

Subjects in gendered constellations of spiralling disempowerment: Situated, personal meanings of rape and other forms of sexualised coercion

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"I have always been careful before, just generally careful.

But ...I take extra good care of myself... because I just don't want anything to happen again... I think I have become more dependent on other people than I used to be". (Project-participant)

Abstract

Personal perspectives on having been subjected to rape or other forms of sexualised coercion as well as its meanings/consequences in everyday life are sparsely researched in mainstream psychology. Furthermore, questions of gender, power and participation and their connections to personal perspectives are also rarely explicitly nor critically investigated. Similarly, gendered aspects of sexualised coercion are frequently underestimated in common everyday discourses. Thus, it is crucial to explore how questions of gender and power may be interwoven in this psycho-social phenomenon and its meanings. Therefore, we investigate: 1. Intersecting societal aspects of gender, power and participation, their connections to women being subjected to sexualised coercion, and the concept of (dis)empowerment. 2. Situated, personal and common meanings/consequences of concrete incidents of coercion for women having been subjected to them. 3. Connections between being subjected to coercion and being a subject and participant in this context of action. Our article is part of an exploration of 1st person perspectives of women who have asked for assistance at Centre for Victims of Sexual Assault in Copenhagen. The exploration is informed by an attempt at

connecting approaches from critical and feminist social theory and from the approach of *Kritische Psychologie*.

Our analysis indicates how situated societal conditions may result in 'spirals of disempowerment' through which women experience a sustained loss of agency during and after incidents of coercion. The analysis underscores the necessity of conceptualising connections between societal and situated conditions of 'power over' and 'power to' in gendered relations of relative dominance and subordination, sexualized coercion, (dis)empowerment, and possibilities for participation. As a consequence, and by pointing to, as well as developing inclusive agency-oriented support initiatives, psychosocial conceptualisations and practices may avoid contributing to disempowering spirals feeding on victimisation, individualisation, psychologisation, and pathologisation.

Keywords

gender, disempowerment, rape, women's oppression.

Introduction

With an approach informed by both critical social theory, feminist theory, and *Kritische Psychologie* we want to develop an understanding of how societal conditions contribute to gender based violence such as sexual coercion. Furthermore, we want to explore how they are connected to constraints of women as a group 'an sich', and how they become elements of the difficulties experienced by women subjected to coercion. Hereby we wish to contribute to overcoming individualising and pathologizing approaches common in mainstream psychology (Pedersen 2011a).

Gendered aspects of life are depicted in ways that display serious problems. For example, in Denmark it is not unequivocally recognised that men's sexualized coercion of women is a gendered problem connected to men's and women's unequal societal conditions for their participation in everyday life. The underlying and idealizing assumption is that everybody regardless of gender is a free and equal citizen in a democratic society. As in other western late-modern liberal-democratic societies, we adhere to a liberal equality ideal that is considered to be the foundation of a just societal order (Brown 2006: 21; Dahlerup 2001:31; Fraser 2003:56). This ideal implies that all must be understood and treated as autonomous individuals and not as members of social groups. Unequal access to resources, status, participation and influence related to a late-modern gendered power relationship thus become 'non-issues'. Yet, informed by feminist scholars, such relations can be conceptualized as a gendered relationship of dominance and subordination (Fraser 2003; Young

1990), and in the vocabulary of Haavind (1982, 1993) further specified as relations of relative dominance and subordination between men and women. Silences concerning this relationship are, among other things, related to how dominant discourses represent Denmark as one of the most gender equal societies in the world (Borchorst & Siim 2008; Lister 2009). The obvious problem is that the rhetorical adherence to the ideal of gender equality risks disguises and conceals the extent of the of the relative subordination of women and men's dominance. Consequently, an understanding of how these practices actually constrain and/or enable the participation of women and men in everyday life is out of reach.

With this article we want to investigate the following questions: How can we understand connections between societal conditions for relations between men and women and men's sexualized coercion of women? Which meanings may rape and other forms of sexualized coercion have for women as a group 'an sich', and which meanings/consequences may sexualized coercion have for women having been subjected hereto? How may these meanings and the perspectives of these women be understood in an approach connecting social theory, a (dis)empowerment approach and the 1st person perspective approach of Kritische Psychologie? And what significance may this have for provided assistance?

From its onset Kritische Psychologie has had two interrelated critical aims. One is the critique of societal conditions and how they contribute to the suffering of subjects in their conduct of everyday lives; the other is the corresponding critique of an individualising mainstream psychology. Thus, working with questions such as ours as with other social problems, attempts at connecting social theory and Kritische Psychologie support the development of our critical understanding.

Why a gender perspective in research?

Research raising questions of gender inspired by Kritische Psychologie is with few exceptions (f. ex. Haug 1999, Kousholt 2006) difficult to find. But most research and debates concerning social problems draw on implicit assumptions concerning gendered differences that are embedded in gendered discourses and other social practices, concealing connections between these practices and social problems. Ronkainen (2001) uses the concept 'genderless gender' for practices in which gendered social dynamics play a part, but where meanings of gender are neutralized through discursive practices. She points out that in much research on women subjected to violence, they are referred to in a gender-neutral

terminology, for instance as ‘victims’ or simply as individuals. Their difficulties are also understood through the use of gender-neutralizing theories, as in the simplifying and generalising categorisations of diagnostic concepts, such as ‘Post Traumatic Stress Disorder’ (Pedersen 2011a).

Although women are prevalent in national and international statistics, in research on sexualized coercion, questions connecting personal and societal meanings of gender are often treated as a matter of secondary importance, if at all. But in Denmark a major study shows that 0,4% men report experiences of sexual coercion while the equivalent number for women is 4,7% (Kjøller & Rasmussen 2002). The latest national survey of victimisation between 2005 and 2015 reports a mean of 4700 women pro year answering that they have been subjected to ‘coerced intercourse’ (Pedersen, Kyvsgård & Balvig 2016). Women are estimated to constitute 84% of all victims and men 16%. Both men and women are predominantly victimised by men.

Another aspect of research on sexualised violence is that it is generally pathologized and disconnected from gender. Emerson and Frosh (2001:85) argue that research approaches formulate problems that represent and depend upon ‘powerful pathologisation and individualisation’ of perpetrators. Such approaches ignore, or even contest, that sexualized coercion ‘viewed as a sexualized expression of power, control and dominance can be seen to *conform to* rather than *deviate from* the values, expectations and discourses that configure forms of hegemonic masculinity and organize the apprenticeship of boys into its sexual and non-sexual expression’ (Emerson & Frosh *ibid*: 77; cf. Ryan & Lane 1997).

In agreement with Emerson and Frosh, we propose that research on sexualised coercion must be critical and gender sensitive, and that it must point to societal change. Without change, there will be no challenge to dominant gendered discourses and practices, and no alternatives for boys’ perception of masculinity (*ibid*:80). Neither will there be any improvement in women being subjected to coercion, nor for the support they may receive.

Feminist research aims at producing knowledge on gender (power) relations and their meanings, as well as insight into social organisation based on gender (Lundgren 1993:13ff). Looking at society through such lenses means viewing its situated processes of structuration as, among other things, organised on the basis of gendered power relations. This not only entails that socially produced work-, communication- and relations of participation are studied in gender sensitive rather than in gender-neutral perspectives, but also that these relations are understood and problematized in a power perspective (Stormhøj 2003: 371, 2004: 473).

In a social sciences approach to gender research, gender is understood as a basic principle of social differentiation that builds on a hierarchical relation of difference between the 'feminine' and the 'masculine' (Bourdieu 1999:12ff, Widerberg 2005: 610). One critical aim of gender research is to contribute to the social transformation of unequal gender relations within and across contexts of action (Stormhøj 2003, 2004). Another is to clarify personal meanings/consequences of concrete participation in gendered power relations based on approaches such as diverse schools of critical psychology.

To make complex relations between gender and power visible, it is imperative to draw on theories about overarching societal conditions that cast these relations as part of societal conditions for the participation of diversely gendered persons. Concurrently, such theories must be sensitive to the historical and the context-specific social organisation of gender.

Gender power relations in a social-theoretical light

The current relationship of relative dominance and subordination between men and women must be perceived as multi-dimensional, and as reproduced and/or changed by participants through ordinary or extraordinary everyday discourses and other social practices.

Societal dominance and oppression

Basically, we understand society as differentiated and hierarchical, and emphasize on-going struggles between dominant and oppressed persons and groups, who have conflicting interests in maintaining or changing social order and corresponding practices of everyday life. This perception benefits primarily from Bourdieu (1984, 1987, 1992), Fraser (2003, 2005), and Young (1990, 2004). Hierarchical relations of difference between social groups are constituted as results of societal inequalities in access to resources, status and decision-making power. These inequalities make concrete situated practices for concrete persons possible, difficult or impossible, thereby constraining and/or enabling their participation in everyday life.

Along with the process of constituting society social groups are formed 'an sich', referring to how social groups are constituted through hierarchical differences-creating structurations, pervading society as a whole (Young 1990).

Oppression and dominance are concepts about societal conditions. Oppression implies systemic disadvantages and limitations for social groups constraining group members' possibilities for participation, self-realization, and

self-determination, while dominance entails systemic advantages and possibilities for social groups which in contrast expand possibilities for participation, self-realization, and self-determination for group members (Fraser 2003: 13ff, 48ff, Young 1990:37). The fact that oppression has a systemic character means that it is produced by the normal processes of everyday life, and also that an oppressed group need not have a correlated oppressing group. For instance, not all men belong to the group 'rapists' nor do all women belong to the group 'victims'. Whilst societal oppression concerns relations among social groups, these relations do not always fit the notion of intentional and conscious oppression of one group by another (Young 1990: 41). Rather, this kind of oppression flows from taken-for-granted norms, habits and values, assumptions underpinning institutionalised rules and practices and the collective consequences of following those practices and rules, which means that oppression is maintained and reproduced by people simply living their lives by the formula: business as usual. The practices of everyday life, societal conditions and institutional arrangements are interrelated and facilitate each other. This dynamic will be unfolded below in analyses of personal meanings/consequences of sexualized coercion for women.

Though oppression is systemic, it may also be conscious and intentional (Young 1990: 42). In many cases, as with sexualized coercion, it is often individual, identifiable men who knowingly and intentionally offend and do harm to women.

The late-modern relative relationship of men's domination and women's subordination

As a social group 'an sich', women can be perceived as relatively subordinated suffering from economically, culturally, and politically based forms of oppression (Fraser 2003, 2005). The economic dimension shows an unequal distribution of resources and burdens between men and women, producing and reproduced by gendered divisions of labour that constrain women's possibilities for participation, self-realization, and self-determination i.e. their agency in everyday life. The cultural dimension is characterised by cultural value patterns privileging qualities coded as 'masculine', while devaluing traits associated with the 'feminine'. These patterns imply status subordination. Generally, women enjoy less respect, recognition and prestige than men, which also reduces their possibilities for participation, self-realization, and self-determination in their conduct of everyday life. Such value patterns organise and pervade many contexts of action and are codified in many laws and welfare politics (Ehrlich 2001, Fraser 2003). Different forms of violence against women in general, and

sexualised coercion in particular, flow from gender-based status oppression, which women as a group 'an sich' are subjected to. In the political realm, unequal access to representation and framing of issues produces forms of political misrepresentation. Due to gender inequality in political participation and representation, women's access to an equal say in common affairs and their framing are diminished compared with men's (see also Siim 2000).

Supplementing Fraser's arguments about sexualized coercion, Young (1990: 61ff) emphasizes that women's possibilities for participation, self-realization, and self-determination are reduced due to the very risk of sexualised coercion, which all women potentially face. The fact that women live with the knowledge that they are at risk exclusively on account of their group identity limits their freedom of action. The awareness hereof figures as a real and restrictive condition for participation in many aspects of everyday life (Caiazza 2005). Consequently, oppression through sexualised coercion not only means that concrete women are being harmed, but also that on a daily basis, multitudes of women are conscious that they may be harmed because they are women. Therefore, with Young we may describe sexualized coercion as a social fact, as an aspect of gendered social practices, in the sense that everybody knows that it happens, and that it will happen again.

Women as a social group 'an sich' is produced by various forms of gender-related oppression. Yet, there are also hierarchical relations of difference between women related to class, age, sexuality, race/ethnicity etc. implying that concrete women are likely to be both oppressed along some axes of inequality and dominant along others (Fraser 2003: 26; Young: 1990: 42). We fully recognize the importance of analysing the varied effects and meanings of intersecting relations of privilege and lack of privilege in terms of sexualized coercion. Pedersen (2007) has done so in relation to the intersection of the social meanings of ethnicity and age. But the consequences of such intersecting relations for personal meanings of sexualized coercion of concrete woman will not be directly traceable in the analysis below. Our primary focus is on connections between personal meanings/consequences of sexualized coercion and women as a group 'an sich', and such meanings/consequences for women subjected to coercion. Women as a group 'an sich' have both different and common societal conditions, with the latter spelled out as discourses about and the prevalence of sexualized coercion, which they must relate to because they live a woman's life. Hence, despite the differences in conditions and the unequal possibilities for participation that these differences generate, women overall face problems and develop understandings and strategies for action that are connected to common conditions for them as a group 'an sich', such as attempting to avoid or ignore the risk of sexualised coercion. A second crucial point is that the three different

dimensions of gender oppression (economic, cultural, and political) in practice often overlap, implying that they can enhance each other, which generates disempowering and/or empowering spirals. And a third key point is that despite hierarchical power that oppresses and constrains women as a group ‘an sich’, there is space for politics, for women’s agency to influence common conditions, as well as those specific to their concrete conduct of everyday life (Fraser 2005; Young 1990) (see also Lister 2003). ‘Power over’ then coexists with ‘power to’: power as enabling, as agency, even though, in some cases, it may be minimal.

Thus, we consider men’s violence against women in general, and sexualized coercion in particular as aspects of societies based on historically situated gendered relations of relative dominance and subordination, rather than as de-situated misdeeds of a few deviant or pathological individuals.

Furthermore, sexualized coercion as a societal form of oppression may well contribute to constraining relations and thereby overlap other forms of oppression that are indirect consequences of events of coercion. As the study we draw on illustrates, sexualised coercion may be followed by severe reduction of economic resources and by other forms of deprivation that influence personally important forms of participation (Pedersen 2011b). We shall return hereto in our analysis of 1st person perspectives of women participating in the study.

A critical concept of (dis)empowerment

Although it is also frequently used as an empty buzz word, we wish to use the concept of (dis)empowerment. Andersen (2005) argues that within a critical tradition of social sciences, the concept of (dis)empowerment is a complex analytical concept. Accordingly, a critical conceptualisation of (dis)empowerment must include processes that may support the capacity of underprivileged groups for overcoming powerlessness. Such processes should aim at enabling agents to become reflective and competent, and acquire voice and action capacity in an inclusive society (Andersen 2005:60). Empowerment processes may then be perceived as processes through which underprivileged individuals, social groups, and (local) communities improve their ability to create, manage, and control material, social, cultural, and symbolic resources (Hvinden & Sander 1996, Andersen et al 2003 in Andersen 2005:60). Such processes contribute to improve possibilities of participation in the societal processes of daily life. This conceptualisation of empowerment implies a generative concept of power: a ‘power to’ create and develop possibilities. In the critical empowerment tradition, aiming at changing societal processes of ‘power over’, focus is directed towards dialectics between societal conditions for the conduct of lives of persons and groups, and changes in consciousness, self-

perception, and action capacities of persons as well as groups. But an increase of personal capacities for action cannot stand alone if processes of disempowerment are to be broken. What is needed in order to enhance critical and transformative empowerment processes is change in the societal conditions of underprivileged groups and persons.

In our approach, sexualized coercion is an instance of gendered disempowering practices. Changes related to practices of relative gendered domination and subordination, such as the sexualised objectification of women's bodies, as genderless gender discourses and practices of individualisation, and as pathologisation of persons committing and/or subjected to gender-based violence are examples of possibly transformative empowerment.

For change to occur, critical empowerment strategies that unveil and challenge relative dominance and oppression related to meanings/consequences of sexualised coercion must be incorporated in psychological thinking and practices, as well as in everyday practices. Our analysis is meant to contribute to such a change.

1st Person perspectives on sexualised coercion

Our discussion switches from an emphasis on social theory and overarching societal relations of dominance and subordination, to an emphasis on 1st person perspectives (Pedersen 2011a, Salkvist & Pedersen 2008, Schraube 2013) of women taking part in the empirical study informing our analysis (Pedersen 2011b). The 1st person perspective approach was fundamental to the study as such, but equally so to support conversations (Pedersen 2004).

Our approach to the analysis

Our switch in emphasis could have been conceptualised as a switch from a perspective from above to one from below, creating a division between societal conditions and personal perspectives. But since we understand social processes as intertwining and mutually interwoven practices connecting overarching societal with locally situated personal ones, we work with a connecting duality of emphases. Both societal conditions and personal and local aspects hereof are understood as always situated and concrete. They are also seen as changing and changed over time and place. But it is in the changing duality of 1st person perspectives and the meanings/conditions they are embedded in and create, that agency and (dis)empowerment unfold as situated in everyday life. Although there are, of course, diverse incongruities in and between our approaches, this

understanding is fundamental to our social theory approach as well as to Kritische Psychologie (Dreier 1995, 2008, Holzkamp 1998, Nissen 2005, Schraube *ibid*).

Since the main aim of our article is to discuss gendered aspects of sexualised coercion, and this issue of Annual Review of Critical Psychology is dedicated to Kritische Psychologie, we will not make an extensive presentation and discussion of hereof. In the following analysis, we simply wish to present how it may benefit our understanding of the meanings/consequences of a specific form of gender-based violence in the conduct of everyday life.

Our analysis does not go into depth with all the implicit gendered meanings represented in the experiences and perspectives of the women who participated in the study. This has been discussed in a separate article (Pedersen 2008a). However, we want to stress that as a consequence of our approach combining societal aspects of gender and Kritische Psychologie, we always understand meanings/consequences of being subjected to sexualised coercion as entwining with situatedly gendered power relations through personal trajectories of participation.

Furthermore, - and because personal meanings are ascribed in connection to participation in different concrete contexts of action - we understand meanings/consequences as concrete situated (im)possibilities, connected to unique and personal meanings that are developed and ascribed from situated perspectives (Salkvist & Pedersen *ibid*). We understand contexts of action as concrete versions of societal conditions, in and with which unique and personal constellations of meaning entwine with more overarching conditions.

Since events of sexualized coercion do not have one single personal meaning, we understand them as having personal *constellations* of meanings. Personal meanings and perspectives are developed and changed in and with trajectories of participation in the intersecting conditions of everyday life. These conditions may be said to have situated sets of possible meanings, understood also as consequences of specific and/or shared contexts of action. To underscore this double signification of 'meaning' we have used the combined concept of meanings/consequences. As the concept of meaning is one that points to the concrete societal as well as to the personal, it underpins the connection between the personal and the societal in our approach. It may be seen as their nexus. While this nexus diverges from person to person as well as across time and place, it may still form situated patterns in motion.

Although personal perspectives and situated constellations of meanings of coercion are embedded in gender/power/agency relations, this is not always recognized and/or voiced by the women who experienced subjection. The gendered aspects of social processes are frequently neither conscious nor

verbalised; nevertheless, they are ‘done’ (Butler 1990). This insight is related to a critical feature of a question concerning 1st person perspective approaches. Kritische Psychologie inspired approaches often emphasise this method; still, a first-person perspective method is more complex than sometimes recognized. It does not mean simply reproducing what affected research participants may say. As it represents a historical and locally situated approach, 1st person perspectives are to be understood as entwining in societal conditions and must also be seen as mirroring practices such as genderless gender discourses on violence. Therefore, such connections have to be taken into account in an analysis even when not directly articulated and addressed by participants themselves. Genderless gender and other aspects of gender-neutralizing symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1998, 1999, Pedersen 2011a) are at play in the 1st person perspectives of the participants of our study. Still, our analysis and discussion of the personal meanings which sexualized coercion were attributed point to interweaving constellations of personal, gendered, and other societal meanings, even when the participants did not themselves designate them as gendered.

The concept of participation is a specific exception to our decision not to unfold most concepts used in Kritische Psychologie. Working with this concept is particularly awkward when exploring meanings/consequences of incidents of sexualised coercion. We will return to this issue below.

The study

The study represented in our analysis and discussion was carried out at The General Hospital of Copenhagen in Denmark (Pedersen 2011b). Although it was carried out in 2004, it reflects present conditions and problems. Its aim was, over time and place, to follow changing meanings/consequences of having been subjected to sexualized coercion. It included 40 women who participated in diverse forms of conversations such as therapy/counselling, group meetings and other kinds of psycho-social assistance. Additionally, 15 of these women were interviewed from a few weeks up to a year after having first contacted the Centre of Sexual Assault. The relatively unique possibility of this study was to follow the women as long as they felt in need of support from the Centre. Furthermore, instead of starting with already defined difficulties as they were described and categorised in specific psychological approaches such as trauma theory, the attempt of the support initiatives was to focus primarily on what the women from their 1st person perspectives experienced as their personal concerns. As a starting question, they were asked to put into words what they, at the time, considered their most critical concerns. Pointing to the social character of the meanings/consequences of the events, it turned out that especially in the first

sessions these were concerns about who should be told of their experience, and in which way. Other issues, also mostly concerning social relations followed later. Subsequently, further aspects of more practical issues in their conduct of everyday life emerged. In their representations of and reflections on their difficulties, the ordinary and extraordinary emerged as interwoven (cf. Shapiro 2017), although neither the ordinary nor the extraordinary is always experienced as such. Nor are 'ordinary' conditions static repeated patterns. Persons involved must act in order uphold the 'patterns' of everyday life or to change them (Kousholt *ibid*). This clearly became very strenuous for many participants.

An (un)imagined risk

Mechanisms of individualisation through 'genderless gender' discourses and other practices, as well as Danish discourses of an 'already implemented gender equality' are in danger of superseding possible gender-sensitive perceptions of sexualised coercion (Johansen *in prep*). Moreover, despite massive coverage by media, concrete knowledge about personal experiences of sexualized coercion is difficult to obtain. This fact may enhance pervasive assumptions that sexualised coercion is practiced by mad strangers, who unexpectedly jump out from behind a bush (Pedersen, Kyvsgaard & Balvig 2016). Similarly, the 'stranger assumption' was one that several participants of our study expressed. Such common discourses interact and may contribute to a neglect of many other sometimes contradicting aspects of sexualised coercion, aspects voiced in the study. 43% of the women who contacted Centre for Sexual Assault at the time of the study had not been subjected to sexualized coercion by a stranger, but by a friend, a boyfriend, an ex-boyfriend, a classmate, a family member, a boss or some other familiar person (Sidenius & Madsen 2004).

Although sometimes not recognised in women's participation in diverse communities of action, the risk of experiencing sexualized coercion constitutes an embodiment of gendered power relations (Cahill 2001, McNay 1999). Consequently, some women, like several in our study, may experience sexualized coercion as an imagined threat that has suddenly and unexpectedly become real (Bohner and Schwartz 1996), while others may be taken aback. In the study, women from the latter group had not imagined it possible that they themselves could be subjected to sexualized coercion, and/or had imagined being able to defend themselves.

One participant who had been subjected to coercion by a friend with whom she shared a flat, said in an interview that she wanted other women to know that:

"No matter how strong you feel, you must know that it is okay to be weak in such a situation. Do not think of that as a defeat. Because I did in the

beginning. I felt that one can just...fight it, that you can do this and that, well... it is important to know that this is not what you should expect. And if it is a defeat, well then you should learn to live with it. Because you can do nothing about it. No one can..."

Cahill (2001) believes that women may 'forget' that they are at risk. But since it must be presumed to be troubling and constraining to incessantly try avoiding the risk of sexualized coercion, women may more or less consciously seek to discount emotions and thoughts connected to this risk.

Accordingly, their 'forgetfulness' may be considered to be intentioned omissions of considering the risk, and/or as a way of participating in spite of this risk. Furthermore, and related hereto, Denmark being branded as a gender-equal society exacerbates the likelihood of ignoring the risk.

That the experience by the participants of our study was often generalised in a loss of confidence in the reliability of others became clear. Brison who experienced rape as well as a threat to her life, similarly generalised her experience of sexualized coercion in the following way: When the unthinkable becomes real, one begins to question even one's most realistic perception (2002).

Articulated gendered meanings

On the surface sexualized coercion, although it is extraordinary gendered oppression in one of its concrete forms, may appear to be more or less unique and incidental. Partly for this reason, it may also appear as a purely interpersonal, individual and private incident. Multiple and diverse individualising discourses concerning all persons involved corroborate to underscore this understanding. In spite of the disregard for the general risk of being subjected to sexualised coercion, of individualizing discourses and of other connected practices, several of the women participating in our study, like the two below, spontaneously suggested that all women risk be subjected to coercion while simultaneously implying that it would be by men:

"When I talk to other (women) about it, I always make sure to make them think it over once more. A little more than just superficially. They probably think the same as I did before, but just have them understand that (women), going about (freely) shouldn't be taken for granted. You have to remember to think it over once more..."

And:

“Now, it was someone I knew... I learned that it can happen with almost anybody you know, right?”

In spite of it being individualised and seemingly unique and incidental many participants' reasons for gendering their experience were that they had not expected that they themselves may be subjected to being over-powered, but that it did happen all the same. The experience of subjection occasionally also meant that they spontaneously reflected on other gendered practices of everyday life (Pedersen 2008a). They changed their perspectives on gender relations such as the pervasive and gendered sexualisation of the everyday lives of youths in Denmark (Johansen in prep.):

“I notice it more now. I don't know if it was like this before, but I didn't notice it then... that everything is about sex, all the time. It is very much about looks and about sex. And so many women, including my friends... Well for instance, if we're going out... I just never thought of it in that way until now. They may stand for two hours putting on make-up and put on a push-up bra, and everything of this sort. So, start thinking: well, why all this for men?”

The experience is understood both as individual and personally transformed into a hazard for women in general. This reflects that subjection is both experienced as a concrete personal event as well as it being an event connected to practices of a gender dominance-oppression relationship, taking place in unique but situated circumstances (cf. Helliwell 2000). In our approach, an event of sexualised coercion is an embodied aspect of a gendered societal and concrete context of action. For a woman who is subjected to coercion, the experience is situated and a specific oppression of her as a subject. Lack of possibilities of negotiating the circumstances of her participation in this and diverse other contexts must then be understood as restraining her 'power to' in her personal conduct of life.

(Dis)empowerment is related to agency and possibilities for negotiating the conditions for one's participation. Whether these conditions constitute participation in (overlapping) processes of political, cultural, or economic dimensions, co-determining our conduct of everyday life, they require confidence in our possibilities for participatory influence. The experiences women have with coercive subjection, as well as the meanings it is ascribed and other consequences it may have in the aftermath, contribute to different forms of gendered constraints in participation. Our analysis will indicate that such constraints may interlock and form 'spirals of disempowerment'.

Economic resources

Most participants in the study were young, between the age of 16 and 25, and the conditions of their day-to-day life were not economically secure. Most were students and lived off varying part-time jobs, study grants or other unreliable sources of income. Only a few had steady employment and some lost their jobs. For some, being subjected to sexualized coercion meant temporarily postponing their education. Over time, this often had the effect of reducing their financial means and negatively impacting the trajectory their education. For instance, it intervened with active periods of studying, which may affect the allocation of grants and constitute consequences reaching into their futures.

As many participants had to give up their part-time jobs because of difficulties following sexualised coercion, they would occasionally, when having lost the right to a grant and not being entitled to unemployment benefits, find themselves without any economic means what so ever. Not being able to pay their rent, several women had to give up their housing arrangements. Because perpetrators knew where they lived, some also wished to move, but, like this woman could not afford to:

‘...that you can’t even really relax in your own home, because you, because I could see the scene of the crime from my balcony, right? Then you’re kind of trapped in your own home, right?’

Some could no longer afford to take part in activities with friends or even pay tuition. Some found themselves accumulating debt that they had difficulty paying back. While these young women were trying to establish less dependent adult lives, difficulties in sustaining their livelihood led to increased or re-established dependency on others, often on boyfriends and parents. In her study Caiazza (ibid) concluded that lack of control over economic means alone may limit women’s participation in civil life and vice versa. In addition, women who are engaged in active employment are usually the ones who participate most in other aspects of civil society as well as political activities.

The personal meanings/consequences of loss of income and a resulting sparsity of economic resources had significant intersecting ‘spill over’ effects on other constraints experienced by the women in our study. Feeding into spirals of disempowerment, economic problems for example contributed to loss of mobility and increased the dynamics of isolation and marginalisation discussed below. In the short and long run, the women who had been subjected to sexualised coercion were especially threatened with exclusion from participation in many contexts of civil life.

Freedom of movement

Limitations in freedom of movement is another example of several and coinciding conditions that increase the risk of marginalization that women experience in their everyday life, especially those who have been subjected to sexualized coercion. A large part of the activities that constitute participation in civil life, such as employment, volunteering, cultural activities, sports activities and socializing, takes place after dark. When the women in our study had been exposed to coercion outdoors in the evening and after dark, they experienced themselves as especially restricted in public spaces at these times of the day (Salkvist & Pedersen *ibid*). In the Danish winter, this may be up to 18 hours. Especially in the evenings, but also otherwise and in order to go anywhere at all, for instance attend classes, many of the women then felt obliged to hire a taxi, thus further straining an already strained budget:

A young woman who was a member of a band, and who was also active in both politics and community work had to quit these activities temporarily. She feared walking in the streets and lacked the means to afford taxi fees (transcript from group sessions).

All but one of the women felt generally less safe for shorter or longer periods after the incidents. A woman who had to move said in an interview:

“Now I have applied for an apartment, I have spent a lot of time thinking about where to live and stuff. But then, eh, you can say Sydhavnen, that might not be the coolest place... Valbybakke, well that is a nice neighbourhood and I feel safe there. And I can see lights all the way, right? Then I feel sort of, well that’s okay. But you know, I have become much more careful about where...”

Our study thus confirms Caiazza’s (*ibid*), in as much as women having subjected to coercion become especially restricted in their whereabouts. It also points to the ways in which - and to how significantly - this may be the case when experiencing lack of power to deal with aspects of their everyday lives. Furthermore, echoing Caiazza’s study (*ibid*), it indicates that feeling secure or insecure in public spaces influences women’s participation in civil life. Caiazza concluded that forms of constraint which women are subjected to through the reality of practices of sexualised coercion means that women as a ‘group an sich’ in comparison with men are limited in their possibilities for participation in the public sphere.

Isolation

Isolation may follow from restrictions of movement and participation in civil life, but other aspects of the possible aftermath of sexualised coercion interrelate herewith.

Events of sexualised coercion are over-determined by massive sensationalising, and often sexualising media coverage and multiple dramatizing discourses. Although diverse recent campaigns in Denmark and the western world have tried to overcome elements of some of these discourses, it is still difficult for women to talk about their experiences. Thus, sexualised coercion can be understood as non-events, meaning events that are so tabooed that they cannot be talked about (Asplund 1987). Both the - ostensibly contradictory - phenomena of massive media discourses and the character of non-events of the events of coercion were significant for the participation of the women in diverse contexts of action. Both contributed to potential isolation. One of the participants of the study expressed this in her way:

“You feel very lonely after an experience of assault, I think. Both privately but also when you are in social contexts, because you are suddenly so different. Something has happened to you that means you can’t identify with the group, and suddenly the group has other interests than you do... Suddenly you realise that your friendships seem very superficial, and that you have developed in a way perhaps they haven’t”.

In the everyday lives of young people in Denmark there is great focus on having fun, on sexuality and on partying, therefore friendships may prove particularly difficult to maintain (Salkvist 2006) in the aftermath of coercion. In the perspectives of the women, the sexualisation and dramatization, as well as the symbolic violent and at the same time heavy gendering of the events, contributed to their character of non-event (Pedersen 2008a). This equally contributed to isolation. A young woman suffered from insomnia, had difficulties attending her classes and stopped going clubbing with her peers. She explained:

“... I just don’t want to get totally wasted and then hook up with someone, and then... because I just can’t get myself to do that. Also, because I know that some of those people from my class... they just go with random men. And I’d never be able to do that...”

Then people became very sort of stand-offish and were sort of... well, perhaps annoyed with me because I never went to classes. And yes, if I did go then I’d be so tired and perhaps I hadn’t done my homework one hundred percent and stuff... I think in a way they got a little scared of me”.

Many more extraordinary circumstances strained the women emotionally, cognitively, and practically and in doing so frequently led to marginalisation. These circumstances were connected to women having to deal with (re-)establishing 'power to' in their everyday lives, but also with such experiences as police interviews, waiting for court cases to start, and participating in trials (cf. also Guldberg 2005).

Furthermore, in and with marginalisation participants in the study suffered loss of social support now especially needed in their conduct of life. In this way, specific personal as well as common meanings/consequences of sexualized coercion further contributed to constrictions generating forms of communicative/social isolation (Pedersen 2011).

Absence of institutional recognition

Additional constraints intersected in contributing to experiences of lack of agency in the conduct of everyday lives. The narratives of the participants indicated that support from social security offices was scarce or non-existing. Sexualized coercion was not seen as an event that justified financial support. This may be connected to lack of societal and/or local recognition of the meanings/consequences of the gendered relations of relative dominance and subordination and of their ordinary and extraordinary consequences for everyday life. Social workers did not appear to be well-informed of the personal and societal meanings of sexualized coercion:

A young woman became pregnant as a result of her being raped. She had an abortion. In spite of the fact that she suffered from anxiety, insomnia and flashbacks she had managed to acquire a much-needed job. She explained that she lost her room in a shared apartment because the social security office declined helping her with the rent, until she received a pay-check from her new employer (therapy transcript).

Unless specific circumstances required them to do so, the women infrequently informed people outside their closest circles of the experiences of sexualised coercion. Most women did not wish to disclose details of the events or their emotional and cognitive difficulties, even to close friends and relatives. Having to disclose the reasons for their need of economical support, several women experienced their efforts to obtain assistance as humiliating, embarrassing and painful. Consequently, the young woman above and other women felt as if they had to beg. Despite the woman's efforts she experienced the following:

She had been subjected to sexualized coercion by her husband as well as her father-in-law. Her husband had acquired debts that she was made responsible for in the aftermath. Furthermore, he stalked and threatened her. She informed a social worker about the experience of coercion and her social and economic difficulties. His answer was that he himself had once been subjected to violence from his wife, and that he did not believe this to be reason enough for economic help. In order to sustain a minimal livelihood, she was obliged to work weekends. Not being able to afford to buy food for her dog, she had to have it put down (therapy notes).

Although interest in and information about sexualised coercion have ostensibly improved in Denmark during the past few years, women subjected to sexualised coercion still seem to encounter similar difficulties, as these women did in 2003 (Aydin & Clasen *ibid*).

In the course of the conversations with the women visiting the Centre of Sexual Assault, it became very clear how the meanings/consequences of changes in the possible trajectories of participation in their everyday lives troubled the participants, feeding into and aggravating the difficulties they experienced.

Blame and guilt

The participants in the study considered and reflected on questions of blame or even guilt, aspects of the dominant discourses about experiences of violent events, especially rape and other forms of sexualised coercion.

In order to avoid the risk of being subjected to sexualised coercion, something she had already experienced once, a woman hired a taxi to return home from a party. She was raped by the driver. She explained:

“Sometimes I think that it was my own fault, for instance that I could have chosen not to drink... I could have defended myself... There are so many things.... I think that you also think that it is your own fault. Also, because he tried to... to..., he really tried to blame it on me. “

She not only associated her feelings of guilt to having been drinking, but also to having taken the front seat in the taxi, as well as to the driver's accusations of her being flirtatious. She reported that several of her family members thought it was her own fault, because they thought she “drank so much”.

However, meanings of sexualized coercion, that is women's personal assessment of such events, are not exclusively connected to the contexts in which acts of coercion take place, nor to pre-existing personal perspectives. As our analysis has indicated, they draw on and are entwined with overarching societal

practices. The attribution of guilt described by the women quoted here is often termed ‘victim blaming’ or ‘woman blaming’ (Roche & Wood 2005). Such practices of ‘blaming’ are also widely used practices in public places, like social security offices, police stations, and courtrooms (Ehrlich *ibid*, Laudrup & Rahbæk 2006). Their focus is on women’s actions instead of on the acts of coercive violence committed by offenders. Through their lack of recognition of coercion and its gendered character, such practices belittle and disregard what women have been subjected to and express disrespect for concrete women as well as for women in general. Thus, they become part of what Fraser (2003) terms status subordination, which is an aspect of a larger process of gendered disempowerment. In the ways in which they represented the experience of coercion and were interwoven in the contexts of the aftermaths, such processes contributed to and were attributed personal meanings by participants. Embedded in the contexts in which they participated, what the women experienced and how they dealt with the meanings/consequences of sexualized coercion interacted with what other participants expressed and did (cf. Refby 2001). The following example is just one, even relatively ‘harmless’, version of such discourses.

“... ‘often it is this; ‘how could you even think of letting him into your house?’ Well, we had had coffee before, right. And then ...I have been told that ‘gosh you are naïve, you are so stupid’, or... And then I must say, ‘well then that is what I was’... “

This woman reflected on and challenged attributions of responsibility and guilt implicit in some of the comments she received. Yet, she was intensely and extensively affected by them. Challenge was one aspect of strategies of action she developed in order to deal with them; being obliged to do so further complicated her everyday life.

In general, rape and other forms of sexualized coercion are considered to be serious crimes. Still, discourses on women’s responsibilities for protecting themselves were at times constitutive of narratives developed by some of the women’s closest relatives. Since they themselves also drew on culturally dominant discourses of shame, blame, and culpability, it affected the women’s perception of their own actions. Furthermore, it affected their personal capacity to - and agency in trying to - counteract or solve other difficulties such as the ones described above, which became yet another facet of potentially spiralling disempowerment in their participation in and across intersecting aspects of diverse communities of practice.

Contesting blame

Women who challenged the discourse of blame they encountered, sometimes even from relatives, friends, police-officers, and hospital employees (who should have been aware of the common attributions of blame and culpability) experienced additional suffering. The women frequently reported that, when they tried to reflect on their own acts related to the incident of coercion, they were told not to think that they were at fault.

Although well intended and often helpful, this does not, in and of itself, change the societal conditions connected to and perpetuating women reproaching themselves for what has happened. An implicit individualisation of women's responsibility for 'looking out for themselves' contributes to concealing overarching aspects of women's conditions. Attempts at convincing them that they are not to be blamed for incidents of sexualized coercion may be overshadowed by such aspects of their conditions. Furthermore, women *are* at risk, and many women do in fact acknowledge that there is a need to be cautious, especially when they have already experienced a realisation of this risk:

"I have always been careful before, just generally careful. But ...I take extra good care of myself. But it is mostly when going out at night making sure to be with somebody and so on, because I just don't want anything to happen again. Eh... and then I have become more, I think, I have become more dependent on other people than I used to be."

Women may be caught in contradictions between not thinking that they are at fault, and the need to be cautious in order to avoid harm and be attributed blame. Moreover, contradictions between discourses mirror contradictions in and of the conduct of everyday life: One is always a subject and a participant in a given context of action, even when being subjected to torture (Scarry 1987, Pedersen 2017). But we also always act in relation to, as well as in dependence of concrete situated versions of common conditions. Therefore, our possibilities and, as a consequence, the necessity of situated reflections on strategies of action are often limited by overarching contradictions. As is the case with all other contexts of action, the psycho-social meanings and situated problems related to sexualized coercion are neither exclusively personal, nor are they solely generated by diverse situated versions of common conditions. We are always subjects in complex patterns of contradictions, those inherent to societal conditions in and with which we conduct our lives, as well as those inherent to what we may call the human condition: Being subjects in the dual sense of being subject over and subjected to conditions of the conduct of everyday life (Holzkamp 1998). Concerning sexualised coercion, we must connect our understanding of

discourses on responsibility to contradictions characterising phenomena of genderless gender, other contradictory practices relating to gendered relations of 'power over' and 'power to', and to specific forms of gendered victimisation of women.

Besides, as in Herman's influential contribution (Herman 1995), in much other trauma literature as well as in common discourses of everyday life, feelings of guilt are conceptualised as natural reactions to extreme experiences. Because they are not understood as contextually mediated but as individual, this contributes to their individualisation in practice, complicating difficulties integral to practices of blaming (Pedersen 2017, Pedersen 2011a).

Victims, Agency and Participation

As one expression of their being acting subjects, participants in our study reflected on the concrete incidents of coercion they had experienced, as well as on the contexts in which these were and became embedded. They raised questions concerning whether and how they could have avoided the incident, why they did not call for help, run away, 'did not fight back', or even why they did so. They asked themselves whether they could and should have acted differently. Their perspectives illustrated the diversity of their experiences and of their reflections concerning agency and their own use hereof:

"Even though I have wished so many times that I could just go back and do it over, be able to do exactly what I wanted... you know, kick him... do something. But it's... all you think of is to save yourself. And when you... when someone does this to you, well then, then I don't trust that person. You know, you don't know what that person might do then. And then all you can think of is to get it over with."

Because she had not been able to avoid being subjected to coercion, this woman apparently believed that she had 'not done anything'. When in similar ways she and other women reflected on 'not having done anything' this was mirrored in whether they considered their experience to be an incident of 'real rape' and/or sexualized coercion (cf. Gavey 1999: 205).

Still, and contradicting a common discourse that experiencing rape is comparable to losing one's life and consequently must be avoided at all costs, another woman also worried about having 'done something':

"Afterwards, what frightened me most was not the bullying, but how I reacted. I defended myself. I could have endangered my own life!"

In the aftermath, several women were met with disbelief or even with accusations of ‘not having done anything’:

“Well it is like this... ‘are you sure it wasn’t your own fault?’ And well, ‘you could have done something!’”

In our study, it became apparent that the participants were not ‘passive’, as it is also often implied in the concept of ‘victim’. The women’s accounts point to their having done what they thought possible and effective in order to limit further harm to themselves, also when they ‘did not do anything’.

In the aftermath of the incidents nearly all the women expressed strong wishes to act in ways that may be helpful in dealing with what they described as a situated cognitive/emotional uncertainties and lack of security, limiting their experience of agency. They wanted to be able to deal with their everyday lives and focussed on maintaining and (re-)establishing control in its day-to-day conduct.

Having experienced severe constriction of their agency, they all expressed dislike of, and distanced themselves from, discourses and other practices they now experienced as further victimisation in diverse contexts, and as constriction of their possibilities for participation in a variety of practices. Among other things they contested the concept of ‘victim’, a concept that several women disliked. Similar to others, one woman stated:

“I don’t want my life to change. I don’t want to become a ‘rape victim’. For instance, I don’t want to categorize myself as such or think of myself in that way. It does not fit with my life”.

The expressed aversion may be interpreted as a personally reasoned and intentionally directed attempt at (re-)developing and reclaiming possibilities in the conduct of every life (cf. Holzkamp *ibid*). One may understand this as the women’s attempt at neutralising potential spiralling disempowerment in the aftermath of coercion, in order to regain and/or maintain their positions as agents and participants with ‘power to’. But because concepts of agency, of agent and of participation are commonly associated with influence, power over, power to, or even culpability, using such concepts also analytically may appear as lack of recognition of, empathy with, or even insult to women who have been subjected to coercion. Still, and although their agency has been and is violently restricted, their perspectives and reflections suggest personal wishes to be recognised, although coerced and restricted, as agents. It suggests a need for theoretical and support approaches that recognise them as such.

Contradicting an understanding of them as mere victims, women seeking support at the Centre for Sexual Assault developed new strategies of action, new ways of thinking and new standpoints in the process. Several mentioned this in the concluding interviews:

“I’m better now at sort of letting things out instead of keeping them to myself all the time. I’m better at that. I never used to be good at that”.

And:

“It (the experience and the aftermath) has made me capable of managing unexpected situations”.

In the support sessions and in interviews, several women displayed remarkable ability to act effectively in unknown and complex situations. They dealt reflectively, intentionally and efficiently with unfamiliar situations as well as with new facets of well-known contexts. The young woman quoted below was, for the first time in her life, compelled to ask the social security office for economic support, was referred to an employment office, had to cooperate with sceptical police officers, and talk with medical personnel and lawyers about issues related to coercion, even as her boyfriend was leaving her:

“It was as if..., no this is enough, right? And then at the same time you got these, I don’t know how to put it... these days with victories, then you kind of felt: now I can... now things are going the right way”.

Likewise, Regehr, Marziali & Jansen (1999) highlight how, what they term women’s resilience and their creativity in the aftermath of coercion, impressed them in their support work.

In the sense of being subjected to sexualised coercion women are victims of gendered disempowerment. But simultaneously as subjects during incidents of coercion and in their aftermath, although victimised, they insist on and must be understood as participants, acting reflectively in diverse contexts. They are participants who from their situated personal standpoints are developing what they deem the most effective courses of action in trajectories of participation. They understand themselves and should be understood as responsible but not blameable agents, relying on their personal, situated but constrained agency. Although objectified through subjection they are not mere objects, but neither are they at fault. They are victims of societal conditions embodied in the acts of aggressors, victims also in a legal sense, but victims who refuse to be understood exclusively as victims, and whose sufferings are prolonged when they are. They

risk becoming further victimised by complex constellations of personal meanings/consequences of spiralling (dis)empowerment in, and through, their situated participation in an everyday life, characterised by women being positioned in relations of relative dominance and subordination. Resilience is thus not individual, but connected to a persons' possibilities in diverse trajectories of participation. It is a realisation of past experiences in the present, connected to expectations for a possible future. As personal meanings/consequences are situated, they comprise the entwinement of the meanings of my personal perspective, my personal situated trajectories of participation, and of their connections to my conditions here and now, as well as to my imagined future. They are the axis of the (im)possibilities in the present of my past and my possible future. In the cases of sexualised coercion and other past and violent experiences, the personal meanings and situated consequences of events may dominate the present and continue to dominate the future.

Some dilemmas in support

In a critical empowerment tradition, empowerment, as we see it, is about creating a basis for processes through which underprivileged social groups may improve their abilities to create, control and manage diverse resources in order to counteract disempowerment. The aim of such processes is primarily to promote the development of reflective agents with voice and capacity for action in an including society (Andersen *ibid*).

Yet, critical research shows that support initiatives may become disempowering (Mardorossian 2000, Marecek 2005). Kitzinger (1997) proposes that psychologists, in order to change the world in which they themselves participate, use psychology in ways that reproduce existing societal conditions and thereby maintain conditions in which connected problems and suffering originate. When predominantly being understood and addressed as victims, clients risk being stigmatised and deprived of voice and agency. They may thus be further constrained in their capacity for reflection and action (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer 2003, Lamb 1999, Mardorossian *Ibid*). Other discussions of possibilities for participation as well as of ethical aspects of support have dealt with similar issues (Dreier 2000, 2008, Linder 2004, Paré 2002, Álvarez-Uria 2004).

With our analytical differentiation between 'power to' and 'power over', the concept of (dis)empowerment connects subjectively reflected and motivated strategies of action with existing situated possibilities for participation. They may scaffold interconnecting processes of personal and societal change, encouraging shared agency. Understanding empowerment in this way, as well as starting with situated personal perspectives, the concept of participation shows promise for

critical psychological approaches to support. With this concept, exploring perspectives and experiences with and of clients as well as related conditions including support, reduces the risk that approaches to empowerment lead to practices in which societal and personal aspects of (dis)empowerment are overshadowed by de-situated individualisation, psychologisation and pathologisation (Álvarez-Uría 2004).

A critical anchoring demands not only that one grasps personal meanings/consequences of sexualised coercion, but also their connections to personal participation in an everyday life (Pedersen 2004, Salkvist & Pedersen *ibid*). Theoretically, a participation approach emphasises an understanding of women who have been subjected to coercion as unique acting subjects, subjected to embodied aspects of oppression. An awareness hereof is a prerequisite to exploring personal as well as shared societal meanings of gendered forms of oppression that manifest themselves in and through sexualised coercion. This approach has consequences for our personal and institutional support, as well as for our understanding of personal and common psycho-social meanings of coercion.

Empowerment processes require recognition of women's unique 1st person perspectives, and of their wishes and possibilities for reflection in counselling, in therapy, in police questioning, in court, in medical treatment and in other contexts of their everyday lives. One example hereof is that in a participation approach focusing on personal reasons for action, the understanding of 'not doing anything' is reversed into its own negation. As mentioned above, it may consequently be interpreted as intentional self-protection from further coercion and sometimes from being killed (Salkvist & Pedersen *ibid*).

Therefore, and firstly, our approach means that meeting women who seek support means meeting women who have been subjected to coercive domination. One goal of a participation approach as an alternative to mainstream approaches, is to avoid further victimisation through common practices of symbolic violence. This means assisting them in exploring their unique needs and interests as concrete and societally situated, while avoiding psychologising aspects of support through predetermined understandings and practices. It also requires assisting empowerment through recognition of persons seeking assistance as knowledgeable participants, necessitating a focus on their situated 1st person perspectives. Thus, seen from 1st person perspectives, the point of departure is to explore which are the most important questions to work with.

Secondly, there is a dilemma mentioned above concerning the focus on 1st person perspectives in *Kritische Psychologie* (Pedersen 2011b). A focus on 1st person perspectives indicates, on the one hand, respect for personal perspectives. On the other hand, it also means taking into account that such perspectives are

related to participation in specific versions of constellations of meanings and interests at play in overarching gendered structurations of society. This may sometimes mean understanding the personal perspectives in ways different from that of the person who holds them, which, again, may indicate a need for assistance in exploring 1st person perspectives as possibly related to issues common to persons being subjected to similar conditions. One such issue could be what persons suffering in the aftermath of violent experiences may have in common (Pedersen 2017), for instance in the sense of how sexualised coercion may co-create conditions for conducting one's life, such as marginalisation and further constrictions.

Thirdly, one additional dilemma involves specialised and institutionalised support and is in fact a dilemma twice over. Its first element is that professional specialists such as psychologists are intended to be just that, which implies that they are more knowledgeable of what the person in search of assistance needs than she is herself (cf. Linder *ibid*). This will in many cases mean (unintentionally?) belittling or disregarding her 1st person perspective. The second element is that professionals, on the other hand, are expected to disregard or exclude anything that may be understood as a 'political perspective', their own or that of the person primarily concerned. Like the claim of being more knowledgeable, this is an aspect of the definition and education of professionals (Callaghan 2005) that risks obscuring aspects connected to the meanings/consequences of the suffering of a client in the case of sexualised coercion, an implication hereof is that questions of gender are infrequently raised, or raised uncritically in an essentialising fashion. This contributes to an individualisation of the incidents and their aftermath, rendering them indecipherable, and stands in the way of participatory processes in empowerment- oriented contributions to change. Additionally, it may contribute to pathologisation, and as such again to disempowerment.

This study was carried out as part of the public health system which led to one of its obvious limitations, namely that it became partly subjected to the depoliticising approach, restricting, among other things, investigations of the meanings of gender. Yet, interestingly enough this might not have been the case if it had been based on a, often more legitimate, biologising approach to gender.

Fourthly, as assistance is frequently individualised, and sexualised coercion is a 'non-event', the possibility of sharing and comparing experiences, perspectives and reflections with others encountering similar difficulties in their conduct of life is severely limited. Drawing on de-situated generalisations from their own situated professional perspectives, the meanings of rape and other forms of sexualised coercion are commonly, even in the case of group sessions, primarily constructed by professionals. Being de-situated such generalisations

may disregard and dominate the perspectives of persons participating in group sessions. When this is not the case, participants in group meetings may recognise the specificities of personal perspectives and conditions as well as their common conditions, and obtain assistance in understanding and conducting their everyday lives (Pedersen 2008b). This is possible through shared and distributed development of perspectives and strategies of action, despite the fact that dominant discourses, like trauma discourses, may interfere with possibilities of empowerment.

Concluding remarks

In the tradition of gender and feminist theory, and wishing to make a contribution to an understanding of the personal meanings of gender in social theory as well as of relations between social conditions and personal perspectives and lives, we have attempted to connect the approaches of social theory and *Kritische Psychologie*. Rape and other forms of sexualised coercion have been the focus of this attempt. A clear limitation of our study is that it includes only women who have requested assistance. This means that the participants of our study may have had more difficulties than women who have not done so. But as the focus of our analysis is on societal aspects of gendered conditions and not the suffering of individual women, we propose that the analysis points to potential difficulties common to women in general and especially to women exposed to sexualised coercion. Not all women encounter the same problems, but they experience situated personal combinations of complex constellations of such difficulties and constriction of their agency.

Although it is not always immediately or directly recognised, we see sexualised coercion as a gendered practice with gendered meanings/consequences. It emerges as a practice that predominantly women, living women's lives as part of a 'group an sich' and in relations of relative dominance and subordination, are subjected to.

Because of the character and consequences of sexualized coercion as connected to relations of relative domination and subordination, women's voices, in particular the voices of women who have been subjected to coercion, are often de-politicized, marginalised or silenced. Thereby, psychology, social politics, the public and individual women are deprived of the knowledge that these voices could contribute to. This also affects the shaping of possibly empowering support initiatives that women with their particular experiences and perspectives could contribute to improve. And because women's perspectives, their lives, and their experiences with diverse forms of disempowerment connected to coercion cannot

be standardised, the diversity of perspectives and initiatives that they may contribute to develop is crucial.

Despite the situated extreme constraints they have often been subjected to, understanding women subjected to coercion solely as subjected objects or victims constitutes a reductive comprehension. Although the actions of others may be more or less constraining a person is never merely an individual nor an object, but always a subject in contexts. As during incidents of coercion, she engages in courses of action through reflected trajectories of participation. Her actions, feelings and thoughts before, during and after sexualized coercion are not simply unmediated re-actions to coercion. They are actions from her personal perspective in a specific situated gendered context. If we, in theory as well as in practice, fail to appreciate this, we deprive women of agency. We contribute to what can be termed processes of secondary victimisation, further constraining their possibilities for reflected participation in empowering activities.

The voices of the women participating in our study point to situated and intersecting forms of 'power over' at play in diverse spheres of their conduct of life, for instance in the case of the concrete incidents of coercion, and of diverse practices of blaming women. They also point to how economic problems, sexualised youth culture, social work and other conditions may scaffold gendered aspects of life in the aftermath of sexualized coercion, while co-creating what we term vicious spirals of intersecting constraints.

In such spirals, women are subjects in a dual sense: as 'subjected to' and as actively participating subjects with power to improve their personal and common lives. In these spirals, their experiences with gender and other relations of power point to complex situated societal conditions for women's lives, and for women's lives in the aftermath of sexualized coercion in particular. Understanding these conditions may form the basis for further analytically developed recognition (also in its double sense) of how gendered intersecting cultural, economic, and political conditions have meanings/consequences for and in incidents of coercion. It may also inform us of what it might take to avoid and to break vicious spirals and contribute to changes of involved overarching structurations.

In our article, we have presented some aspects of the conditions for and the meanings of sexualized coercion. Gender neutralizing, victimising, individualising, psychologising, and pathologising discourses, alongside other situated practices constitute hurdles for the transformation of sexualized coercion into a psychological/social/political issue, one that takes a critical analysis of gendered relations of relative dominance and subordination into account. The inclusion of these relations is necessary in critical empowerment-oriented analyses, discussions, social/political initiatives as well in support initiatives.

Including them is necessary in working towards prevention of sexualised coercion and with its meanings/consequences.

The point here is that sexualized coercion by virtue of ‘spill over’ effects from some forms of oppressive/constraining practices to others give rise to the spirals of disempowerment embedded in social processes which limit agency in everyday lives. It is therefore an interdisciplinary project to deconstruct/reconstruct dominant gender discourses and other gendered practices. Likewise, it is an interdisciplinary task to support women’s voices and participation in ways that benefit the development of changed practices connected to their safety as well as to the aftermath of gendered violence. In such practices, the connections between personal meanings of - and historically specific societal conditions for - violence must be explored further.

Concluding her study, Caiazza (ibid) claims that violence and the fear of violence must be central to our understanding of the conditions that (dis)encourage women to participate in civil empowering processes. She suggests that, since security encourages women to participate in civil activities, then security should be considered a political right.

The questions are then, which critical empowerment processes, including the prevention of vicious spirals are necessary to achieve security, and how sociological and psychological gender research may contribute to the development of such processes?

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