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## **Getting to the point? Reframing narratives on knife crime**

Knife-enabled crime has emerged as the most significant national debate on UK youth crime for several years with public debates mostly exploring offenders' motivations which then center on commonly recognised tropes of protection, safety, ubiquity and normativity. Recent academic research continues to widen these motivational debates acknowledging perceptual insecurity, (Traynor 2016), engagement in deviant lifestyles (Harcourt 2006), and lack of trust in police (Brennan 2018) as key variables. Building upon these perspectives this article seeks to re-frame the dominant narrative by examining how knife-carrying and knife-enabled crime is also a signifier of street 'authenticity' and thus for some, an agentic route to advancement within the social field of the street gang.

### **Current debate**

Knife-crime fatalities in England and Wales have reached a 70 year peak according to the Office for National Statistics, (ONS, 2019), sparking widespread alarm and public debate. Between 2017 - 2018, 285 homicides were carried out using a knife or sharp instrument, (of which 55 occurred in London) (ONS 2019), and by year ending March 2018 offences involving a knife or sharp instrument totalled 40,100, (Allen and Audickas, 2018).

Exploring the data reveals that sixty-three per cent of sharp instrument homicide victims were white and twenty-five per cent were black; twenty-five per cent were men aged 18-24, (up 38%) with twenty-five per cent killed by friends/acquaintances and twenty-five per cent killed by a stranger, (ONS 2019). Suspects too are mainly young men aged 16-24.

Importantly Massey, Sherman and Coupe (2019) recently identified that not only is knife-enabled crime highly localised in certain locations but analysis of non-fatal knife-enabled attacks can help pinpoint localities for future knife-enabled homicides.

As a result, tackling knife crime is now a top priority for the UK government via the Violent Crime Strategy (HM Government 2018); the Metropolitan Police and the Violent Crime Task Force (VCTF); and for the London Mayor via his London Knife Crime Strategy (MOPAC 2017)

As new strategies to tackle knife-enabled crime are commissioned the current vogue is to stress the newly articulated public health, rather than criminal justice, approach, i.e. advocating partnership working to reduce risk factors (Foster, 2013; Eades et al, 2007; Sethi et al, 2010; Cordis Bright, 2015; Williams et al, 2014; McVie, 2010). For a recent analysis of contemporary evidence on knife crime, see Grimshaw and Ford (2018).

The search to explain increased UK knife-enabled crime has revealed a dearth of contemporary research into offender motivations. This situation was also reported over ten

years ago by Eades et al (2007) and whilst unchanged, it remains a serious impediment to our understanding of these issues.

As a result the foremost perceptual paradigms underpinning motivational narratives for knife-carrying remain little changed over 50 years with their familiar focus on symbolism, fear, protection and fashion. These traditional perceptual paradigms stress the fear generated by other young people, threats of robbery or violence and the violence associated with drug markets. Interestingly, some of the recent increase in knife-enabled crime data is now attributed to altered business models for drug supply, known as County Lines, (NCA 2018) and how these supply lines are controlled by street gangs.

Whilst UK street gangs are not new, their rapid evolution (Densley, 2013; Harding 2014; Pitts 2007), now offers further explanatory dimensions to knife crime data. Not least because gang members demonstrate a greater propensity to carry knives (McVie 2010) compared to non-gang members. Despite the fact that public debates and government policy often (overly?) focus on the street gang as a contributory factor to knife-enabled crime, the learning derived from gang research has barely impacted upon our understanding of offender motivation for knife-enabled crime. This remains a serious gap in our knowledge and inhibits the development of harm reduction policies and interventions. It also leaves knife-crime policy predicated on outmoded research whilst ignoring contemporary gang evolution as a motivating dynamic.

In short, government policy and policy interventions remain over-reliant on ageing tropes of youth motivations in knife-crime. Research on knife-enabled crime remains heavily focused upon narratives of self-protection and self-defence and are seldom cognisant of recent theoretical developments such as signal crime theory (Innes 2004); Actor-Network Theory (Latour 2005); or street capital theory, (Harding, 2014; Sandberg and Pederson 2011). Through such omissions valuable insight is obscured or lost. This article therefore seeks to revisit some of the contemporary knife-crime narratives and to re-interpret them via Street Capital Theory utilising Bourdieusian (1990) concepts of social field and habitus. This re-framing is made vivid by utilising empirical data from interviews with gang-affiliated young men. Prior to considering the social field of the street gang it is valuable to first review insights offered by contemporary narratives on knife crime.

### **Contemporary narratives on knife crime**

In the UK, fear, victimisation, peer-group pressure and fashion are considered the prime motivations for knife-carrying (Lemos and Crane 2004). These authors also cite the wider cultural influences of music, media and computer gaming as reinforcing gender-identity and aspirations towards street credibility. However as these cultural artefacts are available to a

wider population, their influence upon the specificity of knife-carrying youth remains unexplained.

Gendered debates also centre on masculinity with attendant violence arising from 'masculinity challenges', (Messerschmidt 2000: Mullins 2006). Here weapon-carrying facilitates construction of a hypermasculinity: widely seen as advantageous in navigating street life. Shepherd and Brennan (2008) also argue that knife-carrying is centred in machismo, although a history of playing with knives as a way of strengthening gender-defined identity is cited by Townsend and Barrett, (2003).

Lemos and Crane (2004) noted that whilst initial motivations for knife-carrying might be protection, the end result can often be aggression. Marfleet referenced this as a form of 'replicative externality' (2008:84), though one might more easily term it a form of neighbourhood escalation. The role of peer-group associations and their collective joint agency which builds bonding social capital is also an issue here, (Deuchar 2009).

It is more commonly agreed that a decision to carry weapons demonstrates proximity to, or connectivity to, violent environments. Silvestri et al (2009: 7) noted with some insight often lacking in other research that, 'The complexity of circumstances affecting behaviour is coupled with the complexity of social meanings, values and behaviour which young people experience and re-negotiate, individually and in groups'. For Silvestri et al, fear is generated amongst widespread stress, inequality, disaffection and disadvantage as the lived experience of these young people. More recently, Grimshaw and Ford (2018) identified demographic change alongside material inequality and relative deprivation as a driver of youth violence.

The role of environment in conjunction with the presence and interaction of its social actors is central to the analysis of Holligan (2015) who employs Actor-Network Theory (Latour 2005) as an explanatory vehicle for the aetiology of knife crime. In utilising this analytic paradigm the causality of violence resides in the assemblage of actors, mediators and networks interacting through relationships, in which family and neighbourhood are prominent.

For Lauger (2016), in the cultural setting of 'street life' and gang environments, weapons retain practical and symbolic significance for accumulating respect, whilst simultaneously acting as generators for myth-making. Carrying knives as a way to generate respect within the street world, (Palasinski 2013; Palasinski and Riggs 2012) is now more recently explored but remains under-developed as an explanatory narrative.

Palasinski (2013) reported the young men in his research normalised and trivialised the social consequences of knife-carrying whilst noting legal consequences were viewed as inevitable.

Riggs and Palasinski (2011) argue young men view knife-carrying as a legitimate response to potential threats and the absence of police authority in inner-city areas such that knife-carrying is constructed as harm prevention and being streetwise. In this analysis *not* carrying

a knife is deemed irresponsible. The authors caution against viewing knife-carrying as arising from immaturity or deviance and argue that in developing policy to reduce knife crime, authorities should de-emphasise internal behaviours lest knife-carrying is viewed as inevitable. They recommend promoting recognition of low controllability and unpredictability of knives such that they increase risk.

Brennan, (2018:587) argues lack of trust in the police is an important overlooked variable in research. He notes weapon-carrying is consistent with anti-social, anti-police attitudes and might reflect immersion in criminal lifestyles as much as it reflects responses to potential victimisation.

Internal triggers are foregrounded in the MPS Youth Knife Crime research (2016) which cite: Vulnerability (fear and need for protection); Identity issues (including low self-esteem and wanting to fit in); teenage tensions, (including pushing boundaries, becoming an adult), alongside environmental triggers such as lack of Positive influences, (including negative role models, rejection of authority); and Challenging environment (including domestic and peer-group violence, school exclusion and exposure to gang violence). The emphasis here was on a strong need for belonging and the fact young people are heavily influenced by their environment. The equally complex circumstances affecting behaviour and the complexity of attributed social meanings negotiated by young people further inhibit our understandings of which interventions are effective, (Centre for Crime and Social Justice, 2009).

In summary, some narratives focus on causal relationships, internal or external, with a dominant focus on manifest motivations as opposed to latent motivations.

Usefully these contemporary narratives do offer up some commonalities which can now be further explored through re-framing, e.g. masculinity, fear, protection, victimisation, peer-groups, social capital, violent environments, demographic change, actor relationships, respect, legitimisation and normalisation. There is a need to reframe these contemporary narratives to access greater insight and advance debate, not least for practitioners as current tropes appear to offer little when translated into policy. The reframing is undertaken utilising social field theory (Bourdieu 1990) and street capital theory, (Harding 2012; 2014; Sandberg and Pederson, 2011) which are summarised below.

When considering how the street gangs generate certain motivational behaviours it is crucial to utilise the voices of those embedded in the social field of the gang. The reframing is therefore centered on direct quotations from the field which illuminate familiar tropes of fear/protection but also which speak to the lived experience of youth operating within the anomie of 'advanced marginality', (Wacquant 2008).

### **Locating the voices of the social field of the street gang**

The qualitative data presented here emerged from research into county lines drug networks operated by London-based street gangs. Eighteen interviews were conducted between

2017-2019 with London males, aged 16-25yrs, who were both gang-affiliated and actively running/managing county lines. This research received ethical approval from University of West London. The sample was sourced using gatekeepers, i.e., youth workers working with gang-active young males operating county lines; and via gang consultants who negotiated access to young men embedded in street gang life and drug supply. Each interviewee was a weapon-carrier. Additional quotes are drawn from my Doctoral research into street gangs in south London (author, 2012). The definition of gang adopted was that of the Centre for Social Justice, (2009:24): *A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who (1) see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group, (2) engage in a range of criminal activity and violence, (3) identify with or lay claim over territory, (4) have some form of identifying structural feature, and (5) are in conflict with other, similar, gangs.*

Whilst the central research focus was drug supply, wider issues of gang life and weapon-carrying were also central to personal narratives. These interviews offer insight into the lived experience of gang members and motivations for weapon-carrying which help to reframe the debate (Silverman, 2011). The first names are fictional.

### **The street gang as a social field**

The concept of the street gang as operating within a defined social field is a useful interpretive frame by which to unpack the symbolism and utility of knife-carrying and usage.

The social field (Bourdieu 1990; Fligstein and McAdam 2012) operates as a structured domain with relational boundaries and code of behaviour commonly recognised by actors in the social field as 'The Game'. Within the domain actors are governed by certain rules regarding what constitutes legitimate action and each actor within the social field struggles and strives to improve their position within the hierarchy in the hope this will give them elevated status and advantage.

Within the social field of the street gang this internal hierarchy privileges the long-standing Elders, (aged above 25) whilst Olders (aged 18-24) below them and Youngers (aged 12-17) below them struggle for dominance and advancement by employing strategic tactics which permit re-positioning, (Harding, 2014).

Hierarchical position is determined by the acquisition, presentation and retention of street capital (Harding, 2012; 2014; Sandberg and Pederson 2011) which operates as a recognised currency amongst actors. Criminal and social activity generates street capital through which actors demonstrate skills in 'The Game', e.g. use of a knife. Stocks of street capital are therefore actively generated, monitored, maintained in the expectation of conversion into economic capital, (Bourdieu 1990; Harding 2014). Stocks of street capital are easily deflated by rivals (e.g. by being disrespected or stabbed) or inflated (e.g. by gaining respect; by stabbing someone). This constant dynamic creates an internalised field economy of inflation/deflation which in turn creates a social arena of competition. This highly competitive

social field is riven with threats, risk and violence as each actor competes with peers and rivals to maintain position and then advance within the hierarchy.

The social field can usefully be characterised as a topography of risk which must be navigated by mutually antagonistic actors. The topography of risk is central to how the social field is perceived by young people. Here fear is generated by an absence of authority ('the security gap'), but also the unpredictability and change within the field arising from the daily interaction of its actors. Fear can be mitigated by a range of behaviours such as knife-carrying or intimate knowledge of the field (interpreted here as knowledge of the physical environment and the mental domain). These too can be reframed in the following ways:

**Absenteeism (Absence of authority)** - In the social field of the street gang appropriate authority figures (e.g. adults, fathers, teachers, police) are absent or inconsequential. Police are deemed irrelevant or an irritant. This constitutes a landscape where adults are not in control; they neither understand it nor inhabit it. Consequently they are unable to keep their children safe from harms they neither recognise nor identify with. Often they are just absent. State abandonment of these areas of multiple deprivation further reinforces alienation and marginality. Wacquant (2008), Elias (2000) and Pitts (2007) all acknowledge the role of neoliberals in creating and sustaining discredited areas (Pitts 2007) through what Wacquant describes as the 'degrading process'. As one respondent noted:

*'Police? They're a joke, there ain't no police round here blood'. Pugzie, 19yrs.*

Traynor (2016: 100) repositions this view of absenteeism from a youth perspective coining the term 'the Security Gap'. This security gap occurs when young people lack 'personal or social resources upon which they can draw' or which provides a capacity to confront risk. Traynor views this gap as situational, temporal and spatial.

Perception of this topography coincides with interpretations of ontological security becoming crucial in establishing motivations for knife-carrying. Intimate knowledge of this topography can generate fear:

*'No, it never feels safe, but that's why you have people you know, you carry what you need to carry.'* Manz, 20 yrs.

Holligan et al (2016:147) suggest that knife-carrying for protection arises from a 'pragmatic analysis of the cultural construction of an uncertain social space'. In social field theory, such admissions are rarely made as they indicate a diminished street capital whereby the actor is not yet fully able to interpret the nuances of Road Life.

Knife-carrying as Protection:

*'I wasn't violent in a sense where, you know, I would go out and attack people and stuff like that, I would, just like any person in that situation, I would carry a weapon to protect myself'. Staffie, 22 yrs.*

*'My body armour? - Well, why do you think blood? Well, it's protection, innit? Sometimes, you understand, sometimes Man coming for niggers, understand. It's just safety measures, you understand, safety precautions from Opps, Enemies, Pagan, you understand?' Boss, 24yrs.*

The Unpredictability of this topography remains a pivotal point:

*You never know what's gonna happen tomorrow, do you know what I'm trying to say? Anything could happen, like you could get stabbed, you could get shot, if Mandem try to come in your Endz and that, it's like I was saying before, it will come down to a wrong look over anything, you could get stabbed, you could get shot, so you never know'. Manz, 20 yrs.*

Through such perceptions (designated as intimate knowledge within the social field of the gang), the Survival narrative becomes the most dominant. Clements (2010) analyses knife crime within the framework of Elias (2000) and Wacquant (2004), noting the 'decivilising effects of educational exclusion and institutional abandonment in 'neighbourhoods of relegation', (Wacquant 2008b: 116). Clements argues cogently that a widening of embedded poverty generates 'decivilising spurts' (Elias 2000), which in turn reinforces relative deprivation and group exclusion. A failure of school learning and socialisation inhibits coping mechanisms and reaffirms some young people's status as uneducated and de-skilled and thus unable to enter the labour market. This in turn prevents the occurrence of the major element of the civilising process leaving marginalised youth to fill this void with violence which for them becomes the source of power and reputation. Clements stresses the role of education as a 'transitioning process' without which 'some ghettoised young people react against the anomie of their existence by an overly defensive stance of self-protection', (Clements 2010: 447). Elias refers to this as a 'survivalist mind-set', (Elias 1978). One respondent acknowledged this as:

*'Survival man, that is straight survival man. Sometimes someone's going to take someone else's life for something you did, there ain't nothing to live for man, they don't know how to look for them, they might just go out there and be making money, it is what it is man, Life for Life'. Boss, 24yrs.*



The self-protection trope is thus re-framed as an intimate knowledge of the social field such that knife-carrying becomes a logical outcome of the risk assessment/mitigation routinely conducted by those operating within the social field. The lived experience of gang-affiliated youth necessitates a formal assessment of all dangers so as to assist navigation of this 'landscape of risk', (Harding 2014). Here knife-carrying is deemed a rational judgement. Ability to accurately 'read' and interpret the social field becomes a revered skill worthy of generating street capital. Ability to anticipate the landscape and read the signals operating within the social field are highly prized precision-honed techniques for skilled operators. Holligan et al (2016) argue that signal crime theory offers insights into weapon-carrying, noting that people tune into such signals in order to calculate risk (Innes (2004). Innes (2004:356) posits that signal crime is 'a criminal incident that is interpreted as indicating the presence of criminogenic risk'. Signal crime theory fails however to acknowledge the highly situated and interpretive variants operating within differing social fields.

### **Actors**

The gang social field is replete with actors at varying levels of the hierarchy, each being in competition with their peers. Often these are perceived as rivals or 'Opps':

*'Yes, the roads are mad out there mate, like you can get stabbed, you can get killed over a ten pound note out there. They're pagans out here bruv, there's feds, there's enemies, you understand?'* Boss, 24yrs.

For many, this social field is all-encompassing generating not only a social code of conduct (Road Life) but a code of street justice.

*'It comes with the Game, it's the lifestyle, this shit comes with it. So if you want to be on this ting, then this comes with it, innit, you're gonna have to be part of what it is and deal with the consequences.'* Prince 21 yrs.

A lack of trust is ubiquitous in the social field:

*'So you've gotta watch out for all of them, you understand, and on top of that it's snakes, normal people that will snake you, you understand?'* Sage, 21 yrs

Specific actors present specific dangers:

*'One of my friends, he's really well known as the 'floating area assassin'. So, he floats up and down this road, robbin' people. That's what he's known for. So all the gang members are all*

*worried about this guy. You've gotta handle him with care, 'cause he's dangerous. He's been in lock up, he's been stabbed so many times, he's scarred up, he's got no soul, left. And he's dangerous'.*  
Prince, 21yrs.

Young people are unable to engage with the criminal justice system which largely criminalises them in any event. Thus they disengage and retreat to a primitive form of street justice meted out by their peers – but it is accessible, instant and understood:

*'Every action has got a reaction buddy'.* Boss, 24 yrs.

Linked to this might be concepts of social identity theory (Hennigan and Spanovic 2012; Wood 2014) which links personal identity to the influence of gang membership. This theory argues that social life involves grouping by categorisation (e.g. gang member) which ultimately inform how people behave in certain social situations. Once internalized these become social identities which guide and direct an individual's public behaviour determinant upon their depth of alignment and participation with a group. Stronger group connections lead to more prominent social identities. Embedded gang members thus identify with the street gang and so are expected to perform their gang identities in public, (Lauger 2016). Parallels can be easily identified between concepts of social identity and compliance to the social field and habitus.

### **Habitus and normalisation**

Within the social field actors are in 'conflict and convulsive struggle towards mutually agreed goals and are guided by the rules of the game and the habitus', (Harding 2014:47). Habitus is described as 'durable cognitive and corporeal dispositions, tastes and schemes of perception possessed by each agent' (Bourdieu 1990, p. 56). The habitus of many young people within the social field of the street gang acts as an internalised embodied form of socialisation, expressed in ways of thinking, being, walking etc. It guides and coordinates social action but also limits the horizons of those within the social field.

*'You learn it just by hanging around', (Author, date)*

Fraser (2015:40) refers to habitus as 'the set of durable character dispositions – habits- that all individuals possess'. For those growing up in a violent environment such dispositions can become instinctive or pre-conscious instilling a 'retaliate first' mentality, (Winlow and Hall (2009). Though studies on this aspect are scarce, Leyland and Dundas (2010:437) in their study of Scottish homicides between 1980 – 2005 concluded that 'contextual influences of the neighbourhood of residence might be more important than individual characteristics in determining the victims of assault': deprivation, poverty and alcohol-related violence were

singled out as key issues. McNeill and Wheeler (2019) alongside the Home Office (2018) similarly refer to adverse childhood experiences, (ACE).

As the habitus self-limits social trajectory and career horizons, it also establishes what might be considered a 'credible action'. Violent reactions such as knife-carrying are both legitimised and validated by the habitus and go largely unchallenged. Knife-carrying therefore becomes an integral part of the habitus and has over the past 50 years or more become an accepted element of the social field meaning it is now expected behaviour. Conversely *not* to carry a weapon such as a knife would now be viewed as weak or 'moist'. Knife-carrying will generate and cement trust, demonstrate in-group loyalty and provide clear signals of reliability. To carry a knife is to be designated as a Credible Actor in the field.

### **Normalisation**

Constant daily immersion within this social field generates a sense of normalisation of behaviours including violence:

*'It depends on what scale you want man, like violence, to us, is just life, you know what I'm saying? It's life man. For someone to get stabbed up, it's an everyday thing man, like for an ordinary man, it's a shock, but for us it's... someone got stabbed'. Mel, 19 yrs.*

*'It will come down to a wrong look over anything, you could get stabbed' Tyrrel, 18 yrs*

Code of the Street by Anderson (2000) affirms that where the use of violence is legitimated as a sub-cultural norm then guilt neutralisation also becomes an easily adopted script.

Alongside normalised expectation of violence is normalised acceptance of this aspect of the social field:

*'It was in my neighbourhood every day. Right in front of my face someone would be getting robbed, somebody would be having a fight, and then someone would get stabbed, right in front of my face like it was nothing. Someone was running off, everyone was scattering about the place and then there was a body just dying right in front of me. And the worst thing about it is you walk past it because it's an everyday situation.'* Myron, 21 yrs.

In some ways the normalisation script is bolstered by local neighbourhood passivity and inactivity, or at times a casualised acquiescence to normalised violence which can be read as condoning knife-carrying for protection but which simultaneously generates wider forms of criminal agency.

Holligan et al (2016) reported on one interviewed participant who utilised the discourse of Glasgow as 'stab capital of the world' to normalise his weapon-carrying.

### **Social fate**

The habitus acts as 'bounded agency', (Evans et al 2001:24) which ensures those sharing the social field will often share the same social trajectory and their experience confirms the actions most likely to bring benefits or advancement, (Harding 2012). Thus upbringing and socialisation helps pre-determine the logical outcome or trajectory for the actors within the social field. Conditioning to social fate conjoins with assumptions that merely being young (or black) in this social field brings the anticipation of becoming a target or a victim of knife crime. This realisation can generate fear or resignation:

*'It's kill or be killed'. Trigga, 19 yrs.*

In this way knife-carrying fulfils the social fate of the actors involved, becoming part of the personal and biographical narrative:

*'It comes with the Game, it's the lifestyle, this shit comes with it. So if you want to be on this ting, then this comes with it, innit, you're gonna have to be part of what it is and deal with the consequences'.  
Boss, 24 yrs.*

It becomes destiny to carry a knife (or to be stabbed). The display of knife wounds itself is already part of the myth-making within street gangs and again plays a role in generating street capital and reputational enhancement:

*'It's part of the lifestyle, it's part of the deal, innit? Obviously, Man is trapped in the system, they don't want to live how I live, do you get me? But man's in a circle where violence is a means of communication, man don't hear talk, man hears violence. It's a dog eat dog world'. Sage, 21yrs.*

### **Street Capital**

To be a credible actor in the social field one must be able to generate then maintain a substantive level of street capital, (Sandberg and Pederson 2011). Harding (2012:35) describes street capital as 'an aggregate of cultural capital (street knowledge and street skills), habitus, local history, family connections, networks (social capital), relationships, reputation, status and symbolic capital (available assets of recognition, honour and prestige) which form a resource of high value within the social field of 'the Street''.

In this way street capital is ‘the equivalent of a Road Ranking – the totality of accumulated capitals and experience embodied by the individual operating within Street Life’, (Harding 2012:35). Ability to anticipate reactions whilst reading the signs and codes of the social field demonstrates ability to read ‘The Game’. This in turn shows knowledge of ‘The Game’ and self-awareness of your own role within it. In ‘Road Life’, knife-carrying generates street capital thereby performing a series of utilitarian factors which can be recognised and read by others. Importantly it conveys that you are willing and able to engage in violence if necessary and provides a credible threat of violence which builds reputation.

*‘Stabbing? It’s more vicious. And people used to do things and, you know, be hidden and stuff like that, now it’s like they want to do things to be famous’.* Prince, 21 yrs.

Knowledge of how to hold a knife and where to strike for maximum damage or effect similarly demonstrates you are to be taken seriously. Young men will coach each other in body strikes and Olders will mentor Youngers in this regard.

The type of knife purchased/used can also demonstrate street capital as does parading Zombie knives online. Street capital is also garnered through ability to conceal a knife and hide it during transportation. Ability to draw a knife from a sheath, a shoe or waistband is central to street conversations and youth braggadocio.

Once acquired street capital must be maintained constantly and monitoring levels of respect is often given as acceptable motivations for knife attacks:

*‘I’ve seen guys who are put to stabbing someone or fighting a guy that they were laughing with and talking with only a second ago’.* Myron, 21 yrs.

The decision to use a knife as a weapon demonstrates close physical engagement to opponents. Young men (interviewed by this author) who choose to throw acid have revealed that distance is a key factor in their choice to use acid as opposed to knives. Acid can be thrown from several metres and does not require propinquity for effective usage. Acid usage further compels the victim to drop whatever they are carrying, be it a weapon, or laptop and run off. Thus acid adds the additional advantage of instant incapacitation. However it is a combination of habitus and prevailing cultural norms which will determine weapon choice and usage.

Street capital theory designates the need to rapidly elevate your reputation above others to achieve distinction. In an increasingly competitive social field, a simple stabbing behind a shed is no longer deemed sufficient to build street capital at the level required. Such acts are now so common place they have lost their beneficial efficacy. What is needed is a ‘reputational extravaganza’, (Harding 2014) as a public display of The Game. Thus public incidents are often sought out or actioned in which a victim is stabbed in a public street, or in

a public domain unconnected to the social field, (e.g. the murder of Sofi Belamouaddin in the Victoria tube station during rush hour). Such incidents of street performance for which applause is deferred until a post-incident debrief brings instant street capital accreditation.

A final element of street capital theory is its link to peer pressure. In social field theory this can be reframed as awareness one is operating within a codified social field. Here ones behaviour has either been judged wanting or individuals have acted peremptorily to avoid opprobrium if their hierarchal position is at risk from challenge or threat. Many realise they operate within a 'theatre of conflict', where rules have recently changed. Within the social field of 'Road Life' or the street gang, peer pressure operates as a calibration of personal stocks of street capital. Opprobrium by peers signifies a deflation in street capital, whilst validation brings respect and increased street capital.

### **Social Control within social field**

Within the social field of the street gang, social control acts to maintain the status quo of the social field hierarchy. Controls are enacted via sanctions which limit any reduction in street capital for Olders and Elders thereby acting as a Conservative strategy against younger gang members who are often viewed as secessionists (Harding 2014).

Olders keep Youngers in line by instigating sanctions. This can include stabbing in the buttocks for minor infringements. Physical violence is also the sanction of choice for those using the Expressive Repertoire:

*'If you 'out-boi' me in front of others, I may say, "Oh shut up". He then says, "Oh you are getting brave little man", then I might cause a scene'. There is a lot of stabbing in the bum – to me that's more of a warning than a deliberate act to take someone out'. (Author, date)*

Some Youngers actively seek to usurp those above them to elevate their hierarchal position:

*'Most Youngers would not be afraid to stab an Older. They are realising if you cheat them and keep 'boi-ing' them (treating them as a boy), it is safer and easier to take you out than continue to be treated like this'. (Author, date)*

Youngers establishing themselves within the social field for the first time sometimes attempt to establish physical boundaries they can relate to. They are often unaware that the social field boundaries are relational rather than physical, but for them physical boundaries make sense. Gang turf is thus constructed by Youngers and then actively defended. This presents as forms of 'postcode wars'. An incursion across perceived boundaries (Slippin') is considered

a reputational violation instigating a deficit in street capital which must be rectified through control mechanisms – usually confrontation and often stabbing.

Moments of confrontation involve a pattern of dialogue which includes challenge, fronting and hyping. Whilst this is often a recognised and scripted performance, it can often become infused with emotion and get quickly out of control:

*'I would also need to know who you are first - the danger is I don't know and get it wrong. I need to put up a front that I am someone and he will need to do the same. "Don't you know who I am?". I respond... "Are you stupid, are you dumb? Are you trying to move on me? Do you want me to stab you?" You have to throw in threats. You could also call his bluff – "Go on stab me then!" That is how it escalates'. (Author, date)*

### **Asymmetries**

Competition amongst the tiers of the gang hierarchy ensures a constant dynamic of asymmetric imbalance. As the volume of actors in the social field expands, so the type of individual actor varies. Ability to evaluate one's personal potential (and limitations) alongside that of an opponent is a valued aspect of street capital. Risk mitigation for potential asymmetric interaction is therefore a sub-set of the protection narrative.

Asymmetric imbalance is furthered in business transactions within the social field. Knife-carrying is therefore considered as re-balancing unfair advantage.

Transactional insecurity in this landscape of risk has increased considerably. Whilst some young people will carry knives in the execution of a robbery, business deals involving drug supply are locales of increased risk. County lines dealers and drug runners will all now expect to be carrying knives and expect to be robbed, (NCA 2017). Here knife-carrying can be re-framed under employee protection:

*It can be, like it's, Man that could be trying to kick a man's door, try and nick a Man's food [drugs], try and go at a man's workers, you understand? So, we don't deal with [hands] you understand, so what I do, it requires a bullet-proof vest and stab vest man'. Boss, 24yrs.*

Business conflicts, such as an aggressive take-over of a drugs line generates further risk and potential for knife attacks:

*'If they try to take over, then obviously it's gonna get sticky innit. We're not gonna sit here, you have to retaliate and it comes at a price. One time maybe they run off, then the next time someone could end up dead, stabbed, because these days you get a lot of young youths that you see carrying shanks and that. And then*

*you've got adrenaline and everything, they will not think about what they're doing'. Boss, 24 yrs.*

In this way the emotional content of actors in the social field further adds to unpredictability.

### **Unpredictability of social field**

As the social field evolves and alters it becomes more unpredictable and unreadable. This can catch people out as rules and actors both change:

*'You never know what's gonna happen tomorrow, do you know what I'm trying to say?' Tyrel, 18 yrs.*

*'Anything could happen, like you could get stabbed, you could get shot, if Mandem try to come in your Endz and that, it's like I was saying before, it will come down to a wrong look over anything, you could get stabbed, you could get shot, so you never know'. Mel, 19yrs.*

The unpredictability of the social field has now precipitated a new form of knife attack. This is essentially an imperative for immediate action – identifiable as Stab on Sight:

*'I don't care if I see them with their mum, sister, whoever. It goes off straight away. Shooting, stabbing, whatever you're going to do'. Pulla, 18 yrs.*

In this way the social field operates with a range of actors at different stages and levels in the hierarchy striving amongst a set of recognised and codified behaviours. Knife-carrying becomes a vehicle for reputation management and control. Its utilisation offers opportunity for nuanced advantage and advancement. In the final section I shall demonstrate how the conditions of the social field are now changing and becoming more dangerous.

### **Discussion: A social field in flux**

The social field of the gang is not fixed but evolving, (Densley 2013; Harding 2014). Recent evolution has been quickened through the ubiquity of social media and as a new location for gang activity. The landscape of risk has thus recently altered and social competition has increased within this 'arena of struggle' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). This creates greater uncertainty and unpredictability but also new opportunities for expanding the gang repertoire and demonstrating adherence to the social field rules. Greater competition amongst field actors brings increased difficulty in assuring status elevation. This results in



greater jostling for position and heightened potential for status deflation via frequent challenges to status.

This has led to a Crisis of Authenticity within the street world and particularly within the street gang. It is now critical to be considered, and then validated by others, as an 'authentic player' in 'The Game'. A validation of Authenticity will increase respect and operates as a regular Standing Order in the bank of street capital. Moreover it situates you within the circle of trust, designating you as a bona-fide 'Playa'. Not to carry a knife, or to be without one, is to be 'Fake' and unauthentic. Those deemed unauthentic, or who fail to demonstrate their authenticity, will now be vulnerable to being identified, revealed, targeted and victimised. It is therefore paramount to avoid the slur of fakery and its attendant deflation of street capital. A knife becomes the defender of the identity (not just the person), (Traynor 2016). When that identity is street-oriented towards a criminal/deviant lifestyle, weapon-carrying becomes an enhancing signifier of intent or immersion offering opportunities for group solidarity and bonding (see Harcourt 2006 and Brennan 2018).

### **Agency and taking control**

Operating within the landscape of risk requires constant vigilance and re-appraisal of presenting risks. The multiple variables which generate and give rise to violence are almost immeasurable. Thus knife-carrying within the social field operates as an opportunity to take control. Within a fearful and hostile environment it shows capacity to correctly risk-assess all opportunities but it then goes further to recalibrate and re-balance the perception of risk. In such ways knife-carrying becomes not just common sense but an adaptive logical response to social field threats.

In this way knife-carrying provides and facilitates a form of agency which might otherwise be missing. One aspect of the landscape of risk is self-regulation whereby young people limit their own movements through territory perceived a risky (Harding 2014). Traynor notes that, 'a knife can facilitate greater geographical movement for young people who feel that their movement is restricted by the presence of hostile others, and provides an increased sense of confidence', (Traynor 2016).

Other forms of taking control are evident within the social field. Again we are told that young people will hide their knives around an estate in case they get stopped and searched or suddenly jumped. A more agentic re-framed perspective suggests that this is re-taking control of the environment. Pre-placement of knives within the shrubbery of a housing estate or block of flats demonstrates ability to risk assess and control the environment.

Holligan et al (2016) and Winlow and Hall (2009) identified something similar from their interview participants who were prepared to strike first and act pre-emptively. Recent expansion of the social field suggests that this assertion, once limited to interpretations of the

physical field boundary (gang turf), is now open to wider interpretation. Some seek more control over the encounter with rivals and Opps and thus readily draw their blade first. In this way there is one less risk to consider. The possibility of the knife being used against you (derided as nanny-talk by some youth) is rejected as not possible as this would admit a flaw or skill deficit.

Knife-carrying as a form of Agency is not just felt or believed but visibly enacted and demonstrated to others encompassing words to action or myth-making to movement. It therefore allows for increased control of the situation (in the field of unpredictability), permitting control of planning and control of the narrative. Personal biography becomes reassuringly self-scripted.

Taking control provides opportunities to re-balance and re-coup street capital. It shows that you have understood the new current dynamics of the social field and are ready to move up to the next level and be reckoned with. It demonstrates agency and visible agency demonstrates street capital in its own right. Knife-carrying and knife attacks are therefore a visible Performance of Authenticity.

### **Pressure in 'The Game'**

Changes in the gang social field play heavily upon its actors. The daily dynamics, e.g. pressures of navigating the field, monitoring levels of street capital, running a drugs business, evading capture or arrest, evading attack by Opps or rivals and its recent unpredictability - generates intolerable stress and endless pressure, (Pryce, 1979). Smoking a joint will no longer provide the release and dialogue with peers only reifies the dangers through negative rumination, (Woods and Alleyne 2010). All this brings a compelling imperative to release the pressure and achieve legitimacy, (Lauger 2012).

Stabbing permits a release from the pressure: pressure for revenge or retaliation; to perform in front of peers; to act, regain or rebuild street capital. After a stabbing the performance is done and achieved - you can leave the stage. Expectations, both personal and group, have been met bestowing a sense of achievement. Successful pressure release requires achievement in the culmination of the action required to complete this stage in 'The Game'. It is the passport to elevation to the next level and is marked up as another win in 'The Game'. It confirms you as an Arch Game Player. It certifies, verifies, stamps and reinforces your authenticity in 'the Game'.

The knife, as tool, becomes the means to achieve this release, constructing it as both (life) Taker but also (Street life) Giver. Conceptually then it both cuts and heals simultaneously: manifestly wounding the rival whilst healing the internal latent wounds of the assailant. In this moment there is a transference of the pain of 'The Game' which is then physically pushed

into someone else; a personalised invasion of the body corpus. Hidden inner wounds are externalised making the latent manifest, both visceral and visible. Street Capital theory places great emphasis upon the asymmetries of the social field. In the same way that street capital theory demands an equalising of any deficit, when applied to knife crime, the theory suggests that words are redundant and insufficient so pain must be equalised, transferred to, then experienced by, the victim.

After the stabbing some assailants report a sense of dissonance, disassociation or unfulfillment, a questioning of what next? The social field (like Gaming) always provokes the question - how do I get to the next level? What skills are now required? Some assailants report a sense of achievement and elevation of feelings usually achieved via exuberant post-incident debriefs with peers, centered on myth-making and crafting personalised street biographies.

Through re-framing street narratives we can identify that knife-carrying and knife-enabled crime can be agentic routes to advancement within the social field. It grants opportunities to take control of one's social fate, to recalibrate chances of success and survival, to re-balance asymmetric challenges, (including transactional ones); to protect the body corpus and the identity. As a move in 'The Game', knife-enabled crime is normalised by the habitus, it is expected, validated, and very effective.

### **Future policy**

Research into weapon-carrying, (notably motivations for knife-enabled crime), and youth violence, (notably the specifically situated dynamics/behaviours operating within street gangs), remains underfunded and inadequate. It is hoped the above insights, plus those of Brennan (2018) and Traynor (2016), which offer more nuanced interpretations of the variant motivations for weapon-carrying and knife-enabled crime will find a translation into policy. We must recognise that over-simplified dichotomies of fear/protection are insufficiently generalist and fail to account for the victim/offender nexus. We should seek to avoid sweeping catch-all policy interventions by focusing more bespoke interventions on different motivational cohorts. Importantly policy interventions must challenge knife-carrying as the supreme signifier of street gang 'authenticity' and aim to exploit differences between those youth who are embedded adherents to street gang rules and street justice and those for whom knife-carrying advertises their desire to be seen as 'authentic'.

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