

They and us: Psychology of ‘Ndrangheta members

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Abstract

The age-old operations of criminal organizations like ‘Ndrangheta are progressively infiltrating global economic, political, financial, and societal structures. The worldwide reach of ‘Ndrangheta across all facets of existence is deeply unsettling to those even marginally acquainted with its history and undertakings. ‘Ndrangheta has been a subject of scholarly investigation for many years, frequently dominating headlines in prominent newspapers. Notwithstanding, ‘Ndrangheta fundamentally embodies an exceptionally ancient and archaic community, characterized by a remarkably robust structure and ideology, complete with its own regulations, symbolism, and way of life. Concurrently, it constitutes a dynamic entity that extends globally and adapts in accordance with various economic, political, and other circumstances. No nation worldwide has thus far succeeded in effectively addressing this phenomenon. However, delving into the mindset of the individuals within the ‘Ndrangheta, scrutinizing their psychology and ideology, presents an alternate, potentially more efficacious approach to comprehending their mindset and actions. This article explores the core psychological and philosophical traits of the Calabrian subculture, which have endured unchanged for over a century, serving as effective paradigms for the educational, behavioral, operational, and lifestyle aspects of this criminal subculture.

Keywords

‘Ndrangheta, ndrangheta psychology, ‘ndrina, family, psychological characteristics

Introduction

As time elapses and the conditions of existence undergo transformation, the ‘Ndrangheta legacy persists, traversing borders, migrating to northern Italy and beyond. Despite its deep historical roots grounded in unchanging principles, rules, and upbringing, this entity remains a dynamic entity, perpetually undergoing reshaping due to the evolving global landscape. This includes its pursuit of enhanced efficiency and heightened resistance to external influences. ‘Ndrangheta extends its reach into diverse realms of life, instigating the emergence of novel industries, markets, businesses, and enterprises.

This article delineates the principal attributes of 'Ndrangheta, which, in the 21st century, have evolved, adopted new configurations, trends in advancement, and novel characteristics that enable its sustained prominence on the global business stage. It thrives in its capacity to develop, broaden its scope of capabilities and activities, even in the face of crises, pandemics, and other cataclysms, both within Italy and across the world. It is noteworthy that this organization not only maintains stability across diverse circumstances and industries but also actively capitalizes on emergent catastrophic events and global disruptions to further its gains. This proactive approach aids in accruing profits, attracting new adherents, and expanding its criminal enterprise. The topics being discussed align with the overall discourse in contemporary interdisciplinary research on organized crime (Astarita et al., 2018; Bueger & Edmunds, 2020; Daniele, 2019; Gamba et al., 2018; Villani et al., 2019).

Methods

During the research, Academician Oleg Maltsev (2018a) devised a specialized approach named the "Methodology of Criminal Traditions Analysis" while investigating the 'Ndrangheta, a criminal organization situated in Calabria, Italy. This methodology comprises twelve blocks and offers a thorough depiction of criminal traditions. It enables the execution of research, the precise definition of research subjects, and the formulation of numerous conclusions. Moreover, it facilitates the assessment of an individual's proficiency in analyzing a specific criminal tradition. The methodology encompasses the following blocks:

- Block 1. Mechanisms of structure formation.
- Block 2. Motivating factor.
- Block 3. Rules of interaction between members of the organization.
- Block 4. Hierarchy.
- Block 5. Figures and roles.
- Block 6. Mechanisms of moving up the hierarchy.
- Block 7. Obstacles of levels.
- Block 8. Training inherent in each level.
- Block 9. Tactics and strategy.
- Block 10. Subculture.
- Block 11. Business. Mechanisms of expanding influence and secret power.
- Block 12. Special accesses.

It is crucial to consider the timeline when applying this methodology, accounting for historical periods in the development of criminal traditions. The methodology involves determining the initial period of tradition emergence, collecting data in each block, and subsequently progressing to the next historical period and applying the analysis methodology. This approach is necessary due to the variations in block content across different historical periods of a tradition or organization's existence.



FIGURE 1. SCHEME OF 'NDRANGHETA "UNIVERSITY"

The methodology features a comprehensive set of questions that must be addressed to assert a thorough understanding of a specific criminal tradition. This versatile methodology can be employed for investigating any tradition or organization, not exclusively limited to criminal entities. This article provides a partial overview of Dr. Maltsev's research findings to address the questions posed herein. The findings of this research and a thorough explanation of the methodology are extensively documented in the book titled "Deceptive Silence" (Maltsev, 2018a).

Results

The primary distinguishing characteristic of 'Ndrangheta, setting it apart from other criminal structures and organizations, lies in its foundation and existence rooted in familial ties, which facilitates its expansion and augmentation of power. Within the realm of the Calabrian criminal subculture, its organizational model mirrors that of patriarchal societies. The fundamental unit of 'Ndrangheta, referred to as the 'ndrina, is structured around the conventional Capobastone family, with additional members often having some degree of kinship. It's worth noting that historical records indicate instances where initiation into this organization could occur even without family bonds, such as during prison sentences. However, this practice has largely waned in the contemporary era (Maltsev, 2018b). The dominance of the familial framework acts as a shield against extraneous and uncertain relationships, rendering 'Ndrangheta resistant to legal scrutiny while upholding its family-centric code of honor.

In the context of the Calabrian criminal subculture, a pivotal emphasis has consistently been placed on the education and upbringing of offspring born into these families. Raised in adherence to established lifestyles, principles, norms, codes of honor, and family laws, these children are nurtured within this distinctive milieu. Drawing upon research from the Memory Institute, Academician Oleg Maltsev has postulated and substantiated the core concept of the 'Ndrangheta family as a "university." This "university" within the family encompasses distinct phases of psychological and philosophical indoctrination for 'Ndrangheta members. The educational hierarchy comprises four levels, paralleling the structure of the Spanish fencing system. The findings of this research are comprehensively documented in the book titled "Deceptive Silence" (Maltsev, 2018a).

Any child born into an 'Ndrangheta family finds their destiny irrevocably predetermined from the very outset, encapsulated in the adage "no escape from this cycle." Thus, their course in life is essentially preordained, leaving them with the sole option of following the path that has been set for them. In actuality, from a young age, clan offspring undergo meticulous training adhering to culturally ingrained paradigms and codes rooted in values like silence, fortitude, resilience, and defiance against legitimate authority. Immersed within the sphere of familial connections (albeit within a criminal context, marked by the distortion of ancestral principles such as honor, religion, and family), the children of bosses are compelled to internalize the dynamics of power, cultivate reverence for the "capi", and cultivate aversion towards the state and its representatives, as well as entire groups like "traitors" and homosexuals (Gratteri & Nicaso, 2016).

Of heightened significance in the contemporary 'Ndrangheta world is their cohesiveness and mutual trust. For instance, in the television series "ZeroZeroZero," which draws inspiration from Roberto Saviano's account of the potent and merciless 'Ndrangheta, as well as Mexican cartels and the like, one plotline underscores the actions of an authoritative figure who takes the life of his own grandson due to betrayal of the organization (Saviano, 2014; Sollima et al., 2020)

Naturally, this attitude of trust and solidarity within the subculture is cultivated right from childhood and solidified through initiation rites, inductions, and blood oaths. The specific rituals might exhibit variation across regions, an aspect that too remains a subject of scholarly inquiry. During the initiation process, a prospective "picciotto" pledges an oath to serve their 'ndrina devotedly until their demise, as stipulated by their unspoken code. As recounted by the

Carabinieri, a statement made by Onofrio Garcei on February 28, 2010, during an interception sheds light on this. He said that the ritual was beautiful in all its forms. It was something that makes you do something (Trumper et al., 2014).

From a young age, the descendants of 'Ndrangheta leaders are instilled with the belief that dishonorable transgressions necessitate a blood remedy. Nonetheless, it's essential to underscore (drawing from 'Ndrangheta's historical context) that frequently, it's the women who orchestrate the "set pace of retribution", particularly within feuds and confrontations with mortality, aiming to eliminate to avoid being eliminated (Maltsev & Lunov, 2020). Moreover, it's imperative that they never overlook the principle that matrimonial unions are exclusively formed within the confines of the familial and criminal culture. Weddings essentially serve as instruments to fortify the criminal influence of two or more families.

For example, the marriage between Elisa Pelle, the daughter of Giuseppe ("Gambazza"), and Giuseppe Barbaro, the son of Pasquale ("u Castanu"), which occurred on August 19, 2009, was intended to establish a powerful alliance, showcasing their extensive influence from various angles. This insight comes from Raffaele Oppedizano (Baratta, 2016)

Over the years, a prevailing notion has emerged that the magnitude of attendance at banquets is a barometer for gauging the supremacy of clans over others. This principle extends to processions and festivities firmly under the sway of crime families, intended to garner consensus and public endorsement. Similar to other ceremonial occasions (such as baptisms and funerals), weddings serve as a forum for meetings wherein strategies are delineated, and hierarchies of the organization are allocated.

In discussions with Calabrian leaders concerning the significance and essence of the family, alongside the sanctity of marital relationships, the discourse consistently gravitates towards the care of children. However, many researchers underscore that it's imperative to recognize that these values are often merely a facade, exploited on one hand to embellish their societal image (a veneer of normality and social acceptability they often present), and on the other hand, serving as pragmatic instruments to conceal their illicit undertakings. The family assumes importance because it remains in close proximity to the boss; it is controlled by him, never betrays, and upholds its designated role. Through blood bonds, if necessary, it ensures the continuity of the 'remarkable endeavor' even when most are in prison.

In contemporary times, numerous psychologists delve into the behaviors of 'Ndrangheta members through the lens of intuition. Girolamo Lo Verso (2013), a psychology professor at the University of Palermo, underscores the discernment of an "integral mafia" identity — an individual identity that becomes nullified, where "each decision is anchored in the agreement and regulations dictated to the mind by the mafia family. Autonomy of thought and action is virtually non-existent. The mafia family prescribes the standards for delineating right and wrong, equity and injustice, and, most significantly, allies and adversaries. To them, someone outside the mafia family's fold possesses inferior value, akin to "nothing." Such an individual is depersonalized, dehumanized, rendering them readily disposable. Terminating the life of a "non-person" culminates in a form of redemption. Some individuals who have cooperated with law enforcement, recounting their experiences within mafia families, recall the emotional strain of being perpetually beholden to the expectations of their patriarchs, the clan's "capi". Luigi Bonaventura, the former head of the eponymous clan, elaborates that he perpetually sensed he was under surveillance (Gratteri & Nicaso, 2019).

In the perspective of psychologists, even during acts of homicide, 'Ndrangheta members appear to lack any discernible emotional reaction. They simply carry out their duties with maximum efficiency. Lo Verso expounds that there is not a trace of killing, everything transpires akin to a dream, a sentiment that psychologists find somewhat heretical. This observation attests to the sheer tenacity that characterizes such men. Mafiosi, in this regard, assume the guise of war machines devoid of the capacity for emotional gratification. Gratification emanates solely

from the dominion established, the thrill of omnipotence, the authority to determine the fate of others' lives and deaths. This elucidates their ability to perpetrate murder and inflict torment within stifling, claustrophobic hideouts (Coppola et al., 2010).

Interestingly, a prominent figure from southern Italian culture, renowned boxing coach Cas D'Amato, exhibits a parallel behavioral pattern owing to the cultural context he hails from. D'Amato, who mentored three world champions, was characterized by a strict and severe demeanor, yet he was also esteemed for his sagacity (Maltsev, 2019). In a biographical work about Cas D'Amato titled "Confusing the Enemy," Dr. Scott Weiss recounts an incident involving a visit from the mob to D'Amato's gym. Faced with an unmistakable threat, D'Amato could have responded with aggression or even gunfire. However, he adopted an alternative approach. He calmly stated, "Take one more step, and I'll have you all on these stairs." Remarkably, without a hint of doubt, his words were heeded, and the "visitors" retreated. It's noteworthy that there was unwavering confidence in his ability to follow through with his statement. They simply departed, and the confrontation was resolved (Weiss & Hague, 2013).

Antonino Giorgi, a lecturer of the course "Elements of Psychopathology of Life Contexts" at the Catholic University of Brescia, was part of a team, led by Professor Caterina Gozzoli, that delved into the psychology of the 'Ndrangheta in Lombardy, with the aim of comprehending their psychological dynamics within social-organizational coexistence. Giorgi elucidates that the mafia organization epitomizes fundamentalism in the sense that it negates subjectivity and simultaneously shuns diversity, a pivotal facet for the evolution of identity structures. In this context, an individual's existence hinges solely upon their membership (Giorgi, 2019).

'Ndrangheta members can also be categorized as a form of enclave. There's an opinion that 'ndranghetisti incessantly maintain their role, overtly exhibiting an array of attributes such as hubris, egocentrism, haughtiness, manipulativeness, fascination with control, deceit, superficial and feigned emotional responses, absence of guilt, lack of remorse, deficient empathy, emotional detachment, fearlessness (in the negative sense, wherein they act with disregard for potential risks and others' reactions), disdain for danger, a propensity for risk-taking, disregard for societal disapproval, neoteny (a desire for youthfulness to minimize aging), and neophilia (among younger individuals). This is compounded by a disdain for social norms and substantial immorality, which translates into an outward respect for tradition, even to the extent of eliminating 'troublesome priests' if deemed necessary.

Extensive research has also been conducted within prisons where 'Ndrangheta members have been incarcerated. This phenomenon even garnered the attention of Cesare Lombroso (1890) in his treatise. He highlighted that prisons frequently consisted of unsanitary, poorly supervised spaces lacking facilities such as toilets, adequate lighting, and sometimes even water. This environment led to the annual outbreak of ailments like typhus and petechiae, which, due to the lack of hygiene, spread to uninfected prisons and neighboring towns. Numerous prisoners occupied ground-level rooms adjacent to busy streets, enabling them to converse with passersby, airing grievances, offering prayers, and sometimes even audaciously issuing threats to those who walked by.

Contemporary research into prison behavior reveals that leaders are willing to endure stringent diets to project signs of fatigue, frailty, and exhaustion. Others, with the assistance of experts, swiftly self-diagnose mental illnesses to evade severe penalties. Researchers Nicola Grateri and Antonio Nicaso, who focus on the Calabrian subculture, underscore that some investigations involve recorded interviews with incarcerated bosses and 'Ndrangheta operatives. These accounts frequently recount instances of feigned illnesses and meticulously orchestrated deceptions, often with the collaboration of experts. A substantial portion of criminal inquiries centers on the interactions 'Ndrangheta members maintained with medical doctors, psychologists, and other specialists during their imprisonment. Many times, they simulate illness. Essentially, Calabrian bosses engage in deception to gain an upper hand. In certain scenarios, they don a façade of vulnerability, weakness, and unjust persecution. Conversely, in their pursuit of better

self-preservation, often bolstered by considerable resources, they secure proficient legal and technical-expert assistance (Badolati, 2014; Gratteri & Nicaso, 2019).

Discussion

In this article, we have introduced a newly developed methodology, recognizing that contemporary discourse employs various methods for studying criminal organizations. Let us outline the general principles of methodology for such studies:

1. **Ethics and Safety:** Researching antisocial organizations often entails risks for investigators. It is crucial to uphold ethical standards and ensure the safety of researchers.
2. **Multidisciplinary Approach:** The study of antisocial organizations necessitates multifaceted research methods. Integrating elements from criminology, sociology, political science, and psychology can yield a more comprehensive understanding.
3. **Qualitative Methods:** Employing qualitative methods like interviews, observation, and document analysis aids in comprehending the internal structure and functioning of an organization.
4. **Use of Informants:** Given the challenges of accessing antisocial organizations, researchers frequently rely on informants to provide valuable information.
5. **Network Analysis:** Research on antisocial organizations often involves analyzing their social and organizational networks.
6. **Contextualization:** Grasping the sociocultural and political context in which an organization operates is vital for interpreting research findings.
7. **Quantitative Research:** In addition to qualitative methods, quantitative data such as crime statistics can be utilized to analyze the scope and characteristics of an organization's activities.
8. **Propaganda Analysis:** Investigating materials created or used by an organization, such as propaganda materials, can offer insights into its goals and strategies.
9. **Comparative (Cross-cultural) Analysis:** Comparative studies of antisocial organizations can reveal commonalities and differences in their activities.

It is crucial to emphasize that research on antisocial organizations demands caution, strict adherence to laws, and unwavering commitment to ethical standards. Researchers must collaborate with relevant authorities and prioritize the safety of both themselves and the public. Compliance with laws and regulations, particularly in interactions with representatives or materials from these organizations, is paramount.

Additionally, highlighting principles, methods, and technologies is essential for investigating criminal and terrorist organizations:

1. **Network Analysis and Technology:** Employing modern technology for network analysis aids researchers in understanding the structure and interrelationships among organization members.
2. **Radicalization Research:** For extremist organizations, studying radicalization processes and the influencing factors in joining them is a vital component of research.
3. **Remedial Education:** Understanding the causes and mechanisms of antisocial organizations contributes to the development of effective prevention and remedial programs.
4. **Counter Propaganda:** Research on propaganda techniques and their societal impact assists in developing strategies to counter the negative influence of these organizations.
5. **Ongoing Research and Monitoring:** The study of antisocial organizations requires continuous monitoring as they may alter their structure and strategies over time.
6. **Collaboration with the Community:** Involving the public in the research process can garner greater support for preventing and combating the activities of antisocial organizations.

7. Analysis of International Trends: Since many antisocial organizations are transnational, analyzing international trends is crucial for understanding their activities.
8. Flexibility and Adaptation: The study of antisocial organizations necessitates flexibility and adaptability to changing circumstances and modus operandi.

These principles lay the groundwork for developing a methodology for the study of antisocial organizations, with an unwavering focus on safety, ethics, and compliance.

Conclusion

According to psychologists and researchers who have meticulously examined and scrutinized 'Ndrangheta, this organization is progressively expanding, much like an imperceptible entity grounded in a historically established foundation. It manifests as a tangible yet concealed phenomenon entrenched within the labyrinthine recesses of globalization," as driven by the 'Ndrangheta imperative. The approach of analyzing the Calabrian subculture through the lenses of psychology and philosophy has proven effective in unraveling the latent aspects of 'Ndrangheta. Nonetheless, only a limited number of global scholars have ventured into these realms. The endeavor to delve into the rationale and cognition underlying the behaviors of 'Ndrangheta members serves as an efficacious avenue to fathom their mindset and conduct. This endeavor also facilitates the anticipation of particular actions and avenues of activity, along with the strategies and techniques they deploy in various situations.

Their actions undoubtedly possess criminal characteristics. However, since the 20th century, significant attention has also been directed toward comprehending the business model and philosophy of 'Ndrangheta. This philosophy exhibits resilience against the fluctuations of the world and effortlessly adapts to varying conditions, thereby enabling substantial profits. While numerous researchers have analyzed 'Ndrangheta from sociological, historical, criminological, and economic standpoints, the psychological examination presented within this article also yields valuable insights and conclusions. This approach contributes to the study of the 'Ndrangheta phenomenon at the crossroads of various disciplines, enabling the projection of emerging trends in its development and proliferation, and engendering a comprehensive comprehension of the contemporary landscape. In essence, the fusion of psychological insights with the broader understanding of 'Ndrangheta permits a multifaceted perspective that transcends disciplinary boundaries. This holistic view empowers researchers to anticipate the trajectory of this organization's evolution and dissemination, all while advancing a comprehensive grasp of its role within the present-day global milieu.

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