

Excerpt from “Violent Stories: Personal Narratives, Street Socialization, and the Negotiation of Street Culture Among Street-Oriented Youth” by Timothy R. Lauger

For full text see Lauger, T. R. (2014). Violent stories: Personal narratives, street socialization, and the negotiation of street culture among street-oriented youth. *Criminal Justice Review* 39(2): 182-200.

Violent retaliation is a salient feature of street life (Jacobs & Wright, 2006, 2008, 2010; Topalli, Fornango, & Wright, 2002), and stories that conveyed a retaliatory ethic were common among members of the DFW Boyz. Jacobs and Wright (2006) note that violent retaliation arises from a moralistic need to get even coupled with a cultural scheme that fundamentally distrusts the legal system and emphasizes personal autonomy for handling one’s problems. Scholars have also found that this ethic is intensified for gang members who regularly deal with the pervasive threat of intergroup conflict (Decker, 1996; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Papachristos, 2009). Storytelling draws on these prior experiences, existing threats, and cultural ideas to communicate and transmit the retaliatory ethic among street offenders. Members of the DFW Boyz told stories about ongoing street conflicts and specific incidents from prior street conflicts; they were part of the gang’s folklore that reinforced its capacity for violence to members, associates, and unaffiliated peers. They also followed a predictable script in which the gang’s retaliation was measured, rational, and inevitable.

Although the DFW Boyz mostly discussed fights, their stories about retaliation typically involved gun violence. Such narratives not only allowed them to communicate when, why, and how gun violence emerged on the street but also provided vital context to an array of important cultural frames that are linked with retaliation. Some scholars have aptly noted that the use of guns is closely associated with authentic masculinity, power, and elite status in street life (Anderson, 1999; Wilkinson, 2001; Wilkinson & Fagan, 2003). The DFW Boyz frequently used the terms “shooters,” “killers,” or “hot boys” to elevate the status of individuals who were willing to resort to gun violence. They used stories to contextualize frames about strength and “realness,” reinforcing the notion that the capacity to use guns places a person or a group at the pinnacle of street life.

The following story occurred between five DFW Boyz in the parking lot of an apartment complex. It was part of an extended conversation that focused heavily on an emerging conflict between the DFW Boyz and another gang called the Naptown Boyz.

Although members of the DFW Boyz were incensed about a recent incident in which the Naptown Boyz tried to “jump” a member of the gang, they generally downplayed the severity of the conflict. They reasoned that the Naptown Boyz were unwilling and unable to resort to serious violence, and so

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the DFW Boyz could easily intimidate and/or force the group to submit. Still, the threat of violence caused the group to talk about guns, shootings, and different people in the city. Aaron, Shawn and Layboy’s older brother, mentioned a specific person who “brings his guns out a lot” to threaten other people.

Lil’ Crazy responded:

That’s what I’m saying. Mother****s trying to pull out their guns and s*** like that. We don’t pull our heaters [guns] out. We don’t really need to get heaters until like some serious s***.

Shawn provided an example, “When they start to shoot at us like they did at Woodlawn.”

“Yeah,” agreed Lil’ Crazy, “We brought out the heavy artillery then.”

“What was this?”

Lil’Crazy tried to clarify the setting, “When we was sleeping over there in the bricks [an apartment complex].”

Shawn bragged, “We shut the mother*** down. We was just shooting. Came over that day and shut it down. We was over there, “ah nah, nigga.” Them niggas shot at us, the East Side Boyz. They shot at us one time from the bricks ‘cause we outside, they shoot at us. Then the niggas from the bricks start talking s***, we come over there about one hundred strong with pumps [shotguns] and all kinds of s***. They didn’t come outside.”

Lil’Crazy added, “Motherf*** walking down the street ‘what’s going on bro.’ Heaters [guns] all in their path. ‘Who you trying to get.’ That’s how much love we got.”

This piece of DFW Boyz lore contrasts the gang’s actions to that of its peers and then describes how members react to threatening situations. Other people frequently use guns as a means to threaten or intimidate, but the DFW Boyz use guns judiciously. The narrative structure also highlights three important features of gun violence. First, members of the DFW Boyz are willing and able to use gun violence, but their aggression is, again, a reaction to the unjust actions of another party. They were shot at simply for being outside the apartment complex, and violent retaliation is the expected response for being the target of haphazard and unjustified violence. Second, the retaliatory actions of the DFW Boyz were likely embellished to highlight the connection between strength, power, and extreme violence on the streets. The DFW Boyz did not just shoot back at the East Side Boyz; they “brought out the heavy artillery” and “shut the mother*** down.” Shawn said that they “were shooting” and had 100 people armed with shotguns (“and s***”), which provides an exaggerated image of the gang engaged in a mass shooting. This communicates that retaliation should be severe. Third, Lil’ Crazy’s use of the word “love” in the conclusion to the story indicates that third parties affirm both the group and its excessive use of violence. Admiration is one anticipated benefit of violent retaliation. By communicating these features of gun violence, the story reinforces a collective understanding of when, why, and how guns should be

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used on the street.