“What about Last Time?”

Exploring Potentiality in Danish Young Women's Violent Conflicts

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■ **ABSTRACT:** The article explores how violence as actuality and potentiality shapes the lives of Danish at-risk girls and young women. The article draws on seven months of ethnographic fieldwork in Copenhagen and includes 25 girls and young women aged 13 to 23 who have all experienced using physical violence. Centering on a single young woman's narrative, violence is analyzed as a meaningful social practice intimately linked to navigating violent social terrains and managing precarious everyday lives characterized by instability and marginalization. Drawing on the concept of potentiality, it is argued that violent interactions are shaped by both the fear of oncoming danger and the desire for powerful social positions. This perspective opens a micro-longitudinal perspective, which explores situational dynamics of violence through time, hereby contributing to micro-sociological studies of violence.

■ **KEYWORDS:** Deleuze, gender, potentiality, violence, young people

Violence shapes the everyday life of millions of people and has a profound impact on social relations and everyday dispositions. Ethnographic fieldwork, characterized by extended submersion in a social field, has proven valuable for gaining insight into the lived experience of violence and social suffering as it unfolds and becomes embedded in everyday life (Green 1994; Jackson 2002; Kleinman et al. 1997; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004; Vigh 2006). This body of research explores violence as a “continuum of violence” (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004: 1), not reduced to physical violence or singular events, but viewed, rather, as social processes imbued with meaning and life-altering potential. From a sociological perspective, violence is embedded in social structures and must be explored as meaningful social practice that has both symbolic and instrumental forms and functions (Blok 2001).

Living in a context of endemic violence—in the family, among peers, or in the neighborhood—shapes young people's perceptions and use of violence (Henriksen and Bengtsson 2018; Ng-Mak et al. 2002). Positioned between childhood and adulthood, young people experience and cope with violence in their own unique ways. Young people's experiences of violence have been widely studied, finding these experiences to be gendered, racialized, and intimately linked to multiple forms of deprivation (Anderson 1999; Chesney-Lind and Jones 2010; Harding 2010; Miller 2008; Ness 2010). This article explores how violence plays out “through time” (Saldaña 2003) among young Danish women, which draws attention to the fluidity and change in the meanings and orientations of violence across time/space. I refer to this as a form of micro-longitudinality, which involves exploring situations as they expand in time and space considering not only what (actually) happens but also imaginaries of what could happen. The article

draws on seven months of ethnographic fieldwork among girls and young women aged 13 to 23 living in Copenhagen who have experienced using physical violence. During the fieldwork, I interviewed 25 girls and young women several times, and their narratives provide insight into how violence unfolds in their everyday lives and how the anticipation of violence shapes everyday dispositions. I argue that paying attention to both the actuality and potentiality of violence provides a richer and more nuanced understanding of the dynamics shaping violent situations. This claim and the empirical insights that I use from an under-researched context are valuable for youth scholarship, particularly gender studies on violence, and for micro-sociological studies on violence.

The concept of violence is empirically slippery and can refer to a wide range of social experiences, which include elements of domination, force, and infliction of pain, damage, or deprivation (Kleinman et al. 1997; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004). I draw on this broad understanding of violence, which is common within anthropology, to grasp how physical violence links to other forms of deprivation and violation. Rather than focusing on physical violence per se, this article explores violent conflicts, defined as social interaction with moments of physical violence, which extend through time and space also by means of socio-technical forms of communication, such as Facebook, mobile phones, and online chat rooms. Thus, physical violence, defined as aggressive acts of kicking, hitting, or using weapons, can be an element in these conflicts, but is not a priori singled out as important. This approach allows for a processual understanding of violence, where violence is not explored as a physical encounter bound in time and space, but rather as a social encounter imbued with social meaning and as productive of social relations and subjectivities.

The article is situated within youth scholarship, particularly studies on young women's violent engagements, which is presented in the following section. I then present the concept of potentiality as it has been theorized by Giorgio Agamben (1999) and developed by Henrik Vigh (2011). The next section introduces the study, the empirical context, and explores violence as potentiality and actuality in the narrative of a single informant. Finally, I discuss how my findings reflect and supplement wider patterns in the study of youth/gender scholarship on violence and micro-sociological theory on violence.

Violence as Gendered Experience in a Context of Deprivation

Within criminology and youth studies, violence has been widely studied among young men living in deprived urban areas, establishing a link between marginalization and “the search for respect” through violence and gang involvement (Anderson 1999; Bourgois 1995; Harding 2010). While more limited in scope, a growing body of scholarship is engaged in exploring girls' and young women's engagement in risk-taking and violence, finding these to be gendered in its form and function (Chesney-Lind and Jones 2010; Gundetjern and Sandberg 2012; Henriksen 2017; Miller 2008). Ethnographic studies have provided insights into young women's gang involvement (Campbell 1992; Miller 2001; Young 2009), orientations toward street culture (Choak 2021; Jones 2010; Ness 2010), and involvement in drug economies and violent crime (Baskin and Sommers 1998; Miller 1995). The large majority of these studies are empirically situated in US inner-city areas characterized by multiple forms of deprivation and structural inequalities, and it is argued that girls' offending is a response to the gendered everyday violence that women experience, such as domestic violence, sexual violence, racism, and a routine devaluing of girls (Chesney-Lind 2006; Choak 2021).

These feminist studies successfully recast the image of the pathological, deviant female offender that proliferated earlier studies, showing rather how young women manage structural inequality and gendered vulnerability in diverse, creative, and even violent ways. While mainstream criminology failed to adequately research women's street-oriented engagements, feminist scholarship has shown how young women navigate urban terrains in ways that are uniquely gendered and need researching on their own terms (Miller 1998). The image of girls as passive hang-arounds to male gangs or reduced to sexual objects is challenged by studies that find girls actively engaged in carving out spaces of belonging and mastery (Henriksen and Miller 2012; Young 2009). Young women too are "in search of respect" (Bourgois 1995), when they experience social control, violence in the home, marginalization at school, or other forms of deprivation. However, girls balance a fine line between engaging in violence as a legitimate response to threats, insults, or assaults, and excessive use of violence that constitutes an aberration from gendered norms. Thus, a gendered cross pressure between doing what is right and doing what is necessary shapes girls' violent interactions in significant ways (Jones 2010).

In a European context, the studies are more scattered with most studies coming out of the UK. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, scholars have been dedicated to exploring the meanings of violence for young women (Barter et al. 2004; Burman et al. 2003; Young and Hallsworth 2011). These studies find that the use of violence is tied to street presence and mobility across urban space, and push and pull effects propel youth to seek street life. Tara Young and Simon Hallsworth (2011) argue that violence is not a key identifier in the studied peer group identities, but the young people use violence to regulate peer group relations and positions and for protecting themselves or their peers. These UK-based studies contribute to nuancing the link between social disadvantage, marginalization, and violent interactions. Michele Burman, Jane Brown, and Susan Batchelor (2003) find no correlation between socio-economic deprivation and girls who self-identify as violent, while Young and Hallsworth (2011) find a significant pattern of social problems such as dysfunctional families, limited school attendance, and limited economic resources in their sample. What seems to pull British youth toward violent street cultures is not only survival, but the desire for autonomy and mastery of their social worlds (Young and Hallsworth 2011). These studies suggest that more refined understandings are needed of how deprivation impacts young people and their creative mastery of precarious, unsafe, or deprived social worlds.

In a Nordic context, the ethnographic studies of girls' violence or crime involvement is limited to a few studies (Flekkøy 2000; Gundetjern and Sandberg 2012; Henriksen 2013; Natland 2007). While girls in the Nordic countries are underrepresented in crime statistics, the gender gap in juvenile offending is closing. In Denmark, girls aged 15 to 17 made up 18 percent of juveniles convicted of an offence in 2019, compared to less than 10 percent in 2000 (Statistikbanken 2021). This article contributes with insights from a Nordic context and aims to open new ways of exploring violence in the lives of young people, by listening to narratives of violence through time, as ways of managing and making sense of precarious everyday lives.

Theorizing Violence as Potentiality

The analysis of young women's violent engagements centers on the tension space between violence as actuality and potentiality; between what is and what could be. The concept of potentiality derives from the political thinking of Agamben (1999), where it is a key concept in analyses of law and governance. Agamben is concerned about not only what is, but also what could be, and how all things come into existence by our awareness on their non-being. Sight is experienced not only as seeing, but as an experience of not-seeing, the sensation of being in complete

darkness. In this sense, experience is defined by its negation but also its contingency for multiple variations. Any event, perception or life trajectory holds multiple potentialities or possibilities, which exist within it. Agamben argues that even when a potentiality is actualized, “this does not mean that it disappears in actuality; on the contrary, it presents itself as such in actuality” (1999: 183). The concept of potentiality is productive for understanding everyday violence through time by drawing attention to how violence shapes lives in its absence and through the imaginaries of how violence could (have) reconfigure(d) the social terrains we inhabit every day.

The inspiration to explore violence as actuality and potentiality comes from ethnographic studies of how everyday life unfolds in contexts of social conflict and political violence. Scholars argue that uncertainty in everyday life (physical, social, or material) is managed by orientations toward change and attempts to anticipate oncoming crises (Johnson-Hanks 2005; Tausig 1992; Vigh 2011; Whyte 1997). Anthropologist Henrik Vigh (2011) has explored how male youths navigate terrains of political conflict in Northern Ireland and Guinea Bissau and argues that young people in these contexts are vigilant observers of their social terrains, continually scanning the terrain for negative potentiality such as threats, violent attacks, or the configuration of new hostile alliances. Vigilance is defined as an orientation toward a “shadow world of actors and factors that may be beyond our immediate senses, yet which we nonetheless act towards in anticipation” (Vigh 2011: 93). This entails a constant, even subconscious reading of the environment for signs of oncoming danger. In this perspective, vigilance is a social competence that results from being continually embedded in a context of crisis. Depending on the intensity and frequency of oncoming crisis, this can lead to hyper-vigilance: “Hyper-vigilance leads to the world becoming hyper-signified, so that every political gesture or utterance is interpreted as a possible sign of oncoming conflict” (Vigh 2011: 99). In a conflict terrain, the anticipation of violence produces a violent situation, and social imaginaries become formative of present action. While the urban terrains of Copenhagen are not comparable to the social terrains explored by Vigh, the concepts of vigilance and negative potentiality are useful for understanding how youth in peacetime, even in affluent welfare state contexts, also navigate social terrains permeated by potential violence.

Vigh’s conceptualization of negative potentiality, drawing on Agamben, is analytically powerful, yet it fails to address how conflicts and violence are also powered by fantasies of social mastery and aspirations for powerful social modalities; thus a positive potentiality. Agamben’s theorizing of potentiality is not limited to negative potentiality, but all forms of possible transformations and playful remaking of the world (Balskus 2010). This article draws on a wider understanding of potentiality to advance an understanding of how negative and positive potentiality constitutes a driving force in violent interactions. In this perspective, violent engagements are instrumental in establishing safety and powerful social positions, and the terrain is being scanned not only for signs of oncoming danger, but also for oncoming possibilities for new powerful alliances and social positions. The social terrains of urban Copenhagen are not violent in the sense that physical violence happens every day. However, for some young people, violence is embedded in their everyday lives, and the notion that violence could happen, shapes their interactions in critical ways.

The Study

The study is based on seven months of ethnographic fieldwork in Copenhagen and the suburbs south of Copenhagen. It included 25 girls and young women, aged 13 to 23, who had all experienced using physical violence against peers. I interviewed and spent time with the participants alone or in small groups by hanging out in malls, at train stations, in pizza bars, in their homes,

walking in their neighborhoods, and driving in my car with them. Ethnographic methods are valuable for producing data on meaning-making processes and complex social dynamics in a relatively small sample (Hastrup 2003). Over time I gained in-depth knowledge of their experiences with conflicts and violence, their everyday lives, and their relationships to family, peers, boyfriends, and social workers. I gained insight into how these relations and living conditions changed through time and were subject to potential change on a daily basis.

The participants were included in the study with the aid of two projects for youth at risk situated in inner-city Copenhagen and a suburb south of Copenhagen. Both projects offered counseling and out-of-home placement for youth at risk. The participants all came from less affluent families with a range of social problems such as domestic violence, substance abuse, illness and unemployment among parents. They had troubled school experiences and struggled with substance abuse, homelessness, and had been involved in crime. One-third of the participants were ethnically Danish, one-third were of mixed ethnic origin with one parent being Danish, and one-third were of ethnic origin typically from the Middle East such as Turkey, Afghanistan, Palestine, or Lebanon. The sample was not randomly selected and the findings are not representative of Danish female youth in general, yet they illustrate experiences common for youth receiving extensive support and treatment through welfare institutions (Lausten and Jørgensen 2017; Oldrup et al. 2011).

My data consists of 32 transcribed interviews and 250 pages of typed field notes that have been coded using NVivo8. The interviews include narratives of approximately 40 situations of violence, which have been analyzed for meaning, form, and function rather than as testimonies of what “really” happened. Triangulation has been attempted to validate some narratives of violent events (Lindegaard 2010) by, for example, asking other participants about their experiences of the same event or by returning to the same event in later interviews with the informant. For practical and ethical reasons, I have not observed situations of violence, since passive adult witnessing could communicate acceptance of violent behavior (Fangen 2001). I have witnessed aggressive verbal interactions and followed conflicts through time also via Facebook and text messages, which provided insight into meaning-making processes and the rationalities of violence. As a white, middle-class woman in my early forties, I was positioned close to the social workers, which the respondents had met in various interventions, while I also positioned myself as an “atypical adult” (Corsaro 2003: 5) by listening to their narratives without giving advice or making judgments. They all had access to social workers, who they confided in and who supported them in accessing the help they needed.

Coding and analysis can be described as an iterative process (Okely 1994) in which insights into and overview of the data were supplemented by reading feminist theory, feminist criminology, and qualitative studies on violence. From this iterative process, my analytical lens centered on the tension space between violence as actuality and potentiality. For this analysis, all data coded in Nvivo as “violence” and “conflict” was re-read and supplemented by data coded as “respect,” “peer groups,” and “instability.” A single narrative was identified as exemplary of wider patterns in the aggregate data, and detailed reading of all field notes and interview transcripts related to this narrator enabled analysis of interactional dynamics of violent conflicts through time, contextualized in precarious everyday lives.

Turbulent Lives in a Nordic Welfare State Context

While the aim of the ethnographic study was to explore the form, function, and meanings of violence perpetrated by girls, it became evident that the use of violence could not be isolated

from wider experiences of violation and uncertainty. All the participants had experienced violence at home as witnesses to intimate partner violence, as victims of parental violence, or as perpetrators/victims of violence against siblings. They also spoke of different forms of harassment, discrimination, sexual and physical violence among peers as normal and somewhat trivialized everyday experiences (Henriksen and Bengtsson 2018). The experience that violence is common is supported by a Danish study on violence among children and youth at risk, where researchers found that these children were simultaneously at increased risk to violent victimization at home and among peers compared to normal children (Oldrup et al. 2011). Thus, while studies document widespread and increasing zero-tolerance of violence in Danish society (Balvig and Kyvsgård 2006), violence prevails in some social spaces where it links to social disadvantage such as poor mental health, substance abuse, and poverty (Børnerådet 2017). Half of the participants came from social housing areas that appear on the “Ghetto list,”¹ defined as areas with a high concentration of non-Western inhabitants, crime, and unemployment (Ministry of Transport, Building and Housing 2018). These areas constitute pockets of deprivation in a city generally defined by good living conditions, a high income level, and free public services. The remaining half of participants came from residential areas such as Nørrebro, Vesterbro, and Nordvest, which are generally safe, low crime areas. However, they are experienced as unsafe, especially by those girls who spend most of their time outside the home, some from the ages 11–12 years old. While violence does not happen on a daily basis, hearing about, seeing, or fearing violence is embedded in their everyday lives.

The Danish welfare state is known for a varied and generous service provision for children and families. In a population of almost 6 million, 14,000 children and young people are placed in out-of-home care, mostly in foster care, and three times as many receive some other kind of intervention (Lausten and Jørgensen 2017). The girls and young women in this study have all received various interventions such as family treatment, mentor, or special education, and more than half of them have been placed in out-of-home care. In all cases, placements in out-of-home care have been initiated in their early teens and have been multiple, thus resulting in volatile care relations and living conditions. While out-of-home placement is supposed to be a safe space, young people living in residential care report incidents of peer violence, neglectful care and protection by staff, and learning risk behavior from peers with a wide range of problems (Henriksen & Bengtsson 2018). Despite living in a Nordic welfare state, these young people are not protected from violence or the precarious everyday lives described in studies elsewhere. Danish youth also experience welfare inaction (Myers 2013), and in quite a few cases their vulnerability increases with every placement they experience.

Analysis: Vulnerability and Social Mastery in a Violent Terrain

The violence that is narrated by the young women in this study unfolds at the backdrop of marginalized and precarious everyday lives. In this section, I will focus on a single narrative of violence, which is not presented as an isolated event, but rather as a series of threats, verbal attacks, and hostile alliances. The narrative is drawn from mainly one interview, which is supplemented by information presented in a second interview and conversations recorded in field notes. The narrative demonstrates how violence as potentiality shapes the lives of young women in dramatic ways, and how violent engagements are embedded in quests for safety and social mastery in precarious everyday lives.

Sandra is 15 years old and ethnically Danish. She grew up in and around Copenhagen, and when I met her, she was living with her father in a small town approximately 30 km south of

Copenhagen. Due to problems at home, she mostly stayed with friends. In her words, “just a few days in each place, so they don’t suspect you’ve moved in.” Her dwelling patterns resemble what is referred to as “couch surfing” (McLoughlin 2013), which is typical for how young people cope with homelessness. She has had a casefile with the social services since birth, yet a permanent solution to her situation has never been established. She has previously stayed in residential homes, been placed in foster care, and has had several mentors² and case workers. Just prior to my first meeting with her, she had been expelled from a boarding school, which was yet another failed out-of-home placement. She was expelled due to behavioral problems and a violent encounter with another student. However, she assures me that it was a minor incident that served as an excuse to expel her. “Violence is in the past,” she claims, yet during our conversation she speaks of three or four violent conflicts within the past year. Her narratives of peer-group interactions provide insight into how her decision to refrain from using violence is challenged in everyday interactions.

Sandra has a large network and her close relations seem to change quite frequently. During the four months of our engagements, she regularly spoke of two main groups of friends, and two female friends she spent most of her time with. Her relations were continually changing not only in intensity but also in terms of being hostile or supportive alliances. Sandra explains it in this way: “If we get cross with each other, you never know what happens. You always have that other thing at the back of your mind: What about last time? You always remember those things, you don’t just put it behind you. It can easily come back.” According to Sandra, conflicts can “easily come back” and even among her closest friends she expresses uncertainty and a need for vigilance. It seems that conflicts can always be revisited and gain significance in new ways in new configurations of power and people. As Sandra says, “you always have that other thing at the back of your mind.” This “other thing” can be previous violent encounters or knowledge of others’ capacity for violence based on personal experience or narratives of fighting that circulate among youth. It is a hidden capacity that can be activated and shapes social interaction by its “absent presence” (Agamben 1999: 179).

To illustrate how violence as potentiality shapes the configuration of relations and social positions, I will explore one of Sandra’s narratives of conflict. As I have argued elsewhere, girls’ conflicts are often rhizomatic, in the sense that they are multilinear, multicausal, and, like rhizomes, seem to lack a point of beginning, but rather evolve in a continuous flow of new connections and becomings (Henriksen and Miller 2012). While there is no starting point, I will begin my presentation of her narrative with a minor prank.

Sandra explains that she and two other female friends, Nadia and Mira, had called one of Sandra’s male friends, Emir, as a prank. Emir is described as having high status among the ethnic minority boys in her neighborhood, and according to Sandra, he refers to her as his “little sister.” Sandra had, by chance, gained access to a cell phone number for Emir, which only his closest friends used but the girls use for the phone prank. They were sworn to secrecy. Fun while it lasts, the realities of the prank soon reach Emir, and he gets cross with Sandra. Sandra gets cross with Nadia, the girl who revealed the secret. For a few days, none of them speak until Sandra starts receiving hostile text messages and calls from another girl called Jeanette. Jeanette is a friend of Sandra, who she recently quarreled with, and now Nadia and Jeanette have joined in a hostile alliance: “So after a couple of days, and suddenly Jeanette calls me and says, ‘I will kill you’ and ‘I will beat you, you little slut.’ And I was like: What’s up? So they kept doing it for like two or three weeks. And it annoyed me, so now it’s like three weeks since I heard from Jeanette.”

Two friends, who Sandra has separate issues with, have joined in a mutual effort to position Sandra as a potential victim of threats and violence. Sandra’s falling out with Nadia and Emir constitutes a positive potentiality for Jeanette in the sense that she can capitalize on the destabi-

lization to build new alliances. This form of alliance-building and protraction of violent conflicts is very common in the conflict narratives presented in this study. Such alliances express loyalty and serve as possibilities for positioning oneself as powerful, while not being fully exposed as the main target of violent retaliation. These situations of positive potentiality are vital for building respect and powerful positioning, as Sandra explains in relation to another conflict, where a girl had spread rumors about her regarding an intimate relationship. “So I called her and said, ‘If you have a problem with me, come to Ishøj in ten minutes. Call me when you get here and we will sort it out one-on-one face to face.’ ‘Cause I’m not afraid of her there, I don’t care. It’s Ishøj, nothing can happen there. I just need to call one, you will see. All the immigrant boys of Ishøj, the young ones who know Emir, they will be there. She will never make it out of Ishøj.”

Thus, conflicts are defined by not only their negative potentiality as fear of oncoming danger but also positive potentiality by disrupting the monotony of everyday life, creating excitement and for affirming alliances and social positions. By challenging the girl to meet her face-to-face, Sandra tries to orchestrate a situation, where she can mobilize her network and show her powerful position in a peer group providing protection and support. Sandra and her peers are continually scanning the social terrain for these possibilities, and for Jeanette, the conflict between Sandra and Nadia constitutes such a possibility of rallying support and building respect. For Sandra, two conflicts have mutated and, in alliance, they constitute a more significant threat than before. After a while, Sandra responds in the following way: “So I have told Nadia, that I would like to speak with her. There is no reason to be arguing. I just want to explain to her, not to piss me off. I did actually have problems with a girl who had talked about me behind my back . . . where I ended up beating her.”

Sandra tries to balance the gendered cross pressure between doing what is right, dealing with conflicts through dialogue or passivity, and doing what is necessary, maintaining respect by using or showing willingness to violence (see also Jones 2010). She reminds Nadia of a violent episode, where a girl ended up in hospital after a brief violent encounter, mainly committed by Sandra, but with the participation of Nadia. Sandra reminds the girls of her capacity for violence, as a resistance to their positioning of her as someone who gets threatened. The violence they have committed together becomes negative potentiality in their internal conflict. What started as a minor disagreement about a phone prank and disloyalty is now turning into a serious matter where threats of violence are reconfiguring the social terrain.

However, the extent of the hostile alliance is unclear to Sandra. Knowledge circulates by means of face-to-face communication, but also through Facebook, chatrooms, and cell phones. Social technologies are integral to the everyday lives and socialization processes of children and youth all over the world and in Western countries in particular (Bell and Kennedy 2000; Weber and Dixon 2007). All the participants of this study had cell phones and regular access to online media, although smart phones were not as widespread as today. The use of cell phones to inform friends and rally back-up was mentioned in almost all incidents of prolonged conflicts. Facebook was often mentioned as an additional layer of communication, where insults were posted and alliances established. Text messages were circulated, Facebook exchanges took place with some people just taking a note of it, others “liking it,” or commenting “Slut. I hate you.” It was common knowledge to call anonymously, call from other people’s phones, calling and pretending to be someone else, and checking other people’s texted messages. With online interactions, you never really know who participates, what they know, or who does what, creating a “pulse of uncertainty” that proliferates everyday lives (Kofoed 2013: 191).

Sandra has no way of knowing who knows about the conflict or who is allying with or against her. If Jeanette and Nadia have allied with the group of boys from her neighborhood, she is vulnerable on a larger scale. Again, “the other thing” at the back of her mind reminds her to be

vigilant. A while back, Sandra had allied with these boys to set up a meeting with a girl, Coco, at the local mall. Coco had spread rumors about Sandra, however when Coco met up with the boys, Sandra was there pretending not to be annoyed or aware of the gossip. Meanwhile, she and her friends had planned to “make Coco say sorry” in the privacy of the lavatories. As Sandra explains: “I usually just warn people, like ask them, ‘what do you think you are doing’ and if they apologize, ok. Do it again, and I’ll beat you. People know that I usually do what I say I will do.”

While Coco was given the chance to apologize, the situation escalated into physical violence and Sandra’s successfully communicated she was someone not to mess with. Now the tables have turned, and Sandra is potentially vulnerable; she could be “Coco” the next time she meets up with any of her friends. In her current position, she is not orchestrating apologies or violent retaliation, but is placed in a vulnerable position, where the social terrain appears opaque and packed with negative potentiality. Violence is not the only solution, but the social terrain is imploding in anticipated violence.

In a terrain where opacity combines with negative potentiality, the socially invisible must be exposed (Vigh 2011: 104). The threats posed by Jeanette and Nadia must be called out, which explains why Sandra stops ignoring their insults and threats. While committed to not using violence, she fears that this strategy of non-violence positions her as vulnerable. After a few weeks, Sandra responds by reminding them of her capacity for violence. However, while this can work to deter future threats, it could also intensify the situation. Sandra’s engagement with the anticipated violence and her potential victimization produces a situation of near-violence. Her strategy to call out Nadia and Jeanette is an attempt of social mastery; to establish a position protected from violence, insults, and vulnerability. The situation encompasses both negative and positive potentiality—being positioned as weak and vulnerable or powerful among peers.

There is more at stake than the relation to Nadia and Jeanette. Their potential alliance with the boys of her neighborhood makes Sandra vulnerable not only to violence but also to a marginal position in the street-oriented peer groups she belongs to. These peer groups are central to managing a precarious living situation, where she often finds herself homeless. During the four months I met with her regularly, she was kicked out of her home five or six times, often late at night. This made her dependent on a large network of friends and acquaintances to manage an unstable living situation. While homelessness was not an experience shared by most of the young women in this study, volatile living conditions were characteristic of the sample, and Sandra’s peers, as expressed in this quote: “That bunch? No that was last winter. We have been spread out. Mira was robbed in her apartment and moved to a youth pension in Valby. It was her best friend who did it, totally weird. Caspar was sent to residential care somewhere, I don’t know, but I still talk to GC, he is my buddy.”

The social terrain is being reconfigured by not only violence but also volatile “homes,” welfare services, and peer groups in flux. Sandra and her peers are placed in out-of-home care, expelled, become homeless, and move in and out of peer groups. Across these spaces they maintain a violent reputation because “you always have that other thing at the back of your mind,” as Sandra said at the beginning of the analysis. Sandra cannot always withdraw to the safety of her home and avoid these peers. Thus, her desire not to be a violent person is challenged by her precarious life and position in a social terrain of potential violence. Her narrative demonstrates how a social terrain can implode in negative potentiality and how a phone prank can evolve into a dramatic event about social life or death. This illustrates how violence works in the lives of these young women not only as actuality or in its presence, but even more so in its present absence, where it has the potentiality to destabilize identities and social relations.

Discussion

Sandra's narrative provides in-depth understanding of how violence plays out in a tension space between actuality and potentiality, which shapes the dynamics of violent situations. While it could appear as if nothing happens in Sandra's conflict narrative, at least no physical violence, it is evident that the potentiality of violence shapes her everyday interactions and dispositions in dramatic ways. In this section, I will discuss the findings in light of the aggregate data of the study, highlighting how detailed attention to the tension space between actuality and potentiality provides new empirical insights that are relevant to youth and gender research and micro-sociological studies of violence.

Sandra's narrative highlights how violent situations are shaped by both the actuality and potentiality of the situation. Potentiality presents itself as fear of victimization, subordination, and marginalization in peer groups, but also as the possibility for powerful positioning, building respect and strengthening alliances. By applying the concept of potentiality in a wider understanding than proposed by Vigh (2011), I demonstrate how violence is used to carve out spaces of belonging, empowerment, even excitement, as studies from the UK also suggest (Choak 2021; Young 2009). These findings resonate with scholarship highlighting violence as instrumental for building respect among young men living in deprived urban areas (Anderson 1999; Harding 2010), while studies of girls' conflicts tend to focus on relational concerns as the key to understanding these conflicts (Miller and Mullins 2006; Underwood 2003). Sandra expresses concern about both; her reputation as someone not to be messed with and her belonging in peer-groups. This suggests that the fears and desires that fuel young people's violent engagement may be quite similar irrespective of gender (see also Burman, Brown & Batchelor 2003).

The way young people establish respect and peer group belonging may however be gendered. A key theme in Sandra's narrative is her ambivalence in wanting to refrain from violence while maintaining her social position and alliances by communicating a will to violence. Scholars have largely framed this as a gendered dilemma between doing what is right and what is necessary (Jones 2010; Ness 2010). In Sandra's narrative, this dilemma is narrated not only as gendered but as situated in different spatial logics of violence. The young women of my study were moving between spaces of “zero-tolerance” and potentially violent spaces, sometimes also experiencing that these spaces collide, such as in residential care or in certain schools, where staff operated based on zero-tolerance logics, while youths position themselves and each other using violence. This was the case when Sandra was expelled from boarding school based on her misbehavior and use of violence, which many of the other young women had also experienced. In fact, most of the narratives of conflict presented by the young women include reflections on how to avoid the use of physical violence, while maintaining a reputation as someone who can and will use violence. This is done by allying with peers, posing threats and insults on social media or the phone, or bringing friends along to prevent a conflict situation from escalating into (excessive) physical violence. These narratives imply that the concept of potentiality may be particularly valuable for understanding girls' violent engagements, because violence largely remains a “hidden capacity” (Agamben 1999: 179), which produces and protracts the tension space between violence as actuality and potentiality.

I also further suggest that social technologies add a layer of opacity that in tandem with violence as potentiality shape social interactions between young people. Further research is needed to advance our understanding of how social media work to enforce some of the driving mechanisms in violent conflicts among youth, and further explore how online interactions constitute a dimension of violence among street-oriented youths. Research on cyber socialization (Bell and Kennedy 2000; Weber and Dixon 2007) and cyber-bullying (Kofoed 2013; Kofoed and Ringrose

2012) could support such criminological endeavors. Social media contributes to producing a “pulse of uncertainty” in everyday life (Kofoed 2013: 191), which makes vigilance and preemptive quests for social power imperative for youth. Cyber-bullying and cyber-mediated violence plays out in addition to the physical violence among street-oriented youths, which needs further exploring within youth research.

The violent conflict described by Sandra plays out in a group of loosely connected friends and acquaintances; young people who know each other from school, out-of-home placement or their local community. The verbal and physical violence in her narrative plays out between girls, but the boys are bystanders in the sense that they are informed about the conflicts and Sandra is concerned about their loyalty: violent conflicts also mostly play out in gender-mixed peer-groups and among young people who are acquainted in various ways, in resonance with the descriptions of street-oriented peer groups studied by Tara Young (2009). Thus, depicting these conflicts as “girls’ violence,” which is common in the literature (see Alder and Worrall 2004), neglects the gender-integrated affiliations and dynamics that are an element in street-oriented youth groups. Looking at the 40 violent situations that were described in my study, 10 of the situations include a male victim. In about half of the situations, which include girls fighting with other girls, boys play an integral part as bystanders or persons disrupting a violent situation. In Sandra’s case, the boys participated actively in orchestrating the violent retaliation targeting Coco, just as her alliance with the group of boys was a main issue of concern. Conflicts thus play out in gender-integrated contexts, which became clear by applying a wider perception of space and time.

By approaching violence as potentiality, it becomes possible to explore how the past, the present, and the future entangle to produce emotional tension shaped by both fear and desire. As proposed by Randall Collins, the micro-sociology of violence needs to include “larger slices” of space and time to fully account for the dynamics of violent encounters (Collins 2009: 35). I propose that potentiality can be applied as a sensitizing concept, which enables an exploration of wider temporal and situational dynamics. I refer to this as a micro-longitudinal perspective, which is relevant for micro-sociological studies of violence and the theorization of interactional, symbolic, and situational dynamics of violent situations (Collins 2009; Felson and Steadman 1983; Mullins and Miller 2008). This scholarship focuses on specific situations of violence as they are narrated by perpetrators, victims, or bystanders or documented in visual recordings of violent situations. However, violence is largely explored as a product of past practices and accumulated events, which fails to account for how social practice, including violence, plays out in a tension space between actuality and potentiality. The micro-longitudinal approach does not require a specific length of study, but rather opens situational analysis to time/space dynamics and micro-alterations that include past, present, and future imaginaries and aspirations.

Sandra’s narrative provides insight into the intimate link between violence and precarious everyday lives. The use of violence is instrumental for establishing safety, a sense of belonging and social mastery, while it also contributes to producing a volatile social terrain. Most of the young women in the study had moved and/or changed schools frequently as children, and as teenagers this pattern continued, and now coupled with multiple out-of-home placements, and high conflict levels at home. As the young women in the study grew older, they positioned themselves increasingly oppositional to violence, as their lives also seemed to stabilize. Many of them were old enough to live in a small apartment of their own (provided and paid for by Child Protection Services), and they started attending school more regularly. Ingunn Marie Flekkøy (2000) argues that Swedish young women refrain from using violence because it becomes increasingly incompatible with dominant discourses of femininity. Life-course scholars have highlighted that young women become oriented toward family obligations and turn away from

a street-oriented lifestyle (Bottcher 2001). These findings are true for the young women of this study, however it also seems that the stabilization of their lives, particularly getting a small place of their own, curtails the need for young women to navigate volatile peer groups and use violence to build respect and safeguard alliances.

Conclusion

This article shows how violence as potentiality and actuality shapes everyday socialization among youth living in precarious life situations. The potentiality of violence installs a fear of being positioned marginally open to future violation and produces a desire for powerful social positioning. Thus, violence can be a response to multiple forms of deprivation, but it can also be an active engagement with a social world depriving young people of autonomy, agency, and a sense of belonging. By exploring the tension space between actuality and potentiality, the analysis of violent situations expands in time and space. This is referred to as a micro-longitudinal approach to studying violence, which enables analysis of wider situational dynamics, such as past experiences, present concerns, and possible futures. Rather than identifying changes from one point in time to another, this micro-longitudinal approach brings to the forefront the micro-alterations through time/space, which significantly shapes the dynamics of violent situations. Violence as potentiality has a profound impact on young people's lives, and contributes to a more rich and nuanced understanding of how young people live with violence and navigate potentially violent social terrains.

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■ NOTES

1. The list includes 29 residential areas defined by: (1) a population with more than 50 percent non-Western immigrants and their descendants; (2) more than 40 percent of inhabitants between the ages 18 and 64 being unemployed; and (3) the number of convicted persons exceeding 270 per 10,000 inhabitants. The areas are defined as in need of urban development initiatives such as restoration and increased social service provision (Ministry of Transport, Building and Housing, 2018).
2. The Danish term is *kontaktperson*, which is translated as "mentor." It designates an adult supervisor who supports a child with emotional and social problems, usually two to five hours per week.

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