

## Summary

### Aim and research questions

Through a constructionist and narrative analysis this dissertation examines local actors' understandings of gangs and crime among adolescents in socioeconomically disadvantaged suburban areas. This is an important social issue that needs to be addressed in several ways. The issue affects the inhabitants in the areas personally in their everyday life and professionals face problems connected to it on a daily basis through their work. It is also an engaging question often focused in media. In all these contexts stories are told from particular perspectives, often each claiming to represent the 'truth'. While none of these truth claims is rejected in this thesis, I show that the story of the youth gangs cannot be represented by any one interpretation alone.

The purpose of the thesis is to investigate different interpretations of the situation and to study the ways in which these are used, communicated and negotiated in a local context. My choice to focus on *understandings* stems from a conviction that it is primarily the interpretation of a phenomenon, what is attributed as important, that determines how people think and act in relation to it. The typification of an issue, i.e., considering it to be 'of a particular kind', has significance for how 'the situation' is reported, as well as for defining or implying its causes and designing measures against it. The underlying understanding has power to construct reality. In addition, discursive comprehensions of youth gangs and juvenile delinquency include power dimensions. Local actors with different interpretative repertoires (patterns of understanding) are competing with each other in order to make their personal version appear as the most credible one. Therefore, I also analyse how different interpretative repertoires relate to one another, and how they struggle for discursive power through interpretive precedence.

Through narrative analysis of local stories of gangs and problems in the neighbourhoods I look for different interpretative repertoires that answer questions such as: what is described as 'problematic', what is said to characterize the 'problem', why does it occur, how is it maintained and by whom and how should it be countered or resolved? I also investigate the social rules and norms mentioned in the context and descriptions about violation of these rules. In order to convey their thoughts in the interview situation, the research participants organize their stories in different ways. They use various rhetorical tools, make linkages to metanarratives and allocate roles and positions.

From a constructionist perspective juvenile delinquency cannot be considered as something objective and unchanging. Therefore my analysis is based on an understanding resembling a *post-modern criminological perspective* (Einstadter & Henry, 1995/2006). From this point of view both law and criminality are viewed as discursive

sive, relational and context-bound phenomena that can only be understood through repertoires of interpretation.

### **Empirical material and analytical tools**

The research participants were people who live or work in these areas – young and adult residents as well as professional groups such as police officers, social workers and staff from youth centres and schools. A total of 99 people were interviewed (35 individual interviews and 20 group interviews). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim in their entirety. The material also includes fieldnotes from 11 observations in the same residential areas, written down immediately after the field visits.

In the thesis, this narrative dimension is analyzed as the narrators' discursive and contextual framing in order to adduce a certain understanding and to establish credibility for their own interpretations and problem definitions. I study the research participants' stories as keys or clues to how they tie their understanding of youth gangs and juvenile delinquency together in coherent patterns (Potter & Wetherell, 1987/2007; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). The selection of a narrative method as main analytic tool is based on my focus on the *stories* and the *telling* about youth gangs and criminality. This method can be conducted in many ways and with several inputs. My choices can be summarized as: 1) *the story as text* (content and narrative structure), 2) *the narrative functions* (what the narrators want and do with his or her story) and 3) *the telling* (the performance of the story and the context of this occasion). Important concepts here are for example *interpretative repertoire* (coherent understanding patterns that I look for in the data), *reproduction* (re-creation of social structures through social action) and *subject positions* (positions individuals can take or be allocated within a given social structure).

The research material comprises of interviews and observations in four neighbourhoods, which had been depicted as especially challenged by gang crime, in Gothenburg, Sweden. In these areas, there had also been a number of hostile confrontations between local youth and legal authorities. The data were originally gathered for an evaluation of a municipal program called *Ung & Trygg [Young & Safe]* (Forkby & Liljeholm Hansson, 2011) during 2008–2009.

### **Theoretical framework**

A central theme in the thesis is to examine how the research participants use different interpretative repertoires to make their stories comprehensible, and to construct themselves and their world. A fundamental feature of all such interpretative work is the understanding of similarities and differences among humans and the balance of power between them. To illuminate this difference-making theoretically, I use the concept of *social exclusion*. Other important analytical terms are *relative*

*deprivation*, that is, how people in a community compare themselves with one another and become aware of injustice and inequality (Young, 1999/2007) and *moral differentiation* (Elias & Scotson, 1965/2004), which concerns the definition process by which certain groups describe themselves as morally superior to others.

During the analysis the issue of gender construction became increasingly important. In chapter 7, I focus on stories in which links to girls and women are made. To illustrate the gendered positions that narratively are assigned to girls, I use Hirdman's (2001/2010) three formulas for constructions of women in a historical context. These are: the *basic formula*: **A – not A**, where women are constructed as 'not men', the *comparison formula*: **A – a**, where women are constructed as an incomplete and smaller version of men, and the *normative formula* **A – B** where the sexes are constructed as fundamentally different.

The construction of masculinity is a recurring theme for analysis throughout the thesis, and in this context the concepts of *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell, 1995/2008), male *homosociality* (Kimmel, 1996) and *protest masculinity* (Messerschmidt, 1993) are central.

## Main results

The context for virtually all the participants' stories is one of the four disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The problems mentioned are often associated with groups of young men hanging out in the local square, usually called 'the gang in the square'. Chapter 5 – *Events in the suburban square* – deals with such stories and highlights descriptions of the *atmosphere* in the local square and *activities* associated with the gang in the square, such as socializing with friends, messing around in unruly manners or committing crimes and rioting. Assumptions about *why* young people (especially boys) choose to *meet in this way* is analyzed. In these stories the actors' characters are often described in a rather predictable way. However, based on context and the narrator's perspective, the set of roles may shift.

The participants' stories also comprise or imply hypotheses about how an individual becomes a criminal. In a meta-story that I call *the criminal career*, this is described as a rather linear process that evolves in certain steps and follows a specific escalating pattern. Conversely, in the meta-story of *youthful foolishness and identity formation* disturbing activities, minor crimes and riot behaviour are described as something that happens as a result of 'youthful indiscretion' which most young boys will grow out of, as they get older and become more mature. Hence, the boundaries for normality are in this interpretation considerably extended.

Another meta-narrative concerns the *good and beneficial professional work*. In this a main feature taken for granted is a conception of the own professional group as the holder of the role as *rescuer*, someone who puts things right. The roles of the *victim* and the *perpetrator* are found among residents where the professionals work. In the professionals' stories, events, people, issues and the atmosphere in the area tend to

be related with the own organization's terminology and in line with its 'mandated course of action' (Smith, 1990/1993). Under especially dramatic and spectacular circumstances (as in a riot situation), the professionals can find themselves deprived of their tools to improve the situation. The roles can then temporarily be reversed, so that the professionals become the victims. In such a situation it is common to require that the local residents (who otherwise are understood as victims) participate in the restoration of the original role set, for example by testifying against the perpetrators. If they do not comply, they risk being categorized as *accomplices*. This label can also be applied to other professional groups, if they are perceived as not fulfilling their part of the assignment.

Sometimes the boys in the gang hanging out in the square are the same individuals as in the stories about the 'criminal gang'. At other times this connection is looser. In the interviews many participants tell about rules of conduct, which gang members (the Gang Code), and sometimes also residents in general (the Street Code), are forced to follow. Chapter 6, *Codes of conduct*, addresses this. Following Wieder (2001) these codes are studied from two perspectives – first in terms of their *content and impact on life in the gang and the neighbourhood*. For some residents the codes constitute resources that can generate social capital, while others experience them more as a constraint. For example, many research participants talk about a great respect for the power exercised by the codes, and that they are prepared to follow the prescribed rules out of fear or loyalty. Secondly, the codes are studied with a focus on the *functions and consequences of the 'telling of the codes'*. This perspective reveals a somewhat different picture. It is often possible to understand the 'telling of the codes' as a way for the male narrators (these stories are predominantly told by boys and men) to present themselves as brave, loyal and well-informed 'insiders' and by that to produce masculinity. The codes can also be used as accounts to excuse or justify behaviour, or as a means to gain appreciation and respect. The professionals' 'telling of the code' functions often as accounts, too, for example as a way to ease guilt feelings for not being able to fulfill their professional mission to resolve the problems. By describing the code as an undefeatable external force, it becomes possible, despite failures, to term their own work as meritorious. In such cases, the 'telling of the code' can be understood as a way to repair one's self-image. The telling of the Gang Code and the Street Code often contains frightening stories about how people who have violated these rules have been punished brutally and without mercy. The coda of these stories is a clear message about how to act in order to avoid danger. In these contexts the codes and the expected retribution after a violation are almost always expressed as a *causal inevitability*, as something law-bound and impossible to avoid. The 'telling of the codes' is widely spread and used in all the participating groups – by individuals who have themselves been involved in gangs, by residents in general and by professionals. Events are in this way given a moral framing with explicit behaviour directions. The sanctions linked to

the conduct codes not only operate punitively, but also have a general deterrent effect and, hence, a strong disciplining function. In this way the retelling of the terrible things that happens to people who dare to violate the codes, plays a crucial role in the reproduction of existing relations of power in these areas.

In chapter 7, *Stories about Girls and Youth*, an actor category frequently mentioned in passing, but less visible in the core of the narratives' plots, is lifted, namely, the teenage girls in the neighbourhoods. In the participants' stories these girls are often assigned rather inconspicuous and stereotypical roles. This is particularly true when others talk about them, but to some extent also when girls talk about themselves. The chapter addresses how the girls are portrayed in these stories and how they are positioned in relation to the boys in the area as girlfriends, cheerleaders, nurturing mothers, saving angels, sisters and so on. However, depending on context and who is telling whom, the story's purpose and overarching interpretative repertoire, can have a great effect on the understanding of these positions. A characteristic feature of the girl positions is that they almost always are included in an SRP-ratio (Standard Relational Pair) coupled to a boy position (see Sacks, 1972; Silverman, 1998). For instance, the 'president wife' is strongly connected to 'the president', 'the flashy girlfriend' and 'the nurturing mother' to 'the criminal boyfriend' and 'pure sister' to the 'protective/controlling brother'. This way of defining a gendered position based on its relationship with another gendered position, is much more common concerning girls than boys. Generally, the boys are given more independent and nuanced positions, primarily defined in relation to other boys. It is also common to categorize girls, especially among boys, in binary categories where one is seen as better and more sophisticated, while the other is deemed as inferior. One way to understand these differences in the narrative positioning of girls and boys, respectively, is to consider the stories as meta-narratives of gender and gender construction. I identify three types of meta-narrative linked to power and gender. In the first one, *staging power*, girls appear in the narratives as peripheral, minor characters or as a part of the scenery (such as 'hangarounds', 'tail', 'cheerleaders') in relation to the boys, who play the main characters. In the second type, *normality power*, the boys' supposedly normal behaviour is used as a reference to evaluate the girls' behaviour. In the third kind, *definition power*, girls and boys are assumed to be fundamentally different. Based on this understanding it is possible to maintain and defend gender-specific norms and rules of conduct. While boys' behaviour is largely governed by homosocial ideals, linked to the prevailing hegemonic masculinity, the stories about the girls are characterized by conceptions of the 'good woman' or 'the madonna'. To construct this character it is often placed in relation to the image of 'the deviant woman' or 'the whore'. The dual image of women and girls in the meta-narrative of definition power is sometimes challenged by a counter-narrative, where equality between the sexes is perceived as the ideal state.

The third part of the thesis, *chapters 8–9*, deals with the research participants' *explanations* of gangs and crime – what they perceive as important underlying causes, motives and drivers. The presumed causality is seldom explicitly expressed. More often it is implied through a certain problem definition or account embedded in the narrative context. The analysis shows that the participants' explanatory models can be understood as mainly based on three overarching interpretative repertoires – *the normality-oriented*, *the justice-oriented* and *the goal-oriented*. The first one is based on a notion that youth crime can be explained by background factors, which are manifested as normality deviations. Thus, the perspective is based on beliefs that certain behaviours can be classified as 'normal' and that others can be categorized as 'non-normal' or deviant. 'Normality' in this case is almost always defined by the narrator's own moral stance or the prevailing norms within his or her own group or organization. This interpretative repertoire is also built around a number of meta-narratives that operate at different levels. At the individual and family levels the predominant meta-narratives concerns deficits in either personal development (especially immaturity), or parents' ability to nurture, set boundaries and transfer generally accepted moral values on to their children (especially sons). At the group level, the meta-story of peer pressure prevails. In another meta-narrative within this repertoire, the difficulties are categorized as a 'neighbourhood problem'. Admittedly, 'the gang in the square' is pointed out as perpetrators also in this story, but it is not in the same way emphasized that the problems stem from them as individuals or as a group. Rather, the areas lack of social organisation and structure is seen as the reason why criminal gangs are formed.

The underlying assumptions in this normality oriented interpretative repertoire perspective have a close resemblance with some classical criminological theories, especially psychological theories of personality development and socialization, but also with control theory, social learning theory and social ecological theories of disorganisation in the local community. Through placing the problems in the individual or in the immediate environment, this interpretative repertoire also shares certain assumptions with the so-called 'weak versions of exclusion' or neoliberal explanations of exclusion (see Martin, 2004; Sahlin, 2000; Sen, 2000; Veit-Wilson, 1998; Young, 1999/2007).

Within the *justice-oriented interpretative repertoire* youth crime is regarded as the socially excluded groups' external response to unfair and unequal living conditions in the community. Just as in the normality oriented interpretative repertoire, juvenile delinquency is understood as a result of negative background factors. In the empirical material this approach is given voice primarily by adults and young people living in the areas in question, but also by representatives of youth centres and social services. This interpretative repertoire is based on some strong meta-narratives with specific assumptions. But rather than several easily distinguishable meta-stories, as in the normality oriented perspective, it is more of a large meta-

narrative about *the unjust and exclusive society*, which contains smaller meta-stories about *negative designation and stigmatisation of certain groups*. Closely linked to these are also some counter-narratives, which focus on those who exclude and stigmatize, claiming that these groups *base their arguments on false grounds*. Criminality is understood as a response from those who are exposed to these injustices, and together with the suburban population in general, these groups are the story's *victims*. More than as a problem in itself, juvenile delinquency is in this interpretative repertoire regarded as symptoms of deficiencies of the society, which lead to social exclusion of disadvantaged groups and to unequal distribution of power and resources. Theoretically, these explanations are closely linked to conflict theory and labelling theory in criminology. By locating the problems mainly with social structures on a societal level, they also resemble so-called 'strong versions of social exclusion' (Martin, 2004; Sen, 2000; Veit-Wilson, 1998) or what Young (1999/2007) terms 'the traditional social democratic explanatory model'.

Narratives that relate to the *goal-oriented interpretative repertoire* focus on the enticements, incentives and motives of criminality and on the profits that such behaviour is said to bring, as for example, better economy, popularity, status, thrill, amusement and opportunities to emotional debauchery. The perspective is expressed mainly by individuals who have themselves been involved in crime. In the interviews they give accounts to make their criminal conduct understandable. The problems of disadvantaged neighbourhoods are in this interpretation defined in a similar way as in the justice-oriented one – some groups have significantly more resources than others, which is perceived as unfair. However, this inequality and injustice that are so central in the justice-oriented interpretative repertoire, constitutes in this context more a background description. The decisive factor is rather how an individual, despite belonging to a group with few resources, can achieve the same goals of success as can more economically and socially affluent groups. When criminal actions in this way are understood as available means to reach desirable ends, the interview participants speak from a meta-narrative about *letting the ends justify the means*. Such reasoning has similarities with the theory on anomie or strain (Merton, 1938). In addition, the narratives studied in chapter 9 provide an understanding of criminality reminiscent of Young's (1999/2007) and Nightingale's (1993) discussion of *relative deprivation* and *structural inclusion and cultural integration*. They argue that criminality among young people in the western world cannot be explained only as a simple consequence of structural exclusion, but that cultural inclusion also plays a crucial role. Criminality, formations of gangs and criminal subcultures are from this point of view seen as reactions to a combination of cultural over-identification and societal rejection. Based on Young's and Nightingale's reasoning it is possible to understand the justice-oriented and the goal-centered interpretative repertoires as two sides of the same coin. The degrading and problematic feeling of relative deprivation, is by some young men compensated through con-

structuring protest masculinity. This often includes an essentialised image of themselves as tough, hard and thoroughly masculine individuals.

In the final chapter of the thesis, chapter 10, I approach the three interpretative repertoires as narrative constructions. Furthermore, I sum up my view on how these are constructed and given meaning by various discursive markers. I also describe my current understanding of how narratives about experiences can function as arguments for a particular interpretation, how stories can be used to convey different claims and how discursive markers in personal stories can provide clues to more complex assumptions.

To be able to express an idea about the world through a story, it is necessary to study the environment and to evaluate received information through the personal Membership Resources (MR, see Fairclough, 1989/2001). In this case the main theme is problematic situations in a neighbourhood or conceptions of youth gangs and crime. The research participants' definition of these problems can be seen as a clue to their ideas about the *rules of the game*, which is closely connected to their conception of *what kind of game* is at hand. Do they see it as an intervention against crime, a measure to maintain law and order, a battle for respect and power, a struggle for justice, equality and dignity or as a contest to prove oneself as the most cunning, awesome, masculine, rich or popular man in the neighbourhood? Through these conceptions it is also possible to find out what the participant claims *is at stake* here, what might happen in the future if the opposing side is allowed to 'win the game'. That is, is it a loss of democracy, a widespread lawlessness, a reduced sense of security, an increased injustice and inequality or an extended risk to be labelled as unmasculine? These future-oriented notions can also include a vision of a future ideal state, which in contrast to the current problematic situation, is seen as worth fighting for. To send these messages about the *conception of the game*, the teller can use a wide variety of narrative tools and techniques, for example contrast descriptions, extreme case formulations and accounts, or link the personal story to a meta-narrative. If there is a good match between the various parts of a story, it is often possible to distinguish certain claims; most common in my research material are: *facts- and causality claims*, *moral claims* and *action claims*. In the thesis, the participants' *positioning* of the actors in their stories has been given special attention. How the main roles are distributed is a clear signal about which interpretative repertoire the narrator adheres to. I have discerned three different *sets of role* that seem crucial to bring about the moral messages of the stories. In the first one, the *triangle drama*, it is possible to distinguish a victim, a perpetrator and a rescuer. These stories also contain a blaming theme, which suggests that the narrator believes there is a guilt that needs to be placed correctly. In the second role set, *insider – outsider*, the narrator differentiates the actors according to how close they are to the centre of a certain community (e.g. a gang or to society). Often a binary division is made, where those who are perceived as insiders are placed on one side of a



border and the outsiders on the other. In the interviews, this division occurs in two versions. The first one distinguishes between the knowledgeable and well-informed insider (often the narrator him- or herself) and the uninformed outsider. The other one is based on different groups' access to power, and is reminiscent of Elias' and Scotson's (1965/2004) figuration 'established and outsiders'. The third role set, *under – over*, is based on hierarchical divisions of superior and subordinate subject positions.

In the final chapter I also return to the question of masculinity construction in the participants' stories. I discuss this in relation to Connell's and Messerschmidt's (2005) reasoning about hegemonic masculinity on three levels – local, regional and global. Most of the stories in this study take place at the local level. *Protest masculinity* is according to Messerschmidt (1993) a way for male groups, who lack resources to do hegemonic masculinity, to create manhood. Much of the movements of the 'gangs in the square' and their self-presentations as frightening, dangerous, moody and out of reach of the law, can be understood as they are doing masculinity. Even though their behaviour often leads to conflicts with other groups in the area, they do succeed to enforce desirable values of hegemonic masculinity at the local level, such as authority, control, independence, aggressiveness and to exhibit a capacity of violence. It is also possible to discern what Messerschmidt and Connell (2005) categorise as hegemonic masculinity at regional level, which they claim has a great impact on masculinity construction at the local level. In the interviews several inter-discursive references to admired masculinities on regional level occurs, retrieved from music artists, movies, TV-series, especially from the gangster/mobster genre. Counter-narratives to these stories are often told by professionals or adults, but also by young people, who in interviews present themselves as someone who have left this kind of childish thinking behind in favour of a more mature way of reasoning. A frequent theme in these narratives is that these boys lack positive male role models and look up to the 'wrong kind of men', which makes them construct a fallacious and immature sort of masculinity. In the analysis, I also discuss a possible interpretation of the research participants' frequent references to the gangster genre in American popular culture. The movie gangster can be understood as someone who shows a way to manhood and respect, even for those who are in a vulnerable and excluded situation. From this point of view this character's behaviour might be perceived as a socially acceptable masculine way to express personal feelings of frustration and disadvantage.

The narration of youth problems is significantly more prevalent in socially disadvantage residential areas than in other types of neighbourhoods. The massive presence of problem-focused stories may threaten to take over the entire understanding of 'what these neighbourhoods really are'. When residential areas tend to become synonymous with certain problems, it also reinforces the notion of crucial differences between established and outsider groups, between affluent and eco-

nomically disadvantaged neighbourhoods and between groups with and without significant power to influence their situation.

Once again I want to emphasize that my argument is not about whether these problems exist or not. On the contrary, the result of the thesis points to the importance of realizing the pervasive force of the interpretative repertoires. Narrated problematic situations and events can be understood as symptoms of different phenomena, and connected to these are a wide variety of ideas about what needs to be done to change the situation for the better. In such a scenario, the focus is not the 'real' causes of the problems or reasons to, but who are, in the discursive struggle for precedence, most successful in asserting their own interpretation as the most evidence-based and realistic version of reality.

The study also highlights the narrative functions of 'stories about the troubled neighbourhood', for example, to construct gender, identity, fellowship, normality, professionalism, ethics, credibility, and to produce facts, reproduce power relations and exercise discursive power. This can all be understood as parts of the answer to why some of these narratives are told again and again, albeit with different interpretative repertoires, but after all with rather small variation.

The dissertation single out the importance of, in situations like this, putting oneself in a reflexive and listening position and of exposing one's personal and taken-for-granted interpretations to scrutiny and criticism from other perspectives.