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# 'You and Your Laws and Us With Our Laws': A Murderer's Stories Navigate Conflicting Normative Domains[1]

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Utilizando o modelo estrutural de histórias de Labov e a tipologia de relatos de Schönbach, em **'Vocês com as suas leis e nós com as nossas': Histórias de um assassino que atravessam domínios normativos conflitantes** examinamos uma entrevista com um assassino na Venezuela e comparamos duas histórias ali narradas: uma sobre o assassinato e outra sobre a sua vida familiar. Embora a maior parte da primeira dissesse respeito ao homicídio, invocando valores e normas ligadas à subcultura criminosa, nela também se avaliou o crime a partir da perspectiva de um enquadramento convencional que reconhecia a importância da família. A segunda história, ambientada nesse mesmo quadro familiar, revela um conflito entre diferentes exigências normativas postas ao assassino. Ele resolveu-o dando finalmente primazia a seus valores e identidade subculturais.

**Palavras-chave:** narrativa, histórias, justificações, subcultura, assassinato, Venezuela

Employing Labov's structural model of stories and Schönbach's typology of accounts, we examine an interview with a murderer in Venezuela and compare two stories that were narrated within it: one about the murder and one about his family life. While most of the first story accounted for the murder by calling on values and norms that attach to the criminal subculture, it also evaluated the crime from the perspective of a conventional framework that recognized the importance of family. The second story was set within that same family framework, revealing a conflict between different normative demands made on the murderer. He resolved it by finally giving primacy to his subcultural values and identity.

**Keywords:** narrative, stories, accounts, subculture, murder, Venezuela

## Introduction

> — I tell you, it happened that day because, in the end, that partner, well, he also stole something from us there, and we were there. So, you know how that is: you and your laws and us with our laws. You understand? No, I am not from here, I am from Maracay, and in the end I was here on holiday, and stuff, and you know, I was fucking around, and the guy, well, he stole from me and I had to kill him. That's it. What else are we going to do? You know that these are things that happen. Now I'm sentenced here. Just imagine, a bunch of years, unfortunately. Well, he lost and we lost. You understand? (20–26)[2]

This is the story that L, a convicted murderer, told to a researcher who had gone to see him in jail. The researcher was interested in studying the situational context of murders — the circumstances, participants, and events immediately before, during and after a killing — and he wanted to get at this by asking murderers to tell him what happened. So, as with other interviews that he had carried out, he asked L to "tell the story of what happened [*that day*] (...) in

your own words," and L duly told his story. It was brief, and the interviewer waited for more, so L added the following:

> — It happened like that. What happened was that I was selling drugs over here, we were selling drugs over here and stuff, and fucking around, and the crazy guy stole from me, so we had to kill him. What else are we going to do? We can't do anything else, unfortunately. What can we do? (26–29)

And with that, he felt that he had told his story and waited to see what the interviewer would say. After another brief pause, the interviewer asked "Was that at night?" and from there L began to add to his narrative ("No, that was in the afternoon..."), prompted by further questions from his listener. What followed was a conversation lasting about an hour, in which L added detail to his story and also told other stories — about a robbery he had once committed, about his arrest, conviction and sentencing for the murder, and a little bit about his family. But the essence of his first story remained unchanged and, as it developed, what he had initially said would become clearer. By the end of the interview, it would be seen that L's first brief story reflected the tension that he felt between his deviant world and his family life. In this article, we explore that tension and the ways in which it was presented and handled by L. We focus on the structure of his narrative and on the accounts that he gave within it, both of which illuminate the strategies he used to construct his moral persona. Our objective is to provide a detailed example of the "complex and often contradictory stories violent actors tell" (SANDBERG *et al.*, 2015, p. 1182).

In the context of a day-to-day conversation or a research interview, a question such as "tell us what happened" is almost always a powerful invitation for someone to talk about something that happened previously. A request or instruction such as this usually offers the recipient ample opportunity to tell a story — whether short or long, clear or confused, well-structured or chaotic — which brings together people, actions, places, and times in some sort of plot that gives the listener a version of what happened. By including these elements in what is told, the narrator is developing — consciously or unconsciously — a story and not simply giving a chronicle, metaphor, explanation or piece of dialogue (PRESSER and SANDBERG, 2015a), because in a story "events are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience" (RIESSMAN and SPEEDY, 2007, p. 430); in other words, events are given a temporal continuity and a causal relation between them.

A story (which is one of the principal types of narrative) has a structure or content that is susceptible to analysis, as amply shown in the humanities and social sciences (LABOV, 1972; LABOV and WALETZKY, 1997; MISHLER, 1995; RIESSMAN, 2005), including criminology (ALTHOFF *et al.*, 2020; PRESSER and SANDBERG, 2015b). In particular, "Narrative Criminology" (PRESSER, 2009) has sought to use narrative analysis to study offenders' subjective interpretations

of their crimes and the ways in which their meanings are created and communicated through stories (FERRITO *et al.*, 2017; PRESSER and SANDBERG, 2015b). Narrative criminologists are interested in the stories that offenders tell about their crimes, because those stories reveal the ways in which offenders make sense of their experiences and construct their identities and sense of self (PRESSER, 2004; SANDBERG *et al.*, 2015). Additionally, given that their stories describe events that break rules, they inevitably deal with moral matters and usually involve some form of "moral repair", such as those used in "accounts" designed to explain negative or untoward behavior (GOFFMAN, 1959; ORBUCH, 1997; SCHÖNBACH, 1980; SCOTT and LYMAN, 1968).

In the present study, we combine the structural model of stories developed by Labov and Waletzky (1997) with a typology of accounts developed by Schönbach (1980) to examine the way in which a convicted murderer — who we have called L — told the story about his crime to a researcher. More precisely, we aim to explore how L told more than one story in which the murder played a role and to identify the different types of account (concessions, justifications, excuses and refusals) he offered in two of them. In one story, L presented himself as a *malandro* (wrongdoer),[3] well versed in the norms and behaviors of persistent offenders; and in the other, he talked of his role as husband and as father to four children and described something of his family life and its disruptions. Each story focused on a different experiential and normative domain, one deviant and the other conventional, and it is interesting to see how he resolved the conflict between them.

Our article is organized into four sections. In the first, we provide an overview of the structural model of narrative and of the nature and typology of accounts. We pay particular attention to what we believe to be a novel aspect of our study, which is the combination of both perspectives in order to gain a more comprehensive view of how the intersection between storytelling and accounting illuminates the presentation of behavior, identity, and moral status and the meanings given to deviant behavior — in this case a murder. In the second section, we describe the methods used to conduct the interview with L and to analyze both the structural elements of his story and the accounts that he provided within them. In the third section, we present the results of our analysis; and finally, we reflect on the contribution that our findings make to understanding the management of different normative demands made on career offenders.

## Narrative analysis and accounts

The so-called "narrative turn" in the social sciences has clearly established that, apart from being an object of study, narrative is also a method of analysis and a form of reporting an investigation (EWICK and SILBEY, 1995; SANDBERG *et al.*, 2015). The classical conception of

narrative refers to a significant story which is worth telling, characterized by a chain of events and personal experiences which are ordered logically and chronologically (LABOV, 1972), in which "one thing happens in a consequence of another" (FRANK, 2012, p. 25) and which also develops a moral stance (OCHS and CAPPS, 2001) towards its content. Given those characteristics, narrative analysis undoubtedly offers an important method, not only for understanding the way in which a succession of events is organized, structured and presented, but also for exploring the objective and meaning of any story.

Within the variety of methods that have been developed for studying narrative, a structural approach has been very popular (FRANZOSI, 1998; MISHLER, 1995), in particular that developed by Labov and Waletzky (1997) (see RIESSMAN, 2005). The latter proposed that a narrative structure includes at least some, or all, of the following elements:

a) *Abstract* (optional): introduces and summarises the narrative, implicitly answering the question "What is this story about?".
b) *Orientation* (optional): gives the time and place of the events and describes the people involved and their circumstances and activities at the start of the story.
c) *Complication* (required): a fundamental part of the narrative, and the whole story, which describes an event or series of events that lead to a problem, or something unexpected. The complication is an answer to the question "And then what happened?".
d) *Evaluation* (optional): description of the emotional or dramatic effects of the story from the subjective perspective of the narrator; or "an explanation or justification for actions taken by an actor in the narrative" (LOWREY and RAY, 2015, p. 284). In effect, the evaluation gives the rationale or "point" of the story, and answers the questions "Why is the story being told?", "What is its meaning?".
e) *Resolution* (optional): the final segment(s) of the chain of events which describes the actions taken after the complication, answering the question "And what finally happened?"
f) *Coda* (optional): signals that the story has ended.

Labov and Waletzky (1997) argued that all of these elements must be present in order for a story to be "complete." On the other hand, a narrative is "minimal" if it only includes the complication. Labov also commented that the orientation and evaluation do not necessarily have to appear in the order shown above; they can be included in any part of the narrative. But for Labov, evaluation is a key part of narrative structure because it communicates the narrator's interpretation of the story. Indeed, in more recent work, Labov (2002, 2010) argued that the evaluation represents an important ideological space for the verbal construction of "praise and blame" and the resulting "polarization" of the actors involved in the story. Thus, narratives that include an evaluative element with a sufficiently developed moral posture are an important resource for assigning or

negotiating responsibilities or justifying negative events through the use of linguistic strategies (MISHLER, 1995) and tactics such as providing "accounts" (LOWREY and RAY, 2015).

For their part, accounts have been amply studied in the fields of communication, psychology, and sociology and, like many other topics of interest, they have been defined in different ways (DE FINA, 2009; ORBUCH, 1997). Thus, for some scholars accounts are confined to explanations of objectionable behavior (SCOTT and LYMAN, 1968), whereas in the views of others accounts can also include descriptions or narratives of events which are not necessarily incorrect, undesirable or problematic (ORBUCH, 1997). In the latter vein, some scholars have used the concept of accounts to designate stories which describe a wide variety of events, such as divorce, death, retirement, job loss and migration (see, for example, DE FINA, 2009; HARVEY *et al.*, 1990; ORBUCH, 1997). For them, the story *is* the account.

In the present study, we use the more restricted character of accounts as first described by Scott and Lyman (1968). These are generally short utterances or segments of text which are offered for expected or actual questioning by others of someone's own behavior, and are designed, among other things, to save "moral face." Schönbach (1980; see also SCOTT and LYMAN, 1968; SYKES and MATZA, 1957) identified four such types of accounts:

a) *Concessions*, in which responsibility and blame for the behavior are accepted, and which may be accompanied by an apology or remorse.
b) *Justifications*, which claim that the behavior being questioned was not, in fact, objectionable.
c) *Excuses*, which mitigate personal responsibility and blame for the behavior.
d) *Refusals*, which deny that the event has occurred or that it is attributable to the speaker.

Apart from saving moral face, accounts can also be deployed to protect a self-image, construct identity, repair broken relations, mitigate responsibility, avoid punishment, or resolve conflicts (FRITSCHE, 2002; SCHÖNBACH, 1980; SCOTT and LYMAN, 1968; SYKES and MATZA, 1957). Because accounts implicitly contain moral elements relating to agency, responsibility, blame, faults, and norm violation, they are particularly significant for narratives and evaluations relating to criminal and deviant behavior (PRESSER, 2009). And in this more restricted view, stories *contain* accounts.

A growing body of work in criminology focuses on the narratives developed by offenders and victims to describe their experiences (PRESSER and SANDBERG, 2015a). This "narrative criminology" has explored narratives of homicide, including the accounts within them, with a view to understanding the construction of meanings and the explanations given by murderers (see, for example, BROOKMAN, 2013; DILMON and TIMOR, 2014; DI MARCO and EVANS, 2020; HENSON and OLSON, 2010; PETTIGREW, 2020; PRESSER, 2004). However, few studies

have looked at the functioning of these explanations within the structure of the narrative as modelled by Labov and Waletzky (1997). Perhaps the study by Lowrey and Ray (2015) comes closest to this type of analysis, in which they compared the presence or absence of evaluative components in true and false confessions about murder. However, they did not employ a typology of accounts to focus on the particular sorts of comment (excuses, justifications, etc.) made by the defendants; thus, the role played by accounts in the presentation of a moral self was not addressed.

Studying accounts within the structure of a narrative, as we propose to do, allows us to put them in the context of the larger narrative strategy. As we see it, the relationship between accounts and narrative strategy is reciprocal: accounts take on meaning within the context of a given story, and the story itself also gives meaning to the accounts. Exploring both should help to understand the significance and meaning of the behavior subject to normative questioning as told by the person who is questioned, in this case a murderer whose narrative we selected as a case study.

## Data collection and coding strategy

The material in this study comes from one of eleven interviews with men convicted for murder carried out as part of a larger project on homicide in Venezuela[4]. L was sentenced to 15 years in prison for the murder — along with associates — of another man who he said had double-crossed him. As L told his story, it became clear that he had had ample experience as an offender and he appeared quite open to relaying information about previous crimes as well about the murder. When he was interviewed in March 2019, he was 36 years old, having committed the murder six years before that.

L was interviewed in a police jail in the town of Ejido (near Mérida, in Western Venezuela) which, like many other police jails in the country, holds both suspects and convicted offenders. The format was a semi-structured interview with the questions being put to L by a member of the research team. After describing the project, outlining the topic of the interview and obtaining L's consent to participate in the research project, the interviewer began with the following question: "We'd like you to tell us the story of what happened... [*in relation to the murder*]." Like other interviewees, L told a fairly short initial story about the murder and then answered numerous follow-up questions from the interviewer, focused particularly on the incident and its immediate antecedents. As the interview proceeded, L also narrated the details of a previous serious offense (an armed robbery) and talked quite a lot about how he was arrested, tried and sentenced for the murder. He also included some elements of a brief story about his family life. The interview lasted for approximately one hour and, with L's consent, was digitally recorded on an audio device.

Project assistants transcribed the interview and checked the transcription for accuracy, and our analysis is based on that transcript.

The analysis involved two stages. First, using Labov's structural model of narratives (LABOV, 1972; LABOV and WALETZKY, 1997), we identified the different parts of L's story. Given the segmented structure of the story which resulted, the second stage was to identify and code the accounts that appeared in each segment using Schönbach's (1980) typology (concessions, excuses, justifications, refusals). Each author independently read and coded the transcript of the interview and afterwards both authors compared the results and discussed and resolved any differences in coding. Parts of the interview with L, especially at the beginning, reproduced the canonical structure of narrative proposed by Labov. As the interview moved forward, L repeated some things already said about the murder or added things that had not been said before. As mentioned above, he also told stories about a previous armed robbery, about the legal process relating to his arrest, trial and sentence, and about his family[5]. For our study, we focus on L's stories about the murder and about his family life, because the latter provided a significant counterpoint to his main narrative and showed him juggling with different experiential domains and different types of accountability. (However, we recognize that it would be possible to look at all the stories L told, the links between them, and the consequences for identity and meaning.) As might be expected, we found the largest number of accounts in the evaluative portion of L's story about the murder.

## The story of the murder: 'You and your laws and us with our laws'

L's narrative of the murder developed within two normative and experiential frameworks which were announced in his initial story: "you and your laws and us with our laws." As his narrative developed, most emphasis was given to "us with our laws;" however, towards the end he shifted to the terrain corresponding to "you and your laws." Interestingly, the shift was brought about by his realization that the victim had a young daughter, and in his other story about his own family L also evaluated the murder in terms of the prevailing norms which stress the importance of family.

### 'Our laws'

L's *orientation* for the story of the murder showed him to be well versed in the norms and behaviors of a life in crime. He was on vacation in the city of Mérida, having been let out of prison in San Juan de Los Morros (near Maracay in Central Venezuela) after serving almost five years for the armed robbery of a judge. He commented that there was nothing to do in prisons, no programs

or courses, and that the only thing prisoners learned was to take firearms apart and put them back together, or how hand grenades work. As a result, "you come out of prison crazier" (58). In Mérida, he was selling drugs, getting up to no good, "jumping around" from one thing to another.

The *complication* began when L and others were at a place where they usually gathered (which he did not identify) and the police arrived. Everyone ran away, but somehow as that was happening L lost a Glock pistol and half a kilo of cocaine. The details were not clear or complete, but L heard that "so-and-so" (never identified) had got the pistol and he told the future victim (V) to go and retrieve it, also offering him that they could work together, presumably in drug dealing. Although V retrieved the pistol, he kept it for himself and avoided all contact with L. (In narrating this L referred to V as a *loco* [*crazy person, or idiot*] clearly indicating that V had deviated from the rules that govern expected behavior in relation to crime, its accessories, and fruits.) L searched for V and talked to another *loco* who told him where to find V. In circumstances that were not clear in L's story, several mates brought V and the other *loco* to the place where the murder happened, but the other *loco* ran away when he saw what the group wanted to do to V. (This other *loco* was also the person who later identified L and two others as the murderers.).

As a *resolution* to the problem that had emerged, the group was ready to start roughing V up, but L told him that he could avoid problems if he admitted that he had the gun and returned it. According to L, V at first denied having the gun, but as the violence continued, changed to saying that he had it, and then back to saying that he did not. L told him that he had not given a clear answer and that what had started would be finished — he would die.

> — When we arrived — there were four of us — and the other mates were waiting for us and that's when one of the mates says "Shall we give it to him?" So I took hold of him like this [*shows the interviewer*] and I said to him "Look brother, I'm going to speak clearly to you and I want you to speak clearly to me, because today you're going to die if you don't." So the loco first says no to me and afterwards when we were really giving it to him, there was a moment when he said "yes, yes, I'll give it back to you" and so on. But in that moment the loco said yes and then said no. And I said: "Ahh, well, no. You're going a motherfucking long way away. You're out. So that you see what you do." (149–157)

> — "They told me that you have my pistol; you've got my stuff; give me my stuff. I don't want a problem with you; I don't want anything, you poofter. Tell me clearly once and for all, because I'm going to tell you clearly, you're going to die right now, just like this. You understand me?" I told him once and for all, "You're going to die for being a cheat, a bad one, false," and stuff, and well, you know, that cocksucker. Well, he's all but still alive... He wasn't going to die... I myself was going to give him a truce so that he could live. But no; he went back and forth because he was a cocksucker. He didn't even deserve to live. He had gone crazy. (339–345)

L and others attacked V with a pole and a machete. They also tried to strangle him, and they threw him down a ravine, thinking that he was dead. When they saw that he was still alive, they continued attacking V until he was dead.

In the evaluative segments of this narrative, L offered justifications, excuses, and a concession in relation to what happened. The *justifications* outlined the norms that L claimed should prevail in dealings between criminals and could be summarised in the popular phrase "honor among thieves."

> — We practically live something like a crazy life, a life where, well, you know that if you're going to run a red light[6] they're still going to kill you. You understand me? Similarly, if you decide to steal something, if you do something that you shouldn't, they kill you because you know that you are doing something wrong. You can't steal from another loco who is working just to get money for himself; and you're going to steal from him? It's a lie. (162–166)

> — In the end, everything is difficult. I'm hanging out with a bunch of rats, malandros, fuckers, whatever you want to call them. Fuck. I would always tread carefully, with the right steps. You understand me? "Don't hang out with that one." I don't hang out with him. "Don't go around with..." I don't. Where am I going to go? You understand me? I've got to start to tread carefully. If not, it's sad. They kill you. (247–250)

> — They shouldn't be able to accuse you of a mistake. You understand me? Let's say that you leave me a bag of guns, if you want to; and me, what do I have to do? That's yours. I have to keep it just as you gave it to me. I have to look after it. If you give me a bag of drugs, or a bag of money, or whatever you want, give me your money, it's got to be all there. You understand me? Not being there thinking that "I'm going to take some of your money," "I'm going to take some," because as it's a bag of money, I'm going to take out some without knowing if you've already counted it, without knowing anything. You can't. You've got to walk properly. You understand me? Walk well, normal, always original, never ever looking at other people's things. (252–260)

L said that one should not steal from others who, in his terms, are "working" in order to live. He described the ideal behavior — not messing with other criminal's stuff — and also commented on the need to be very careful about who one deals with and how one deals with them. The justification for murdering V was that he broke this rule and therefore deserved to die. L described this rule as holding among all those who, like him, lived "the crazy life." It was one of "our laws." And to illustrate it he put himself in the place of the victim: if L stole from others, if he did not "tread carefully," he himself would be killed. This was the same principle that he espoused to V as he and his associates were beginning to rough him up. Later in the interview, L described this as a form of justice:

> — Do you think that what happened was right? (Interviewer)

> — Right, because…maybe you have a different idea of justice and we have a different idea… For us, it turns out that, well, the right thing is that he died. With that people come to respect things more….so respect is what we are looking for, so that each one holds the line…walks straight. (L) (385–391)

L's *excuses* for the murder built on his justification for the killing: once the victim broke the rules, there was nothing else that could be done. As he told V in the early stages of the incident, if he came clean, admitted that he had L's gun and agreed to return it, L would have called a truce

and left him alone. However, because V denied, admitted, and then denied having the gun, L had no option but to kill him ("Ahh, well, no. You're going a motherfucking long way away. You're out."). Indeed, there were aspects of L's narrative which framed the incident as an informal (and violent) court hearing. They were in a secluded area on a hill outside the town, among pine trees. When L and three associates arrived, six others — together with V — were already there and one of them asked L whether they should "give it to him." L practically described himself in the role of a judge, explaining to V that if he told the truth he would avoid the violence. He commented to the interviewer that, given where they were gathered, V must have known that they were thinking of killing him. However, V shifted his story back and forth and as a result he was punished: "when he said no [*he didn't have the gun*], that was it; now there was no going back: dead and dead" (200). L mentioned that some of those present were against going as far as killing V, but "he said yes, he said no, and there were no more words…but now, fuck it, now [*there was nothing more to be done*]" (237–241). In other words, once V had failed to come clean about the gun, L had no choice but to kill him.[7] And to emphasize this, several times during the interview, L asked the rhetorical question "What else are we going to do?". Furthermore, using this portrayal of the murder as a necessary punishment, L was able to attribute it to V: "I don't know what happened to that guy... he was a mate, but I don't know, he brought about his own death there, stupidly, unfortunate" (35–37); "in the end it was like the day of the crazy, I don't know what happened to that *loco*" (157–158). While L knew what happened to rule breakers in the world of *malandros*, V had either forgotten it or hoped to avoid it, but "If he had given me my thing, I wouldn't have killed him" (225).

## 'Your laws'

Alongside these justifications and excuses, anchored in "our laws," L also switched to "your laws" by *conceding* that V's death was not right, but wrong. Towards the end of the interview, he described how he had told a lot of people that he was thinking of killing V, and that many had tried to dissuade him, including a *santero* [*folk priest*]. But "That was before it happened, you see. Here I am super, super repentant" (552). One day in prison he was talking to a female friend about the incident with V and she told him that V was the father of her daughter, something he had not known before. It made quite a big impression on him:

> — Well, the guy was a guy, dude. Also I didn't know that he was the father of one of my friends' child, dude. And I found out in prison, because I was in prison and I was talking to her [*on a visiting day*] and no, "That was the father of my daughter." "Oh fuck, yes girl. Well, I'm hope that you'll forgive me," but dude, I had no alternative.

— After your explanation, what did she say? (Interviewer)
— Nooo, nothing, because everyone there knew. In that neighborhood everyone knew what that guy had taken, and everything, everything.
— According to what you heard, did people understand why it happened? (Interviewer)
— No. Unfortunately, in truth, nothing should have ever happened. What happened is, well, it happened without anyone wanting it to…It's like everything: if it's happened we can't go back again. (503–512)

Finding out that V was not only a father, but father to his friend's daughter, L was drawn away from the world of the *malandro* to that of families. Suddenly, V was a "guy," not the "poofter," "cocksucker" or *loco* who had stolen his gun. Similarly, his friend and her neighbors could not have accepted an account of the crime which reflected *malandro* rules and principles. Significantly, it was interactions with people other than his criminal associates that led him to express his regrets. Indeed, he aligned himself with people in V's neighborhood, saying that "nothing should ever have happened."

## The story of L's family

Just as the framing of V as a father led L to evaluate his own behavior in a different light, within his narrative L also told a brief story about his own family. The *orientation* described something of his life as a husband and father. He was born and lived in Maracay, and a cousin of his fell in love with a woman from Mérida who was working in Maracay as a maid. They got together and moved to Mérida. On a return trip to Maracay, L's cousin persuaded him to go to Mérida for a "job" (unspecified) and on that trip L met and fell in love with his wife: "I came over here to fall in love, so far away, twelve hours from my homeland. Fuuuuuck!" (379–380).

Even with a life in crime and the consequent encounters with criminal justice, L was able to maintain frequent contact in with his family. Following the armed robbery of the judge, he was sentenced to nearly six years in prison but was released earlier:

— I did my four years and ten months, but I did them with my children inside, practically sleeping with me[8], routine…Anyone could…could go in. Fuck; if your grandmother went to visit they would let her in. (361–366)

Once out of prison, L had begun to build up his family life again:

— I had just done four years and ten months over there [*in San Juan de Los Morros*]. Imagine it. I was out and just beginning... to have a bit of money and stuff, to look out for myself, to provide for my kids. Because, as it happens, I have four kids... A daughter who's fifteen, one who's twelve, one who's seven and a son who's one. So I was there, well, and the only person who gives me some grief is my woman, no-one else. (166–185)

Then came the *complication*: after V's murder, L relocated to Maracay but was eventually arrested, sent back to Mérida, convicted and sentenced to prison:

> — But I've been here [*in Ejido and other police jails in Mérida*] for four years without seeing my family. Imagine it. (366)

Unlike his story about the murder, in which the latter was the *resolution* to the *complication* caused by the loss of his gun and drugs, in the story of his family the murder was not even the direct *complication*; rather, it was his conviction and imprisonment which *complicated* his family life. He might have been exaggerating the situation somewhat, for how could he have a one-year-old son if he had been in prison and not seen his wife for four years? (There must have been conjugal visits of some sort.) However, his broader claim about the *complication* was that it had ruptured his family life.

> — I lost my family, dude, which is out there suffering.
> — Why did you lose your family? (Interviewer)
> — No; I have my family, right? But I lost it in the sense that, fuck, you know that you are working hard out there for your family. So it is better to be out there than in here, because in here we don't do anything, and in this place [*Ejido jail*] even less. At least outside, as I am telling you, I have my family, my thing, and I had my family and all my stuff, cool. But here, there's no-one, there's no-one to work with, to do a deal with, to do anything. (515–522)

In this story, there was as yet no *resolution*, which might come if L's wife severed all contact with him, or if he returned to her and the children once he is released from prison. One part of the *evaluation* revealed the point of L's story to be the importance of his family:

> — I always ask God to, no, no, leave me in peace now with my family, dude. I want to live well with my family and relax, dude. Eh, it's not that I like this, or anything about this, but in the end I don't know what happened, and fate sent me that jumped-up kid, dude. I don't look for trouble; in fact trying to take care of my money and enjoy life and have fun with my kids and family, dude. I don't have nothing to do with no-one, not deaths, nor nothing of no-one. (347–352)

In these comments, L located himself firmly within the realm of family life where problems with others, including murders, had no part. In saying that he did not like "this," he was recognizing that *malandro* life and family life were incompatible, but how did he resolve the contradiction? In the end, his adherence to *malandro* values, in particular the importance of enforcing respect for the rules (and the person) prevailed over the importance of family. In accounting for the distress caused to his family, and himself, he effectively *justified* his actions by appealing to the importance of the *malandro* code for his sense of self.

> — If he [*V*] were to be born again, well, I would kill him again, to see if he would still be loco. Because, after all, you... you don't want to bring harm to nobody. They bring it on themselves. After all, why did he have to be

> thinking about stealing from me? He should be thinking about stealing from a millionaire, from someone who has something, from someone else. (205–208)
>
> — They'd told me that this loco had already done the same thing several times. So now, now, it was practically the case that if I didn't do it, someone else would. If someone else had, I wouldn't have had to do it. Unfortunately, it was me who got him; we had to do it ourselves. There's regret, yes dude, there's loads of regret, there's a bit of everything. But now we couldn't turn the disk over or rewind the film. If we could rewind, fuck, everything would have changed. But it was that cocksucker... Nobody would have died. What happened was that, well, it fell to me. (570–576)

Thus, despite the problems that the murder and conviction brought for L's family life, if V were to somehow reappear L would have killed him again. L saw the murder as the culmination of an unfortunate set of events: V had double crossed other associates and got away with it; L was the next victim of his cheating and could not do anything else but kill him. It "fell to him" to mete out punishment and take the consequences even if that meant losing his family life again. This, perhaps, might have also been the account which he would give to his wife, the only person who "gives him a little bit of grief."

## Discussion and conclusion

If L's narrative was fragmented, disorderly and wide ranging, this was partly because of the nature of the interview and the interviewer's questions, which diverted to new topics only to return to previous ones. Of course, it was also due to L's narrative style, as he touched on different aspects of the case and his life, often leaving things unclear. However, within this mosaic of talk L told several stories which can be assembled using Labov's structural model. Most obviously, the main story was about the murder; and there were additional stories about an armed robbery L had committed, about his arrest, conviction and imprisonment for the murder, and about his family life. The first three reproduced his experience as a *malandro* (his life in crime and as a prisoner), but the fourth located him in a different social domain, that of the family, which held different — more conventional — values and placed different demands on him. We have chosen to explore his stories about the murder and his family, which were not discrete narrative events but interleaved in his talk with the interviewer, in order to see how he managed and accounted for the conflict between the two normative domains that he moved in.

Previous research in narrative criminology has recognized that narratives about crime can include more than one discursive framework (e.g., BROOKMAN, 2015), but has been less attentive to the concurrence of different stories within one narrative. Previous research on accounts has focused on their social functions and their possible role in facilitating crime (MARUNA and

COPES, 2005; PRESSER and SANDBERG, 2015a), but has paid less attention to the ways in which they are embedded in stories and their function in the moral work that the stories are designed to achieve. Using a single narrative, offered by L in interview, we have shown how he used three types of account in his story about the murder (justifications, excuses, and a concession) which belies the putative assumption that actors will only provide one type of account when they are challenged, or perceive themselves to be challenged, about something that they have done. While lawyers may look to identify and exploit what they see as inconsistencies in testimony (e.g., EADES, 2008), including the use of different kinds of account, in the interview that L gave he did not see any inconsistencies in his evaluation of the murder and neither did his interviewer.

The challenge for L was of a different nature. His story about the murder was told and evaluated from the perspective of a *malandro* who, through his manner of talk and the information that he gave, explicitly and intentionally presented himself as such to the interviewer. However, his story about his family, albeit much briefer and with sparse information, introduced a different experiential domain and a different identity for L. Crucially, it was a story in which the complication had occurred (imprisonment and separation from his family) but L told of no resolution. His evaluation of events so far was a concession to the importance of maintaining and supporting the family, but this conflicted with his commitment to the *malandro* code. Realizing that the conflict was apparent as he told the two stories, he opted to give priority to his *malandro* identity and accept the disruption of his family as a product of fate, which had sent V his way. Much previous research has focused on subcultural values and discourses, such as those enacted by L, but what has been less evident is the manner in which those values and discourses co-exist with conventional values within one narrative as they did in what L said (however, see ANDERSON, 1999).

As we noted previously, L's was one of eleven interviews conducted as part of a larger project, and it is important to note that no other interviewee told a story about a dispute among thieves, nor presented themselves as a *malandro*.[9] Other interviewees told of conflicts with neighbors or friends, in two cases with intimate partners, and often denied responsibility for the killing, attributing it instead to others, to alcohol, or to an accident. Thus, we make no claim for the generality of our findings and it would be important to explore the structural characteristics of the narratives that these other interviewees told and within them the ways in which they accounted for their behavior. Our objective here has been to follow Sandberg *et al.*'s (2015) call to illustrate the complex and conflicting stories that an offender can tell and, more particularly, explore the way in which a murderer navigated two experiential and discursive domains.

## Notes

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[2] Here, and in the rest of the article, we have opted to use a more literal translation of L's talk rather than trying to smooth it out for the reader. We have also included all of the vulgar words that L used and tried to find appropriate equivalents for his slang terms. Numbers in brackets refer to the line numbers in the transcript of the interview with L.

[3] "Malandro" is the popular term used to designate persistent offenders and neighborhood nuisances in Venezuela.

[4] Similar to many other studies in narrative criminology (e.g., BAMBERG and WIPFF, 2020; BROOKMAN, 2015; DOLLINGER, 2018), we use a single case study to illustrate in detail the discursive strategies we are interested in (cf., NOOR, 2008). We selected the interview with L because he alone among the eleven interviewees presented himself as a *malandro* and in his narrative interwove this self-portrait with that of a family man. By contrast, the other interviewees all presented themselves as conventional individuals drawn by diverse circumstances into committing (or attempting) murder. L's narrative thus allowed a comparison between the stories of the *malandro* and the family man in terms of the meaning and role of homicide within each.

[5] McKendy (2006, pp. 473-474, emphasis in original) described similar characteristics in interviews with prisoners in Canada: "In places they were messy and hard to follow, strewn with what I've come to call *narrative debris*: fragments, false starts, pauses, gaps, inconsistencies, disfluencies, self-interruptions, repetition, non-lexicalized sounds, and various kinds of verbal stumbling."

[6] "Run a red light" is slang for breaking rules.

[7] Of those involved in the incident, two others were convicted of murder. L did not talk about those who were not convicted, simply saying that those who were convicted were bearing the consequences of their behavior.

[8] Up until 2013, family members were allowed to stay overnight in prisons using makeshift accommodation in cells, passageways or on roofs (PÉREZ SANTIAGO and BIRKBECK, 2017, p. 1046).

[9] One of the interviewees had also been convicted in L's case, but he said little in the interview, accepting only that he was present at the scene but denying any hand in the killing.

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