Telling Stories

Published by Georgetown University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/13062

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=395324
Negotiating Deviance: Identity, Trajectories, and Norms in a Graffitist’s Interview Narrative

JARMILA MILDORF
University of Paderborn, Germany

Life narrative research in personality psychology has focused on narrative trajectories and on how dispositional traits (what your personality is usually or typically like) and characteristic adaptations (i.e., more particularized and context-sensitive aspects of one’s personality) are combined to form integrative life stories (McAdams 1985). However, life stories can also go awry. This calls for revisions of assumptions such as continuity. Mishler (2006, 41) argues that the conception of a plurality of subidentities “points to another problem with temporal-order models of progressive change: the tendency to treat identity development as a unitary process, as if each life could be defined by a single plot line.” Life narrative research can no longer take linear narrative trajectories for granted. Furthermore, life stories need to be considered within the contexts in which they are told. McAdams (2007, 23) contends that “stories are made and remade, performed and edited, instantiated, contoured, and lived out in the social ecology of everyday life and with respect to the norms of narrative content, structure, and expression that prevail in a given culture.” Three points McAdams mentions here will be of interest to the present case study: performance, narrative norms, and culture.

This chapter addresses this question: What happens if the life story told hinges on the creation of an identity generally associated with deviance and crime? I examine, as a case study, narrative excerpts from an interview conducted with a graffiti writer in the city of Stuttgart in 2006. I look at the ways in which this graffiti writer oscillates between discursive strategies that can be attributed to the demands placed on him as a member representing a deviant subgroup of society and those required by the interview situation.

Deviance, Youth Subcultures, and the Graffiti Scene: A Brief Overview

The study of deviance has shifted from the perception of deviance as an attribute or as part of a person’s individual psychology (e.g., in social pathology theories or criminology) to theories that take into account wider social patterns and the role of
stigmatization and labeling for constructions of “deviance” (Scott and Marshall 2005). Though deviance in statistical terms simply means that someone or something is significantly different from the mean or average of a comparable group, the decision about what counts as “deviant” is by no means simple; one first needs to establish what is “normal behavior” (Lemert 1951, 30). Labeling theorists have pointed out that actions or behavior only become “deviant” when they are so labeled by others. Becker (1963, 9) argues that “deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an ‘offender.’”

This emphasis on labeling is of particular interest to sociolinguists because the implication is that deviance has to be negotiated on a discursive level. As far as graffiti is concerned, it can be seen as deviant behavior because there are laws that forbid it. Tagging is illegal. Ironically, however, graffiti was partially adopted by mainstream culture when galleries started to exhibit graffiti as subcultural art, and graffiti on canvases began to be marketed and disseminated through magazines (Lachmann 1988, 245–48). In a sense, graffiti becomes acceptable if viewed within the “art context.” This will be important for our understanding of the graffiti writer’s narrative presented here.

Another helpful notion is “career.” Graffiti writers follow certain career paths, which usually begin with interest in the hip hop culture and graffiti scene and recruitment by already practicing writers. The graffiti subculture, like any subculture, is also marked by inherent codes of practice and rewards, such as the recognition from their peers that writers can obtain. As Ferrell (1998, 605) points out, “The subculture exists not only as a residue of shared physical space but as a larger community of meaning, an exploding cultural universe of collective symbolism and style that in many ways transcends space and time.” Codes and rules are not necessarily visible to people outside the subculture, and they thus need to be communicated in (self-)presentations of the subculture. Agar and Hobbs’s (1982) analysis of a drug addict’s story of how he became a burglar demonstrates how the informant uses different types of coherence to achieve both local and global goals in telling his life story. Interestingly, the addict shows “commitment to straight morality standards, even though his actions are dictated by street morality” (Agar and Hobbs 1982, 27). We will see that the graffiti writer uses similar strategies to negotiate his deviant position vis-à-vis the interviewers.

Two further studies have informed this research: Widdicombe and Wooffitt’s (1995) study of the language of youth subcultures, and Macdonald’s (2001) investigation into the graffiti subculture in New York and London. Whereas Widdicombe and Wooffitt are rooted in conversation and discourse analyses and therefore set out to investigate how youths talk about who they are, Macdonald takes a more content-analytical approach by focusing on what the graffiti writers have to say about themselves. Macdonald shows how graffiti writing enables youths to find a voice, to demonstrate their masculinity, and to gain status among their peers. Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995, 226) found that their respondents raised issues that are also dealt with in the social science literature on subcultures, namely, “conformity, authenticity, the political dimension of membership, categorization, the relationship between the individual and the group, the identity of self and the constitution of the group.”
Methodology and the Data
The data for this study emerged as part of a student project within a seminar, “Contemporary Poetry and the City,” held in the summer of 2006 at the University of Stuttgart. Four students explored the theme of “city and culture” in and for the city of Stuttgart. They conducted interviews with art students, a dramaturge, a slam poet, a rap singer, and a graffiti writer. The interview with the graffitiist, Mo, was taped and videorecorded. Because Mo wished to remain anonymous, he was filmed with his back turned toward the interviewers and a hood over his head. The interview lasted for about twenty minutes. Mo had been given possible questions in advance so that he had time to reflect on his answers before the interview took place. This procedure had an influence on the overall trajectory of the interview and on Mo’s manner of speaking. In a sense, he had time to plan a “performance of self” (cf. Thornborrow and Coates 2005, 13). Furthermore, the interviewee and the two interviewers were of approximately the same age. Mo, who was twenty-four years of age at the time of the interview, spoke to two students in their early twenties. At the same time, their educational backgrounds differed. While Achilles and Julia study at the university with a view to becoming high school teachers, Mo dropped out of high school around the age of seventeen. He never trained for a job and has sporadically earned a living by doing odd jobs. He has already been convicted several times for graffiti writing and for substance abuse. This information has implications for the data obtained in this student project.

Discussion
For my discussion I have selected three excerpts from the interview conducted with Mo. The first excerpt is taken from the very beginning of the interview. Beginnings in interviews are important, because this is frequently the place where identities are established for the first time in the interaction. I demonstrate to what extent Mo’s self-portrayal follows conventional life narrative trajectories. The second excerpt contains Mo’s response to the question about his motivations for being a graffiti writer. Following Agar and Hobbs (1982) in their emphasis on coherence and thematic integration in life histories, I show here how Mo creates macro-level coherence for his personal development on the micro level of his discourse. I will especially pay closer attention to the linguistic features that constitute this micro-level discursive work. In the third excerpt, Mo talks about the issue of illegality. This is of particular interest for my initial question because here the respondent has to negotiate deviance. We will see that surprisingly, or perhaps not so surprisingly, Mo draws upon common cultural values to recast his illegal activities in a more acceptable framework.

Initiation Stories and Interviews: Narrative Trajectories
Mo’s narrative follows the conventional teleological pattern of life histories, which begins at the beginning—that is to say, at Mo’s birth. In the opening lines to the interview, Mo provided all the information he deemed relevant in the interview situation: his name, his place of birth and where he lived at the time, his age, and the activity around which the whole interview revolved: graffiti writing. This indicates
that right from the beginning of the interview, he “staged” himself for an unknown audience, which also involves passing on relevant biographical data. Throughout the interview, his turns, which never overlapped the interrogative turns of the interviewers or vice versa, invariably began with an affirmative and phonetically emphasized “yes/JA” or with a repetition of the interviewer’s question (e.g., “Warum sprühe ich. Ja // Why do I tag. Yes”; see excerpt 2). Let us have a look at how Mo presented his initiation into graffiti writing:

Excerpt 1

1. JA, mit sechzehn 🅱️ siebzehn hab ich: angefangen mich für HipHop zu interessieren und alles was so dazu gehört.
2. Hab die typischen 🅱️ Filme angeschaut, Menace II Society,
3. und bin mit Freunden dann eher 🅱️ zufällig eigentlich auf: auf ne Dok-Dokumentation gesto-gestoßen,
4. Style Wars heißt die,
5. da gehts um die New Yorker 🅱️ HipHop: Geschichte und um die vier Elemente des HipHops, Mخيلching, DJing, Breakdance, und Graffiti,
6. und das hat mich einfach 🅱️ tierisch das hat mir tierisch gut gefallen,
7. und hab: dann auch in der Schule >immer wenn mir langweilig war eigentlich< versucht, so ähnliche Dinge 🅱️ zu zeichnen,
8. hab mir dann irgendwann 🅱️ mit n paar Freunden einfach Spraydosen gekauft
9. und hab zu Haus versucht, selber zu sprayen,
10. und 🅱️ seidem bin ich eigentlich darin: gefangen mehr oder weniger
11. und 🅱️ kann einfach nich mehr 🅱️ davon lassen.

[1. Yes, at sixteen seventeen I developed an interest for hip hop and everything related to it. 2. I watched the typical movies, Menace II Society, 3. and then I more or less incidentally came across a documentary, 4. it’s called Style Wars, 5. which is about the history of hip hop in New York and about the four elements of hip hop, MCing, DJing, break dance and graffiti, 6. and I was really, I was really impressed with that. 7. And then in school, whenever I was bored basically, I tried to draw similar things, 8. and then one day some friends and I simply bought some spray cans 9. and I tried tagging myself at home. 10. And since then I’ve been all caught up in it, 11. I just can’t give it up.]

Mo’s speech is highly monitored as can be seen, for example, in its relatively monotonous intonation pattern with occasional but regular rises in intonation and pauses in speech. Nevertheless, typical features of spontaneous spoken conversation also occur. For example, Mo self-corrects the case of the personal pronoun from accusative “mich” to dative “mir” in line 6 because he is obviously searching for the right verb to use here and accordingly has to adapt the verbal subcategorization frame (“das hat mich einfach 🅱️ tierisch das hat mir tierisch gut gefallen // I was really I was really impressed with that”). In line 3 we see a repetition in “auf: auf” and two cut-offs in “Dok-Dokumentation gesto-gestoßen // stumbled upon a documentary.” The indefinite article “ein/eine” is mostly reduced to “ne” (“ne Dok-Dokumentation,” line 3) or to clitic “n” (“mit n paar Freunden // with some friends,” line 8), and the final plosive “t” is deleted
in the negative particle “nicht → nich//not” (line 11). Interestingly, Mo does not use dialectal forms even though a weak Suebian accent is noticeable, especially in his slightly more closed and palatalized diphthongs. I will argue later that the respondent’s attempt to speak a standard variety of German can be attributed to the interview format on the one hand, but also to the fact that the graffiti subculture is informed especially by American role models and that speakers therefore perhaps gravitate less toward regional linguistic patterns, at least if they perform their subculture to outsiders.

If we apply Labov and Waletzky’s (1967) analytical model for narratives of personal experience, Mo’s narrative appears very orderly. The narrative begins with a brief orientation in line 1, where Mo tells the interviewer about his age when he began to be interested in hip hop; a lengthy complicating action sequence ranging from lines 2 to 7, in which a number of activities are mentioned that led up to Mo’s increasing engagement with graffiti writing; the resolution in lines 8 and 9, which describes the point in time when Mo actually started writing graffiti himself; and a coda in lines 10 and 11, where this whole process of initiation into the subculture is evaluated in retrospect as inevitable and irreversible. Widdicombe and Woofitt (1995, 84–85) also found that their respondents almost invariably began the interview by offering an identification of themselves. They attribute this to the interview format in which the interviewer’s initial question was intended to elicit such a response.

The interview format certainly has to account for the linear order of Mo’s opening self-narrative. However, I would also see it as the respondent’s attempt to mirror the inherent logic in his personal development, as he describes it in his story. Much in the same way that the narrative progresses in linear fashion, the events in Mo’s life that led to his career as a graffiti writer are also presented as following logically—that is, temporally and causally—from one to the other. This logic is indicated through the connector “dann//then” (lines 3, 7, and 8) but also through the sequential ordering of events in what are mainly narrative clauses conjoined by temporal juncture. The only clauses that deviate from the pattern are the coordinate clauses in lines 4 and 5, which give background information about the documentary that Mo mentions as one of the main sources of motivation for his subsequent career, and the restricted clause in line 6, which provides a more emotional reason for Mo’s increasing involvement in this subculture: “Das hat mir tierisch gut gefallen // I was really impressed with that.”

Two further lexical choices are worthy of comment because they support on the linguistic level the presentation of the events in Mo’s life as matter-of-fact and essential: the particles “eigentlich//basically” (lines 3, 7, and 10) and “einfach//simply” (lines 6, 8, and 11). They tone down the syntactic elements to which they are adjoined (Eisenberg 2006, 233). “Eigentlich” not only modifies the adverbial phrase in “eher ↑zufällig eigentlich // rather incidentally basically” (line 3) or the parenthetically embedded subordinate clause in “immer wenn mir langweilig war eigentlich // whenever I was bored basically” (line 7), but it also becomes a discursive device that invites the listener to accept the explanations the speaker offers as regards his actions. “Eigentlich” suggests that things could have been different but this is how they were “basically” or “in essence.” The threefold repetition of “eigentlich” emphasizes the in-
evitability of how things came about in Mo’s life: He became interested in graffiti because of the documentary he happened to watch, and he started his first drawing because he was bored in school.

“Einfach” fulfills a similar function. It also expresses how compelling certain things are: “Und das hat mich einfach (.) †tierisch das hat mir tierisch gut gefallen // and that simply really that really impressed me” (line 6); “hab mir dann irgendwann (.) mit n paar Freunden einfach Spraydosen ge kauft // then one day I simply bought some spray cans with some friends” (line 8); “und (.) kann einfach nich mehr (.) davon lassen // and simply can’t give it up anymore” (line 11). Furthermore, short pauses are used in these clauses to set apart individual phrases and thus to give more phonetic, as well as semantic, weight to subsequent phrases. In other words, Mo’s lexical choices, in combination with marking prosodic features, support the rationale underlying his life narrative and are used to convey to the interviewer a picture of his initiation into the graffiti subculture as something brought about by “outside forces” rather than his own agency or volition, as it were.

**Motivation and Danger: Telling a “Good” Story**

In the second excerpt from the interview, Mo answers the question: “Why do you tag?” Rather than following Labov and Waletzky’s (1967) narrative syntax for line breaks here, I now chunk the narrative into intonation units to give a flavor of the performance side of the story:

**Excerpt 2**

2. Also auf jeden Fall in erster Linie nich um irgendwas zu beschmutzen oder zu beschädigen,
3. °das is (.) ein: Nebeneffekt°.
4. Ich sprühe eigentlich in erster Linie wegen dem künstlerischen †Anspruch ich will schöne Bilder malen
5. ich will (.) will den Leuten †zeigen was ich †kann
6. wie wie †gut ich des kann
7. nur irgendwann reichts dann natürlich auch nich mehr ne kleine Hauswand zu besprühen
8. dann will man †mehr
9. dann will man das perfektierten
10. will des †schöner machen will des †größer machen (.) sucht sich dann †neue Stellen sucht sich †größere Wände ge†fährlichere Wände
11. und (.) s is einfach (.) also (.) je ge†fährlicher des is desto mehr Kick dahinter is wenn man so n großes Bild fertig gestellt hat
12. >des is wie im Rausch wenn einem richtig der Arsch auf Grundeis ging und man dauernd dachte Oh jetzt könnt gleich jemand kommen<
13. aber ich muss des jetzt fertig machen,
14. >dann hat man dann einfach auch so n Adren- Adrenalinstoß<,
15. >ich muss des jetzt hier fertig machen und ich muss des perfekt machen<,
16. und natürlich je \textsuperscript{†}größer und per\textsuperscript{†}fekter und ge \textsuperscript{†}fähiglicher des war desto Re\textsuperscript{†}spect kriegt man auch von: von den andern entgegen gebracht
17. und man kann sich da nen \textsuperscript{†}Namen erarbeiten.

[1. Why do I tag? Yes. 2. Well, at any rate not primarily to muck something up or to destroy something, 3. that is a side effect. 4. I spray primarily because I want to be an artist, I want to paint nice pictures. 5. I want to show people what I can do, 6. how well I can do it. 7. The only thing is that one day it’s no longer enough to paint a small wall of a house, 8. you then want more, 9. you want to perfect it, 10. you want to make it nicer, make it bigger, you search for new places, search for bigger walls, more dangerous walls. 11. And it’s simply, well, the more dangerous it is the greater the thrill when you have finished such a big picture. 12. It’s like being intoxicated when you’re shit scared and you keep thinking “oh, someone might be coming along any minute now 13. but I have to finish this now;” 14. then you simply feel the adrenalin kick in, 15. “I must finish this here and now and I must make it perfect,” 16. and of course the bigger and more perfect and more dangerous it was the more respect you earn from the others 17. and you can make a name for yourself.]

In comparison with excerpt 1, this excerpt displays a livelier response, which can be seen especially in the way Mo speeds up his speech (lines 12, 14, and 15). The pace of Mo’s speech is also increased through rhythmical devices such as regular rises in pitch, for example, in lines 4 to 6, or in line 16, and through parallel syntactic constructions marked by a repetition of short clauses in which the subject is partially elided: “Dann will man \textsuperscript{†}mehr dann will man das perfektion ieren will des \textsuperscript{†}schöner machen will des \textsuperscript{†}größer machen (. ) sucht sich dann \textsuperscript{†}neue Stellen sucht sich \textsuperscript{†}größere Wände ge fährlichere Wände // then you want more, then you want to perfect it, [you] want to make it nicer, want to make it bigger, [you] search for new places, search for bigger walls, more dangerous walls” (lines 8–10). The effect is almost that of a musical cadence that imprints itself on the listener’s mind. As I mentioned above, Mo’s speech throughout the interview remained more or less monotonous. By speeding up his speech in this sequence, Mo reenacts for the interviewer his sense of excitement and agitation when he is out tagging. He describes the thrills involved in writing graffiti and how he is driven toward ever-bigger and -better pictures.

In line 11, Mo takes time to reflect on how he can further explain these emotions, which can be seen in the three short pauses of speech, the false start in “s is einfach (.) // it’s simply (.),” and the discursive particle “also//well,” which signals to the listener that an explanation is to follow. He then verbalizes his feelings as “mehr Kick // greater thrill.” In line 12, Mo’s self-monitoring is further lessened; he uses the regional reduced form “des” of the demonstrative pronoun “das//that” (also in lines 6, 13, 15, and 16) and the slang proverbial expression “wenn einem richtig der Arsch auf Grundeis ging // when you’re really shit scared.” Interestingly, this lapse into slang and regional variants is incongruent with Mo’s rather formal usage of the preterit form in “ging//went” and “dachte//thought.” The preterit is uncommon in spo-
ken German, especially in southern varieties, where the perfect tense is preferred for
talking about past events (Fabricius-Hansen 2005, 520).

What emerges at this point is what I would perceive as a conflict between two
narrative demands—namely, to speak authentically about one’s personal experiences
with the subculture on the one hand, and on the other, to convey a positive self-im-
age in the interview, which includes adherence to the commonly assumed rules of
this formal speech event. Put differently, even though Mo obviously makes a great
effort to monitor his speech, he gets carried away here. We must also not forget that
he spoke to peers who were equal in age but different in educational background and
prospective social standing. In this light, his depiction of his activities can be inter-
preted as an attempt at not only recounting but also, in fact, performing his subcul-
ture favorably by converging toward the speech of the interviewers.

Coupland, Garrett, and Williams (2005, 71) contend that “the performance frame
establishes a relationship between the meanings co-articulated in the performed event
and the meanings that define the wider cultural formation. This relationship and the du-
ality of meaning is laid open to scrutiny when in some sense relevant cultural practices
are performed or referred to in a particular event.” In this interview, Mo performs as an
informant with insider knowledge of a specific subculture. He also performs as a sto-
ryteller who relates key developments in his own life. More important, he performs all
this to recipients who are not “in the know,” and his performance has to negotiate be-
tween the values of his subculture and those of the mainstream culture, which consid-
ers the subculture’s activities illegal. We will see in the third excerpt that one way of
coming to terms with this “duality of meaning,” as Coupland, Garrett, and Williams have
it, is to import values from the mainstream culture into one’s own discourse.

In the present excerpt, the strategy seems to lie more in a satisfactory execution
of the performance as such, that is, in performing well as a storyteller. For example,
Mo uses direct speech to convey his mixed feelings of anxiety and excitement when
he is out tagging: “Oh jetzt könnt gleich jemand kommen< aber ich muss des jetzt
fertig machen // Oh, someone might be coming along any minute now but I must fin-
ish this now” (lines 12–13), and in line 15: “Ich muss des jetzt hier fertig machen
und ich muss des perfekt machen // I must finish this here and now and I must make
it perfect.” A long research tradition has focused on the dramatizing effect of direct
speech in oral storytelling (Clift and Holt 2007, 7). Mo’s use of direct speech with
its first person deixis (“ich muss . . . // I must, . . .” “jetzt hier // here and now”) makes
the scene he depicts livelier and brings it closer to the listener. At the same time, di-
rect speech here conveys something of his emotional state.

The urgency of Mo’s wish to complete his task is conveyed in the threefold rep-
etition of the verb “müssen/must” (lines 13 and 15), which in addition receives pho-
netic stress. This discursive strategy of personalizing the related experience is in
stark contrast to Mo’s use of the generic third person pronoun “man/one” in lines 8,
9, 11, 12, 14, 16, and 17. The generic pronoun presents the events as if they could
relate to anyone or to no one in particular. Although Mo talks about his own feelings
of compulsion, anxiety, and adrenalin-induced excitement, he at the same time speaks
about and on behalf of other members of his subculture. They experience similar
things when writing graffiti, as his use of “man” suggests.
The values of the graffiti subculture are then summed up in lines 16 and 17: “Und
natürlich je größer und perfekter und gefährlicher war desto Respekt
ingewinnen von den andern entgegen gebracht und man kann sich da nen
Namen erarbeiten // and of course the bigger, more perfect and more dangerous it was
the more respect you earn from the others and you can make a name for yourself.”
Gaining respect from other graffiti writers and making a name are central achievements in
the graffiti subculture and are presented by members of this subculture as their main
reasons for writing graffiti (Macdonald 2001, 68ff.). Mo reinforces these values by re-
peating the adjectives “größer//bigger,” “gefährlicher // more dangerous,” and “perfek-
ter // more perfect” over and over again, in both their positive and comparative forms
(lines 10, 11, 15, and 16). Moreover, he signals his immersion in this subculture by pro-
nouncing the word “respect” (line 16) the English way. The lexical item “respect” thus
not only captures an important value but also becomes a linguistic token for an “im-
ported” subculture whose rules and language assign to the German-speaking graffiti
writer a hybrid position. This position also needs to be negotiated vis-à-vis the inter-
viewer. As I argued above, one strategy for doing so is possibly Mo’s repression of di-
alectal speech and colloquialisms, which in present-day Germany are increasingly
reserved for familial or intimate contexts (Niebaum and Macha 2006, 172).

Illegality and Fitness: Negotiating Deviance

One last feature in the second excerpt already leads me on to the topic that predomi-
nates in the third excerpt below: illegality and the discursive negotiation of deviance.
In line 2 of excerpt 2, Mo interestingly first defines the reasons for why he tags ex neg-
ativo: “Well, at any rate [I tag] not primarily to muck up or to destroy something.”
Labov (1972, 381) treats negatives as comparators and sees their narrative power in the
fact that they “provide a way of evaluating events by placing them against the back-
ground of other events which might have happened.” In our example, Mo starts by us-
ning negatives as disclaimers to counteract potential criticism on the part of the
interviewers, who can be seen as representing the mainstream culture. This mainstream
culture perceives graffiti as an illegal activity, and Mo implicitly refers to what many
people probably think of graffiti: that it damages and devalues buildings, train cars, and
so on. By indirectly “quoting” such views and by immediately negating them in the pre-
sentation of what he does, Mo reframes his graffiti writing and assigns to it more posi-
tive values. He claims that he wants to be an artist (“Ich sprühe eigentlich in erster Linie
wegen dem künstlerischen Anspruch ich will schöne Bilder malen // I tag primarily
because I want to be an artist I want to paint nice pictures,” line 4) and that he earns re-
spect through his work (“man kann sich da nen Namen erarbeiten // you can earn a name
for yourself,” line 17). This discursive revaluation is particularly strong toward the end
of the interview and can be seen in this excerpt:

Excerpt 3

1. JA (.) Legalität is so ne Sache.
2. Das is der Grund warum ich jetzt mit m Rücken und dieser tollen ((touches his
hood)) Ka puze zu euch sitz.
3. S is halt einfach nich legal, Graffiti sprayen,
4. und wird auch (.) in Deutschland ziemlich hart besch-bestraft.
5. =Also ich hab da auch schon so meine Erfahrungen mit gemacht,
6. hab (.) ehm, Reinigungskosten zahlen müssen oder Sozialstunden ableisten.
7. JA, ma ma wird fit als Graffiti Sprayer wenn ma man immer mal wieder (.)
schnell wegrennen muss, über Hecken springen.
8. Man is 
9. man kommt nie zur Ruhe.
10. Des is zwar auch ne gute Voraussetzung für dann (.) weitere (.)
Verfolgungsjagden.
11. Ma is eigentlich immer fit (.) und immer gefordert.
12. Muss sich fit halten, ja.

[1. Y es. Legality is a tricky question. 2. That’s the reason why I am now sitting
with my back to you and with this wonderful ((touches his hood)) hood on. 3.
It’s simply not legal, tagging, 4. and you’re quite severely punished for it in
Germany. 5. Well I’ve had some experiences with that too, 6. I had to pay for
cleaning and do some social work. 7. Yes, you get fit as a graffiti writer when
you have to run away quickly every once in a while, jump over hedges. 8. You
are fit, 9. you never have a break. 10. It’s true that this is also a good
prerequisite for further chases. 11. You’re always fit really and always under
pressure. 12. You have to keep fit, yes.]

Again, Mo begins his answer with the phonetically louder, affirmative particle
“JA//yes,” which signals his readiness to respond. He then hesitates before he com-
ments, in a mitigating way: “Legalität is so ne Sache // legality is a tricky question”
(line 1). The demonstrative particle “so” here assumes a modifying function used to
convey the speaker’s attitude. The implication is that he does not fully agree with other
people’s views of graffiti. It is also important in this context that Mo does not use a
noun like “Problem//problem” to talk about illegality, for example, but the neutral
“Sache//thing.” When he mentions the illegal status of graffiti in Germany in lines 3
and 4, the modal particles “halt einfach,” together with the pitch rise on the verb “is,”
again imply that even though illegality is a fact, Mo does not see it that way. The ironic
remark in line 2 concerning the measures he has to take to remain anonymous (“mit
m Rücken und dieser tollen ((touches his hood)) Ka puze zu euch sitz // sitting with
my back to you and with this wonderful hood on”) underline his disapproval.

Between lines 4 and 5, the response switches from a general assessment of the
issue of illegality to a more personal story, and the latch indicates that Mo is quite
keen on relating his personal story. Interestingly, the personal narrative is then made
less personal again through the usage of the partially reduced, regional form of
“man//one,” “ma” (lines 7, 8, 9, and 11). As in excerpt 2 above, the generic pronoun
presents the experience as something that other graffiti writers also experience. This
evokes a sense of group identity. The speaker immerses his personal identity expressed
in the first person pronoun “ich//I” (lines 2 and 5) in the more generalized identity
of his subculture.

The most striking feature in this excerpt is the usage of the adjective “fit,” which
occurs four times (lines 7, 8, 11, and 12) in this short response. Its frequency, as well
as the fact that it is phonetically stressed in line 8 and set apart through a subsequent pause in speech in line 11, assign discursive significance to this lexical item. It seems rather odd that a graffiti writer should talk about his activities as “keeping him fit.” In the study by Macdonald (2001, 106), for example, the respondents mainly talked about the dangers involved in tagging rather than about their physical prowess, even though one respondent drew a comparison between the pressures involved in tagging and those you have to endure when participating in a sports competition. The fact that Mo emphasizes physical fitness can be interpreted as his attempt to lodge graffiti in a more acceptable cultural framework. Rather than talking about what makes graffiti illegal and unacceptable in the eyes of mainstream culture, he highlights an aspect that has an important standing in contemporary German society: namely, to keep fit and healthy. He thus discursively assigns a new value to graffiti and turns fitness into part of its “symbolic capital” (Macdonald 2001, 65).

Conclusion
In my analysis of the interview data, I have tried to give credit to both what Mo said and how he said it. As I showed, Mo’s discourse participates in larger cultural narratives of self both thematically and as far as the very design of his self-narration is concerned. The interview begins with a conventional life narrative pattern marked by a chronological as well as causally linked sequence of events. The linear narrative trajectory underlines the respondent’s attempt to make sense of his career as a graffiti writer both in retrospect—that is, when looking back on his life—and also in the interview situation vis-à-vis the interviewers. In a sense, we discern here what McAdams (2007, 19) postulated in his life story model of identity, namely that “people . . . construe their lives as evolving stories that integrate the reconstructed past and the imagined future in order to provide life with some semblance of unity and purpose.”

The influence of the interview situation must also not be overlooked. The formality of this speech event contributes to the fact that Mo spoke in a highly monitored way, which can be seen in the regular, relatively slow, and monotonous cadence of his speech, as well as in self-corrections and a careful choice of lexical items. Interestingly, however, formal language features such as the use of the preterit also clashed with slang words and colloquial or dialectal speech forms. This stylistic slippage particularly occurred at moments in the interview when Mo talked about his tagging activities and about the dangers involved in them. I interpreted this as an indication of a conflict between two discursive tasks. First, he had to accommodate to the formal requirements of the interview situation; second, he also had to represent and to perform his graffiti subculture. The latter, I argue, requires linguistic sincerity, which includes an authentic rendition of the subculture’s activities, for example, the usage of verbal tokens such as the English word “respect.” To use Agar and Hobbs’s (1982, 15) words, Mo also had to synthesize “the street world and the straight world” for the interviewers.

This aspect of negotiating the world of one’s subculture and the values and expectations of the mainstream culture became especially salient in the way deviance was verbalized in the interview. As I demonstrated, Mo used two strategies of coping with conflicting views concerning graffiti. First, he shielded himself from
potential criticism by negating mainstream views of graffiti as destructive and disorderly behavior and by recasting his own activities as “art” or “work.” This theme recurs in other parts of the interview, where he expressly denies his participation in “nasty” forms of graffiti writing such as “etching,” which involves the usage of acids to burn patterns into surfaces. Second, he imported values from the mainstream culture in order to reevaluate graffiti writing. Rather than presenting it as a criminal offence, he talked about the way it keeps you “fit.”

What emerges is a discursive strategy of converging toward the main culture’s narrative expectations, both on the micro level of narrative form and features and on the macro level of sociocultural values and rules. The close analysis of prosody, lexical choices, disclaimers, and narrative trajectories demonstrated how Mo positioned himself vis-à-vis the interviewers within the subculture of graffiti artists, trying to create involvement and to gain approval. He redefined tagging within the boundaries of acceptable social behavior. In a sense, then, the counternarrative thus created ironically made use of the same strategies of the established discourse it indirectly sought to attack.

NOTES
I thank my students: Sarah Bauer, Beate Fleischer, Achilles Siouzios, and Julia Stahl. I also thank Mo for participating in this study and for allowing the interview to be published.

1. Note that the lexical item used to express the strength of Mo’s emotional response, “tierisch,” receives phonetic emphasis through a rise in pitch. The adjective “tierisch” literally translates as “animal (attr.)” but in its adverbial form is used figuratively in German slang to add emphasis to the subsequent adjective.

2. The verb “erarbeiten” contains the verb “arbeiten” = to work. Again, the graffitist reframes his activities in terms of work.

REFERENCES


This page intentionally left blank