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Torsten Kolind, Thomas Friis Søgaard, Geoffrey Hunt & Birgitte Thylstrup (2017) Transitional narratives of identity among ethnic minority youth gangs in Denmark: from collectivism to individualism. Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention, 18:1, 3-19, DOI: 10.1080/14043858.2017.1315276

Publication metadata

Transitional narratives of identity among ethnic minority youth gangs in Denmark: From collectivism to individualism

1) Professor Torsten Kolind (corresponding author), Centre for Alcohol and Drug Research, Aarhus University. Postal address: Centre for alcohol and drug research, Aarhus University,Bartholins Allé 10, 8000 Aarhus C. Denmark. Tel: +45 871 65767. E-mail: tk.crf@psy.au.dk

2) Assistant professor Thomas Friis Søgaard, Centre for Alcohol and Drug Research, Aarhus University. Postal address: Centre for alcohol and drug research, Aarhus University,Bartholins Allé 10, 8000 Aarhus C. Denmark. Tel: +45 871 65315. E-mail: tfs.crf@psy.au.dk

3) Professor Geoffrey Hunt, Centre for Alcohol and Drug Research, Aarhus University, Denmark & Institute for Scientific Analysis, San Francisco, US. Postal address: Institute for Scientific Analysis, 1150 Ballena Blve. #211, Alameda, CA. 94501, US. T: 510 865 6225. E-mail: huntgisa@ix.netcom.com

4) Associate professor Birgitte Thylstrup, Centre for Alcohol and Drug Research, Aarhus University, Denmark. Postal address: Artillerivej 90, 2. 2300 København S. Denmark. Tel: +45 871 65336. E-mail: bt.crf@psy.au.dk

Transitional narratives of identity among ethnic minority youth gangs in Denmark: From collectivism to individualism

Introduction

Like other Nordic countries, concerns about integration have become increasingly contentious themes in Danish public and political debates (Andreassen, 2007; Mouritsen & Olsen, 2013). Within these debates, ethnic minority young men have been pointed out as especially problematic because of their seeming involvement in youth gangs, drug dealing and serious crime (Jensen, 2011). Such developments have been identified as a particularly troubling reflection of the difficulties of integrating immigrant populations successfully (Klement et al., 2010). Furthermore, as neo-liberal ideology – emphasising individual entrepreneurialism, self-responsibility and meritocracy (Harvey, 2005) – has come to increasingly influence welfare state institutions (Bjerge & Nielsen, 2012; Villadsen, 2008), the labour market (Lundkvist, 2009) and everyday life in many countries, including Denmark (Jensen, 2009), ethnic minority men are increasingly identified by their supposed inability to act as empowered self-managing actors. Within this framework, ethnic minority men's subjectivities are often invoked as explanations for their marginalized position and criminalized life-style – their supposed lack of motivation, will-power and effort, and their tendency to make the 'wrong' choices (Andreassen, 2007; for similar processes in Germany, UK, and US contexts see: Bucerius 2014; Harvey 2005; Lawler 2005).

In Scandinavia, research on ethnic minority men has predominantly focused on early crime and drug career developments, and suggested that street cultures constitute collective sites of opposition where marginalized ethnic minority men culturally resist experiences of racism and social marginalization and instead construct enhanced personal dignity, respect and masculine status (Bengtsson, 2012; Jensen, 2011; Lalander, 2009; Sandberg & Pedersen, 2011). In this way, Scandinavian research resembles much of the international research, notably US and UK, on ethnic minority men and street cultures (Bourgois, 2003; Mullins, 2006; Back 1996). Importantly, however, little attention has been given to ethnic minority men's experiences and cultural formations in later stages of their criminal, drug or gang careers (exceptions include: Calverley, 2013; Glynn, 2014; Moloney et al., 2009). This is particularly true in the Scandinavian context where qualitative research on ethnic minority men's desistance processes from crime, drug or gang involvement is almost absent (exceptions include: Sandberg, 2010a; Søgaard et al., 2016). In

Denmark, the reason for little research may be related to the fact that only recently did ethnic minority youth street gangs become a high priority problem on the political agenda (Bengtsson 2012). Prior to that, the focus was solely on biker gangs. However, in recent years, a growing number of street communities in Copenhagen, composed mainly of ethnic minority men, have developed and started to demonstrate a new territoriality based on violent conflicts over local drugs markets (Jacobsen 2012; Mørck et al. 2013). These developments have made gang conflicts, particularly in Copenhagen, a key issue of local and national governmental concern.

Against this background, this paper examines data from an ethnographic study of ethnic minority men in Copenhagen and their attempts to move away from gang involvement, criminality, drug use, and drug sales. We argue that the young men's desistance process involves a gradual drift in their narratives from describing their lives in collectivistic modes of identifications, defined by street gang solidarity and opposition to mainstream society, to more individualistic modes of orientation that emphasise individual responsibility and development, and more mainstream values. While such narrative shifts could be seen as a move from (active) cultural resistance to (passive) accept of dominant neo-liberal perspectives, we argue instead that in their narratives, neo-liberal ideology is also actively appropriated by them, enabling them to construct a positive self-image and generate feelings of empowerment within a disempowering environment (see also: Trimbur, 2011). Finally, we also suggest that the young men's narrative emphasis on individualistic values play a role as technologies of change and self-governance (Foucault, 1997), particularly in their early desistance phase, facilitating possible later stage identifications with more mainstream cultural collectives such as the family, responsible fatherhood and work.

Social exclusion and street culture

In several parts of Europe, social exclusion of minority youth has been well-documented (Fangen et al., 2012)[1]. Such social exclusion includes not only economic aspects, but more general relationships between the individual and the society, such as education, labour market, spatial, social relational, and socio-political forms of exclusion (ibid.). In Denmark, the media often portray ethnic minority men negatively (Andreassen, 2007; Jensen, 2011). Minority individuals report experiencing discrimination when applying for jobs (Slot, 2011), and are often recruited into low status and low paid jobs (Ejrnæs, 2008).They often experience difficulties in the educational system, frequently being labelled as 'troublemakers' by teachers (Gilliam, 2009), but also facing higher risks of dropping out in the later stages of their educational career (Dahl & Jakobsen, 2005).

In the so-called 'ghetto areas' territorial stigmatization has also been documented (Christensen & Jensen, 2012). Finally, minority youth are sentenced more frequently than ethnic Danes (Andersen & Tranæs, 2011) and experience extensive discriminatory policing (Ansel-Henry et al., 2003).

In resisting such social exclusion and inferior cultural categorizations, researchers have documented the importance of ethnic minority men's performance of 'protest masculinity' (Connell, 1995) and especially 'street culture' (Bengtsson, 2012; Jensen, 2011). Street cultures offer the possibility of alternative status and recognition, based on collective values, often influenced by larger cross-national cultural symbolic fields (Lalander, 2008), opposed to or resisting the values of the dominant mainstream society, from which these young people feel excluded (Jensen, 2011; Lalander, 2009; Sandberg & Pedersen, 2011). Recent theoretical developments have also suggested understanding street cultures as social fields, with their own criteria of status and recognition. "Street capital" based, for example, on violence and drug selling can be transformed into prestigious social capital and an enhanced masculine identity for men, who possess little alternative access to masculine status either within the formal economy or in education (Sandberg & Pedersen, 2011; see also Bourgois, 2003).

Oppositional street cultures, however, are not the only ways that minority youth respond to experiences of social exclusion. In a study from Sweden, Andersson (2003) identified three different minority groupings. The 'Foreigners' exhibited a highly collective orientation and employed a strategy that resembled oppositional street culture, whereas the 'Ethnic Entrepreneurs' saw themselves as positively contributing to building bridges between their 'home' culture and Swedish culture. The third group, the 'Liberal Multiculturalists' discarded any minority status, and sought recognition within the mainstream Swedish areas of recognized societal prestige (for instance sport). In a somewhat similar manner, Lalander and Sernhede (2011) suggest that minority youth, who are part of a more politically inspired youth culture, tend to develop clear strategies for social change where education and social mobility are seen as ways to counter social exclusion, thereby creating alternative collective structures of dignity. Finally, in a study of Norwegian drug dealers, Sandberg (2009) highlighted ethnic minority men's discursive 'bi-linguality' as they drift between a 'gangster discourse', similar to the street culture outlined above, and an 'oppression discourse' related to a tendency in Scandinavian welfare organizations that explains criminal involvement such as drug selling as a result of structural discrimination, especially arising from discriminatory practices within the labour market.

While the research mentioned above in general seems to suggest that the use of collective and individualized narratives by Scandinavian minority youth is mediated by social class structures so that 'individualistic narratives' are mostly used by elite minority youth, while 'collective narratives' are used by socially excluded young people, our own study suggests that narratives drifting from collectivistic to individualistic ones are key to understanding how socially excluded minority young men try to reconstruct their self-identities in periods of attempted desistance. In this way, our paper reflects criminological theory, which argues that desistance is not just about the transformations of offenders' circumstances, but instead desistance is best understood as a 'drifting' process, involving progression and relapse (Carlsson, 2012) as well as subjective processes, such as willpower, cognitive transformations, and particularly relevant for this paper, the desisters' narrative reconstructions of themselves and their identities (Maruna, 2001).

In this paper, the concept of narrative is used in order to comprehend our research participants' stories about their experiences and values as well as their ideas and anticipations about how their futures may ideally turn out. Narratives, however, are not only representations of past experiences, but may influence future behaviour and future interpretations of behaviours and events (Mattingly 2001). In this way, as indicated by Maruna (2001) in his theory on desistance narratives, new understandings of oneself can achieve transformative power. In addition, narratives are not solely individualistic but instead linked to more general societal or subcultural scripts in which the individual is placed (Presser and Sandberg, 2015). That is, the language, symbolism and scripts used to mediate individual experiences are taken from and describe a larger cultural and social context (Sandberg 2010b: 455). More specifically, within our data, two types of narratives can be identified. First, a collectivistic narrative drawing on values attached to street culture, gang loyalty and opposition to mainstream culture. Second, an individualistic narrative, drawing on more general neo-liberal thinking in which the individual is portrayed as self-responsible and self-accountable and ultimately alone in his endeavour to desist (Harvey 2005). These two narratives, it should be stressed, are not exclusive, as the collectivist narrative encompasses individualistic elements and vice versa (cf. the concept of *drifting* above). Furthermore, our analysis suggests that the individualistic narratives are best understood as technologies of self-governance (Foucault, 1997), facilitating changes in the young men's mode of identification from gang culture toward more mainstream culture. While the highly individualistic aspects of these young men's narratives in many ways reflect 'advanced liberal' (Rose 1999) or neo-liberal rationalities, emphasising personal responsibility and self-governance, we highlight how becoming 'ethical' for young men also

involved emerging identifications and connections with more mainstream cultural collectives, such as 'a good normal life', the family and an Islamic religious community. Discerning and cutting out the contours of the somewhat distinct narratives used by the young men can in this way help us understand some of the challenges of our informants as well as the reformatory potentials of individualistic and neo-liberal scripts.

Method and Data

This study is based on interviews and fieldwork in the spring of 2014 among 23 ethnic minority men (18 to 28 years of age) enrolled at a rehabilitation centre for criminal offenders located in the suburbs of Copenhagen. The rehabilitation centre, referred to here as the New Start programme (NS), is a non-governmental organization offering a rehabilitation programme set within the context of a large boxing gym. Enrolment in the program was for some of the young offenders a parole requirement. Participation also prevented the young men from having their welfare benefits cut, and successful completion of the programme could enable those with a (prior) gang affiliation to have their names removed from the national gang offenders' list. NS was selected as a research site because, in spite of being a non-governmental organization, it branded itself as being the last frontier of the Danish welfare state, accepting individuals who were too unruly to be included in other rehabilitation programmes. The neighbourhood where NS is located is characterized by a majority of people of ethnic minority background, high unemployment and social problems, high crime rates and ongoing violent gang conflicts. The young men in this study self-identified as being of Turkish, Palestinian, Iraqi, Albanian, Ghanaian and Roma cultural backgrounds. Most of them had formerly belonged, or in some cases still did belong to the same local street gang, and most had lengthy histories with the criminal justice system. Their illegal offences ranged from drug dealing, violence, burglaries, to that of manslaughter. In addition, most had a history of heavy consumption of cannabis, and many of them admitted to still being daily users.

During 35 days of participant observation over a period of three months, two of the authors interacted informally with the young men and the staff at NS. Unlike other re-entry programmes, NS did not require participants to stop using drugs or to break their connections with active criminals or gang members. The only requirements for programme entry were that participants had expressed a wish for change, and agreed to refrain from committing crimes, acting abusively or dealing or consuming drugs on NS's property. The program's measure of success was a

combination of the young men's desistance from crime and drug use and their (re-) entry into the labour market.

We conducted five focus groups and 23 semi-structured individual interviews with a total of 23 young men (12 enrolled clients, eight former clients and mentors and three 'friends of the house'). At NS, the mentors were all former clients who had successfully completed the program and were now employed to assist enrolled clients in their desistance process. The three young men, here categorized as 'friends of the house', all shared similar life circumstance with the enrolled clients, and they frequently participated in the institutional programme alongside the official clients, who were often their childhood friends. All interviews were conducted in Danish and in an informal manner and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. The interviews were organized as life-stories, starting with informants describing their childhood and migration history, their relationships with peers and family, their involvement in crime and drug use/sale, and ending with conversations about their current life situation, motivations for change, religion, and future prospects. We thematically coded and analysed field notes and interviews using established ethnographic iterative techniques of continuous comparison and triangulation of data. Importantly, observations showed that NS constitutes a rehabilitation programme that uses particular masculinized meta-narratives, derived from the world of boxing, to communicate values of individual willpower and self-responsibility to the young participants (see also: Søgaard et al. 2016). Thus, NS is an example of how neo-liberal and individualist discourses are gaining prominence in Scandinavian welfare institutions (Franzén 2015). In the analyses, we analyse how such societal and institutionally mediated discourses of individualism articulate in the young men's transitional narratives.

Before interviews, the young men were thoroughly informed about the purpose of the study and the voluntary and anonymous nature of their participation. Signed consent forms were gathered from the young men who agreed to participate, and it was made clear that they could withdraw from the study at any time without suffering any repercussions. As it turned out, none did so. To retain participant anonymity, pseudonyms are used throughout the article.

Results

Our data provide insights into how desistance from crime and drug using careers is an ongoing struggle for our research participants. Also, the data revealed how informants' narration of different selves seemed to play a key role in their desistance process. In this first part of the analysis

therefore, we examine our research participants' narratives on their (former) involvement in a street or gang culture. More specifically, we look into the *collective* values expressed in such narratives. In the second part, we analyse their transitional narratives focusing on 'moving on', as our research participants call it, and we study the *individualist* notions of self-governance inherent in these accounts.

Collectivist narratives

Growing up

Many of our participants talked about how their parents experienced difficulties becoming integrated in Danish society. Many of them had never learned Danish well enough to be able to communicate efficiently with the authorities, many were unemployed, and some had suffered severe traumatic experiences from the countries they escaped. According to our participants, such experiences of alienation have also been somewhat reproduced in their own lives in the Danish society. Most of them described difficult times in primary school and several dropped out of the educational system. Nooh for instance told how his school failure was very much related to a feeling of inferiority as a newcomer to Denmark.

> *I came from Iraq when I was 14 […] It was really tough, I had to do maths for 5th graders and I felt I was like nothing in that class. Because all the others they could read, and I was far behind them, right? I just wanted to be like the others […] So... I had a confrontation with a teacher, and then was sent to another school.*

Besides their experiences in the educational system, our participants also described the experiences of being treated unfairly by 'the municipality,' being discriminated against in work places and by managers never responding to their requests for apprenticeships, because, as they saw it, their non-Danish names. Some said that the areas in which they lived were stigmatized as 'ghettos' by the broader society and by politicians. Finally, several stated that they did not really see themselves as Danes and knew they were not perceived as such by ethnic Danes. In this quote, Mirsad reflects on the public discourse about 'Muslims', and how this contributes to his feeling disconnecting from the broader Danish society:

> *You don't hear about anything else in the media: it's Muslims this and Muslims that […] It started after September 11th, that's when they came down on the Muslims, and you really*

get fucking tired of it. I understand damn well why there are some Muslims who've had
enough and start doing all kinds of sick stuff. I get really pissed off when I think about it [the
way Muslims are represented in the media].

In contrast to problems experienced at home, their educational failures, and the lack of acceptance from the wider Danish society, many of our participants experienced street life as a positive alternative. During their teens, many had started engaging in criminality, violent gang activity, drug use (mainly cannabis) and drug sales. In order to understand the attractiveness of such street cultures, and especially the collectivist element, we focus on examining the central values of gangs, brotherhood and loyalty as described by our respondents.

Gangs, brotherhood and loyalty

Interestingly, most of the young men reported how the group of people they had socialized with since childhood had, at a certain point, turned into being a gang, or more accurately, how the police and the media at one point started to categorize them as a gang. The notion of immigrant gangs is relatively new in Danish public discourse (Bengtsson 2012). Consequently, when our respondents were children no gangs existed in their neighbourhood, only groups of young people who hung out together. This is how Ashraf recalls getting involved in the gang:

The people I've been hanging out with… we've been friends since we were little […] But the
older we got, and we were still hanging out, then the state or the police stated calling us a
gang, but…we were just some friends who grew up together…I wouldn't say that we were a
gang.

In recollections of their early groupings, our participants highlighted the central values of growing up together, sharing the same experiences of mutual support and friendship. These values also form the core in their narratives about their later gang involvement and in the subsequent street capital.

In studies of street cultures, researchers have argued that violence, a non-fearful attitude, and 'hyper masculinities' are central ways of gaining respect (Honkatukia & Suurpää, 2014; Hunt et al., 2005). Likewise, our respondents talked about episodes of violence where they were able to counter rivals' insults, stand up for themselves, and maintain their personal honour and respect. In such stories, they always presented themselves as tougher than their counterparts and emphasised how they

would never walk away from a confrontation. We see this presentation in the following quote from Mehdi:

> *Then they [rival pushers] send some guys over to me, who might have been 2-3 years younger than me…and they say: 'You can't sell [drugs], either you buy from us, or you have to pay a percentage'. Then I laugh and say: 'No way! You're little punks with no hair on your balls. If you want to try something, just come on'. And I know that they don't dare… Bring on the big guys and let them tell me, right?*

Developing street capital can be seen as part of the young men's collective response to their feelings of marginalisation and otherness. As such, this cultural capital may hold a potential for resistance (Johansson & Lalander, 2012) because it represents a collective set of values within which the young people feel mastery and acceptance. By being violent, "up front," aggressive, and not walking away from trouble, our participants gained status and 'respect' and a sense of belonging to a larger community.

The very idea of community and brotherhood also occupied a central place in the young men's narratives of gang involvement. Although they described their gang involvement as being stressful and dangerous, they also emphasized its ideals, which they still find important today. These ideals were characterized by the group being more important than the individual, and the idea that brotherhood represented a substitute family. For our participants, loyalty and togetherness were central virtues, and within their narratives, it is clear how the gang, and especially the idea of the gang, offered an alternative source of identity. In this quote, Hamid tells how such belonging is generated:

> *Well, this is love, man. Behind the [prison] walls, we're together, we eat together, we sleep together. On the outside we eat together, we sleep together, we make money together. Everything. When you've done this for eight, nine years […] then you've got a very strong friendship…You've been tried on cases together and he has not said a word against you. Do you see what I mean?*

The ideal of the collective as more important than the individual is also clearly expressed in this following quote by Ümit who describes his commitment to the gang:

> *Int: Were you important [in the gang]?*

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> *Ümit: I meant a lot to them I would say. I sacrificed myself a lot for the gang, you know.*
>
> *Int: Was it because you were willing to do a lot of things?*
>
> *Ümit: Yes, sacrificing myself, you know.*

The moral value of brotherhood informed our participants' narratives of their present life even though today they strived to disconnect themselves from the gang and street life. This is, for instance, clear for Mesut, who now works at NS as a mentor. Mesut describes below how, when faced with the dilemma of being requested by NS to provide information about the activities of his gang-involved friends, he would always side with his (former) so-called brothers:

> *I would never rat on anyone. Never! People from the streets know who I am. I would never speak badly of others […] I'm not like some cop. Or they [the non-gang employees at NS] are not some cops that I have to tell. They know damn well that they're dealing with criminals, so what the fuck did you expect?*

However, it also appears that when the young people try to embark on a new life, their old collectivist narratives about street values, the gang as a moral community and the importance of brotherhood no longer are sufficient. In fact, part of their previous narratives have to be abandoned and new ones developed. These new narratives are much more individualistic in nature.

Individualist narratives

Moving on

Given the central aim of this paper to show how our participants narrate their desistance experiences, we will start this section by outlining some of their motivations for quitting the gang, giving up criminal activities and drug use, and 'moving on' as some of them describe it.

A key motivating factor for 'moving on' relates to being tired of constantly having to live in fear of being attacked or even shot by rival gangs. This fear was present even for those, who were only peripherally connected to a gang. In the areas where the young people live, a relatively violent gang rivalry had been taking place for many years with significant casualties. Our participants also expressed being tired of constant surveillance by the police, being on their 'gang list'[2] and knowing that sooner or later they would end up in prison (again) if they continued to be involved in criminal activities. Some described how they had a debt to the authorities, which they wanted to get rid of,

and most wanted to get a proper job and start earning a legitimate income. Some participants also had debts to drug pushers or other gang members and such debts were felt to be more acutely problematic than even their debt to the authorities. Our participants also told us that a prime motivation for wanting to 'move on' was to restore trust and a (good) relationship with their families and local neighbours. Some were anxious that their chances of being married were unlikely as most families would be unwilling to permit their daughters to marry a person living a criminal life. Consequently, many of our participants sought to improve their public standing. This is how Nabil expresses it:

> *I think that I've made some mistakes. I think there's been a lot of wasted time, you know? You just run around in these groupings and make others fear you. Give other people a bad impression […] I had a lot of problems...stress over doing time and stuff. In the long run I just had it.*

The dominant theme in many of these young men's' narratives about their future was the desire to live a 'normal life'. A 'normal life' worked as a metaphor, which represented both a break from their past, their activities and values, and a belief in a future free of major problems and concerns. The core elements of a 'normal life' could be described as rather mundane, and in no way out of the ordinary. In this way, 'a normal life' stood out as a contrast to their past lifestyle. Furthermore, the 'normal life' metaphor did not include elements of overt resistance, protest (masculinity) or subcultural symbolism. Instead, it reflected mainstream values including being married, having children and raising a family, getting an honest job and having one's own house or apartment. This 'modest' dream was expressed by Ümit in the following way:

> *Well, all I want is to live a decent life. A job, which I like getting up to in the morning… I haven't made my mind up about what it will be, but a job where I can take care of me and my family.*

Considering the young men's motivation for 'moving on' and their visions of their future life, we will now examine the central values and norms expressed in their transitional narratives. Two themes appear central: *self-responsibility* and *religion*. However, in contrast to their narratives about the gang and their former life, these narratives are more individualistic and the element of resistance more subtle.

Self-responsibility

The young men's transformative narratives about how to 'make it', 'get on in life' and 'get out of the gang' rested primarily on individualistic values and were seen as individual journeys. Instead of drawing on a collective set of values attached to the street culture, they attempt to re-construct their lives in light of contemporary neo-liberal individualist values centering on self-responsibility, personal development and self-government. Instead of street capital, they tried to acquire mainstream (and religious) capital. Values such as an individual's willpower and autonomy correspond, in some ways, to street values (see also: Bengtsson, 2012; Honkatukia & Suurpää, 2014). However, there are also important differences in terms of self-governance. Ideally, the strong individual in the street and the gang is always there for his friends, whereas the strong individual in the neo-liberal society mainly pursues his own happiness and is held solely responsible for his own well-being and actions (see e.g.: Trimbur, 2011).

When talking with the young men about how to move on in their lives, end their drug (mainly cannabis) use, get a job, and acquire 'a normal life', they all highlighted that this would to a large extent be their own responsibility. Individual will-power and determination were the key attributes which would determine their potential accomplishment. We see this in the following quote where Abdul starts by talking about stopping using drugs but then broadens out the discussion to include a general orientation in life:

> *Just like you were able to start, you're also able to stop. It just takes being a man. It means that you really have to fight for it. And people who say that they can't, those are the ones who are a bit weak, who have to build up inner strength. Maybe I can't become an engineer or something like that… Then I can become something else, you know. I tell myself 'You can do it!' You can do it!'*

In a similar way, Raatib and Ümit discuss what it takes to get a job, which for the young men constitutes a gateway to living 'a normal life':

> *Raatib: Some people say it's hard, but it depends on your will power… For example, there are people who send off 400 applications and who don't find a job. And then there are some people who know someone who works somewhere and then they get in that way. So you can't really say… If you're willing then…*
> *I: Why do you think some succeed and others don't?*
> *Ümit: More willpower.*

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> *Raatib: First off, it's basically all up to you.*

As part of rebuilding a normal life, our participants strongly valued the identity potentials inherent in traditional working class labour. However, for many of the young men, their dream was to start their own enterprise. Some described how they would most likely begin by being employed, but that, ultimately, their goal was to run their own business. Thus, the narrative figure epitomized in their descriptions is the self-responsible entrepreneur, who only has himself to answer to. This is clear in this quote in which Mesut was asked how he would like his life to look like in five years' time:

> *Then I'll become self-employed […] I am working on it, right? I'm a floor fitter. And there's a lot of money in it. And yeah, just to have my own business and then just run it. And then I know that I won't have time for all the other stuff [his former gang related life], because it's work from morning till night, right?*

Buying into a neo-liberal ideology of self-responsibility and entrepreneurship naturally meant that any failures in overcoming their disadvantaged position automatically fell back on the young men, who had not 'tried hard enough' or were not 'determined enough'(see also: Deuchar et al. 2015). Such thinking is, for instance, clear in Mirsad's rationalization of why he has acquired a steady job:

> *Those who don't have one are not fighting for it. If you really want a job then you get one…Those people who tell you that they can't get a job, they're not fighting hard enough.*

One could imagine that the young men's (past) gang-related activity and their criminal records would be an impediment for success on the labour marked. However, according to several of our research participants – and in line with their individualistic narratives – this is not necessarily the case as such past experiences, according to the young men, have only made them strong and determined. The following commentary by Siad and Abdul illustrate this belief:

> *Siad: The way I see it – well, I've been around myself, but it makes you stronger. You can get people like us to do anything. We'll get by…We're not weak victims…because we've got street smarts. What we learned along the way can be used in the real life.*
> *Abdul: Also the fact that many who've been criminals, they've got that independence or are those leader types, you know? Compared to those who've only been sitting around reading*

papers and had higher education and all that. They end up being weak compared to the criminals, you know?

In sum, we see how the young men buy into highly individualist explanations and strategies, at the expense of references to structural constraints. Also these young people, who are in a transition phase, describe themselves as 'lone riders' riding away from their gang past into a future, where they think they will succeed individually because of their own will-power and resolve.

Islam

Anthropological studies of Islam show that everyday religious life and religious practices are almost always embedded in, and interpreted through, actual social life. In other words, the tenets of Islam tend to take form and meaning depending on the context in which Islam is practiced (Marsden & Retsikas, 2013; see also Bucerius, 2014 for an example of how Islam is adjusted to fit the everyday life of drug sellers). What is special about our participants' narratives is that their references to Islam reflect, to a large extent, a highly individualistic relationship. While Islam may have been adopted by our participants because it represents a moral collective, which in some ways could supplant the collective idiom of the gang, it also appeared that this "new" moral compass was primarily a matter of the individual's highly personal relationship with God.

Most of our participants reported that their parents are believers and that Islam played a role in their upbringing. However, for most, Islam did not play a significant role in their lives on the street or in the gang. Only now, when they try to redirect their lives, has religion become a moral point of reference (see also: Calverley, 2013). Our participants feel that in this new phase of their lives, they have to account for their previous acts as individuals vis-a-vis God. In fact, a few participants expressed real fear of having to confront all the "bad and immoral" acts they had committed. Moreover, although Islam represents a larger moral code for them to turn to, in general they describe this relationship as being essentially individualistic. Because they have done wrong things for which they feel solely responsible, they themselves have the sole responsibility to redirect their lives, and face God individually. In this quote Ahmed, who only recently had turned to God as part of his attempt to redirect his life, tells about his religious considerations:

Ahmed: I was scared shitless. I thought I'd end up in hell. So ever since I've started praying all the damn time. Hey, I've been messing things up all along. I haven't been keeping the

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commandments that you have to if you're a Muslim. I've screwed things up for [my] parents who are really important. I've sold drugs, I've, you know, hurt other.

I: How about now, do you pray, for example?

Ahmed: Yes, when I'm alone. You get pressured by your mother at home; 'Remember to pray'. But I do it on my own. What happens is that I become relaxed.

As we can see, for Ahmed Islam can give comfort, but religious practice is for him an individual matter. This was also the case for many of our other informants. Though a few attended Mosque, most did not, and no one talked about being attached to any local religious community.

The somewhat individualistic approach to religion is also clear in the narratives of those participants who have yet to practice Islam, but who nevertheless spoke of their preparing to do so. In their views, they have to change their ways of living before it makes sense for them to conduct actual religious acts and call themselves real believers.

Tariq: I won't say that I've lived in line with Islam....Of course I haven't prayed the five times a day that you're supposed to and fasted during Ramadan and things like that, right? I've made a lot mistakes in my life, but deep in my heart I'm a Muslim.

I: Do you go to the mosque?

Tariq: No, I don't, but of course it's a future goal...Like breaking your bad habits, changing your lifestyle before you get 100 percent involved...You can't just go to the mosque and then hit town Saturday night, right. If you're under the influence of hash, then you can't pray. So, it means you have to change your lifestyle. And then you get into it, and you get into it with all your heart.

So, in Tariq's mind, he has to change himself before he can turn to any Islamic religious community. Other participants, however, were more pragmatic and felt that observing religious practices, despite not living a decent and religiously honourable life, was possible and provided a kind of "safe bet." One could call this a personal pragmatic version of Islam constructed to fit the individual's lifestyle. This is the case for Nabil:

Nabil: Of course I'm in for my religion. But ehm it's not like 100% ; when I'm doing criminality.

I: Can you be involved in criminality and still say religion is important?

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Nabil: Yes, you can. You know, I don't pray and things like that, but the things I can follow in Islam I do. For instance, I pray Friday's prayer; well I don't pray every time, but in some periods it can happen.

For other participants, turning to Islam was more complicated and in fact, some felt that they were novices and did not know even how to actually practice their faith (see also Bucerius, 2014). They did not know how to pray, and how many times they had to rise and kneel in the Mosque. Although, as one of our participants remarked, he could of course look it up on YouTube.

To conclude, Islam played an important role in our participants' transitional narratives. They stressed that they could turn to God for contemplation and direction. At the same time, 'moving on', even with the help of Islam, was described by them as being their own responsibility and it largely depended on their own individual will-power and determinedness. Nooh clearly sums up this blend of God and self-responsibility in the following quote:

There are some who drink excessively, but pray their five prayers, and people tell them that you are not allowed. Then they say: 'Well, listen it's between me and God. If I get punished [for drinking], then I get punished, but at least I pray. I might be intoxicated or on one thing or the other, but I'm not proud of it'. I think it like depends on God and one's own will.

Discussion

We have analysed the narratives of a group of young ethnic minority men (n=23) from the Copenhagen area, who are in a transition phase of their lives: attempting to exit their involvement in gang life, criminality and drug activities and start a 'normal life'. The young men were enrolled in or attached to the *New Start* (NS) rehabilitating programme. We have shown how their transitional narratives represented a drifting from collective to individualist values. Their collectivist narratives focused on solidarity and responsibility towards the group, and adherence to the codes of the street. Their individualist narratives centred on self-responsibility and individual will-power, personal development and change (maturing), and a personal pragmatic relationship to God. Their prior collectivist narratives were aligned to street subcultures similar to the ones used by other marginalised young people resisting marginalization and attaining alternative forms of cultural

capital (Lalander, 2009; Sandberg & Pedersen, 2011). The individualist narratives, we argue, are embedded in contemporary neo-liberal ideologies which emphasize that the individual is accountable and responsible for his own actions and his own success and failure. In this perspective, the society (structural inequalities) is not to blame, as achievement solely rests on individual entrepreneurship and determinism (Trimbur, 2011). Such individualist discourse is found in many present-day Scandinavian welfare institutions, in which clients are encouraged to become self-empowered individuals responsible for overcoming their problems (Bjerge and Nielsen, 2012; Villadsen, 2008). NS is an example of an institution with such individualist ideological underpinnings. At NS, the young men were strongly inspired to take charge of their own lives, through the institutional use of meta-narratives communicating values of individual willpower and self-responsibility. More specifically, NS used symbolism, drawn from the world of boxing to encourage the young men to think of themselves as men, who in the face of potential social failure are able to muster personal will-power to make a successful 'comeback to life.' The individualistic narratives of our participants therefore draw on both broader societal discourses of individualism as well as the specific ideology of NS (see also: Søgaard et al., 2016).

However, we also wish to stress that owing to the focus of this paper in identifying and separating out the collectivistic elements in the young men's narratives about the gang from the individualistic elements in their transformative narratives, in reality, these narratives are naturally not nearly as clear-cut as we might have implied. Instead, the young men's narratives 'drift' between these two modes of representation (see also: Hopkins, 2006). In our analysis, we have commented on this complexity by alluding, for instance, to the individualistic elements that also exist in hyper-masculine street culture narratives. In the last part of the discussion, we will focus on this complexity and the challenges that drifting between narratives may involve. These challenges may in turn hinder the young men's desistance processes.

First, the young men's transitional narratives rested on a break from their former criminal activities and gang life with its accompanying collectivist values. Not only was this, at times, experienced as difficult and challenging as they were attempting to move into a new, and for many of them, an unknown moral terrain, but they also experienced a sense of disloyalty in attempting to pursue this path. This was apparent, for instance, in Mesut's account above where his motives for helping another young man to stay drug-free could be seen as based partly on an individualistic narrative of personal development but also on a collective code of loyalty and brotherhood.[3]

Second, the young men's narrative shift also represented a shift in the cultural capital they aspired to and needed in order to succeed. Although the young men 'just' wanted a normal life in order to exist without problems in mainstream settings, they nevertheless needed not only economic, but also cultural capital (Bourdieu 1996). Unfortunately, it is our view that the young men, in general, do not possess such qualifications. In other words, a discrepancy existed between their aims and the structural problems they had to face. For instance, most lacked a vocational education and their existing cultural capital rested primarily on the collectivist values of street life and the gang. They possessed 'street capital' but not 'mainstream capital'. One possible shortcoming, in terms of cultural capital, can be seen, for instance, in the quote from Abdul, where he finds that his former criminal involvement has given him qualifications superior to mainstream law-abiding people who are only used to 'reading papers'. While he envisages such qualifications as being central for his future desistance process, it could also as easily be the case that these qualifications will disqualify him from succeeding in mainstream settings. In this way, our participants' struggle to define and acquire prestigious cultural capital in a situation which resembles the predicament of other marginalised individuals trying to advance, achieve success, and 'make it' (Bourgois 2003).

Third, in the young men's narrative attempts to move on, their individualist narratives of desistance clearly dictate that if they are not going to succeed in living 'a normal life', they will only have themselves to blame. Thus, success and failure become an individual matter related to individual entrepreneurialism, self-responsibility, and meritocracy, and not a result of structural inequality (Harvey, 2005).

In general, we have depicted a relatively bleak picture of the young men's gradual drifting from collective to individualistic narratives. However, it is also possible to view our participants not only as victims of an overarching individualist discourse, but as active agents capable of reinterpreting or re-articulating such presumably all-encompassing discourses (Hall, 1986). They do not do this in a critique of, or resistance to, unequal power relations, but by countering the stigmatizing categories of Danish society, which tend to portray marginalized ethnic minority men primarily by their deficiencies (their lack of legal employment and their absence of loyalty towards dominant Danish cultural values) and criminal behaviour (crime, gang and drug involvement) and generally suggest that young immigrant men will never succeed in society. That is, the young men's appropriation of an individualist discourse is a way for them to narratively overcome their presumed destiny and negative societal expectations (see also Trimbur, 2011). It is a way for them to present themselves

not as victims but as resourceful young men with an equal right to take their place in Danish society. In this way, the article contributes to existing research on marginalized ethnic minority men and street cultures by exploring not only how they drift between different narratively constructed positions (Sandberg 2009), but, more importantly, by suggesting that appropriations or 're-articulations' (Hall 1986) of dominant neo-liberal ideology can be used to construct a sense of personal agency, crucial to marginalized men's desistance processes. Our study in this way adds to existing research on the importance of individual agency in desistance processes (Maruna, 2001), by pointing to the constructive interplay between societal meta-discourses and subjective notions of agency. We cannot know, at this stage, whether these young men will have success in their narrative accounts. However, it can be noted that such 'politics of storytelling' (Jackson, 2002) in which agency is recaptured in situations of disempowering environments can, if nothing else, provide the narrator with a sense of agency and power.

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[1] We would like to note, that we understand ethnic identity as a social accomplishment continually constructed in interaction (Brubaker, 2002). Hence, ethnic groups are not passive recipients of acquired cultures, but active agents who negotiate their lives within given structural conditions (Song, 2003). Ethnic identity, it follows, cannot simply be claimed by an individual, but has to be recognised and validated by an audience (Jenkins, 2008). Such understanding of ethnic identity is used to denote our informants' minority position as non-Danes originating from non-Western countries

and the subsequent marginalization and social exclusion which often follows. Consequently, their ethnic minority identity is a structural position from which their actions stem and acquire meaning.

[2] This involves that the police routinely distribute information to municipal authorities making it more difficult for individuals to receive social services, to tax-agencies, and to local venue owners who are then expected to exclude 'gang-related' individuals from venues.

[3] One could suggest that for some of the young men, heavy use of drugs, especially cannabis, could impede their desistance from a criminal career. However, according to our young participants, smoking cannabis enabled them to keep calm and to reflect upon the consequences of their activities, rather than being controlled by instant impulses. While it may be the case that the young men's use of cannabis led them to become less involved in impulse-driven forms of crime, such as violent street fighting, it might also be the case that such drug use led them to become passive when it came to gaining foothold on the mainstream labour market, often highlighted as crucial in young men's later desistance phase.