

## Acting crazy

A strategy on the streets of Copenhagen

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# Acting crazy: A strategy on the streets of Copenhagen

## **Abstract**

U.S. studies of street culture note that acting ‘crazy’ can provide status on the street, but rarely elaborate on this phenomenon. Based on several years of participant observation in the street culture of a disadvantaged part of Copenhagen, this paper provides an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of ‘craziness’. It reveals that it is a nuanced and multifaceted phenomenon and that the street actors can strategically act crazy to gain several advantages. It further explains how ‘craziness’ has to be tempered with other amiable characteristics to be beneficial in street culture, and how it can also be advantageous in dealings with state institutions, as well as a disadvantage in mainstream society.

## **Keywords**

Street culture, crazy, violence, status, welfare state

## **Introduction**

One night, as I was walking with Tariq towards a 7-Eleven, I shared my reflections on his community's street culture, which I was ethnographically studying.

Hakan: I have been thinking about writing that what gives status is being sick.

Tariq: Yes.

Hakan: What do you think about that?

Tariq: Yes, indeed.

Hakan: Yes, right? Thus, people want to be known as 'sick', as 'mental', because then one rises.

Tariq: So, you mean there are hierarchies, and then you're at the top, that way?

Hakan: Yes.

Tariq: No, try to look at Søren, he is mental, but he is not [high status]. That is, if there is something [a problem] and he can handle [beat up] the other, then he'll do it, but otherwise, he is not.

Hakan: No, no. I know. It is not being mental that does it. Being mental alone doesn't matter. It is about being brave, that is, doing things that others will not do, you know: [being] dangerous, sick. And then if you are also mental, then that is an extra plus. Then you are completely dangerous, because then people do not know what you can come up with. Like Ömer. You become known for being unpredictable.

Tariq: Yes, that's right. [...] Suddenly you run amuck over nothing. But you also have to think about...

Hakan: That some play crazy to get status?

Tariq: Yeah, and because then they do not go to prison and can get money from the state.

This late-night conversation with Tariq highlights a phenomenon that is often described in U.S. studies of street culture (Anderson 1999; Vigil 1988), that being seen as ‘crazy’ can be advantageous on the streets. However, beyond its importance for status and protection, this phenomenon has rarely been discussed in detail in U.S. literature. Moreover, in-depth knowledge thereof is fragmented, with brief elaborations scattered across several works. In studies of European street culture, the phenomenon is rarely mentioned at all. More comprehensive knowledge of the phenomenon is beneficial, not only for studies of street culture, but more broadly in criminology, as it can shed light on the rationality of (criminal) motivations and actions that appear irrationally deviant. This article discusses ‘craziness’ in the street culture of Nørrebro, a partially disadvantaged district in Copenhagen. It is based upon ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in Nørrebro from 2006 to 2015 with young men participating in the district’s street culture. I became familiar with their distinct valorisation of ‘craziness’, used here as an umbrella term that covers what their street culture considers ‘crazy’, ‘sick (in the head)’, ‘ice-cold’, and ‘mental’. An in-depth analysis is provided of different important facets of craziness through an unfolding of themes mentioned in the above conversation with Tariq.

I first focus on clarifying the central characteristics of craziness: indifference and recklessness, comprising the ability to (or appear to) be ice-cold (emotionally unaffected), unpredictable, and able to cause chaos. I discuss how acting/being crazy

can be advantageous in street culture—especially regarding status, but also material gains, freedom of action, masculinity, dominance, and entertainment—and why some act crazy to gain these advantages. As such, I reveal the rationality of apparently irrational behaviour by elaborating on the strategic reasons for acting crazy, and thereby demonstrate that the act is predominantly an example of impression management conducted to cultivate advantages—rather than the manifestation of an irrational mental disturbance. In particular, regarding gaining status on the streets, I emphasise the relationship between craziness and violence. I further illustrate and analyse the (blurred) distinctions between acting crazy and being (allegedly) mentally ill, as based on medical diagnosis, and discuss the strategic advantages of the latter. Moreover, I describe how these forms of craziness must be tempered by amiable characteristics—that is, being ‘a good man’ on the streets—to be beneficial. Having clarified the role of craziness within this street culture, I finally turn to its placement within a broader societal context by discussing how acting crazy can be advantageous and disadvantageous in youth’s dealings with the welfare state and mainstream society, respectively.

By focusing on these topics, I provide a holistic ethnographic analysis of ‘craziness’ in street culture. Herein, findings and arguments scattered across U.S. literature converge into a thick ethnographic *elaboration* of the central facets and advantages of craziness. Beyond revealing that this ‘U.S.’ phenomenon also exists in European street culture—even in an unlikely context as Denmark, with its strong welfare system (Esping-

Andersen 1990)—the article contributes to global understandings of craziness in street culture by demonstrating that it is a nuanced and multifaceted phenomenon, which can be used by street actors in various ways: as entertainment and to gain status, masculinity, dominance, freedom and material benefit. It can be an act/play or ‘impression management’ (Goffman 1956), but can also be based upon medical diagnosis. Indeed, the lines between such distinctions are blurred in the phenomenon of craziness—as reflected in the descriptions that follow. Lastly, the article reveals further novelties in regard to the existing literature by demonstrating that craziness has to be tempered with ‘good’ characteristics, and through its focus on the broader societal context, it elaborates the (dis)advantageous relationship between craziness in street culture and the wider society.

### **Crazy on the street**

Dating back to William F. Whyte’s (1993 [1943]) classical study of a Boston slum, or arguably Fredric Thrasher’s (1927) seminal gang study, ethnographies of street culture encompass a long tradition in U.S. social sciences, focusing on the often marginalised and criminal(ised) lives of mostly young men in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (e.g. Anderson 1999; Bourgois 2003 [1996]; Contreras 2013; Liebow 2003 [1967]; Rios 2011). Central to these studies is the enduring argument that street culture is, to a significant extent, a response to structural factors. This subcultural argument finds resonance in the influential theory of the "ghetto poor" proposed by Wilson (1987).

Wilson's theory is based on an analysis of various societal changes, particularly the impact of deindustrialization and the resulting scarcity of employment opportunities for many unskilled African Americans, and the outmigration of working African Americans from segregated inner cities (ibid.). These circumstances lead to a concentration of poverty among the African American poor that gives rise to "concentration effects" (Wilson 1987, 58), that exacerbate the challenges faced by these communities. These effects are partially culturally based; the shared structural constraints among residents give rise to collective, interaction-based cultural responses (Wilson 1987).

In such circumstances, individuals living in these communities, confronted with limited opportunities for economic and social advancement in mainstream society—as well as a lack of police protection within the segregated communities, racial stigmatization and subsequent alienation from mainstream society (Anderson 1999; Rios 2011)—may develop a street culture, predicated on an interaction-based "code of the street", as a means of establishing social standing, respect and ensuring self-protection (Anderson 1999). Thus, street culture offers alternative criteria for acquiring respect to individuals who have limited avenues for gaining respect in mainstream society—which is a central reason for its emergence (ibid; Bourgois 2003 [1996]; Liebow 2003 [1967]).

Accordingly, studies of street culture have often focused on the issue of respect and status. They have revealed that the street's criteria for respect can be in opposition to mainstream society, and hence be seen as deviant, as well as often being related to a

violent prowess, which is necessary to get by in a violent environment where police protection is not guaranteed, and the illegal street economy can be thriving (e.g., Anderson 1999; Bourgois 2003 [1996]; Contreras 2013).

A peculiar finding in this regard is that being ‘crazy’ can yield respect and status to the youth on the street. Thus, ‘Locura’—or ‘craziness’ (Moore 1991: 62), ‘quasi-controlled insanity’ (Vigil 1988: 160)—is an estimable and central phenomenon in Mexican-American gangs, characterised by unpredictable and unrestrained behaviour (Moore 1991; Vigil 1988) often related to violence (Moore 1991: 62), hence the display of phenomena such as ‘destructive fearlessness, toughness, [and] daring’, which are, for instance, manifested in ‘gang banging’ (Vigil 2007: 63). The status and respect that this ‘craziness’ provides Mexican-American gangs (Vigil 1988, 2007) can also be observed among other disadvantaged youth. Gus, one of Contreras’ (2013) informants in his ethnography of Harlem’s Dominican street culture, receives deference due to his reputation for being ‘crazy’ violent. Similarly, Caesar, an informant in Bourgois’ (2003 [1996]) ethnography of Harlem’s Puerto Rican street culture, gains respect and status on the streets because his mental instability affords him a similar reputation—one that can serve as protection in street culture; others are fearful and less inclined to commit violence and transgressions against those deemed crazy (see Maher 1997; Sánchez-Jankowski 1991). This is also true among African-American street youth, where to “‘act crazy’ – that is having the reputation for being quick-tempered” (Anderson 1999: 73) is



a way of manoeuvring in the ‘code of the street’, as it deters disrespect and confrontations and can establish respect and power due to the fearless violence associated with it (Anderson 1999: 136)—indeed, it can potentially be a way of reaching the top of the street hierarchy (Wilkinson 2003). As is also indicated in gang names (Garot 2010), the nicknames of street actors (Vigil 2004), the pseudonyms they give themselves in research (Mullins 2006) and in rap music (Lauger and Densley 2018), there is thus a certain regard connected to being perceived as crazy in street culture. Though this is clear from U.S. street culture literature, it is rarely elaborated upon. Consequently, in-depth knowledge of this phenomenon, particularly beyond its potential importance for status and protection, is limited. An exception, however, is seen in Rios’ (2011: 97-123) ethnography of Black and Latino boys in Oakland. It reveals that what appears as “crazy” to adults and authorities trying to enact social control of the boys is ways for the boys for to fight for their dignity and defiantly resist the stigmatization and criminalization that they experience.

The ‘awesome status of a “psyco” [sic]’ in street culture is, however, not limited to the US streets, as seen ‘from Los Angeles to New York to Glasgow, [where] graffiti on walls attest to the *collective* celebration of the acts of the vato loco, the “psyco”, the group that has been accorded a reputation as “mental”’ (Katz 1988: 138; see also Ilan 2015). Thus, in Glasgow, the leadership positions in the gang that Patrick (1973: 178) studied were allocated to ‘the most disturbed, the most violent boys, those with lowest

impulse control. To use the gang's terms, such boys were the "mentalest" [...]. Prowess in violence—spontaneous, irrational, unprovoked violence—marked out the leader".

Beyond Patrick's (1973) ethnography, the phenomenon of 'craziness' has been rarely described in a European context, possibly because European studies of street culture are relatively new and scarce. While some European studies have focused on drug dealing (Bucerus 2014; Lalander 2009; Marsh 2020; Sandberg and Pedersen 2011; Kalkan 2021 [2018]), violence (Bakkali 2019; Brookman et al. 2011; Kurtenbach 2021; Marsh 2020; Sandberg and Pedersen 2011; Kalkan 2021), territoriality (Ilan 2013; Kurtenbach 2021), religion (Bucerus 2014; Tutenges and Sandberg 2021; Kalkan 2021 [2018]), and popular culture (Ilan 2015; Moshuus 2005; Kalkan 2022), 'craziness' has not been explained. Marsh (2020: 102–103) reveals that some men in the street culture of Dublin are deemed (violent) 'psychopaths' and are feared, but he does not study these individuals, focusing instead on the vulnerabilities of 'addicts' with mental problems. Sandberg (2008: 161) mentions that some of his Norwegian 'data material were similar to Bourgois' (2003) description of the status gained by the psychiatric patient Caesar' and 'to Vigil's [...] descriptions of the "locura" attitude'. However, he does not elaborate on the similarities (see also Sandberg and Pedersen 2011: 126). As such, the importance of 'craziness' in street culture, clearly illustrated in U.S. studies, is seldom seen in newer European studies; hence, knowledge regarding the phenomenon's form, characteristics, and potential importance in a distinct European context is lacking. The

following descriptions of the phenomenon address this gap in both European and U.S. scholarship by providing an in-depth elaboration of the central aspects of craziness, its nuanced and multifaceted nature, and its (dis)advantages for the street actors.

## **Method**

The empirical basis for this article is the ethnographical fieldwork that I conducted from 2006 to 2015 among young men from Nørrebro, a district in Copenhagen where Wilson's (1987) arguments regarding the concentration of poverty are relevant. The transition from an industrial to a service-based economy in Denmark has exacerbated poverty among ethnoracial minorities, primarily due to their overrepresentation in unskilled jobs. Due to ethnoracial segregation, this poverty is spatially concentrated, as exemplified by Nørrebro, the most impoverished district in Copenhagen, with the third highest number of ethnoracial minority inhabitants (Kalkan 2021 [2018]). Beyond difficulties in acquiring jobs for those who are unskilled, many inhabitants of Nørrebro also face ethnoracial and territorial stigmatization, which further exacerbates their difficulties in acquiring esteem and respect in mainstream society (*ibid.*). Furthermore, Nørrebro has a vibrant street culture that has emerged among some of the marginalised (especially minority) young men, as a response to such shared material and symbolic structural problems (including criminalization, which is one of the forms that racialization takes for them) (*ibid.*; Kalkan 2021b). This street culture provides a means of economic subsistence and thriving, through the illegal street

economy (where especially burglaries, street and commercial robberies, and dealing in hashish and cocaine, are key elements), as well as respect through alternative criteria for recognition (Kalkan 2021 [2018]).

To study this culture, I moved to the area in 2006 and lived there until 2015. By frequenting a local youth club to become acquainted with the young men from the district and developing a rapport with some of them, I was able to participate in their lives outside the club. There, I became acquainted with over 100 young men who were often marginalised as they had no qualifying education and were unemployed; hence, they spent considerable time in the streets of Nørrebro and subsisted on welfare, periodic work in the off-the-books economy, their parents' income, and/or the illegal street economy. I built relationships of varying strengths with them, which was partially facilitated by the similarities between us, as I, like most of them, am a Muslim male from an ethno-racial minority group with unskilled parents and was relatively young (24 years old at fieldwork commencement)<sup>1</sup>. By virtue of my relations, I spent hundreds of days participating in and observing virtually all spheres of the young men's lives (except in prisons and educational institutions). I also performed numerous 'informal ethnographic interviews' (Agar 1996) with them, and recorded 'ethnographic interviews' (Spradley 1979) with 84 of them, some of whom were interviewed multiple

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<sup>1</sup> Such similarities alone were insufficient to gain the trust of, and build relations with, the young men, which rather developed over time through *fieldwork*.

times. I coded the transcriptions of the recordings with the software program NVivo, and the comprehensive fieldnotes manually on the computer. Some of the codes and sub-codes addressed craziness and other related phenomena, such as violence, respect, and being a 'good man'.

The data analysis comprising the coding was conducted via the ethnographic 'funnel approach' (Agar 1996), an open-ended method that permits the gradual emergence of themes, which are then pursued through further fieldwork. For example, realising early on that the youth on the streets appear to valorise not only violence, but also being allegedly mentally ill, I then pursued this through more participant observations and conversations (which permit the potential rejection or, as in this case, elaboration of original assumptions). Hence, the analysis in this approach, including the development of themes and the corresponding coding, was based on both an open reading of the data and ongoing reflections on the lived experiences from the fieldwork, as well as comparison of the data with theories and ideas gained from other research (cf. Okely 2002). Through this holistic approach, I developed and analysed the themes presented and elaborated here.

### **Being indifferently cold**

One summer evening at a park, Jamal answered my question about what is crucial for the hierarchy in his street community:

[It is about] who is most *ice-cold*, you know. Like if there are problems with someone, then it is he who has to show himself for the group. [...] Like, if we're going to fight with someone, then one [of us] is going to go and shoot him in the leg, and the other one is going to shoot him in the heart or head [to show himself]. [...] They think [about] respect, [that] people hear, 'Oh, he just smashed that one, smashed his teeth, gave him a knife, stabbed him down'. You understand? Cold and cynical, that's what it's all about.

As Jamal indicated, the (potential) ability to inflict the most corporeal harm on others is critical for status among these young men. This ability is strongly related to what they describe as being 'indifferent', 'sick', 'crazy', and 'ice-cold', terms used to characterise more actions than those reflecting a violent ability, but are often used in relation to them, especially actions that many others would not dare execute. The display of courage is, thus, estimable among these young men, and those engaging in more impressive actions of this nature are often labelled 'ice-cold'. This term more broadly refers to the ability to be unaffected by others' assessments of one's actions or their consequences, and is as such reminiscent of the term 'cool', which is particularly prevalent among marginalised youth in the United States (Katz 1988: 97). Hence, 'ice-cold' is used for many different actions, from serious to minor. However, in minor cases, the term is not used truly evaluatively, but rather randomly; that is, being referred to as ice-cold does not necessarily bestow real recognition. The term is used authentically when it denotes actions that show one truly does not care about its consequences. Being 'indifferent' and making statements such as 'I don't care about

anything' are ways of positioning oneself among these young men. One who not only claims to be indifferent about 'everything', but also shows it in his actions, can be described as ice-cold. The indifference is most evident when his own life is at stake in a given act, or when he is putting others' lives at risk, as it shows that he does not care about the punishment he may receive for taking someone else's life. This man proves that he is 'ice-cold', and receives recognition that elevates his position.

Soner: You have several people. You have someone who is higher, and then you have someone who is [lower] [...]. Those up here, they control it all.

Hakan: Those who are willing to die and kill?

Soner: Yes. They have everyone's respect. [...] But it's not just because they are good at dying and killing, but because they are good people at the same time. Because if they were bad people, then all of these [other youths] would go their way. [...] [But] people respect them. [...] They have seen them stand in situations where everyone is panicking. There are shootings, people run off, and they sit perfectly still and scold. [...] That's hardcore.

There is not even anyone pulling the trigger, but still people running away. [...] [But one] says, 'Hello, man, I told you, put that gun down' [...] and him there [with the gun], he starts firing. People jump down on the street, jump and hide. [...] [But the one who talks like that] pulls again and shoots [back].

This situation here shows who is a man and who is not. Those who ran away long ago, they show it in the city, people can see it. They do not have to talk about it: 'we do not need to talk about it,

we have seen you flee and such things. You shut up’, right? But they respect that you are weak as a human being. They do. That is why they are loved.

Having the ability to maintain composure and be emotionally unaffected, even in life-threatening situations where everyone else is panicking, is being ice-cold (although Soner here calls it ‘hardcore’ many youths would use ‘ice-cold’). The person who demonstrates this ability proves that he ‘is a man’. Being ice-cold is strongly associated with tough masculinity—similar to being ‘cool’ in the United States (Ilan 2015; Majors and Billson 1992)—and the accomplishment of such masculinity in the eyes of one’s peers is a central reason for acting ice-cold for the marginalised young men, who have limited resources available for accomplishing conventional masculinity (Messerchmidt 1993).

Hence, upon scrutiny, being ice-cold does not equate to being courageous, as courage presupposes knowledge of what is dangerous in a given situation and that this danger has meaning to the individual (Plato 1999 [1983]). Instead, ice-cold actions, which hinge on having and showing indifference to the consequences of one’s actions, equate to being fearless. The concomitant recognition is also why some of the young men position themselves in relation to each other by saying ‘I fear only Allah’—ergo, due to his alleged street cultural fatalism (Anderson 1999; Bourgois 2003 [1996]; Brezina et al. 2009; Sandberg and Pedersen 2011; Wolff et al. 2020), he fears no one and nothing that can surpass him on this earth. In the style of the street icon Tupac (see Kalkan 2022),



who sings ‘Only God can judge me’, he is only answerable to a higher power who alone can judge his actions. He stands above human morality and reason—he is thus irrational. Thus, being ‘ice-cold’ is closely related to the terms ‘crazy’, ‘sick’, and ‘mental’, which are often categories of recognition among these youth (although their specific meanings and any recognition or contempt they express depends on context); being ‘ice-cold’ is a form of craziness.

### **Behaving recklessly**

Daud illuminated the recognition aspect of such categories one night by explaining that one gains and builds respect over time, through actions ‘like, if there’s something, it’s you who go first in [the] row. [...] [Like in] fights or such. [You have to be] more sick in the head and such, more indifferent [...] more being ice-cold’. The reputation and status associated with being ice-cold, sick in the head, or crazy is built through demonstrations of recklessness and disregard for consequences.

Hakan: What then gives a high status?

Rasool: I’ve told you that a thousand times. [...] Violence and blood. [...] There is nothing else. If anyone says that there’s something else, then they do not know this game. Forget it. Violence and blood. That’s the way you advance in this world. [...] [The violence] is not about going out

and fighting with fists. It's about how psychopathic, *yani* [that is]<sup>2</sup> some would describe it as psychopathic, but in reality, you know what it's about? How recklessly ['konsekvensløst', literally 'consequencelessly/without consequence'] you think.

That is to say, you just go out with a machine [gun], and then you just pop someone right in the head. Paw paw, in front of four witnesses. Completely cold ass [reckless] [...] with whether you get [an] expulsion [sentence], [...] should do time for ten years, [...] his family should come and chase you, [...] [or] his friends, they put you on some death list. You're cold ass with everything, you think recklessly when you act. There we have status.

Such recklessness is strongly related to violence, and thus acting recklessly is a powerful marker of how dangerous one can be, which is why it brings recognition.

Rasool, one of those with the highest status among these young men, also mentions that 'some would describe it as psychopathic', or crazy, but these are people who do not understand the 'game' of the street. In this environment, it is rational to think irrationally (cf. Katz 1988; Sandberg and Pedersen 2011). There are associated benefits, such as status and material gains, as expressed by Rasool in his statement about prison:

Violence. That is number one in prison. It's the violence that speaks. I head-butt one [...] [and] stomp him well and thoroughly in front of the camera, in front of guards, in front of all the

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<sup>2</sup> The young men's street vernacular predominantly contains Danish, but also words from the languages of the countries their, or their friends', parents migrated from. The English translation has maintained such words and highlighted them in italics (followed by a translation), whereas everything else has been translated into English by me. Moreover, some of the quotes in this paper have been slightly edited for clarity of English expression.

prisoners. [...] I get two weeks in solitary. [...] After solitary I come out for normal yard time again.

Then, you can already figure out, *akhi karim* [generous/noble brother], there are many prisoners, psychologically weak men, they think: ‘Him there, he is a psychopath, just stay away from him. He’s cold ass, [...] he does not even want to get out of here, since he head-butts people [...] in front of the camera’. [...]

But they do not know the system the way someone like me does. [...] You will not get a longer punishment unless [...] he who has been beaten says, ‘Yes, it's him [...], he did this and that’. [...]

Even though it looks like chaos to others, there is a system in it internally, [...] like chaos theory. [...] Others [...] think: ‘Him there, he is completely gone [in the head] [...] *Yani*, that does not make sense’. [...] But when he meets me two weeks after, it makes perfect sense. Those who sell *ju* [hashish], they come, they pay me. [...] [Then the others] can suddenly see the benefit. Two weeks ago, it looked completely chaotic.

Since the above example is pertinent to prison life, it does not directly illustrate how acting recklessly is beneficial on the streets. However, as described, being known for being crazy also provides recognition on the street—and can there similarly result in material benefits (see Kalkan 2021 [2018]). Furthermore, the culture of prison (where many of the young men occasionally spend time) and the street are similar in several respects and can be conflated (see Bengtsson 2012; Wacquant 2001; Mitchell et al. 2021).

The example is thus also expressive of the street, in its illustration of the rationality of behaving ‘crazy’. When Rasool is extremely violent towards another prisoner in front of others, he knows he will be punished. Hence, some other prisoners think that there is something wrong with him, as his actions seem meaningless. Ergo, he must be ‘completely gone [in the head]’ and a ‘psychopath’. However, what to them seems chaotic and meaningless is not to Rasool. He behaves based on knowledge of the consequences; he has weighed the advantages and disadvantages of his actions and behaves ‘reasonably’. What appears to others as ‘chaos in one’ (Nietzsche 2003: 46) is a strategic action to him. What appears as a manifestation of mental illness can, in the context of the street, instead be a reflexively and ‘rationally’ calculated action. Thus, one does not have to be indifferent to the consequences of their actions to be described as ice-cold and crazy. It is enough to appear as such, which is why indifference or craziness can become a strategic act; an ‘impression management’ (Goffman 1956) performed through chaotic actions. This ‘soulful chaos’ characterises the ‘crazy’ person, as ‘the person who is most fearsomely beyond social control is the one who does not appear to be quite in control of himself because his soul is rooted in what, to us, is chaos’ (Katz 1988: 102). Ergo, he can be dangerously violent—and is therefore respected.

### **Playing and being (perceived as) crazy**

To gain the advantages that craziness can yield, young men (especially teenagers) may 'play crazy'. This act is however not without risks, as it allegedly, over time, causes some of them to really 'go crazy':

Hakan: How do you play crazy?

*Tariq:* Do something crazy, something unpredictable. [...] For example, [...] driving on the opposite road or reversing in the freeway [...] just for fun. [...] Then, of course, people start saying, 'Oh, he's crazy, that one', and [...] the rumour spreads. [...] In the beginning, it is just for fun. And then after he has done it many times, it becomes a habit, then eventually, he might forget who he truly is. [...] Then he might just continue that role, you know, the psychosis role. [...]

There are also people who, for example, just stab their friend down for fun. [...] [Razeem] stabbed another in the hand, just like that for fun. There was no quarrel or anything [...]. We were just sitting and dazing outside in a shed, smoking cigarettes, then for no reason, he just suddenly stabbed him in his hand [...] and then he took it [the knife] away, and just laughed.

Driving on the opposite side of the road or reversing on the highway are risky actions and thus express the capability to act recklessly. Razeem's action is also an example of this. Stabbing his friend for no reason and laughing showed that he is 'crazy' and acts recklessly. But more importantly, he creates chaos around him. For no reason, he might inflict pain on others, which makes him unpredictable and thus (more) dangerous. There is an 'aura of dread' (Katz 1988: 135) around the chaotic individual. Those who interact with him do not know where they stand and are therefore forced to be careful, for example, by showing deference and adapting to his rhythm and behaviour during

interactions (cf. Collins 2004), which is why this individual gains another benefit of acting crazy: dominance on the street.

As Tariq says, certain young men behave this way for fun in their teens, because other young men acknowledge them for it and laugh at their behaviour. Challenging fate by driving on the wrong side of the road or reversing on the highway is a source of amusement—as well as ways in which the ‘crazy’ individual shows daring and gains recognition. The tension that lies in these dangers breaks the dull and monotonous nature of everyday life on the streets. The ‘crazy’ person is therefore also recognised for creating fun.

But as can be seen, Tariq believes that over time, such actions make the actor truly crazy. I cannot comment on whether this is true based on my data. That playing crazy contributes to developing a general pattern of action characterised by abnormal traits cannot be excluded, but this is hardly the main reason. Generally, those perceived as ‘truly crazy’ are diagnosed with mental disorders by psychiatrists. Such individuals are by other youths considered to have developed these disorders because of tragic experiences or substance abuse (cf. Marsh 2020), and not just because they have ‘played crazy’. Individuals with an official diagnosis are not (only) seen as playing or acting crazy but are bestowed with an essence of craziness because a scientific authority, through its ‘rites of institution’ (Bourdieu 1991: 117–126), has attributed such status to

them. These individuals are referred to as ‘mental [‘psykisk’ in Danish, which is an abbreviation of “psykisk syg”, meaning “mentally ill”]’.

I walk past the park and see a group of young men sitting there, so I go in and greet them all, by shaking their hands and saying ‘salam’. Ömer looks at me and says, ‘Hey, why are you working with the Danes? Why are you against us immigrants? What is it that you have against us?’

I am surprised and puzzled for a second before jokingly saying, ‘Well, I just do not like you black pigs [none of them are of African descent; the term ‘black’ here refers to people of Middle-Eastern descent, like the young men and me] coming here and taking over our country. Out with you! Denmark for the Danes!’ and raising my arm in a Hitler salute.

Ömer responds by saying to his pit bull terrier, ‘Take him, take him’. It reacts immediately and jumps up and bites me on the upper side of my thigh. However, it does not bite hard, it just grabs hold there [and left only some red marks]. Frightened, I raise my arms out of its reach while shouting ‘Ömer! Ömer!’. He then calls to the dog, who lets go of me and moves back towards Ömer.

I then ask him, in great surprise, ‘Why did you do that?’

Ömer: Because you said that.

Hakan: But it was just for fun.

Ömer: Oh, I did not know that. You must not say such things. Don’t you know I’m mental? I do not understand such things.

His ill-concealed smile, however, reveals that he of course knew it was for fun; he used his ‘mental’ diagnosis to take liberties. I do not answer him.

Then, a little later Ömer sics his dog on Mahmo, who is visibly frightened by the animal and whose anxiety amuses others. Mahmo responds promptly by climbing up the tree next to him, shouting at Ömer to stop. The others laugh at Mahmo. Ömer then turns to Salim, saying, ‘Why are you just standing there like that?’

Salim replies, ‘No, Ömer, no’, while his face stiffens.

‘It will do you good to run’, Ömer says, smilingly and then to his dog, ‘Take him, take him’.

Salim runs off with the dog behind him, and Rasool runs along, while holding it back by its collar, so that it does not catch him. The rest of us (including Mahmo) follow them, smiling and chucklingly watching the riot while walking out of the park.

Ömer’s actions in this example show several things. First, he uses his ‘mental’ diagnosis for greater personal freedom. By attacking me and others with the dog<sup>3</sup>, he behaves as he wishes without being limited by external circumstances, such as morality and consequences. He displays similar behaviour in other ways, such as taking 10.000 DKR from a close friend’s father’s shop in front of said friend and crashing a friend’s new car by driving it recklessly on the pavement, in response to which his friends do little; as Tariq elaborated, ‘what shall they say [to him]? He’s mental’. Second, because he is unlimited and mental, he can ‘misunderstand’ things and be unpredictable, just like Razeem and Rasool in the previous examples. Ömer can create horrors around him for

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<sup>3</sup> In my case, I believe this was because my ‘cocky’ answer transgressed the scope of action afforded to me by my social place – see Kalkan 2021 [2018] for an elaboration of ‘social places’.



no reason and is, therefore, dangerous. This makes him more feared, giving him respect and dominance over others.

Therefore, Ömer acts 'crazy' sometimes to get his way, create fun, or maintain his 'mental' reputation. This was expressed one day when Ömer, Rasool, Obaid, and I were driving back to Nørrebro from Freetown Christiania. In this incident, Ömer repeatedly ran red lights, which scared me. Although I did not say anything, he noticed my tense body language, firm grip on the car's door panel handle, and probably my anxious facial expression. He laughed at my anxiety, pointed it out to the others, and decided to scare me even more. He stepped hard on the accelerator and sank his head forward and below the car window, so he could not look out, while pretending to shoot out of the car with his hand. This time, however, he scared not only me, but also the others. As we approached the cars in front at high speed, Rasool and Obaid anxiously began to shout 'Ömer, Ömer', while Rasool patted him hard on the shoulder. Ömer then lifted his head up again and laughed. He thus demonstrated that anxiety-provoking life-threatening situations are merely amusement for him. Through this fearless and self-destructive behaviour (cf. Bourgois 2003 [1996]), he established that he actually 'does not care about anything', including his own life; that he not only pretends to be crazy, but is actually 'mental'. This is the primary source of his high status in the street community.

**'A good man'**

Violent capabilities alone, such as being dangerously ‘mental’, are, however, not sufficient to gain status and other associated benefits in street culture. It is also necessary to be ‘good people’, as Soner explained. Otherwise, instead of gaining respect and status, others will be pushed away. One who is only dangerous, known only for, in Artan’s words, having ‘cut off fingers’ and ‘shot’ others, experiences that others ‘start to hate him. Thinking he’s a pig, and stuff like that. [...] Because you only hear bad things about him; he is dangerous’. Thus, the dangerous violent side must be balanced with a friendly and sociable side, with being ‘a good man’.

Being a good man is the opposite of being an egoist. The term is often used for those who have done something ‘good’ for others. Those who think of others and help them are trustworthy, generous, and respectful. Rami listed such descriptions when I asked for some examples of how to be a good man. He then explained that the young men understand ‘a good man, just as everyone else thinks of a good man’, but in Denmark ‘a good man’ is not a common term or category, which is telling of its significance on the street.

The good man is well liked and valued for being good. However, being good by itself is not a source of increased street status. For that, violent capabilities are necessary.

Furthermore, if only a good man, one risks being exploited by certain people in the community. Therefore, conveying that one does not put up with transgressions and is ready to defend oneself becomes crucial (cf. Anderson 1999). Being able to change

behaviour according to the circumstances is an essential competency in street life (and thus not only pertinent to moving between social spheres, as described by Anderson 1999; see also Marsh 2020: 106–107, who reveal that violent street actors can be kind and compassionate in the family sphere). Those who are successful on the streets have mastered this balancing act of usually being ‘good’ when it is suitable and showing brutality when one’s borders are transgressed. The former behaviours make one well liked and trusted and enable forging of connections with other central actors in the street (economy); the latter ensures that one is not disrespected or swindled.

This combination of being ‘good’ and dangerous results in high status, not the individual components themselves. This is exemplified in Ömer, who enjoys great respect on the streets not only due to his erratically dangerous ‘mental’ condition, but also because he is ‘good’. Several young men appreciatively mentioned these aspects in his absence. Silas believed that Ömer’s high status was due to him being ‘a good man. Every time he is with someone, he buys food and drinks for that person. He thinks of others, you understand? It’s because he’s a good man, that’s why people like him’.

These collective dispositions, especially in terms of economic expenditure, are characteristics of the ‘good man’. Additionally, Ömer also shows concern for others, a welcoming and social side, a special sense of humour, and, according to several others, a pronounced sense of justice—which is why even individuals he has acted against respect him and say he is ‘a good man’, according to Tariq. His personality, thus,

contains several sympathetic traits, alongside dangerous ones. This is why Ömer—like other high-status ‘crazy’ individuals—is genuinely well liked and not just feared. If he did not also have this ‘good side’, he would probably be excluded from the community of the street, and if he had only the good side, he would not enjoy the same respect and status.

### **Psychotic in a welfare state**

Whereas marginalisation increases young people’s risk of developing mental illnesses (Sapiro and Ward 2020), due to e.g. the possession of less social capital and the possible experience of racial stigmatization (DeSilva et al. 2005; Nazroo et al. 2020), it can also create an incentive to play crazy. For the most marginalised youth, playing crazy can seem a reasonable strategy beyond their teenage years, as they have less to lose by doing so and thus less to ‘care about’. As such, one’s indifference and capacity for recklessness is not only determined by one’s attitude, but also by one’s structural and material position. The more structurally and materially marginalised an individual, the greater their possibility of rising in the street hierarchy, as having much to gain and little to lose means they can take greater ‘ice-cold’ risks more easily (see also Hirschi 1969; Sandberg and Petersen 2011). They have more to gain by being viewed as crazy, both symbolically in the form of a higher degree of submissiveness and respect from their peers, and materially, as the fear of such a label is beneficial in the illegal street economy (see Kalkan 2021 [2018]). Furthermore, a psychiatric diagnosis enables

certain forms of assistance from the Danish welfare state and a lower probability of prison sentences. Hence, some young men are willing to act crazy in front of a doctor so they can receive a diagnosis and claim to be 'mental'.

This was clarified for me one summer evening when I was sitting on a bench with Mahad, whom I had met a few times before through mutual (street) friends, but had not seen for approximately three years. I found that night that this was because he had been imprisoned during this period. However, his sentence was not complete; he said that he was now on temporary release from the institution and would be completely released in a couple of weeks. I then asked him when he was going in again, and he told me that he himself controlled when he went in, but thought he would go in again this evening.

Hakan: How do you control it yourself?

Mahad: It's because I have a treatment sentence. I'm not in a *hapis* [prison], I'm in an institution at the hospital. There you can control it yourself. *Yani*, they do not say anything to you coming later than you were supposed to, then you just get a curfew for eight days.

Hakan: Oh, okay. So, after the eight days, you can go out again?

Mahad: Yes, then it's normal again. Then you are allowed to go out for, for example, two hours [this time he has been out for three days], but nothing happens if you come later. You're mental [he says smiling], what are they going to say to that? You felt like staying out.

Hakan: Okay. So you've been in there for three years?

*Mahad*: No, no. I was first in *hapis* for two years and four months. Then I came out, then I went in again after three months. Then I played mental and got a treatment sentence.

Hakan: Oh, okay. But why did you not play mental the first time then?

*Mahad*: I did not think of it. It was because I talked to a Paki[stani] afterwards, he had done it. He gave me the idea, he said: ‘Mental, it’s not something you are your whole life, you are only so for a moment [the moment of the crime]’. Then I did it. I told some doctors, ‘I was mental. I was drunk and on drugs’ and stuff like that. Then they said, ‘That is something we decide’. Then they asked a hundred questions, from every angle, just like you. Then I just zigzagged it [moves his hand in waves from side to side]. Then I got a treatment sentence. [...]

Hakan: Is it better than *hapis* then?

*Mahad*: Yes, a hundred times. Here, you are not limited, there are not all sorts of restrictions. In *hapis*, you have to ask for permission just to pee. Here, you are not always in a cell. You see, I’m out now, I’m allowed to go out. [...] You [also] get welfare payments. In *hapis*, there is just ‘reward’ [diet and labour, with extremely low hourly wages], which is nothing. You use it right away.

Hakan: Do you also get it when you come out, that is, welfare payments?

*Mahad*: Yes, of course. And if they think you cannot work or take an education, then you get something else, 10,000 [DKR] a month or something. [...]

Hakan: How long have you been sitting in there now?

*Mahad*: For two months.

Hakan: Okay, you know how long you would have done time if it was *hapis*?

*Mahad*: One year and nine months. [...] It says so in the judgment. The sentence is one year and nine months, but then I got a treatment sentence instead.

Hakan: And there you have only been sitting for two months and getting out in a few weeks?

Mahad: Yes. [He did not, however. He came out after seven months; thus, he was in there for about 9–10 months. This was because, during an exit from the hospital, he beat a man who was shouting insults at him]. [...] It's a maximum of five years [at the institution, as long as there is no restriction order], but it is until you get well, you see. You get well quickly.

Thus, Mahad benefited from being diagnosed as mental. However, with such diagnoses, one may be cementing their exit from mainstream society and its normality—such a strategy risks closing the gates to a potential future in mainstream society. What appears as a reasonable strategy at a given time can, in hindsight, be seen as the most marginalising and result in regret, which Tariq attested to concerning acquaintances who had ‘played mental’.

However, only few men use such a strategy. Not all youth want to be labelled crazy, and fewer want to be diagnosed as ‘mental’. Further, several others said they would rather be in prison than admitted to a psychiatric institution, as the concomitant medication and contact with mentally ill people allegedly makes one suffer a ‘mental breakdown’. For many of the young men, being labelled ‘mental’ would be as stigmatising as it would be for most individuals in mainstream society (cf. Rüsç et al. 2005).

An episode with Nazim illuminates this. It was a summer night. Five young men and I sat on the benches of a yard and drank whiskey and cola under the cover of some trees. Nazim then said, without any prompting:

Hey, if anyone says I have psychosis again, I'll slaughter them. I will slaughter that one Shedi, fuck him up completely. Do you know what happened at my job? [...] One of the waiters comes and says, 'Are you Nazim?' Then I said, 'Yes'. [...] She says 'You're a little', and then she does this with her hand [turns the hand around the temple] to sort of say, I have psychosis, and I flipped my lid. She did not think I would be like that, you know, she thought it was like normal. But I said to her, 'What?! Who told you that?' She replies: 'No one'. Then I said, 'What do you mean by "no one", you bitch?! I'll find out who said it to you, and then you can visit him in the hospital. Piss off!' [...]

I know it's him, Shedi, it's him she walks around with. I will find out where he lives and where he goes, and then I will catch him. I will fuck him up completely, slaughter him, break his bones! He will not talk like that about me, that little whore. [He looks around at all of us]. If anyone says I have psychosis, I'll slaughter them. Nobody will talk like that about me. [The rest of us nod in agreement].

Evidently, not only does Nazim not want to be described as having psychosis, but promises to beat anyone he believes has characterised him as such, implicitly threatening us as well. Being categorised as 'mental', crazy, or having psychosis, which can give recognition on the street, is strongly stigmatising in mainstream society. Nazim lives the street life; he primarily spends his free time there. However, he is not financially dependent on the street economy, as he recently obtained a restaurant job. This work is in mainstream society and being seen as psychotic there could be detrimental. Hence, he reacts fiercely to his colleague, who has taken the street's



assessment of him into the workplace. He must ensure that it does not spread, as it can threaten his newly acquired position. He, therefore, tries to eliminate the assessment of him having psychosis by promising to enact violence, so that the assessment does not conflict with his role in mainstream society again; however, this violent reaction also indicates that he is from the street.

If being assessed as having psychosis had not infiltrated his workplace, he would have probably just laughed it off. Perhaps he would have even worked actively to be seen as such, as there are benefits to it on the streets. However, unlike many other young men, he has something bigger that he may risk losing.

Based on this analysis, it should certainly not be inferred that all severely marginalised people act crazy because they have little to lose and potentially more to gain. Such behaviour is merely a more reasonable strategy for them in the face of certain circumstances. Few of the young men are, or are perceived as, 'ice-cold' or crazy, or are diagnosed as being 'mental'. However, these individuals usually constitute the elite on the streets (except for those who, like Søren, are seen as crazy or 'mental', but not as more dangerous than others) due to the reckless and erratic violence associated with them.

## **Conclusion**

The oft, albeit briefly, described phenomenon of 'craziness' in US street culture studies can also be found on the streets of Nørrebro, Copenhagen. However, as demonstrated

here, ‘craziness’ in this context is a nuanced, multifaceted, and blurry phenomenon, ranging from acts of impression management to diagnoses of mental disorders. It is dependent on the display of indifference towards the consequences of one’s actions, and as such appears irrational. However, the display of such irrational recklessness can become a rational strategy due to the advantages associated with being seen as ice-cold, crazy, or mental on the street. Thus, the street actors can purposefully and rationally act to appear irrationally, unpredictably, and chaotically ‘crazy’ to gain status—as described in US street culture studies—as well as material benefits, greater freedom of action, reputation, masculinity, dominance in interactions, or simply acknowledgement for creating entertainment. But, to acquire such gains, except in regard to entertainment, the apparent irrationality or mental disturbance, has to be coupled with a delicate balance of violent capabilities and amiable characteristics that allow one to be seen as a ‘good man’.

This is the multifaceted shape that ‘craziness’ takes in Nørrebro, a highly unlikely place to find a cultural phenomenon that could fundamentally have been viewed as a product of the severe “multiple marginality” that exists in the US inner cities (Vigil 1988: 9-12). ‘If it can be found in the Scandinavian context of a strong welfare society, it can be found anywhere’, is an argument one could make, on the basis of what appears as a least likely case or context (Flyvbjerg 2006). However, as the holistic analysis revealed, the welfare context can enhance the phenomenon of craziness, as there are

institutional and welfare benefits associated with being labelled as ‘crazy’. Marginalised street individuals hence seek a diagnosis of mental illness to accrue such benefits—although such a strategy may be regretted later due to the stigma attached to ‘craziness’ in mainstream society.

Moreover, structural marginalisation in this welfare context is ultimately the root of the phenomenon of ‘craziness’. The spatial concentration of disadvantage (cf. Wilson 1987; Kalkan 2021 [2018]), the further marginalisation which it entails, as well as racialization and criminalization, have spawned a street culture among parts of the youth that operates with alternative criteria for recognition (Kalkan 2021 [2018]). These include valorisations, as well as strategic uses, of ‘craziness’. Thus, the welfare state does not eradicate the marginalisation processes that give rise to the street culture that is the basis of the described phenomenon of ‘craziness’. Furthermore, the strong penetration of the welfare state in the institutional makeup of disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Denmark (as well as other European countries) (ibid.) might even contribute directly to the development of the phenomenon, through potential stigmatization and labelling processes, and potential revalorization of stigmatising deviant labels by the youth (cf. ibid.; Rios 2011). The ethnographic clarification of whether these or other processes occur in the interactions between disadvantaged youth who (end up) ‘act(ing) crazy’ and welfare institutions in Europe would be an illuminating line of novel research on the production of ‘deviance’. Moreover, what

appears as irrational deviance, or as simple ‘street culture craziness’, is here revealed as a multifaceted and nuanced phenomenon with comprehensible rationalities. Whether or not such complexity and rationality apply to other apparently incomprehensible and irrational forms of (criminal) deviance, as well as other apparently simple street culture norms and behaviours, would appear to be a fruitful question for future research.

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