In nomine Diaboli: The ideologies of organized crime

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Abstract

This article addresses the topic of ideologies underlying organized crime using interviews with individuals living in Mafia-affected territories. High school and university students produced narratives that reflected their ideologies about organized crime, which were duly compared with the ideologies endorsed by Mafia members in televised interviews. This comparison has yielded several similarities, namely the presence of amoralism, familism, verticalism and religious relativism, but, at the same time, substantial differences in the form of anti-reductionism, anti-normalism and anti-victimism (vis-à-vis reductionism, normalism and victimism). The thrust of this study is that ideologies about organized crime are, to a large extent, shared by members of organized crime and outsiders living in Mafia-affected areas.

Introduction

Narrative criminology is a theoretical paradigm that aims to study the types, the textual composition and the mechanics of stories about crime and violence (Poppi and Verde, 2019; Presser, 2016; Presser and Sandberg, 2019; Sandberg et al., 2015). Unlike other approaches that have examined the role of narratives in criminal contexts, narrative criminology pays considerably more attention to the active role of narratives. Narratives give

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insight into the nature of not only crimes but also actions and behaviours (Poppi and Verde, 2019; Presser, 2004, 2009).

Narrative criminology has emphasized that all narratives about crime can have consequences in real life. Because narrative criminology is primarily attentive to people's stories, rather than the events purportedly behind those stories, the accuracy of the stories is not the main concern. Both 'true' and 'imagined' stories have consequences because they affect thought and action (Presser and Sandberg, 2019; Sandberg, 2010). Narrative criminology considers all those dimensions in narratives that can affect harm-doing – causes, reasons and intentions – as well as aspects that give shape to ideologies such as attitudes, values, ideas and practices.

So far, in critical discourse studies and criminology, hardly any attention has been paid to the analysis of narratives about organized crime. For this reason, this contribution perceives organized crime as a criminal phenomenon, but also as a sociocultural phenomenon that can grow and spread because of the ideological construct that defines its functioning. Seen through the lens of narrative criminology, narratives about organized crime can reveal the ideological constructs and, therefore, the criminal actions and thoughts that derive from them. In other words, narratives enable the analysis of the ideologies of organized crime and so advance our understanding of this socially deviant system. The ideologies of organized crime represent a relatively understudied topic (Poppi et al., 2018; Travaglino et al., 2014). As a sociocultural entity, organized crime cannot be confined to the borders that delimit an organization. Various authors have, in fact, described organized crime as a cultural phenomenon (Hess, 1998) that functions as a collective attitude (Hobsbawm, 1971), a cultural construction typified by power and violence (Arlacchi, 1986). It is also important to understand whether ideologies of organized crime can also expand outside the organization and become part of attitudes, values, ideas and practices that even ordinary people can embrace.

Previous contributions to organized crime studies have shown that ideologies can be passed down from one generation to another, from father to son, within criminal families (see Sergi, 2018), something that some scholars have labelled as 'black pedagogy' (Schermi, 2015). However, what remains unexplored is the understanding of the impact that ideologies of organized crime can have on individuals external to criminal families. Because organized crime ideologies can also exist outside criminal families, the question that arises is to what extent ideologies of organized crime can also be shared by ordinary people. Standing at the crossroads between critical discourse studies and narrative criminology, the present contribution seeks to examine the potential similarity between the ideologies of organized crime members and those of ordinary people by analysing the narratives and joint fantasizing of ordinary people, represented by high school and university students, in a region of Italy severely affected by organized crime.

Organized crime and ideologies

A growing number of scholars have been trying to understand the specific elements that define organized crime. In general terms, several authors (for example, Dalla Chiesa, 2010; Sciarrone, 2014) suggest that organized crime represents criminal groups that base their power and activities on alliances that aim at achieving social, economic and

political privileges through the intimidation and exploitation of culture. Because of its interconnection between organizational and societal values, organized crime is never a separate and marginal entity but is always intrinsic to the communities where it develops (Sergi, 2015). Attempting to identify the essential properties that define organized crime, Finckenauer (2005: 65–6) proposes a comprehensive framework that considers seven distinctive elements: (1) ideology, (2) structure/organized hierarchy, 'with leaders or bosses and then followers in some rank order of authority', (3) continuity, because 'the group is self-perpetuating; it continues beyond the life or participation of any particular individual', (4) violence, use of force or the threat of force, (5) membership/bonding, according to several criteria, such as ethnicity, kinship, race and criminal background, (6) illegal enterprises and (7) penetration of legitimate businesses and corruption. The merit of Finckenauer's approach is that it combines cultural aspects (for example, ideology, membership/bonding) with organizational ones (for example, structure/organized hierarchy, continuity). Finckenauer's work (2005) seems to have inspired several studies. For instance, network analysis studies conducted by Varese (2006) and Calderoni and Piccardi (2014) provide evidence about the structure of criminal organizations, showing that the internal vertical composition is combined with horizontal dynamics, in which various subgroups cooperate on equal terms within the same criminal organization (see also Catino, 2014). Subgroups are based on family connections or local community members (Calderoni and Piccardi, 2014; Dickie, 2014). Furthermore, other studies report that organized crime illustrates a high level of resilience, which makes it very difficult to eliminate (Lengnick-Hall and Beck, 2003, 2005). As Ayling (2009) suggests, criminal organizations can quickly adapt their structure and organization to adverse circumstances. This continuity can take place, for instance, when affiliates, or even the bosses, need to be replaced after being arrested or killed.

Although Finckenauer (2005) mentions the role of ideology among the fundamental aspects of organized crime, this has been generally discounted in the literature. The rationale behind this trend is based on two main reasons. Ideology refers to socially contingent values, interpretations and taken for granted knowledge that is necessary for individuals or groups (Balkin, 2002; Dant, 2013). For Althusser (1969: 231), ideology is a representational system 'endowed with a historical existence and role within a given society', but it is also a 'representational, metaphorical and precarious closure that stabilizes meaning within specific contexts' (Laclau, 2006: 103) – aspects that are also essential to recognizing the nature and mechanics of organized crime. Although ideology has been defined in various ways, in this contribution ideology is deemed to be a central element of any cultural system. The direction that is taken aims to understand ideology as a source of social power, 'as the capacity to control and manage the labour and activities of a group to gain access to the benefits of social action' (DeMarrais et al., 1996: 15).

Regarding organized crime, scholars have often found it challenging to use the concept of ideology for at least two reasons. The first reason is the difficulty of gathering data about the ideology of organized crime. From a discourse analytic perspective, ideology emerges from discourse (Purvis and Hunt, 1993; Van Dijk, 2006); the cluster of utterances exchanged in social contexts are imbued with utterers' meanings and intentions and treated as meaningful by other participants. The utterances of members affiliated with criminal organizations can rarely be found (to be duly analysed), and the few

exceptions come from mediated sources such as television interviews (Poppi and Di Piazza, 2017; Poppi et al., 2018) or official acts such as depositions in trials (see Sciarrone, 2006; Vannucci, 2016). The second reason is rooted in the difficulty of translating academic insights into practical measures to combat organized crime, which is a top priority (see Cressey, 1967). Whereas the knowledge of the organizational level can lead to some forms of intervention (network analysis is considered an investigation tool), the ideological dimension is regarded as a less practical aspect in actions against organized crime. The tendency to overlook ideology has several serious consequences and leads to reducing a complex phenomenon to its criminal dimension only, with the risk of underestimating its capacity to penetrate and recreate society in its own image (see Lupo, 2015; Paoli, 2008).

In recent years, the importance of ideology within criminal contexts has become less marginal. For instance, in their attempt to explain the onset of jihadi terrorism, Ilan and Sandberg (2019) show that ordinary criminals have become a global threat owing to an interplay between socioeconomic processes, context and ideology.

Recent contributions in the field of critical discourse studies have indicated that organized crime can be described in terms of ideological constructs. Specifically, Poppi and Di Piazza (2017) and Poppi et al. (2018) provide the first description of the main ideological constructs associated with one of the most known criminal organizations, Cosa Nostra. These investigations, based on critical discourse studies, identify the discursive strategies produced by the sons of two of the major bosses of Cosa Nostra during TV interviews. The analyses report a list of ideological constructs that emerge from the discursive strategies and that seem to represent the attitudes, values, ideas and practices that shape the criminal organization's internal relationships, as well as their relationship with the external world. These notions include reductionism, amoralism, familism, verticalism, normalism, victimism and religious relativism (Poppi and Di Piazza, 2017; Poppi et al., 2018). Specifically, *reductionism* consists in advertising the organization as a smaller entity in order to encounter less harsh legal treatment by legal authorities, and *amoralism* refers to the suspension of moral evaluations when organization members commit crimes. Although amoralism or, more precisely, moral accommodation represents a fundamental characteristic of organized crime, some criminal organizations do not use reductionism, but prefer appositional advertising. *Familism* summarizes the family interests as taking priority over the individual or any other collective interest (for example, society). Mafia members may sometimes refer to other members as 'brothers' and to the organization as the 'brotherhood' – as observed in the Russian Mafia (Mallory, 2007) – converting the de facto affiliated members into a family. As several authors have also pointed out (Ciconte, 2011; Pignatone and Prestipino, 2013), familism underlies people's deeply ingrained attitude: only what is near is considered important. *Verticalism* enacts the strong hierarchical structure that regulates the relationship between the boss and his subordinates (see also Catino, 2015; Giordano and Lo Verso, 2015). The boss is frequently labelled with terms that indicate the group's obedience, such as 'godfather' or 'chief'. *Normalism* embodies the attempt to diminish the family's criminal background and increase the perception of similarity between affiliated members and ordinary people. This aspect is closely associated with the development of *omertà* (see Lupo, 2015). 'Omertà' is an Italian term that refers to a code of silence; it is considered to be a matter

of honour and loyalty to maintain silence when interrogated by authorities. The loyalty to the group is often paired with *victimism*, a cultural tendency to frame accusation and investigation as a condition of unmotivated persecution. Finally, *religious relativism* shows that religious feelings are seen as tools for serving the family's interests.

For their part, Travaglino et al. (2015) and Travaglino and Drury (2020) define some ideological aspects of organized crime by focusing on *masculinity* as a predictor of Mafia-like values such as social dominance orientation and positive attitudes towards organized crime. As a matter of fact, very few women participate in criminal organizations or, at least, few have high positions in criminal groups; organized crime is a masculine phenomenon, guided by culturally accepted masculine values. This is based on the assumption that organized crime is defined not by a single ideology but by a number of ideological constructs that define the properties and the functioning of Cosa Nostra in different domains, together with the specific views of society members.

Narrative criminology and interactional fantasizing

Narratives – or stories – can be described as structures of knowledge and practices that consist of sequences of thematically and temporally related events (see Frank, 2012). As De Fina (2008), Tamboukou (2008) and Poppi and Castelli Gattinara (2018) suggest, narratives do not necessarily reflect reality, but they can also create and shape the way individuals perceive and affect the social realities they inhabit. To make sense of different types of narratives, Loseke (2007) distinguishes between the notions of cultural narratives and personal narratives. *Cultural narratives* – or master narratives – exist on the macro level and characterize abstract and general representations of society. Cultural narratives – also regarded as standard views (see Snajdr, 2013) – can be juxtaposed with more personal constructions that exist on the micro level. *Personal narratives* are particularly relevant on a personal level because their content is more likely to reflect individual differences in personality characteristics and life experiences (McLean et al., 2007). In this regard, personal narratives are thematically based (Poppi et al., 2018; Poppi and Sandberg, 2020) and shape the ways in which individuals attend to, and feel about, events and social phenomena (Ochs and Capps, 1996).

A narrative can be regarded as the product of a single voice about real events, as well as imaginary events that are co-constructed by several people (see Botvin and Sutton-Smith, 1977; Propp, 1970). In ordinary social interactions, participants tend to build fantasizing scenarios single-handedly in reference to topics commenced by other interlocutors, and across turns in the interactions to which they contribute (see Poppi, 2019; Poppi and Sandberg, 2020). Interactional fantasizing describes a practice where participants induce or inspire other participants to produce narratives about imaginary events (Poppi, forthcoming) or what some scholars refer to as imagined possibilities (Hall, 1974: 55). Interactional fantasizing merges the concept of fantasy (Miller and Sperry, 1988) and interactional narratives (Nelson, 2003). A crucial property of interactional fantasizing is its capacity to reveal the values, ideas and practices of a society, and therefore its ideologies, which start from micro-level interactions and can contribute to the understanding of macro social phenomena (see Poppi, 2019, 2021, forthcoming; Poppi and Sandberg, 2020).

In the context of organized crime studies and the ideological analysis of organized crime, narratives and interactional fantasizing have never been used together. However, the importance of imagined possibilities within narrative criminology has been suggested (for example, Joosse, 2019; Joosse et al., 2015; Sandberg, 2010; Sandberg et al., 2019). 'Stories can "speak" to individuals at various waypoints on a moral career in this way because they . . . invite story-hearers to imagine themselves at different consequential positions in a story's landscape' (Joosse, 2019: 4). In addition, within a narrative criminology framework, Joosse et al. (2015) describe Somali youth's imagined engagements with al-Shabaab terrorists and the difference between youth's narratives and those of terrorist recruiters, indicating that this difference resulted in resilience against terrorist recruitment. In a similar fashion, Sandberg et al.'s (2019) work on 'drinking stories' describes the imaginative emplacement in which individuals engage in anticipation of going on drinking holidays, showing that fantasizing is a substantial component of narrative production. Although narrative criminology still prefers to discuss narratives about real events (but see, for exceptions, Brookman, 2015; Sandberg et al., 2015; Wickramagamage and Miller, 2019), the very nature of this approach leaves a lot of room for exploring collectively constructed imagined possibilities as well.

In order to suggest how narrative criminology can allow scholars to understand the interplay between organized crime and its ideologies, three aspects can be proposed. First, narrative criminology uses *all* stories and not only those that are regarded as a 'falsehood of dominating myths' (Presser and Sandberg, 2019: 3). Crucial in this approach is individuals' personal stories and how these stories draw on their attitudes, values, ideas and practices, and hence ideologies. Second, narratives and their ideological content can have real consequences and thus tangible effects as analytical tools. This aspect is even more evident when narratives are shared by large groups of individuals, shaping their knowledge and practices (Presser, 2018). Third, narrative criminology considers narratives to be social entities per se, rather than mere representations of information about social phenomena. Because narrative criminology is mainly interested in individuals' narratives, no particular attention is given to the specific events purportedly behind their stories (Polletta, 2006). Hence, the narrative criminology perspective neatly encompasses interactional fantasizing. With the aim of studying organized crime and its ideology, narrative criminology can be used to analyse stories told by ordinary people, individuals who are not affiliated with any Mafia-like groups.

The present contribution draws on critical discourse studies and narrative criminology with a view to understanding if and why some ideologies that have been identified in organized crime members' discourse could also be shared by ordinary people. This contribution aims to compare the findings of two analyses of ideological constructs revealed on the basis of interviews with Cosa Nostra bosses' sons examined in Poppi and Di Piazza (2017) and Poppi et al. (2018) and the ideological constructs about Mafia held by ordinary people, based on their narratives and interactional fantasizing. In line with Maynes et al. (2008: 129–30), this study aims to produce ethnographic generalizations in which personal narratives and interactional fantasizing 'are used to unveil otherwise hidden meanings, motivations, social practices, interactions and mythologies' (Raitanen et al., 2019: 5).

Data and method

The present study uses interview data collected by the first author (from July 2019 to September 2019). The participants – high school and university students – were informally approached via a social network platform (Facebook), through the first author's personal connections and their friends. The participants were 22 males and 8 females aged between 18 and 21 years (average 19.6). All of them were Italian and come from Foggia, a city in the region of Apulia affected by a marked presence of organized crime.[1] The subject selection procedure for this study relied on the notion of *deep interest* (see Poppi and Sandberg, 2020; Raitanen et al., 2019): the participants were selected for having (1) an interest in considering organized crime as an interesting topic, in both factual and fictional representations (for example films, TV series) and (2) a willingness to consider the possibility of justifying some activities in which organized crime was generally involved.

The data-gathering procedure involved individual interviews with 18 students and four collective interviews with three students in each. The reason behind using the two types of interviews was to collect data involving not only single-voice narratives but also interactional fantasizing, which is possible only in multi-party interactions of three participants. The single-voice narratives came from interviews via Skype or Telegram, an instant messaging application, and interactional fantasizing was sought in multi-party interviews facilitated by the use of Skype and Microsoft Teams, where participants could interact with each other.

Although there was no rigid structure that limited the semi-structured interviews, all the participants were asked a set of similar questions in each interview. Specifically: (i) 'What would you do if you were the boss of the local criminal organization?'; (ii) 'How would you react if you knew that a parent or relative of yours was involved in some kind of criminal association?'; (iii) 'In what circumstances would you consider joining a criminal organization?'; (iv) 'Is there something that makes criminal organizations fascinating or do they just represent a form of evil?'; (v) 'Would you consider organized crime to be a job, a type of career or just a criminal lifestyle?'. In general terms, the questions addressed issues related to organized crime and its possible implications on personal, social, economic and cultural levels.

The coding process relied on a thematic analysis. The themes were developed by the first author based on a grounded-theory approach and then refined in collaboration with the second author. Several themes emerge from the data, specifically: anti-reductionism, amoralism, familism, verticalism, anti-normalism, anti-victimism and religious relativism.

The interview/conversational extracts are quoted verbatim, albeit translated from Italian, the participants' native language. Thus, the translations of the messages and the audio-transcriptions include the stylistic imperfections of spoken and written discourse that arose in the natural language used by the participants. Whereas the single-voice narratives do not make any reference to the participant, interactional fantasizing is reported with sequential references (for example, i, ii, iii) to the person speaking. The interviewer's contributions are reported in italics and the interviewer's notes are reported in square brackets.

Ideologies about organized crime

Anti-reductionism

Reductionism refers to the rhetorical and conceptual construction that aims to minimize the capacity of the organization and the gravity of the committed crimes. In the narratives and interactional fantasizing we have identified, reductionism does not seem to be conveyed. The function of reductionism, when expressed by affiliated members or criminal organizations' family members, can be interpreted instrumentally. For instance, reductionism can be used to scale down the criminal liability of the prosecuted. When describing the dimensions of the defendants' criminal power, the participants show a perspective in which organizations are deliberately overemphasized to the point of becoming entities that 'control everything and that can do anything they want' (Extract 1) and 'their power is infinite' (Extract 2).

(1)
These are people that control everything and that can do anything they want
It's common knowledge
Especially in the South, not a single leaf can be free from them

(2)
The Camorra and 'Ndrangheta have tons of money and they can buy entire sectors of the economy and their power is infinite

Although these views could be considered expressions of the innumerable myths and fascinations that characterize organized crime (see Larke, 2012), another interpretation is possible too. The participants are aware of the immense economic power of the organizations (see Naím, 2012; Paoli, 2004), but the construction of an ideology around them serves to create an image of power that could even ennoble the organizations. This ideology – here labelled *anti-reductionism* – may serve to portray organized crime as essential for the functioning of a society because it represents those who pull the strings (Extract 3) and that, ultimately, cannot be defeated (Extract 4).

(3)
These are the people that control Italy and other people like these control Mexico, Colombia and other countries
These are the real governors
These are the real presidents, and the elected ones are just puppets

(4)
I also think they cannot be stopped because they are too powerful
And they work perfectly like a perfect mechanism
A mechanism that works well, I'd say

The danger associated with anti-reductionism is that it makes for acceptance and even subordination, not just for fascination. Organized crime owes much of its power to the fact that it is often considered not as a deviation from a norm (that is, legality), but rather as something that it is impossible to prevent. How can organized crime be defeated at a

cultural level when part of its ideology serves to portray it as fundamental and inevitable? ('I also think they cannot be stopped because they are too powerful.')

Amoralism

Amoralism captures the suspension of moral judgement towards individuals who commit crimes for or on behalf of the criminal organization (see Bigoni et al., 2016). The participants address their own perspective about how organized crime regulates its internal matters and how their business can always be regarded as legitimate. As the following extracts suggest, amoralism could perform at least three different functions.

First, amoralism can contribute to the representation of organized crime as a world characterized by a different moral system from the one with which people are familiar. This seems to be expressed in Extract 5.

(5)
(i) Different situations, different reactions
(ii) Yeah, but that's a different thing!
(i) No, no. If you are inside, and some partners get killed you must take revenge
(iii) It's a different life and there are rules
(i) Exactly, revenge is fair within that world

Second, organized crime can be portrayed in terms of a system that works through orders that are non-negotiable or transferable and where, therefore, there is little space for individual moral evaluations, in contrast to 'morally decent self' representations (see, for example, Presser, 2004). In Extract 6, one participant seems to present his/her own view of morality, but the final statement ('Orders are orders, and they cannot be good or bad . . . I cannot say much anything about it, but I'd probably do the same!') shows that amoralism is specifically about following orders without questioning their nature or goals.

(6)
When we talk of mobsters, Mafiosi, things are different
These people are different
Especially the ones that live here in the South
People have a different mentality there
They don't think about good or bad
They think in terms of orders
[. . .]
Orders are orders and they cannot be good or bad
I cannot say anything much about it, but I'd probably do the same!
Everybody would do the same!

Third, some participants also express a relativization of the crimes that typically characterize organized crime (for example, drug dealing). These crimes are explained as inherently motivated by a general logic of demand and supply (Extract 7; Extract 8). The moral evaluation serves to relativize the reasons and the contextual conditions that justify these crimes.

(7)
Selling drugs is a huge problem, but they just sell what people want
I would not blame the sellers, but the buyers
They are the big problems
[. . .]
Of course, selling is a serious crime, but people are bad
They push the Mafia and Camorra to sell these things!
I would not blame them, but I'd blame the junkies!

(8)
Drug trafficking would not be a problem if people did not want any drugs
People create demand
Not the criminal organization!
[. . .]
The Mafia used to sell burned CD Roms, music, video games, just on the street
People did not need CD Roms anymore and the illegal sellers disappeared
Would you blame the organizations?

Extract 8 presents the clear relativization of the moral responsibilities of criminal organizations, similar to what Giuseppe Riina, a convicted active member of Cosa Nostra and the son of one of the most important bosses of Cosa Nostra, says about drug trafficking: 'Homicides and drug trafficking is not only because of the Mafia, I mean, these things are not done only by Mafiosi' (Poppi et al., 2018: 9).

The notion of amoralism that emerges from these examples sets a system of attitudes, values, ideas and practices that help organized crime members to continue their criminal activity by minimizing the impact of regret, guilt and shame (see Zeelenberg et al., 1998). As the participants seem to suggest, amoralism is an essential construct facilitating law violation.

Familism

The participants quoted in Extracts 9 and 10 seem to express familism, as if the interests of parents and relatives are a priority over the collective interests of people outside the family. Familism has been traditionally regarded as one of the most common ideologies of organized crime and one of the few amply discussed in the literature (see Berkowitz, 1984; Mastrobuoni and Patacchini, 2010). This is also culturally and historically motivated: Southern cultures assign considerable importance to family bonds and the authoritative role of fathers (Tarsia, 2015). In the light of the discussions of hypothetical matters that could occur in their families and their symbolic value, it emerges that the family is where moral suspension is evident. Moral suspension is often conceptualized as a form of scepticism and disbelief about the seriousness of the events reported (Extract 9).

(9)
I don't really care about things my father has done in his life
He is a really good person!
So, I don't really care
What would you do if your father were accused of very bad things?

I would not care, and the accusations can be false
That's obvious!
[. . .]
I cannot be objective, of course
I am his son!

A striking aspect manifested in Extract 9 is that the participant's reaction to an accusation against a family member (that is, father) is rhetorically similar to what Giuseppe Riina says about his father. Specifically, 'because I love my father, [. . .] I love my family, despite everything that they have been accused of . . . it's not up to me to judge my father' (Poppi et al., 2018: 10).

(10)
I don't have any doubt between my family and the rest
[. . .]
But whatever my family members do is fine with me
[. . .]
People are only strong in their family
[. . .]
And my father has proved many times to be a great person, with values and great love for his family

In Extract 10, the suspension of judgement ('But whatever my family members do is fine with me') is combined with an idealistic representation of the family as a system in which individuals can fully express themselves and the father is the key figure ('And my father has proved many times to be a great person, with values and great love for his family'). The idealization of the father and the suspension of any moral evaluation of him promote a system of relations that are at the heart of verticalism, another emblematic ideological construction of criminal organizations.

Verticalism

Verticalism – the construction that conceives of a rigid hierarchy with power vested in the person at the top – reflects the structural aspect of organized crime, and thus the relational dynamics between heads and their subordinates. As Extracts 11 and 12 show, the participants share views that are compatible with the verticalism expressed by affiliated members (Poppi and Di Piazza, 2017; Poppi et al., 2018). The narratives and interactional fantasizing present verticalism as the only feasible structure of criminal organizations.

(11)
The only way to manage huge power is a very rigid hierarchy
Bosses are geniuses in organizations
Can you imagine how many things they need to take into account?
It's impressive
[. . .]
That's why rules and roles need to be clear

Top, medium, low, one, two, three
The problem is trust and sincerity though
Who would be the ideal boss for you?
In a family, the father together with his sons

(12)
People in those systems need to have bosses, someone above them
You can't have democracy
[. . .]
Bosses hold power and this is essential
And trust and obedience are everything, that's why fathers are usually the bosses of family
roups
Would you like to work or live in democratic, horizontal systems?
Yes, of course, but but organized crime is a different thing
Completely!

The ideology of verticalism rules out other forms of organization. This is made explicit in Extract 12, where the participant approves of horizontal organizations but unequivocally dissociates this view from how a criminal organization should work. What verticalism and familism have in common is the crucial figure of the boss. The boss is hyperbolically represented as a figure of remarkable talent and capacity ('Bosses are geniuses in organizations') and a figure that demands unconditional trust ('And trust and obedience are everything'). As the participant quoted in Extract 11 suggests, the father is the person to play the role of the boss. Family idealization, together with the values of belonging and sincerity, can be seen as underlying the notion of the boss, a father-like figure. Specifically, the participant in Extract 12 claims that 'fathers are usually the bosses of family groups', indicating that 'trust' is an essential factor for the proper functioning of criminal organizations.

Anti-normalism

Whereas the sons of Cosa Nostra bosses such as Angelo Provenzano (Poppi and Di Piazza, 2017) and Giuseppe Riina (Poppi et al., 2018) tend to represent their fathers and their families as ordinary people conducting a reasonably normal life, the participants express different attitudes.

(13)
These people are terrible for sure
[. . .]
But it's not easy
Other clans, police, there is always the risk of being killed or arrested
You need to be very tough for this
It's not for everybody

As Extract 13 reports, the participants discuss some psychological aspects of the affiliated members where bosses are represented as highly gifted individuals who risk their lives, as well as being extraordinary figures who can attain important positions of power

while dealing with internal problems and external dangers ('But it's not easy. Other clans, police, there is always the risk of being killed or arrested'). Extracts 14 and 15 describe bosses in very positive terms ('He's a genius!'; 'If you get to be a boss, I don't know . . . I don't know . . . at 40 years old you are kind of special'), which qualify as representations of *anti-normalism*, being the result of fictional dramatizations that make for the creation of the outlaw hero myth (see Pobutsky, 2013).

> (14)
> Messina Denaro [considered to be one of the new leaders of Cosa Nostra] is still on the run
> How many years is that? 30?
> He's a genius!
> [. . .]
> Only a genius can stay on the run for so long!

> (15)
> That's a world where if you start at 18, you can get arrested by 20 and get killed by 25
> If you get to be a boss, I don't know
> I don't know
> at 40 years old you are kind of special
> And you work with people all around the world
> Investing millions and millions
> They are corporations
> And the bosses are top managers!

What also emerges in the extracts is a depiction of organized crime as international corporations in which the bosses are represented as managers (Extract 15: 'They are corporations, and the bosses are top managers!'). It may be that capitalist ideology is part of how organized crime is perceived. This is in line with studies that consider criminal organizations to be essentially reduced to capitalist firms (see Arlacchi, 1986; Schneider and Schneider, 2011).

Anti-victimism

Victimism, the construction that frames journalistic and police investigations as personal persecutions, seems to be absent in the data. Despite this rhetorical and discursive utility of victimism, the participants report radically different content. The participants' hypothetical scenarios about what they would do as bosses indicates a sort of pride in the imagined criminal actions (Extract 16: 'If I were a boss, I'd never be so hypocritical as to deny what I do. . .People should fear me'). The empathy towards the criminal actions is a strategy of consent in order to 'look stronger among the other affiliated members!'.

> (16)
> (iv) If I were a boss, I'd never be so hypocritical as to deny what I do
> People should fear me
> (v) But where? Not in front of a judge, for sure!
> (iv) I don't know but the best thing is to be feared
> (vi) That's a strategy for consent
> and look stronger among the other affiliated members!

Thus, the participants endorse *anti-victimism*, in which the construction of a strong criminal image is the main goal. This is the case in Extract 17, where some assumed knowledge of organized crime is made explicit.

> (17)
> I am sure they like to be feared and they are kind of proud of their evil actions
> I think their pride is what that makes them so dangerous
> They like to increase their status of 'bad guys'
> [. . .]
> It's hard to explain, but if they make 5, they tell it like they did 8
> They build their aura!

As participants such as the one in Extract 17 claim, Mafia members like to boost their criminal status, although criminology literature claims the opposite (Poppi and Di Piazza, 2017; Poppi et al., 2018). This contradiction can be explained in terms of the seductiveness of criminal power, in the sense of cultural capital embedded with fascination. The emphasis on criminal power could serve to increase people's fascination with criminal activities (Rosner, 1995).

Religious relativism

Religious relativism is a construction that reflects pseudo-religious values with a view to serving family interests. The participants discuss hypothetical examples of the two main functions that religion could have in organized crime issues.

First, the reference to figures central to Christianity (for example, Jesus, the Virgin Mary and Padre Pio) has the function of invoking instrumental protection against bad events that may occur within a criminal organization. This is stated in Extract 18.

> (18)
> (ix) I am not a believer, but even if my father did something bad, I'd try everything
> I'd even try to pray to Jesus, the Virgin Mary and Padre Pio for him
> (x) I think these things are important and faith is underrated
> *Mobsters do that too; they seem to be very religious!*
> (ix) Yes, they are, and I understand
> They live like in a permanent Russian roulette and when you have no certainties you need to believe in something
> It's normal, and they want Jesus, the Virgin Mary and Padre Pio to protect them!

Regarding the second function, the recourse to God points to the complete impossibility of being judged by any man except on a transcendental level (Extract 19: 'Only God can judge the real reasons'). Interestingly, something similar can be found in the discourse of the gangsta-rapper culture, in which the perception of legitimated violence and the evocation of higher justice explain artistic creations such as 2Pac's track 'Only God Can Judge Me' (*All Eyez on Me*, 1996), which can become a mantra for diversified forms of violence (see Prestholdt, 2009).

(19)

When people are forced by poverty and marginalization to become criminals, even big criminals, we can only judge their actions but nothing else

Only God can judge the real reasons

[...]

The Mafia and Camorra exist in poor areas because people are forced to find different ways, even very bad ways

It's not up to us to judge their nature

As the extracts illustrate, religious relativism supports other ideological content such as familism and an indirect form of victimism. Familism is here exemplified by a participant's effort to go beyond lack of faith in order to hypothetically defend his father (Extract 18: 'I'd even try to pray to Jesus, the Virgin Mary and Padre Pio for him'). Even for non-believers, religiosity may serve as a tool for attaining selfish interests and, simultaneously, for being acquitted.

Discussion and conclusions

Merging critical discourse studies with narrative criminology, the present study has provided insights into Italian high school and university students' ideological constructs about organized crime. The use of single-voice narratives and interactional fantasizing has allowed us to access some ideological content about organized crime that would otherwise have been difficult to identify. This ideological content is compared with the ideology of Mafia members themselves, as reported by previous studies (Poppi and Di Piazza, 2017; Poppi et al., 2018).

The ideologies about the Mafia shared by the sons of Cosa Nostra bosses and Italian students overlap in some dimensions. Specifically, this refers to the ideas of amoralism, familism, verticalism and religious relativism, the ideological constructs that determine how criminal organizations operate. There are at least three alternative factors that might explain these similarities. First, some of these ideologies may merely reflect broader ideologies present in society on which the students agree. This is, presumably, the case with familism, an ideological construct described in the Italian context (see Mucchi-Faina et al., 2010; Ruspini, 2009). Second, the interviewees might just be echoing the common beliefs known to be Mafia members' first-person ideology of organized crime. Thus, the students may not personally endorse crime members' ideology, but they just perceive the basic assumptions of the standard Mafia beliefs.

On a related note, the assumed similarity between the ideology of organized crime members and that of ordinary people suggests that black pedagogy can also affect individuals beyond criminal families. This transmission of criminal ideologies outside the family context can be explained by both the engagement and interaction of criminal groups with the surrounding environment – in a process of the sharing of delinquency (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960) – and 'the intersection between local culture and systemic criminal behaviour' (Sergi, 2018: 14). As a matter of fact, the criminal ideology shared by high school and university students from a city affected by organized crime does not imply that their local culture is inherently criminogenic. As some studies show (see Christopher et al., 2014), ideologies can also be learned as common-sense knowledge

and may represent the foundation for 'webs of significance', the ways in which people interact, communicate and share experiences.

There are striking differences between the ideological constructs about organized crime that seem to be shared by the students and those endorsed by Mafia members; these differences can be accounted for in at least two ways. First of all, criminal organizations tend to display their reductionism, normalism and victimism in order to reduce their criminal culpability in public and legal domains (for example, TV interviews or trials). Thus, these ideologies serve to protect the organization against legal interventions. This is precisely why criminal organizations are often described as an 'under-world' (Kaplan and Dubro, 1986) or 'hidden society' (Falcone and Padovani, 1991). In order to establish and maintain a level of secrecy, criminal organizations set rules for reductionism, normalism and victimism. These do not represent preconditions for the development of criminal organizations; rather, these are defence mechanisms that minimize the responsibility and guilt for active members of criminal organizations. These organizations seem to be based on what Foucault (1991) calls 'governmentality'. This concept, which encompasses a system of norms guiding the affiliated members' activity in the name of their ideology, represents a normative system in which subjects take on an identity and discipline themselves – a self-governing mentally. By contrast, because the participants in this study do not belong to criminal organizations and, therefore, do not need to hide any criminal activity, the ideologies of reductionism, normalism and victimism are absent from their ideology of organized crime. The impact of media and fiction needs to be considered as the sources of anti-reductionism, anti-normalism and anti-victimism.

The mass media have played a major role in spreading positive representations and promoting the acceptability of criminal behaviours (see Larke, 2015), turning Mafiosi into fearless heroes with whom audiences can empathize and whom they envy. This concerns not only mainstream film and television productions that have popularized organized crime (for example, *The Godfather*), but also gang-culture language, music, body markings and clothing (see Evans et al., 1999). All these cultural influences have contributed to the development of myths that project positive evaluations of criminal conduct (see Beck, 2000). Within cultural frameworks that see organized crime as a positive example of self-achievement (Iacolino et al., 2017) and social prestige (Sergi and South, 2016), anti-reductionism, anti-normalism and anti-victimism contribute to maintaining and reinforcing these representations. From the participants' perspective, the negation of these ideologies may serve to build a myth of the criminal organization as an entity that acquires social capital as the seriousness of their crimes increases. For this reason, the notions of criminal responsibility reduction (reductionism) and false attributions of responsibility (victimism) are discarded. Similarly, membership in a criminal association is associated with power and uniqueness within a social context, and participants reject the idea of victimism.

This study suggests that high school and university students' ideology of organized crime shows similarities with the ideology of Mafia members themselves. Criminal organizations thrive thanks to some beliefs and values that are, at least partially, socially accepted. These social values and beliefs lie at the heart of organized crime. Consequently, eliminating organized crime requires some changes in cultural values and beliefs that are deeply ingrained even in young people's minds.

The limitation of this research is the small data sample and the open-endedness and indeterminacy of perspectives that individual people may have. Thus, a different set of participants might have expressed different ideological constructs about Mafia.

As other contributions point out (Poppi and Verde, 2019; Sandberg et al., 2015), ambiguity and openness make it 'possible for narrators to explore existential issues without having a clear answer and to continuously adjust evaluations and content' (Sandberg et al., 2015: 4).

Regardless of its limitations, this contribution represents one of the first explicit attempts to discuss the role played by narratives and interactional fantasizing in the study of organized crime from the perspective of narrative criminology. Additionally, the focus on organized crime ideologies shared by ordinary people can contribute to the development of criminology, indicating that ordinary people's perspective on crime is worth considering.

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Ethics standard

The authors declare that informed consent was obtained from all subjects before they were included in the study and no real identifying information about the subjects is included in the article.

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Note

1.   See   https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/puglia-foggia-italy-mafia-fears-ambush-four-dead-gun-attack-a7886621.html; https://www.ansa.it/english/news/2020/01/17/foggia-mafia-emulating-ndrangheta-says-dia_339d37c8-acf9-4bc2-8477-b9541de8febe.html; https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/16/italy-to-strengthen-anti-mafia-task-force-after-bomb-in-foggia.

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