

‘Of course you like to fight’: Frames for storytelling in a liberal anger management programme

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Previous research has critiqued conventional anger management programmes for disregarding participants’ values honouring masculine performances of being tough, risk-seeking and capable of violence. Conversely, the Danish programme subjected to case study in this paper, represents a liberal approach that endorses such values while still encouraging participants to reform their behaviour. We investigate this approach as a frame for participants’ storytelling, i.e. narrative presentations of past, present and future selves. Detailed narrative analysis demonstrates the counsellor’s conveyance of a non-judgmental attitude, which indicates expectations that participants value practices such as fighting and using illegal drugs. We explain how the approach emerges as a gendered and classed frame which some participants may not align with, specifying how a participant who is unable or unwilling to adopt expectations may struggle to present as properly masculine. The study demonstrates that therapy which seeks to accommodate particular forms of masculinities may unintentionally marginalise some participants.

Keywords

Anger management, class, frame, masculinities, narrative, storytelling, therapy, violence

Introduction

Violence is legally banned and normatively rebuked across societies. Responding with formal and informal sanctions is one way societies deal with violent behaviour, another being rehabilitative programmes such as anger management. General dismissive views of violence are contrasted by groups of youths that consider violence as an expected, necessary and even joyful aspect of everyday life (Jackson-Jacobs, 2004). This raises the question as to how programmes seeking to prevent violence should approach participants who value physical aggression. Some programmes, we refer to these as conventional, dismiss such values, insisting that violence remain illegal and morally wrong. Other programmes, we refer to these as liberal, recognise that participants' views of violence may depart from those of conventional society and express acceptance of physical aggression while still orientating participants' attention to the negative consequences that violent actions might have, given the legal and normative framework that participants find themselves in.

Across various modalities, whether conventional or liberal in approach, therapeutic programmes tend to rely on talk to produce desired outcomes (Peräkylä et al., 2008). Sharing personal stories is generally considered an important category of therapeutic talk, making it a 'core task for counsellors to elicit personal narratives from their clients' (p. 20). As previous research documents, these stories do not wait in the minds of participants for counsellors to disclose. Rather, they are products of interactional storytelling set in a particular narrative environment (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008; Järvinen, 2004; Polletta et al., 2011; Andersen 2015), which means that programmes tend to influence how participants' stories make sense of their pasts, understand their present and project their futures.

While all approaches have consequences in terms of how they enable and constrain participants' storytelling, determining the consequences of what we describe as a liberal approach to violence is critical as it stands in opposition to the legal and normative framework of the wider society, which remains dismissive. Nevertheless, scholars have so far paid little attention to this issue. Previous sociological research has focused on and critiqued anger management programmes for disregarding 'subcultural' values related to fighting (Laursen and Laws, 2016; Kramer et al., 2013; Perry, 2013; Fox, 2005), while approaches endorsing these values have not received much scholarly attention.

This paper addresses this knowledge gap through a case study of a liberal, state-sponsored anger management programme set in an urban area of Denmark. Theoretically, we draw on narrative ethnography (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008) and the concept of frame (Goffman 1974). We understand frames as structures of expectations (Tannen, 1993: 15) which individuals communicate to each other through subtle or not so subtle cues when they interact. Empirically, we draw on ethnographic fieldwork to demonstrate how the structures of expectations embedded in a liberal approach generate a gendered and classed frame which participants may or may not align with.

Anger management, protest masculinity and therapeutic frames

Anger management is a label adopted by programmes seeking to modify problematic, anger-related behaviour through cognitive-behavioural therapy. Many programmes are conducted under the label of anger management, with no particular curriculum, having become a brand name program (Lipsey and Landenberger, 2006). These programmes share common features

such as systematic training regimens, encouraging offenders to monitor their patterns of automatic thinking in situations that trigger aggressive behaviour, and role-plays intended to help offenders identify alternative ways of perceiving and coping with high-risk situations.

A key assumption in the approach is that anger-related offences are correlated with distorted thinking patterns characterised by self-justificatory thinking, misinterpretation of social cues and deficient moral reasoning (Barriga et al., 2000; Beck 1999). Anger management programmes were ‘designed to correct these dysfunctional and criminogenic thinking patterns’ (Lipsey and Landenberger, 2006: 2). These programmes have attracted some criticism. Howells and Day (2003) argue that anger management needs a more sophisticated understanding of gender and culture. Other research explicitly criticises anger management programmes for attempting to coerce self-change in ways that are insensitive to participants’ own moral values, social experiences and gendered identities (Fox, 2005; Kramer et al., 2013; Perry, 2013). Drawing on fieldwork from prison-based programmes in Denmark, Laursen and Laws (2016) describe how participants’ relations regarding masculine values of being ‘tough’, ‘standing your ground’, ‘being loyal to friends’ and being ‘capable of violence’ are approached in the programmes as cognitive distortions that need to be replaced by ‘correct’ thinking patterns. They argue that the ‘therapeutic ethos neglects participants’ contextualised interpretations of their lives’ (Laursen and Laws, 2016: 17) and that this neglect creates deep fissures between programme instructors and participants.

While these values are described as masculine, it is important to keep in mind that masculinities—as well as other gendered identities—come in plural (Connell, 2005). The gendered identity that comes into play in anger management through values of being tough and capable of violence may be conceptualised as protest masculinity (Connell, 2005), hypermasculinity (Bengtsson, 2016) or even protest-hypermasculinity (Lane-Steele, 2011). Protest masculinity is ‘constructed in local working-class settings’ but ‘embodies the claim to power typical of regional hegemonic masculinities in Western countries’ (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 847). Hypermasculinity similarly indicates an exaggeration of male stereotypical behaviour (Bengtsson, 2016).

The structural dimension is crucial in understanding protest masculinity. Connell (2005) situates masculinities in relation to positions in labour markets and societal structures, arguing that protest masculinity emerges in opposition to hegemonic masculinity as a way in which marginalised men, lacking access to social fields of power, make a space for themselves using the cultural resources of gender stereotypes. While not pursuing the ‘protest’ aspect of gendered identities, we do follow Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) in their approach to gendered identities as embedded in the socio-economic structure as well as protest-masculinity as a form of masculinity pivoting around practices linked to the use of violence and illegal drugs.

Drawing on fieldwork from a US prison-based anger management programme, sociologists Kramer, Rajah and Sung (2013) describe how programmes are based on unsubstantiated claims that work is always available for participants and that jobs in the informal economy are reliable stepping-stones to better opportunities. Even at times when matters such as discrimination are acknowledged by counsellors, ‘such social contradictions were exonerated by claiming that making the “right” personal choices allows individuals to overcome structural inequalities’ (p. 538). Thus, such programmes are criticised for disregarding socio-economic structures that continue to constrain participants’ life chances.

In contrast to the programmes criticised for disregarding participants' values, which are linked to practices of fighting and using illegal drugs, the programme under study accepts—even expects—such values among participants. On this account, we describe it as liberal. Specifically, we study how participants are imagined, how they present themselves and how they in turn are responded to *within* therapy. How each individual does this, however, is linked to personal experiences and biographical particulars that *transgress* therapy (such as gender identities and social class background). Thus, the therapeutic frame is located within a wider context.

As pointed out by Arminen (2005), studies of institutional interaction face a methodological challenge as the richness of context is 'potential[ly] infinite' (p. 32). The solution proposed by Arminen is to address the aspects of wider contexts relating to, e.g. gender, class and socio-economic structures 'only insofar as they are demonstrably relevant and consequential for the interaction in question' (p. 34). This approach, drawing on a conversation analytical perspective (Drew and Heritage, 1992), resonates with our frame analytical perspective (Goffman, 1974), forefronting encounters (Manning, 2010) and addressing aspects of the wider context to the extent that this comes to matter in the ongoing interaction. In line with this, our case study addresses participants' gendered and classed identities as these come into play in the therapeutic encounters.

Data, methods, programme and participants

The paper is based on data generated through ethnographic fieldwork in a state funded Danish anger management programme located in an urban area. This was part of five months of daily fieldwork conducted in 2011 in drug treatment for young people, and the programme was completed within this setting. The first author participated in all eight sessions of the anger management programme, sitting at a desk taking extensive field notes, while the counsellor and participants sat in armchairs around coffee tables a few meters away. In the sixth session, she was invited to take an active part in an interview exercise, which she accepted; otherwise, her participation was relatively passive, enabling her to produce detailed notes on talk, interaction and body postures. She also conducted qualitative interviews with the counsellor, other staff, the programme participants and their peers in treatment. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

This is a case study (Stake, 1995) of a particular anger management programme. The benefits of the ethnographic approach include getting data in a 'natural' setting where the effect of the researcher being present is limited compared to, for example, interview research, and an opportunity to study the complex unfolding of social life (Gobo, 2008). One limitation is that our findings cannot be generalised and applied to anger management programmes at large. We still believe, however, that insights emerging from observations of ongoing therapy sessions can be useful for programmes representing similar approaches and, more generally, illuminate the potential of sociological research to inform a field dominated by psychology.

The study was registered and approved by the Danish Data Protection Agency and adheres to guidelines for ethical practice in youth research, as provided by Heath et al. (2009). The counsellor and participants were individually informed about the study, and everyone consented. All quotations are translated from Danish to English, and the names of all participants were changed as part of the anonymization of data.

Institutional context

The programme is carried out in an institution that emphasises that counsellors should interact with participants in a non-judgmental way. This emphasis features centrally in what Peräkylä and Vehviläinen (2003) call the ‘professional stock of interactional knowledge’, which offers counsellors normative and descriptive guidance, e.g. on how to ask questions. This stock of knowledge is communicated through written sources and spoken instructions. The work carried out here is based on a set of shared values, emphasising the recognition of participants and avoiding moralising. This set of values exists as a written source, which is used in the process of recruiting new counsellors, but is also continuously upheld in everyday communication in the organisation (interview with leader). The values are also reflected in the material setting, for example, images of cannabis leaves are used as decorations, symbolically cueing a liberal approach.

Being liberal and non-judgmental does not fully account for how counsellors practice therapy in this institution. Different counsellors go through different routes, employing different therapeutic modalities such as narrative, systemic and cognitive therapies. Nevertheless, this set of values clearly guides counsellors in their treatment practices and this is the focus of this study (for more details on other aspects of therapy and the institutional context, see Andersen 2015).

Research participants and sessions

A female counsellor aged 29, who holds a diploma in therapy, was in charge of the programme. We refer to her as Rebecca. Before instructing this outpatient anger management course, Rebecca instructed similar programmes within the prison services. Importantly, the manner in which she imagines programme participants is likely to have been influenced by this experience. Cognitive and narrative therapies are the main inspirations for her work, but she is also influenced by institutional values. Every session begins with Rebecca’s introduction to a theme of the day (e.g. angry thoughts and how to recognise them) and an agenda (e.g. including a practice of assertive communication). In each session, participants are also encouraged to use a logbook to tell a story about a specific troubling experience involving anger. During the sessions, Rebecca makes notes on a writing board and generally smiles and talks a lot. She seeks to accommodate participants in terms of the types of beverages she serves in the sessions and reschedules one of the sessions out of concern for one of the participants’ appointment with a renowned tattooist.

In the eight sessions, two young men participate. Marc, aged 21, was first convicted of violence five years ago when he was 16. He has been to court four times, received convictions every time and has served prison sentences three times. His participation in the programme is court-mandated. Marc’s hair is shaved short, and he is noticeably broad-shouldered. In some sessions, he wears work clothes, explaining that he has just finished work (an apprenticeship as a craftsman). In other sessions, he wears baggy pants, a hood and trainers. He tends to lean back in the chair when he is not talking and gesticulates with his hands while speaking. In the interview, he explains that he grew up in a home with alcohol abuse and a violent father and that he began smoking cannabis and committing misdemeanours around the age of 13/14. He also explains that completing his apprenticeship and getting a job is important to him.

Bastian, aged 19, first faced charges of violence and possession of illegal drugs a few months ago. His participation in the programme is formally voluntary; however, he hopes it will make his case look better in the judicial system. His hair is short-shaved, he wears baggy pants, T-shirts or a hoodie and has lots of tattoos. He is not engaged in school or work but mentions in the first session that he practices mixed martial arts. Bastian is mostly leaning back and is less talkative than Rebecca and Marc. He is especially reticent when Marc is in the room. In the interview, Bastian explains that his parents are well educated job holders and that he holds aspirations for higher education.

Storytelling in therapy: frames and resistance

The anger management programme subjected to case study in this paper, represents a liberal approach characterised by a non-judgmental acceptance of deviant values among participants such as values linked to practices of fighting and using illegal drugs. The analysis is not an evaluation of the effectiveness of this approach but, rather, an investigation of how it emerges as a frame (Goffman, 1974) for participants' storytelling. Specifically, we investigate how Bastian's and Marc's personal stories fit within the therapeutic frame and relate this to socio-economic structures as well as gendered and classed identities beyond therapy.

Rebecca – the therapeutic frame accommodating 'the imagined participant'

Prior to the first session, Rebecca puts up a series of black and white photos on the walls of the therapy room. The photos are portrayals of angry, threatening men. In one of them, a frowning man is staring and pointing his finger directly at the viewer while his mouth is shaped as if he is saying 'you'! The photos are not commented on in the first session but in the second one, Rebecca uses them in a thematised talk on 'stages of anger' (field notes). The photos remain on the walls throughout the sessions.

Rebecca has previous experience of anger management in prison, and she reflects on how the values of this institutional setting contrast her experience in prison:

Rebecca: I think we [staff] have a good culture in relation to how we talk about them [the young people in therapy]. I mean, like very respectful. [...] I've been in prisons [...] there is not much respect [towards prisoners] and you don't really care what they want for themselves. (interview)

In line with the values of the institution, Rebecca seeks to respect participants' values. She relies on information obtained from the sessions but also on previous experiences and a priori expectations. In the first session, where Rebecca, Marc and Bastian meet each other for the first time, Rebecca explains the overall aim of the programme in this way:

Rebecca says that the objective of this programme is not to turn them [the participants] into 'soft little lambs'; they will continue to experience anger, which is completely 'natural', but the objective is that anger should not 'get the upper hand'. 'It is you who are to take control and manage the anger', Rebecca says.

(Field notes, first session)

A recurrent feature of the programme is the logbook used as a scaffold to guide participants in telling stories about their anger experiences. A series of questions encourages participants to first explain where they were and who they were with when a specific incident happened. They are then asked to reflect on their thoughts and feelings and, finally, to evaluate whether they perceive their actions as okay or not okay and how it relates to their personal values. Rebecca introduces the logbook in the first session:

Rebecca presents the logbook. It's a little greyish book with black typing. Rebecca says that they are going to use it in the programme, but obviously, the intention is not to make them write a novel. 'I do not assume that you are used to writing a diary', Rebecca giggles. [Then she asks:] 'Do you have any idea about the purpose of writing in a logbook like this?' Marc answers that you are to describe situations so you can tell what you could have done differently. Rebecca says 'that's right', adding that it also enables one to identify improvements.

(Field notes, first session)

Throughout the sessions, Rebecca expressed acceptance and even an expectation that Marc and Bastian enjoyed fighting. In session two, for example, fights and illegal drugs were discussed in this manner:

Marc says, 'If I could fight without facing consequences, I would, 'cause I love to fight. But I don't want to go to prison again'. Rebecca says, 'That's exactly the point. You don't fight 'cause you're stupid. It's because you like it'. Marc says, 'Fights are a bit like drugs. You feel a rush. It's amazing'. Rebecca asks whether Bastian recognises this. 'Yes, 100 percent. You feel great afterwards', Bastian says.

(Field notes, session two)

In analysing how Rebecca organises the therapeutic frame and how she explains the programme's purpose to the participants, we see cues (Goffman, 1974) being communicated both verbally and through imagery. For example, the photos work as concrete visualisations of what anger looks like and how expressions are imagined. Notably, all photos portray men who are white, able-bodied and strong-looking, while there are no pictures of, for example, angry women or children. This creates a link between anger and masculinity. Further, their threatening postures link anger with the potential of physical aggression.

Explaining the purpose of the programme, Rebecca emphasises that it is *not* about turning them into 'soft little lambs'. The use of negations communicates expectations (Tannen, 1993: 41ff), and here, Rebecca conveys that she imagines that Marc and Bastian would have had a problem if softness were the purpose of the programme. Rather than softening them up, Rebecca explains that the programme aims to facilitate control-taking. Similarly, in presenting the logbook, she negates the 'girlish' connotations of writing a diary—such as expressing emotions—which participants might have. Distancing the logbook from such associations appears to be an attempt at accommodating the participants' gendered and classed forms of masculinity (Connell, 2005).

In responding to Marc's statement that he loves to fight, Rebecca indicates that this is expected: of course, he does not fight because he is stupid but because he likes it. Turning to Bastian and asking whether he recognises this, Rebecca further indicates that she also imagines that Bastian shares Marc's pleasure in fighting. Bastian responds 'Yes, 100 percent. You feel great afterwards', thus confirming her expectations. An interactional analysis of the situation makes it clear, however, that the answer 'No, I do not recognise that' would entail a risk of someone losing face (Goffman, 1955). Bastian would counter Rebecca's expectation, thereby risking her face as a professional by suggesting that she does not know what she is talking about. He could also risk his own face as a 'No' could be interpreted as indicating that he is weak and less of a man than Marc. Perhaps more, he might risk threatening Marc's face as 'No' could indicate that Marc's finding pleasure in fighting is in fact stupid. Frames are structures of expectations (Goffman, 1974), and the programme emerges as a frame for participants' storytelling with underlying expectations (Tannen, 1993). In this situation, both Marc and Bastian align with the expectation. In other situations, however, Bastian expresses distaste for physical aggression.

Summing up, Rebecca organises a therapeutic frame for participants who she imagines have an orientation towards particular forms of marginalised masculinity, which comes to work as a frame for storytelling. The sessions invite particular kinds of stories that represent protest masculinity (Connell 2005), but resistance remains a possibility (Järvinen, 2014; MacMartin, 2008). Participants in treatment programmes can be seen as agreeing, adapting or resisting in relation to the kinds of stories they are encouraged to tell (Järvinen & Andersen, 2009). Marc and Bastian tell very different stories, and this case is therefore particularly illustrative in terms of clarifying how agentic participants relate individually to therapeutic frames.

Marc – a fit between personal stories and therapeutic frame

In the first session, Rebecca invites participants to 'practice using the logbook' (field notes). Marc volunteers to tell an anger-related story and describes an argument about how to build a scaffold in a work training programme. This is the first elaborated story told by a participant in the programme:

[Marc says] Dejan thinks he's a real badass just 'cause he's wearing electronic tagging, and he doesn't know who Marc is. Rebecca asks what Marc was thinking, and Marc says 'He ought to get his ass kicked so he knows who he's messing with'. Rebecca asks what Marc did and how one could tell that he was angry – how *Dejan* could tell that Marc was angry, she modifies. Marc says that he was yelling, pointing, shaking. Marc describes it as fury [part of the logbook is to label the anger], and while he is talking about it, his voice is raised, and he is gesticulating fiercely. 'I can tell that you got really angry', Rebecca says. Marc says that tears started to show in Dejan's eyes. Then he [Marc] left to have a smoke and cool down. 'By then, Dejan knew I was the boss', Marc says. The benefits of handling the situation like this were that 'He listened to me, became respectful, stopped arguing', he adds. Rebecca asks what would have happened had Marc hit Dejan. 'Then I would have been kicked out of the programme and lost my apprenticeship', Marc says. He thinks he handled the situation okay.

(Field notes, first session)

Throughout the sessions, Marc tells lots of stories, often volunteering when Rebecca asks participants for examples. Bastian listens to these stories that present Marc as tough, capable of violence and unwilling to tolerate any forms of disrespectfulness. Marc is a vivid storyteller, using dramatising techniques such as gestures and reported speech (Shuman, 2012). One of his stories in the second session is illustrative. It is about an incident that happened shortly after he was released from prison and his girlfriend broke up with him. Marc went out to get drunk and found himself in the streets talking with three students:

‘And then I remember, standing there, and the thought came to me “why don’t you just head-butt him?”’. And so he did. ‘I started way back’, Marc demonstrates with his head and says that the student pulled his head back, and then he hit the [student’s] mouth, and he started bleeding quite a lot from the forehead. He ran after one of the other students but didn’t catch him and then returned to the first one and kicked him. Marc says it was random and that it [his anger] really didn’t have anything to with them. [...] Marc doesn’t think that there were any advantages to the way he dealt with this situation and notes several disadvantages.

(Field notes, second session)

Analysing Marc’s stories, we see that they fit well in a frame that expects stories to be associated with a form of protest masculinity (Connell, 2005). In the first one, he describes a conflict with another man, Dejan, who was also committed to standing up for himself through displays of the capacity to use violence. In line with the above, Rebecca does not challenge the particular type of masculinity at play. Instead, she encourages Marc to reflect upon the consequences of using violence, making it clear that violence may not be a beneficial way of resolving the situation. The normative component of the story is not that violence is unacceptable or that Dejan did not deserve a beating; rather, violence should be avoided because of negative consequences for Marc, who could risk losing his apprenticeship.

In the second story, Marc describes the use of violence in a different context. The opponents are weak (described as ‘students’), and there are no indications that they had provoked him. This situation does not include the traits that would make it a respectable fight ‘between real men’. When Rebecca encourages Marc to reflect upon the advantages and disadvantages of doing what he did in this situation, it does not entail any contradiction of the masculine performance of being tough, risk-seeking and capable of violence; rather, it conveys norms concerning what kinds of violence are appropriate.

Turning from Marc’s stories about incidents in the past to those projecting his future, he envisages a reorientation in relation to gendered identity. In the last session, Rebecca instructs the participants to invite someone significant from their everyday life. In Marc’s last session, Bastian is not present and vice versa. Marc invites his long-time friend, Jesper. Rebecca explains that Jesper is invited as a witness to what she refers to as Marc’s ‘journey of change’ (field notes). She then asks Marc:

‘Can you describe the changes that have come about?’ ‘I’ve developed a taste for life’, Marc says. ‘Taste for life’, Rebecca repeats, noting it on the writing board. ‘What does

that mean to you?’ ‘It means that a lot of bad stuff is not going to be part of my life anymore’, Marc says. ‘What bad stuff?’ Rebecca asks. ‘Well, violence and hatred’, Marc responds, adding other stuff that will no longer be part of his life. ‘My social network has improved a lot’, Marc says, ‘through Jesper who has lots of friends’. Rebecca asks about how he was when meeting new people in the past. ‘I told badass stories’, Marc says. ‘I acted all street smart, saying “Then I fought a bunch of guys, and they were complete losers”’. ‘And now you don’t tell badass stories anymore?’ Rebecca asks. Marc and Jesper laugh a bit. ‘Now you tell a different kind of badass story, like more human’, Jesper says.

(Field notes, Marc’s last session)

After Marc’s recollection of the changes, Rebecca turns to Jesper, who confirms the story, adding that their union is also ‘a big part of his life and something we talk a lot about’ (field notes). Like Marc, Jesper is doing an apprenticeship, and Jesper tells that he and Marc have talked about sharing a flat as they have the same rhythm of getting up early and working long hours. ‘We’re not afraid to roll up our sleeves’, Jesper adds (field notes). Rebecca asks how he relates to the changes going on in Marc’s life.

‘I get a sense of pride’, Jesper says, and mentions something about Marc being ‘a good man’. ‘Good man. What does that mean for you?’ Rebecca asks. ‘You have different kinds of joys’, Jesper says, ‘like maybe a bit more mature, a better sense of reality’. Rebecca pursues with follow-up questions, and Jesper explains, ‘if you talked about fights in the old days, then you talk about work now’, and ‘if you talked about drugs before, then I don’t know, maybe it’s bills today’.

(Field notes, Marc’s last session)

In Marc’s story of the future, and in Jesper’s response to it, the issue of masculinity looms large (Bengtsson, 2016). The changes recounted are not just about becoming a better person, but about becoming a better *man*. As Marc’s stories of the past link his masculinity with the pleasures of fighting and drugs, stories of a future not involving this imply some reconfiguring of his masculinity. The storyline Marc pursues draws on the notion of maturing. While not completely discrediting past actions, the stories appear to be linked to a bad-boy phase that he is now maturing out of, transitioning into a traditional male breadwinner role. Marc expresses a blue-collar worker identity, which he shares with peers (friends, union): men who are not afraid to roll up their sleeves. In this way, a gendered story of a problematic past reflects in a gendered narrative solution for the future (Andersen 2015).

Overall, Marc is the kind of participant the programme expects (Perry, 2013). He has a troubled background, including a home with alcohol abuse and a violent father, and he openly talks about the pleasures of fighting. He is confident in his storytelling, yet willing to adapt to the format of the logbook. From the perspective of the present (Järvinen, 2004), embedded in therapy, Marc’s stories of the past differ from those of the future through a re-negotiation of aspects of masculinity. The changes can be described as a development away from destructive expressions of protest masculinity (Connell, 2005) to conventional expressions of working class values animating hard manual labour (Willis, 1977). Marc’s narrative sense-making of his past

and his projection of a future self is well facilitated within the therapeutic frame and supported by conditions beyond therapy, such as the fact that he has been able to get an apprenticeship.

Bastian – a misfit between personal stories and therapeutic frame

Like Marc, Bastian is also encouraged to use the logbook, and in the first session, he describes an incident leading to an arrest and his first (hitherto only) night in detention. In contrast to Marc, Bastian tells his story hesitantly, and Rebecca continually needs to ask questions in order to drive the narrative forward:

Rebecca asks what kind of emotion Bastian experienced in the situation [a question in the logbook]. Bastian hesitates for some seconds and then answers ‘fear’. ‘Fear’ is not one of the examples of emotions featured in the logbook. The logbook suggests that participants may experience: irritation, anger, frustration, fury.

(Field notes, first session)

Bastian remains reluctant throughout the sessions to talk about personal experience. For example, in session three, Rebecca refers to photos of angry men and asks him about his experiences of getting angry.

‘Do you remember an example?’ Rebecca asks. ‘I don’t actually’, Bastian says. ‘You can take your time’, Rebecca says. A moment of silence. ‘My mind is empty’, Bastian responds. ‘Well, maybe we can get back to it’, Rebecca says.

(Field notes, third session)

Bastian’s reluctance can be interpreted as expressions of resistance (Järvinen, 2014). As MacMartin (2008) points out, counsellors’ questions carry with them a framework of presuppositions that constrain possible answers. However, participants may disaffiliate themselves from these presuppositions through what MacMartin refers to as non-answer responses such as ‘I don’t know’ or ‘My mind is empty’.

Bastian does, however, tell some stories, and as Rebecca alternates between Marc and Bastian, contrasts stand out. For example, in session two, immediately after Marc’s story about assaulting the students, Bastian is firmly encouraged to provide an example from his own life. When he states that he cannot think of one, Rebecca suggests that he can give a ‘minor example’ and then goes on to propose that he talks about a specific conflict with his mother:

‘She’s stressed’, Bastian says, and then she ‘becomes short-tempered’. Rebecca asks questions, and Bastian replies several times with few words. In response to a question of how arguments tend to end, Bastian says he might get mad and slam the door or go silent. He says, ‘often it’s my fault’.

(Field notes, second session)

There was an awkward silence following these stories. Rebecca’s indication that they are ‘minor’ indicates a hierarchy and expectations not entirely fulfilled. Bastian’s stories emerged as a misfit for the therapeutic frame organised by Rebecca. This misfit manifests in

the first session when Bastian says he was afraid, an emotion not fitting the expectations of protest masculinity reflected in the logbook's suggestions. The logbook suggests that the imagined programme participant may be irritated, angry, frustrated or furious. In print, the emotion 'fear' is not an established possibility, despite fear generally being recognised as one of the driving factors in symbolic interactionist studies of violence (Collins, 2008).

Interpreting this apparent misfit, it seems that Bastian is torn between Marc's stories of severe violence, drug use and working class masculinity and his own more modest experiences with violence, middle-class background and related masculinity. On one hand, as the audience to Marc's stories, Bastian acts supportively: laughing in the right places, adding several times that he 'agrees 100 percent' when Marc says something; he once asks whether he could join in next time in response to one of Marc's elaborate stories describing a weekend trip where Marc combined plenty of illegal drug use with sexual hook-up adventures. On the other hand, Bastian's own brief stories convey emotions entailing the risk of making him appear feminine. The contradictory pattern of self-presentation indicates an awareness of this and may explain his reluctance towards telling elaborate personal stories. Further, Marc's stories convey the message to Bastian that Marc does not tolerate any kind of disrespectfulness and against this backdrop elaborated stories openly contrasting the values embedded in Marc's storytelling may—in the face-to-face interaction—appear risky. Rather than challenging Marc's values Bastian may prefer to pay lip service when he is acting as audience to Marc's stories and to keep his own storytelling to a minimum.

Turning from Bastian's stories about incidents in the past to stories of his future, the differences between his and Marc's storytelling become even more obvious. As witnesses in the last session, Bastian invites his parents and his older brother, Sander. While Marc's main concern is getting a proper job, Bastian's concerns are directed at getting an education like his brother who is already at university. With his witnesses present, Rebecca encourages Bastian to recount the changes going on in his life:

'Have you done something else to improve your mood?' Rebecca asks. 'I've taken steps towards becoming more independent', Bastian says. Rebecca asks him to elaborate. 'I'm learning basic practical stuff like doing laundry, grocery shopping, cooking', Bastian says. 'Is it difficult?' Rebecca asks. 'Yes', Bastian says.

(Field notes, Bastian's last session)

The changes Bastian describes include activities traditionally considered feminine, such as doing laundry and grocery shopping. In contrast to Marc, he describes changes, not towards traditional working-class masculinity, but towards a form of masculinity that Connell (2005: 127-128) describes as resulting from a practice and ideology of equality, clearly resonating with his middle-class background.

While Marc's story of change gains support from his friend, Bastian receives support from his brother, Sander. Bastian is talking about becoming more reflective, mature and confident, and Sander responds that it makes him so 'proud and so happy' (field notes). Sander offers Bastian help in whatever way he can.

Rebecca says that there are concrete suggestions of help and that his brother offers to be his ‘liaison – what do you think about that?’ Rebecca asks. ‘He already is’, Bastian says, and describes a trip to [a shopping mall] and how Sander helped him get started with using a calendar because ‘the last time I had a bad time, my parents called him’.

(Field notes, Bastian’s last session)

Sander supports the emotional, reflexive language Bastian uses to evoke a form of masculinity that does not exclude going to shopping malls altogether. Their close relationship appears to influence the way Bastian perceives himself and reveals a dimension of his stories that are less geared towards working-class constructions of masculinity.

Overall, Bastian is not really the kind of participant the programme expects. As Perry (2013: 532) asserts, the assumption that participants in this kind of programmes are working class is a common oversimplification which, in practice, will be disrupted if participants self-identify as middle class. Bastian can be interpreted as a case of disruption in this sense. He has a middle-class background, good grades in school, and while he to some extent indicates a commitment to protest masculinity through MMA-fighting, illegal drug use and tattoos, he seems to downplay this in the sessions. This might be because he gets a sense that his stories cannot compete with Marc’s spectacular chronicles or because the setting with a counsellor, the role-play, logbooks etc. remind him too much of his middle-class background for it to be natural to mobilise such stories. Either way, by not meeting the expectations embedded in a therapeutic frame organised for stories reflecting protest masculinity forms of values, Bastian struggles to present himself in a proper, recognisable masculine manner.

Importantly, however, Bastian seems to benefit much from the therapeutic design that allows him to invite significant others from his everyday life-world into therapy. In this session, Bastian gets to decide who his audience is, and Bastian’s brother supports his more emotional and reflexive storytelling in a way in which the frame accommodating stories of protest masculinity does not. Inviting new people into therapy may thus open up storytelling opportunities in ways that are important for participants that counter programme expectations.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that designing a therapeutic programme to accommodate some ‘imagined participants’ can marginalise others. In the therapeutic frame embedding this programme, pictures on the walls of angry men, the continuous probing for stories of violence, the introduction of the programme as one that will not make them soft, and the persistent acceptance of protest masculinity are all powerful mediators of institutional expectations. While counsellors must certainly imagine who participants are in order to accommodate their needs (Gubrium and Järvinen, 2014), this study calls for a meticulous reflexivity concerning how programme and counsellor expectations frame participants’ storytelling and how storytelling opportunities are ensured for participants who counter these expectations.

This reflexivity is particularly acute in the case of liberal approaches for two reasons. First, stressing a non-judgmental attitude may lead to the misconception that participants can tell any story they want, as they want. Second, while participants in therapy encounter counsellors (i.e. formal institutional authorities in state-sponsored programmes) who endorse values such as enjoyment of violent fights and illegal drugs, as soon as the participants leave

therapy, they risk encountering other authorities (e.g. the police) who do not share this liberal approach. This constitutes a paradox in practical as well as ethical terms.

While the merits of a liberal approach seem warranted by the potential to increase resonance with some participants, this study clarifies that such an approach may not be experienced as liberating for all participants and that some structural dynamics still remain unacknowledged. More specifically, we argue that insights from sociology need to deepen our understanding of how a programme works a) *in* a context where socio-economic structures organise access to work and horizons of possible futures (Wacquant, 2008) and b) *as* a context in the sense that it emerges as a frame through situated structures of expectations (Goffman, 1974) and demands of interactional face-work (Goffman, 1955).

In some of the psychological literature, the process of making narrative presentations of selves and social worlds is explicitly addressed. For example, the literature on narrative therapy describes a vision of therapists and participants' 'co-creation of new, liberating narratives' (White and Epston, 1990: x). The founding fathers of narrative therapy, White and Epston further note that 'we would work to identify and critique those aspects of our work that might relate to the techniques of social control' (p. 29). From a sociological perspective, we advocate that the notion that only 'aspects' of a therapist's work relate to techniques of social control and that it is possible to 'identify and critique' these in a way that enables the creation of 'liberating narratives' are missing out on some structural dynamics. Specifically, this seems to downplay the importance of the social class of participants in the local context of therapy as well as in the broader context of society. In clarifying, rather than downplaying the structural dynamics influencing therapy, sociology may supplement anger management programmes and more generally the dominating psychological approach to therapy.

Finally, the issue of how the overall organisation of society influences storytelling in therapy also needs to be addressed. In Marc's case, the reinterpretation of masculinity is particularly effective because it can be supported by socio-economic structures, most importantly the presence of blue-collar work programmes with a prospect of an actual job in these sectors of the labour market. Had he lived under conditions of advanced marginality (Wacquant, 2008), for example, in American ghettos or French banlieues, this change in lifestyle, self-story and masculinity would not have been as accessible. For Bastian, the circumstance that he lives in one of the most gender-equal countries in the world (Esping-Andersen et al., 2013), where a large proportion of the population participates in higher education, enables his narrative projection of future performances of masculinity. Rather than pursuing a vision of 'liberating narratives', therapists need to acknowledge the structural dynamics that significantly shape participants' life-worlds and horizons of possible futures.

Conclusion

Including masculine ideals of being 'tough', 'standing your ground' and 'capable of violence' in therapy is warranted (Laursen and Law, 2016). The hope is to increase resonance with participants and thus make treatment more effective. While we find that it can be helpful for some participants, it can however be problematic for others and encourage the reproduction of destructive values and masculinities. These findings are produced through a sociological approach to anger management, a practice and research field that otherwise remains dominated by psychological insights. Sociology can make a two-fold contribution to understanding how

participants' narrative self-presentations and social worlds remain contextualised even in liberal programmes. Our study illuminates both the importance of socio-economic structures in society at large and the importance of the interaction order in local face-to-face encounters.

This contribution is not entirely applicable in the sense that it instructs how therapy should be reformed. To some extent, the study does point to some easy fixes. For example, one might consider including the emotion 'fear' in a logbook to make it more legitimate for participants to talk about this emotion, which the sociological literature indicates is common in situations involving violence (Collins 2008). At the same time, other aspects—such as access to blue collar jobs—are not easy to fix and remain out of the programme's reach. In general, this study suggests that interventions benefit from being situated, responsive and meticulously reflexive. The ideal should not be to liberate storytelling from therapeutic frames or structural contexts beyond therapy but to develop a language that enables participants to re-connect their stories to their social relations and everyday life-worlds.

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