Narrating violent victimization by positioning self and others*

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Victimologists observe that telling one's story can foster healing for survivors of violence. To understand these processes better, victims' narratives must be understood as situated acts of telling. This paper takes one man's narration of victimization long past — child abuse and rape — as a case. We examined his interview-derived storytelling with a focus on narrative positioning, narrative discourse modes, and negations. We found that Stefan (a pseudonym) used various discursive modes and narrative positionings to exercise control over the stories and what they mean. His agency was partly achieved by what he recounted not doing or saying, and what he refused to address in the interview situation. Thus, his narratives feature his own defiance and self-empowerment in both the scene and the aftermath of violence. These findings lead us to conclude that narrative strategies of storytelling should be taken into account in any practical interventions that involves testimony about harm.

Keywords: victimology, narrating violence, narrative positioning, narrative discourse modes, agency, unsaid

Introduction

Victimologists consider telling one's experience to be an indispensable aid to healing. Both on individual and societal levels, speaking truths is deemed restorative, such that psychiatrist Judith Herman (1997) refers to "the universality of testimony as a ritual of healing" (p. 181). What exactly does storytelling do for former victims? We sought an answer to that question in an examination of one man's rendering of past victimization. Our aim was to identify ways of narrative meaning-making available for telling about one's harmful experiences.

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This paper reports on analysis of that examination. It draws on two interviews with Stefan (a pseudonym). Stefan was 59 years old when the interviews took place on two consecutive days in September 2009, in Tennessee, USA. The interviews with Stefan were part of a larger project, spearheaded by the second author, on discourses concerning harm. Interview prompts were designed to elicit talk about harm. Stefan shared several different narratives in wide-ranging talk concerning what harm is and what harm-related experiences he has had. In this paper we examine Stefan's narratives of two 'types' of violence, child abuse and rape, which he called the worst things that had ever happened to him. The analysis addresses how violence gets narrated, with a view of narration as complexly related to experience and to the immediate communicative exchange.

Whereas narratives portray how it felt to live through events (Fludernik, 1996), they also shape — in the telling — what events are even taken to *be*. As we shall see, Stefan frames the trauma of being raped as imbricated with his father's hostility, and centers defiance in his narration of both rape and the father's abuse. An analytical approach stressing narrative agency was called for. We opted to use positioning analysis because of its capacity to discern how people, through storytelling, manage or resist subordination, which violence fundamentally pursues. It furthermore offers a nuanced approach to storytelling's synthesis of individual experience and societal expectations (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Deppermann, 2015).

Stefan's various positioning moves were illuminated through study of how he represented thought and speech as well as negations — what he and others did not do and especially what he and others did not *say*. Thus, analysis of narrative discourse modes (Cohn, 1978; Palmer, 2005) and textual absences (Presser, 2023) were brought to bear on our positioning analysis.

Conceptually, the analysis is framed by narrative victimology, which highlights the role of storytelling in victimization experience and relevant social practice (e.g., public policy) (Hourigan, 2019; Pemberton et al., 2019; Walklate et al., 2019), and by narrative criminology, which explores how narratives may promote, legitimize, or motivate harm *and* may contribute to resisting or combatting harm (Presser, 2019; Presser & Sandberg, 2015). This paper *extends* these approaches by probing situated storytelling and undertaking more granular discursive study than has been done before. Before turning to our analysis we consider insights from victimology on healing in the aftermath of violence, our thoughts about the ethics of the study, and research methods including data collection and analytic strategies.

Narrating violence: Victimological perspectives

Violence pursues power. In the act of violence the perpetrator denies the victim agency. In turn, narrating violence can restore agency to survivor-storytellers. The latter is not a given. Examples abound of stories that are coerced or forced into limiting formats, such as by institutional hearings and victim impact statements. More generally, social structures including hierarchies, norms, and all manner of discursive forms constrain what we even think to narrate and how. Still, storytelling is at least potentially empowering after trauma.

Agency is thematized in clinical and scholarly discussions of achieving psychological integration through narration, as Susan Brison (2002) states: "one can control certain aspects of the narrative and that control, repeatedly exercised, leads to greater control over the memories themselves, making them less intrusive and giving them the kind of meaning that enables them to be integrated into the rest of life" (p. 54). Debra Kaminer (2006) identifies six processes via which narration is theorized as having a salutary therapeutic impact on survivors of trauma and especially violence: (1) emotional catharsis; (2) creation of coherence through linguistic representation; (3) habituation of anxiety; (4) empathic witnessing of injustice; (5) developing an explanatory account; and (6) identification of purpose and value in adversity. All of these processes 'activate' the survivor, who becomes the manager of their emotions and memories, and the ultimate judge of what the violence meant.

Contemporary narratologists stress the essentially social nature of storytelling (Björninen et al., 2020). Likewise, victimologists note that how stories are received matters a great deal to victims and to recovery. The philosopher Susan Brison (2002, p. 54), who suffered rape and assault, recalls:

> I found it healing to give my testimony in public and to have it confirmed by the police, the prosecutor, my lawyer, and ultimately, the jury, who found my assault guilty of rape and attempted murder.

A healing kind of storytelling, at a minimum, has narrators telling what they wish *as* they wish to a supportive audience. In contrast, the victim who is *made* to tell their story or whose telling is governed or disparaged in some way is said to be subjected to revictimization. Criminal legal processes are notorious for controlling storytelling of those implicated — as plaintiffs, defendants, or witnesses.

Legal agents direct victim-narrators to describe specific events set in historically ordered time with clear agents and patients. They require narratives that keep 'separate' events separate, to answer questions and say no more. Experience — perhaps especially the experience of very serious 'kinds' of victimization and/or a pattern of ongoing victimization — may be at odds with traditional expectations

for a narrative. Such victims may not know who is responsible for harming them. They may blame different agents on different occasions, including themselves. They may seem to equivocate on just what 'the' victimization consisted of. In giving priority to experientiality over plot, Monika Fludernik (1996) recovers these narratives from event-centeredness. The "small stories" approach developed by Michael Bamberg and Alexandra Georgakopoulou (2008) invites scholarly analysis of scant recounting, which may be seen when victims grapple with memory and manage difficult emotional experience. Understanding of narratives as situated in the moment of storytelling mitigates the expectation of chronologically faithful and 'full' portrayals of the past.

With these complexities in mind — and the basic insight that stories are always told *to* someone — we ask: How does Stefan construct violent experience narratively? What discursive strategies and positionings are discernible with implications for situated and more lasting claims about agency, intent, and morality?

Ethical considerations

Before turning to how we addressed the aforementioned research questions, we pause to discuss ethical considerations. Telling was a rare and emotional experience for Stefan. He sobbed as he began to tell the story of being raped; he had only once before shared about the experience. All of us who receive the story are onlookers to suffering. The second author, who led data collection, takes some responsibility for Stefan's narration, in responding to the question of having been harmed, being 'about' victimization. Nothing in the design of the study directed participants to reflect on resistance, resilience, or triumph over hardship.

However few the requirements and expectations a researcher might impose on narration by violence victims, the researcher typically wields power as the driver of the study, its basic parameters and the eventual analysis. Stefan was not, we believe, coerced to tell his story, and yet we cannot know that he was better off for having done so. We would, however, note his engagement with the interviews: he seemed to treat them as a prompt to reflection even beyond the sessions. For instance, in the final moments of the second interview, the interviewer asked Stefan to weigh in on harm that cannot possibly be justified, Stefan responded with a few thoughts, then remarked, "I'll have to sit down and think of a better answer, but that's the best I can come up with right now." His projection of ongoing conversation, in which he plays a lead role, suggests to us that the dialogue had its rewards and invited agency. We return to the matter of Stefan's agency as storyteller in the analysis.

Research methods

Despite having rather different academic backgrounds, both authors have migrated toward 'real world' narrative analysis. The integration of social science, discourse analytic, and narratological methods was a boon to the project.

Data collection

The interview with Stefan was part of a larger study of how people reason about doing harm, including how they construct legitimate and illegitimate harm in narratives. This larger study was conceptually framed by narrative criminology (Presser, 2009), which concerns how narratives promote, legitimize, or motivate harm but may also resist or otherwise counter harm. The present analysis directs attention to narrating harm-experiencing, which is more properly the domain of narrative victimology than of narrative criminology. Yet, emergent findings of Stefan's resistance to dominant meanings of his experiences, cued their relevance for narrative criminology as well as narrative victimology.

Methodologically, discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013) and structural and dialogic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) guided the larger study. These approaches align with our quest to understand big and small moves in both what participants said and how he said it. When the first and second authors came together to discern dynamics in Stefan's interviews and narrative, we turned to positioning analysis for even more fine-grained investigation.

For the larger study, 60 persons in Tennessee were interviewed and asked their thoughts on various harms (e.g., corporal punishment of children, meat-eating) as well as harm as a concept. The interviews were semi-structured around prompts including: How would you define harm? and Would you share a story where you either did harm or nearly did? The second author and a team of four student (sociology graduate and honors undergraduate) researchers under her supervision conducted the interviews. The second author conducted a day-long orientation to qualitative interviewing with all of the student-researchers. The research participants were located through snowball sampling: the research team asked friends and acquaintances to ask their friends and acquaintances to participate. No compensation was given.

The interviews were held in various private locations including the participant's home, the interviewer's home, and private campus offices. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed into Word. The first interview with Stefan lasted 67 minutes; the second interview lasted 89 minutes. An advanced doctoral student in sociology conducted the interviews with Stefan at her home. Stefan was

a white, 59-year-old self-identified cisgender man. The interviewer was a white self-identified cisgender woman in her late 40s.

A word is in order on the contribution of a *single*-case analysis. We commend it. Positioning analysis has been developed in papers that use one extract of one interview as data (including foundational works by Bamberg and Georgakopoulou cited here). The approach has regularly showcased the fact that questions of *how* narratives are used — instead of focusing on *what* is said — are necessarily addressed via deep dives into limited material (cf. Baker & Edwards, 2012). We were also inspired by single-case analyses in sociological criminology that illuminate discursive/interactional moves on the part of narrators, a prominent example being Clifford Shaw's (1930) *The Jack-Roller*. At the same time, we are struck by the scarcity of close studies of sexual violence experienced by boys and men, including in our own data sets.

Whereas the authors have conducted interviews with other people victimized by violence, we have been challenged to deliver a careful, fine-grained analysis involving more than one narrator. At least three kinds of variation are under investigation in the current study: (1) between different levels of positioning, such as in the storyworld and in the storytelling exchange; (2) between two different victimization experiences; and (3) between what is said and what is not said. The focus on one man's narration allowed us to take care with all three — that is, with all of Stefan's most salient discursive moves.

Analysis

Positioning analysis

To make sense of how Stefan narrates violent victimization, we examined the ways he positioned himself and others. Psychologist Michael Bamberg (1997) developed narrative positioning analysis, broadly, to give "more centrality to the speaker's active engagement in the construction process of narratives" (p. 341). With Georgakopoulou, Bamberg explicated "levels" of positioning along three lines: (1) positioning the characters in the story; (2) positioning the teller and other participants in the interactive situation of the telling; and (3) positioning the teller's identity vis-à-vis dominant cultural models, norms and/or expectations (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). For example, a narrative analyst might ask who the protagonist is (e.g., an innocent young boy), who the teller is (e.g., a good person honestly engaging in the interview situation), and what cultural expectations the teller is drawing from (e.g., that children need their parents' protection) in the storytelling.

Arnulf Deppermann (2013, 2015) subsequently revised the model developed by Bamberg and Georgakopoulou by dividing their level 1 into two categories and their level 2 into four categories. In Deppermann's reformulation, Level 1a positions the story characters vis-à-vis one another; Level 1b positions the story characters by narrative design, such as the narrator assigning social categories or describing tones of voices. Level 2a denotes the teller positioning their former selves, often indicating biographical change between former and present self. Level 2b has the teller positioning their present self in relation to the listener. Level 2c involves meta-narrative interactional positioning towards the listener(s), for example, by asking their knowledge or evaluation, whereas Level 2d is interactional positioning by the story recipient(s) guiding the present situation. With the added complexity, the Deppermann model invites more nuanced analysis, one that pursues different ways of positioning and more positions, such as different selves through time. In general, we deployed Deppermann's model for our analysis.

Narrative discourse modes in thought and speech representation

The empirical work of positioning analysis brings us to the matter of how narratives render past thought and speech, those of the self and other characters in the story. A useful model for investigation of such is the speech act category approach within narratology, which considers who is speaking in a text, the narrator or a character. Dorrit Cohn (1978 and in passim) developed this approach to distinguish the modes of consciousness representation in fiction. As a synthesis of previous work, Alan Palmer (2005) set out the narratological speech act category model for thought representation that includes thought report (in the narrator's discourse), free indirect thought (which mixes the narrator's and character's discourses) and direct thought (in the character's discourse), also applicable to speech representation. We followed this tripartite model, which has previously been used to analyze thought and speech representation outside the fictional realm, specifically with interview material (see Hatavara, 2023).

Free discourse supposedly follows the character's speech or thought verbatim and can therefore be associated with their agency, even if necessarily mediated by the teller (Cohn, 1978). Indirect discourse is also called psychonarration, as it allows the narrator not only to assign feelings and aspirations of the characters with the use of mental verbs and emotive language, but also enables the portrayal of feelings unconscious to the character experiencing them (Cohn, 1978). Free indirect discourse, in particular, has considerable interpretative potential as it linguistically merges the character's and the narrator's discourse, often creating either empathetic or ironic relation between the character and the narrator. Therefore, it can be an important strategy for controlling proximity to and distance from the

previous self (cf. Hatavara, 2023). Analysis of the various discursive choices allows us to discern such positioning.

Unsaid and negations

Speakers position themselves in alignment with or against normative discourses or "master narratives" in Level 3 positioning (Bamberg, 2004, p. 347; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 385). Because master narratives refer to the canonical, they are less often articulated than are counter-narratives, which actively resist the former (Hyvärinen, 2020). Thus, to grasp Level 3 positioning involves interpretative work along discursive lines. In and beyond master narratives much goes unsaid in communication: meaning is constructed through what is said *and* what is not said.

Unsaid is the focus of a burgeoning field of silence studies whose focus is not limited to narrative texts (e.g., Murray & Durrheim, 2019; Schröter & Taylor, 2017). Contributing to that body of work, Lois Presser (2023) offers a set of methodological strategies, comprising what she calls *unsaid analysis*, for discerning what goes unsaid in texts with harmful consequences. Unsaid includes both (1) omissions that serve powerful interests, which surface as figurative speech (e.g., metaphors) and patterns of over- and understatement, and (1) erasures of persons, events, actions, experiences, contexts, and perspectives. Presser also emphasizes the social construction of unsaid through lenses of pragmatics (e.g., politeness in conversation) and intertextuality.

We did not subject the interviews with Stefan to unsaid analysis. However, we noted and then systematically assessed how Stefan did his own kind of unsaid analysis, calling attention to what powerful actors in his early life did not say with harmful effects and their silencing of young Stefan as part of the abuse he suffered. Stefan also called attention to his resistance to future harm via self-silencing (keeping secrets), which points to silence as sometimes harmful and sometimes helpful and even empowering: as Presser (2023) notes, "Whomerever voice is demanded, silence is protest" (p. 8). Our analysis pays close attention to what Stefan resisted saying in both the storyworld and in the interview, related to his own agency.

Narrators may recount what they did not say in the storyworld, and thus do Level 1a positioning: for example, they were loyal to a secretive cause when others were not. They may also refuse to tell something — even calling attention to their refusal — in the present context of communication, and thus do Level 2b positioning, for example, as self-willed. The latter is always relevant, if not accomplished, where persons tell stories by answering questions. Therefore, unsaid analysis cuts across all levels of positioning, even though it is most clearly instrumental in iden-

tifying the third level positionings where the speakers draw on master narratives but typically leave them unarticulated.

Analysis

To present our analysis, we move through the interview material where Stefan recounted two experiences of violent victimization — Stefan's father's abuse toward him when he was 15 and an earlier incident of being gang raped at the age of 13. We follow this reverse chronological order because this is the order of Stefan's telling: indeed, he narrated one experience the first day of the interview and the other experience the second day. This approach allows us to focus on the key instances of Stefan's narration of harmful experience (see Denzin, 2012).

Stefan's narrative of child abuse was notable for its close description. That narrative drew a stark contrast between malevolent intention on the abuser's part and the innocence of the victimized Stefan. Other contrasts in the narrative were a happy afternoon interrupted by a brutal beating; not knowing versus knowing; and an active offender versus a passive victim. Discursively, Stefan the narrator directed the listener to consider the situation of abuse as the young Stefan experienced it.

Child abuse

As stated above, Stefan recounted the story of physical assault by his father on the first day of interviewing, after the interviewer asked if he might share episodes in which he was intentionally harmed. Child abuse came first to his mind.

(1) **Interviewer** Let's think of an episode where you were harmed. Maybe — intentionally. Um, in your life. Is there something that comes to mind?

Stefan My father (chuckle). Generally (chuckle). [Okay.] My father was never really — I never thought my father ever treated me well even when I was a little- little kid. Um, I don't remember anything — any uh — any fond memories of him at all. But after my elder brother died when I was seven, things really went downhill. Um, regular beatings, constant yel- constant — verbal abuse, uh, complete disrespect, um, he had no problem mak- making me feel miserable on a daily basis.

Responding first by naming a single actor ("My father") and emphasizing a *pattern* of action ("Generally"), Stefan then elaborated upon mistreatment seemingly set off by tragedy. He understated, through litote, the father's poor treatment of him — from the perspectives at the time of telling ("My father was never really")

and in the past ("I never thought"). The latter reflection takes the form of psychonarration, where Stefan-now described a general sentiment he held as a child toward his father. With the short sentence "I was a little kid," Stefan assigned social categories on Level 1b — the vulnerable child that he was and the abusive father. Via past tense he positioned himself at the time of telling on Level 2a as having been a child but not occupying that position any longer. The use of psychonarration emphasizes Stefan's privileged position at the time of telling as opposed to the helpless child. It makes clear positioning on Level 3 — of Stefan having overcome a childhood with abusive and neglectful parenting.

Immediately after the above exchange, Stefan recounted the incident of physical abuse in detail. He evaluated it as the "worst incident" within a broader context of child abuse:

(2) Uh, when I was about 15, this was the worst — incident. I was 15 and it was a Sunday afternoon, I was out playing football with a friend. I came home, it was time for dinner and I walk in — walk in — the living room door — front of the house — and he's sitting on the couch and he says you're late — with a really nasty look on his face and I said, well I'm not late and it wasn't a nasty response or disrespectful, I just said, I'm not late, and then I realized there's no noise in the house.

Stefan's portrayal of the events is notable for the granularity of representation, which is important for the story level positioning of characters by narrative design (Level 1b). Stefan told the happenings in detail: entering the living room, his father sitting there. He switched to present tense after stating that he came home: "I walk in" and "he's [his father is] sitting on the couch and he says you're late." The present tense immerses the listener in the moment when the young teenager encountered his father sitting on the couch. The effect of this dramatic present tense is further emphasized by Stefan's quoting the father's words verbatim. Story level positioning with the enactment of reported dialogue has been understood as a powerful means to express the story characters' positioning ("you're late," Level 1a). Since Stefan used the father's words as direct discourse, that is, in the linguistic form that his father could have used himself, the father's menacing stance becomes further highlighted and presented firmly as belonging to the father as a character, rather than being imposed by the telling Stefan at a later point of time.

Stefan further built the character of the father by describing the expression on the older man's face. The mention of "a really nasty look" anticipates something malevolent to come and cues highly discordant story level positioning between the two characters (Level 1b). Stefan's response to his father's accusation that he is late, by contrast, "wasn't a nasty response." The negative expression suggests that

Stefan feels the need to explain his past behavior, perhaps against an assumed supposition of his listener (cutting through Levels 2a and 2c positioning).

In the following sentence Stefan reported a realization he had at the time of the told: "there's no noise in the house." Stefan quoted his own past thoughts as if verbatim. The discursive imitation of his past thoughts invites the interviewer to understand how it felt to have the sudden realization (Level 2c positioning).

Stefan continued to partially immerse the telling in the time of the told as he returns to the present tense, beginning "Turns out."

(3) Turns out the entire remainder of the family was across the street watching TV, which back — which they did occasionally back then because the people across the street had a color TV. But uh, in hindsight I know they were over there on purpose because he wanted to be alone with me. And as soon as I said, uh, I'm not late, he got up out of — uh off the couch and never explained anything to me and beat me up — literally with his fists, beat me up. Threw me against the walls, threw furniture at me. By the time he was done, uh, told me to go in the bathroom and clean up for dinner. Not your normal cleanup for dinner. And uh, he must have called them 'cause they — while I was in the bathroom, about three four minutes later, I was a mess — took — took me a while to clean up, about three four minutes later, the whole family comes walking in and I don't believe that was a coincidence — I'm quite sure he called them and said OK, come on back over. Because dinner was all ready.

Stefan narrated his father's past intentions as known, even obvious, to Stefan as narrator but not to Stefan the character. Speaking from hindsight, Stefan recalled that the rest of the family had been sent away "on purpose" to allow the father to instigate and carry through the planned violence. A bit later, Stefan stressed that the violence was motivated, his father a mindful assailant, as he noted that while his father was an alcoholic, he was not drunk but rather "completely lucid" during the assault (Level 2b positioning).

Stefan did not portray himself as doing anything at all during the abuse: his father is the sole actor, beating and throwing Stefan and the furniture. The assault has a definite end when the father is "done" ("By the time he was done…."). In contrast to his passivity at the story level, Stefan suggested his own discursive power over the situation, as he only quoted the father's past words at the beginning, "you're late", but at other points used his own narrative mode to tell what the father did and said. When relating the father's doings during the abuse, Stefan only used the pronoun "he" referring to his father once ("he got up off the couch"), but repeated "me" — referring to himself — repeatedly (five times). After the one "he," the father is metonymically reduced to "his fists" and then largely omitted from linguistic representation as an active subject.

Then too, Stefan assumed control at Level 2c, in relation to the interviewer. Immediately following Stefan's account of his father having sent the family away ("I think he called them and said OK, come on back over. Because dinner was all ready"), the interviewer asked a simple "Why?" In effect she attempted to intervene in Level 2d positioning, but Stefan asserted his hold on the story-managing position he had assumed:

(4) No, I got to finish this, there's more to it. Uh they came back and my mother put dinner out on the table. So, he held up dinner and — we sat down at the table and he said to me, I don't like you, I don't love you, when you're 18 you're out of this house, but until you're out of this house you keep your mouth shut, you don't say a word and you do whatever I say. Do you understand me? I said yes. And he stood up and screamed at me and he goes 'Yes *what*?' And I looked at him, I didn't know what the hell he was talking about and he goes 'Yes *sir*!' So, I looked at him and I cocked my head and I went, yes sir. To this day I don't know why that happened. I have absolutely no idea why that happened.

Stefan repeated his father's words as if verbatim in the list-like declaration by the father, describing how he feels about Stefan and what he wants him to do, emphasizing the father's purposiveness and quest for domination. The recounting highlights the father's rage, as Stefan described his father's screaming at him, demanding that Stefan call him sir, and vividly imitates the angry tone of voice with his own tone (prosodic design hence Level 1b positioning). While Stefan mimicked the father's modeling of what Stefan is supposed to say — "Yes sir!" — with the angry tone, no specific tone is detectable in Stefan quoting his own reply "Yes sir". Thus did Stefan highlight his cool demeanor relative to that of his father in the aftermath of the physical abuse. It is interesting, however, that Stefan stated that he cocked his head before giving the required answer, at this point choosing to portray Stefan's own audacious action in telling (Level 1b positioning).

Stefan's report on his body language is perhaps the strongest indication of his own will and agency in the story about the beating. To further emphasize that Stefan is taking a stand here, the tilting of the head is preceded with telling about Stefan looking at his father. A succession of verbs — "So, I looked at him and I cocked my head and I went, yes sir" — underscores that at this stage Stefan was also doing and not just receiving. Describing himself looking at his father can be interpreted as Stefan-the-narrator's choice to position (Level 1b) himself as brave, since looking at someone is usually understood as standing one's ground; at the same time it nudges towards level 2a positioning of Stefan already at the time of the story showing signs of his skills to overcome hardship, which becomes further

highlighted in the second example we analyze. Further mentioning that he also tilted his head, the narrating Stefan signaled even more defiance.

Presently the interviewer asked Stefan to help make sense of his father's abuse, specifically his abusive diatribe ("I don't like you, I don't love you…") and Stefan offered an explanation.

(5) **Interviewer** Do you suppose it was a matter of him projecting his anger of — of other things to you?

Stefan No, it was a matter of hate. The man literally hated me and I have no idea why and when he said that, my mother sat right there at the kitchen table and didn't say a word and all the kids were there.

Stefan's explanation quickly gave way to telling more about what had happened, specifically that while his father lectures him, his mother "sat right there at the kitchen table and didn't say a word." Using "right there" and specifying the place as "the kitchen table," Stefan located the happenings very specifically and highlighted the fact that the mother was immediately present; the mother is positioned with other characters in the midst of the action but taking no part in it (Level 1b).

The disnarrated "didn't say a word," positioning the mother through story design (Level 1b) — suggests that his mother *should* have said something as otherwise it would not warrant mentioning. (In contrast, Stefan did not remark on the silence of his siblings.) Through interactive positioning that addresses common shared expectations between Stefan and the interviewer (Level 2c) this negative expression also indicates Level 3 positioning, summoning what would have been expected from a parent. Stefan portrayed her as a weak if not evil moral actor. What is more, Stefan is morally superior to his mother, which surfaces in the discursive resemblance between her having chosen the position of one who "didn't say a word" and the command he reportedly received from his father, "you don't say a word." Both mother and son are silent, but Stefan's harmful silence is commanded while his mother's is, evidently, voluntary.

Gang rape

The next day, Stefan narrated the gang rape incident quite differently than he did the child abuse incident. Whereas he drew some similar contrasts very generally, such as between active and passive positions, he said little about the offenders and their intentionality. Details of the event — what happened and what was said — are spare compared with those provided in the child abuse narrative.

Toward the end of the session on the second day of interviewing, the interviewer asked if the greatest harm that was ever done to Stefan was what his father did. Stefan replied that there is another thing he has not yet mentioned, but he

wants to take a break before telling about it. After the break he started to tell about a recurrent nightmare he had from adolescence until his middle age years. The nightmare involves "this dark figure that looked like a man" and approaching. It has "no features whatsoever," but rather is "just like a shadow of a man." Stefan shared that "through the years, it always seemed to get a little closer to me." Stefan recalled waking suddenly from the nightmare one night, remembering the rape, and subsequently rising quickly, hitting his head.

(6) Anyways I had that dream that night, and um — at uh — it — I — found out who it was and when I did, I — I uh bowled up in bed and whammed my head right into that — that rafter. (Inaudible few words.) And um, when I was about 13, um, I and uh the kid next door — living next door to me, Cory Mullins, behind where we lived there were a good deal of woods there and there's a small village there called Barkin Bend and it was a quarry. And — and near that quarry there was a cave and it wasn't a cave you'd like walk straight into, you had to climb down the rocks [Mm-hmm], probably a good hundred feet. [Mm.] And we were in that, um, cave one day in the summer, I was 13 and uh Barkin Bend is a really — not — [it's] like a rough area. Those kids didn't go to the same — same school we did. Um. And anyway four — like 16-, 17-year-old guys came in there and they raped us.

The "who it was" that he finally recalls in the dream is not stated; instead, the next character mentioned is "the kid next door, Cory Mullins" who was raped alongside him. Stefan uttered two more sentences about the rape's setting before mentioning its agents ("Those kids") and the violence ("and they raped us."). Giving the happenings, the decisive label of "rape" and assigning clear roles of rapist and victim (Level 1b positioning) show Stefan's use of power in the moment of telling (Level 2a positioning) to name the event yet not to describe the happenings in detail as he had lived through them.

Stefan's portrayal of both the moment of realization and the situation of entering the site of the rape include several spatial references that may be seen to bear wider embodied and cultural significance. Positioning, we note, situates persons *somewhere*. Therefore, spatial references can offer shortcuts to the interpretation of positioning even when these references are metaphoric. Both the cave and the place where Stefan is sleeping at the moment of realization are confined, low spaces where it is impossible to stand up properly. The forced bending down posture channels the orientational metaphor where subjection is down (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003, p. 15).

Stefan provides few details of the rape scene, though he does designate the rape as a terrible harm, calling it "the worst thing that was ever done to me. By far." It is thus interesting that his evaluative remarks do not concern the rape *per*

se. Rather, they have to do with his not being able to tell his family lest he suffer more abuse from his father for having been sexually assaulted. Stefan can be heard weeping in the interviewing situation and the interviewer stops the recording for a while. When recording continues, the interviewer stated: "so all that you could remember was walking home and not saying anything." Apparently she was repeating Stefan's words about what had happened. Stefan highlighted his not-saying emphatically and reflexively, prominently featuring 'I':

(7) …there wasn't any question in my mind that I wasn't going to say anything. I knew it. I wasn't going to say anything, but I thought about the reasons why I wasn't going to say anything. Uh, something like this, you're supposed to have a family, and uh I knew that if I told my parents what had happened that my father would have beat me, probably to an inch of my life, and I'd spend the rest of my life looking, having to see their looks, because they certainly would have looked at me differ — differently I know, for the rest of my life. And then, so I didn't say anything. Not for thirteen to thirty-se- not for twenty-four years.

The necessity of not saying anything was very clear and cognized for him at the time of experiencing the talked-about events. In the immediate aftermath of the rape, Stefan took some control by choosing not to narrate (Level 1b positioning), which he emphasizes in the telling, both positioning his past self (Level 2a) and prompting the interviewer to consider what it means to have a family (Level 2c positioning).

Stefan's moral assessment, "you're supposed to have a family" — seemingly one that helps its members in difficult situations — was attributed to Stefan the child. He understood even then that he was a victim of unsupportive parenting; he evokes a cultural norm of family support on Level 3 positioning. Stefan related his past thoughts first in indirect form using mental verbs like "I knew" and summing up the happenings as "what had happened," assuming a discursive distance from, but epistemological mastery over, the past self and past happenings. Next, he also approximated his past thoughts discursively in a manner coming close to free indirect discourse, where the thoughts of the teenager could be discerned assuming the standard linguistic markers of the form: *I'll spend the rest of my life…*. Thus, Stefan allowed the interviewer relatively intimate access to what he had experienced right after the rape, cutting across positionings on story and interaction levels.

Stefan managed to avoid abuse and stigmatization by remaining silent. The repeated expression "rest of my life" marks the decision as one that had a formative effect on his whole life, according to Stefan's interpretation: the chosen silence gives him agency over formidable outcomes in his life, bringing together a past

decision on the story level, emphasizing it on the level of interaction, and with subsequent, transcendent meaning for self-image — all three basic levels of positioning actively working together as Stefan makes sense of his experience and its significance.

From Stefan's discussion of his agentive silence, the interviewer moved directly to a criminological question about the rapists (Level 2d positioning). In response, Stefan provided a clear and curt answer to the effect that he has never been curious about their motives:

(8) **Interviewer** Wow. Did you ever wonder what made them do it, or…

Stefan They're pigs, all right. I never wondered about that. They're just pigs.

Stefan-the-narrator here used a cultural trope of "pigs" that ends signification, lumping it with other, less serious forms of male misconduct, with "all right" and "just" both further signaling that no further discussion is needed. With "I never wondered about that" Stefan asserts that even at the time of his experience he did not ponder offender motivation. Indeed, the attribution of animality suggests a lack of specific motivation, emphasizing Stefan's refusal to represent the thoughts of the assailants. It positions Stefan and the rapists on the story level (1b) in two completely different categories.

The interviewer immediately followed Stefan's "They're just pigs" with another stab at criminological reasoning (Level 2d positioning), which Stefan simply did not engage. Rather, he changed the subject, transitioning with "But the interesting thing" to cue a more important point:

(9) **Interviewer** Sick?

Stefan But the interesting thing about it is, because I mean at thirteen you're, uh…

Interviewer It's a very tender age.

Stefan Well, a very tender age, but you're also forming your sex. (Mmhmm.) And the interesting thing of it was, was from what little I knew of my sex at that time I knew that it was something great, not something awful. And, I just told myself th-that I was determined not to let them make it awful. Of course, I then had no idea when I was going to start having sex, but, um, I made a real effort to separate that from sex (Mmhmm.) because that wasn't sex. That was violence. (Right.) That wasn't sex. It was power. (Right.) And, um…(4-second pause) I really did succeed in that.

The "interesting thing" that Stefan described is not 'about' the rapists. Instead, "the interesting thing" is his own inner triumph over the rape's lasting effects. Using psychonarration, Stefan recounted how the teenage Stefan "was determined" to think of the rape as an act of violence, nothing to do with 'his' sex, thus

safeguarding an unsullied sexuality in the four-plus decades following the rape. Stefan powerfully redeemed the past events to categorize them in relation to Level 3 positioning and his successful identity work.

The interview proceeded with the interviewer asking other questions about the aftermath of the rape incident, specifically if Stefan ever subsequently encountered the perpetrators. Stefan answered these questions, mostly factually. (For example, "Did you avoid that area?" "Well, I didn't go back to the cave.") He then returned to the topic of the rape incident itself. He recounted that "When they started I fought them all away" and contrasts that resistance with his friend's reaction "like freeze frame." Stefan indirectly related what the aggressors wanted him to do through negation — "Until he pulled the knife to my head I- I wouldn't lie still for 'em" — and through telling about his refusal to do that emphasizes his own agency in the described situation (Level 1b positioning). That he eventually had to lie still at the edge of a knife is never directly expressed.

Stefan spoke little about his feelings during most of the account, until relating that he felt long-lasting shame after the incident.

(10) Um, took me a long time — to get over the shame of it even though I know — didn't — *knew* I didn't have anything to be ashamed about. But I felt shame. [Mm-hmm.] And dirty. [Yeah.]

This emotional experience was at first related indirectly, preceded by a consideration of getting over the feeling and evaluation that it was an unwarranted emotional response. Subsequently, Stefan did directly describe those feelings, using the evocative metaphor of dirtiness. Stefan narrated both what happened and the feeling of it from the distance of the time of the telling with the narrator's formally indirect but semantically decisive discourse. In doing so, Stefan took care to maintain interpretive and emotional control at the time of the telling. He also emphatically asserted knowing that there is no shame in being raped and revises the formulation of that knowledge ("*knew* I didn't") to indicate that even the experiencing Stefan was aware of not needing to feel ashamed.

Discussion

For recovering from hardship or disorder, narrative is widely considered to hold unique value. Kaminer (2006) identifies six restorative processes of narrating trauma. Our analysis of Stefan's narration of violence had us, in effect, expanding upon two of those processes — the construction of linguistic representation and explanatory accounts. We emphasized both the story that was told and its telling, the discursive choices made, and the positions these constructed in story and

telling scenes. We innovated with positioning analysis through close attention to negations — what did not happen, what was not the case, and what was not said.

Stefan narrated two experiences of violence, both involving physical incapacitation, deliberate injury, and silence. Using several discursive modes and positioning himself and others strategically, he exercised the power of narrative to make sense of happenings and to explain them. Importantly, he chose how and what to narrate, for example to portray his father's intentions in detail and as known and to refuse to speculate on the rapists' intentions. Stefan claimed mastery over trauma via how he positioned himself in the stories, in the telling context, and in the conjured social-moral world that encompassed both.

Contrasts between Stefan's narrative of child abuse and his narrative of gang rape highlight agency in making meaning of trauma. In recounting his father's physical assault, Stefan made discursive choices and provided thick detail to characterize both his actively hostile father and his passive mother as morally inadequate. With the use of present tense together with direct quotations of his past thoughts Stefan invited the listener to understand how it felt to live through the events. In contrast, the rape incident was recounted with more discursive distance.

Moreover, Stefan emphasized his father's intentionality, though not that of the rapists. The father's intentions are known to the narrating Stefan. In contrast, the gang rape story begins with no human agents. Stefan used a single descriptor for his rapists ("pigs") and resisted the interviewer's bids to discuss them or their motivations any further.

Stefan's evaluation of the rape narrative can be summed up in terms of his defiance and self-empowerment, though permeated by his sustained dread of the violent father he casts as a hypothetical judge of the rape. In the rape narrative, Stefan is a champion at the level of the story, bypassing an alternative storyline that would have had him stigmatized and revictimized (by the abusive father) and keeping his attitudes about sexuality distinct from the rape experience. Stefan narrated himself as making the best possible choices from hindsight evaluation. Distancing himself from the happenings as experienced both in the story level and in discursive modes enables Stefan to project triumph over harm in the moments of storytelling.

Stefan emphasized his father's abusiveness in narrating both episodes of violence. His narrative of being raped operates, in effect, as an adjunct to his narrative of being abused by a parent. In our view Stefan's storytelling surrounding rape functions as a counter-narrative (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004). He contested dominant understandings of sexual violence as the worst sort of victimization that one — and especially males — might sustain. He resisted the interviewer's — and societal — focus on (some) offenders and their motives. Rather, he insisted on a story

that centers victimization experience and not the etiology of rape. His narratives feature his own psychological resilience in the scene and immediate aftermath of violence. His resistance to master narratives concerning violent victimization and crime was nuanced, forged out of what is done and not done, said and not said.

Conclusions

Our study aligns with Kristen Hourigan's (2019) argument that "narrative victimologists must examine victims' narratives with sensitivity towards their fluid, co-constructed, purposeful and situated nature" (p. 259). It heeds Georgakopoulou's (2020) call for scholarship "uncovering and analyzing the contextually sensitive co-construction of stories and any moments of agency, resistance, performance but also ambivalence, dilemmas and contradictions for their tellers" (p. 56).[1]

Victims of violence are subjugated in the victimization event but may establish mastery by telling their stories of victimization (Brison, 2002; Herman, 1997). We do not claim that interviews are consistently healing encounters (cf. Easton & Parchment, 2021; Rosenthal, 2003). We *do* claim that to invite victims to tell their stories, with at least some capacity to speak as one wishes, is to invite the exercise of control. Elizabeth Cook and Sandra Walklate (2019) observe that narrative interviewing affords "victims a space to reassert control and agency over experiences which have been previously disempowering and isolating" (p. 241). Regulating proximity to those experiences is associated with mental wellbeing (see Hatavara, 2023). In narrating victimization one may also resist being positioned as helpless, pathetic, marginal, deplorable, or culpable. As such, narrating may shape 'harm' in the here-and-now, and not just in one's recollection of harm.

The research interviews with Stefan allowed him to assert agency vis-à-vis his experiences of violence by laying claim to what they meant (and did not mean) through specific linguistic choices. Thus, we strongly endorse narrative victimology taking a reflexive stance on studies and deeply probing narrative composition and interaction in research encounters. In regard to this latter emphasis on encounters, we see the benefits of narrative victimological engagement with ideas about "the collaborative work of storytelling" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 107) including the situated and otherwise social construction of what is left unsaid (Presser, 2023).

1. The study similarly follows studies of narrative ambiguity in criminology (Sandberg, Tutenges, & Copes, 2015; Poppi & Verde, 2021; Presser, 2008).

Positioning was key in both recalling and staging opposition to silencing (Level 1), to the demand for expression (Level 2), and to relating personal experience to the culturally and socially expected (Level 3). Our analysis has showcased Stefan's versatile use of narrative strategies on all levels of positioning, therefore warranting the use of Deppermann's fine-tuned analytical model. We believe, however, that the basic model discerning the three levels of positioning would be sufficient for victimologists to direct their attention to how any telling of the past is affected by what happened in the past, by the configuration of the communicative situation and by the ongoing identity work of the teller.

Through (Level 2) positioning analysis, an exercise in narrative victimology — asking how persons story *past* harm — is also an exercise in narrative criminology — which includes consideration of how persons resist harm in the present interaction. Narrative criminology has unmet potential to discern storied influences on harm *in situ*: this study models the kind of work to be done.

Future research should uncover whether some narrative strategies are more common or more important in telling about different types of victimization experiences; whether and how relations of gender, race, class, caste and other stratifying structures shape such strategies; and what strategies are chosen given different challenges by interlocutors. Narratives of sustaining harm are variously structured, sometimes formidably so, but narrators do avail themselves of resources and strategies for claiming preferred identities.

Stefan did not reference systemic injustice in his narratives. However, we see rich possibilities for deploying positioning analysis to study how other, specifically oppressed, trauma-suffering narrators discursively locate themselves within or in relation to structural oppression and resistance, both past and present.

What do our findings mean for practice? Social work has for decades sought to put clients in charge of the help they receive, at least as an ideal. Our findings suggest that social service providers should honor clients' agency in recounting their experiences. For example, they should not assume what 'the worst thing' was, which could be conveyed more or less explicitly. They should also pay close attention to the various ways clients lay claim to agency, in the stories they tell and in the telling moment. The basic tri-partite model of positioning analysis might be taught and undertaken by direct service providers. In particular, it is important that providers be coached to attend to and honor clients' Level 2 positioning — engaging the immediate exchange — to achieve agency.

The second author was once one of those providers. She looks back with some discomfort on the blunt approach with which she approached crime victims whom it was her job to help. She is certain she tended to direct talk toward concrete harms (e.g., money stolen) and to regulate conversation so that it reached a relatively quick conclusion geared toward the help we were able to provide. Large caseloads

are part of the problem, but so too are deficient understandings of the complexity of assembling narratives of life experiences, which training in narrative analysis could improve. Proper training would highlight the importance of ways of narrating as much as narrative content for self-understanding and recovery.

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