

The cultural persona as nexus between structural marginalization and youth risk behavior

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Abstract

Structural marginalization exerts its effects through multiple social-ecological levels down to the individual behavior of youth violence and related risks. However, there is very little research or theoretical literature documenting or specifying mechanisms, paths, and linkages across levels. This paper traces one path in which long-term structural constraints intersect with the adolescent development process via a construct called the *cultural persona*—a form of archetype or model that embodies the value-structure, role, and performance of violence and related risk behavior within the kinds of underground or street economies that develop and persist in high-poverty communities as an outcome of structural marginalization. This mechanism is described, together with its limitations, along with examples and recommendations for interventions and further research.

1 | INTRODUCTION

While the linkages between structural marginalization and youth violence are complex and involve a progression from distal through more proximal social-ecological levels, very little research or theoretical literature has sought to document or specify causal paths and linkages across levels. In part, this is because such research is difficult and requires longitudinal studies that encompass multiple domains, and because the theory itself is inconsistent. With the goal of contributing to the theoretical gap, this paper outlines one unique theoretical mechanism through which

long-term structural constraints and their impact at the community level can intersect with the adolescent development process and increase the likelihood of violent behavior as well as proviolence attitudes. The mechanism involves a construct called the *cultural persona*—a form of archetype or model that can generally operate as a cultural replicator, though in this case embodying the value-structure, role and performance of violence and related risk behavior that may be prevalent in high-poverty communities where, as an outcome of structural marginalization, underground or “street economies” have evolved. It is important to acknowledge at the outset that the presence and awareness of such personas (current and past) is hypothesized as an important part of the socio-cultural environment influencing the identity development process, and thus behavior, for any adolescent. In this paper, however, the focus is on cultural personas that may shape understandings and behavior related to violence for adolescents in high-risk, marginalized settings, as well as community and peer social norms supporting that violence.

Structural marginalization as a causal factor is understood here to be multidimensional, including, *inter alia*, the coexistence of concentrated and sustained poverty, limited and unequal economic opportunity, limited and unequal access to education and resources, and the intersectionality of racial/ethnic discrimination as well as other forms of social exclusion associated with these factors. A recent effort to assess research linking just macroeconomic factors to youth violence outcomes (M. Edberg, Yeide, & Rosenfeld, 2010; Rosenfeld, Edberg, Fang, & Florence, 2013) proposed an analytic framework that included both a temporal dimension (long-term vs. short-term economic factors and their impacts) as well as a matrix of social, psychosocial, cultural, and economic mediating domains through which the impacts of macroeconomic factors are manifested. These mediating factors were organized into domains of family, schools, community resources and social spending, and street markets. The working hypothesis was that any given macroeconomic factor produces a number of pathways or *trajectories* of impact through these domains and that the ultimate impact on youth violence is an outcome of the ways in which the economic conditions are filtered, shaped, mediated, and moderated through these domains. The report concluded that there was very little research following such trajectories, that most of the extant research addressing broad structural and economic factors was cross-sectional, and that the bulk of the research, and interventions, focused on the more proximal connections between, for example, family factors or school conditions and youth violence outcomes.

Acknowledging that not all youth violence is an outcome of macroeconomic factors, the report concluded that long-term macroeconomic phenomena, operating through distal and proximal mediating domains, “can create conditions that increase the likelihood that youth will engage in violence.” Such factors “have been associated with environmental stress in multiple domains, including families, schools, community resources, and in the community itself where [illegal] street markets and gangs are much more likely to be a feature of the social landscape. The stress disrupts and undermines the integrated social institutions involved in healthy social development”; thus, “when poverty is a long-term neighborhood condition, its collateral damage can be profound.”

Profound indeed. While overall homicide rates have dropped in recent years, youth violence has remained persistent and even spiked upward in some areas. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2018), homicide is the third leading cause of death for young people ages 10–24. Each day, some 1,400 young people are treated in hospital emergency rooms for nonfatal assault-related injuries. Moreover, it is not just a problem for the United States. Back in 2002, the World Health Organization (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002) recognized this as a global problem, noting that interpersonal violence among young people age 15–29 accounted for 36.2% of the total mortality reported by WHO in that year. The severe violence in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala that is driving families northward is largely youth violence as well, primarily fueled by two gangs, MS-13 and Calle 18 (Bishop, 2016; Franco, 2010). These and other data beg the question that has, for some time, generated a plethora of explanations and models: Why, of all age groups, is it youth who are so highly represented in violence data?

To be clear, youth violence is an inequitable phenomenon. Not all youth are equally involved or victimized. Despite all the horrific high-profile school shootings that have occurred in recent years in suburban areas not previously known for high rates of violence, the more persistent, long-term prevalence of youth violence occurs

largely in urban or close-suburban communities characterized by high poverty and multiple health risks. This is the day-to-day violence that does not make the news, with a few occasional exceptions. Importantly, however, youth (and adult) violence have also been occurring more in rural communities in ways that mirror urban settings, particularly where long-term poverty intersects with emerging volatile markets for illegal drugs, including methamphetamine, and more recently opioids and fentanyl (see Rosenfeld, quoted in Lopez, 2018).

This paper presents a particular kind of link between structural marginalization and youth violence. This link is especially salient because the issue is *youth* violence, where most of those involved are adolescents or young adults. While the risk and protective factor and other longstanding etiological literatures effectively highlight key exposures associated with youth violence, they do not address the internality and subjectivity of how such circumstances are synthesized by youth who come of age under these conditions, and how that, in turn, shapes the ways in which violence (and other risk behavior) is conceptualized, represented, and enacted by youth in marginalized communities where the options for pursuing an identity, a self, are so curtailed. The construct of a cultural persona as outlined herein is intended to help fill that gap. To elucidate the construct and its potential outcomes, the sections that follow will: (a) review the identity formation process in adolescents; (b) focus on how that process is vectored by the social environment of a street market in a high-poverty community context; (c) describe the role of cultural personas in mediating the link between structural marginalization, identity formation, and violent behavior outcomes in that context; and (d) comment on applied implications of this mechanism and theoretical construct. For purposes of this paper, street markets will be defined as “social spaces, typically within an urban context, centered around the distribution and public sale of illegal goods – drugs, stolen merchandise, and other goods” (M. Edberg & Bourgois 2013, p. 183).

2 | ADOLESCENCE AND “BECOMING A SELF”

The crux of this issue is that adolescents are typically engaged, as a developmental stage, in querying and shaping their identity (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966, 1980), or stated in other terms, *assembling a self*. Part of this process, per Erikson, involves “connecting the roles and skills cultivated earlier with the ideal prototypes of the day” (Erikson, 1968, p. 128). That concept of “ideal prototypes” is an important construct in the identity-risk behavior association, since, by nature “ideal prototypes” are public and thus sociocultural phenomena to which value is assigned, and the prototypes are thus available for appropriation in a dialogic process between individual experience and collective representation (Bakhtin, 1981; Battaglia, 1995; Holland et al., 1998). The assigning of social value to behavior occurs by definition in social environments where meaning is shared, in part through the way specific behaviors are *represented* (see, e.g., Geertz, 1983; Sperber, 1996). These representations form at least one important source of identity development, as they are the available semantic material from which individuals build their self-concept—for example, standards and processes by which individuals become full persons, gendered persons, admired persons, and so forth (see Carrithers, Collins, & Lukes, 1985; Leenhardt, 1979; Marsella, DeVos, & Hsu, 1985). Erikson (1968) called such material the “resources of identity.”

The social process of becoming a self also involves the day-to-day *performance* of the “represented self” (Goffman, 1959). Among other objectives, that performance involves *managing the information* others have about you—a process of impression management in which the sociocultural environment provides the stages, scripts, characters/personas, and backdrop for the task. Individuals constantly use this (social, cultural) material to create selves or identities, and in doing so must signal to others what identity is being presented. In addition, the individual needs to *validate* the identity by follow-up actions that are in keeping with the identity so claimed. For youth violence, this dynamic is well-described by Anderson (1992b, 1997; Fagan and Wilkinson (1998); Sandberg (2009a, 2009b); and Wilkinson (2004) in terms of performance of self within the code of the street, and within a set of opposing and value-laden identities—for example, the highly valued “tough” or “wild” identity versus the devalued “punk” and “herb” identities (Wilkinson, 2004).

Moreover, forming an identity during adolescence is both *externally and internally represented*. The construct of *self-concept* is useful here as a lens for understanding the ways in which an internally represented identity can be associated with clusterings of risk behavior, where *self-concept* is defined as an internal mechanism that provides the “incentives, standards, plans, rules and scripts for behavior,” and adjusts “in response to challenges from the social environment (Markus & Wurf, 1987, pp. 299–300). Importantly, Markus and Nurius (1986) propose that an individual's inventory of self-representations includes *possible selves*—that is, representations of selves that could be, should be, are not desirable, and so forth, or that represent past, current or future selves. These, according to Markus & Nurius (1986), serve as incentives or motivation for behavior. If, as noted, a key task of adolescence is to experiment to resolve the identity/social role dilemma (Erikson, 1968), then the “possible selves” element of the self-concept is highly salient, because adolescents can construct possible selves in “conventional domains” supporting positive behavioral outcomes, or if this does not occur, adolescents may seek alternative ways to self-define (Oyserman & Markus, 1990), including violence and risk, if these are supported within the social context (Erikson, 1968; Hirschi, 1969; Oyserman & Packer, 1996; Sutherland & Cressey, 1978). Drawing from the theories of Ogbu (1991) and Bourdieu (1977, 1990) among others (Devine, 1996; Fordham, 1993, 1996), in high-poverty situations traditional or socially positive trajectories that include academic success, for example, may not be perceived as significant or relevant to available life-paths, and may, therefore, have little social value, either in an instrumental sense or in terms of social recognition. (This does not mean that more positive trajectories are absent in the local imaginary, but that they may be pushed aside or subordinated. During interviews, the author has heard youth in high-risk settings describe such positive trajectories, while simultaneously expressing little knowledge about how to enact them, and generally not connecting them to the real world in which they lived.) Thus, extensive involvement in violence and other risk behavior by adolescents is likely to be consistent with the construction and performance of a “risky self” (or “delinquent self” or “violent self,” etc.) as this is understood within a particular high-risk social context in which they enact it. As explained below, that understanding is facilitated by the “cognitive and behavioral shortcut” of a cultural persona.

The performance of a self has multiple dimensions, including *encoding one's actions* so that they are consistent with that identity. Encoding occurs in the actions taken—the violence itself, and specific symbolic aspects of its presentation, which have included tattooing, hair and clothing styles, physical gestures such as holding a gun sideways, and facial expressions (for stark images, see the documentary film released in 2008 called “Crips and Bloods: Made in America,” by Stacy Peralta, narrated by Forest Whitaker). The symbolic aspects of violence, together with the acts themselves, are part of the performance—creating a narrative that has meaning and resonates with other adolescents in terms of establishing and validating a socially valued identity.

The stories told about one's own conduct and persona enter into a public space in which that narrative is evaluated against the existing models and narratives that are salient within a sociocultural context (neighborhood, community). For youth, these will also articulate with the content of social media, YouTube, music, and a range of cyber-representations, as well as localized, interpersonal discourse. The narrative process involved in performing and representing a violent or risky identity is a key part of the linkage between individual identity development and a social context. The power of such narrative processes in self-formation has been well-recognized in both anthropological and psychological theories of the self (see, for, example, Bruner, 1986; Budwig & Wiley, 1995; McAdams & McLean, 2013; P. J. Miller, Mintz, Hoogstra, Fung, & Potts, 1992; Mintz, 1995; Ochs & Capps, 1996; Sperry & Sperry, 1995).

3 | BECOMING A SELF IN A STREET MARKET CONTEXT

Adolescents in high poverty, marginalized settings face unique challenges in shaping identity. As noted in a previous publication, “the compelling nature of street market conditions in concentrated poverty communities, as a social ecology, exerts a particular effect at the time adolescents are in a key phase of development—thus, compounding

the effect by linking the “imperatives of the street” to the development of personal identity” (M. Edberg & Bourgois 2013, p. 189). Street markets themselves become a unique, integrative social formation that *generates* identities connected to violence-supportive rationales, motivations, and behavior as one holistic process distinct from the impact of exposure to identified risk or protective factors that may have preceded involvement in such contexts—a quality referred to in this paper as *generative*. Street markets, and the public representations associated with them, are an identity incubator that is powerful at the same time adolescents are vulnerable.

The dynamics of street markets as a specific marginalized setting draw from Wilson's general thesis concerning the history and persistence of “underclass” communities (Sampson & Wilson, 1995; W. J. Wilson, 1987) at a macrolevel, as well as from microlevel research by Elijah Anderson and others on “codes of the street” and their origin (Anderson, 1992a, 1992b, 1997, 2000; Stewart & Simons, 2006). These largely urban settings are outcomes of a historical trajectory in which economic opportunities are highly limited, coupled with long-term disconnection from mainstream economic activity. To fill the gap, drug selling and other informal—often illegal—economic activities form the basis of a “street economy” which in turn undergirds a sociocultural tableau that is the dominant playing-field for achievement, material gain, and status (see also Bourgois, 1989, 1996; M. Edberg, 1998, 2007a; M. Edberg & Bourgois 2013; Fagan, 1992; Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998), and consequently for the development and perpetuation of norms and attitudes about violence. In previous research, violent offenders have described the role of violence, especially gun violence, in negotiating personal status within such settings (Bourgois, 1997; Katz, 1988; Wilkinson, 2004).

There are other factors that interact with this process. One is gender—these kinds of street market identities are still largely male-gendered (Messerschmidt, 1993, 1997), though they interact with female roles in the same settings (J. Miller & Decker, 2001). The presence of gangs adds another dimension and a potential source of identity, even amplifying the role of violence (see Vigil, 2007). The manifestation of structural inequality is even more acute when considering race as a factor. There is ample documented evidence (e.g., see Wilkinson, Beaty, & Lurry, 2009, as well as the public discourse that has followed the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson and the ensuing Black Lives Matter movement continuing to the present protests), for example, of the widespread view among African-American youth that it is not possible to seek justice from police for violent crime they have experienced, because police do not respect or care about them. As a result, they are on their own to take care of justice against violations, and their own personal reputations are tied up in their willingness and ability to do so—potentially through the use of violence. Violence in this sense may be understood as a form of “self-help” and social control when few other resources are present (Black, 1983; Cannon & Wilkinson, 2007). This view is likely shared by youth in Latino and other communities of color as well.

These kinds of adolescent identities also occur across ethnic/cultural groups in the U.S. and abroad. The street identities just referred to are remarkably similar to the requirements for a personal reputation within the “reputation vs respectability” identity continuum first identified by P. J. Wilson (1973) in the Caribbean and amplified by Whitehead (1992) and Whitehead, Peterson, and Kaljee (1994) as a framework for understanding male-gendered risk behavior in a context of historical and structural constraints. Chong et al. (2009) documented similar circumstances and street codes among young Southeast Asian adolescents (ages 13–17) in the San Francisco bay area, shaped by a social context of alienation and discrimination. Moreover, while the street code literature has focused on young males, ethnographic work by Jones (2008) among inner-city young women found a similar pattern of organizing their social world around three key elements of the code; reputation, respect, and retaliation (also see J. Miller, 2001; J. Miller & Decker, 2001). Research in Oslo, Norway (Sandberg 2009a, 2009b) highlights two discursive modes of self-presentation among minority drug dealers, one of which presents the narrator as “hard, smart and sexually alluring” and is the dominant discourse on the street, used to gain respect (“gangster discourse”).

Finally, high-poverty, high-violence communities have a powerful impact on adolescent constructions of risk. A belief that there is a limited future in such high-risk settings changes the interpretation of risk, such that the benefits of immediate or short-term social recognition and the resources that may accompany that recognition outweigh concerns over incarceration, injury, or death. This interaction between perceived future and risk perception has been documented with respect to multiple health issues (M. Edberg, 2004a, 2007a; M. Edberg &

Bourgeois 2013; Weintraub, Fernald, Adler, Bertozzi, & Syme, 2015). And for youth in marginalized communities with street markets, carrying a gun can be significantly associated with a self-appraised probability of being alive at age 25 (DuRant et al., 1995). It is a protective factor in a world of threat.

4 | THE CULTURAL PERSONA AS BEHAVIORAL MEDIATOR

The adolescent identity formation process, including as it does a scan of the surrounding context for material, will very likely incorporate a specific kind of “shortcut” that offers a multidimensional guide for how to enact and represent a particular identity—whether that identity is embedded in a marginalized context or one associated with wealth and social power. This shortcut involves referential interaction with one or more cultural personas. Note that a cultural persona as used here is different, for example, than a Jungian archetype (Jung, 1969). It is closer to what cognitive anthropologist Bradd Shore refers to as a “person exemplar” (1996, p. 65), and can be defined as a culturally shaped, flexible public representation that persists over time, and is embodied as a person and iterations of that person (M. Edberg, 2004b). The unique feature of such a model is that it serves as both a bundle of meanings *and* as a prototype for how to act out those meanings in practice. Thus, it is not just a cognitive category or type, nor is it a “social model” as proposed in Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986, 2001) because in enacting the persona one is, to varying degrees, representing a stance within a particular context of meaning or “figured world” (Holland et al., 1998) by virtue of the meanings and propositions embodied in the persona. By contrast, a social model is defined primarily in terms of its function as an example from which to learn behavior via observation of the rewards and/or negative consequences resulting from the model’s actions. Finally, *cultural personas are not stereotypes*. A stereotype is typically an externally generated (by those external to a given group) and selectively abstracted depiction of people from some identified group and/or their behaviors that is often used for derogatory or discriminatory purposes. Stereotypes are instrumental in defining differences. Cultural personas, by contrast, are *internally generated*, from meanings and constraints germane to the lives of people who share histories and contexts. As described herein, they are representations tied to context, they evolve, and they are tools used in the formation of identity.

Table 1 shows the relationship between related constructs about the self and the construct of a cultural persona.

Importantly, the subjective meaning(s) tied to cultural personas are often shaped by social position, whether based on class, gender, a constructed “racial” or ethnic category, national identity, geographic identity, virtual identity, or imagined community. They are also shaped by cultural history, embodying attitudes, dispositions, and what Bourdieu refers to as a “bodily hexis” (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). For adolescents in search of an identity, cultural personas thus link social context, a set of values, attitudes, and even a worldview, to actions—providing a ready guide for “how to be” that persona. In the street market setting, the relevant personas are concrete and visible, as are the fruits of their actions, in terms of money, reputation, power, efficacy, and access to goods. Figure 1 is a general schematic of the process described.

The following are several examples of cultural personas from research by the author, as well as other work, that are linked by their characteristics to violence, substance use, and other risk behavior. These selected personas are intended to illustrate the kinds of personas that can and do evolve in specific, structurally marginalized settings. This is by no means an inventory of all possible personas known to individuals in such settings, and should in no way be interpreted as representative of any ethnic or social group in general.

4.1 | The narco-trafficker as a persona

Whether referring to Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman, Amado Carrillo Fuentes, or other narco-traffickers current and past in a Mexican border context and beyond, the narco-trafficker is clearly a cultural persona that exerts some

TABLE 1 Cultural persona and related constructs in social psychology and anthropology

Archetype (Jung, 1969)	Modes of being, patterns, or forms that exist in the collective unconscious (and thus universal to all humans), which can take form as universal types of beings, such as mother or trickster.
Ideal prototype (Erikson, 1968)	Definition not fully clarified, but generally referring to categories of people in a developing adolescent's social world (e.g., father, mother), including vocational categories of people, and their ideal characteristics.
Possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986)	Representations (from the social context) of selves that could be, should be, are not desirable, and so forth, or that represent past, current, or future selves.
Social model (Bandura, 1986)	People in the social world of an individual from whom the individual learns, through observation, behavior, and the consequences of that behavior—a process called vicarious learning.
Person exemplar (Shore, 1996)	If exemplars, in general, are “culturally salient instances of objects, people or events’ (Shore 1998, pp. 64–65), they can take form as object exemplars, person exemplars, event exemplars, and narrative exemplars, where person exemplars are classifications of significant others in a social world, as ideal types or prototypes, sometimes modeled in stories or verbal tropes.
Cultural persona (e.g., M. Edberg 2004a, 2004b; M. Edberg & Bourgois 2013)	A culturally shaped, flexible public representation that persists over time, and is embodied as a person and iterations of that person. The unique feature of such a model is that it serves as both a <i>bundle of meanings</i> and as a <i>prototype for how to act out those meanings in practice</i> . Thus, it is not just a cognitive construct but a bridge between cognition, the sociocultural world (meanings, values), and action.

influence on youth involvement in risk behavior. The cultural framing of narcotraffickers has occurred by various means, among them a controversial pop-song genre called the *narcocorrido*—narratives about drug traffickers, who are often represented as models, admired persons, or *social bandits* (see Hobsbawm, 1969). This is accomplished because the songs are in the form of *corridos*, historically thick, value-laden border ballads that made their debut recounting epic tales of folk heroes who resisted the Texas Rangers, American authorities, or in some cases even Mexican government authorities (Herrera-Sobek, 1993; Paredes, 1993, 1958). Historically, corridos were tales of ordinary people who, reacting to injustice or unfair circumstances, rose to heroic status through their exploits or their outsized ability to overcome overwhelming odds. Violence and tragedy were often part of these narratives. While popular interpretations of narcocorridos still draw from the border context of historical corridos, the references have changed (see M. Edberg, 2004a). Still, the narcotrafficker persona clearly trades on the *situated* corrido hero; narcocorridos are most popular among rural, working-class, and migrant populations on or near the border area, though that popularity has extended to Central and Latin America, as well as significant areas across the United States (especially for such well-known groups as Los Tigres del Norte, Los Tucanes de Tijuana, Valentin Elizalde, Chalino Sanchez, or El Komander). Like some “gangsta rap,” early reggae, and recent Bollywood representations of Indian bandits, narcocorridos often describe the situations and exploits of people portrayed in some manner as outlaw heroes, or *social bandits*. The fact that these songs are in corrido form has significance with

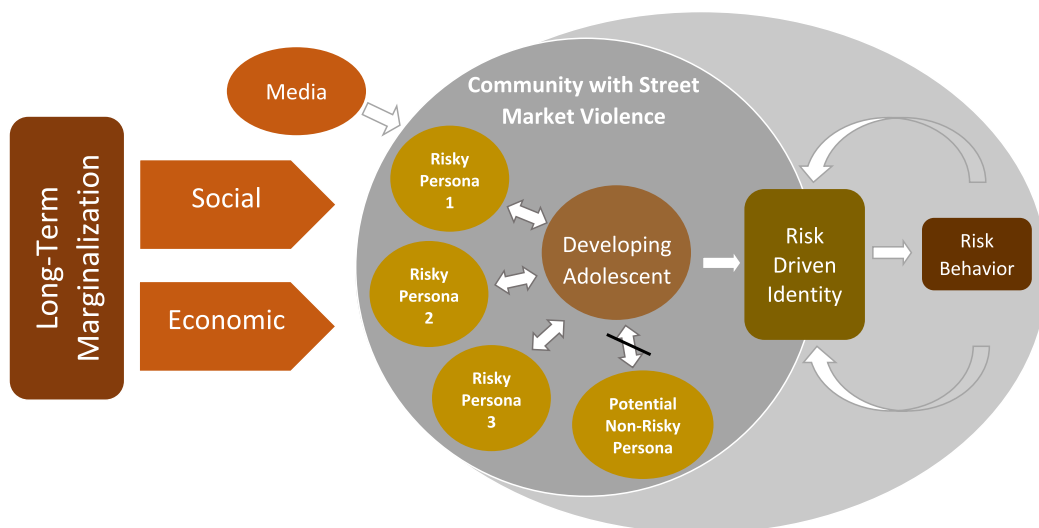


FIGURE 1 The cultural persona as behavioral mediator between structural marginalization and youth violence

respect to their meaning and the meaning of the narcotrafficker persona they feature, even as that persona has been appropriated and commodified through mass marketing.

In an ethnographic study conducted in the U.S.–Mexico border region—primarily in high-poverty urban areas such as Ciudad Juárez—investigating perceptions of the “narcotrafficker image” as portrayed in popular media (M. Edberg 2001, 2004a, 2004b), many youth in focus groups and interviews expressed a desire to have corridos written and sung about them, like the songs sung about the exploits of popular narcotraffickers. That desire was not deterred by the prominence of violence and other risk behaviors. By contrast, the violence and other risks foregrounded in these narratives were actually the key to understanding a social context in which the narcotrafficker-protagonists were positioned as individuals who *stood out*, who *possessed something special*. As explained in these interviews and focus groups, risk, even risk of death, was viewed as “the currency that could elevate a youth who lived in the dusty squalor of the border colonias into a kind of pantheon of the notable, to be among those who ‘made a dent in the cosmos,’ so to speak, and were recognized for doing so—something that regular life in the colonias was not likely to offer. Even if the end-result was death, the attainment of any notoriety was perceived as better than the poverty, facelessness and lack of respect they expected otherwise” (M. Edberg & Bourgeois 2013, p. 190). Thus prevalent understandings about violence and related risk were inseparable from the context that generated them, and the narratives were motivators and meaningful structuring agents for action.

As narrative structures, corridos, and narcocorridos linked behavior and meaning as a *semiotics of self*. While no one in any interview directly attributed their actions or activities to narcocorridos per se, they clearly provided sociocultural material through which an individual could personify the values represented. This is also translated into clothes, body language, a physical presentation of self (Bourdieu’s “bodily hexis”), an attitude toward death and risk, a preoccupation with projecting power and importance, and other ways in which the identity is articulated with daily life in the high-poverty, and high-risk, border setting. Narcocorrido narratives provided ample detail on risk behavior including violence, drug use, drug selling, and sexual risk—presented as aspects of the life led by narcotraffickers. While clearly a life full of danger, treachery, and tragedy, it is also presented as a life lived from a position of power, flaunting the structural restrictions based on class, race/ethnicity, or even national identity. These images had a considerable though complex resonance for people who tended to be poor and otherwise shut out of the traditional gamut of powerful and esteemed social roles.

Enacting the narco trafficker persona (at the time of the research described above)

The “look”—for example, the expensive boots, silk shirt, western hat, cellphones, jewelry, bodyguards, truck, symbolic weapons such as the AK-47 (known popularly as a “cuerno de chivo” or horn of the goat), multiple, beautiful girlfriends (for males), an amulet worn around the neck to honor the narco trafficker saint, Jesus Malverde.

The “attitude”—for example, willingness to show one's wealth and in some cases to spread it around (including to the community), willingness/eagerness to take risks, ruthlessness, use of symbolic violence, contempt, and boasting vis-a-vis enemies/rivals, *joie de vivre*, demand for loyalty while expecting treachery.

4.2 | The celebrity drug dealer, Rayful Edmond III

As an instantiation of another, though related, cultural persona linked to violence and risk behavior within a specific context, Edmond was a notorious urban street drug dealer in Washington, DC, during the 1980s/early 1990s who played a significant role in the crack cocaine epidemic in the city, and became something of a celebrity, known to then—DC mayor Marion Barry, a friend to several players on the Georgetown University basketball team, and later material for rap songs by Jay Z, Rick Ross, and Westside Gunn. He was also the subject of a documentary film, and was featured on an episode of the television show *American Gangster*. According to some sources (BET, 2010; Ferranti, 2013; Williams, 1990), he was said to have been fabulously wealthy, selling \$300 million in 1 year, and his organization employed 150 people—though it was also responsible for 30 homicides. According to one profile, “by 1986, when he was 22, Edmond was running a multimillion-dollar cocaine operation, and his lifestyle was in keeping with the job. He would jet to Las Vegas for a Sugar Ray Leonard fight, or he'd take a limo to Atlantic City for Mike Tyson's fights or to New York for shopping sprees at Trump Plaza and Gucci. In his time he sported a \$45,000 diamond-covered Rolex on his wrist, a 3-carat diamond stud in his ear and a \$15,000 diamond-covered cross around his neck. He was notorious for giving the kids in his M Street NE neighborhood \$100 bills and for taking friends shopping at pricey boutiques in Georgetown. One day he and a friend walked into Hugo Boss, the clothing store, and spent \$25,000” (Williams, 1990). In addition to a Porsche, he is said to have owned a Jaguar convertible with gold-inlaid hubcaps and a white Range Rover four-wheel-drive vehicle. He was eventually arrested and sentenced to multiple life terms following a nationally covered trial, though he infamously continued to deal drugs from prison (working with the Colombian Medellin cartel) until he was rearrested again. Yet he was clearly a mythical figure in some way, who was generous to his community, liked by many, and a provider in what was otherwise a harsh, poor neighborhood. There were multiple “street stories” that circulated about him, and it is highly likely that he was viewed by some youth in neighborhoods in Northeast DC as well as other areas as the image of the kind of urban drug trafficker persona described by Whitehead et al (1994) and others.

4.3 | Social bandit and oppositional personas across cultures

Both the personas described above share some similarities to what Hobsbawm (1969) called the *social bandit*, a particular kind of persona that appears across multiple cultures, and is defined as a product of structural marginalization. The compelling nature of such oppositional characters who arise from conditions of poverty and exclusion, whether caricatured, exploited or not, has broad appeal. Woody Guthrie extolled the virtues of a depression-era outlaw in his ballad about Oklahoma gangster Pretty Boy Floyd¹ (also see M. Edberg, 2004a). The

¹“Pretty Boy Floyd” as written by Woody Guthrie. Lyrics © BMG RIGHTS MANAGEMENT US, LLC, Warner/Chappell Music, Inc.

outlaw motorcycle gang persona (e.g., Ralph “Sonny” Barger of Hell’s Angels fame), representing untrammelled freedom, is another recurring persona, in the U.S., Canada, Europe, and even in Thailand (see Barger, 2005). Veerappan, the Indian social bandit and “Robin Hood,” was only captured after 30 years of eluding the police (with ample help from people in his home territory, the Sathyamangalam forest in South Central India, in the state of Tamil Nadu). He was reputed to have been motivated in part by revenge against police and other authorities for their treatment of the local population, and his character has been featured in movies, songs, ringtones, and more. Like narcotraffickers, he had significant influence on local government officials, through bribes, through regular communication, and at times through threats. Similarly, as a genre, reggae, particularly early reggae, is full of tales about Jamaicans from marginalized, high-poverty areas like Trenchtown in Kingston, who ran against the law, or in the case of Bob Marley’s famous “I Shot the Sheriff,” who engaged in violence against the police as a result of unjust treatment highly reminiscent of the early Mexican corrido “El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez.” Some early gangsta rap (e.g., Ice T, Public Enemy) combined political critique and the discourse of hard-core urban life, before the genre was overwhelmed by marketing considerations. No doubt similar personas have arisen and appear in popular representations connected to other instances of structural marginalization and opposition as well.

5 | LIMITATIONS AND CAUTIONARY NOTES ON THE CONSTRUCT

In addition to what has already been stated, it is important to acknowledge other limitations and caveats regarding the role of the cultural persona in shaping adolescent identity and violent behavior within a high-poverty, street market context that is, as noted, an outcome of long-term structural marginalization. Two such caveats concern heterogeneity and directionality.

5.1 | Heterogeneity

The process and mechanism described in this paper is not deterministic. It should not be read as asserting that every adolescent in these high-poverty contexts will take on the high-risk, violent cultural personas described. It is intended to present a generalized pattern or tendency that is nonetheless contextually prevalent and shaped by constraints inherent in the setting. Individuals will vary in the degree to which they adopt or buy in to a particular persona (per Harding, 2011), and this will likely depend on personal factors, their exposure to other personas, and the degree to which they think such personas are meaningful and possible for them, the nature of their support systems, and other factors. Moreover, identity formation does not typically mean “one person, one persona”—adolescents typically draw from several personas as they find and inhabit an identity for themselves. It is simply that the prevalence of these personas, articulated with marginalized settings, increases the likelihood of adoption as a resource for identity formation.

5.2 | Directionality

The question of directionality with respect to the role of a cultural persona as described is important. Does the existence of these kinds of cultural personas precede behavior or vice versa? The most likely answer is both. To be appropriated in the identity formation process, cultural personas have to exist a priori, and the meanings they represent have to be salient. However, the specific characteristics of a persona evolve and are influenced by the actions and narratives of those individuals who enact that persona. Moreover, the structural constraints that lead to long-term poverty, exclusion and the formation of street markets create imperatives that also shape the kinds of behaviors that are necessary to survive, which can then be made to fit within a known persona.

Neither of these caveats detract from the potential importance of cultural personas as mediators for youth violence—there is never one single behavioral determinant.

6 | IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Given the potential role of specific *cultural personas* as linking mechanisms between structural factors, adolescent identity development, and risk behavior outcomes in marginalized community contexts, what are the implications for efforts to prevent youth violence and other risk behavior in these settings? First, the salience of this phenomena should prompt critical reflection concerning the long-term effectiveness of the plethora of youth risk behavior prevention programs that focus on risk factors (e.g., based on the approach originally framed in Catalano & Hawkins, 1995; Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992; and Hawkins et al., 2000). This is not to denigrate the value of such programs, only to consider their limits. Addressing risk factors may be most effective at earlier stages in the trajectory toward serious risk behavior, if doing so can prevent youth involvement, or entrenchment, in high-risk social contexts. But these programs do not address the structural context that underlies the co-occurrence of risk factors, their essentially *syndemic* nature (see Singer, 1994; Singer, 2006; Singer & Clair, 2003), and cannot therefore affect the most fundamental driver; nor are they geared to address the link between that structural context and identity formation.

Programs based on a resilience or protective factors model (Masten, 2001; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008) may fare better in some sense because there is an assumption of risk context, and the goal is to *strengthen resilience in the face of acknowledged risk*. Positive youth development (PYD) is a broad term encompassing a range of resilience approaches. PYD literature is somewhat bifurcated into one cluster that emphasizes sets or lists of specific positive assets to be strengthened (Catalano et al., 2012; Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak and Hawkins 2004), and another that could be called the ecological or integrated stream of PYD thinking influenced by Richard Lerner and colleagues (Lerner, 2005; Lerner & Lerner, 2011; Lerner et al., 2005; Silbereisen & Lerner, 2007), and to some degree reflected in Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003). As for any PYD approach, the preventive focus is on protective factors or assets (Lerner et al., 2005; Scales et al., 2005; Schwartz, Pantin, Coatsworth, & Szapocznik, 2007; Theokas et al., 2005); however, in the latter case, it is coupled with a proposition that a key change mechanism stems from interaction within a multilayered, ecological web—a *person-context relationship* that promotes thriving among youth. This involves not just building youth capabilities but the development of social and community support systems surrounding youth. Moving one step further, the *Social Justice Model of Youth Development* (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002) specifically addresses structural factors (e.g., racism, lack of economic opportunity) by involving adolescents who are in high-risk environments as agents of social change, and doing so as a youth development strategy. Through a process of critical consciousness and training for social action, the capabilities and energy of youth are directed toward changing the pattern of marginalization.

Some risk-factor derivative literatures have also made a link to identity-generating dynamics. *Problem behavior syndrome* theory, for example, (Donovan & Jessor, 1985, 2016; Donovan, Jessor, & Costa, 1988; Jessor, Donovan, & Costa, 1991; Jessor & Jessor, 1977) views risk factor patterns and trajectories of involvement in risk as clustered, and as a reflection of shared attitudinal/worldview characteristics.

If the role of structural context in framing, motivating, and sustaining youth violence and other risk behaviors in an interactive process with identity formation via the cultural persona is accurate, then one key implication is that programs addressing specific predictors of risk behavior are missing an essential and powerful dynamic. Such factors, whether at the family, peer, community school, or other levels, are decontextualized by virtue of their analytically distinct treatment. Even though the impact of multiple and cumulative exposures is clearly recognized, framing, for example, family dysfunction or social norms supporting violence as mediators which, if addressed, can affect behavioral outcomes is insufficient. In this article, a generative dynamic is outlined that links structural factors to high-risk community settings and to identity the development as one interconnected phenomenon.

“Family dysfunction” or “supportive norms” are not seen as distinct risk factors among others but as integrated nodes in a culture of risk behavior that is embedded within a pattern of living, such that one can no longer simply “change norms” as if these norms are discrete, commutable objects (see critique of social norms theory in health promotion, Edberg & Krieger, 2020).

When youth in a marginalized, street market-dominated community seek guidance and material to shape their identity, they will look to available personas and scripts that achieve contextually embedded goals. Violence and other risk behaviors that cluster with it are part of a representational and behavioral aggregation that may communicate power, existential efficacy, notoriety in a circumscribed world, solidarity among peers (e.g., gang members), or even a superhuman ability to live without concern for risk. To intercede in that process, short of changing the actual structural conditions, *the options for creating a socially valued identity have to be changed (e.g., additional personas, not associated with violent behavior), and the behavioral repertoire for enacting these identities must be expanded (e.g., additional ways of demonstrating power)*. This is important because the developmental imperatives of adolescence will exert their influence, regardless of what other kind of prevention programs exist. Several categories of research and program implications follow from this conclusion.

6.1 | Conduct targeted research focusing on the processes, mechanisms, and factors influencing adolescent identity formation in high-risk communities

While there certainly has been research about adolescent identity and risk behavior, the research recommended here would focus specifically on identifying, in different high-risk settings, key dimensions of personal status, and identity that are fulfilled through violence—identifying the “generative schema” (M. Edberg, 2007a, 2007b, 2014; M. Edberg, 2018, ch. 14). There are a number of qualitative research strategies that could facilitate this goal. Research is also needed to explore other identities, roles, and behaviors that would respond to the same or similar dimensions of identity and status. A modified, exploratory use of the “possible selves” approach may be useful for this purpose, tied to the attributes elicited from the first research strategy.

6.2 | Develop and test intervention approaches that are specifically designed to affect the issue of identity development as an integrated dynamic

Interventions based on this strategy would aim to introduce non-violence related roles and behaviors (to the “inventory” of violence-related behaviors) that, at least to some degree, are responsive to the motivations and attractions (generative schema) underlying risky or violent personas in a particular community context. Social cognitive modeling, participatory PYD, and social justice youth development are three such strategies. All, to one degree or another, involve youth in conceptualizing and enacting different identities that do not fully conflict with existing (negative) personas but harness some qualities of those personas toward more productive outcomes. Along with that, intervention development could aim to identify the resources and contextual factors needed to introduce those new roles and associated behaviors as realistic possibilities for youth in high-violence communities—an effort that may require collaboration with schools, businesses, or nonprofit and other funders, and the creative development of job-related options. *The goal is to dilute the potency of violence and risk behavior as socially validated components of identity by adding, over time, to the social fabric meaningful social roles and employment/economic possibilities that produce visible evidence of personal efficacy and gain, and that share some aspects of the qualities identified as worthy of emulation.*

Interventions could also identify modes of representation and channels of communication through which alternative identities (not dependent upon violence) and behaviors identified from the formative research could be disseminated. From that step, social marketing and diffusion approaches could be employed to disseminate

messages about these “status-worthy” alternative behaviors and identities. Examples of prevention efforts that incorporate at least some aspects of this approach include the following.

- The *Adelante* intervention developed and implemented by a collaboration between a university research center and a Latino immigrant community to address the co-occurrence of substance abuse, violence, and sex risk among youth (M.C. Edberg et al., 2020; M. C. Edberg et al., 2016). Drawing from ecological PYD and from a social justice development perspective, the intervention included the development of community roles for youth that entailed participation and advocacy regarding community conditions, allowing for the redirecting of oppositional identity characteristics toward positive goals. This process was facilitated by the use of Photovoice to identify community conditions for change, training in advocacy and public communication, and events as well as social media channels through which that advocacy could be expressed. An earlier version of this approach was piloted as a component of an intervention called SAFER Latinos (M. Edberg, et al., 2010), in the same community, focusing on violence prevention.
- The *Adelante* intervention's use of branding theory (Evans & Hastings, 2008) and social media to create—with youth participation—an intervention identity (Evans et al., 2016; Evans, Cleary, Andrade, & Edberg, 2018). Branding theory is a potentially useful approach to address identity development because it entails the linking and packaging of behavior in relation to an attribute-driven identity (Evans et al., 2018), especially where the brand identity is community derived and represents community aspirations. The branding for *Adelante* was then incorporated in community communications and youth-driven social media (Andrade et al., 2015), where the avoidance or substitution of risk behaviors was integrated into a brand identity that held some social cache.
- While not a community intervention, the Truth Campaign for tobacco prevention among adolescents is an excellent example of reframing (reversing) risk behavior and the identities associated with it, and employing an oppositional identity to promote prevention behavior (Evans, Wasserman, Bertolotti, & Martino, 2002; Hicks, 2001).

A distinguishing characteristic of this kind of program approach is that the potential social roles/identities offered are context-driven, structured around the complex of behavioral motivations characteristic of specific social contexts, and based on an understanding that these motivations are now a product of the context itself, not just the designated risk factors that may have contributed to its existence. Thus, for example, instead of implementing a preset school-based curriculum that teaches conflict resolution skills based on a risk-factor assessment that identifies these skills as lacking, the approach advocated here would first determine whether or not *conflict resolution* is a recognizable or meaningful goal in that particular context. The normative goal may in fact be publicly asserted dominance. A program solution might then need to focus on developing an intervention component that sought to *change the terms* by which dominance is defined.

As noted in previous work (M. Edberg, 2004b; M. Edberg & Bourgois 2013), a key principle around which program activities can be structured is the *principle of substitution*, in which youth have opportunities to direct at least some of the motivational force connected to violence and risk behavior toward *substitute roles or activities* that meet at least some of the underlying motivational need. This, of course, is not easy, because it means competition between the new opportunities and existing identity roles. However, not enough has been done to explore or test interventions that incorporate the overall approach presented here. It is an important area in need of further study as well as practice.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://publons.com/publon/10.1002/jcop.22368>.

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