Cooperation in Criminal Organizations: Kinship and Violence as Credible Commitments

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“Everybody is playing the same bullshit game, trying to keep as much as they can, pass along as little as they can get away with, regardless of what the rules say. They always fudge. [...] That’s why nobody totally trusts anybody” (Pistone and Woodley 1997: 79)
If the authorities seize some drugs without telling anybody, “this will throw the criminal groups into chaos. Nobody will believe the others’ word, their vindications, and everybody will accuse the other fellow members of embezzling the good and not keeping to the agreements” (Arlacchi 1994: 89)

Our puzzle...

*How are criminals motivated to cooperate with one another in the absence of trust and law?*

*What are the mechanisms underpinning cooperation?*
Credible commitments

Informal yet credible commitments increase the likelihood of cooperation and establish reliability (Williamson 1983; Cook, Hardin, Levi 2005)

Credible commitment: increases the cost of pursuing the undesirable course of action, thus making it less likely to happen.

How can we make a given commitment a credible one in the absence of law and trust?

Hostage taking

- Taking hostages to guarantee promises
- The British monarchy and parliament resort to this strategy to protect the safety of the sovereigns when they are to travel to the parliament to deliver their annual speech

Hostage-taking strategies are used by criminals to establish credible commitments.

We identified two specific devices:
- violence
- kinship
**Violence**

Violence is a constitutive element of Mafia-like organisations.

As a by-product, it also conveys information, which can be used against the actor who has committed such acts.

Because of its intrinsic potential for damage, information can also be employed as a hostage in establishing a credible commitment (Gambetta 2009).

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**Kinship**

Kinship provides cheaper information about the identity and whereabouts of the members’ relatives → form of hostage-taking.

The relatives are in effect hostages of the organisation.

In case of defection, the organisation will easily be able to punish the defector’s most immediate relatives

→ Kinship: increases the cost of defection
Just to recap...

Shared information and shared kinship about violent acts can serve to establish a credible commitment among two or more parties, and as a consequence foster cooperation among them.

We now test two related propositions:

1. The likelihood of cooperation is higher among members who have shared information about violent acts.

2. The likelihood of cooperation is higher among members who are kin-related.

The Data
Two unique datasets on the actual behaviour of criminals involved in two Mafia-like organizations:

1. A Neapolitan Camorra clan based some 50 kilometres north of Naples (Southern Italy) with outposts in Scotland and the Netherlands.

2. A Russian Mafia group operating in Rome in the Nineties.

On the Camorra Group:


On the Russian Group:


Methodological Issues (Coding, Validity, Techniques):
Source of data

Transcripts of phone conversations wiretapped by the police during their investigation

Camorra: 7-month listening between 1998 – 1999

Russian Mafia: 9-month listening between 1996-1997

We supplemented and triangulated our main sources with other court documents, interviews with key informants and open-access data.

Coding procedure

Systematic content analysis (manual coding):

Who was in contact with whom within each group to discuss what, where and when

→ MATRIX Contacts BY Attributes

Characteristics of each contact include: date, place, whether violence was mentioned, tasks (more on this in a bit!)

→ MATRIX Actor BY Attributes

Characteristics of each actors include: gender, nationality, the presence of a blood tie with the boss (core kinship) or any other member of the group (kinship extended)
Coding procedure

Russian Mafia dataset (Varese 2012a,b):
758 contacts and 164 actors
Core group (members): 22 individuals and 295 contacts

Neapolitan Camorra dataset (Campana 2011a):
202 actors and 1,824 contacts
Core groups (members): 51 individuals and 1,370 contacts

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the Camorra clan and the Russian Mafia group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Neapolitan Camorra Clan</th>
<th>Russian Mafia Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td><strong>%</strong></td>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actors</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinship</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinship (extended)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality: Russian</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality: Italian</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Contacts Exchanged</td>
<td>1,370</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The QAP Analysis

QAP Procedure

Network data: problem of non-independence of observations

Quadratic Assignment Procedure (QAP): permutation-based nonparametric test of the dependence between two square matrices of the same size (Dekker, Krackhardt, Snijders 2007; Mantel 1967; Hubert 1985; 1987; Krackhardt 1987, 1988);

Multivariate version of the QAP procedure (MRQAP): assesses the association between two variables X and Y, controlling for other variables Z, -- the approach is very similar to multiple linear regression (Dekker, Krackhardt, Snijders 2007)

For our analysis we used the Double Dekker Semi-Partialing MRQAP procedure
Measuring Cooperation
(a.k.a. the Dependent Variable)

Number of contacts exchanged by two members of a given group → proxy for cooperation

The more contacts two members exchange, the higher the degree of cooperation between co-offenders

The dependent variable is a network matrix: actor BY actor with the number of contacts exchanged in each cell

Independent variables

A number of dichotomous network matrices:

- Matrix recording whether two actors have shared some information about violent acts;
- Matrix recording whether two actors share a kinship tie

We also controlled for the effect of sharing the same task

For Russian Mafia group we also controlled for the nationality of the actors.
Table 2. QAP regression on all contacts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1 (Russian Mafia)</th>
<th>Model 2 (Camorra)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dependent variable</td>
<td>All Contacts (ln)</td>
<td>All Contacts (ln)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinship</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>0.091 ** (0.072)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinship (extended)</td>
<td>0.313 *** (0.182)</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>0.600*** (0.228)</td>
<td>0.503 *** (0.171)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>-0.070 (0.121)</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task ‘Group Management’</td>
<td>0.043 (0.248)</td>
<td>0.080 ** (0.072)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task ‘Resource Acquisition’</td>
<td>0.034 (0.126)</td>
<td>0.218 *** (0.071)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task ‘Economy’</td>
<td>0.001 (0.002)</td>
<td>0.104 *** (0.055)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task ‘Protection Activities’</td>
<td>0.193 *** (0.175)</td>
<td>0.082 ** (0.066)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adj R-Square</td>
<td>0.524</td>
<td>0.432</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model probability</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Standardised coefficients. Standard errors in brackets. *** significant at 0.01 level; ** significant at 0.05 level; * significant at 0.1 level.

Test if violence (and kinship) affects tie-formation also in relation to tasks that do not require the use of violence

Thanks to the coding procedure we developed, we know the reason behind each contact (in our model: task).

**New model:** “violence-free tasks” only (RA + E) – tasks that not require the use of violence to be successfully performed

Dependent variable: number of contacts exchanged in relation to «violence-free» tasks only
### Table 3. QAP regression on contacts related to Task Resource Acquisition and Task Economy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Model 1 (Russian Mafia)</th>
<th>Model 2 (Camorra)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dependent variable</td>
<td>Only Task RA and Task E contacts (ln)</td>
<td>Only Task RA and Task E-leg contacts (ln)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinship</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>0.052* (0.036)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinship (extended)</td>
<td>0.310 *** (0.176)</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>-0.044 (0.108)</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>0.451 *** (0.195)</td>
<td>0.481 *** (0.094)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adj R-Square</td>
<td>0.296</td>
<td>0.239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model probability</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Standardised coefficients. Standard errors in brackets. *** significant at 0.01 level; ** significant at 0.05 level; * significant at 0.1 level.

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### More on violence...

“Murders that could be taken care of by one or two men were instead carried out by all his [Augusto La Torre’s] most trusted legionnaires, who were usually expected to fire at least one shot, even if the person was already dead. One for all and all for one. Augusto required full participation, even when it was superfluous” (Saviano 2007: 273)

→ Saviano (2007): savageness, the decision of a man “intoxicated” by his imperial name; a sign of his madness.

→ Each member was made ‘a hostage’ to all the others (violence as hostage-taking)
Conclusions

• Trust among criminals is low and possibly lower than among law-abiding members of society. And yet illegal transactions take place.

• Several options to establish credible commitments and thus increase cooperation among criminals are indeed available in the absence of law and trust (third-party enforcing; cutting-off options; hostage-taking).

• Both sharing information about violence and kinship may act as hostage-taking strategies, and thus foster cooperation among law-breakers.
• We tested our predictions using novel evidence on Mafia organizations and concluded that the likelihood of cooperation is higher among members who have shared information about violent acts.

• Violence has a stronger effect than kinship in predicting tie formation and thus cooperation – (a) even when it comes to “violence-free” criminal activities; (b) even in clans made of relatives.

• Kinship still remains a viable device to foster cooperation among criminals, but when other mechanisms not based on kinship do exist, criminal groups are more likely to resort to them.

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