

Article

The Glasgow miracle? Storytelling, violence reduction and public policy

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Abstract

The city of Glasgow, once dubbed the ‘murder capital of Europe’, has more recently become famed for its experiments in violence reduction. In this article, based on a large-scale study of violence reduction, we focus on the discursive construction of this so-called ‘Glasgow miracle’. Based on interviews with 40 senior stakeholders working in Scotland during the period 2000–2020, we explore the significance of dramatic personal stories of tragedy, redemption, and rebirth in shifting the public narrative around violence. In so doing, we contribute new empirical and theoretical evidence to narrative criminology, demonstrate the conditions under which progressive policies can come to the fore, and interrogate the role of storytellers in communicating these stories with persuasion and influence.

Keywords

Bourdieu, narrative criminology, policy mobility, Scotland, social transformation, violence

Introduction

The city of Glasgow, Scotland, is founded on the legend of St Mungo, who reputedly performed four miracles on the banks of the Molendinar Burn in the sixth century. His feats

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are immortalized in the city's coat of arms, as well as the famous lines by the Scots poet Edwin Morgan: *The bird that never flew/The tree that never grew/The bell that never rang/The fish that never swam*. Storytelling and mythology remain central to the city's character but in more recent times, these urban legends relate less to the resurrection of animal and plant matter and more to the rejuvenation of the city's reputation. Glasgow has long held an image as a 'Scottish Chicago' (Davies, 2007) or 'murder capital of Europe' (McKay, 2006), with popular representations frequently portraying 'a filthy, slum-ridden, poverty-stricken, gang-infested city' (Damer, 1990: 5). In 2004, the United Nations announced that Scotland had the highest rates of violence in the developed world, and the World Health Organization found the city to have the top homicide rate in 21 European countries (Krug et al., 2002).¹ The reputation, it seemed, was sealed.

In the years that followed, however, a remarkable transformation occurred. Since 2006/2007, police recorded crime statistics have shown a 48% decrease in non-sexual violent crime (Scottish Government, 2016, 2018), including a 38% fall in homicide and 43% fall in attempted murder and serious assault. The dramatic reduction has, by and large, been attributed to the work of Scotland's Violence Reduction Unit (VRU), a small team of police officers and analysts tasked with reducing the epidemic levels of knife crime and homicide. Through a programme of direct intervention, policy lobbying, and practical influence, the Scottish VRU promoted principles of prevention and education over policing and justice, advocating for a broader 'public health' approach to violence reduction.² Though the precise causal mechanisms are debatable—and follow a pattern of crime reduction in North America and Europe (McVie, 2017)—this has not prevented a consensus of cause and effect. Like the New York miracle before (Zimring, 2007), which led to the exportation of the 'broken windows' model of policing, the dramatic reduction has led to policy transfer of the 'Glasgow model' to England and Wales through the funding of 20 new regional VRUs.

In this article, based on a study of violence reduction in Scotland and England, we focus on the discursive construction of the so-called 'Glasgow miracle' and interrogate the role of storytelling and narrative in its constitution. Based on interviews with 40 senior stakeholders working in Scotland during the period 2000–2020—including senior politicians, civil servants, police officers and community leaders—we explore the significance of dramatic personal stories of redemption and hope, relayed by charismatic storytellers, in shifting the public narrative around violence. In so doing, we seek to contribute to narrative approaches to criminology (Fleetwood et al., 2019), analyse the conditions under which progressive policies regarding violence prevention can come to the fore (Polletta, 2006), and interrogate the performative role of storytellers (Bauman, 1986) in communicating these stories with persuasion and influence.

The article makes three primary arguments. First, drawing on interview data, the article makes an empirical case for the significance of storytelling and narrative in the discursive reconstruction of Glasgow during the period 2000–2020. For reasons of space in this article, we centre one specific example: David's story. This instance of storytelling, as we shall see, played an outsized role in the reframing of violence in Scotland and warrants close investigation. Second, drawing on cultural sociology, we argue for the significance of local and national context, which contain within them a deep reservoir of cultural myths, in evaluating audience receptiveness to particular narratives. The telling of

David's story resonated with a national conversation over independence, tapping into an enduring 'Scottish myth' of egalitarianism (McCrone, 2001). Third, we evaluate the significance of both enabling structures and individual storytellers in the discursive reframing of violence in Scotland. While it is clear that leaders of the violence reduction movement were endowed by audiences with charismatic or quasi-religious authority, these investments took place against a backdrop of political and policy dynamism that supported rather than inhibited change. This combination of storyline, storytelling and audience, we argue, has important implications for future contributions to narrative criminology, penal policy, and violence prevention.

Changing the narrative: Field, place and social transformation

Since the 'narrative turn' in social science, analytical approaches that centre and probe the storied nature of individual subjectivity have become increasingly prevalent (Alexander, 2003). In the field of criminology, recent years have seen a resurgence of abiding interests in the significance of stories in 'instigating, sustaining, or effecting desistance from harmful action' (Presser and Sandberg, 2015: 1), mining the 'deep stories' of crime that circulate and reverberate in society. Drawing from a diverse theoretical foundation that moves from ethnomethodology to 'techniques of neutralization' (Sykes and Matza, 1957), narrative approaches connect the storied construction of crime and harm with individual belief-structures and self-justifications. Initially focusing on the way that narratives were deployed by offenders, be it in the form of justificatory 'gangster narratives' from wider society (Sandberg, 2009), the framing of past violence as a form of 'heroic struggle' (Presser, 2009) or articulations of 'redemption scripts' that smooth the path towards desistance (Maruna, 2001), narrative scholarship has burgeoned into an interdisciplinary enterprise incorporating literary theory, linguistics, and social psychology (Fleetwood et al., 2019). In the process, the analytic gaze has broadened to include not only those in conflict with the law but also those who create, impose, and police it, as well as the wider significance of stories of crime in the justice system and beyond (Annison, 2021). Recently, narrative scholars have also sought to interrogate the role that stories can play in challenging both systemic and street-based forms of violence (Copes et al., 2023; Fleetwood, 2019; Sandberg and Colvin, 2020), in short not 'just to analyse narratives, but to try and change them' (Fleetwood et al., 2019: 16).

Notably, in this regard, recent theoretical interventions have sought to tether a narrative-oriented analysis of the social world with abiding sociological concerns regarding structural inequalities and cultural reproduction. Unlike postmodernist accounts of narrative that are unmoored from their place and origin (Presser and Sandberg, 2015), this conceptual vocabulary seeks to situate the performance of narrative through engagement with the Bourdieusian concepts of 'habitus' and 'field' (Fleetwood, 2016; Sandberg and Fleetwood, 2017). For Bourdieu, the social world is composed of a series of semi-autonomous, relational social spaces, or 'fields', which maintain their own unique logic, power and forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1993). These are dynamic sites incorporating both normative and affective dimensions, which produce particular modes of thought and action; akin to both a competitive field and a magnetic force field. Fields have particular embodied effects, in the form of an imprinted 'habitus' for those in their orbit, as

well as relational currencies, or capitals, that anoint individuals with social, cultural or economic status within that environment (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). For narrative criminologists, habitus and field influence the forms of story that can be told, by whom, and in what situation. As Sandberg and Fleetwood (2017: 379) note, 'storytellers have creativity, but only within the limits of the field'. Put differently, social position influences the authority with which a story is told, and how it is received.

In this article we seek to extend these insightful interventions through engagement with two broad areas of theoretical inquiry. The first, drawn from the field of cultural sociology (Alexander, 2003), grounds the dynamics of narratives and social fields within specific historical contexts. Like habitus, which is 'both individual and collective' (Bourdieu, 1998: 66), narratives are not just individual but 'can also be collective' (Sandberg and Fleetwood, 2017: 368). Collective narratives, or 'formula stories' (Loseke, 2015), represent cultural structures that pattern the fabric of everyday life, and powerful waves through which collective myths of nationhood are communicated (Alexander, 2003: 5). In Scotland, as we argue, these national narratives relate to meritocracy (McCrone, 2001: 79), a 'lad o' pairts' narrative of social mobility and democracy, and we analyse the significance of this 'deep story' in understanding a discursive shift in relation to violence. The second, drawing on recent translations of Bourdieu and subsequent scholarship, explores the role that narratives can play not only in cultural reproduction but also in social transformation. This work elaborates an account of symbolic revolutions, in which field arrangements are rearranged by a combination of external conditions and charismatic leadership of 'someone who, completely possessed by a system, comes to take possession of it by returning the mastery he possesses against the system' (Bourdieu, 2017: 377–378). We argue that charismatic leadership and storytelling formed a constituent element in a larger discursive shift towards violence prevention in Scotland. This account, we argue, allows space for an analysis of the significance of narrative in contributing to systemic change.

Methods and data

The methodological framework for this article involves a reconstruction of the development of public health approaches to violence reduction in Scotland, of which the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit was a major proponent, and is drawn from a broader study of public health and violence prevention in the UK.³ The broader study seeks to establish a new evidence base on public health approaches to violence reduction, and the ways such policies transfer between jurisdictions. Here, we centre the 'origin story' of violence reduction in Glasgow, and in turn Scotland, which prompted the subsequent transfer of policy to England and Wales.

The data presented are drawn from a wider qualitative dataset involving 190 participants drawn from a range of policy, practice and community settings in Scotland, England and Wales, focusing on the recent history of violence prevention initiatives.⁴ In this article, we draw on a sub-sample of 40 semi-structured interviews with senior stakeholders, who had a significant role in violence reduction in Scotland, to reconstruct the development of the public health approach to reducing violence in Scotland in the period 2005–2015. From an initial list of key policy actors, we

used snowball sampling to access different parts of the policy networks, allowing multiple points of entry. These data were used to establish the broader social, cultural and political conditions in which violence reduction occurred. This dataset was analysed for explanations for violence reduction (e.g. changes in youth culture; VRU interventions; enforcement; early years, etc). While, on the face of it, the Scottish experience appears to adhere to the classical models of policy ‘windows’ during critical moments (Kingdon, 1995), the interviews revealed unexpected resonances beyond the policy field in areas of practice such as education, health, third sector and community work. As such, the role of storytelling and narrative emerged unexpectedly as a prominent theme, leading to subsequent recoding and re-analysis. Drawing on Sandberg’s delineation of narrative analysis, we draw primarily on performative and structural dimensions (Sandberg, 2022).

In what follows, we interrogate the role of storylines, storytelling, and narrative performance in the evolution of the public health approach to violence in Scotland. Drawing on the voices of those closest to events as they unfolded—drawn from politics, policy, policing, community, practice and academia, often in combination—we seek to analyse this development ‘retroactively from the adoption process back to the initial learning’ (Wood, 2016: 395). One limitation of this methodology, however, is the tendency to recall events more smoothly than they were experienced at the time. In order to ‘sample “failure” as well as “success”’ (Peck and Theodore, 2012: 28), we actively sought out contradictory accounts and conflicting interpretations.⁵ For reasons of space, however, we present the argument through a single narrative that resonated across all interviews: David’s story.

David’s story: Tragedy, redemption and hope

‘David’ is a pseudonym for a 15-year-old boy found guilty of culpable homicide in Glasgow, in the mid-1990s, and subsequently sentenced to seven years in prison. His story forms the basis of a case history formulated by Scotland’s Violence Reduction Unit in 2007. Following Annison’s (2021) analysis of the role of storytelling in policy narratives, here we trace the ‘career’ of David’s story (Polletta, 2006: 7) in the wider unfolding of violence reduction in Scotland. The story had both an immediate and lasting impact, and formed a frequent reference point in interviews across all participant groups. Below, we make the case that the impact of this story was rooted in its adherence to a number of classical storytelling modes: tragedy, redemption, and rebirth. The story begins with CCTV footage of the murder itself.

David’s story: Tragedy

Bathed in yellow streetlight, a grainy image of a city centre street sparks suddenly to life. The street is mayhem. Bodies shift quickly in and out of shot, at diagonals, throwing stretched punches. The focus is unsteady but six or seven people, all young men, are visible. A figure dressed in a blue tracksuit and white cap appears, cutting a zigzag path through the melee. He appears to throw one punch, then another, before turning to raise his hands in celebration. The knife that had been secreted in his hand is now visible, reflecting the glare of the streetlight.

The second punch inflicted a stab-wound to the heart, that claimed the life of a passing stranger. The film cuts, and the story begins.

The film acts as an introduction—or ‘inciting incident’—for a presentation by members of the VRU, which follows David’s story from birth to the age of 15, when the murder took place. A stark timeline is presented. Born in 1981, David was rehoused three times in his first five years due to repeated incidents of domestic violence, moving between some of the most disadvantaged wards in Glasgow. His mother had addiction issues and struggled to care for him, and he spent weekdays with his grandmother. Between the ages of nine and 12, David was rehoused three more times due to poor living conditions and urban ‘regeneration’, often living with family members actively involved in crime. At age 12, he began to truant and was considered by the school to be ‘outwith parental control’. He began to run with a local street gang and received police attention for breaches of the peace, solvent abuse, assault, shoplifting, and theft. In the post-trial report, the judge suggested that there was little indication ‘in the background or supporting evidence suggesting that David is anything other than a pretty ordinary teenager ... [with] a decent and supportive family’ suggesting that professionals involved in his care had little understanding of the realities of his life and their potential impact. During his time in prison, David’s mother died of a heroin overdose, and his sister was taken into secure care. The story ends as David is released from prison, rehoused on the same street as the prison and becomes a father himself.⁶

The basic outline of David’s story was developed for a presentation to the Scottish Government in 2007, at a time when rates of violent crime in Scotland were at epidemic levels. The VRU combined police intelligence and other sources to compile a composite case history of David’s life, and presented it as a narrative. Former VRU Director John Carnochan recalls the initial invitation as follows:

we want you to come along and speak. You’ve got 15 minutes. So we sat down, had a think about it and we thought, we need a narrative, we need a story. So we had a piece of CCTV footage which was of a young ... a man being murdered by David. And we ... used that.

The CCTV footage is raw, shocking and demands attention. As visual and narrative scholars have long recognised (Brown and Carrabine, 2017), narratives that are tethered to striking events and images ‘endow events with the moral purpose, emotional telos, and engaging ambiguity that persuade others to participate’ (Polletta, 2006: 35). Several interviewees were present during this initial presentation. According to these participants, the account held the audience spellbound. The 15-minute session became an hour-and-a-half long, with all other business cancelled. As one participant noted, it was ‘brilliant, entertaining and shocking’ and ‘a pretty big deal’ (Civil Servant 1). Similarly, a former First Minister who was present recalls:

The unusual thing in this case was specifically inviting somebody in who had a proposal and was basically asking us for political support, he wasn’t just telling us what was happening ... he was basically coming in to say, ‘I’m going to show you how serious this is and I’m going to tell you

how I think we can deal with it and I'm here to ask for your support', and [it was] incredibly powerful, incredibly powerful.

Founding members of the VRU recalled that, prior to this moment, they had been searching for ways to 'change the narrative', meeting with national news editors to discourage sensationalist language. It was not until the telling of David's story, however, that the direct power of storytelling became crystallized.

The story adheres to one of the so-called 'basic plots' (Booker, 2004): fundamental story-shapes that recur in both classical and contemporary storytelling, such as 'rags to riches' or 'the quest'. David's story represents one of the most well-known of these: tragedy. A tragedy, at its most basic, involves an unfavourable ending for the main character. This may be the result of an internal flaw or a bad decision, but it always ends in disaster (Hart, 2011). Like Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, from the outset the audience is made aware of its fateful conclusion, before tracing the journey that led to that ineluctable outcome. Crucially, however, the flaw revealed by the story is not with the protagonist but the society that failed them. In its piece-by-piece account of warning signs missed, it shifts the spotlights from the deed itself to the systematic failures that led up to it. It was clear to the members of the VRU responsible that they had struck upon something extraordinarily powerful, recalling:

At the end of it, there was that thing of I looked round the room and it was deathly silent, utterly deathly silent ... oh my god this is really resonating in this room, really, really utterly resonated in this room. I was totally and utterly dumbstruck because nobody's seen anything like this before in terms of what we're talking about. (VRU member 1)

Notably, however, in its first iteration the story represented a 'fledgling' narrative (Polletta, 2006) that required further refinement and retelling. Over time, it became clear that it was not only David's story that resonated, but also its performance. As Bauman (1986: 3) notes, good storytelling relies on performance 'as a mode of communication, a way of speaking, the essence of which resides in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill'. While narratives that 'stop' at tragedy can be fatalistic and prevent action (Polletta, 2009), over time the story evolved into a different arc: that of redemption.

Impact and influence: Redemption

Aristotle, in his classical treatise on rhetoric, noted that persuasion can be said to be nested not only in the qualities of the speaker (ethos), but also in the emotional receptiveness of the audience (pathos) or the strength of the argument (logos) (Rapp, 2022). David's story, combining as it does all three elements, over the course of the following years became a staple of the VRU's public communications, delivered to wide-ranging audiences both internationally and locally. A former Director of the Scottish VRU recalled that although it 'is difficult to quantify exactly how many times we have told the story or how many people have seen it ... I reckon that it is tens of thousands' (Carnochan, 2015: 59). Certainly, interviewees from across a wide range of backgrounds—from education to health, early years to youth work—made direct reference

to the story. The emotional impact of the narrative left an affective imprint that sustained over time. As one interviewee recalls:

So I think that was a really powerful piece and I think ... David's story in the early years framework was, I mean, you know, I remember when I first met John Carnochan at an early years conference I was like, why is there a police officer? And then when he got up and spoke I was like, 'oh, my god, yeah'. (Civil Servant 2)

Analysts of storytelling have long argued that narrative commands attention in a uniquely compelling way (Hart, 2011). For participants interviewed, the storytelling of the VRU delivered a clarity and power of message. Notably, the message conveyed by David's story involved a shift from a traditional justice narrative around individual responsibility to that of a systemic failure. At a time when Anti-Social Behaviour Orders for youth offending and other forms of individual responsabilization were to the fore in both devolved and Westminster politics (Garland, 2001; McVie, 2011), the emphasis on societal shortcomings represented a radical shift in focus. Without explicitly stating it, by subverting standard accounts, the presentation exposes how ill-considered actions on the individual scale can have fatal, if unintended, consequences. As one participant commented:

It just highlighted ... without actually saying to a social work or a department, you could have done better, without actually saying to a police officer, you could have done better, or a teacher, you could have done better, or housing, you could have done better. It just says, look here's a story. This happened, this is real. (VRU member 2)

Tragedy prompts action, and the story created an imperative to prevent similar tragedies. Participants recalled being able to see themselves in the narrative—as teachers, social workers or early years workers—and related the narrative to missed opportunities for intervention in David's life. The shortcomings of services prompted audiences to see their own practice in the story, and find ways to change it. As one participant recalls:

I think it's so powerful ... it was one of the first things I did, you know, we sat and we watched John Carnochan speaking about all that, and I suppose, you know, the kind of key messages that I bring out to staff is that, you know, our children are shaped by their experiences, and it's not always ... it's not a choice. (Headteacher 1)

The personification of David's story, which could have been told through statistics or policy, therefore created real impact. Building on this success, in subsequent years the VRU began to employ people with convictions, whose personal stories of change in turn became a staple of the VRU's public profile. A participant recalls the power in the VRU's telling the 'the stories of young people ... [who] don't have a voice, traditionally ... but quite often they were real people. And that made all of a difference' (Journalist 1). After seeing the presentation of David's story by VRU co-founder Karyn McCluskey, another interviewee recalled a 'lightbulb moment' that led to her founding a pioneering charity:

She showed us CCTV footage of a young ... I mean, you've probably seen it, it was part of the history. She showed us that CCTV footage of that young lad committing murder in the centre of Glasgow. I know a lot of people say they don't have a lightbulb moment, but that was a lightbulb moment for me because I had never actually considered how people came about the injuries that I was treating. (Third Sector 1)

These individual changes formed part of a discursive shift, in the years that followed, from a policy framing of violence as a justice issue towards a public health approach stressing early years and education. The result, for one interviewee, was the 'lighting of a thousands tiny candles' (VRU member 4). As another commented: 'a 20-minute presentation actually probably had more influence than I would say a £5 million gangs work programme' (VRU member 1). In order for this narrative to gain this form of momentum, however, it was necessary for certain 'structural conditions' to be present, allowing the cultural influence of storytelling to generate 'independent force' (Polletta, 2006: 7). In the context of Scotland, we argue, this narrative found a willing audience in the debates surrounding Scottish independence, and a search for hope.

Legacy: Rebirth

Over time, David's story became one of many told by the Scottish VRU, with tragic tales replaced by those of individual, collective and community rebirth. Of the 'basic plots' outlined by Booker (2004: 195), 'rebirth' involves a situation in which 'a hero or heroine falls under a dark spell which eventually traps them ... they languish ... [t]hen a miraculous act of redemption takes place'. The narrative of the Glasgow miracle, like the New York miracle, which came before (Zimring, 2012), exemplifies this narrative. As one participant reflects of the early influence of the VRU:

The real effect in my opinion ... was to change how governments think. It was to change the narrative over the offender. To change the narrative of the victims. To change how we think we should be spending our money and how we should be looking at young people. And how we should treat young people with knives ... That was the real successes and that's what's led to some of the reductions. (VRU member 1)

This change of the narrative, we argue, was rooted not only in the power, performance and pathos of the story itself, but also in the audience. As cultural sociologists have long argued, stories not only adhere to basic patterns but are often rooted in narratives of national identity (Alexander, 2003). For Alexander, in the United States, stories of the Founding Fathers, the Holocaust, Vietnam, Watergate, and 9/11 form a reservoir of collective imaginary. As discussed earlier, the Scottish myth of national identity relates to stories of egalitarianism. Writ large in the phrase 'We're Aw Jock Tamsons' Bairns', or in Robert Burns' poem 'A Man's A Man for A' That', such mythologies represent a 'contemporary and active force providing, in most instances, a reservoir of legitimation for belief and action' (McCrone, 2001: 91). The 'deep story' of Scottish exceptionalism and egalitarianism, we argue, formed an indispensable narrative bridge between past reputation and redemptive present.

For journalists interviewed for the study, the telling of a ‘very strong and compelling narrative [about] the VRU in Glasgow and how it came about and how it succeeded’ (Journalist 2) came to form a regular feature on the national and international media landscape, allowing the VRU to ‘set a political agenda through the newspapers’ (Journalist 1). Such a story of rebirth was one that allowed audiences to replace feelings of shame over Glasgow’s violent reputation with those of national pride, as stories of ‘revolution, foes vanquished, and threats averted strengthen national identity by stimulating emotions of fear, pride, longing replaced by determination, and grief replaced with joy’ (Polletta, 2006: 12). In the process, the VRU ‘changed not just the media narrative but also the narrative of politics to some extent ... changed the way we talked about youth violence ... [becoming] a kind of global news celebrity in a minor way’ (Journalist 1). It is not coincidental that the success of this narrative took place against a backdrop of the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014.

The reversal in the public narrative of violence in Scotland, did not, of course, occur solely as a result of David’s story. Nonetheless, as Polletta (2006: 7) argues, there is urgency in ‘identifying the structural conditions in which new ideas and identities are likely to have political force’ if the ‘constitutive’ role that narrative can play is to be harnessed. In the section that follows we analyse the role of charisma, structure and storytelling in the abiding influence of the VRU, and its message of violence prevention and public health.

Storytelling, charisma and social transformation

Narrative criminologists have, in recent years, sought to embed understandings of storytelling within the context of relationships of power. Sandberg and Fleetwood, for example delineate the ‘limits’ placed on storytelling by the norms of the field, and the individual’s position within it. As such, they argue, ‘field shapes the kinds of narratives told’ (Sandberg and Fleetwood, 2017: 379). Polletta (2006: 8) refers to this as ‘storytelling authority’, with ‘groups and activities with higher social status’ able to ‘both gain from norms of storytelling and be able to breach them with fewer ramifications’ (Polletta, 2006: 25). In Fraser’s (2015) ethnographic account of gang-affiliated youth in Glasgow, for example, higher-status members of the group could tell stories without challenge, regardless of truth, while those with lower status could be derided for stating relatively uncontroversial facts. In the example of the Violence Reduction Unit, its position as a police-led partnership clearly influenced the reach and authority of David’s story. The public narrative that inspired action (Ganz, 2011) prompted changes in policing, education and early years, with a range of participants describing their storytelling as ‘powerful’, ‘imposing’, ‘intimidating’, ‘forceful’ and ‘credible’, influenced by the position of authority from which they spoke within the bureaucratic field of the State (Shammas, 2018). For some, the successes in violence reduction were a combination of this status with ‘power of personality rather than power of policy’ (senior VRU partner).

Contrary to scholars who present Bourdieu as a determinist (Jenkins, 2002), recent posthumous publications (Bourdieu, 2017) have considered the conditions that allow for agent-driven ‘symbolic revolutions’ that lead to social transformation (Fowler,

2020). This amounts not only to a form of ‘virtuosic performance’ that allows an individual to ‘bend’ the field and act against its intrinsic logic (Dziewanski, 2020), but a capacity to alter systems of perception themselves, in the form of an avant garde movement (Grenfell and Hardy, 2003). As Bourdieu (2017: 457) argues, ‘those actors who possess extraordinary cultural capital in any particular field will also possess the potential to restructure that field and to revalue its values’. Though the instance that Bourdieu highlights is that of Manet’s incendiary impact on the artistic field, the capacity of a charismatic individual to shift structures of perception can also help account for the narrative shifts documented in Scotland. Not only are story and audience significant, but also the storytellers.

The VRU founders, John Carnochan and Karyn McCluskey, were invariably described by participants as ‘charismatic’. ‘Charisma’ as a form of leadership authority has a long lineage, following the sociology of Max Weber, and his distinction between ‘traditional’, ‘rational-legal’ and ‘charismatic’ models of political authority. Where in most instances political authority is derived from occupancy of a ‘rational’, legitimated office of state, during moments of ‘political distress’ (Weber, 1968: 245), leaders may emerge outside of bureaucratic structures who are endowed with ‘specific gifts of the body and spirit’ (Weber, 1948: 245). These individuals draw strength not from ‘rational’ traditions but from the ‘charismatic’ authority of the prophet or demagogue (Weber, 1968: 243), and are invested by followers with ‘extraordinary gifts’ (Bendix, 1960: 295). Participants discussed the founders of the VRU in similarly striking terms, as being ‘held up as these sort of great game changing sort of community actors’ (Journalist 2) or ‘jump[ing] out, as people who transcended the boundaries’ (Academic 2).⁷ It is notable in this context that the VRU members themselves paint a picture of their work in quasi-religious terms, with one commenting that they were ‘becoming quite evangelical about some of the parts of it, particularly early years’ (VRU member 2). Certainly, participants recounted their first meetings with these individuals in remarkable detail and spoke in reverent tones, repeating specific quotes and phrases from speeches and public statements, making reference to the figures themselves with ‘a kind of tincture, a special element or quality’ (Turner, 2003: 9). For example, the VRU founders were described across a spectrum of policy, political and community audiences as ‘raconteurs’, ‘very inspiring’, ‘incredibly powerful’, as having a ‘presence’ and exuding a ‘magic ability’.

As Oommen (1967: 91) notes, such leaders may emerge in times of trouble, separate from existing bureaucratic structures, as a result of a ‘collective excitement’ brought on by the political moment but there are instances when such leadership can emerge within ‘permanent systems of authority’. In the early 2000s, Scotland was in the grip of a national embarrassment stemming from damning international reports of epidemic rates of violent crime, and a clear sense from senior politicians and police that a radical change was required. John Carnochan was a veteran murder detective in search of a way of preventing, rather than solving, homicide cases, and was ‘a personality that basically intimidated the living daylights out of these people and they just shut up and got on with it’ (VRU member 3). Karyn McCluskey was a former nurse now leading the intelligence division amid an entrenched ‘cop culture’ (Atkinson, 2017). As one participant put it: ‘I think it mattered that John was a six foot Glasgow cop,

and he felt cop-ish. And it mattered that Karyn was a woman and that she was bolshie [rebellious]' (Academic 1). The position from which both spoke, therefore, indicated something of a personal change or journey that was replicated in the narrative arc of their storytelling. The investment of these individuals with charismatic qualities, importantly, enabled connection not only with practitioners, but with politicians, civil servants, influential voices in civil society who came to form a growing chorus around the need for a narrative shift from individual to systemic violence.

Once a charismatic leader has become established, a form of freedom can emerge: 'once followers attribute such extraordinary qualities to leaders, these leaders are accorded a certain "radical freedom" that is seldom found in non-charismatic modes of the social contract—a 'virtuosic' quality to effect 'alchemical transformations of moral culture' (Joosse, 2018: 995). As such, for Weber (1968: 245, emphasis in original), 'charisma is *the* great revolutionary force'. Like charismatic leaders elsewhere, where 'proof comes in the form of baffling success' (Turner, 2003: 14), evidence was delivered in the form of changes to police process, legislation and—latterly—in remarkable reductions in violence. Certainly, interviewees described the environment created by the VRU as one of experimentation and freedom. For one participant, this freedom allowed a form of agentic action that is rare in the relatively closed circles of policy-making. Making specific reference to John Carmochan, they intimated that:

He had grown up in Scotland, he was a good cop, he investigated murders, he just did ... he framed violence and murder in the way his culture had taught him to frame it, as violence. And he just thought violence is just part of life, like air is part of life. So a different way of framing it, the idea that actually you could do away with violence ... it has to come from a rebel. It has to come from somebody who is not just doing things in the ordinary way. (Academic 1)

This characterization of 'rebels' speaks to Bourdieu's delineation of a 'symbolic revolution'. In Bourdieu's (2017: 377–378) terms, symbolic revolutionaries are individuals who simultaneously embody high status and rebellion, 'people who whilst totally "in" are also totally "out"'. As evidenced by the participants quoted above, the policy 'field' in Scotland has experienced a discursive shift, with VRU messages such as 'adverse childhood experience (ACE)-aware' and 'trauma-informed' (Zeedyk, 2021) now a staple of Scottish Government policy.⁸ This was neither a straightforward or ineluctable outcome, with ongoing tension with policing and Government (Carmochan, 2015), nor was it one-dimensional and unchanging. The VRU led changes to police processes for those found with a knife, successfully lobbied for increased sentences for knife carrying and worked in tandem with a highly controversial policy of stop-and-search (Murray, 2014) while also advocating for a public health approach within political circles.⁹ It is only recently, as the VRU became a significant influence globally, that the organization has become invested with an 'institutional charisma' (Bourdieu, 2017), and associated lore.

Conclusion

In addition to the four miracles immortalized in Edwin Morgan's poetry, St Mungo reputedly performed a fifth, lesser-known, miracle. Attempting to preach to the people

of Glasgow on a flat plain, he found his voice would not carry. Instead of giving up, or preaching only to those closest, he raised the earth under his feet into a mound, from which he could be seen and heard by all. Reportedly, the incident gave rise to the city's motto: 'Let Glasgow flourish by the preaching of the word.' Legends such as this continue to beat a deep rhythm beneath the city of Glasgow, and it is, perhaps, in this tradition of oratory in which the VRU story is most readily apprehended. Like the myth of St Mungo, the founders of the VRU sought not to preach solely to the converted, but to change the terrain on which the debate took place.

As has been argued, narratives and storytelling have been central to the reconstruction of the city of Glasgow away from its traditional representation as a 'violent city', and its subsequent presentation as a success story in violence reduction. A headline from the *Washington Post* perhaps summarizes this reversal best: 'Glasgow was once the "murder capital of Europe." Now it's a model for cutting crime' (Adam, 2018). Through narrative analysis of the structure and performance of 'David's story', we have sought to analyse the role that storylines—particularly tragedy, redemption and rebirth—played in this discursive reconstruction, while examining both their conditions and influence. As has been argued, the Scottish VRU used storytelling and narrative in a way that mirrored a shift in Scottish political rhetoric towards a more compassionate era of justice (McAra and McVie, 2013), contributing to 'whole-system, cultural and organisational change' (Youth Violence Commission, 2018: 6) that found a ready audience in the midst of debates over Scottish independence. A number of implications flow from this conclusion.

First, storylines matter. As cultural sociologists and narrative criminologists have long realized, the story form carries a depth of emotional resonance that has the potential to radically alter action. As Fleetwood et al. (2019: 1) note, 'stories shape our social world; they inspire us to do or resist harms. With careful and close attention, they can tell us a great deal.' Yet, as recent contributions to victimology (Walklate et al., 2019) have demonstrated, the story form can also be limiting, and there is clear significance in the VRU's shift from tragic narratives to those of redemption and rebirth. David's story is an instance of what have been called 'small stories' (Lorimer, 2003): personal narratives that strike a chord with a larger public narrative and carry on their wings the seeds of social change. Approaching David's story, and the wider story of the VRU, through the lens of tragedy, redemption and rebirth, demonstrates the affective payload that such story arcs can carry on their wings. As Sandberg and Fondevila (2022: 226) note, '[s]tories instigate actions'. The example of David's story suggests the need to pay attention to the role of storylines more broadly, as well as storytelling authority and who has the power to to speak (Annison and Condry, 2022; Mackenzie et al., 2023).

Second, audiences matter. As noted, the success story of the VRU contributed to the founding of further VRUs, first in London then across England and Wales. As Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London (2018), stated when announcing the London VRU, 'in Glasgow, where a long-term public health approach to tackling serious violence was adopted ... the approach has ... delivered large reductions in violence'. The evidence presented here suggests that the successful shift in narrative in Scotland was facilitated by a set of structural and agentic conditions that may be difficult to replicate wholesale. This, perhaps, is one explanation of why evidence of successful violence reduction in the new

VRUs has been mixed at best (Home Office, 2023). As has been argued, the narrative of hope and redemption personified by the VRU struck a chord with both the ‘deep story’ of egalitarianism in Scotland, and the historical moment of an independence referendum, conditions that are unlikely to reoccur in other contexts. Rather than approaching any transfer of the ‘Glasgow model’ as an instance of straightforward policy transfer, therefore, we suggest that the process may be better understood as one of policy *mobility*, exploring the ‘heterogeneous networks of innovators, emulators, adaptors, and circulators ... probing their frayed edges as well as their centers of authority’ (Peck and Theodore, 2012: 28). In this sense, the historical, cultural and political contexts in which policy change occurs (Loader and Sparks, 2004)—and the ‘agonistic interplay’ between policy actors as the crucial determinant of change (Goodman et al., 2017)—may be as important as the policy initiative itself.

Finally, performance matters. In the field of narrative criminology, a number of important recent contributions have demonstrated the role that stories can play in resisting forms of violence (Copes et al., 2023; Fleetwood, 2019; Sandberg and Colvin, 2020). As Sandberg and Colvin (2020: 1588) summarize, such counter-narratives are ‘stories that challenge or oppose dominant stories either in mainstream social or in subcultural contexts’. In this article, we have seen that the presentation of these narratives can be profoundly influenced by the charismatic weight of the performance, and in turn the individual actor. The example of the VRU, and its founders, give credence to the centring of the individual agent, particularly as a way of understanding and approximating change. Drawing on Weber’s concept of ‘charisma’ in dialogue with Bourdieu’s concept of field, we have sought to evidence the role that opinion leaders and ‘influencers’—particularly when anointed with pre-existing status—can have on changing societal perceptions, and resisting the harms of criminal justice. As Bourdieu (2017: 377–378) notes of this form of symbolic revolution: ‘[i]n the advanced forms of autonomous universes, the fields, it’s the only form of revolution’. While the work of the VRU cannot be said to have single-handedly or independently brought about Scotland’s reductions in violent crime, the story of Glasgow has shifted from one of tragedy to redemption, resuscitating the city’s image in a way that, perhaps, shows that the miracles of St Mungo remain relevant to this day.


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Notes

1. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/4257966.stm>.
2. For more information see <http://www.svru.co.uk/>.
3. 'What Worked: Policy Mobility and the Public Health Approach to Youth Violence', Economic and Social Research Council Award ES/T005793/1. For more information see <https://changingviolence.org>.
4. The project was awarded ethical approval by the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee, University of Glasgow. The interview data-set will be available open access via the UK Data Service (UKDS) in due course.
5. As many of the participants are public figures, well versed in speaking 'on the record', they were offered the option to waive anonymity, which many took. While for the purposes of presentation we have opted to anonymize the majority of direct quotations, in a number of select cases where anonymization was not possible we have used participants' real names. In each case this has been done with consent.
6. For a full account of David's life, see <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2011/dec/19/glasgow-gang-violence-david-story>.
7. Bourdieu's application of charisma differs in some respects from Weber's (Fowler, 2020). Whereas, for Weber, 'the prophet acquires charismatic power by force of personality or by simply responding to a need for leadership ("supply and demand")' for Bourdieu prophetic leaders' critique of the priesthood derives in part from their own lived experience of powerlessness and denigration, especially at the hands of the higher clergy' (Fowler, 2020: 453).
8. The Government's programme for Scotland 'A Nation with Ambition' (2017–2018) made a commitment to reduce the impact of adverse childhood experiences suffered by vulnerable young people. This has been expanded and included within the Governments plan for Scotland 2019–2020 'Protecting Scotland's Future'.
9. The then Health Secretary Nicola Sturgeon declared violence as a public health issue, which firmly placed the premise of prevention, a 'straightforward' principle, which could be applied to other policy areas, such as early years.

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