



To become 'ndrangheta in Calabria: organisational narrative criminology and the constitution of mafia organisations

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Abstract

The 'ndrangheta is a mafia group from Calabria, Southern Italy. Considerable efforts have been made to understand the structures and the organisation of this mafia, not only in the province of Reggio Calabria where it originated, but also in other Calabrian provinces and even outside the Calabrian region. Building on judicial data from a recent maxi-trial (Rinascita-Scott) against 'ndrangheta clans in the province of Vibo Valentia, we build a theoretical approach based on narrative criminology applied to organisational studies of secretive organisations. We find a 'script of narratives' emerging from collaborators and affiliates' stories – about socialisation, discretion, and accreditation - which reveals how recognition and constitution of 'added' 'ndrangheta clans are thought to work. This script helps us understand the constitutive power of narratives in mafias and critically approach the study of such organisations.

Keywords Mafia · 'Ndrangheta · Calabria · Narrative criminology · Communication-as-constitution · Organisational theory

Introduction and background

When a maxi-trial against 355 defendants started in Calabria, Southern Italy, in January 2021, newspapers all over the world reported once again on the growing threat of the Calabrian mafia, the 'ndrangheta. The trial, dubbed 'Rinascita-Scott', was set in motion in December 2019, when over 400 people were arrested by order of the DDA (District Antimafia Directorate) in the district of Catanzaro. The people arrested were alleged members or associates of 'ndrangheta clans in the province of Vibo Valentia, one of the five provinces of Calabria (which

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are Cosenza, Catanzaro, Crotona, Reggio Calabria and Vibo Valentia). While various sections of this trial are ongoing, the findings of Rinascita-Scott pose questions relating to the structure and the operational capacity of the 'ndrangheta. Impressive in this trial is also the number of *pentiti*, former members turned collaborators of the prosecution (over 50).

The 'ndrangheta – which is an old term coming from Greek etymology that loosely means 'Honoured Society' – is not a new phenomenon (Ciconte 2019). The 'ndrangheta was added to the criminal organisations within article 416bis of the Penal code (targeting mafia-type associations) only in 2010 following investigations and trials named 'Crimine' (Sergi and Lavorgna 2016); however, the birth of the Calabrian mafia is usually placed before or during the unification of Italy in 1861 (Ciconte 2011).

The 'ndrangheta has its roots in the province of Reggio Calabria, where most of its activities developed. The known 'ndrangheta structure that this paper will refer to is therefore the one in the province of Reggio Calabria. It is today considered the most powerful and *glocal* Italian mafia – both locally strong and globally present (Sergi and Lavorgna 2016). This claim is based on the versatility and flexibility of the clans in different criminal markets, as well as their ability to influence politicians, entrepreneurs and other social actors through infiltration, corruption, and connivance. Europol (2013) warned about the reach of 'ndrangheta clans in Europe in both illegal and legal markets (Savona and Riccardi 2015; Dagnes et al. 2019); a recent study (Sergi and Rizzuti 2022) has found that of all Italian mafia groups in Europe, 'ndrangheta clans are the most active in drug trafficking and money laundering. Clans' activities are traceable outside Europe in countries such as Canada, Australia, USA as well as in Latin America (Sergi 2022; Varese 2011).

Considerable efforts have been made to understand the structures and the operational capacity of this mafia since the 1970s; various antimafia operations have centred around the 'ndrangheta and its structures: from the trial of the 'three provinces' in the 1970s/1980s, to the trial 'Olimpia' in the 1990s, to finally reach a considerable result with the trials for operation Crimine in late 2000s. Crimine's final sentence in 2016 gave the world a snapshot of what the 'ndrangheta looks like, building on previous trials and knowledge of the previous 20 years but succeeding where others had failed: several convictions, which fixed in jurisprudence the representation of the 'ndrangheta as a hierarchical and highly coordinated mafia.

The 'ndrangheta appears traditional and yet innovative, often revealed by both criminal activities and socio-cultural traits, such as their family-oriented model and their attachment to rituals (Ciconte 2015; Sergi 2022). Catino et al. (2022) have also confirmed how intermarriages among some key 'ndrangheta families have been used strategically to strengthen criminal alliances. Structure-wise, the 'ndrangheta is presented as a clan-based federation with different levels of Higher-Level Bodies of Coordination, as emerging from accrued knowledge 'certified' by judicial cases (Catino 2019):

The key structures of the 'ndrangheta to keep in mind also for the purposes of this paper are:

- *Ndrina*: the family clan indicated by one or more surname. It is often described as hierarchical and based on blood ties, by birth or marriage.
- *Locale*: a confederation of several 'ndrine in a given territory and which is divided in major and minor society.
- *Major and minor societies* of a locale: characterised by different rankings, called *doti*, each attributed through various oaths and blessings/rituals, depending on the level of importance.
- *Mandamento*: three territorial configurations above the locale, all in the province of Reggio Calabria (in the city of Reggio Calabria, on the Ionian and on the Tyrrhenian side of the province); these structures act to support the activating and the solving of disputes among *locali*.
- *Provincia* or *Crimine*: the structure at the highest level of coordination; it works above the mandamenti and operates for the whole province of Reggio Calabria. Established in the '70s but effectively known only at a later stage, it was set up to promote coordination across activities and solve the most difficult disputes across clans.

There are several issues with the analysis of the 'ndrangheta's structure and the clans' capabilities in these structures. One of the key issues relates to the homogeneity and unity of the organisation, especially beyond the province of Reggio Calabria; for over 30 years – until early 2000s, journalists, magistrates, and investigators saw this mafia with a collective name but a very fragmented structure, no hierarchical unity, but mere coordination across the different clans. Since operation Crimine, the structure of this mafia is 'proved' as vertical and hierarchical from the very basic level of the 'ndrine (Sergi and Sergi 2021; Catino 2019). This unity is often taken at face value by analysts and researchers as if it was something we do not need to debate any longer. This can be problematic when, especially abroad, it becomes prescriptive of what the 'ndrangheta *is expected to be*.

The argument built by the prosecutors, in the pre-trial and trial documents of Rinascita-Scott, is that in the province of Vibo Valentia, all mafia-type criminal organisations are aligned to 'ndrangheta's rules and structures of the neighbouring province, Reggio Calabria. This argument is primarily based on the narratives of collaborators, former clan members, and to a lesser extent - on interceptions and surveillance gathered in recent years. Collaborators' declarations and interceptions/surveillance are presented to sustain that the 'ndrangheta is in fact a unitary organisation, also outside its 'original' and most known province of Reggio Calabria, and that this is a commonly accepted status quo in the other provinces, especially Vibo Valentia. The validation, constitution, and preservation of the status of the 'ndrangheta in the different Calabrian provinces, and especially in Vibo Valentia, are essential components of evidence at trial, thus subjected to the same risk of distortion whereas the truth of the trial becomes the one and only truth. In this paper, we reflect on how to explore the recognition and constitution of 'ndrangheta clans critically, with the example of the clans in Vibo Valentia. The on-going maxi-trial Rinascita-Scott¹ gives us the opportunity to explore the narratives of collaborators

¹ For media coverage of Rinascita-Scott see (in Italian) <https://www.lacnews24.it/rinascita-scott/> and (in English) <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/reporters/20220107-italy-s-ndrangheta-mafia-a-trial-for-the-history-books> and

and members under a perspective of narrative criminology applied to organisational studies. We find a ‘script of narratives’ emerging from collaborators and members’ stories – made of three steps: socialisation, discretion, and accreditation. This script reveals how recognition and constitution of ‘added’ ‘ndrangheta clans are thought to work. We argue that narratives help constitute the ‘ndrangheta as a secretive organisation; they contribute to shaping an environment, made of shared scripts and shared actions, that lead to criminogenic or harmful practices.

This study

This study needs to be considered primarily as a theoretical effort to introduce a critical criminological approach, via narrative criminology, in the study of mafia organisations. Organisational approaches to mafias usually ignore or provide a stereotyped portrait of cultural factors of these phenomena, taken as exogenous to the analysis (Sergi 2017; Santoro 2021). We argue that narrative criminology, as a social constructivist approach, complements organisational studies, and especially communication-as-constitutive perspectives when applied to secretive organisations. The study is rooted in, and wishes to contribute to, the processes of production of knowledge. We treat the ‘ndrangheta as a pretext to interrogate the paths of recognition and constitution of the mafia phenomenon, but essentially the study wishes to explore the mechanisms of recognition (Pizzorno 2007) in semi-secret organisations, through (internal) members’ narratives. Narratives are a way of representing the organisation, but also a way of defining it, making it consistent with expectations, and telling others about it, which is consistent with the idea of ‘organisation’ as ‘organising’ (Czarniawska 2014).

The study has an empirical component to substantiate theoretical claims. It will critically analyse the narratives in Rinascita-Scott pre-trial and trial documents and the documents from other trials that Rinascita-Scott refers to. These narratives are primarily by former members of the ‘ndrangheta in interrogations; by collaborators of justice who spoke to prosecutors, and by (alleged) members intercepted in conversations.

The main research question is: *what are the paths of constitution and recognition of ‘ndrangheta clans, between one another, and within the main ‘ndrangheta structure based in the province of Reggio Calabria?* The primary dataset for this study is found in the 13,856 pages of pre-trial documents, containing arrest warrants, excerpts of collaborators’ declarations, interceptions, and surveillance transcripts. This data was coded for 1) name and particulars of the mafia-type group/clan and 2) the group/clan’s path into the ‘ndrangheta. In order to cross-check point 2, further data was collected, including: declarations of former members and/or interceptions in other investigations mentioned by Rinascita-Scott files pre-trial documents, when available; judiciary chronicles of witnesses’ testimonies for Rinascita-Scott and for other relevant trials/operations through a purposive media analysis (searching for the name of the operation + the name of the witness + the location of the clan) on LaCNews and il Vibonese, local tv and press news outlets covering the Rinascita-Scott trial daily (starting 13 January 2021 and for just over one year). Narratives were first analysed for content and

then for discourse and connected to the different clans and structures of the criminal organisations they referred to. Secondly, narratives were grouped around the emerging categories of the script, which will be further analysed below.

We propose a narrative criminology framework to consider the constitution and construction of mafia-as-clandestine organisations, specifically the ‘ndrangheta today, as *the product of an enduring script of narratives*. A set of stories (narratives) may intentionally or unintentionally build a secretive or clandestine organisation when those within the organisation somehow coordinate their action within the common script. We argue that we can understand mafias as (criminogenic) products of insiders’ and members’ shared scripts of narratives, their stories, and that we must consider how these narratives are generated from within the secretive organisation they constitute. The ultimate challenge of research into mafia organisations is therefore to understand how the script is indeed formed and shared.

This framework helps us critically analyse the modus operandi, the expectations, and essentially the architecture, of the ‘ndrangheta, by looking at the way in which narratives from within contribute to *making* the phenomenon. This phenomenon, differently from other approaches concerned with the study of mafia organisations, allow us to also understand changes, dissonances, and evolution in the narratives of the ‘ndrangheta. We are not concerned about whether the ‘ndrangheta in Vibo Valentia is really, truthfully, one organisation with the ‘ndrangheta in Reggio Calabria and whether this mafia has a unified structure or not. We argue in fact, that the way these narratives are shared, built, and reinforced, also constitute the organisation, true or not as they might be.

Narrative criminology meets communication-as-constitutive perspectives on secretive organisations

a) Narratives in criminology and organisational studies on secretive organisations

Narrative theory has been a particularly successful framework in recent critical criminological advancements (Fleetwood et al. 2019; Presser and Sandberg 2019). It was anticipated by the work of Henry and Milovanovic (1996) about ‘constitutive’ criminology, which posits that crime is not caused but rather ‘discursively’ constructed. Narrative criminology was introduced by Presser (2009) who highlighted how stories are constitutive of both crime and harm. Narrative criminology is a social constructivist approach even though as Sandberg and Fondevila (2021) notice, studies using narrative criminology as a framework, have not always paid much attention to changes in formal state definitions and popular public understandings of crime. In our case, the state definition of mafias in Italy is particularly important to shape narratives and has been shaped by narratives too: mafia and antimafia languages are ontologically interdependent (Sergi 2017).

Studies in narrative criminology focus primarily on the narratives of offenders (Fleetwood 2016) as well as of victims (Hourigan 2019) with emphasis placed on the stories individuals tell at a certain moment in time and in certain societal contexts. According to Presser and Sandberg (2015:1) “*narrative criminology is any inquiry*

based on the view of stories as instigating, sustaining, or effecting desistance from, harmful action". Presser (2018: 57) explains that narratives "set out an integrated common sense of action", thus including 'action' among other characteristics of narratives that make it constitutive of crime and harm, such as temporality (across interlinked events) and causality (between events). Temporal and causal relationships are developments in plots that shape narratives. Narratives can be criminogenic not only because they can directly drive people to commit criminal acts, but primarily because they shape the environment and create *scripts of narratives* that eventually lead to crime and harm. This is particularly important, we argue, when we look at (criminal/mafia) organisations; it is in the shared scripts of narratives that we find the constitution of a secretive organisation. In fact, as argued by Sandberg (2022), narratives can be affected by organisational contexts: stories can be adapted to what the contexts 'expects to hear' or otherwise guided by organisational cultures. The relationship between individual and organisational narratives is found in the small, everyday talks and exchanges; abstract levels of organisational values and discourses are constantly negotiated with here-and-now storytelling in the interplay between language repetition, contexts where the talk occurs and wider socio-historical ways of understanding the world (Van De Mierop et al. 2022). The scripts that might emerge are the result of internalised day-to-day activities and utterances. These are social scripts; they are culture-specific but modified through interaction over time while living and 'being' in a situation repeatedly (Schank and Abelson 1977; Meng 2008). They can include a certain degree of organisation in as much as they embody the process of self-creation of Foucauldian concern (Foucault 1970) and Dewey's conceptualisation of habits as pre-condition of knowledge (Dewey, [1922] Dewey 1983). Scripts are quite popular in criminological research, as a way of generating, organising, and systematising knowledge - accent on *generating* - about the procedural aspects and procedural requirements of crime commission (Cornish 1994). In constitutive (narrative and critical) criminology (Henry and Milovanovic 1996), however, scripts are texts, stories, narratives that are constantly growing and, therefore, weaving into one another while 'constructing' realities.

Here is the possible integration between the organisational approach to mafias (as an ensemble of rules and procedures that define roles) and narrative criminology to mafias (mafias as product of scripts). The mafia organisation can therefore be seen as the product of the scripts of narratives that members tell in as much as these narratives create, reinforce, and 'disseminate' concepts, roles, and rules. Additionally, organisational theory postulates that communication is constitutive of organisations and their relations with the environments (Taylor et al. 1996). The communication-as-constitutive framework in organisational studies acknowledges that the recursive property of language is a key element to 'organising' (Cooren et al. 2011) and that the constitution of an organisation occurs also in repeated conversations (and metaconversations) among members (Robichaud et al. 2004). According to Stohl and Stohl (2011) this framework can be applied, with some adjustments, to secretive or clandestine organisations too. These are organisations characterised by 1) mutual agreement among members to keep their affiliation to the organisation a secret; 2) furtivity of internal activities and collective governance structures; and 3) external traces of the existence of the organisation eventually leak

on the outside. Organisational studies, crucially, have also looked at how clandestine organisations, namely the Sicilian mafia, maintain ‘strategic ambiguity’, especially in the form of opacity (e.g., protective silence), equivocality (e.g., one-sided disclosing) and absurdity (e.g., hyperbolic disclosing), to protect themselves from public scrutiny (Cappellaro et al. 2021). We can therefore identify the ‘ndrangheta as a secretive or clandestine organisation – part visible, part secret, whose members are bound to non-disclosure of affiliation status, whose communication is recursive and, as such, it can become constitutive and strategically ambiguous through a variety of means. This brings us to advance more theoretical hypotheses.

b) Truthfulness and legitimacy in communicating the ‘ndrangheta as a secretive organisation

The name ‘ndrangheta, according to a ‘mainstream’ or ‘master’ narrative of prosecutors, scholars, and journalists indicates first and foremost a consortium of confederated clans acting through alliances and strategic coordination structures from the southern part of Calabria, in the hinterland of the capital city Reggio Calabria. But what we know about the ‘ndrangheta comes mostly from stories of those who were inside of it (collaborators’ declarations), or still are inside of it (interceptions). It is recognised that information and communication are strategic assets when we understand mafias as secret societies (Catino 2019), as they are necessary inputs in the industry of private protection which, according to Gambetta (1993), is mafia’s distinctive activity among its many businesses. Thus, analysing the nature of communication in mafias is paramount (Santoro 2021). There are a few problems in applying a communication-as-constitutive approach to secretive or clandestine organisations (Stohl and Stohl 2011). As Taylor and Van Every (2000) argues, the role of *conversations* allows a collection of individuals to transform into a collective actor by allowing them to make sense of the circumstances in which they find themselves. With opaque membership (we don’t always know who is speaking), such as those of clandestine organisations (and the ‘ndrangheta among them), it is more complex, if not at times impossible, to approach conversations and meta-conversations and appreciate the constitutive nature of communication this way. There is in fact, a ‘fragmentary materiality’, as Stohl and Stohl (2011) call it, in what we capture from the outside of a secretive / mafia organisation. Declarations, interceptions, and other conversations about the organisation are fragments, and these fragments are themselves ‘texts’. Indeed, as interceptions are often revealed through arrest warrants, we can also assume that they have already undergone some degree of construction by prosecutors, who are also giving their own imprinting to these judicial narratives; some offices/prosecutors will apply criminal law in a constructivist way, and some others won’t (Sergi 2019). These fragments can be analysed in a narrative criminology perspective as social and cultural scripts (Meng 2008). A crucial element of narrative criminology is that it is not concerned with the accuracy or truthfulness of stories, essentially because stories contribute to criminogenic or harmful actions, and not because of the truthfulness or accuracy of the events they narrate (Presser and Sandberg 2019). This means that some narratives about the ‘ndrangheta contribute to construct the organisation independently from the accuracy and/or truthfulness of the story.

Another issue in applying the communication-as-constitutive approach to secretive organisation is that of *legitimacy* (Stohl and Stohl 2011). As Taylor et al. (1996) recall, what an organisation is always depends on who is speaking in its name, on its behalf, and who can legitimately do so. In the description of 'ndrangheta's structures consolidated by the judiciary and by organisational literature (Catino 2019), the legitimacy of collaborators' declarations and intercepted materials overlaps with the standards of proof of evidence at trials and is seldom questioned. Arguably, legitimacy comes from the credibility of witnesses and this, in turn, creates an expectation of *truth* on their narratives. According to narrative criminologists, however, narratives are always collectively sourced and, as such, they are the product of specific social contexts and a variety of interests at play. Legitimacy is part of this collective production as much as it emerges as part of the social contexts where narratives exist. Presser and Sandberg (2019) argue that, for narrative criminologists, stories *precede* actions, even though they are told *following* action. As stories keep being told they might enable and reinforce more harmful or criminogenic effects. This leads us to move beyond issues of legitimacy, authority, and truthfulness in these narratives: the collective nature of narratives/stories is constitutive of organisations in specific social contexts because narratives set out an integrated common sense, a script of narratives.

c) The role of narratives in competing social constructions of the 'ndrangheta as an organisation

According to Stohl and Stohl (2011), communication-as-constitutive perspectives see organisations as transparent, formal, and evolving systems that are knowable, also through communication. The risk, especially with secretive organisations, is to confuse the organisation with its manifestations, as if everything we see from the outside is *all there is to see of the whole organisation*. The secretive organisation risks being *reified* on the basis on its (partial) communicated manifestations, treated as a rational system, with clear pathways and structures. This reification does not allow to understand mutations and cultural components, including those brought about by changing constitutive and collective narratives in specific spaces and times.

The 'ndrangheta's structure, for the way it has been described by the judiciary and reconstructed in specialist organisational literature based largely on judicial files (Catino 2019), risks to appear as a *truism*, a set of dogmatic statements made by insiders or captured during the investigation in some other way, all taken for the *reality* of the 'ndrangheta. In a nutshell, organisational approaches to the structure of the 'ndrangheta may accept the organisation as it has been 'constructed' by the judiciary, oftentimes forgetting that court cases, albeit logical in their own way, do obey evidentiary rules and construct data and intelligence in a way that fits *evidentiary* narrative. The fragments, declarations and/or intercepted conversations - constructed in judiciary files to respect the standards of law of evidence - were not given in the first instance for that objective, of course. Essentially, the way the 'ndrangheta is described by prosecutors - after listening to collaborators and to members' interceptions is *intentionally* constructed also through selected narratives to build a rational and intelligible structure of mafia power, with an objective:

punishment. Oral knowledge and narratives from insiders, transferred into judiciary documentation, are constructed as another form of knowledge (Berger and Luckman 1991). Those in the ‘ndrangheta might have different perspectives, values, and observation points into this secretive organisation altogether. To insiders, the organisation might appear as a nebulous *afterthought* and not a clearly structured organisation; they see parts and manifestations of it (like rituals or activities). The rest, they construct collectively through others’ narratives and conversations, trying to make sense of their own, and others’, acquired *scripts*.

Finally, Stohl and Stohl (2011), in line with narrative criminologists, argue that communication about secretive or clandestine organisations is deeply embedded in historical records and that the opportunities and constraints of these organisations are embedded in their contexts. Narratives are historically and socially embedded and for this reason any reification or formalistic description of the organisation can only be a picture of a certain set of narratives in a certain historical moment. A critical and cultural understanding of the history of the ‘ndrangheta is needed to be able to make sense of the constitutive capacity of current texts, conversations, and other communication mechanisms within historical depths (Sergi 2022). Indeed, looking at ‘soft variables’ within organisations - such as historical and cultural elements - can help us trace how a sense of belonging is generated in organisations and how cultural traits are also soft variables used as a way to control members and communication of the organisation (Kunda 1995).

This framework can help us approach the empirical question of this study - *what are the paths of constitution and recognition of ‘ndrangheta clans, between one another and within the main ‘ndrangheta structure?* We can therefore analyse the Rinascita-Scott narratives and the scripts they reveal, specifically in relation to an aspect of the organisation: the constitution and recognition of ‘added’ clans.

Script of narratives: To become ‘ndrangheta in Calabria

Overall, notwithstanding what different collaborators *think* they know and *decide* to share in their stories for the benefit of prosecutors, their account of the ‘ndrangheta structures, rituals, and codes, appear convergent but also often characterised by ‘hearsay’. Inaccuracies, converging accounts and hearsay all constitute the secretive character of the organisation that the ‘ndrangheta is for its members. Most of the accounts analysed— even when rendered to prosecutors or at trial in the recent years - refer to knowledge of 1980s-1990s with very few exceptions. The temporality and causality of these narratives consolidated in the last 30 years and contributed to build the ‘ndrangheta. Members have dissimilar levels of knowledge about the organisation, acquired directly or indirectly. However, their narratives reveal *a script of narratives*, a shared sense of how the ‘ndrangheta is formed and more specifically how ‘new’ units, in a different province than Reggio Calabria, associate with the ‘main’ ‘ndrangheta from Reggio Calabria. As said, this script is the result of internalised day-to-day activities and utterances; it is a social script, culture-specific but modified through interaction over time while living and ‘being’ in the ‘ndrangheta’s surroundings repeatedly (Schank and Abelson 1977; Meng 2008).

Divergent narratives in this script can be considered an effect of the secretive nature of the organisation. Eventually, the script for recognition of ‘added’ ‘ndrangheta clans is made of the following narratives.

- *Socialisation*: the narrative of how individuals involved with a local clan (alleged or ascertained members) learn about the rest of the ‘ndrangheta and how they get socialised into the organisation’s structures, roles, and expectations.
- *Discretion*: the narrative of discretionary pathways to be recognised as part of the organisation.
- *Accreditation*: the narrative of how belonging to the organisation gets ‘certified’, internally and/or externally.

Socialisation: Hearsay and expectations

In the province of Vibo Valentia, a narrative on *socialisation* in the ‘ndrangheta structures happens organically for most individuals already members or affiliates of emerging clans. Geographical proximity, hearsay and word-of-mouth are the mechanisms that facilitate socialisation of different individuals into the secretive organisational structures where they will obtain recognition for their own clan and activities. Excerpts taken from collaborators’ accounts and from interceptions of alleged members show that socialisation into the ‘ndrangheta is about developing expectations about recognition and constitution of criminal structures. Formalities and conventions, which are learned and taught by ‘ndranghetisti or wannabe ‘ndranghetisti, reveal and construct the secrecy and the ritualistic nature of the organisation. Consider, for example, the ways in which members and affiliates of groups around Vibo Valentia learn about the main clan, Mancuso, from a village called Limbadi, which is identified as the reference clan (the local ‘Crimine’) for all ‘ndrangheta clans in the province of Vibo Valentia; the Mancuso are those who liaise with the main structure in the province of Reggio Calabria. The following excerpts are examples of how, and what, affiliates and wannabe affiliates learn first and narrate afterwards about the Mancusos within the files of Rinascita-Scott and Imponimento analysed.

Benito: so today I learned that Limbadi is the village of mafiosi and I didn’t know it!

Domenico: you didn’t?!

Pino: it’s been forever, they have the ‘mother’ there [meaning the *Crimine function*]!

Domenico: It’s in every newspaper Benito!

Loredana: come on, Benito, it’s been forever!

(Interception of Pino Camillò, affiliate, with dinner guests, 2018).

In this excerpt the affiliate and his guests confirm that the reputation of the village is indeed linked to a consolidated power of the Mancuso clan.

I have heard, in a common criminal context with the Mancusos, of their relationships with masonic lodges, but briefly referred to; I wouldn’t ask if things aren’t said spontaneously. (Franco Pino, 2018, collaborator).

This excerpt shows how socialisation happens organically, naturally, not by ‘asking’ or inquiring about a clan or the organisation.

I know that the Mancusos had connections with the Pesce clan, but I cannot say, from a point of view of the ‘ndrangheta, what their role was, and what power they exercised; I don’t know if there was the same type of relationship between the Mancuso of Limbadi and the satellite clans of the Vibonese province that existed between us from Lamezia and the Belloccos of Rosarno. (Paolo Iannò, 2018, collaborator).

Here the collaborator shows that his knowledge is limited, that socialisation into the workings of the ‘ndrangheta and the Mancuso in this case is expected to work in a certain way, but that way is not fully confirmed.

At the beginning of the 1990s I met Luigi Mancuso. I haven’t met him since, but I know he is the most intelligent of the family and he has a very high ranking in the ‘ndrangheta. I have learned from the Giampà men and other criminals that Mancuso had been called by the Sicilians when they did the attacks of Capaci and Firenze,² to side with them. But he said no. He is the most authoritative, he has a national reputation not just a regional one. (Andrea Mantella, 2018, collaborator).

A recurring narrative on the superiority of the boss Luigi Mancuso is indeed one of the first things that are learned and shared in the territory about the clan.

I don’t know what rankings the Mancusos had, because there was never a chance for them to reveal it... not even in jail. You can’t ask a ‘ndranghetista his ranking, it’s not respectful. (Paolo, Iannò, 2018, collaborator).

In this excerpt we confirm again how socialisation into the ‘ndrangheta rankings happens organically and without any ‘asking’; indeed the high ranking of the Mancuso men is presumed and often left unconfirmed.

Within the Mancuso clan the narrative of socialisation into the ‘ndrangheta structures can include denial and rebuttal of the ‘ndrangheta organisation altogether, as the excerpt below shows. Such a narrative is peculiar in a clan that is recognised as one of the most important groups of the organisation.

The ‘ndrangheta no longer exists! ... once, in Limbadi, Nicotera, Rosarno, ... there was the ‘ndrangheta! ... now the ‘ndrangheta is part of Freemasonry! ... [...] let’s say ... it is under the Freemasonry, but they have the same rules and the same things ... [...]what’s more? ... now there is Freemasonry and those four crooked people who still believe in the ‘ndrangheta! ... [...] once upon a time the ‘ndrangheta belonged to the wealthy! ... afterwards they left it to the poor people, to the diggers ... and they did Freemasonry! ... those are the rules!

² The attack of Capaci refers to the car bomb that in 1992 killed judge Giovanni Falcone, his wife Francesca Morvillo and the bodyguards in Sicily. The attack in Florence refers to a bomb in the city of Florence detonated in 1993. Both attacks are linked to the strategy of tension and attacks by Cosa nostra.

... how has Freemasonry got it! ... [...] because the real 'ndrangheta is not what they told you... because the 'ndrangheta is not going to do what *they* say ... [...] because ... once ... now they are all young men who go ... they are freewheeling they are drug addicts! ... [...] common crime! ... the 'ndrangheta didn't want to do drugs! ... [...] ... it's over! ... you have to modernize! ... don't stay with the old rules! ... [...] the world changes and everything has to be changed! ... today we call it "Freemasonry" ... tomorrow we call it p4, p6, p9³ (Pantaleone Mancuso, one of the bosses of the clan, intercepted in conversation, 2011).

The narratives reveal how, even in the province of Vibo, clans are also said to be connected to the main 'ndrangheta in Reggio Calabria, indicated as Reggio, or often 'Polsi', with reference to the Sanctuary of the Madonna (of Polsi) in the Aspromonte mountains, a symbolic place for the 'ndrangheta.

From the Vibo area I knew, even directly, members of clans Anello, Cracolici, Mancuso, La Rosa. I knew Mantella and Lo Bianco. All these clans, like the Bonavota, responded to Reggio Calabria. It was not possible to be recognised if not by Polsi, so even the clans in Rosarno necessarily responded to Polsi, even if I had no direct knowledge of it (Giuseppe Giampà, 2018, collaborator).

In this excerpt the collaborator confirms one of the pillars of the socialisation in the 'ndrangheta: the main structure remains in Reggio Calabria.

The 'ndrangheta clans I mentioned, Vallelunga and Anello, were detached from Mancuso, I believe, and responded directly to Umberto Bellocco from Rosarno. However, Umberto Bellocco and in general the Bellocco family - together with the Pesce - were part of the locale of Rosarno and therefore I think they always referred to Polsi [Reggio Calabria] in the end (Michele Iannello, 2018, collaborator).

Here the collaborator airs doubts on two clans, Vallelunga and Anello, who are in the province of Vibo Valentia, thus are supposed to be 'under' the Mancuso but in practice they might be linked to another very important clan, Bellocco, in the province of Vibo Valentia. The reason for this is geographical proximity as Rosarno is only a few km away from the area where the Mancuso and their associates are mostly active. In any case the affiliation of Vallelunga and Anello to the Bellocco does not impair their 'legitimacy' as they also are linked somehow to the main structure in Reggio Calabria/Polsi.

You ask me if there is a higher structure that is responsible for all the various provinces. I can answer that this needs to be identified in the 'Crimine of San Luca'. I don't know if in this Crimine of San Luca there were also members from other provinces, from Cosenza, Vibo, Lombardia, Piemonte, but I think that it's San Luca because the people from the province of Reggio Calabria have the highest ranking, and only those with the highest ranking can be part of the Crimine (Francesco Oliverio, 2013, collaborator).

³ This should be intended as a reference to the irregular masonic lodge called P2 (Propaganda Due) which was discovered in the late 1970s and led to a huge corruption scandal.

When learning about the organisation, affiliates tend to have only a few things clear: the core of the 'ndrangheta is in Reggio Calabria, with expectations about the higher ranking of members there. The destiny of clans in other provinces is often quite ambiguous or uncertain.

Discretion: Pathways of access and protection

While the narrative of socialisation into the 'ndrangheta norms and structures is an ongoing learning experience for many 'ndranghetisti (or wannabes), the 'official' recognition of criminal structures ('ndrina or a locale) in Vibo Valentia is a narrative of *discretion* by a few individuals. In other words, it seems that there are a few acceptable and accepted ways, at times alternative to one another, to be 'recognised'. There are different '*lines of criminality*' as they are called by some collaborators, or in interceptions, which represent *pathways of access* into the 'ndrangheta. The narratives on how 'lines of criminality' work construct the accepted pathways to access the organisation. These pathways are as important as the people, with discretion power, who guarantee them: they imply an offer of protection to the clan that asks to be 'added'.

Depending on which 'ndrina/clan and/or locale seeks recognition there are expected/predictable 'lines of criminality', which start with an introduction by the 'right' people (for example, in the province of Vibo Valentia, by one of the Mancusos). The excerpts below are about the recognition of '*ndrine* and *locali* (plural) in the Vibo province: collaborators speak about the 'ndrine or the locale they know about and how they accessed recognition. These narratives show how pathways of access and lines of criminality are justified: locally in the Vibo province, a criminal structure needs to declare itself *with or against* the Mancuso clan. Afterwards, the structure will proceed to seek recognition by the clans in Reggio Calabria, through different – established – reputable members/clans (such as Bellocco, Commisso, Pelle, in the Reggio-based 'ndrangheta).

This 'ndrina was recognised directly by Umberto Bellocco and not by Mancuso. For the years I am referring to (1986-1995) I know that both Rocco Anello and Damiano Vallelunga had disagreements with the Mancusos from Limbadi, thus they responded directly to Umberto Bellocco from Rosarno, choosing an alternative, 'bastard', line than the rest of the Vibo province. (Michele Iannello, 2018, collaborator, on the Locale of Filadelfia, Vibo Valentia).

In the same fashion as before, this collaborator declares that the reason why two Vibo-based clans (Vallelunga and Anello) were indeed linked to clans in Reggio and not to the Mancuso is because of disagreements. Their line of criminality and access into the 'ndrangheta starts by situating themselves against the main local group.

The recognition of the *locale* happened before my arrival; I never had direct contacts with the bosses of other historical clans to which mine was connected, such as Pelle and Commisso, Aquino and the group by Franco D'Onofrio in Piemonte, or others. [...] The Locale of the Piscopisani was created in 2009/2010 by Rosario Battaglia, Michele and Rosario Fiorillo; thanks to

the crimes they had committed they met the requirements to receive the *doti* (rankings) even though they were young. [...] They particularly disliked the Mancusos and their abuses around Piscopio. They were resolute in this hatred, and this helped them to be recognised as Locale. (Raffaele Moscato, 2015, collaborator, on the Locale of Piscopio).

In this excerpt the pathway to recognition and the lines of the criminality show that indeed a lot of the process remains expected and narrated as the affiliate reveals never to have met those who ‘approved’ the locale of Piscopio, but that nevertheless the narrative on how this happened is ‘legitimate’.

I know that Franco D’Onofrio managed to get the *locale* recognised for the Piscopisani thanks to the Commissos in Siderno. [...] I know about the opening of the Locale because D’Onofrio told me in jail in Turin, but also because I had it confirmed by the Bonavota, those with whom I had more contacts. [...] I know the opening of this Locale was celebrated [...] For the opening of the *locale*, D’Onofrio brought Giuseppe Galati to the Commissos in Siderno, I heard it from TV and afterwards the Piscopisani told me that it really happened and that was also confirmed by Francesco Scrugli. (Andrea Mantella, 2016, collaborator, about the Locale of Piscopio).

The same collaborator talks more about the recognition of the locale of Piscopio by revealing how he learned about the events in question (again, socialisation at play) and how he confirmed it as well.

At that time, in San Giovanni di Mileto there was a detached ‘ndrina of the two Mancusos, Luigi and Giuseppe. Since 1986, the Mancusos in Limbadi had the highest rankings in the ‘ndranhgeta in the Vibo province. They had a *locale* that was connected directly to San Luca [Reggio Calabria]. They were the bosses of the whole area of Vibo and all the local ‘ndrangheta structures referred to them, they were ‘the mother house’ for the area. (Michele Iannello, 2018, collaborator, about the Locale of Limbadi).

The collaborator here confirms indirectly that the reason why the Mancuso were considered to be the bosses of the local area was because of their connection to San Luca, one of the core areas of the ‘ndrangheta power and origins in Reggio Calabria.

When there was the feud between Bonavota and Petrolo, the latter were stronger as they were supported by Mancuso and Fiaré. As soon as Antonio Bonavota learned about this line of criminality, he sent a letter to Piromalli [important family in Gioia Tauro, Reggio Calabria] asking for no one else to enter the feud and, subsequently, to intercede with Mancuso and Fiaré. The Bonavota, recently got closer to the group of Cutro [province of Crotona] even if their dead father had high rankings and was tight with Polsi [Reggio Calabria]. (Bartolomeo Arena, deposition at trial Rinascita Scott, 2020, about ‘ndrina Bonavota).

This collaborator confirms how there are some members of the ‘ndrangheta, who hold discretionary power; these individuals - like Piromalli in the excerpt

above – have the reputation and the power to decide and intercede in pathways of access and in lines of criminality.

My line in the ‘ndrangheta was with Giuseppe Piromalli, Luigi Mancuso, Nino Pesce and Umberto Bellocco. In 1980-1981 I met in jail in Cosenza Nino Gangemi from Gioia Tauro, connected to Piromalli and then Umberto Bellocco from Rosarno. I had already received the dote (ranking) of *camorra*, but Gangemi told me that my situation had to be voided and the ‘copiata’ [the triad of men who bless members with new rankings] changed. I was ‘undressed’ and ‘remade’ and given by him the doti of *picciotto*, *camorra* and *sgarro* and a new ‘copiata’, with Nino Pesce, Giuseppe Piromalli, Antonio Sena and Franco Muto, from Cetraro (Cosenza). I was given the higher doti of *santa* and *vangelo* by Umberto Bellocco later in jail. [...] Of course, there wasn’t just one line of the ‘ndrangheta, but it was a spider web, various lines with contact points. [...] The belonging to one line helped solving problems, asking, and obtaining favours, and granting favours too, including homicides; it helps gaining respect and knowing who is in charge in that area; knowing how to behave. [...] We in Cosenza, however, didn’t respond directly to the Madonna of Polsi [Reggio Calabria]. Our reference point was Piromalli. If Piromalli then answered to Polsi, that was his business. [...] We were criminals with perspective, we wanted a future. It was important for us to be recognised externally. (Franco Pino, 2018 collaborator, speaking about the Locale of Cosenza).

Crucially, the importance of accessing the right lines of criminality is about getting recognition, protection, and getting things done properly.

In the past I belonged to the ‘ndrangheta and the Locale of Rossano (Cosenza). Our referent with the ‘ndrangheta in Reggio Calabria was Cirillo who had contacts with De Stefano [important clan in the city of Reggio Calabria] and was recognised by them in Sibari. He told us that we were recognised and that Corigliano and Cirò were recognised too. When Cirillo was arrested we didn’t know who to speak to in Reggio in case of issues. We had an ambiguous situation. We went to Cosenza to speak with Franco Pino and then got contacts in Reggio. After we met with the Teganos and Paolo De Stefano and his sons, with Tiradrittu [Morabito] and with ‘Ntoni Pelle I learned that we were *not* recognised as a locale – neither Rossano, nor Corigliano nor Sibari. Cirillo had lied. And we had to ask to be recognised by Reggio, which happened because Reggio asked us something in return, a percentage of our profits. (Pasquale Tripodoro, 2018, collaborator, speaking about the Locale of Rossano).

This collaborator speaks about a substantial problem faced in his locale, when they realised that the recognition, they thought they had was indeed bogus. When the line of criminality is unclear it is an issue not just in the reputation of the clan and his associates but also for their future relationships.

The Societies in Corigliano, Cassano, Rossano and Cariati depend on the clan in Cirò, with men who have high rankings in the 'ndrangheta and who decides death and life of men of honour. It was thanks to the men of Cirò that they opened the Locale. (Vincenzo Curato, 2017, collaborator, about the 'ndrangheta in the province of Cosenza).

This exemplifies how there is still space for divergent accounts of the same story – and also attempts to salvage the recognition path of clan in question – thus creating space for narratives to evolve also in contradiction.

Accreditation: Identity and advantages of “climbing the Mountain”

As seen, narratives *socialise* individuals into the 'ndrangheta's organisational features and soon shape stories about the discretionary recognition pathways and incidentally, about higher members who have the authority to protect newcomers. The ultimate goal of new structures is said to be the connection to the 'centre', to the heart of the organisation, which is identified as: 'Polsi'; 'the Mountain'; 'Crimine of/ in Polsi' with reference to the Sanctuary of the Madonna of Polsi, in the territory of San Luca, in the mountains of Aspromonte - described as 'the Mother Locale' of the 'ndrangheta; 'San Luca' clans, who, according to semi-legendary tales, 'founded' and detain the codes of the 'ndrangheta; or generally 'Reggio (Calabria)', to refer to the 'ndrangheta from the Reggio Calabria province. This perceived and claimed connection to the 'centre' serves a variety of purposes: allowing criminal identity to form; maintaining peace; having protection in an otherwise highly unregulated – and unpredictable - underworld.

When collaborators and members speak about the ultimate accreditation by Polsi/ the Mountain/San Luca/Reggio they identify advantages and the peace of mind, which such accreditation brings. Especially in the declarations of collaborators from the province of Vibo Valentia we see how orthodox certain narratives of the 'ndrangheta can be, how obedient to the 'rules' everyone claims to be (but perhaps isn't in reality). Narratives construct the accreditation by the Reggio-based 'ndrangheta as *not-mandatory*, but highly beneficial to the point of becoming the obvious *choice* for new structures. The excerpts below are examples of these narratives and show how the connection to the 'centre' of the 'ndrangheta is the chosen accreditation, not questioned, and with benefits.

If a *locale* is not recognised by the Mountain of Polsi it doesn't mean that you can't have a criminal power in that territory; however, it was necessary to have that recognition to all have the same point of reference, respected by all. Every year all ['ndrangheta] families in Calabria and the world meet in Polsi where it's formed a 'temporary' *locale*, three men with the highest ranking from the three mandamenti, Reggio-city, Tyrrhenian and Ionian; they represent the whole 'ndrangheta and at that moment there is the election of the 'Capo Crimine'. This common reference is the strength of the 'ndrangheta. (Paolo Iannò, 2018, collaborator).

Here the collaborator explains how the ultimate accreditation is not necessary if one wants to just do crime, but it is indeed necessary if one wants to engage with criminal structures (and affairs) at higher levels.

The Crimine is in Reggio Calabria, in San Luca. The roots of the 'ndrangheta are there. If you needed to you could refer to Reggio and vice versa. You had better capability to solve problems and you weren't isolated; you were 'recognised' everywhere as man of honour; you carried more weight. Without that recognition you could rule only in your house. In this sense, the 'ndrangheta has a unified structure and the Crimine comes from Reggio, actually San Luca; this is at the end of the day a symbolic location, where all the criminals of Calabria are 'recorded'. (Pasquale Tripodoro, 2018, collaborator).

The master narrative on the origins and the core of the 'ndrangheta remaining in San Luca/Reggio Calabria is eventually a narrative of collaboration and not isolation. The accreditation, as it is narrated, confirms that the 'ndrangheta is indeed an associative phenomenon and as such it requires collaboration and mutual recognition.

When someone who has the Santa or the Vangelo is accredited to 'climb the Mountain', they are recognised as Capo-Società of a *locale* by the Locale of San Luca, thus the top of the 'ndrangheta, and they are also called Crimine or Criminale. They get the possibility to form detached '*ndrine* (plural), with a maximum of 7 detached *locali* (plural). [...] In effect, this reconstruction, which gets you worked up, all this 'work' is needed for this: to know who to ask in case of problems; to find solutions to a problem; to be authorised to get rid of the person who is the problem, within a set of recognised rules. (Pasquale Tripodoro, 2018, collaborator).

Climbing the Mountain – i.e. accessing the clans in the Aspromonte area of San Luca and Polsi – reassures affiliates that problems will be solved in concert, that in case of trouble someone will help. Narratives on ultimate accreditation serve the purpose of confirming that, even in a secret organisation, one is not isolated and can expect a degree of solidarity.

Someone in our group was gay, and the 'ndrangheta couldn't tolerate it. [...] I tried to solve the situation and having him kicked out but they both told me that 'these things don't exist' and that 'we respond to San Luca' so we couldn't allow it, to have a gay man in our clan. (Andrea Mantella, 2017, collaborator).

Getting the 'quality seal' justifies the choices clans make and arguably augments the reputation of the 'ndrangheta overall. Accreditation, however, also implies the respect of a set of rules, which the 'added' '*ndrinalocale* at times observes in stricter ways than required, as the example above reveals.

G: Crotona detached from the province of Reggio Calabria and had its own province, like Reggio.

PP: Who is in charge in Crotona then?

G: There is the *locale* of Cutro, of Isola, of Cirò, various. Then there is a Capo Crimine like in Reggio [...] every year someone comes, it gets renewed, to avoid being traced, once it's in Cirò and the year after in Cutro, but we talk all the time...

PP: With reference to the province, I understood that the province of Crotona was born out of an agreement with Reggio, in jail. But this Province of Crotona, is it completely autonomous or does it refer to Reggio?

G: It is autonomous.

PP: Before you referred back to Cirò?

G: No, not us in Lamezia (Province of Catanzaro).

PP: Those in Crotona responded to Cirò and you...

G: To Rosarno [Province of Reggio Calabria].

PP: Thus, to Reggio Calabria essentially...[...] So in the past few years, when Nicolino Grande Aracri [founder and head of the Crotona 'ndrangheta province] got out of jail...

G: We don't respond to Reggio anymore, only to the province of Crotona (...) if we do an affiliation...

PP: You tell them...

G: We don't go to Reggio, we go to..,

PP: you tell Cutro (province of Crotona), you tell them the news...clear?

(Deposition of Giuseppe Giampà, collaborator, to public prosecutors, 2012)

Even when this non-mandatory accreditation leads to structures that appear completely autonomous (like in the case of the Province of Crotona, widely understood as autonomous – 'ndrangheta-wise – from Reggio) the reference to Reggio persists and confirms the main narrative.

Conclusion

This paper took narratives as objects of inquiry. Within our combined theoretical framework, these stories can be seen as communication-as-constitutive elements of the 'ndrangheta organisation. Notwithstanding its origin, legendary to some extent (Ciconte 2011), its rituals and other evidence of the existence of the organisation, the construction of the 'ndrangheta today is also shaped by such narratives. Understanding how the original 'master narrative' that constitute the 'ndrangheta began – buried in myths, legends, rituals, and time – will be a challenge for (another) research.

Court documents and case law seek to establish the truth of narratives and stories about the 'ndrangheta, by respecting the standards of admissibility of evidence. However, in line with narrative criminology and with communication-as-constitutive organisational perspectives, we don't have to accept these stories as true. These narratives, nebulous or accurate, matter beyond their truthfulness: they are what makes profiles of the secretive entity understandable and components of the organisation visible. They are part of what *constitutes* the organisation, in

its dynamic and ever-changing form. They don't just reveal the organisation, they contributed and still contribute to its continuous *making* and *recognition*. In line with Pizzorno (2007) individuals contributing to these scripts contribute to a never-ending process of adjustment to their own contexts in 'circles of recognition'. Such circles of recognition eventually are received as accreditation in larger social aggregates (Sciarrone and Storti 2019; Pizzorno 2008).

To become 'ndrangheta in Calabria is a matter of learning and then successfully employing the narratives about secretive traits and structures of the criminal organisation: it is the outcome of a process whose full content is not known by the subject who internalises and contributes to the narratives (Pizzorno 2008). Affiliates' narratives contribute to further constitute and maintain the organisation as secretive. Moreover, the secretive nature of the organisation is pierced at times by narratives that, albeit often congruent, do not in fact allow to establish any firm truth about all mechanisms of the organisation, if not for its ultimate goals and expectations. As noted by Cappellaro et al. (2021: 32) "*when the survival [of the clandestine organisation] is not at stake, organisations may avoid engaging in repeated struggles with external audiences and risking triggering off potentially excessive and never-ending conflicts*". In such cases, organisations, like the 'ndrangheta clans, might select only some of the strategies to maintain strategic ambiguity (Cappellaro et al. 2021): from protective silence over certain practices and rituals, to one-sided disclosure of information; from hyperbolic disclosure to – as we have argued – consolidation of narratives about the secrecy.

Collaborators and affiliates' stories about the 'ndrangheta as a secretive or clandestine organisation are not characterised by 'fragmentary materiality' in the sense that they are *incomplete*. There is indeed an organisation even if we can never see it but only catch fragmentary signs of its presence (Parker 2016). Narratives reveal fragments of the secretive nature of the 'ndrangheta a posteriori, but, a priori, they contribute to constituting the organisation in as much as they build expectations around it too. As argued by Pizzorno (2008:162) "*sociality is based not on the social action of an actor maximising utility (or self-interest) but on a relation between actors attributing to each other a social name, or social identity*". In other words, the constitution of social positions depends on the reciprocal recognition during the encounters of social actors.

On a theoretical level, we claimed that the foundations of narrative criminology can support communication-as-constitutive organisational perspectives applied to secretive organisations, such as mafias. Narrative criminology allows researchers to develop a methodology and stop questioning the legitimacy, truthfulness, and fragmentation of communication, conversations, and texts in mafia or other secretive organisations. This means that we do not need to conclude (like the prosecutors need to) on whether the 'ndrangheta is a unitary phenomenon and, if so, to what extent other provinces, such as Vibo Valentia, Crotona, and Cosenza belong to this unified 'ndrangheta. We can accept the phenomenon as it's perceived, experienced, and constructed to be. And accept that the scripts emerging from the narratives also constitutes the organisation in as much as they are social scripts for cultural communication (Meng 2008) and useful critiques to the field of crime analysis (Cornish 1994).

Every narrative about the ‘ndrangheta analysed for this paper is constitutive communication of the organisation. Narratives help constitute the ‘ndrangheta as secretive *because of* their incongruent nature, and not *in spite of* their incongruent nature. Even when collaborators or members do not confirm each other’s accounts of events, their stories contribute to creating that appreciation, and expectations, of the ‘ndrangheta as a secretive organisation. The organisation is confirmed as secretive precisely by those who are violating this secrecy. As noticed by Simmel (1906: 462) “*the secret of the one party is to a certain extent recognised by the other, and the intentionally or unintentionally concealed is intentionally or unintentionally respected*”.

If the ‘ndrangheta maintains this narrated yet secretive identity, it also maintains its reputation. Reputation is currency for mafia organisations (Smith and Varese 2001). Through these narratives, reputation endures and evolves, outliving any revelations about its structures.

Narratives produce experiences in the same way experiences produce narratives (Presser and Sandberg 2015). If the experience in question is a clandestine or a mafia organisation, then we can re-postulate the initial statement: narratives produce a clandestine or mafia organisation as much as this organisation produces narratives. As it has been argued, organised crime groups, thus also mafia groups, “*identify, design, build and interpret several ‘spaces’ thus creating or affecting ‘territories’ and ‘social places’*” (Sergi and Storti 2021:2). The narratives analysed in this study also have value in helping us understand the territories where they emerge and where they constitute the mafia organisation; this mafia organisation is likely to affect the territories as well, making this relationship an incredibly elaborate wheel of constitution and re-constitution of space and phenomena in that space.

As seen, in the province of Vibo Valentia, where the Rinascita-Scott trial concentrates, narratives about the formation, constitution, and recognition of ‘ndrangheta structures ‘far from the centre’ (meaning outside the province of Reggio Calabria), reveal a shared script for the constitution and recognition of ‘added’ clans to the ‘mother’ organisation – via steps of socialisation, discretion, and accreditation. The script makes four analytical contributions, for further research enquiry:

1. First, this script helps us understand the constitutive power of narratives in mafia organisations, that might be tested also beyond our case study.
2. Second, the annexation to the ‘ndrangheta outside the province of Reggio Calabria is described as a *choice*. This pushes the understanding of the ‘ndrangheta way beyond the sole narrative of ‘family-based’, ‘blood-ties’ and traditional affiliation (Ciconte 2011; Catino 2019): the belonging to the ‘ndrangheta for those who are not ‘born’ into it (in the Reggio-based clans) is convenient and chosen.
3. Third, the three main narratives of the script reveal the link between the ‘ndrangheta as a secretive organisation and the ‘ndrangheta as a mafia-type, criminogenic and harmful organisation. In fact, while most of the narratives are about structures, expectations and functioning of the mafia organisation, they might also provide several justifications for the criminal activities (protection, rackets, homicides) that individuals and clans undertake.

4. Fourth, further research could also look at how the development of rivalries and feuds inside a criminal organisation could be defined also as the development of conflicting, opposite scripts of narratives between two or more factions of members.

This study was not meant to be an exhaustive analysis of the structures of the 'ndrangheta but wished to advance a critical and theoretical contribution to the study of mafia organisations, which takes in consideration the nature of narratives about the organisation. This contribution can also be used, and this study replicated and expanded, to analyse and understand other aspects of the architecture of the 'ndrangheta beyond the issue of 'recognition'. Further research can in fact investigate the narratives of rituals, legends and myths of the 'main' 'ndrangheta and how these construct protection and obedience across clans. Studies of mafia mobility can progress by looking at 'recognition' and constitution of clans outside Calabria. Additionally, this study could be expanded to studies of other mafia-type organisations when various groups that operate in territorial proximity to one another share similar pathways to gain reputation and protection and establish rules.

Declarations

The article complies with ethical standards of the discipline, and it does not involve human participants.

Conflict of interest The author discloses no conflict of interests.

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