had it like a 0.1-er and 0.2-er. Then we split one gram into four and eight. And the 0.1-ers is one eighth, and one fourth is a quarter, right. Split grams into four. At that time it was 400 for quarters. And 200 for the 0.1-er. Making it 1600 kroner for a gram, right. Then we paid, at least no more than 500 each gram ourselves, if we even paid that much. 400, I think.

Jakob's technical account displays his street cultural capital about how the trade works. The values were the same among high-level and lower-level actors, but those with more street capital had more elaborate stories about bigger operations and schemes, reflecting their greater street capital. Being able to tell these stories was dependent on one's capitals and position in the field.

Previous analyses of crime-as-business emphasise the economics of drug dealing. As important as it is to deal successfully, ability to talk about dealing establishes one's position in the field through storytelling. Doing so revealed abilities, and recognition of one's street capital by others. Bragging about the size of operations and the amount earned was common. Too much bragging however, risked undermining the credibility of the storyteller, since keeping quiet about business was central to being a successful criminal entrepreneur. Having stories told about one's successes was an even better way to uphold reputation through stories. Thus, street social capital (Ilan 2013) is also bound up with narratively establishing one's capital, reputation and position in the field. Crime business stories thus perpetuate the doxa of the field.

Violence stories

Violence is paramount for the street field – stories of violence, maybe even more than violent practices. They establish the speakers' violent potential, ability to command respect, and convey the values embraced by the actors that constitute the street as an autonomous field (Sandberg et al. 2015). Robert, a mid-level amphetamine dealer described the sensations of fighting in this way:

R: Oh, yeah, that's the best part, nothing beats the feeling when 5-6 you're fighting against, alone, are lying there and you have won, still standing. Even if you're bloody and messed up – there's nothing comparable.

I: So you feel some kind of intoxication then?

R: Yes. Definitely.

I: Is there any type of drug getting you somewhere near that experience?

R: No, there is nothing getting anywhere near *that* – but there are things you can use to make *it* better. But there is nothing like that feeling of winning when the other team – like, you should have lost, but you won. Nothing can beat that. I've had the tendency to always need to get the last punch or the last word. In every setting.

Robert emphasized the attractions of fighting, likening it to a sport using metaphors of winning and teams, echoing Bourdieu's (1998) comparisons between the field and a game. The attraction of fighting includes the narrative gratification of being able to tell stories about it afterwards (Jackson-Jakobs 2004). These stories were also a way of justifying violence and drawing boundaries towards others (Copes et al. 2015b). Violence stories establish and accumulate street capital within the boundaries of the street field.

An appreciation of violence was ingrained in street actors' habitus. Kjetil, a high-level amphetamine dealer described how violence was his "drug" and that he got a kick out of it:

I did an armed robbery. A fucking ugly case, it was a big thing here in Norway at the time. On TV and everything; it really took off. So that was a bad case. We were supposed to rob a money transport, but then the plan changed and we ended up going into a snack bar and went crazy. We sliced a couple of Moroccans, cut them up, and it really escalated. Yeah, it really escalated. Intense stuff.

As the above account hints, violence is haphazard and messy, and he was later imprisoned for this violence. Both Robert and Kjetil display their position in field and their street capitals narratively, but it is not just the act, but their ability to *story* it effectively that provides street capital. It takes narrative skills to story violence in such a way that strengthens their position in the field.

Violence was often portrayed in rational terms, linking stories of violence with crime business stories. Petter, a high-level amphetamine dealer told a story about someone breaking into his house and stealing from him. According to narrative conventions of the field, retaliation was the logical conclusion, but since he was in prison this was an unfinished story.

I: Have you figured out who broke into your place, or?

E: This one time I figured it out. He's inside on a longer sentence, so we got to wait until he gets out again before I can get to him (laughing a little).

I: What are your plans?

E: Well, I guess we'll take a trip to the woods; you don't get away with a break-in at my place, you know...

I: So he should have expected this?

E: Yes, he knows me well, so he shouldn't have done it.

I: No, but he was desperate or...?

E: He was desperate, or just stupid. I don't know what made him do it.

I: No, but was he an addict, was it to...

E: Maybe. I don't know. But I'll find out when I talk to him.

I: Yes, but will he get punished anyway?

E: There will be punishment, that's just how it is.

Arguably, the purpose of revenge is to create stories. They convey shared values in street culture, and also establish the storyteller as one that cannot be messed with. The latter is of course important in black markets where there were few official sanctions.

Violence stories about retribution and revenge are told, and re-told, continuously reproducing the field and drawing boundaries with other fields. Frank, a mid-level cannabis dealer was sentenced for grave violence. He told this story to explain the importance of respect and pride in the street field:

F: Yes, there was one [guy who was] raped with a cucumber, for [stealing] 5 kilos of hashish, right. So there are some cases. But this was about hashish that disappeared many years ago, right. He really took a beating then, and almost died right. There was someone standing with an impact drill on his head, bang bang, down in a garage. He still didn't pay; walking around downtown, thinking he's really badass, right.

I: Oh... and that was just for hashish?

F: That was for hashish, but it escalates when it starts getting personal, right, because then it suddenly is about ego and pride and what this guy tries to do with your name. If he's trying to make you look like a fool right, then you just have to get rid of him straightaway. I thought it went pretty far even at that time; he got raped for hours inside an apartment, right. But yeah, thinking he's tough; that's what happens.

The message of violent retribution is the same as in Petter's story, and in that way it can be seen as conveying the same values of the street field: if you do not show

respect you should fear the consequences. Frank's story is not clear-cut however, and illustrates how stories are often ambiguous and send multiple messages at the same time (Polletta 2006). Frank simultaneously endorses the idea that disrespect should have some consequences and admits that they went too far in this case. More than conveying strict rules, street talk is the site of negotiations about what kind of violence is legitimate, and in what situations. Stories of violence reproduce the field, but not always in predictable ways, and also continuously change it.

Stories of violence are a decisive part of the narrative repertoire of the street field and a crucial aspect of the habitus of the actors embedded in it. They are crucial in constituting the fields' autonomy. Stories of violence fill conversations by being exciting and entertaining, and established actors in the field typically have a solid repertoire of them. They establish the borders of the field by setting out the legitimate targets for violence: snitchers, thieves, drug addicts and police. Stories of violence establish and maintain hierarchies through reputation, signal participation in the field, convey values, and confirm or challenge the borders of the field. While much has been written about violence in criminology, a Bourdieusian inspired narrative analysis shows the importance of *stories* of violence for individuals' position in the street field and their importance in defining the boundaries of the field.

Drug stories

Drug stories are not as important for hierarchies and the organization of the field as stories of violence and crime business stories, but play an important role nonetheless. They do different kinds of work, such as entertaining, but also express important street values. Benjamin, a mid-level cannabis dealer, told a long story about different kinds of drugs:

B: I've always been fascinated by drugs, always thought it was very interesting and wanted to try everything. There was a difference between me and the musicians [at a music joint where he worked], like, if they ate one pill of ecstasy, then I could eat three or four and ten or more

I: So, you felt a bit different at that time?

B: Yes, I was. I knew that I loved drugs, no matter what it was really. I loved everything that gave me a different sense of consciousness.

I: The fascination was that it gave you a different sense of ...?

B: Yes, I had a few different categories then... I learned a lot from LSD, but selling hashish brought in the money, plus that I really enjoyed smoking during sex. Ecstasy was just for fun. All of the X number hallucinogens were also for learning, and opiates to relax.

I: What did you learn? Expanding the consciousness?

B: Yes, I know that it's a really sick idea and a cliché to expand the consciousness, but it really is a suitable expression actually. I don't know, you learn a lot, well, you don't have any filter, you need to face yourself and who you are, not the one you want to be or think you are. The first time I ate acid I didn't like very well what I saw, so that changed me in a positive way then.

(...)

B: I don't know how to put it in words. It's like describing red to someone who's blind or something. But you get - what should I call it - a cosmic understanding or something, your own being. I believe that's something everyone should do in their life.

To have street capital, drug experiences and stories must strike a fine balance. Drug stories can provide valuable cultural capital about drugs and intoxication, but one should not be seen as a drug addict (Copes et al. 2008). Benjamin is struggling with this balance in the quote above. Drug stories that provide street capital often portray the protagonist as someone who takes great chances, but is capable of controlling the risks (Collison 1996). Drug experiences and stories are often about distinguishing oneself through expressing a kind of secret knowledge that helps constitute the field, distinguishing insiders and outsiders (Bourdieu 1984). Drug experience is also a sign of commitment to the field; trying drugs comes with a risk, and it produces field-specific knowledge or stories that can help accumulate street capital.

Drug stories also illustrate the blurry boundaries between social fields. Benjamin's narrative here for example is clearly influenced by the 'hippie'- story of drugs, emphasizing the expansion of the mind, getting deeper insights, or what Young (1971) describes as subterranean values. They are also closely linked to the subcultural capital Thornton (1995) describes in the club scene. Drug stories are not exclusive to the street field, but rather an example of stories that cross fields and – as opposed to crime business and violence stories – can provide for symbolic capital in different social contexts. Drug stories probably have more appeal in drug using contexts (e.g. Parkin 2013), than in a context of drug dealing or crime business, but told in a particular way they can be effective in the street field. They demonstrate secret knowledge, revealing courage, guts and rejection of mainstream values. Drug stories could be told by anyone in the field, however they were most useful for those at the bottom of the street hierarchy without access to convincing crime business or violence stories.

‘Hard life’ stories

Another decisive part of the narrative repertoire of the street field is ‘hard life’ stories. They were about troubles such as domestic violence, substance misuse in family, and ‘tough’ neighbourhoods, and often told as part of larger life-stories. Johannes, a mid-level ecstasy-dealer, story of a dramatic childhood experience is illustrative:

J: My dad died when I was 3 years old. By an overdose. At the hospital.

I: He was on heroin as well?

J: Yes. He was an alcoholic and a heroin addict and a criminal. After he died my mother got married with someone else. That’s the guy I’m calling dad today.

I: He was a traveller?

J: He’s a traveller. Also one doing drugs. So I grew up with it around me all the time. I grew up with uncles being on the run, staying with us. Overdoses everywhere. I’ve been to many ‘drug-houses’, as they call them.

I: So you experienced early that this was the way the world was like?

J: My first memory is from when I was 4-5 years old. One of my uncles was on the run, a double murderer. I remember him sitting in the caravan with a sawed-off shotgun, saying he was going to kill the police if they came. And that’s some of my first memories.

I: Do you remember how you reacted?

J: I thought it was really cool. That’s what I thought then. It was exciting, right.

Johannes' story reflects his position at the bottom of the field (Bourdieu 1989) among the down-and-out population of injecting drug users. 'Hard life' stories are real depictions of the marginalization, suffering and abuse many in the street field have experienced. They are also 'sad tales' (Goffman 1961), putting their crimes into a context that makes them understandable, and sometimes institutionalised in welfare and penal systems. In the same way as drug stories, 'hard life' stories need to be finely balanced to be effective in the street field.

The first part of Johannes' story can secure sympathy and help in other social fields, but it would not have provided much street capital without the twist towards the end that turns it into street talk. Instead of summarizing the story as being about denigrating marginalization Johannes concludes that it was "fun" and "exciting". Within the street field, traumatizing experiences can be made meaningful, transformed into stories communicating his toughness, even from a young age. They convey the speakers' authenticity as having lived the 'hard life' for as long as they can remember. The narrative repertoire of the street field provides stories to make such traumatizing experience meaningful and even valuable.

Stories constantly change fields. 'Hard life' stories have inspired popular culture, especially hip-hop. This music genre embraces ideas of 'keeping it real', celebrates growing up in the ghetto, and is often seen as born from experiences of ethnic and socio-economic discrimination (Chang 2005). Hip-hop and especially gangsta-rap has again influenced stories told on the streets, so that the two are now completely inseparable. 'Hard life' stories are important because they do multiple kinds of work: securing street capital while at the same time explaining the turns life has taken for marginalized populations. They offer a sense of belonging to a particular

social field (Bourdieu 1993) by verbalizing shared experiences and turning traumatic experiences into personal narratives of strength, daring and authenticity.

Discussion

Interviews with those strongly committed to the street field in Norway revealed an extensive repertoire of narratives about the drug trade, violence, drug experiences and tough upbringings. Drug dealers' narratives reflected the street field as a deeply ingrained part of their habitus, and therefore narrative repertoire. Ways of storytelling are deeply ingrained and cannot be readily changed. Whilst prison undoubtedly shapes narratives, interviews also reflected the enduring nature of street talk. In the interview, as in the street, being able to talk with humour, in a relaxed manner about dramatic or traumatic events displayed street capital. Through storytelling, imprisoned drug dealers could come out as entrepreneurs and leaders instead of being marginalized, drug users and victims.

The notion that crime business and violence stories play a fundamental role in street culture and the street field internationally is well established (e.g. Bourgois 2003, Bucerius 2014, Ilan 2015). Combining analysis of street talk with a Bourdieusian concern with social structure shows that personal narratives about crime business and violence constitute an important form of capital in the field. Those with a lot of street capital can typically tell many stories about successful criminal activity and fights, and telling these stories is a way to display competence and skill. Drug and 'hard life'-stories are not as directly connected to the epicentre of the street field as crime business and violence stories, but they are still important. Narratives about drugs can demonstrate the speaker's risk taking capacity. The 'hard life' narrative enables the speaker to relate traumatizing experiences, while still rejecting the

feminine position of the ‘victim’ or ‘addict’, which is often the symbolic other in street culture (Copes et al 2008). While there is great local variation between street fields, we suggest that stories of successful crime, violence, substance use and tough upbringing or neighbourhood are paramount for most street fields. When street fields differ it is more about the weighting of them, than the hegemony of either.

The street field is not settled and the site of continuous struggle over what constitutes symbolic capital. Illustratively, narratives in the street field are often in conflict (Sandberg 2009a, Sandberg et. al 2015). One example is the struggle between the necessity of violent retribution to uphold ‘respect’ versus business-like considerations of the cost-benefits of using violence. In the Frankfurt drug scene described by Bucerius (2014), the younger dealers redefined the street field from a focus on gang fighting and violence to be more about small-scale successful drug business. Although these narratives are produced by the street field, and inculcated in the actors’ habitus, agency operates through individual narrative adaption and creativity in ways that challenge the typical norms and values. Combined with local cultural and historical context and state definitions and interventions (Shammas and Sandberg 2015), the continuous outcome of these discursive struggles shape street fields, and make them differ from one another. For example, Northern European street fields seem to have a greater acceptance for ‘sad tales’ (e.g. Sandberg and Pedersen 2009, Bucerius 2014) than those in Northern America (e.g. Anderson 1999, Bourgois 2003). Street fields, and street talk reflect the larger social space within which they are nested.

Street cultures vary depending on historical, social and economic contexts, but the stories we have identified in this study indicate some common characteristics of street fields. The familiarity of these kinds of narratives reflects the structural

similarities between street fields, as suggested by the notion of homologies of habitus (Fraser 2015) and conceptualisation of a *global* street culture (Ilan 2014). The street field reflects social structures more generally, and it is impossible to understand the stories described in this study without contextualizing them in social space more generally. The seemingly increasing emphasis on business-values for example, can be seen in the light of the gradual dominance of neo-liberalism in mainstream society. Stories of violence are very much inspired and embedded in popular culture emerging from a prosperous cultural industry. Similarly drug stories and ‘hard-life’ stories should be seen against the background of similar stories in conventional society, especially the proliferation of autobiography in the 21st century. As much as street talk is *produced* by the social contexts that host it, we would also highlight the importance and value that street talk has for individuals in the field. Without understanding that, it is hard to understand why they invest in street cultural narratives.

The narratives that identify the street field are not ‘chosen’, but reflect early socialization and social background; in other words the inculcation of social structure via the habitus. Growing up socially marginalized often comes with an absence of other stories (silence), and a well-developed repertoire of street stories that, in addition to embodied competencies and absence of cultural capital in general, further binds people to the street field. The same goes for ethnicity, which in particular street fields can be a form of street capital in itself (Sandberg 2008). A Bourdieusian analysis highlights the interplay between material and symbolic. To put it simply, the exact same statements and stories will more easily be ‘heard’ as street talk if coming from a category of people (ethnicity, class, socially excluded, drug users) already associated with this field.

The street field is not only classed, and in some cases influenced by ethnicity and nationality, but also highly gendered. Masculinity is ubiquitous in the street field. Violence and business stories rely on masculinity; all are about control, dominance, expertise and strength (albeit in different ways). Nonetheless, even within these two narrative genres there are a variety of ways to ‘do’ gender (Jefferson 1994). Illustratively, Grundetjern’s (2015) study of female drug dealers documents a range of strategies (and stories) employed by women dealers. For men however, the gendered space seems to be more limited in the street field, and almost all forms of street talk presented here are underpinned by tough, street masculinity. Thus, in addition to reproducing the street field, street talk also reflects and reproduces wider social structures of gender, ethnicity and class. At the same time, and especially in Bourdieusian analysis, it is important to hold in view the personal value and agency involved in street talk for marginalized populations. Without that, it is difficult to understand local differences and changes in street fields, and we risk reducing individuals to automatic reproducers of social structure and doxa.

Bourdieu’s theory of social practice has been criticised for being overly deterministic (King 2000), and too oriented toward the structural/material aspects of social life, leaving little space for the constitutive role of discourse and narratives (Hasan 1999; Chouliaraki and Fairclough 2000). In our opinion this critique is better aimed at some empirical studies using Bourdieu than his theoretical framework. Bourdieu makes clear that individuals can and do act in novel ways, but only within the limits circumscribed by the habitus. He describes this as ‘regulated improvisation’ (Bourdieu 1990: 57). The best research within Bourdieusian criminology pays close attention to culture, and has generally avoided offering an overly reductive or materialist analysis. We still believe that further emphasis on the role of narrative,

discourse and language can benefit this nascent research. Throughout we have demonstrated the role played by individuals as storytellers in creating the field. While reflecting his central concern with the duality of action and social structure (Bourdieu 1990), this arguably accords a more active role to narrative and talk than Bourdieu originally intended.

Conclusion

Studies of street culture demonstrate the importance of street ‘codes’ that guide practice (Andersson 1999). Nonetheless, they have tended to downplay the importance of social structure in their formation. Bourdieusian studies of the street field illustrate the importance of social structure in shaping individual action, through the notions of street habitus, capital and field. Here we seek to bridge the gap by examining the way that the narrative repertoire pertaining to street fields reflects objective social structural circumstances.

Narratives play a wide variety of roles, they establish one’s position in the field, and transmits values and common ‘schemes of perception’ (Bourdieu 1990: 60). In this way, stories transmit social structures. They are learned, incorporated, and become instinctive as the way things are. Readers might argue that narratives hardly amounts to social structure, but recall Anders and Henrik (at the start of the article), and how not being able to “talk” in mainstream society was as a barrier for leaving a criminal lifestyle behind. Bourdieu’s theory of habitus is ultimately about domination, and this is an important element to retain: street storytellers have creativity, but only within limits of the field. Here, we have demonstrated that these limits are not only material, but also in the ways that the street field shapes the kinds of narratives told. These stories, ingrained in the habitus, reflect the individual’s position in social space

and their point of view. Their desire to construct stories of powerfulness, control and domination belie their marginalized status in society, and ultimately their poor chances at every, really, 'making it'.

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