

CHEATS, THREATS AND REFLEXIVITY: ORGANIZATIONAL NARRATIVES ON POLICING ORGANIZED AND ECONOMIC CRIME

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Drawing on narrative criminology and sensemaking theory, this paper explores interpretive patterns in an interagency policing collaboration that targets ‘work-related crime’ (WRC). WRC is a policy term denoting organized crime and economic offences (i.e. tax evasion, benefits fraud, labour exploitation and immigration law offences) and is framed as a threat to the viability of the welfare state. While the concept signals an intent to coordinate across agencies, policing takes place within local and institutional contexts. How do agents in the police and collaborating agencies render the policy concept ‘work-related crime’ meaningful and actionable? The study articulates three organizational narratives explaining WRC as fundamental criminogenic change, as stability and as a reflexive product of the control apparatus.

Key Words: narrative criminology, sensemaking, plural policing, economic crime, organized crime, crimmigration

INTRODUCTION

Telling stories helps us to create order, and to give meaning to our experiences. Narratives simplify, condense and provide coherence at individual and aggregate scales (Presser 2009; Presser and Sandberg 2015; Kurtz and Upton 2017). The right story can bind diverse participants together and enable coordinated action (Annison 2021). This article examines three organizational narratives told by policing agents involved in a Norwegian multi-agency collaboration against ‘work-related crime’ (WRC), posited in policy as a profit-motivated type of crime that threatens the foundation of the welfare state. The nar-

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natives are discussed as sensemaking devices that reduce complexity, making WRC actionable in local sites while remaining a meaningful concept across organizational boundaries and at a policy level.

Making sense of the world enables us to act, whether as offenders or as agents of crime control (Weick 1995; Presser 2016; Sandberg and Ugelvik 2016; Ugelvik 2016; Fleetwood *et al.* 2019). While the narratives of individual offenders have been a mainstay of narrative criminology, some prior research on organizational narratives—i.e. shared interpretive patterns (Vaara *et al.* 2016)—exists. Examining the role of shared stories in the public sphere, Keeton (2015) found that religious narratives were used by policymakers to rouse support for the 1830 Georgia Indian Removal Act in the United States, while Tognato (2015) explored narrative representations of tax evasion in Italy and how these supported or undermined condemnatory responses to it. Exploring the narratives of actors within the organizations of the penal system, others have and found that storyline may be key in aligning participants in policy reform (Annison 2021), that prosecutors self-consciously constructed coherent trial narratives to persuade the jury (Offit 2019) and that the legitimacy of immigration detention officers, as well as particulars of police cultures, can be talked into existence (Ugelvik 2016; Kurtz and Upton 2017). These works on organizational narratives within criminology explore sensemaking both at an aggregate scale in shared public stories and at the scale of individual professionals within organizations.

The analysis herein is built on 43 interviews with investigators, crime prevention officers and intelligence analysts within the aforementioned multi-agency effort against ‘work-related crime’ (WRC). WRC describes a category of profit-motivated offences against criminal and administrative laws, e.g. tax evasion, labour exploitation and violations of immigration law. WRC has emerged in government policy as a complex, organized threat i.e. apt to undermine the welfare state, and which requires a coordinated response from several control agencies (Office of the Prime Minister 2017a; 2017b; Norwegian Ministries 2019; Jahnson and Rykkja 2020).

Pluralization is a salient trait of contemporary policing (Johnston and Shearing 2003; Boels and Verhage 2016), and the domain of WRC crime control provides a clear example. To coordinate expertise and resources related to policing economic crime, organized crime and migration, is considered key to combating WRC (Norwegian Ministries 2019). To achieve a more holistic approach, connections have been formed between specialist silos within the police organization, and since 2015, inter-organizational links between the police and collaborating agencies have gradually been formalized.

The WRC category subsumes a multitude of discrete offences, and the organizational structure that has formed around it is complex. This study treats it as a concept with ‘high use-value’ (Christie 2004: 40): While it signifies existing, unwanted acts, it is also imprecise enough to allow broad coordination and consolidation among agents in the control sphere. The underlying complexity of the term—and the intention to coordinate control through its institutionalization—make it imperative to explore how the concept is made sense of within local and institutional contexts, in which interlinked agents perform their everyday work. Thus, this study asks: how do professionals task with anti-WRC enforcement render the category meaningful and actionable? By exploring interpretive patterns (Vaara *et al.* 2016), I have identified three main sensemaking organizational narratives about WRC: first, a narrative of change that makes sense of WRC as a transnational organized crime and migration problem; second, a narrative of stability that makes sense of WRC as familiar forms of economic or white-collar crime; and third, a reflexive narrative in which the practices, knowledge and structure of the control apparatus are given primary explanatory power.

An anti-WRC collaboration

The term WRC came into use within Norwegian justice and fiscal policy around 2014. The Government launched an inter-ministerial national strategy in 2015, with updated iterations in 2017, 2019 and 2021. The term was given a capacious definition that seeks to capture an issue spanning jurisdictions and departmental silos, and comprises a variety of offences against criminal and administrative law:

Work-related crime comprises actions that violate Norwegian laws on pay and working conditions, social security, and taxation, often committed in an organised manner, which exploits workers, or which distorts fair market competition and undermines the structural underpinnings of society. (Departementene 2019: 5, author's translation)

This definition includes money laundering, labour exploitation (including human trafficking for forced labour), financial infidelity, tax evasion, benefits fraud and violations of the immigration code by employing workers without a residence and/or work permit (NTAES 2017; Departementene 2019). As of 2019, labour exploitation and tax evasion were considered the most common expressions of WRC (NTAES 2020).

Managing WRC problems thus implicates a variety of jurisdictions and areas of expertise. The Government stated early that 'to combat work-related crime and promote orderly working conditions' requires a 'comprehensive collaboration between public agencies and the parties of the labour market about prevention, knowledge sharing and enforcement' (Arbeids- og sosialdepartementet 2015: 1, author's translation). This and the later iterations of the anti-WRC strategy (Departementene 2017, 2019, 2021) specify the police, the Tax Authority, The Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority and the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration as essential agencies in this collaboration. Bespoke organizational structures have been developed to facilitate increased coordination between them, including a national strategic intelligence unit (NTAES) and seven regional teams engaging in i.e. joint operations against suspected offenders (Jahnsen and Rykkja 2020), as well as temporary projects such as larger-scale criminal investigations (e.g. see Bjelland and Vestby 2017).

Narrative sensemaking in policing

Sensemaking refers to social processes of ordering and organization in which actors turn 'circumstances into a situation i.e. comprehended explicitly in words and that serve as a springboard into action' (Weick *et al.* 2005: 409). From a theoretical perspective, sensemaking has been influential within phenomenological and interpretive organizational studies (Brown *et al.* 2015). It is viewed as a fundamental process for organizing and creating order, which happens as actors in a social context 'engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively' (Weick *et al.* 2005: 409). That sensemaking attempts to provide meaning retrospectively means that 'whatever is occurring at the moment will influence what is discovered when people glance backward' (Weick 1995: 26). 'Plausibility' is a key term within the theory, and it is privileged over accuracy in sensemaking processes (Weick 1995: 56). The theory thus rejects perceptions of people and organizations as rational actors who behave based on perfect information, instead of viewing them as actors embedded in ongoing attempts to make sufficient and plausible good sense of their surroundings to act. Sensemaking studies tend to consider the filters that agents apply so they can separate signal from noise, and to explore which cues and reference points become connected to more general assumptions and theories (Weick 1995).

The introduction of the anti-WRC initiative did not cause a seismic shift in tasks or a catastrophic watershed within policing agencies; rather, this was a new label and frame of reference for generally familiar offences. While sensemaking processes are most visible when there are disruptions to a regular flow of events (Weick 1995; Chan 2007), sensemaking ‘is the result of active and joint reflection on what was known all the time’ (Manning 1997: 142) and may take either the known or unknown as its point of departure.

Narratives form a way to introduce officers’ interpretations of events into the world, contributing to the reproduction of culture (Weick *et al.* 2005; Kurtz and Upton 2017). Stories are resources within the occupational culture that can provide members with cues and labels to help create order (i.e. make sense) of a situation (Chan 2007). Weick’s emphasis on plausibility over accuracy resonates in Shearing and Ericson’s (1991) seminal work on storytelling in policing, highlighting the role of narrative in the reproduction of culture: ‘In their street talk police officers use stories to represent to each other the way things are, not as statements of fact but as cognitive devices used to gain practical insights into how to do the job of policing’ (Shearing and Ericson 1991: 491–2).

While some have considered stories as ephemeral phenomena (Waddington 1999), others consider them constitutive of policing practices (van Hulst 2013). Police occupational cultures comprise norms, values and mores that effect police–public relations (Loftus 2009) and discretionary decisions (e.g. which events will be processed as crimes) (Ericson 1981), and which are transmitted via socialization processes throughout the occupation (Shearing and Ericson 1991; Bacon 2013). Thus, following the sensemaking perspective, this study treats stories, along with the connected discursive phenomena ‘differentiating, fixing, naming, labelling, classifying and relating’ (Chia 2000: 514), as expressions of the occupational culture and shared vocabularies that permit coordinated action. In this way, ‘situations, organizations and environments are talked into existence’ (Weick *et al.* 2005: 409). To study narrative is thus also a way to study occupational cultures (Ugelvik 2016; Kurtz and Upton 2017).

Within studies of policing, sensemaking perspectives have been used to study, e.g. how officers make sense of police reform (Chan 2007), and the community policing movement (Maguire and Katz 2002). Herein, ‘work-related crime’ is the phenomenon, about which the actors are required to make sense as part of their work preventing, investigating, or providing intelligence analyses. It is a policy term and not a penal clause, and the offences subsumed by it can be found spread across administrative and criminal law. This makes WRC a fruitful phenomenon through which to explore narrative sensemaking in policing as control agents must wrestle with what it means vis-à-vis their respective domains, both to make sense of how to make it actionable in their particular site of enforcement, as well as to facilitate coordination between sites (cf. Annison 2021).

The sensemaking perspective as articulated by Weick (1995) has been criticized for building on overly democratic assumptions about how interpretations of events emerge as plausible and become dominant. One charge has been that sensemaking studies may neglect to engage with the formative contexts within which sensemaking occurs (Weber and Glynn 2006; Mills *et al.* 2010). I incorporate this insight from critical studies of sensemaking (Marshall and Rollinson 2004; Maitlis and Christianson 2014: 98–9) by emphasizing aspects of the material and social environment (e.g. how specialist resources are organized, intelligence-led policing methodology and resource availability), and by relating the organizational narratives to certain apparent background cultural resources (Tognato 2015) which they draw on.

Collaborative sensemaking

The orthodox account of police culture, argued Loftus (2009: 8–15), posits that certain characteristics of police occupational cultures are both persistent and near-universal. However, police

culture is not monolithic and working cultures vary, e.g. by the methods and remit of the unit under study (Ingram *et al.* 2013; Loftus *et al.* 2015). Nor is policing carried out solely by the police (Crawford and L'Hoiry 2017; Atkinson 2019; Kammersgaard 2019). However, successful coordinated action may be facilitated with a minimum adherence to a shared purpose (Annison 2021). Which narratives, concepts and theories resonate across organizational boundaries when actors seek to make sense of and coordinate against, 'work-related crime?'

Similar events may carry different meanings for different groups within an organization (Ingram *et al.* 2013; Loftus *et al.* 2015). Individuals involved in collective anti-WRC efforts may well see different cues from which to make plausible sense of events depending on the point in time and their position within the organization (Weick *et al.* 2005; Chan 2007; Mills *et al.* 2010). This, I argue, is an important material and organizational basis for why there exists a variety of sensemaking narratives about WRC.

It has been argued that by considering the nuances of the occupational subcultures of connected policing actors, we can improve our understanding of how composite policing arrangements cohere and work both generally (Bowling and Sheptycki 2015; Whelan 2015) and specifically (i.e. as I have done here, to explore interpretive patterns in this particular context). Herein, I focus on a core set of national, state-based actors which includes several agencies engaged in the policing of organized crime, economic crime and migration. In these areas, *the* police is a pivotal, but not singular, agent involved in policing.

DATA AND METHODS

This project aimed to map salient interpretive WRC patterns and to construct analytic representations of these as organizational narratives. I traced the concept by exploring how it is made sense of by professionals working within various sites of enforcement implicated in the anti-WRC effort, comprising both police and police-adjacent agencies. The work is inspired by multi-sited ethnography, in which the researcher '[traces] a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity' (Marcus 1995: 3). The tracing included three steps during 2015–2020. First, I reviewed relevant policy documents and publicly available strategic analyses, which served as reference points for the multi-situated operationalizations of the concept. Second, I interviewed 43¹ professionals working in intelligence, investigation and crime prevention who were tasked with anti-WRC enforcement. Thirty-six of these individuals were employed by the national Norwegian Police, while the other seven worked in similar functions, and close collaboration with police, but another public agency.² Third, 140 hours of participant observation at an organized crime unit, national criminal intelligence seminars and WRC-related court proceedings informs the analysis but is not the primary data analyzed for this paper.

The multi-sited approach is well suited to studying connections and flows of information and knowledge between sites, as well as exploring how local contexts relate to their surroundings (Horst 2009; Henne 2017). Rather than generating a thick description of any single included unit or agency, my goal was to study how the WRC concept is made actionable in local sites and how a key set of actors may align around narratives that provide a '[...] simplified and *compelling* path for actors through the messy thickets of complexity, delay, diverse views and political contestation.' (Annison 2021: 5)

I sampled participants based on two criteria: First, that they had the first-hand experience of WRC enforcement and/or a designated responsibility in the anti-WRC initiative. Second,

1 I interviewed 23 of these together with the co-author of another study (see Bjelland and Vestby 2017).

2 The Norwegian Tax Administration, The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, or The Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority.

that they contributed to a geographically and organizationally diverse sample that represented differing ideas about the crime problem, how it can be understood, and how it should be governed. The purpose of this study was to trace the presence of ideas and concepts, not to map their prevalence. The sampling strategy was thus purposive rather than random, and best described as 'conceptually driven sequential sampling' (Miles *et al.* 2014: 31). An earlier study of a relevant WRC and organized crime investigation (Bjelland and Vestby 2017) provided an opportunity to identify relevant units and sites of enforcement from which I was able to sample further. These have included specialist investigative units against economic crime, crime prevention liaisons and intelligence analysts at both strategic and tactical levels, including management-level personnel.

Before contacting participants, I applied to the Norwegian Police Directorate for permission to carry out this research and, based on the recommendation of their ethics review board, was granted permission to do so. I then reached out via e-mail to the top-level management of the special units or police districts where I wished to recruit participants, who were in turn also contacted via e-mail and informed of the study purpose and their rights, both in writing and at the beginning of the interview. The handling of personal study data was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

Analyses were conducted based on the principles of the stepwise-deductive inductive (SDI) method (Tjora 2018). It aims to inspire creativity and theoretical ambition and emphasizes inductively sensitive data coding to ensure that the development of theoretical constructs remains grounded in data. This occurs through an iterative process in which the researcher checks in with the data as she progresses upward in abstraction. After inductively coding all the study material, I performed deductive checks against the material as I worked out the concepts of the three organizational narratives presented in the findings section, below.

In asking what WRC stories are told by the empirical material, this analysis was not primarily a study of narratives from the sense of temporally ordered storytelling (Presser 2016: 138). Rather, the three narrative categories I constructed from the empirical materials should be regarded as organizational narratives as defined by Vaara *et al.* (2016: 496): 'temporal, discursive constructions that provide a means for individual, social and organizational sensemaking and sensegiving.' While many participants leaned more towards one narrative than the others, many drew on elements from more than one. As such, the narratives can be considered more as ideal types that highlight current meaning structures than as stories corresponding one-to-one with individuals' explanations. These are composite narratives, analytic constructs that represent interpretive patterns that may be articulated in fragments as part of an ongoing organizational discourse (Vaara *et al.* 2016).

An example of such fragments is shared 'tropes'. The answers to my guiding analytic question above were comprised of concepts, categories, theories and stories about cases, offenders and other enforcers. They often relied on shared tropes in the field: 'single words or short phrases that only hint at familiar stories' (Sandberg 2016: 13). According to Barthes (in Sandberg 2016: 13), the concise form of the trope 'can serve as a signifier to a concept filled with a very rich history'. For example, and as will be explored further in the findings section below, the concept of organized crime may function in part as a trope that draws on a wider set of shared assumptions.

FINDINGS

In this section, I describe and discuss the three organizational narratives: first, a narrative of change; second, a narrative of stability; and third, a reflexive organizational narrative which assigns the perceptions and structures of the control apparatus a key role in how WRC is made sense of. The first two narratives of change and stability are ontological, providing a taxonomy

of WRC as having to do with either migration and transnational organized crime, or as quintessentially familiar and predictable forms of economic crime, respectively. The last narrative, the reflexive, provides a more epistemological exposition of WRC, emphasizing that the perceptions and actions of the control agencies play a key co-constitutive part in shaping it as an object for crime control.

Imported threats: an organizational narrative of change

In his opening address at a national law enforcement seminar in 2015, a then-State Secretary of the Norwegian Justice Department stated that: ‘The threat from organized crime increases ever more quickly year by year’ (field notes, March 2015). His words strike a suitable chord for introducing the organizational narrative of change, which makes sense of WRC as a product of crucially altered global criminogenic conditions. Key among these is an unprecedented influx of transnational organized crime networks into Norway, and a cascade of migration-related challenges that reverberate in crime, welfare and labour market policy. This section will cover those who pose such threats—the perpetrators in the narrative of change—and which values are under threat from WRC.

The narrative of change explains the rise of acts that can be plausibly classified as WRC by way of changed criminogenic conditions external to the police and other control agencies. It proceeds from a thesis of transformation ‘out there’, illustrated here by two quotes:

What we’ve seen through all our cases, travelling around and talking to the financial crime units around the country, we see that what can be labelled WRC is dramatically increasing. (Investigation, 48³)

I’ve said before that what we see is a form of ‘multi-criminality’, more and more. We saw it three or four years back, but I suspected that I exaggerated when I called it organised back then. No, it is professional. It is multi-criminal. There’s mobility. And it operates across borders. (Investigation, 3)

The integrity of the Norwegian state and well-functioning free markets are the central values at stake in the organizational narrative of change. It focuses on deviance and WRC as an aberration to both how crime typically manifests in Norway and how the welfare system, the labour market and businesses should and do operate. It mobilizes criminals, and specifically transnational organized crime, as powerful profit-motivated adversaries who threaten the state and markets:

(...) [P]ublic and private enterprises are exploited by hardcore criminals who systematically target our systems. Which undermines and jeopardises the whole foundation of our welfare state, really. (Prevention, 28)

When we’re talking about preventing and combating economic crime, including WRC, and other serious organised crime, I think a country like Norway can’t afford, and the agencies can’t afford, to abstain from combating those types of crime. Because it undermines the whole welfare state and will cause the bedrock of the Norwegian state to disintegrate. (Investigation, 52)

The threat is described in existential terms. By fraudulently receiving welfare system benefits on the one hand, and by not paying taxes on the other, WRC suffocates the financial viability of the state and thereby threatens the nation’s way of life. Individual instances that may be categorized as WRC are not necessarily spectacular, nor do they involve large sums of money. However,

3 There were more study participants than those interviewed; thus, their identifying numbers are larger than the total number of interviewees ($n = 43$).

the harm caused by WRC is in the aggregate, where its insidiousness is also found: It is difficult to discover a systematic mode of criminality when individual offences do not always rise to a significant level of concern. By institutionalizing the term WRC, the aggregate phenomenon is reified as something that can be targeted:

I think it is important that we have named it because it is a thing. It is not individual cases, it's a sort of phenomenon. (Investigation, 48)

[E]ach case is kind of small. But as a phenomenon, it is a big social ill. (Prevention, 36)

Foreign and organized crime networks are powerful, overlapping symbolic figures in the narrative of change. Moreover, they appear as part of a wider cultural repertoire beyond the scope of policing cultures. Transnational organized crime has long been cast as a security threat (Loader 2002; Zedner 2009; Franko 2020a), and the very concept of organized crime has a rich history of cultural association with immigrant conspiracies (Woodiwiss and Hobbs 2009).

Theories of organized crime as alien conspiracies relieve host societies of responsibility for its existence, casting it as an external threat (Kleemans 2014), and white-collar crimes (as at least a portion of WRC might be termed) raise more concerns when related to established 'folk devils' in organized crime and minority ethnic groups (Levi 2009). The foreigner or immigrant is thus already othered (ibid), succinctly captured in Franko's (2020b) argument that the 'crimmigrant other' has emerged both as a powerful discursive figure and a new form of the penal subject.

The theories of organized crime as alien conspiracies function as tropes (Sandberg 2016); shorthand versions of common cultural theories of the link between organized crime and immigration. The narrative connects these theories to sites where actors must decide what is an appropriate course of action (Smith in Keeton 2015). In the narrative of change, WRC is a threat primarily posed by outsiders and Norway takes on a role as an insufficiently guarded wellspring of exploitable goods:

WRC is different because there's a clear ethnic component. All of the cases are like that. They are committed by ethnic groups that are not Norwegian. It's not that Norwegians haven't worked without paying taxes, but the systematic organisation to do it, that's something we've never seen in a large, Norwegian group. (Investigation, 48)

The presence of foreign workers takes on multiple complex and conflicting meanings within this narrative, for which there are several plausible sensemaking approaches. These individuals may be seen as perpetrators of immigration or illicit work offences, or as victims of exploitation. This narrative emphasizes the dangers to state and market over working conditions and workers' rights:

It is a big problem for society. Workers' rights and that is one thing, but it's also the ways they can get money out of the coffer by abusing benefits and the welfare system, and then not paying any taxes. Of course, this isn't sustainable for society. (Investigation/management, 3)

In addition to a guilty/innocent dichotomy, workers in this narrative also carry an instrumental significance. Regardless of whether workers themselves can be reasonably perceived as members of an organized crime network, they are also the instruments that employers use to commit WRC (e.g. by underpayment and distorting competition in the sector in question). Deporting workers may thus work to disrupt a suspect enterprise (NTAES 2017: 42). This logic is like that of situational disruption strategies (Kirby and Snow 2016), including forfeiture of material resources necessary to carry out work:

Forfeiture, for example. We tried it against a car repair shop recently. How will he keep doing business if we seize the car lift? (Prevention, 35)

We need to focus on lasting change, but we [the police] are too concerned with punishment. Punishment doesn't necessarily generate lasting change. Deportation might be more effective sometimes. We need to be less traditional in how we combat and prevent crime than what we've typically been. (Investigation/management, 1)

The changing narrative mobilizes serious businesses as victims, not perpetrators, of WRC. First, serious businesses can be victimized in outright scams. Second, these licit businesses struggle to be competitive against businesses that drop their prices (e.g. by underpaying workers, committing tax fraud, or outright human trafficking). Fair and undistorted market competition is among the key values to be protected by the anti-WRC initiative.

As shown, the change narrative emphasizes that WRC is largely committed by outsiders: foreigners, ethnic networks/groups and organized criminal networks. These pose a threat to free and fair markets, orderly labour relations, and the integrity of the state and its welfare institutions. However, there is tension and debate in the empirical material over what role regular licit businesses play in the WRC problem complex. This is explored further in the next narrative.

Competitive cheats: an organizational narrative of stability

The second organizational narrative is termed the narrative of stability. It makes sense of WRC as familiar, unlawful acts related to the economy and labour market, with which the police and their counterparts in other agencies have dealt for years. The fundamental assumption in this narrative is that these types of economic offences have always existed. While the anti-WRC initiative may bring warranted attention to sometimes underestimated crimes such as fraud, other—and perhaps more serious—crimes are being committed that fall beyond this scope. Corruption in the public sector and financial crimes and frauds perpetrated by well-renowned businesses are such examples.

This narrative differs from the change narrative in that it does not claim that the world has changed in ways that fully explain the increased attention to WRC. This increased attention is not what the narrative of stability seeks to explain; rather, it makes sense of WRC as congruent with phenomena that already fall under the purview of those who deal with economic offences that are understood to be essentially constitutive of WRC:

I think we're proficient at dealing with the actual crimes. We're good at dealing with economic crime, income tax evasion, VAT evasion, money laundering, investigation of illicit gains. We're good at investigating financial leads. And we're good at investigating environmental crimes. (Investigation, 51)

The thing about WRC and the construction industry and fake invoicing—[...] it is criminal of course to send a fake invoice, but it is a way of cheating in the professional construction market, one we've seen for many years. (Investigation/mgmt, 3)

Much of WRC is another name for fake invoicing. (Intelligence analysis, 44)

The narrative of stability makes sense of WRC as crimes for profit that have always existed within the context of business, and at first sight privileges offences over actors as defining features. This contrasts with the narrative of change's strong emphasis on the role played by actors in (transnational) organized crime. The image of the threat in the narrative of stability is like the economic crimes with which police have become familiar, and WRC comprises mainly familiar forms of economic or white-collar crime:

There's nothing new in and of itself that you find carpenters who recruit Poles to work undeclared for them, and who live in poor conditions in barracks. That's something that's always happened. (Prevention, 37)

[...] lots of people do exactly what they used to do before [the anti-WRC effort started], both in the police and in the control agencies. But now it is as if they've started working on something completely different now that they're working on WRC. But really, they're doing the exact same things they used to do before. (Investigation, 51)

There is no existential threat described in the narrative of stability, and there is no unquestionably immoral and *other* enemies, as that upon which the change narrative relies. This is consistent with the ambiguity regarding white-collar crime discussed in the literature, notably by [Aubert \(1952\)](#), to whom the concept of 'white-collar crime' entangles the criminal with the ordinary, complicating attempts at drawing neat distinctions between criminal and not criminal. The story could, as this article shows, be argued either way: WRC is a by-product of rational action in a marketplace that requires a degree of technical regulation, or WRC is an intrinsic moral evil posed by an Other who threatens our collective identity ([Garland 2001](#); [Tognato 2015](#)). This tension is partly resolved by terming how licit businesses cut corners as 'cheating'. Describing an alleged wage scam affecting 100 workers, one participant invoked the cheating charge:

It's one of the largest construction projects ever in the country, and there's this big [nationality redacted] company that cheats. The 100 people who work for them don't get paid according to what their contract states. In accordance with the rules governing public acquisitions. [...] And the financial crime unit won't even look at it, and management says 'we don't have the time for this' before we've even pitched the case. (Prevention, 35)

Presumptively there exists a threshold for when 'cheating' is no longer a plausible nor socially acceptable way to make sense of events, although the assessment is complex ([Weick 1995](#); [Keeton 2015](#)). An investigator reflects on the (blurred) line:

[I]n the cases we deal with, someone is actually going to deliver goods or services, but they cheat. [...] Violations used as a competitive advantage, not violations as exploitation and pure profits. [...] The Lime case⁴ is actually a sort of crossover where you have both the ugly violations and the economic element as well. (Investigation, 49)

Real criminals, concluded [Levi \(2009: 64\)](#), 'are those who do not provide us with any services that we define as "productive"'. Within the narrative of stability, drawing the line between legitimate actors who break the rules to increase their competitive viability versus those willing to secure a profit by any means, is a way to wrestle with the tension and ambiguity of WRC and economic crime more generally. Notably, this narrative casts regular, presumptively licit, businesses in an array of roles: as victims of fraud and competition distortion, as direct perpetrators, and as beneficiaries of irregular business behaviour further down their supply chains:

It has come as a surprise to many that there's that element [to WRC] as well, that there are the more serious actors, I mean more like white-collar crime with a side of workplace accidents. [Investigating these] may lead us to businesses that operate under the cover of running an ordinary, serious business. And they're not. And they're well known. Publicly traded. And that

4 A highly publicized multi-agency organized crime investigation of a national grocery store chain. See [Bjelland and Vestby \(2017\)](#).

is as damaging as having organised crime and mafia exploiting people more in those kinds of undercurrents. (Investigation, 49)

Drawing hard lines between legitimate and illegitimate businesses is challenging (Ruggiero 1996):

The alarming thing is that the line is blurring between what looks legal and what doesn't. The tendency to dress up as licit, that they make sure they're not all illicit. Of course, if you want to make more money than you can as a purely illicit business, to win big jobs etcetera, you need a front that customers seek out. [...] This makes it so much harder to uncover. (Intelligence analysis, 45)

While this narrative takes the underlying classes of economic offences as its starting point, it also applies actor-oriented criteria—albeit with a distinction between serious versus illicit businesses rather than the ethnic networks and transnational organized crime seen in the narrative of change (Levi 2009). Practitioners attempting to make sense of WRC draw on the concepts of both economic and organized crime, and it has been argued that the similarities between these categories require joint analyses (Croall 2001). How these categories become institutionalized in policing, however, impacts the potential for this to happen in practice. This brings us to the third, and final, narrative.

Policing as a prime mover: a reflexive organizational narrative

The reflexive organizational narrative locates the power to shape definitions of, and reactions to, WRC within policing. In this narrative, WRC finds its shape as a phenomenon by being perceived and made sense of by control agencies, based on a range of unwanted acts (Christie 2004) to which the label may be assigned. For instance, the reflexive narrative does not adjudicate whether WRC is *really* a domestic or transnational issue, or whether organized crime or illicit work are its most salient expressions. This sets it apart as an epistemological perspective compared to the preceding ontological narratives.

Which acts become categorized as WRC is a result of contingent sensemaking processes (Mills *et al.* 2010). Three related contingencies will be discussed here with the reflexive organizational narrative: First, which juridical crime categories are already familiar within an organizational unit's mandate; second, the introduction of intelligence-led policing; and third, resource availability, including funding opportunities for extraordinary operations and the use of deportation as a cost-efficient tool.

Policing juridical crime categories listed as WRC is largely organized within specialized silos in the police organization and across the inter-organizational apparatus which is tasked with WRC control. Units may thus possess different competencies and information sources that apply to different parts of what the WRC concept aims to capture (Bjelland and Vestby 2017; Jahnsen and Rykkja 2020). The organization provides a framework within which in situ sensemaking occurs:

[The immigration unit] is going to discuss WRC as illicit work. Illegal immigrants. Tax is going to discuss it as having to do with tax fraud. (Intelligence analysis/management, 44)

Interpretation is 'bounded by the preexisting conditions of a given social environment' (Keeton 2015: 128), and turning WRC into an actionable category interplay with organizational structures. To note that several labels could conceivably be applied to events is not to say that anything goes, as 'the range of things an event can be made into legitimately [...] are organization-

ally circumscribed and constrained' (Ericson 1981: 19). Specialization hones specific skills but may create divisions that inhibit efforts to tackle a category like WRC that does not align with organizational boundaries (Sheptycki 2004; Fyfe *et al.* 2013). For example:

[I'm] placed here with the immigration police, and that's not because that's where WRC should be organised, but because no one cares about it. Not the financial crime unit, not the organised crime unit, no one is interested. WRC falls between the cracks. There's a bit of financial stuff, there's some human trafficking, there's some worker safety things in there, and no one grabs onto it because 'that case is not mine'. There's no sense of ownership. (Prevention, 35)

In this narrative, how cases come to be known by police (or not) is heavily weighted. A contingency of sensemaking is the introduction of a national intelligence-led policing model in Norway, which aims to improve data-driven decision-making. For instance, in much public discourse, and control practices, the construction industry has been a mainstay WRC arena. Many cases involving WRC relate to construction businesses, producing effects such as market distortion and worker injuries and deaths (NTAES 2017). While there is ample evidence of criminal distortion of the construction market, the reflexive narrative ascribes the prevalence of construction-related cases in WRC to practices of control agencies. A crime prevention officer reflected:

[W]e see the massive problems that the construction industry has had [with WRC]. That's because that is where we've looked. We've looked for WRC in the construction industry, but we haven't looked anywhere else. (Prevention, 30)

It is likely that construction-related instances disproportionately colour the WRC phenomenon relative to other industries. For example, several participants mentioned the fish farms along the Norwegian coastline as an example of an industry in which the opportunities to cut corners and increase profits through worker exploitation, environmental crimes, and other white-collar offences are as plentiful as they are in construction:

The aquaculture industry has grown rapidly over the last several decades and is a bit of a cowboy industry in the sense that it has been allowed to develop quite unchecked. And it has been supported with public funds. But if you break this down [...] there are many steps: There's feed, butchery, sales, processing ... pollution. [...] And we know there are many foreign workers; is there exploitation? (Prevention, 29)

However, the fisheries are less accessible to the police compared with construction, which not only takes place on land but is often highly visible in public spaces and/or outdoors.

I don't think our lack of cases related to fisheries is due to there being no crime in that industry. I think it is due to our competencies and our—really what starts with basic intelligence and our ability and resources to build a basis for sound decision-making to do anything about it. (Prevention, 36)

The availability of information about a crime relates to the initial point in this section: that a unit's formal mandate is a likely determinant for whether WRC is identified as such and if so, the WRC type it is interpreted to be. The body of intelligence data will be coloured by the categorizations of a given unit, regardless of the relative weight between formal mandate and informal culture in the sensemaking process. Intelligence-led policing has been under implementation

in Norway over the last several years, aiming to improve decision-making by making it more data-driven (Vestby 2018). Indicia is the national criminal intelligence platform, comprising the criminal intelligence database and the software interface used to access it. A bespoke WRC 'tag' can be used to make information available e.g. for aggregate analyses or to guide local enforcement. One participant reflected on information as a prerequisite to initiating an investigation:

[W]e have to start out by getting a hold of some piece of information from someone, either in our own organisation or from another, to begin unravelling it [a crime]. We've rarely initiated a project just by hanging out at a street corner and seeing what happens. We depend on information coming in, which is why Indicia is so neat, you can dump results from controls and other information there, so you have somewhere to start digging. (Investigation/management, 14)

Third and finally, the reflexive narrative about WRC relates its operationalization to fiscal and efficiency considerations. This includes the availability of funding for special operations and the use of deportation as a cost-efficient way to process cases:

I think the WRC topic will remain with us [the police]. But there are fashions in our business as well, you know, and people go for it in part because it comes with more resources. [Investigation/management, 5]

[N]ot that there is intra-police competition, but this [WRC] is an area of commitment which again has to do with resources and what are considered important prioritisations. (Investigation, 49)

Back in 2013–2014, a large-scale interagency project was assembled to investigate the Lime grocery chain (Bjelland and Vestby 2017). In effect, it functioned as a signal case (Innes 2014), broadcasting the WRC concept to a wider public during a subsequent period of national media coverage. The case brought the concept to the public's attention and introduced concerns about WRC as an encroachment of organized crime networks into licit businesses and labour market infrastructures. The interagency and interunit (i.e. within the police) investigation was partly enabled by a centralized grant that supports policing projects against organized and serious crime ('Samordningsorganet'):

[the media] are interested and have gotten politicians fired up, it has gotten people fired up in the police and prosecution. [Representatives of the investigation] get invited to meetings and seminars to relay where we're at in the case, strategy meetings hosted by ['Samordningsorganet' and NCIS⁵]. Which the Attorney General, the National Police Commissioner and representatives from the business community attend. And things really sped up from that point, we got so much attention and the case, I think, had a much easier time accessing resources than it otherwise would have. So much attention, and this is supposed to become a signal case. 'This is the hill where we take a stand', you know. (Investigation, 9)

A good sense of the zeitgeist on the part of the initiators of the interagency investigation was partly why the extraordinary effort was made possible. However, the reflexive narrative emphasizes that cost efficiency considerations contribute to sensemaking on a quotidian scale as well. Solving organized criminal network cases and financial crimes is costly and draws on scarce

5 The National Criminal Investigation Service ('Kripos').

specialized resources. This makes them higher-risk endeavours than less complex offences that are cheaper to investigate (Croall 2001).

We often select the easy stuff, or easier—we tend to deal with the surface. (...) We always want to catch the main guy (...), but we don't find him. It is incredibly demanding, so what we do is often deal with the least central actors, couriers and such. Taking these things by the root takes resources away from many other things. (Investigation/management, 1)

[WRC] is so resource intensive to investigate, unless you just deal with standalone offences like we do today. We take standalone cases, minor cases, pick the easy ones, cut them down to the bone and then we deal with the bone. (Investigation, 26)

Policing workers' immigration status is one way to 'deal with the bone' and make WRC actionable. It is an example of choosing a less complex offence, and one that may serve as a proxy for policing employers directly. It enables the use of less resource-intensive administrative sanctions, which are also perceived as effective deterrents (Franko 2020b):

We take these shortcuts all the time, I'm sure of it. I'm convinced that the goal of kicking out foreigners, getting them on the Immigration Act, get them out for staying without legal residence and so on—some of them won't co-operate and it's easier just to get them out. Which disrupts the employer at the same time. (Investigation, 12)

Migrant workers' identity as such may place them under scrutiny as potential risky subjects, and objects of the intertwined powers of the state to punish and banish (Aas 2014; Gundhus and Jansen 2020). An analyst reflected on the possibility that trafficked or otherwise exploited workers might be deported due to their immigration status, rather than having their exploitation dealt with as a violation against them:

Take workers, for an example—I find this is often overlooked within the police. Workers' interests. Particularly foreign workers are often spoken of [within the police] as perpetrators of crime, whereas the Labour Inspection Authority tends to view them as victims of crime. That's a dilemma one probably faces quite a lot: should you expel someone who has been a victim of a crime? Have you accomplished anything if you do or don't proceed in that direction? Expulsion counts and looks good in the police's performance measurement system. While for the Labour Inspection Authority that's not really a success. (Intelligence analysis, 46)

Importantly, by increasing performance targets, substantial pressure has been placed on the Norwegian police to apply for deportation in place of, or in addition to, penal sanctions (Franko 2020b; Gundhus 2020). It has been argued elsewhere that deportation targets and the resource-intensive nature of investigating offences to suspected networks appear to impact law enforcement decision-making in the anti-WRC interagency task forces, whose sanctions are often best suited to targeting front-line workers rather than kingpins (NTAES 2017: 42; Jahnsen and Rykkja 2020). In this narrative, performance targets are an important condition in the field where WRC sensemaking occurs (Mills *et al.* 2010):

[When] choosing between either going after kingpins or deporting victims, and possible witnesses, the deportation track is often chosen. [...] This has to do with performance targets, of course. [...] Of course, if the police are required to deport X number of thousands of foreigners each year, that will affect the choices people make. If you have a handful of illegal workers,

this may have the effect that you'd rather deport than listen to their stories and worry about whether the kingpin just brings in five new workers. (Intelligence analysis, 47)

Foreign workers stand in an interstice of conflicting interpretations. They can be made plausible sense of both as victims of exploitation, and as a perpetrator of immigration offences; as complicit actors in an organized crime network, or as enabling instruments to suspect businesses. A participant reflected thus on the role of nationality in the political shaping of WRC:

[WRC] is an area that has been important to deal with, there's no doubt about that, but I'm unsure whether you'd see this kind of push if you had discovered torpedoing of the welfare system by affluent people whose Norwegian lineage went back for generations. That you'd see this kind of political pressure—I think probably not. (Prevention, 28)

The symbolic figure of the crimmigrant *Other* casts a suspicious light on these workers, one that differs from that shed on full citizens whose exploitation in labour relations may be discovered—despite migrant workers' vulnerability to exploitation (Scott 2017; NTAES 2020).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

To analyze organizational narratives as sensemaking devices is useful to improve our understanding of policing as the situated practice that draws on cultural metanarratives and simultaneously contributes powerfully to shared public perceptions of crime and social control. This article's dual emphasis on sensemaking theory and narrative criminology has enabled an analysis that grapples with the three narratives as sites where this exchange occurs. This helps to avoid an overemphasis on the *sub-* of policing subcultures, which both neglect their embeddedness in mainstream culture along with opportunities to examine why some stories have a greater potential for mobilization than others.

Studying narratives allows us to explore which features of our complex world remain visible once it has been distilled in the story. The first step in sensemaking is turning circumstances into words and categories, imposing an order from which to act (Weick *et al.* 2005). The three narratives have the power to transform 'an individual event into categories which have a character of permanence and exactness' (Ericson 1981: 18). While the anti-WRC strategy is part of a broader push against economic crime (Departementene 2019: 6), the portrayal of its target as multi-criminal, transnational and organized is akin to that found in the narrative of change. The Government strategizes to increase the risks and difficulties for illicit business actors, without adding burdens for licit enterprises (Arbeids- og sosialdepartementet 2015: 4). Despite the traditional white-collar nature of many of the offences listed in the policy, the general business community is not portrayed as offenders. The threat—ultimately against social structure itself (Office of the Prime Minister 2017a)—is seen to emanate from beyond the Norwegian state borders, and to be posed by actors in transnational organized crime. The changing narrative is not only congruent with police preoccupations with organized crime, but as shown, also with common cultural notions e.g. about immigrant conspiracies (Woodiwiss and Hobbs 2009). This may explain in part why it is this narrative, despite its almost apocalyptic articulation, that most closely resembles the narrative of the political 'discourse coalition' (Hajer in Annison 2021: 5) that has formed around WRC.

Interagency enforcement brings police methods to be deployed against offences that traditionally have been controlled within the regulatory sphere. Thus, it is pertinent to explore the stories that vitalize coordinated, inter-organizational policing and to question practically and politically the significance of agencies aligning according to the logic of one story or another.

For instances, the three sensemaking narratives herein differ in their logical implications for assigning blame, allocating victim status and developing crime prevention measures. Explorations into organizational sensemaking narratives enable us to see how similar events may be narrated differently and to use our insights to articulate what is taken for granted in powerful existing, emerging and settling categories (Fleetwood *et al.* 2019; Skilbrei 2020).

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