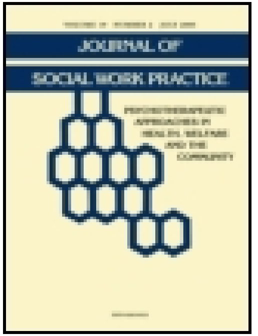

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Violence, role reversals, and turning points: work identity at stake at a therapeutic residential institution for adolescents

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on how one staff member at a therapeutic residential institution negotiates his work identity, exploring how he narrates a violent incident, the formation of work identity, and how the adolescent figures within these processes. Mishler argues that when speaking, we perform identity. As social actors, we select and organise language, telling stories that fit the audience, our intentions, and the occasion. The article is framed both theoretically and methodologically through the assumption that narrative is a fundamental human way of giving meaning to our experiences. Identities are understood as being produced and performed within personal narratives. Thus, in an interview situation, narratives provide an interactive space for personal subjectivities to be expressed and enacted. Drawing on Mishler, we find three essential 'turning points' that shape Alex's work identity: (1) the violent incident, (2) the adolescent's return to the ward, and (3) Alex's subsequent change of wards. We interpret Alex's narrative as a 'narrative of resistance' that may have practical day-to-day implications for the field of institutional care and help expand the staff's clinical toolbox. Further, Alex's narrative is a vital example of stories of violence, which can be incorporated into policy documents on violence management.

KEYWORDS

Therapeutic residential care; work identity; turning points; staff perspective; violence; narrative

Introduction

Narrative inquiry is well matched to 'the daily stuff of social work', as Riessman and Quinney (2005, p. 392) argue. It has also been argued that narrative methods can let silenced voices in institutional care be heard (Smith, 2010). This article focuses on one staff member's view on violence within a therapeutic residential institution for adolescents in Sweden, highlighting how he describes his experiences of exposure to violence. In recent years, the Swedish National Board of Institutional Care (SiS)[1] has reported a rise in violent incidents between staff and youth (SiS (Statens Institutionsstyrelse), 2017). Nevertheless, this topic has been little studied (e.g., Alink et al., 2014; Wästerfors, 2009). In particular, in-depth investigations are lacking. Our analysis will look closely at one narrative by a single staff member, Alex.[2] Workers like Alex who interact with youth on a daily basis embody the most central line of social work at these institutions (Harder

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et al., 2013). Analysing Alex's narrative will help us better understand their daily work and how they negotiate their work identity (cf. Leigh, 2014; Mishler, 1999).

Therapeutic residential institutions can be described as 'violent settings' (Alink et al., 2014, p. 248) since violence is common there, from both the youth and the staff perspective. An essential characteristic of these institutions is their merging of care and control, creating tense emotional zones in which youth often talk about their need for safety (Furnivall, 2018; Moore et al., 2017). They are also often masculine environments (cf. Andersson, 2008; Andersson Vogel, 2017). Accountability is of mutual importance for both staff and youth, as staff not only have a responsibility to work for psychological and social change in the youth, but also need to teach young people to take responsibility themselves. Gharabaghi and Phelan (2011) stress that staff perceptions of youth in residential institutions are mostly based on the concept of accountability, indicating a workplace where rationality is important. They further describe accountability as 'the manner in which staff teams conceptualize the process of assisting children and youth to grow' (p. 76). And they describe accountability from the staff perspective as 'co-creating a narrative' with youth (p. 88), indicating a movement towards a fusion of rationality and emotionality. Finally, organisations such as residential institutions have often been described as rational, unemotional, and neutral entities. Recent research has shown, however, that violence and emotion figure importantly in and around these organisations (Flam et al., 2010).

Violence is a complex and emotion-laden concept. Parkes (2007, p. 405), in her article on the multiple meanings of violence, calls violence a 'slippery concept'. Violence can take many forms, (e.g., Øverlien, 2015; Waddington et al., 2005), is subjective, and is context- and situation-dependent. However, Waddington et al. (2005) argue that a more inclusive definition of violence has the benefit of allowing scholars themselves to penetrate the personal experience and subjective meaning of violence. We use a broad definition of violence that perceives violent acts on a spectrum and includes both physical, psychological and latent violence. This allows Alex to express his subjective meaning of his experiences, since violence is experienced in a vast array of forms in relation to its context.

Within social work, focus is often directed on client or staff stories: giving them a voice by listening (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2017; Riessman & Quinney, 2005). In particular, one function of narrative is to construct understandings of persons and groups. A narrative is a tool for studying complex social dynamics. One way to investigate this even more closely is through the concept of turning points (Mishler, 1999), as turning points are realisations or experiences that initiate desistance developments.

Given the limited scholarship in this area, the aim here is to demonstrate how Alex describes and handles violence, using his narrative as the analytical unit and giving attention to the nature of personal narratives and their relevance to the social work context. The study addresses three research questions:

(1) How does Alex narrate violence in his workplace?
(2) How is Alex's work identity negotiated and formed through his workday experiences with violence?
(3) How does Alex's experience of violence affect his perception of the adolescents he works with?

Context of the study

Scholars have pointed out (e.g., Inderbitzin, 2006) that youth institutions today often are characterised by the relationship between staff and youth, focusing on rehabilitation. Sweden, like many other countries, has a long history of using youth residential institutions, and their staff encounter youth from various backgrounds and with complex problems (Levin, 1998). In 2018, Sweden placed 1,170 young people (413 girls and 757 boys) in 23 different institutions. Placement may come after a court order or a municipal decision, and may be based on troublesome behaviour or difficult home conditions.[3] As regards the psychological condition of youth before institutionalisation, one-third reported being subjected to psychological or physical violence by a parental figure. They also reported a high degree of psychological vulnerability, including severe trust issues, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Youth institutional staff usually have varying backgrounds and types of experience. The formal employment requirements are a secondary school diploma and a two-year post-secondary degree in social work. Nonetheless, staff rather often have no previous work experience or graduate training in the field (Briggs, 2004; Degner et al., 2010; Furnivall, 2018), and the institutions are not required to provide supervision for their staff (cf. Briggs, 2004).

Previous research

In the Nordic context, Pelto-Piri et al. (2017) studied violence management at youth institutions and concluded that while supportive staff team that shares common beliefs is vital, preventing violence is often the work of individuals. Further, they reported that threats were both common in daily work and hard to cope with. Staff underlined the need to process violent incidents after they occurred with the co-workers and youth concerned. In addition, Wästerfors (2016, p. 169) underscores the relevance of 'playfighting', i.e. behaviour that is not explicitly violent, in this particular context. Although playfights can escalate into 'real' violence, which can depart from the monotonous and often detail-controlled everyday life for both staff and young people, Wästerfors argues that playfighting is an innate feature of this environment, so staff and youth must learn to deal with it. Meanwhile, Åkerström (2002, p. 517) points out that violence involves a welter of images, feelings, and assumptions, arguing that staff may not label aggressive behaviour as violence because doing so would position them as victims and their clients as perpetrators.

Outside of the Nordic countries, multiple studies have focused on violence within social work practice (e.g., Koritsas et al., 2010; Macdonald & Sirotich, 2005; Shier et al., 2018) and some studies have focused explicitly on youth institutions (e.g., Alink et al., 2014; Harris & Leather, 2012; Winstanley & Hales, 2015). Fear is a common, though suppressed, emotion experienced by staff in relation to violent incidents of any kind (cf. Andersson, 2020; Andersson & Overlien, 2018; Harris & Leather, 2012). In their study of working cultures at residential institutions, Brown et al. (2018, p. 658) observe that staff can be influenced by a 'fearful state of mind'. They stress that fear shapes and informs three aspects of daily practice: how staff perceive youth, risk-taking, and safety practices. Furthermore, Heron and Chakrabarti (2002) raise the question of why staff are viewed as having a key role within residential institutions when they often are unqualified and

perceived as low-status workers outside of the institution. Heron and Chakrarti observe that staff are often disempowered and ill-equipped to undertake certain key tasks in a manner that meets youth needs. Anglin (2002) identifies various relational components that staff need to be able to use during the workday: for example, listening and responding to youth with respect and establishing structure and routines. Anglin points out that the more regulated the institution, the greater the risk that intimacy will disappear and along with it the familial nature of the environment, possibly increasing the risk of violence.

Identity and narrative theory

Narrative theory operates on the assumption that individuals create their own meaning through experience and structure it into a story-like form (Øverlien, 2012; Riessman, 2008, 1993). Narratives, as defined by Riessman (2008, 1993)), are a particular kind of text or talk, organised around a sequence of events with a temporal order. Narrative study, including theory, method, and analysis, is now cross-disciplinary, used by qualitatively trained scholars in many scientific fields, and can be understood as 'an umbrella term that covers a large and diverse range of approaches' (Mishler, 1999, p. xv). Although this is an encouraging development, Riessman and others have also addressed the 'tyranny of narratives' in several papers that caution against treating all text and talk as narrative (Riessman & Quinney, 2005; Riessman & Speedy, 2007). They warn against giving in to reductionism, wherein rich narratives are reduced to summaries, stripped of context and language. Our aim is to follow Riessman and Speedy (2007) standards by producing detailed transcripts, focusing on language and the context of production, paying attention to content as well as structural features, and acknowledging the dialogic nature of narratives.

Mishler, in his book on turning points (Mishler, 1999), calls identity 'a collective term referring to a set of sub-identities (among them a work identity)' that might conflict or align with one another (p. xv). Mishler argues that when speaking, we perform our identity, noting that we as social actors select and organise language to tell stories that fit the audience, our intentions, and the occasion. Identity is formed and performed in a continuous process. Of particular interest, then, are the discontinuities, which, Mishler suggests, are more typical than not in the stories of our lives. These discontinuities can take the form of turning points, where the teller describes events that shift the course of self-perception: for instance, as in this study, a shift that could influence the view of both self, youth and co-workers. Thus, narratives provide an interactive space for personal subjectivities to be expressed and enacted. As a staff member such as Alex constructs his subjectivities through narrative, a space emerges that facilitates the exploration of his social position.

Method

Teller-focused interviews

The interview was guided by Hydén's (2014, p. 796) notion of 'teller-focused interviews', emphasising the relation between interviewed and interviewer as a means of facilitation and support, given that the topic of violence is often viewed as sensitive and shrouded in

taboos and silence (Hydén, 2008). The objective was to imitate everyday conversation by using open questions (i.e., 'tell me about . . . '), stressing the interview as a dialogic process (Mishler, 1991). The interview can thus be understood as co-produced: a 'complex sequence of exchanges through which interviewer and interviewee negotiate some degree of agreement on what they will talk about, and how' (Mishler, 1999, xvi). Another objective was to preserve the story rather than fracture the narratives into small segments. Hence, significant attention was paid to Alex's own language and the distinctions he drew. If interviews are created in dialogue, they must be understood as situated retellings, i.e. they are not expressions of the one and only story the interviewee has about a specific personal experience. The highest consideration was given to research ethics throughout the project.[4]

Narrative analysis

The present article focuses on one informant, Alex. His narrative was selected partly for its structure (Ragin, 1999), partly for its explicit focus on violence and its detailed accounts of how Alex dealt with, and responded emotionally, to an emerging violent situation. As such, it represents a seldom-told story in this context, and as Ragin (1999) points out, the choice of a case depends both on its substantive and theoretical significance. The single case design, as noted by Ronen (2004) and Gerring (2004), fixes attention on processes, such as the process of how Alex changes and develops his work identity. Alex's narrative is complex, context-bound and context-sensitive, and a hard-to-reach narrative, which fits well within this approach (Ragin, 1999). Further, as Riessman and Speedy (2007) argue, storytelling involves speaking for longer stretches than is customary. Alex's narrative is long and told as one long story, without breaks, disruptions, or digressions. After looking closely at the characters in the narrative, the actions and responses, and the plot, the concept of 'emotional turning points' emerged, as at several spots in the narrative Alex describes a discontintuity: a change in his situation as a result of the violence.

Result

Alex was in his 30s and had three years of work experience at a therapeutic institution for girls. He held a university degree – quite uncommon for institution staff. Alex's institution was a complex of cottages situated within a beautiful landscape near a lake. On route to the interview room, Alex said, 'One desk and two chairs have already been smashed this week' (the interview was on a Thursday). As Mishler (1999) observes, interview respondents reframe their experience in the act of retelling their stories to fit the context. Alex knew that the interviewer was interested in how the staff handle violence in this particular context. In his greetings and introductory talk, he set the scene for the interviewer (Mishler, 1991), underscoring by extension that the narrative to come would be co-created. The following excerpt is from the beginning of the interview:

I[5]: Could you describe a situation you have been in?

A: Yes. I can take a situation from last spring, it's probably the one most etched into my memory. I was on the locked ward. We had one youth in individual care[6] and I relieved

> a colleague out there. After only a couple of minutes, I heard a door being smashed, and I see the girl coming out of her room and just screaming, really panicked screams: "Let me out." She comes around the corner holding some kind of pointed weapon to her own throat. She's in a panic and shouting at me to let her out. I take cover behind a table and then she starts pointing at me, the knife. I hit the alarm button and some of my co-workers come and put themselves a little distance away. She lunges at me a few times, mostly trying to get my keys, but she can't get them, and when she sees that we are staying calm she flips out. She throws the knife against me, it just misses, and then she jumps me. We take her down, but she's rubbed something slippery over herself, planned for this … so it's very hard to get a grip on her. Yeah … so we did get her down … the incident really left a mark on me.

An initial key point that highlights the implicit understanding of the interview topic and the specific situation is that the first question does not include the word 'violence'. However, Alex knows what kind of situations the interviewer is asking about. Alex introduces the components of his work identity claims: he attributes initial specific characteristics to both himself and the girl, underscoring that he is negotiating both his own stance and that of the girl. Alex's story departs in some ways from previous characterisations of staff and youth (cf. Pettersson, 2009). Historically, youth care institutions were created for young boys, and often staffed by men. Hence, they have masculine traits, which means that staff and youth are often portrayed with a focus on masculinity, including strength and a lack of visible emotion (cf. Andersson, 2008; Torbenfeldt Bengtsson, 2012). Alex, however, begins narrating a story in which he is vulnerable and seeking protection. He describes needing help from his co-workers and does not try to downplay the violent incident. The girl, meanwhile – although not via her own voice – is assigned the role of the violent youth, a role more often ascribed to boys in this context (Roesch-Marsh, 2014). She is aggressive, has a weapon, and apparently has planned her action. Girls placed in residential institutions have often been portrayed as psychologically fragile and vulnerable victims, something that has often been problematic because the institutions are organised on the basis of control, not care (Andersson Vogel, 2017; Roesch-Marsh, 2014). Although Alex further emphasises that he and his co-workers stayed calm, the violence escalates. Their method (i.e. the conflict management tool) does not work and Alex has to act without proper support from colleagues or workplace guidelines. He has to solve the situation the best way he can in the moment. Steckley (2012) highlights the need for staff to contain youth emotions. Alex cannot manage that. Thus, what gradually unfolds is a *reverse narrative*, highlighting a form of role reversal for Alex vis-à-vis the girl. The first turning point in shaping character, to use Mishler's (1999) language on work identity, is therefore the violent incident itself. The interview continued:

> She moved later. I don't remember if it was just a day later or maybe a week or so. But she moved to another institution and I was asked if I wanted to start work at another ward, an open ward. I had worked on the locked ward for a couple of years so I thought that could be fun, more focus on treatment, I wanted to give it a try. The spring and summer went great, but then sometime in the fall my supervisor comes to me and says the girl I had the incident with is applying for a place on the open ward. First, I thought it was a joke, no way would that happen. But she was first in line and she had made improvements at her last place, they said, and I could understand that, so why not? So she came to my ward, and … yeah … it didn't take more than a day or two before I felt like, this is the same girl. Uncomfortable. It felt weird to be around her. Like an animal that is very scared. You never know what she might do.

One thing that becomes clear at care institutions is that staff have difficulties talking about violence, since doing so either positions them as victims or perpetrators. Violence is often described instead as a conflict; or, in a contradictory way, it passes without comment as part of professional life, which can be understood as the result of a kind of normalisation process (Andersson & Øverlien, 2018). After the violent incident, Alex changed wards and everything seemed to work out fine. However, he now describes what we would label an *emotional turning point*. He re-enters an exposed position when he negotiates his work identity. On the one hand, Alex describes having recovered. When he realises that the girl is first in line to move back, he reasons that she might have changed. After just a few days, however, he feels and observes that she is the same. He describes feeling like an animal. The girl is transformed by Alex's notion of accountability from orderly to potentially violent. Alex's shift in perspective on his encounters with the girl has consequences for him, both at work and outside the job. Not only does he act differently towards the girl, but his perspective shift also leads to another way of acting towards his colleagues. He experiences an inner change. As Mishler (1999) points out, identity formation is a process of secondary production, and Alex's talk here is an example of that. In the interview, he continued:

> It always starts with something, I think it was a urine sample. Someone suspected that she was taking something and she became very offended. In the aftermath of that, I meet her on the stairs and she spits at me. She was heading out for a smoke, so I follow her out and say "that's not OK". She turns to me and we're right back into it, she's panicked and yelling, very angry with me. She has an issue with younger staff, she gets along better with older staff, but in the heat of the moment she starts screaming that I could be her ex-boyfriend. Although I'm ten years older.

It seems important to Alex to have an explanation for why the girl is violent towards him. He places the explanation outside himself, invoking external factors. On the other hand, when he reproduces her narrative, relational aspects seem to be involved. Alex suggests a meaning to the violence by noting that the girl had issues with younger staff. The relationship between staff and youth is a fundamental one (Degner et al., 2010). One reason Alex does not point out his relationship with the girl as a source of the violence could be because of inherent concerns regarding the relationships between male staff and girls at these institutions: male staff do not want to get too close to the girls for fear of being reported for abuse (cf. Øverlien & Hydén, 2003; Pettersson, 2009; Steckley, 2012). Steckley (2012) speaks of 'touch as risky', although the workers in her study primarily report lack of support from management as their greatest concern. What comes into view is a form of narrative collision within Alex's own narrative. It is as if he keeps returning during the interview to the question, 'Why is she violent?' Another possible interpretation relies on Mishler's (1999) concept of 'competing plot lines': that is, leaving room for complex interplay with other people, but also intrapersonal processes. Both aspects underscore external and internal contradictions, as seen here. In terms of understanding the origin of violence, these competing plot lines emphasise the importance of not getting stuck in static descriptions. In the light of the fact that Alex mistook the idea of the girl moving back as a joke, it is also possible to interpret violence as a silent theme; as such, there is a risk of it becoming normalised (Andersson & Øverlien, 2018; Steckley, 2012). Alex continued:

> It just went on like that. She was uneasy. She didn't act out, exactly; it was more psychological. It just felt the whole time like a fight was brewing and I felt that I couldn't do my job. One thing that happened was that I had go into the room of one of the other girls, because

> we suspected that she was going to harm herself. So I go in, and the girl I'm having problems with is sitting right on a sofa right outside the door. She gets really angry with me for going in and disturbing the other girl. She screams at me, "She doesn't want you in there . . . " She gets really angry at me and tells me I can't do what I'm doing.

Here Alex draws a distinction between psychological and physical violence. Saying 'a fight was brewing and I felt that I couldn't do my job' underlines that although the violence wasn't physical, it was still serious. Saying that he cannot fulfil his duties properly also highlights his struggle, as Briggs (2004) notes that it is a struggle to find an explanation for the emotions you feel. His discretion is limited in one way – should he follow his feelings, the girl's behaviour, or his work duties? It seems that Alex now begins to narrate an additional negotiation concerning his role and that of the girl within the institution: who is in charge? A power negotiation occurs, possibly challenging the specific character of the institution by blurring the lines between care and control. These changes in direction reflect transformation. Heron and Chakrabarti (2002) highlight the issue of power, noting that staff members often experience a lack of support and control. This could make it more difficult for staff to perform basic duties that are important to the youth, who are already in a disempowered position. Alex's position as vulnerable, and the girl's position as a perpetrator, are reinforced by moving him, and not her. They exchange roles: Alex moves from a helping position as staff to implicitly expressing a need for help, while the girl moves from a purportedly vulnerable role to a more explicit perpetrator role. Alex went on to say:

> A: I feel like she's observing me all the time, I felt like I couldn't do my job and finally I told my supervisors that I couldn't stay on. I would be at home, I think I said this during the focus group also, but I would be at home, taking it easy, and the minute I thought about her my heart started pounding, an awful unpleasant feeling, high blood pressure, so I had to go back to the locked ward and it's much better, but something has happened.
>
> I: Do you mean from the first incident when she had the knife?
>
> A: After that incident, the spring and the summer were great but now . . . she lives here now. So I feel . . . just having her here makes me uneasy and if someone from the staff sounds the alarm I'll have to rush over there. I've had sessions with a psychologist who said I absolutely should not see her. But of course I'll have to if the alarm goes off or something.

At this point in the narrative, a third essential turning point emerges. The pressure is now so strong that Alex tells his supervisor he had to change wards again. Furthermore, it is clear that the violence has now also moved out of the work context and is affecting him at home. Not only is Alex afraid of not being able to help co-workers, he also stresses how the incident affected him at home when he thought about the girl. The emotional impact Alex experienced thus underlines an additional role change. Now Alex is the one who feels watched, a feeling otherwise commonly expressed by youth in care (cf. Moore et al., 2017). The roles are reversed. The confusion becomes even clearer when Alex says a psychologist told him to avoid all contact with the girl, although such contact was a potential requirement of his job. The narrative development now reveals Alex thinking about his co-workers in such a way that he is worried that his behaviour will negatively affect them. There is a resistance to helping the girl, but it stems from interactions with the girl, not from a bad position with his co-workers. The turning point at this stage emphasises that Alex acts on his inner feelings, i.e., explicitly addressing the need to change wards, and doing so.

By contrast, the first turning point was more about his inner emotional change, staying at the ward trying to process his emotional reactions. In the interview, Alex continued:

> My biggest fear is that things won't work out for her where she is now and she'll get sent back to the locked ward, and that's where I work now. Part of me wants to go back, but not while she's there. And now she made someone else move too, because of death threats. Not physical violence but death threats.
>
> P: Staff or youth?
>
> A: A staff member, another younger one. So this worker came to my ward because she couldn't handle it. So they move the workers, not the youth.
>
> P: It's clear when you talk about it that the incident affected you.
>
> A: Yes. I remember how it used to be. Deep down I loved the work, I never minded coming in early or staying late just to hang out with the girls. I'm not there now. No, something has happened.

At the end of this narrative Alex displays an emotional expansion. Mishler (1999) argues that respondents often transform questions so they can give meaningful answers. Perhaps because he perceives the interviewer's questions as closed, Alex expands his narrative. He mentions one of his co-workers who is apparently in a situation similar to his own, finding a narrative cohesion. Maybe it is important for him to make clear in the interview that he is not the only one to suffer from the girl's behaviour, which also highlights the interviewer-respondent relationship as a negotiation. On the one hand, perhaps, Alex becomes calm and finds emotional affinity, but it is also possible to argue that this reinforces the subject position as vulnerable. Alex's narrative shows that other staff also undergo role reversals, with potential consequences for both staff and youth. Further, he expresses dissatisfaction with the way the institution transferred staff instead of youth. It might therefore be that Alex, in some way, has changed his attitude towards institutional care and its ability to change adolescents in need of care, in line with the way his work identity has changed. The latter change is reinforced by Alex's alternation between past and present. There is a change regarding work identity when he says, 'I'm not there now', which we argue can be understood as an explicit identity claim.

Towards the end of the interview, the interviewer asked Alex what kept him coming back to work despite all the violence. A little hesitantly, he said, 'I enjoy it, because the staff are great and often the young people are calm.' Still, he returned to the violent incident at the end of the interview, saying, 'I was terrified that my mood would affect the relationship I was in then.'

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate how Alex narrated violence, and thereby to look closely at how his work identity was negotiated and formed and how youth were perceived in this process. For workers at therapeutic institutions, like Alex, the daily life of the ward forms their work identity. However, three turning points also seemed to sharply shape Alex's work identity: (1) the violent incident, (2) the girl's return to the institution, and (3) Alex's change of ward after her return.

Alex narrates a story in which he, not the girl, is in a vulnerable position and in need of support. This is in stark contrast to a common gendered meta-narrative wherein staff

in this context supposedly act without fear and with strength. In other words, this is a role reversal story. Alex is engaged in processes of producing a work identity by assembling various memories, experiences, and episodes expressed in narrative form. Work identity is a performative struggle, constantly disrupted and negotiated. Framing Alex's answer in terms of identity entitlements offers another way of understanding how he defined and achieved his identity as a male member of the staff team, which is our broader objective. As Mishler (1999) argues, turning points represent discontinuities that play an important role in identity formation, including work identity formation. An emerging aspect is the interaction between intrapersonal and interpersonal processes in Alex's negotiation of his work identity – the work identity is thus defined and expressed through the way he positions himself. Although Alex tells his story chronologically (a characteristic narrative convention), his work identity formation process is neither linear nor continuous, but constantly performed and re-performed throughout the interview.

In their article on narrative resistance in social work practice, McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2017, p. 190) seek to extend Riessman and Quinney (2005) work on narrative in social work. Following them, we would argue that Alex's narrative is a 'narrative of resistance' that can be used in social work practice, questioning the static images of staff and adolescents in these kinds of institutions. A narrative of resistance attends in part to power. In this particular case, Alex is given a platform where his story emerges, placing him in control of articulating how he wants to be viewed, which is the essence of a narrative of resistance. His professional relationship with the girl is more than just a story of an employee and a care recipient. Alex's *reverse narrative* has repercussions on different levels, highlighting essential knowledge regarding the youth, co-workers, and the workplace. It places the question of gender in a new, more complex light.

Girls in therapeutic institutional care are commonly perceived as non-violent, just the opposite of what is presented here (cf. Andersson, 2008; Andersson Vogel, 2017). As stressed by Roesch-Marsh (2014), girls at institutions are often described as vulnerable and exhibiting risky sexual behaviour, while boys are not described as vulnerable but instead as acting out physically. One way to interpret the behaviour of the girl in Alex's narrative is that she does not want to be seen as a treatment subject; hence her violent behaviour is a way to express subjectivity, i.e., a demonstration of agency (cf. Wästerfors, 2014). Following Anglin (2002), her acting could also be due to previous trauma. Anglin notes that being able to respond to young people's pain is one of the challenges for care workers. He further underscores that adolescents often are described based on their behaviour, but in such descriptions, their trauma and pain go missing. Alex's narrative thus offers the social work field an expanded understanding of youth in institutional care, which has consequences for the workplace. The workplace is not only influenced by the emotional experience of the staff but also by the types of strategies they select to cope with their feelings and with violence. Furthermore, with respect to co-workers, handling violence underlines the importance of staff cooperation; however, as seen in this paper, handling violence can also lead to a withdrawal process where fear of being exposed to violence takes over, casting a shadow over both daily duties and the relational aspects of the job.

Conclusion and implications

This paper is not only a story about Alex's work identity but also a story about gender, Alex's co-workers, his workplace, and the adolescents he works with. The recent rise in violent incidents in these institutions is deeply problematic. These institutions have a pivotal role to play in preventing violence, as they must protect both staff and youth. Therefore, it is important for social work practice that role reversal stories like Alex's are told, as they may change how scholars and practitioners view this particular environment. One specific concern is to dissolve static perceptions of gender in this context. It is important to attend directly to violent situations in order to create overall understanding within the staff group. Also important are supervision and support groups for staff where these topics can be raised. For example, the field must acknowledge the power of psychological violence in addition to physical violence. Therapeutic institutions for adolescents are places filled with different emotions as well as places where young people in need are supposed to receive care. However, in addition to being a caring context, this is also a violent context where those in power experience the loss of control, underscoring that staff groups need more tools to provide care for these very vulnerable youths, as Furnivall (2018) highlights.

Notes

1. The board that oversees and manages all state-operated compulsory care.
2. Fictional name.
3. Most cases fall under the Care of Young Persons Act. In Swedish: Lagen (1990:52) med särskilda bestämmelser om vård av unga (LVU).
4. Approval sought and received from the Local Ethical Committee in Stockholm. Reference number 2016/2165-31/5.
5. First author.
6. In Swedish: *Vård i enskildhet* LVU 15d §. Individual care is differentiated from 'isolation' both in law and in practice – individual care means that the youth is separated from other youth during the placement.

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