



***The Image of Incriminated Masculinity in Crime Narratives:
A Hegemonic Approach***
***Obraz inkryminowanej męskości w narracjach
o przestępstwie – ujęcie hegemoniczne***

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The aim of this article is to characterize the portrayal of incriminated masculinity in crime narratives.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: Three narrative tendencies creating the image of masculinity were identified through a review and analysis of English-language academic literature on crime narratives. The characteristics of masculinity were examined in reference to the theory of hegemonic masculinity.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The concept of hegemonic masculinity was first defined, followed by a discussion of the specifics of the research material. Subsequently, three narrative tendencies were identified and described.

RESEARCH RESULTS: Three narrative tendencies were identified and labeled: (1) criminality as a determinant of masculine success, (2) male dominance as a central element of the criminal act, and (3) the heroic myth as a mitigating circumstance.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND APPLICABLE VALUE OF RESEARCH:

The narrative portrayal of incriminated masculinity is strongly influenced by the model of hegemonic masculinity. This pattern is often used to promote criminal actions or to influence the legal realities faced by narrators or protagonists. It seems necessary to emphasize the importance of lawfulness and respect for legal norms in the process of educating young men about masculinity.

→ **KEYWORDS:** **FORENSIC LINGUISTICS, CRIMINOLOGY, CRIME NARRATIVES, MASCULINITY, HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY**

STRESZCZENIE

CEL NAUKOWY: Celem artykułu jest dokonanie charakterystyki obrazu inkryminowanej męskości w narracjach o przestępstwie.

PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE: W wyniku przeglądu i translacji anglojęzycznej literatury naukowej poświęconej tematyce *crime narratives* wyodrębniono i nazwano trzy tendencje narracyjne kreujące obraz męskości. Wyznaczniki męskości określono zgodnie z ujęciem hegemonicznym.

PROCES WYWODU: Zdefiniowano męskość hegemoniczną, określono specyfikę materiału badawczego, a następnie wyodrębniono i scharakteryzowano trzy tendencje narracyjne.

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: Wskazano i nazwano trzy tendencje narracyjne: 1) przestępczość wyznacznikiem męskiego sukcesu, 2) męska dominacja jako główny składnik czynu zabronionego, 3) mit bohatera jako okoliczność łagodząca.

WNIOSKI, REKOMENDACJE I APLIKACYJNE ZNACZENIE WPŁYWU BADAŃ: Narracyjny obraz inkryminowanej męskości jest silnie inspirowany ujęciem hegemonicznym. Wzorzec męskości hegemonicznej służy promowaniu działań przestępczych lub wpływaniu na rzeczywistość karnoprawną narratorów lub bohaterów. W toku wychowywania do męskości konieczne wydaje się zwrócenie większej uwagi na wartość przestrzegania prawa.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** JĘZYKOZNAWSTWO SĄDOWE, KRYMINOLOGIA, NARRACJE O PRZESTĘPSTWIE, MĘSKOŚĆ, MĘSKOŚĆ HEGEMONICZNA

Introduction

The issue of male criminality has long attracted scholarly attention in a range of disciplines, particularly in the social sciences and legal studies. Central to this inquiry is the idea that gender – understood as a socio-cultural construct (see Grzyb & Habzda-Siwiek, 2013) – is the most significant individual predictor of criminal behavior (Messerschmidt & Tomsen, 2016). Criminological research includes extensive discussion on the relationship between offenders' gender and the frequency, intent, and methods involved in committing specific types of crimes (see, for example, Messerschmidt & Tomsen, 2016; Melosik, 2021). Official crime statistics consistently show that men are far more likely to commit crimes: "they represent a significant majority, and are, in fact, overrepresented among offenders" (Grzyb & Habzda-Siwiek, 2013, p. 95).

This article adds to the broad and multifaceted discussion on male criminality by introducing a perspective from forensic linguistics. This relatively young branch of applied linguistics studies language as it relates to the criminal justice process (e.g., Gębka-Wolak, 2017). One area of forensic linguistic research centers on the role and nature of so-called *crime narratives*. While this topic has been widely researched in countries such as the

United Kingdom and the United States, it remains underdeveloped in the Polish context and requires further examination and adaptation.

The aim of this article is to examine how problematic forms of masculinity are portrayed in crime narratives. The discussion begins with a definition of masculinity through the framework of hegemonic masculinity. This is followed by an overview of crime narratives from the perspective of forensic linguistics. The article focuses on three narrative tendencies, identified and named through a review and translation of English-language academic literature on crime narratives. These tendencies were selected based on their relevance to forensic linguistic analysis – that is, their usefulness in studying language in the context of criminal justice processes. The article concludes by identifying linguistic markers of masculinity in these narratives and examining how those markers correlate with specific legal goals and strategies.

Masculinity and Criminality

Masculinity is often associated with a set of traits that contribute to unlawful behavior (e.g., Skrinjar & Pettersson, 2020). In some criminological theories, a propensity for violence is even viewed as a central component of masculinity. The causes are typically attributed to both biological and social factors (e.g., Grzyb & Habzda-Siwiek, 2013; Melosik, 2021). As Walsh and Hemmens assert, “masculinity is the single best predictor of criminality” (2008, p. 207). The connection between masculinity and crime also runs deep in historical and cultural narratives. Law-breaking behavior is often romanticized in heroic narratives as a sign of male cleverness, innovation, or resistance against an unjust system. Such portrayals are introduced to boys at an early age, often through superhero-themed media that model dominant ideals of masculinity.

Given the complexity of the issue, it is worth mentioning several influential models of masculinity: hegemonic (Connell, 1995), toxic (Kimmel, 1995), inclusive (Anderson, 2009), hybrid (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014), caring (Elliott, 2015), and defensive (Wojnicka, 2021). In criminological literature, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is particularly prominent, as it is “chiefly concerned with explaining male criminality” (Melosik, 2021, p. 11). This concept does not emphasize a single, isolated type or stereotype of man. Instead, it centers on how men relate to others and the hierarchy of different masculinities (Messerschmidt & Tomsen, 2016). This framework recognizes multiple models of masculinity, each contingent upon specific social and cultural contexts. What they share, however, is the pursuit of dominance – both over women and other men (see Melosik, 2021). Importantly, hegemonic masculinity “is not synonymous with violence-oriented masculinity” (Connell, 2012, p. 13; Melosik, 2021, p. 13). Rather, it functions as an analytical tool for explaining and describing the causes and expressions of men’s unlawful behavior.

Markers of Hegemonic Masculinity

The defining characteristics of hegemonic masculinity have been widely discussed in theoretical literature (see, e.g., Connell, 1995, 2012; Skrinjar & Pettersson, 2020; Melosik, 2021; Kluczyńska, 2021). The most commonly cited domains include a man's status and social role, appearance, body and sexuality, as well as behavioral tendencies. A hegemonic man is professionally successful, holds a well-paid job, and occupies influential social positions. He is heterosexual, and his physical attributes – such as strength, power, speed, resilience, and the capacity for physical dominance or control – signal masculine authority (e.g., Connell, 1995).

He maintains his fit physique through exercise and muscular development (Melosik, 2021). He embodies power and dominance over both women and other men. He represents – and often outwardly displays – the potential for violence and aggression, though this does not necessarily mean he acts on it (Skrinjar & Pettersson, 2020). He tends to gravitate toward extreme and dangerous activities, one example being fast, risky driving (Melosik, 2021).

This figure often possesses heroic traits, which correspond with the related concept of “cowboy masculinity” (Skrinjar & Pettersson, 2020) – he is fearless, creative, and intelligent. He does not tolerate injustice, confronts opponents, and acts in the interest of society. He is also capable of being protective and honorable. He holds power over women and subordinated men, who are more often associated with traits such as fear, caution, withdrawal, passivity, or conformity (e.g., Skrinjar & Pettersson, 2020).

Crime Narratives

The concept of hegemonic masculinity is reflected in many crime narratives, which are a frequent subject of research in forensic linguistics (e.g., Cotterill, 2003; Harris, 2005; Heffer, 2021). A narrative is understood as a sequence of events and facts presented in a particular order and linked by meaningful connections. It includes not only the events themselves but also the way the story is told (Cotterill, 2003, p. 20). A narrative is a form of communication that requires both a speaker and a listener. William Labov proposed a classic structure of narrative consisting of six elements: abstract, orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution, and coda (Labov, 1972; Wyrwas, 2014). A narrative typically begins with an abstract – a brief summary of the story. The orientation sets the scene by describing the time, place, and participants. The complication marks the transition into the sequence of events, while the evaluation helps convey the purpose or meaning of the story (Wyrwas, 2014). The resolution describes how the events conclude, and the coda brings the narrative to a close.

Crime narratives are regularly produced in legal and courtroom discourse. Most linguistic studies in this area analyze the adversarial model of criminal proceedings, which is characteristic of the Anglo-American common law system. Researchers argue that

the adversarial model is inherently narrative-based, both on a macro and micro level (Cotterill, 2003; Harris, 2005). Janet Cotterill (2003) contends that the structure of adversarial trials follows Labov's classical narrative framework, albeit with occasional deviations – referred to as anti-narrative sequences. The elements of narrative are played out through the successive stages of the trial (e.g., opening statements, witness examination, closing arguments, verdict, sentencing or release).

A trial narrative typically has more than one narrator. Its various elements are recounted in parallel by different participants in the proceedings. Central to this structure are the narratives constructed by the prosecution and the defense. The goal of the prosecution (represented by the prosecutor) is to convince the jury that there is no reasonable doubt regarding the defendant's guilt – a strategy often described as gap-filling. The burden of proof lies with the prosecution. The defense (represented by the defense attorney), on the other hand, seeks to establish reasonable doubt about the defendant's guilt, which would prevent a guilty verdict from being issued. The jury is as the audience for both narratives, tasked with determining which account is more credible, in keeping with the principle of the presumption of innocence.

In this context, narrative coherence often outweighs authenticity – jurors tend to be more persuaded by a well-told story than by the factual evidence presented in the case (Bennett & Feldman, 1981, p. 67; Cotterill, 2003, p. 35). Narratives constructed outside of legal discourse are also subject to analysis – for instance, accounts in which the description of events suggests a high probability that an unlawful act has occurred (Skrinjar & Pettersson, 2020). When these stories appear credible and meet legal criteria, they may initiate formal proceedings and ultimately become key pieces of evidence. Researchers likewise examine narratives told by suspects (during investigations), defendants (during trials), and convicted individuals – such as prison inmates (Youngs & Canter, 2011).

Masculinity in Crime Narratives

The image of hegemonic masculinity in crime narratives is shaped by the storyteller's intentions and narrative strategies. Masculinity is most often portrayed as a cause, component, or even a synonym for criminal behavior. In some cases, it is framed as a justification or mitigating factor. The main character in such narratives is typically a male perpetrator. Below, three narrative trends with potential relevance for forensic linguistics are illustrated through concrete examples.

Crime as a Marker of Male Success

Autobiographical accounts by prominent men – who are not on trial or directly involved in criminal proceedings – often include accounts of criminal behavior. The specific genre, written format, and wide readership make such narratives potentially admissible as

evidence and even grounds for opening a legal investigation. These narrators openly admit to committing certain acts, describing their motives, the circumstances (such as time and place), and their methods. They often include exact dates, locations, witnesses, and accomplices. The criminal acts are presented either as formative experiences in the development of their masculinity or as expressions of traditionally masculine traits, understood in a hegemonic sense.

In their analysis of three autobiographies by well-known male figures, Monica Skrinjar and Tove Pettersson (2020) identify a pattern in which narrators describe actions that meet legal definitions of assault, threats, theft, fraud, drug offenses, and tax evasion. The stories also mention speeding, possession of weapons, and even preparation for committing murder. Despite this, the narrators portray themselves as respectable citizens who have achieved success and now hold esteemed positions in society. They revisit their past from a position of stability and accomplishment.

Skrinjar and Pettersson (2020, p. 293) identified six recurring themes in these narratives: physical strength and potential for violence; fearlessness, risk-taking, and recklessness; innovation; rebellion against the system; responsibility; and revenge or retaliation. For example, acts of violence – such as assault or inflicting bodily harm – are often described positively, associated with youth, defending one's honor, or as unintentional outbursts of extraordinary energy, strength, and vitality. One narrator recalls: "During one of the training sessions, I lifted [my coach] and hugged him out of sheer joy. I broke two of his ribs. He could barely walk" (Skrinjar & Pettersson, 2020, p. 297). Acts involving rule-breaking – like traffic violations or theft – are often recounted with a tone of exhilaration, joy, and adrenaline. The narrators associate these moments with vitality, youth, and a zest for life:

So we ended up getting a load of the stuff for free, and of course we enjoyed that. Don't think it was about money, though. It was the buzz. It was the adrenaline. It was like when we were kids in the department store (Skrinjar & Pettersson, 2020, p. 300).

Themes of rebellion, cleverness, innovation, and defiance against the system often emerge in narratives describing acts that could be classified as fraud, economic crimes, or tax evasion. When the system is portrayed as inefficient or unjust, outsmarting it is presented not only as a natural response but also as a sign of intelligence and common sense. As one narrator puts it: "The system naturally encouraged cheating" (Skrinjar & Pettersson, 2020, p. 302).

Actions that would typically meet the criteria for criminal offenses are reframed in these stories as displays of strength, agency, courage, or ingenuity. The narrators position their criminal potential alongside intelligence, creativity, and vitality – traits they claim to have later channeled into building successful careers. They often stress that they had the opportunity to become criminals but made a deliberate choice not to. Their perspective on past events thus includes a layer of self-reflection, emphasizing their decision to stay within the boundaries of the law.

Male Dominance as a Central Element of Criminal Acts

A different portrayal of hegemonic masculinity emerges in courtroom narratives. Here, the man is cast as a dominant, powerful, aggressive, and dangerous perpetrator. Hegemonic masculinity is stripped of any glorification or justification and is instead presented as a driving force behind criminal behavior. When a male defendant is on trial, this portrayal becomes deliberate part of the prosecution's strategic approach. One example of this narrative framing can be found in the discourse surrounding the criminal trial of O.J. Simpson – a former football star accused of domestic abuse and the murder of his ex-wife and her friend (Cotterill, 2003).

During the Simpson trial, the prosecution began constructing the semantic environment of the crime, the victim, and the alleged perpetrator as early as the opening statements. Through carefully chosen vocabulary with powerful connotations, the prosecutor established a compelling narrative (Cotterill, 2003, p. 67). One excerpt that clearly expresses the prosecution's rhetorical goal states: "We will expose in this trial the face of a batterer, a wife beater, an abuser, a controller. You'll see the face of Ron, of Ron's and Nicole's murderer" (Cotterill, 2003, p. 25). From the outset, the accused was described using language tied to violence, control, power, and dominance. The prosecution emphasized the nature of Simpson's relationship with his ex-wife, evoking an atmosphere of danger, tension, and escalating violence. This was achieved through the repeated use of terms like "a cycle of violence" and the words "control" and "to control" (Cotterill, 2003, p. 78).

These rhetorical strategies emphasized the consistency, persistence, and escalating nature of the alleged abuse, which portrays the defendant as an unstable male aggressor trapped in a cycle of recurring violence. His behavior is depicted as embodying the defining traits of hegemonic masculinity – most notably, the drive for domination and control. A key statement from the prosecution encapsulates this framing: "What we are suggesting, and the evidence will show, that there was a *cycle of violence*, a *cycle of violence* and the dominant theme in their relationship and in that *cycle* and the ultimate objective was always *control*, *control*" (Cotterill, 2003, p. 78). The murder of Simpson's wife is presented as the ultimate manifestation of this hegemonic masculine impulse – an act of total control and irreversible possession. Repeated use of terms such as "*to have*," "*to kill*," "*control*," and "*to control*" throughout the courtroom narrative reinforces the deep connection between violence and hegemonic masculinity.

He killed her because he couldn't have her; and if he couldn't have her, he didn't want anybody else to have her. He killed her to *control* her. *Control* is a continuing thing. It was a continuing thing, the central focus of their entire relationship, by killing Nicole, this defendant assumed total control over her. By killing her, he committed the ultimate act of *control* (Cotterill, 2003, p. 71–72).

These narrative motifs were elaborated in the closing arguments through carefully constructed metaphors. The themes of tension, danger, and escalation were underscored by the use of the "ticking time bomb" metaphor: "This relationship between this man

and Nicole, you know, it is like the time bomb ticking away. Just a matter of time, just a matter of time before something really bad happened" (Cotterill, 2003, p. 78). The defendant is depicted as an aggressive man who, with each successive act of violence, lost more and more control. His desire to commit murder is presented as hegemonic in nature – an act inscribed into his very being – making it only a matter of time before an act of violence more severe than all previous ones would occur. This entire metaphorical construction leans heavily on the repetition of words such as "bomb," "time," "fuse," and "short," which builds an atmosphere of tension, threat, and unpredictability is built:

[...] the fuse is getting shorter, the fuse is getting shorter, and there is about to be an explosion, he is about to lose control, and he is about to lose control like he did on those earlier occasions. And sure he didn't kill her on those earlier occasions in October of '93 or in 1989. But that was then and back then the fuse was a lot longer. But now the fuse is way short and it is awfully short (Cotterill, 2003, p. 206).

The Heroic Myth as a Mitigating Circumstance

Defense narratives, as well as the personal accounts of defendants or convicted individuals themselves, often build an image of hegemonic masculinity as a mitigating circumstance or as a justification for their actions. Such narratives can influence not just the verdict itself, but also the length of the sentence, and even the chances of early release. The key themes in these narratives often revolve around heroic traits: honor, courage, the defense of the vulnerable, and revenge for wrongs inflicted on loved ones. The offender is often portrayed as someone caught up in a struggle for survival, fighting a battle, or carrying out a necessary mission, which suggests that his actions were the result of necessity or coercion.

The language used in these narratives often draws from the worlds of myth, fairy tales, or fantasy – perhaps to create a sense of distance between the man and his deeds. This way of framing a criminal act is especially visible in the personal stories shared by inmates. Donna Youngs and David V. Canter (2011) identify four major themes in the narratives of prisoners: the mission driven by revenge, the tragic hero, the professional, and the victim. The first two themes can be linked to the idea of hegemonic masculinity as a form of justification or as mitigating circumstances. The first thematic thread is illustrated by the narrative of a prisoner who committed a brutal assault. An excerpt from his story reads:

My mum had a grievance with this fella next door, he was putting pressure on her and bullying her. ... he came in. He said, "your mum is just a slut anyway." I told my friend that he was getting it, he snapped a cue in half and I put 2 snooker balls in my sock, we waited outside in my mate's car. I knew I wanted to hurt him, I was going to run at him when they came out. Whatever happened, happened. There was a scuffle on the floor and my victim tried to run away. I got up before him and hit him 5 or 6 times. I saw all the blood and stopped hitting (Youngs & Canter, 2011, p. 8).

The convicted individual intended to carry out the assault as an act of revenge and a defense of his mother's honor. He meticulously prepared and executed the plan with full premeditation. The statement, "Whatever happened, happened" reveals the narrator's emotional distance from his own actions. He portrays the events as if they occurred independently of his will, simply because they had to happen. Youngs and Canter (2011, p. 9) argue that the narrator interprets the events as the fulfillment of a larger mission, a plan orchestrated by "higher powers."

A closely related narrative theme is that of the tragic hero. Here, too, the perpetrator distances himself from the act he committed by shifting responsibility onto other people or external circumstances.

I walked into this house and was having a drink and my victim was slagging one of my mates girlfriends off. I thought "that's not right." ... so I got up and just started laying into him while he was on the chair. There are parts of the incident I just don't remember. ... I was stabbing him for an hour or so. I didn't take any weapons with me, I was not out to cause trouble, that's not my lifestyle, I try and avoid trouble. I can't remember where I got these knives from The reason I did it was just because of what he said about my mates, to let him know he just couldn't do that (Youngs & Canter, 2011, pp. 9–10).

The narrator explains that the situation he faced left him with no choice. The victim's behavior demanded precisely such a reaction – there was no other option. His actions were motivated by moral reasons ("that's not right"). Researchers point out that the narrator presents himself as a tragic hero, overwhelmed by deceitful fate (Youngs & Canter, 2011, pp. 10–11). The tragic hero has good intentions and tries to avoid trouble. He bravely faces the adversities that come his way but is aware that, no matter how hard he tries, he is ultimately doomed to a tragic outcome.

Conclusions

The image of incriminated masculinity in crime narratives is strongly inspired by the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Such narratives may serve the goals and strategies of criminal justice, such as initiating investigations, persuading jurors of a defendant's guilt or innocence, influencing mitigating circumstances, or reducing sentencing. We can identify three general narrative tendencies with forensic linguistic relevance. The first tendency frames unlawful acts as manifestations of positive masculine traits that contribute to career advancement and social success. The second represents male desires for violence, dominance, and control as central components of the criminal act. The third invokes the myth of the heroic figure to justify criminal behavior and create emotional distance between the offender and the crime.

Constructing narratives that draw on hegemonic masculinity to legitimize criminal actions or influence criminal justice outcomes raises important questions about the social harm of such practices. In the process of educating boys and young men about

masculinity, it seems increasingly necessary to emphasize the value of lawfulness and respect for the law.

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