

BALANCING CONTRADICTORY IDENTITIES—PERFORMING MASCULINITY IN VICTIM NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT: *Modern sociological identity analysis argues that people perform a preferred identity, rather than revealing an essential self. But what if a given situation necessitates performance of apparently incompatible identities? Earlier research seems to suggest that people will resist one identity and foreground another. Here, the authors present another strategy of delicately balancing the performance of conflicting identities. Their interviews of Swedish young men who were victims of violence reveal that this identity balance occurs through emphasizing and defending the threatened but seemingly preferred identity, with reference to the other identity in more subtle terms. As they elaborated on their experiences, these men did not reject a victim identity altogether but subtly or implicitly modified it. They discursively positioned themselves as both “masculine men” and “victims,” combining seemingly mismatched identities. They achieve the identity work by describing initiative and defense, accounting for non-resistance, and describing injuries, fear, and sympathy from others.*

Keywords: balancing self presentations, victim talk, masculinity, performativity, narrative

Contemporary research has expanded and complicated Erving Goffman's (1959) classic analysis of self presentations in Western everyday life. We do not present ourselves merely with manners, gestures, poses, or choice of style; we also use words, utterances, and stories. Goffman's fundamental observation, though, remains intact. It is not an inherent or fixed self that is to be presented but a situationally desirable self, a self we want others to recognize and honor. As Riessman (2002:701) points out, “informants do not reveal an essential self as much as they perform a preferred one, selected from the multiplicity of selves or personas that individuals switch among as they go about their lives.”

But what if informants are expected to “switch among” selves generally held to be incompatible? How do people discursively perform conflicting identities that

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still are considered as given? Such questions arise when "the multiplicity of selves or personas," to borrow Riessman's (2002:701) formulation, involves categories seemingly at odds with each other. While we find inspiration in Riessman's (2002) analyses of identities as performances in interview narratives, we want to present a strategy that goes beyond what her research suggests (Riessman 2000; 2003). Riessman's data show that people deal with conflicting identities by resisting one and bringing another to the fore, whereas we present data on balancing performance of conflicting identities. Such balancing, we argue, occurs either when non-preferred identities for some reason cannot be hidden or subordinated or when both identities harbor some attractions, even if one of them is considered to be more preferable. We investigate one example of such an identity combination: "young man" and "victim."

Based on analyses of interviews with young Swedish men subjected to assault and mugging, we explore how these men do not necessarily "switch" among identities, as Riessman formulates it, but rather balance the narrative peril of presenting themselves as young men and as victims of crime. At first glance, this combination may seem particularly incongruous: "If men are expected to be masculine and thereby powerful, dominant, and in control, they cannot be discursively produced as victims—the antithesis of masculinity" (Sundaram 2004:66). A closer empirical examination, however, reveals that such assertions are too clear cut. Masculine identifications may not only be combined with a victim identity but also used to modify it. Abstract cultural identities such as "men" and "victim" conflict, but it seems a simplification to argue that they are incompatible in practice. Instead, they may constitute parallel discourses, visible during the same conversation and providing speakers with resources as they go about making sense of their experiences and reproducing their identities.

Our investigation contributes to two research fields. First, the concept of balancing rhetoric can be further analyzed, a rhetoric used by actors expected to combine two or more conflicting discursive materials in their self presentations (e.g., identities, narratives, ideologies, policies, and institutional logic). Our sample is small but still contains analytical generalizability (Yin 2003).¹ In a modern society, contradictory and seemingly incompatible expectations abound, yet people persistently manage to deal with or "go along" with these expectations as if theoretical contradictions, after all, did not matter that much. To specify young men's self presentations as "victims-and-still-not-victims" may, in other words, help clarify general tendencies in people's socially contingent and yet artfully manufactured self presentations (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Here, details such as word choice, manner of speaking, and laughter may play a crucial role. As Berger and Luckmann (1966/1991:14) argue, "people work up and resist identities in indexical, creative and unpredictable ways."

Second, the multifaceted interpretative process of "becoming a victim" can be further analyzed. When talking about others' physical aggression towards themselves, for instance, people may still portray themselves as non-victims; they may downplay vulnerability, present themselves as competent, or claim responsibility (Åkerström 2001; 2003). People subjected to violence or other crimes do not necessarily or wholly define themselves as victims (Holstein and Miller 1990). Our

analysis can contribute to a general understanding of how people practice an ambivalent attitude to a victim identity in a time in which "the crime victim" has become a dominant reference point in criminal justice policy (Best 1997; Garland and Sparks 2000; Walklate 2007).

Balancing Rhetoric as Identity Work

Our analysis rests on a set of arguments regarding identity, masculinity, victimization, identity work, and balancing rhetoric. In accordance with performative perspectives in contemporary narrative studies (Riessman 2002; 2003), identity is not considered as something you "have" but as something you do; it is created, put on stage, and used during a situated talk (Antaki and Widdicombe 1998). Still, there are often external prerequisites. In our case, beyond and before the interview, the interviewees are positioned as men and crime victims. These identities represent two distinct reference groups asking for some kind of commitment (Strauss 1959). "Men" and "victims" consequently cannot be treated as unrelated to each other (so that "playing out" one identity would be irrelevant to "playing out" the other) but as interrelated, both in the interview situation and in previous situations leading up to it: the assaults, mugging or violence, and the invitation to participate in research.

Indeed, for social psychologists, it is old news that two or more selves are possible for a single person, depending on the various social relations in which he or she is involved (Mead 1934/1967:143; cf. Joas 1985/1997:182 on Mead's definition of "sociality"). We may talk about the "component selves" of which a complete and unitary self consists (Mead 1934/1967:144), but what we focus on here is the actual handling of such multiplicity when the selves at stake seem to contradict yet situationally come into contact with each other.

Now, two critical questions arise: What kind of masculinity do we refer to, and what gender context does a Swedish culture provide? Even though there are many forms of masculinities, we here discern the so-called hegemonic masculinity, involving "holding your own" and "not backing down" (see, for example, Canaan 1996; Connell 1995; Messerschmidt 2004), as well as being competent, controlled, and able to handle severe strain. Many studies show that regardless of the type of masculinity you adopt as a man, you have to somehow relate to this hegemonic masculinity, as in female-dominated occupations, for instance. Nordberg (2002) shows how men working in Swedish preschools or as hairdressers (i.e., work places dominated by women) in talk and practice respond to a hegemonic masculinity both when they stress the importance of being a "real man" and when they embrace their profession's female tradition.²

Although the Nordic countries can be described as relatively equal in the sense that "Nordic women and men have the right to equal pay for equal work, and both women and men have the opportunity to combine paid work with parenting,"³ there are still strong ideals and practices in everyday life that underpin traditional masculinities. Magnusson (2008) has shown that among the Swedish married couples she interviewed, it seemed "self-evident for the man to fulfill his need to advance his career or to have leisure activities . . . the women seldom gave vent to individualist aims or expectations for themselves" (Magnusson 2008:83; see also

Holmberg 2001). The couples made traditional values of gender visible through their close connections between career and masculinity; a woman's having a career was related to a risk of affecting the ideals of a "good mother." Despite the fact that Sweden ranks high on gender equality indices, and despite the varied masculinities that we find in this and many other countries, hegemonic masculinity is still reproduced. Thus, the gender context in which the interviewees in this study are placed is more multifaceted than might appear from a distance.

It is equally important to point out that masculinity (in Sweden and elsewhere) is not restricted to displays among men; women also may very well produce and perform it. As Messerschmidt (2004:37) argues, individuals commit themselves to fundamental projects of masculine or feminine self-attribution, but they also situationally adopt cross-gender strategies and gender-varied practices in addition to these projects, and some construct fundamental projects contradicting their bodily sex category. Åkerström (2001) analyzed, for instance, a narrative by a Swedish woman interviewed while imprisoned for drug dealing who easily could have described herself as a typical example of "the battered woman" but instead adopts a masculine discourse. Rather than positioning herself as a weak, vulnerable, and beaten woman, she highlights mutual provocation, responsibility, and competition. In another study concerning violence directed at care personnel in Sweden, female staff in a locked mental ward explicitly talk about themselves as being "machos" (Åkerström 1994).

The concept of victim is similarly used in multifaceted ways. Identity markers of being a victim not only give rise to quite different associations from those of masculinity but also provide a distinctive framing of how harm and injury will be perceived. "Calling someone a victim encourages others to see how the labeled person has been harmed by forces beyond his or her control, simultaneously establishing the 'fact' of injury and locating responsibility for the damage outside the 'victim'" (Holstein and Miller 1990:106). Bestowing on someone (or oneself) the status of victim implies absolving that person of responsibility for whatever harm or injury he or she has suffered, creating a one-sided blaming of the victimizer. Victimization contrasts with another framing in which events are portrayed in relational or interactional terms, visible in close-up empirical research (Emerson 1994). Just as individuals adopt cross-gender strategies and gender-varied practices, they adopt strategies and practices defying or modifying an ideal victim identity, even if they at first sight appear to be typically victimized.

Identity work and balancing rhetoric are closely tied to these arguments. The interviewees in our study create a narrative link (Gubrium and Holstein 2009:55) between a hegemonic masculinity and a position as victim and use it in a balancing way in their identity work. The act of linking one package of associations to another is a meaning-making process (Gubrium and Holstein 2009:55), in our case performed in a process of balancing identities that on a theoretical level appears to be contradictory. It is this parallel process of performance and its subtle forms that we highlight here: masculinity given meaning when balanced with victimization, and vice versa.

One might, of course, ask what is new in exploring such a balancing rhetoric, considering the existence of earlier studies on conflicting identities. We argue,

however, that previous studies have not exemplified balancing but rather how the actors present a preferred identity and downplay an unpreferred identity. Riessman, whose performative perspective has inspired us, belongs to those who have chosen this path when she analyzes men who have multiple sclerosis as presenting "masculinity in the face of a disease that challenges capacities usually associated with masculinity" (Riessman 2003:9), and when she analyzes childless women in India in terms of stigma-resisting practices in their narratives (Riessman 2000). Similarly, Chase (1995) explores the discursive management of identities that "culturally disagree" by depicting how the easy flow of settled discourse of professional and successful work among minority women contrasts with an unsettled discourse of inequality, formed by disrupted talk, hesitations, etc. LaFrance and Stoppard's (2006) study of depressed women's recovering narratives found that these women describe a strengthened ability to "care about themselves" as a core of their recovery process, but this core threatens their identity as women because being a "woman" implies caring about others and, consequently, not being "selfish."⁴ Edley and Wetherell (1997:215) analyze how seventeen- to eighteen-year-old male students during a set of group discussions define themselves in contrast to an influential group of rugby players, associated with the classical image of the tough, sporty, strong man, so that "... the dominant group was challenged by a subordinated or marginalized group—a cultural struggle was thus vividly reproduced in talk."

Conflicting identities are, in other words, studied in many areas but primarily in terms of one identity being put before another. The identity work we have distinguished elaborates the above observations but also contributes to them. As we will show, the contribution not only amounts to balancing rhetoric as such but also to its discursive forms. The young Swedish men counter "victim" in its clear-cut denotation, but they do so in a manner not overly or desperately "masculine," only subtly or implicitly so. Masculinity is implicitly used to modify a victim identity so that the two discourses are drawn upon in parallel.

METHODS AND MATERIAL

This article is based on transcribed interview conversations with seventeen Swedish young men, arranged and conducted within a wider sociological project on men as crime victims (Burcar 2005) as well as an ongoing project focusing on young crime victims.⁵ At the time of the interviews (both projects taken together), the young men were between seventeen and twenty-six years of age, and they lived at one of five places in Skåne (a county situated in the southern part of Sweden).⁶ All had been mugged or assaulted by one or several men approximately their own age. Most of these crimes were committed outdoors in urban areas and involved both known and unknown perpetrators. All of the young men had reported the incident to the police, and most of the perpetrators had been convicted.

Descriptions vary regarding the types of violence each perpetrator used. Some men reported that they were verbally threatened while some were threatened with a stick or a knife. Other violent acts the interviewees mentioned consisted of kicking or punching, hitting with a fist, or hitting with a bottle. The interviewed men

were not asked directly about their social or ethnic background, but based on small talk before, during, and after the interviews, most of them appeared to have a homogeneous ethnic Swedish background but a heterogeneous family class background, coming from the working, middle, and upper classes. We do not focus, however, on these various backgrounds in this particular study in terms of (for instance) presentations of different masculinities.⁷

The interviews took place at a variety of locations, for example at Burcar's office at a university department or at a library or a café (at requests from the interviewees). They were conducted in an informal and conversational manner, meaning that the interviewer first and foremost tried to make the young men talk freely about the crime they had experienced, with the help of a minimum of prescribed questions (for example, "Could you tell me about what happened?").

The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed using a modified version of the Jefferson system and analyzed applying constructionist, interactionist, and narrative concepts, as described below. We have highlighted both what the young men said and how they expressed it. The analysis addressed the tone of the conversation, word choices, pauses, hesitations, and topics.

A central argument is that people can use language to emphasize their affiliation to a particular category (or to reject it); they can challenge or modify a special identity and thereby construct a particular self presentation. Before we present our analysis, we would first like to elaborate briefly on the methodological consequences of this theoretical stance.

Instead of understanding interviews as a way to "collect" data, we view them here as a way to "create" data (Baker 2004; Holstein and Gubrium 2004). The interviewed young men are not taken as revealing their true selves (nor as hiding them) but as producing socially recognizable images of themselves during conversations with the interviewer. An interview "is understood as an interactional event in which members draw on their cultural knowledge, including their knowledge about how members of categories routinely speak" (Baker 2004:163). A careful study of the research interviews as interactional events can unveil how interviewees draw on such cultural knowledge, as well as how they put together different bodies of knowledge (in this case regarding "victim" and "masculinity").

The interaction as a whole is taken as an analytically unavoidable component in the young men's self presentations because it frames and organizes them. It is only in relation to a listener—in this case the interviewer—that discursively accomplished self presentations may unfold. "To put it simply, one can't be a 'self' by oneself, identities must be accomplished in 'shows' that persuade . . . individuals [to] negotiate how they want to be known in the stories they develop collaboratively with the audience in the interview situation" (Riessman 2003:7–8). To some extent, we may therefore say that the interviewer co-creates the young men's narratives. When, for instance, Adam, a nineteen-year-old student who was mugged, portrays himself as tactical by telling how he put away his money in a robbery situation, the interviewer recognizes his cleverness (saying "well, that was clever"), and by doing so participates in the interviewee's performance. Also, asking questions means offering such props, which limits the content of the presentations and, conversely, generates specific narrative tracks.

Holstein and Gubrium (2004) describe how, in fact, every interview, regardless of design, is built on both the interviewee's and the interviewer's activity. Indeed, the conversation would not have been possible without supporting questions, comments, and general collaboration. "While the respondent, for one, actively constructs and assembles answers, he or she does not simply 'break out' talking" (Holstein and Gubrium 2004:152).

Reading Key for Interview Excerpts

Silence or pauses are marked here with a point or digits within parentheses; for example, (.) indicates a short pause while longer pauses (2 seconds or more) are marked with the relevant value within parenthesis. Underlined text shows that the narrator stressed a certain word or syllable, and > < indicates faster speech. Words within [] mark simultaneous speech, and [. . .] indicates that the text has been shortened. A parenthesis containing one or more words marks a description (laughs) or an explanation.

Performing Conflicting Identities: Being a Victim, but Also a Man

One hypothetical solution to identity clashes may be to try to hide or keep at bay a less preferred identity. Sometimes, however, as in the cases at hand, concealing the less preferable identities may not be possible because they are given by the situation, the context, the mere presence of the individual who tells the story, or knowledge that the audience has by other means (as is the case in prisons, hospitals, or schools where records are kept). Furthermore, some identities may well be less preferable than the competing identities in a general sense, but they may still harbor attractions. The case of being a male victim is, in these respects, a multifaceted example. A victim identity connotes passivity, weakness, and vulnerability (Holstein and Miller 1990) and can therefore be expected to be less preferable, especially for young men committed to a fundamental project of masculine self-attribution. But a victim identity is also to some extent attractive—also for men—because it facilitates the reception of others' sympathy (Holstein and Miller 1990). This area is in itself complex because accepting sympathy as a crime victim may also eat away at the foundation of the hegemonic masculine identity, as dictated culturally.

In interactions when the audience "knows" about the identities, or when both identities harbor attractions even if one is preferable, balancing acts may take place. The narrator marks out not one but two identities, thereby balancing and giving them contours in relation to each other. The performance is to some extent a parallel to what Gubrium, Rittman, Williams, Young, and Boylstein (2003:S204) call "benchmarking," which may "form alternative bases of comparison" in interviewees' telling, especially when it comes to comorbidity (Gubrium et al. 2003:S207). Just as interviewed stroke survivors may assess their continued functioning after a stroke in relation to other conditions that are also affecting them, we may say that young men assess themselves after being victimized in relation to another "condition": being male, and the social expectations that accompany this "condition."

Below, we analyze how such balancing acts are performed. First we describe how masculinity is performed, then how it is balanced with performed victimhood. Balancing rhetoric is also depicted within each of these themes. The result suggests that actors perform the more preferable or threatened identity through emphasizing how it, despite the circumstances, has been actualized in a certain situation and by giving identity-protecting accounts. They indicate and implicitly assume the less desirable identity as a counterbalance.

Performing Masculinity

Accepting a Challenge

A robbery or assault can be seen as an event in which masculinity "is put on the line" (Morgan 1992:47), so it may be especially important to present oneself as someone who has defended himself. This presentation is, however, coupled with the stance of the victim: these young Swedish men tell about events that they did not initiate. When the young men consented to participate in the interviews, they were implicitly asked to depict an event in which their masculinity was put to the test and in which they consequently had an opportunity to demonstrate and defend it. When telling about the violent event and its aftermath, the narrators emphasize how they had "not backed down," but they also refer to the consequences of the violence in a "belittling way," thereby declining sympathy.

There are several instances of how the young men portray themselves as having accepted a posed challenge. Consider Eddy, who together with his friends was going to eat at a fast-food restaurant on their way to a club late one evening. They encountered three young men, a little younger than themselves (Eddy estimates that the three were about fifteen years old), who began to provoke them. Eddy relates how he had taken on the young men: "I went back and asked what the hell is this about?!" Such a remark—and the telling of it—is part of a cultural image of the man who's "had enough." Eddy subsequently describes himself as having lost the fight, getting hit on the head with a bottle, but nevertheless rising to the challenge. Elias, who was subjected to an attempted personal robbery when taking an evening stroll by himself, tells the interviewer of an escalating situation in which he first tries to walk away, then stands up to the perpetrator and actively resists the other's threats, going on "counter attack." The attacker first "grabs me by the shoulder . . . and says he has a pistol and that I will give him his cell phone," and the interviewer asks Elias:

Interviewer: You had a cell phone?

Elias: Yeah, yeah I had but I still kept on walking and then he catches up again and then he says that he "well do you want me to shoot you?" and then he shows just like he's got a pistol here in the band- the band of the trousers then uh, an' then what he doesn't know then is that I have a, uh, like a little anti-assault spray, uh, [yeah] so I had that in my inside pocket and so I thought that well then I have to pull that out sort of if he shows his pistol so I pull that out and . . . spray him straight in the face, uh, well so well after that he left.

Elias' story is quite "cool"; he is not "interested in chatting with this guy," and he does not go on the counter attack until he *really* has had enough. When refusing to hand over his cell phone, he also describes this by words that make an

impression of calculation (“I thought”), not only reaction, when he pulls out his spray. Later on in the interview, he explains that he is used both to the area where it happened and to the type of men who do these kinds of things. “Uh, you know I’m used to walking there and so so you know I have no problem so so to speak [...] well I can handle such guys.”

Contrary to Eddy, Elias “wins” and gets away uninjured. Other interviewees actively resist but after a fight. Peter, for example, tells about how some young men try to “crash” a party uninvited. After one of his female friends is hit, he “places” himself in the door opening but is also hit and then responds. He formulates this as follows: “. . . then I get really annoyed and so I grab him and simply push him out (from the party), you know.” Peter ends up with rather severe injuries.

In Riessman’s analysis of men facing multiple sclerosis, she shows how the men draw on various hero images when they explain their situations (for example, “the lone trekker”). The young men in our study similarly produce heroic narratives where the hero in the leading part, after being provoked, steps up and says, “that’s enough,” a presentation not far from the male and grim-looking hero in a Western movie who eventually places himself with his legs wide apart on the saloon floor. An individual man’s story relies, “as all narrators do . . . on cultural stories to form his personal one” (Riessman 2003:10).

Defensive Rhetoric

An example of the effort to emphasize one’s masculinity emerges when the interviewed young men assure the interviewer that they defended themselves and describe how they did it. Others explain, without being encouraged, why they had *not* acted against the perpetrators. Why do they deliver such accounts of non-resistance? Our suggestion is that they engage in an interaction with hegemonic masculinity, thereby answering to a common cultural discourse in which non-resistance is taken as not succeeding in fighting and “standing up like a man” (Canaan 1996; Miedzian 1991).

In the narrative below, the interviewer asks Danny if he has started to practice some kind of self-defense *after* an incident when he was attacked and robbed when leaving his high school in the afternoon by a young man unknown to him, who accused him of being cocky. Rather than answering the interviewer’s question, Danny delivers an account of why he had not had the chance to defend himself *during* the assault:

Interviewer: Well . . . do you have, after this have you done something special taking into consideration defense and so on if you have started to practice or something like that?

Danny: No, I did practice then also but it was (.) you know I had also like (.) it was not that I was defenseless in the situation when I met him, it was just that I had two bags on my back and I was very tired . . .

Interviewer: Mm.

Danny: and, uh, then, uh, got some punches in the head when I had the bags on my back . . .

Interviewer: Mm.

Danny: and then I fell to the ground and then when I was going to defend myself, fight back, he pulled out the knife, you know.

Danny seems to take the interviewer's question on the possible consequences of the attack as a question about his acting in the specific situation, or rather, his not acting. He was not defenseless during the crime situation, he assures; furthermore he "was going to defend" himself, and he delivers an account (Scott and Lyman 1968) of why he has not effectively defended himself in terms of practicalities (bags on his back). Danny does not say explicitly, "Hey, even if I was victimized, I'm still a real man," but implicitly, it seems reasonable to interpret his story as conveying such a moral point. He is not only telling about the assault (or answering the interviewer's question), we suggest, but also communicating with a discourse about men and defense.

Another notable feature is how the interviewed young men formulate their accounts for non-resistance. At least three characteristics recur: (1) The interviewees tend to give answers that do not explicitly address the interviewer's question; (2) in these answers, they present alternative scenarios of what would have happened if they had defended themselves; and (3) they portray their non-actions as "superficially" resembling admitting defeat but as "actually" equal to staying cool and just awaiting the outcome. All of these characteristics indicate ways to preserve or demonstrate masculinity while at the same time responding to an implied victim identity.

In a study about male crime victims, Lejeune and Alex (1973:272) understand this type of answer as a sign of shame. They find among male crime victims a "great need to explain to others, including the interviewers, the conditions that made resistance impossible or highly dangerous." Their findings can be related quite directly to the young men's way of answering unasked questions on self-defense in our study, if we add the fact that these young men also seemed to rhetorically transform this implicit shame. Subordination is made into tactical behavior. Adam's telling, for instance, involves being robbed together with his friends when they were waiting for a bus late at night; the robbers were a gang of young men who seemed to have spotted them when walking past a hot-dog stand, which according to the interviewee attracts "dangerous types." Adam describes how he did not give in to the robbers when threatened with a knife, but that he managed to cheat them:

Adam: I gave him indeed only 13 crowns . . . my money I had (.) put it away in another place, uh, when we met him the first time, I thought that why not put them away.

Interviewer: Well, that was clever.

Adam: Yeah, uh.

Adam presents himself as a tactical actor and is rewarded by the "audience" when the interviewer says, "Well, that was clever."

Another example of a tactical actor is Albert. He and his friends were about fifteen years old when they were robbed by some young men whom he believes were around nineteen to twenty years old. When realizing he was about to be robbed, by hearing one of them saying to another "get your knife out," he describes how he put away his payment cards: "I remember that I tried to be clever by leaving my- my cards in the jacket [. . .] so I didn't lose them but (.) you know I took, handed over money and cell phone and MP3 player."

In a group interview, two young men, Edwin and David, also reflect on their having been tactical when they were mugged late at night on their way home from *Malmöfestivalen*, an annual festival in August involving most of downtown Malmö (a Swedish city). Edwin says he decided to cut his losses and involve himself in negotiation: He told the perpetrator, who took his cell phone, that he wanted to keep his SIM card.⁸ Edwin obviously is a mugging victim involved in a dramatic situation, yet his telling of how he manages to negotiate with the perpetrator can be understood as exhibiting some calmness as well as tactics. His friend David took the opportunity to throw away his cell phone at the same time as the perpetrator grabbed him by the neck. This theme of “taking the opportunity” is evident in some of the other young men’s narratives as well. In the following episode, Adam describes fear; he was “scared to death” when he and his friends on their way to a club late at night were attacked by a man who both robbed and hit them. But a closer look at his story indicates that he is considering the situation and “taking the opportunity” rather than merely being scared:

Interviewer: What did you think, do you remember?

Adam: Uh, I thought that I didn’t know if I was going to run or not because, uh, (2) you don’t know because he said that he was going to stab us, he never said that he was going to kill us but he said that he was going to stab us literally so, “I’m going to stab you” (.) “if you run away” so to speak, uh, so I didn’t know what I was going to do so I thought that, ah, I wait and sort of watch (.) maybe I get some opportunity to run or walk away, and then I got when this couple walked by, uh, so then but I guess that’s what went on in my mind to try not getting harmed so to speak.

Adam portrays himself as reflecting; he “awaits” rather than gives in. Running to get assistance (when the robber focuses on a couple who walks by) indicates a kind of “cool tactic,” and the word “run” is corrected by the addition of “walk away,” which gives a more controlled impression. Adam’s narrative is surely a victim’s narrative, but it also manages to present a controlled way of behaving in a dramatic situation, corresponding to hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995; Ekenstam 1998). David, who threw away his cell phone, also portrays his acts as masculine. When attacked, he still manages to “keep cool” and trick the perpetrator, as if he rather than the perpetrator represents the one in control of the situation (cf. Sundaram 2004:66). Likewise, Albert, who certainly loses his money, cell phone, and MP3, still tricks the attacker by hiding his payment cards. Although the attacker, as Albert says, “checked the whole jacket and the trousers and so on just so I shouldn’t have something left you know,” he still could not find the hidden cards.

Adelswärd (1997) differentiates between accounts that are given in relation to explicit questions and those given in responses to unasked questions or implicit criticism. In a comment on her study on hunter stories, she writes: “A study of mainly the latter category can depict what the hunters themselves identify as worth explaining and defending” (Adelswärd 1997:227, our translation; cf. so-called non-interaction-initiated answers in Jacobsson 2000:112). The same seems to be the case when it comes to the young men in our study. Instead of answering the interviewer’s question, they give an answer to a moral discourse about how men

"should have acted." Thereby, they implicitly point out what they find meaningful to explain and defend.

Belittling Wounds

Sarat (1993) has shown that violence, pain, and suffering are difficult to express verbally. Instead of explicit descriptions, narrators may prefer to talk about weapons involved, punches, or kicks. Violence seems easier to describe indirectly in terms of its consequences, namely wounds and injuries. Specific phrases and features of injuries are thus suitable if one wants to dramatize a victim identity (Emerson 1994; Sarat 1993). On the other hand, some occupational groups, such as care workers, have been found to downplay violence to present a preferred professional identity (Åkerström 2003).

What is distinctive in our material is that the young men interviewed use these techniques both to play down and to dramatize their injuries. First, let us consider how they refer to their injuries in a laconic and stoic way that fits a common cultural image of manliness. Mark describes how he and two friends when leaving a city pub one evening were attacked by "two guys, unknown, and for no reason." He was hit in the face so hard that he fell to the ground: "So I fell and got the bike on me and started bleeding a bit and (.) I don't know well (.) got I guess (.) a tooth got crooked and I got some scratches on the lip and (.) the nose got also crooked so (.) I guess that was it." Since the nose and one tooth "got crooked," one can imagine that the violence was quite serious, but Mark refers to his injuries in a curt and downplayed manner, even if his telling is interleaved with some pauses and hesitations. He finishes by saying, "I guess that was it," which implies a stoic attitude; there is nothing more to it.

In Eddy's story involving being hit on the head with a bottle, injuries can be seen as used props in presentations of a masculine identity. Eddy explains that he does not know much about the attackers' identity because he was "bleeding heavily from, uh, the eyebrow." Later on, however, he explains:

Eddy: Well, really it was quite cool. I got a bit dizzy after awhile you know when we waited for the ambulance it took- they- it- they came quite you know >it took them fifteen minutes to get there< approximately (.) But it was quite cool.

Here we learn that Eddy was indeed injured, but twice he provides assurance that "it was quite cool." Stories in general often have a moral message, a "story point," but they may also make a point about the teller, epitomizing the core of his or her moral character. Here, this does not concern Eddy as a victim: He does not dwell on his attacker but emphasizes how he conducted himself in line with what is expected of a young man.

Benjamin, who is seventeen years old, was suddenly head-butted at a night club by a young man a few years older than he who claimed that Benjamin had shoved him at the dance floor. He describes in a similar, somewhat laconic way his reaction to getting his teeth punched out. In this narrative, Benjamin's injuries are not really central, but still their seriousness is described indirectly, through a focus on dental and hospital appointments. Benjamin's narrative is, like Eddy's,

quite “cool”; he got “sort of angry” (instead of, for instance, really angry), and he emphasizes not the injuries’ consequence (as pain or fear) but practicalities in the form of subsequent paperwork and medical appointments.

Benjamin: Uh, I thought it felt weird inside my jaw [yeah], you know it felt like I had gravel in the jaw [uh huh] and uh yes then (laughs a little) well then you got sort of angry with them then or so (.) ‘Cause () at first you were at the dentist and then you were at the hospital and then you were at the dentist again and, write papers and all such crap and so.

Declining Sympathy

Sympathy is an attraction of a victim identity (Holstein and Miller 1990). Sympathy is, however, two sided: when you “feel sorry” for someone, you also announce that this person is seen as powerless and weak, something that contradicts a portrayal of the “cool,” competent, and strong man (Connell 1995; Messerschmidt 2004). Therefore, it seems quite logical that demonstrations of sympathy in the narratives we investigate are resisted to protect a fundamental project of masculine self-attribution. Even referrals to more formal and institutional “offers of sympathy,” namely help from crime victim support agencies, can be understood as balanced by performed masculinity.

Both requesting and accepting sympathy became sensitive matters in the interviews. The young men seemed to make a point out of the “fact” that as a young man, they could handle being subjected to injury without having to have others feel sorry for them. They recurrently described openly expressed sympathy from others as embarrassing or unnecessary. When relating how family or friends worried about them, the young men described how they were uncomfortable with sympathy. Admittedly, they appreciated people’s concern, but the sympathy must not be exaggerated. Eddy positions himself as someone who neither requests nor willingly accepts sympathy.

Eddy: It’s kind of (plays with his lighter) it’s awkward you know when people are feeling sorry for you and so on. Then (clears his throat) . . .

Interviewer: Mm, does it readily come to that?

Eddy: Yes yeah yeah when I came (.) to work so everyone “oh, poor little Eddy” (talks childish) (laughs).

The interviewees also portray suggestions of seeking help from crime victim support agencies in terms of their having declined such well-meaning sympathetic advice. They depict agencies as equivalent to organizations providing “understanding/curative communication” in general. Elias says that “there was no question” of contacting a support agency because “it felt like I got out of the situation the best way once it happened.” Edwin and David suggest that if there had been weapons involved when they were mugged, maybe “you would have been more shaky” and therefore in more need of talking to somebody. But since there were not, they thought it was enough to speak with each other.

In the following passage, the interviewer asks Danny, who was assaulted and mugged outside his school, if he had consulted *Brottsofferjouren*, a crime victim

support agency. Danny explains that the police informed him about this option but that he did not contact them:

Danny: I never did it was (.) I'm not that kind, you know, I was sort of there wasn't so much to chat about you know. What happened, happened, you know. There was nothing more to it, it was (4) no I don't know . . .

Interviewer: It's not something you need to talk about?

Danny: No, you know I didn't have anything to talk about after that (.) it was the same s- you know sort of (.) I was the same person it was just that I'd got one less laptop, you know (embittered laugh).

"*I'm not that kind, you know.*" Which identity does Danny not want to align with? It seems to be as a person who is a victim: he is not damaged. The incident is not depicted as touching his core self: "It was just that I'd got one less laptop, you know." Another young man, Fabian, telling about being at a party at which one of the invited guests threatened and chased after the others with a kitchen knife, describes a similar approach concerning victim support:

Fabian: Didn't feel like I needed that [. . .] well it was a special event but it wasn't anything special you needed to talk about if you needed to talk about something then you talked to those who were present about what had happened and so on.

In these kinds of statements, there is an emphasis on the self not being inwardly or emotionally affected. These declarations of identity are, however, presented in forms of negations.⁹ Such performances of identities are also found in other studies in which the interviewees wrestle with conflicting discourses. In Chase's study, in which successful minority women speak about discrimination, one strategy was the use of negative constructions (for instance *don't*, *can't*, and *never*; Chase 1995:53). Edley and Wetherell (1997) identify similar negative constructions to perform an identity opposed to a machismo version of masculinity. The difference—which we now will turn to—is that in our material, the negated identity is also performed, in a balancing act.

Performing Victimhood

An identity of being in control, of "doing to" rather than "being done to," and of managing injuries—i.e., what we have seen as belonging to hegemonic masculinity—is not the whole story. The interviewees also manage to point out that they were, indeed, victims of crimes.

Not Being the Instigator

A common cultural construction of violence associates it with intention and responsibility on the perpetrator's part (Arblaster 1994). A crucial element in an "ideal" victim narrative is that victims never initiate the events at issue (Emerson 1994; Christie 2001; Holstein and Miller 1990). The young men in this study seem to take this into account when they assume that a potential participation could

be ascribed to them, by using comments like, “it would have been another thing if I had sort of deserved it,” emphasizing their own lack of responsibility.¹⁰ When telling about how the violent event evolved, the interviewees first emphasize their own innocence and express surprise at being attacked, and thereafter how they defended themselves—or account for their lack of defense (as shown above). This part of the article describes further strategies in which masculinity is balanced with a victim identity.

Letting Witnesses Attest

The young men tell about their injuries, as we have seen, in a masculine, detached way. Such descriptions are, however, balanced by descriptions that portray the young men as victims. The way they do this is noteworthy: They let others attest or bear witness.

Stories about injuries often begin with a “cool” or laconic description, indicating that the injuries were not to be taken seriously, but after awhile, various actors enter the scene, and the interviewees let these actors illustrate their injuries. In this way, the young men implicitly present themselves as quite seriously hurt, which supports a victim identity, but they are at the same time not telling a story that appears whiny or overtly sympathy seeking, which would have defied an image of a calm and composed man (cf. Ekenstam 1998). Eddy, who said that he was “bleeding heavily” but that it was “cool,” refers to his friends’ stories¹¹; these witnesses are animated in Eddy’s story as expressing that “it looked quite brutal” and that he was badly hurt. Later on in the interview, the interviewer asks Eddy how his family members reacted when they heard what happened:

Eddy: (laughs) They were terrified, you know. (laughs)

Interviewer: Yeah.

Eddy: They thought, you know, that I as well yeah (3) my dad rushed over, you know, in well (3) casual clothes and well, you know, like sports pants and a tiny shirt (laughs) my brother rode his bike up there (laughs) . . .

Interviewer: Okay. (laughs a little)

Eddy: Mm, and my mum didn’t, uh, didn’t (.) Uh, I didn’t get- didn’t know until the next day.

In this episode, the drama intensifies. The family is “terrified” and acts in accordance with this state of mind (Eddy’s father doesn’t have time to get properly dressed but rushes off). The mother is depicted not in order to describe her reactions but to explain why she was not there to react; it seems important for Eddy to assemble the whole family, so to speak.

Similar balancing rhetoric can be noted also in Henry’s story about his reaction after the crime. Henry describes being attacked at school by a youngster a few years older than he, whom Henry’s father earlier had reported to the police for assaulting Henry. Some time before the coming court proceeding, this young man attacks Henry again: “Then he came and threatened me and stuff and (3) so he choked me and (3) I believed it was really bad.” He tells about how he felt bad because of this, but a more vivid picture is delivered “by proxy”:

Henry: My friends they thought that I wa- you know they said to me that "you've never been that strange before" "we don't understand what has happened" or something like that . . .

Interviewer: In what way did they think you were strange?

Henry: Well, we spoke about it later too, and they thought like, you know, that I was completely, you know, quiet and I'm not usually quiet (laughs) like up and jumping all the time, so they thought I was really quiet and reserved and reflecting () in my own little world (.)

Another example is George, who initially says that his friends did not react that much when he told them he was mugged because "they had been mugged before." According to George's narrative, being mugged is something you can almost anticipate as a young man ("a fairly common thing")—this anticipation and its masculine connotation corroborates with, for instance, Pettersson's (2003) and Cnaan's (1996) findings. George's narrative becomes, however, more dramatized: "Of course, they reacted a little extra in that we said there were weapons involved and [...] the culprit was stoned." George lets his friends' reactions tell us that this specific mugging was out of the ordinary—he does not explicitly say so himself—and in this manner a subtle victim identity is supported.

Sympathy: Delicate Requests or Complaints

Above we noted that the interviewed young men illustrated how they had resisted offers of sympathy. Still, they seem to request sympathy and recognition as crime victims. The requests, however, are not made explicit but remain somewhat hidden in ironic critique or guarded complaints directed to a lack of recognition of their victim status. Eddy, who had painted a picture in which he was smothered in sympathy and implicitly declared that he did not want to be treated as a child, still delivers a complaint. You can sense some disappointment when Eddy construes others as not authentically interested in his experiences:

Interviewer: Well, I was thinking those you have told, did you believe that they understood or that they just asked you know-

Eddy: (interrupts) I guess they asked just to be nice (laughs a little).

Interviewer: Yes.

Eddy: Yes, many I think so, anyway.

Examples can also be found in which a masculine rejection of help from a crime victim support agency (an institution explicitly associated with therapeutic communication) is matched up with formulations in which the interviewee indirectly criticizes the same institution for not giving attention to one's own target group. Mark, an eighteen-year-old student who was assaulted, for instance, first declares that he has declined help from them as "it is not like I haven't felt anything (.) you know any need to precisely talk about it" (curative conversation, Swedish *tala ut*), then makes what can be interpreted as an indirect complaint about the brochure he got from the victim support agency: "There was this list so it was maybe (.) six out of eight (victim shelters, help lines, support) were for girls that had been raped." Then, he uses a hypothetical form when talking about what has happened, which

avoids positioning himself as the complainer: "Well, if it's a young man who has been assaulted so they send that one (that brochure)."

In narratives about police action, a critique of not getting the proper sympathy that victims deserve is apparent. The young men sometimes explain that the police did not take their case seriously, and they voice this critique despite the fact that they have declared themselves reluctant to report the crime in the first place. The critique can also be given through irony. One of the young men, Danny, who was robbed with a knife outside his school, talks about how the police did not make an effort in catching or arresting the culprit: "See, what I saw (.) and four of my friends saw is not evidence enough (.) for the police."

Other forms of complaint-making include elaborations of how the police have acted nonchalantly by letting them wait. A seventeen-year-old, Mick, who was robbed by some young men close to his home in the evening after visiting a neighbor with his friends, tells about his experience of making a report to the police in the following way: "We got to tell 'em what we had been through and how they looked and so on, then he (the policeman) went out to have a cup of coffee, sort of." To state that someone went to "have a cup of coffee"—a symbol for taking a break or not working—in this situation can be seen as voicing a criticism towards the policeman's passivity and lack of interest, bearing a message that the crime that the young man and his friend had experienced was not a crime of high priority.¹² Likewise, the way Danny (who was also using irony when talking about the police) talks about the time it took for a prosecutor to call the victim, five months, can be seen as an indicator of nonchalance from the representatives of the law, in effect the lack of respect for the young man *as a* victim.

Potter (1996) illustrates how time can be used rhetorically as critique by referring to Anita Pomerantz's study on descriptions in legal settings. According to our interviewees, things may take too short a time (the police not staying to take a proper report but instead leaving for coffee), but also too long (the prosecutor who took five months before calling). Both can be seen as indicating a lack of respect for the one who waits for an answer, seeks help, or is waiting for a decision.

Our main point here, however, is the form that these complaints take. In this context, the young men's complaints can be seen as indirect ways of making claims of performing a victim identity; they accomplish this by calling attention to the fact that they were not treated as such. These complaints are, however, never directly formulated. They do not complain that the police are nonchalant, or "do not care," but the criticism is delivered through irony or concrete illustrations, often followed up with a laugh.

It is worth noting that laughter, humor, and irony are recurring elements in the balancing rhetoric we have studied. Laughter is, as Adelswärd (1998:19) points out, a "meta-communicative act where the person who laughs is expressing his or her attitude to what has been said." Mark, for instance, delicately criticizes the brochure he got from the victim support agency for listing mostly help schemes for girls, by saying, "Yes. (laughs a little) So you hadn't much use of them, you know, so I don't know (laughs a little), yes." Without the laughter, Mark might unambiguously have positioned himself as a dissatisfied and righteous crime victim, which easily may be construed as "non-manly" or feminine. With the laughter, by contrast, he can be said to manage to maintain masculinity and modify a victim identity.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our findings reflect the observation that two or more selves are possible as components in a "unitary" self, depending on the social relations we are involved in (Mead 1934/1967:143), but the results also elaborate this observation by appearing to specify how such plurality can be performed when reference groups are at odds with each other and still situationally overlapping. People may not simply perform one identity as a response to challenge from another but instead balance two or more situationally actualized identities in parallel.

In our empirical illustration of this balancing rhetoric of contradictory identities, a tactical, composed, and anti-emotional self is being sculpted by the young Swedish men but also, indirectly, so is a harmed or injured individual who has been mugged or assaulted. Although incongruous on a theoretical level—victimhood is basically "the antithesis of masculinity" (Sundaram 2004:66)—the identities as "man" and "victim" are not found to be incompatible in practical identity work. Instead, both of these reference groups (Strauss 1959) provide the narrators with resources to make sense of crime experiences. When asked to elaborate on their experiences of being mugged and assaulted, these young men make use of masculine ideals and connotations to modify their self presentations as victims so that their identities are formed as commitments to both of these cultural entities.

The balancing rhetoric in the interviews takes place in various themes, often in implicit or subtle forms—word choice, manner of speaking, unsolicited accounts, and laughter—and in collaborations with the interviewer. Perpetrators are clearly construed as taking the initiative: they are narrated as being responsible for initiating the event during the situation that the narrators describe. A crucial element in an ideal victim narrative is that victims never initiate the events at issue (Emerson 1994; Christie 2001; Holstein and Miller 1990); the young Swedish men consequently emphasize their own innocence and express surprise at being attacked. They seem to be aware that a potential participation could be ascribed to them, by using comments like "it would have been another thing if I had sort of deserved it," emphasizing their own lack of responsibility. At the same time, the narrators are presented as defending themselves, standing up for their autonomy and self respect, or accounting for not having done so. They let animated witnesses, or other actors in the drama, attest to their injuries or to the drama of the crime event. Injuries and fear are played down but clearly exemplified as well, and others' sympathy is rejected but also, in inexplicit but yet displayed manners, somewhat sought. Furthermore, the specific crimes talked about in this study are portrayed as morally different, deviating from "normal" violence (Burcar 2005). Such portrayals imply that the events being talked about should be seen as more serious than others, and consequently more "victim worthy." The narrative performances recurrently contain such contradicting elements that they seem to constitute a multicolored fabric. The narrators go "back and forth" in their stories to negotiate how they want to be recognized.

Hegemonic masculinity is "culturally honored, glorified and extolled at the symbolic level" (Messerschmidt 2004:43), but nonetheless there are several masculinities (Connell 1995; 2000), and "masculine" traits cannot be reduced or permanently attached to one bodily sex category. When we say that the young men in our study adhere to hegemonic masculinity in their self presentations, it is because

we did not see evidence of many masculinities in their crime narratives, but identified instead a common, hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, we do not argue that women could not do the same, or that other men (or men talking about other experiences) could not adhere to other versions. Still, hegemonic masculinity as it is culturally employed seems to offer an attractive option for narrative projects that aim to circumvent a clear-cut victim identity. Although hegemonic masculinity could easily be seen as undermined by any acknowledgement of being a victim, these young men carefully position themselves as both.

Certainly, we have discussed a special situation and a special context: the research interview as well as a Swedish-specific example. The identities were here “given” and inescapable, not possible to subordinate or hide in this situation, but the balancing tendencies uncovered may well occur in other such situations dealing with the ordinary processing of victims, such as in victim accounts to police or in court. Insight into such balancing rhetoric may thus contribute both to further studies of the interpretative processes of “becoming a victim” (Holstein and Miller 1990) and be of use to those dealing with the practicalities of victims and crimes. Victims are “produced,” as Quinney (1972) argued, through practical and political activities; such production may, however, be far from smooth and linear: it may rest on candidate victims’ (in their formal, official sense) half-reluctant or delicate narratives because they may have a stake in other identities. Young men may not “talk themselves into being victims,” paraphrasing Heritage’s (1984:290) formulation of how social circumstances are realized.¹³

On a more general level, it is our hope that the analytical generalizability (Yin 2003) of our empirical case may advance the study of people’s ambivalent performances in general, as we go about combining seemingly mismatched discursive materials in society (Åkerström 2006; Chase 1995; Edley and Wetherell 1997).

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NOTES

1. For a similar discussion on a small sample providing analytical generalizability, in a study of contradictory identities in a study of a women’s rugby team, see Ezzell (2009).
2. Other reports on diverse masculinities in Nordic countries as constructed and positioned against a normative hegemonic masculinity are Folkesson (2000) and Ervo and Johansson (2003).
3. http://www.norden.org/en/areas-of-co-operation/gender-equality/gender-equality-in-the-nordic-region?set_language=en20100503.
4. Studies of discourses in which the presentations of gender clash with cultural assumptions of gender may also involve analysis of resources that *others* use; see, for instance, Gurevich’s (2008) study of trials against mothers who are accused of killing their infants.
5. This ongoing project addresses the meaning of ethnicity in narratives about victimization. Here, however, ethnicity aspects are not the aim of interest and are not taken into account.
6. Veronika Burcar established contact with some of the young men through collegial connections; in most cases, however, the contact was established through the district city court in Malmö.

7. We have not been able to distinguish such differences. This does not mean that a linguistic researcher, with another focus, would not be able to do so.
8. A SIM card contains information on telephone numbers, etc., in a mobile phone.
9. A point made by Professor Karin Aronsson when reading a version of the manuscript.
10. This is thus a twist on formulations of a discourse on responsibility different from, for instance, narratives from female rape victims who sometimes are reported as "taking the blame" or to feeling as though they "deserve it" by painting a picture of themselves as offering themselves as victims by, for instance, being too drunk (e.g., Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeney 2006). Here, the young men deny such responsibility by dealing with this in a restricted sense of discussions on initiation of an interaction.
11. Quoting others or using others as witnesses may have several functions in storytelling. Potter (1996), for instance, points to the role of quoting others as a way of making statements more factual and less driven by one's own stakes. Holšánová (2006) points to the role of quoting others as a way of making sensitive statements, in her case in discourse on foreigners.
12. "Having a 'cup of coffee'" is used in other complaints against professionals. Eddy, who told about how the ambulance took 15 minutes to arrive, explains this by adding ironically that they probably had to first have a cup of coffee. Another Swedish study of crime victims shows examples of how critique is directed towards prosecutors; a young man who was robbed talks about the prosecutor: "She ran away and drank coffee" (Lindgren 1999:62, our translation).
13. Such balancing rhetoric may also be considered among other categories, such as, for instance, young women who have been sexually assaulted but who want to protect the identity of a respectable femininity (Armstrong et al. 2006).

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