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The Trouble with “Troubled Girls”

Margareta Hydén and Carolina Överlien

Abstract

If you are a psychologist, a psychotherapist, a social worker, or belong to any other helping profession, you are probably anxious to get detailed information about the kinds of trouble a troubled girl suffers. In order to help her, you need to assess and categorize her trouble. Assessing problems and making a diagnosis are fundamental parts of the helping process. However, your efforts may not always be met by gratefulness and acceptance. The troubled girl may disagree and resist your way of characterizing her. This resistance puts you in trouble—how can you help someone who does not accept your view—but it may also put the troubled girl into increased trouble. She may exercise her resistance in such a way that her need for help becomes unacknowledged, she might be regarded as a girl without motivation for change, or she may just be distancing herself. But her resistance can also be favourable, in that it may help her to avoid some of the adversities connected with being classified as some kind of troubled person. In this chapter, the dilemma that occurs when the troubled themselves resist the prospective helpers’ efforts to classify them is addressed. The basic argument is that this dilemma cannot be solved unless the helper has the ability to recognize not only the girl’s troubles but also her overall competence and potential for creating a better life for herself.

Introduction

Some years ago, one of us (Hydén, 1994, 1995/2008a) conducted a qualitative study about men’s violence against women. In one of the interviews a young woman, severely beaten by her boyfriend on several occasions, was asked if she in her troublesome situation had ever sought help. “No,” she answered promptly. “That would probably have caused me more trouble.” She continued by giving the following explanation:

I don’t like to talk about the fact that I have been beaten.

You see, I haven’t had a good childhood either.

If you haven’t had that, no one ever gives you a chance. I think one should look forward, but no one else seems to think so.

If they find out that there is a lot of misery at hand, they think they really know something about you.

Just get down in all the old damned trash and stay there, that’s what they want you to.

I hate it when the decent and clever people feel sorry for you.

They look as if no one has ever been awful to them.

I can see immediately what they think: There’s someone who is inferior to me

(Hydén, 1995/2008a, p. 132)

This is a strong and in many ways a tragic statement. The young woman was in deep trouble and was not likely to be able to solve her problems on her own. She desperately needed help, but did not want to ask for it in fear of being continuously badly treated. There was probably little hope that someone would try to offer her assistance, since her appearance was that of a self-sufficient and a bit sullen young woman. She refused to identify herself with the categories of “being beaten” or “battered young woman” or “exposed child.” In her experience these categories are exclusively based on victimization, accompanied by the recognition of weakness and recommendation to submit to those who were better off. Things she valued, like recognition of competence, are excluded. As they were constructed, these categories were not well suited for forming a basis for mutual respect. Hence, she resisted them. Child abuse and woman battering are culturally low valued activities—even if you are forced into them, even if you are a victim of them. A victim of a culturally low valued activity does not necessarily expect to be met by respect, which is deeply troublesome. Respect is a fundamental experience of social relations, because respect means social honor (see e.g., Sennet, 2004).

The woman’s statement may reflect other’s lack of respect and empathy, but it also reflects the difficulty of showing and recognizing mutual respect across boundaries of inequality. When the assumed totally competent people speak, it could be perceived by the troubled as “the language of superiority” (“I hate it when the decent and clever people feel sorry for you”), which often is met by silence and feelings of inferiority. When the troubled abused woman speaks competence it is often perceived as almost the opposite to superiority, namely as an expression of the fact that she is living in denial of her own shortcomings and in a tendency to subscribe to herself the responsibility for the man’s violent actions.

“I think one should look forward, but no one else seems to think so,” the young woman said and hinted that not only was she ready for a change, but that she also was a believer of future possibilities, and as such had some unutilized potentials she could use for realizing her beliefs. However, she was very pessimistic about her chances to find anyone who would join her in her interest in looking forward and identifying potentials, among the people who saw her as “beaten” or “battered.” They seemed more interested in the past. With these options at hand she preferred to be alone.

The young woman was correct in assuming that power can be exercised against a young troubled person, forcing him or her to do things he or she does not want to do. Under certain conditions the reign of the state over an underage person is accepted, and he or she could be placed under the custody of society, for example at a youth detention home. An increasing number of girls and young women in Sweden are each year placed at these kinds of institutions. Here, The National Board of Health and Welfare (2006) reports that the number of girls that have been referred to juvenile detention care has increased with 50 % from 1999 to 2005. In addition, the girls are suffering from more severe problems and live under more difficult social circumstances than the boys in the same situation. About 50 % of the girls have been physically or mentally abused, and 40 % have tried to commit suicide (The National Board of Institutional Care, 2001, 2002, 2003).

This exercise of power is legitimate only if the young persons have acted in ways that are being considered as signs of underdeveloped capacities to reason independently. As the young persons show signs of becoming able to act more maturely, that is being more responsible and rational, the state's command over them ceases. In order to obtain this, they do not have to be free from problems, but preferably be a bit less troubled. At a minimum, they have to prove that they have acquired some capacity for letting their troubles take more reasonable and responsible expressions.

Our interest in troubled girls traces its origin to a study¹ that took place at a youth detention home² for girls and young women aged 13–21 years (Hydén & Överlien, 2005; Överlien, 2003, 2004; Överlien & Hydén, 2003). The aim of the study was to gain an understanding of the difficulties, and dilemmas the staff were facing when working with young women who were understood to be victims of sexual abuse. They saw sexual victimization as closely connected to the girls' problems and their sexual activity was often part of the reason why they were institutionalized. This is an excellent example of how labelling can cause skewed or erroneous conceptions of individual problems and needs. Illicit sexual behaviour such as “promiscuity” has been found to play a major role in placing girls in detention care, a

¹ The study was carried out with grants from The National Board of Institutional Care.

² We translate the Swedish term “särskilda ungdomshem” into “youth detention homes.” The National Board of Institutional Care uses the translation “special approved homes,” which in our opinion does not do justice to the fact that the homes in question are closed institutions and not family homes exclusively picked out to care for troubled adolescents.

criterion that is generally not applied when it comes to describing boys' problems or grounds for placing boys in detention care (Schlytter, 1999). Criteria such as numbers of sexual partners are almost exclusively applied on girls and young women (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998; Schlytter, 1999). Does this mean that sexuality can be a problem for girls but not for boys? We do not think so. Even when basic facts such as dysfunctional homes and insufficient schooling are similar for boys and girls, the decision to place a young person in compulsory care is made on different grounds depending on gender (Schlytter). Furthermore, the Swedish court system is a reflection of the society as a whole. There are different norms regarding female and male sexuality. As a result, girls, to a much greater extent than boys, are placed in institutional care based on what is by the court understood as a problematic sexual behaviour together with other criteria such as drug use. Combined, this poses great demands on the institutions to have an active, open and non-judgemental dialog with the girls on issues such as sexuality, pregnancy, and motherhood (Överlien & Hydén, 2004).

The Present Chapter

The purpose of the present chapter is to discuss labelling of females in treatment, and how that may affect the healing process of girls and women who have been witnessing or been the actual victims of violence in relationships. In addition, the questions whether gender stereotype assumptions of risk direct the attention of treatment in a nonrelevant direction, and how the definitions of the problems at hand may change as a result of the treatment process, are also in focus.

Method

Participants

The participants in this chapter have taken part in two qualitative, empirical studies on exposure to violence, either as young girls with experiences of sexual abuse or as children witnessing domestic violence.

Procedure

Combining Ethnography and Interviews

During a total of 8 weeks over a period of 12 months, the second author (CÖ), took part in the regular activities at two of the five departments of a government funded youth detention home for girls and young women aged 13–21. She participated in the daily activities, observed the staff's daily work and the interaction between the staff and the young women. The

observations were primarily used as way of detecting discussions and situations concerning sexual abuse, in order to conduct inter-views related to these situations. Secondly, the observations were used as supplementary data. The first author (MH) made occasional visits to conduct some of the interviews. In all, five group interviews and 29 individual interviews were conducted. Nineteen staff members took part in the interview study.

The Focus Group as a Method for Studying High-Involvement Topics with Troubled Young People

After having spent some time at the institution, we were increasingly anxious to know whether or not there existed other story lines than the ones about “different” and “vulnerable” troubled girls. Maybe the girls themselves would give a more vivid account of their lives? Or would they talk about themselves along the same lines? Several of the girls had approached us and wanted to be part of our study. According to them, we spent too much time with the staff members. Our interests seemed to be overlapping: we wanted to talk to them and they wanted to talk to us. We decided to go ahead.

Given the fact that we had heard so much about their vulnerability, we carefully considered what kind of methodology we should use. We ended up deciding that the focus group method would well suit our research participants and the purpose of our study. A series of five 1-h group meetings were conducted over a period of 12 weeks. A total of 11 young women took part in the sessions. The number of participants varied between two and five.

Originally, the focus group method was employed for market research and for what can be called “low-involvement topics” in contrast to the “high-involvement topics” our study was engaged in. Drawing on our experience from the study we will however claim, that a slightly adjusted focus group method is well suited for studies with troubled, traditionally unheard groups of people, concerning high-involvement topics, such as “the body,” “relationships” and “sexuality.” However, one of the drawbacks is that the method puts great demands on the interviewer/ moderator. The discussion may generate highly sensitive issues and s/he has to be qualified to deal with this. It is therefore not a “quick and easy” research method. If misused, it could, at worst, lead to intimidating questions from the co-participants, during and after the interviews. It is therefore important that the moderator closely monitors the discussion.

The group participants in our study provided support to each other in various ways. Much of the narration that was going on was co-constructed by the young participants. Disputes constituted important arenas for displaying and revising strong opinions about topics such as child rearing. Thereby, we could also see how the group shared specific ideas about autonomy and sexuality. Further, the group participants offered each other support and self-censorship if the discussion became overly intrusive. On other matters, group participants, in fact, displayed empathy in ways that provided support to other participants who had revealed feelings of insecurity about themselves. Our overall conclusion is that the focus group method probably provided us with a more natural and less intrusive format than individual interviews.

The overall topic for the five focus group sessions conducted over a period of 2 weeks was “What is it like to be a young woman in Sweden today.” A total of 11 young women took part in the sessions. Articles from popular magazines were presented as stimuli material. A semi-structured interview guide was used and inter-viewer/moderator was the second author (CÖ). The topics of the sessions included themes such as romantic relationships, femininity/masculinity, beauty ideals and body image, and sexuality. The articles presented reflected these topics and could therefore be used as a starting point for discussion.

At the beginning of each session, the interviewer/moderator explained to the participants that we were interested in what they thought and felt about a number of issues related to them as being young women. It was particularly emphasized that we were not there to evaluate them, to test them or to judge them, and that there were no right or wrong answers to our questions. All the participants also received a letter a few days before the focus group sessions, stating our intentions with the sessions and that their participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from each participant and their parents. They were also told that they were allowed to discontinue their participation at any time during the sessions and that they were welcome to join the session again after such a break.

Interviews with Children Witnessing Domestic Violence

At the end of this chapter, some examples will be given from a study of children and young peoples’ narratives of being witness to their mothers being abused by their part-ners, e.g., the children’s father or some other man their mother had a close relationship with. The data consist of 29 group therapy sessions with 15 children 12–16 years old and two therapists. I

addition, ten individual interviews were conducted with some of the older children who wanted to participate more directly in the study.

To encourage free narratives, in all interview studies, an open interview style was developed with few questions formulated in detail. In this form of interviewing, the questions are primarily aimed at constructing a framework within which the interviewees would feel free, and have opportunities to discuss their thoughts and feelings. The purpose was to access their understanding and inner logic—or possibly their lack of inner logic and understanding—of what had happened.

Results

Defining “The Troubled Girl”

The girls and young women were sent to the youth detention home for assessment and treatment, because they had a difficult childhood and were currently having trouble, and/or because they had caused other people trouble. The ethnographic study showed that by entering the institution the girl was transformed from someone who was “having trouble” into someone who was “being troubled.” The aim of the assessment process was to determine what kind of “troubled girl” she was.

When the staff members talked about the girls, the general connotation of being “a troubled girl” was that of being different. And, if a “troubled girl” is the equivalent of a “different girl,” she is expected to do “differing” things. The staff gave numerous examples of the character of the close relation between “being troubled” and “being different.” “Being different” was an omnipresent issue at the detention home. The girls were very well aware of the fact that they were there because of “deviant behaviour” and that they were supposed to change that behaviour. The story about the incidents in the local swimming hall is one example of how this issue could be played out between the staff and the girls—and in this case also the “well-behaved locals.” The story tellers are the staff members that accompanied the girls. The data are from the second author’s (CÖ) field notes.

Being Troubled: Being Different

Staff members at the detention centre had decided that taking part in community activities, like spending a Saturday afternoon at the local swimming hall, would be a valuable part of the girls’ treatment. For a small number of the girls, meeting other teenagers in the community

outside of the detention home was nothing new because they attended the local high school. For the majority of the girls, however, this was a rare experience. They all knew that the teenagers in the nearby community gave them belittling nicknames; all eluding to that the girls from the youth detention home were “monsters” or “freaks.” The girls were aware of this nicknaming and the matter was discussed on the way to the hall. The staff advised the girls to behave properly in the swimming hall and pointed out that they had “a great chance to prove them wrong.” What they could report later was that the visit had turned out to be a disaster. Not only had the girls lived up to the nicknames “the monster girls,” they had added a lot to it. The girls had been loud, used foul language and been noncooperative.

There are several possible understandings of this incident. One goes along the lines of that the girls had performed an act of resistance: They were tired of being looked upon as “monsters” and they deliberately acted like some. Another understanding goes along the lines of disappointment: They were interpreted the staff members utterance “show them wrong” as an agreement of the “locals” labelling them as “monsters” and they were acting out that disappointment. A third understanding goes along the line of the staff members’ performative action: By telling the story about “monsters acting like disasters” they said something about themselves as professionals and their ability to deal with difficult young people in difficult situations.

To determine what kind of a troubled girl a girl was, was generally more complicated than to confirm that she belonged to the overall category of “troubled girls.” In the ideal world of assessing children and finding out the kind of services that could be suitable for different kinds of trouble, the assessor has at his or her disposal a well-defined and objectively established set of criteria, covering the fundamental characteristics of categories such as “abuse and neglect” or “maltreatment.” So equipped, the assessment constitutes a smooth working process. The assessor can systematically compare a child’s situation and life circumstances with the criteria and factors associated for example with being identified as a case of “abuse and neglect,” or some other category that defines children in need of the welfare services. In the real world as opposed to the ideal one, however, there is no such preset and objective “given” regarding the definition of social problems. Instead, the definition emerges in a time and context dependent process where the problems are constantly

negotiated and (re) constructed. Several of the girls were categorized as “troubled girls” with weak egos. Nadia³ was one of those girls. The data are CÖ:s from field notes:

Nadia is 14 years old. She is identified as a “troubled girl” with a “weak ego” and with “weak ego boundaries” and therefore wants attention. The story of Nadia’s session in front of a mirror one Friday night was given as one example of how these characteristics could be per-formed. The staff had approved her visiting the local community youth recreation center and she was getting dressed for this occasion. In front of the mirror, she turns every angel of her body over and over again, decides that her clothing isn’t just right, goes to her room, changes clothes and goes back to the mirror. The procedure starts over and over again. Her critical gaze is relentless in its quest to find the smallest flaw. This situation could probably be interpreted in many ways. One could go along the lines of Nadia being not different at all, but in good company with a lot of teenagers preparing for a Friday night in town. For the staff’s interpretation, the matter of deceives importance was that Nadia was a “troubled girl with weak ego boundaries” and thereby “different”. The logic of their argument was that different girls are acting differently compared to girls in general. The general understanding among the staff members were, that “ordinary” “normal” girls are not as painstakingly insecure as Nadia.

“Being Troubled” and the Connection to “Being Sexually Abused”

There was a general understanding among the staff members, that the girls’ troubles were tracing their origins to experiences of sexually abused. Great efforts were made to find out about the link between “being troubled” and “being sexually abused.” However, determining whether or not a girl or young woman belongs to the category of “sexual abused” turned out to be a complex and extensive process.

The disclosure of sexual abuse sometimes appeared as a conviction: the perpetrator could have been reported or sentenced, or the abuse could have been one of the main reasons for the young woman’s being transferred to the institution. More often it appeared as a suspicion: i.e., wearing a baggy sweater could be understood as a sign that she wanted to hide her body and make the staff suspect that the young woman might have been abused or she could talk vaguely about sexual abusive incidents. The issue could also be accompanied by ambiguity around the nature of sexual experiences. Ambiguity was expressed by questions such as: was she forced to have sex or was it voluntarily? What does “voluntary” really mean in relation to sex in the context of drug addiction? What is the difference between “sexual abuse,” a “bad” sexual experience, or a “good” sexual experience—and who is to decide?

If the staff had difficulties to find out whether sexual abuse had happened or not, it was easier for them to define the sexual abused: to be a sexual abused girl meant being vulnerable. In relation to sexuality, some staff members claimed that “being vulnerable” made any sexual act an act of sexual abuse. In excerpt 1, Catherine is presented as an example of someone

³ All names and places have been changed to assure anonymity.

whose entire sex life can be defined as sexual abuse, since Catherine “just want to be liked” and men are taking advantage of that. Catherine is 17 years old and she is allowed to spend weekend nights away from the youth detention home. One Friday night she has a date with Johnny, a boy at her age living in the nearby town. Back at the youth detention home, she tells the other girls that she had sex with Johnny. The news gets to the staff and become an issue. Emotions run high in the discussion of the matter. The dominating view is that Catherine has been a victim of sexual abuse, due to her overall vulnerability. This understanding is reflected in one of the research interviews:

Excerpt 1. “In a way she sells her body”

Participants: Tina (T), female resident assistant, Erika (E), female resident assistant, Mimmi (M), female resident assistant, Patrick (P), male resident assistant, Carolina Överlien (CÖ)

T Some of the girls don’t think they are being abused when they sleep with a guy

CÖ No

T [If it’s three guys=

P Then it isn’t abuse by law as such (.) but it is abuse for her because she suffers psychologically every time it happens

M It is abuse of our girls because of how they suffer from it

E If you take the example of Catherine just as an example (.) she wants to be liked (.) so when she was out last with that guy (.) what’s his name again (.) that guy Johnny or whatever his name was

T Mm

E then (.) in a way she sells her body so that she can feel liked and that is also =

P But that is [slightly different

T [abuse

(Hydén & Överlien, 2004, p. 62)

We do not have Catherine’s account of what happened that night, but we do know that she described what had happened to the other girls as she and Johnny were “having sex.” Her identity as a vulnerable, troubled girl however, redefines this act as “sexual abuse” by the staff. We do not know Johnny’s understanding of what has taken place. If we did, his account may represent a third view. The staff members however, had defined him as a perpetrator. According to them, he must have known that she lived at the youth detention home and thereby was a vulnerable troubled girl, unable to decide for herself whether or not she wanted to have sex with him.

“Being Troubled” is Rarely Associated with Personal Qualities

To have had a difficult childhood or to have been exposed to domestic violence, are life circumstances one cannot be responsible for. Such experiences can even be associated with personal qualities. “To succeed against all odds” or “to have the strength to survive bad life circumstances” are highly valued. When it comes to children who are living a difficult

childhood, the culturally expected behaviour is to show them sympathy and give them support. When it comes to an adult person, the facts of the matter may be different.

The adult troubled person might or might not be met by sympathy—it very much depends on his or her own appearance. Rarely is to be troubled associated with personal qualities. One of the girls in the earlier mentioned study of children who had witnessed domestic violence (Hydén, 2009; Överlien & Hydén, 2009) had in the most brutal way experienced how low valued a troubled person can be and how this directly affected her. Helen, 15 years at the time of the interview, told about a life with a singled socially low valued alcoholic mother and her violent boyfriends. Their life style had not only affected her life at home, but her entire life:

Excerpt 2. “My friend was not allowed to be with me”

Participants: Helen (H) Margareta Hydén (MH)

H When you came to school they called you junkie kid and you felt pointed out you were bullied you were not in school that often

MH Mmm

H The parents of other kids said they were not allowed to be with me

MH Mmm

H It was the same when I started a new school when I was in sixth grade. ‘Cause I was not allowed to stay. So I met a new friend who had a mother who had met my mother at work she was a policeofficer. The mother told her daughter that “you can not hang around Helen”. She told absolutely every-thing about my mother even though she has professional secrecy so she was really not allowed to tell anything

MH How was that for you

H I hated that mother. My friend said “it is not Helen who has problems it is her mother”. But it did not help.

MH Do many adult think the same way as this mother?

H Yes

MH That’s it’s just as well that my child doesn’t hang with that child because her mother has problems’ Do many think that way?

H Yes, because I haven’t had hardly any friends until I moved to grandma and grandpa. Then things got a little better. Then they could hang with me because I lived there. I think you want to protect the children from seeing stuff like this.

This is a vivid and tragic account of what it can mean for a child to be associated with a “troubled mother” and thereby be valued as “troubled” herself, not on behalf of her own action, but on her mother’s. It also shows how low valued the social position of the “troubled” might be and how the children may get involved. In Helen’s case, she was so associated with the low valued position of her mother that she was prevented from being friends with a girl of her own age—and it was nothing she could do about it.

One is Lonely, Different, and Powerless: Many are Normal and Powerful

In the introduction to this chapter, it was argued that one of the dilemmas a troubled girl or young woman has to face concerns her resistance to accept a characterization that may put her in trouble—a resistance that may lead to that her pain gets unacknowledged and she left

lonely without help. We have given some suggestions for reasons to why she might resist; such as, as a “troubled girl” she might be low valued, her overall competence and potential for creating a better life might go unrecognized, and she might be labelled as “different.” In this finalizing part of the chapter an example is given of how this dilemma can be tackled. The example is taken from the study on children and young people who have witnessed violence in their homes, but could be generalized to encounters between a helper and a troubled girl. It gives a notion of how the story lines of the troubled “different” young woman and the competent “normal” young woman could be connected. In the example, this happens in a somewhat paradoxical way.

In excerpt 6, we meet Emma. She is 16 years old and has experienced her stepfather’s severe violence towards her mother and sometimes towards herself. She has had a hard time at school and has been bullied. Not only has she expected to be met by lack of respect if she disclosed her living conditions, she has actually experienced it. Her experiences brought her to the brink of suicide and she was saved at the very last minute. She is obviously emotionally affected during the interview. The interviewer (MH) stops her at several points, asking her if it is OK, if she really wishes to continue, and she says she does. She claims that she really wants to tell what she has experienced. However, the interviewer becomes worried, because her remembrance is so painful. Previous experiences from researching domestic violence had learned the interviewer that exposure to violence is embedded in feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness and that such feelings are closely connected to feelings of loneliness. Sometimes the feelings of loneliness can decline if they are addressed directly. So the interviewer decides to challenge the story line of loneliness:

Excerpt 3 “If I count, it might be 50 %”

Participants: Emma (E), Margareta Hydén (MH)

MH Have you ever thought that there are other children out there who have been exposed to almost the same as you

E Yes I have, it’s a lot actually

MH Mm

E When I think of it

It’s almost fun, that so many have the same problem

It’s less lonesome

MH Just think of what a huge political party you and the others could start

E Mm

MH Then one becomes a bit happier

E Then you think that you’re not alone

When you’re deep down there, you think you’re totally alone, but then

I wonder how many it actually is

MH You can think of it when you take the bus from school

E Today it was nice weather

I was thinking about that and was happy

But when it snows or rains, I hate it

MH Next time it rains and you're on the bus, think of it then, think of how many there are at the bus with the same experiences E: (smiling) Yeah, and if I count, I think it might be 50 %

MH: (smiling) Yeah, and then you can count on the next bus, and the next and the next

Acted on in the interview was the interviewer's apprehension of Emma's vulnerability and suffering. To try to open up the space for another story to be elicited, a story that might position Emma differently seemed to be of first degree of urgency for various reasons: Emma was very ambitious and wanted to give a good interview, she wanted to use this chance to talk because she had not had many encounters with people who truly wanted to listen to her, she was young and inexperienced and she had not had much assistance during her childhood in supporting herself, to mention a few. The interviewer acted because she wanted to save Emma from another painful experience. What is also worth emphasizing is that what Emma had to tell was difficult to listen to and caused the interviewer substantial emotional strain and drain of energy. This is an aspect central to the experience of researching sensitive topics in vulnerable populations that has not been much reflected on (see further Hydén, 2008b).

Focus Groups' Discussions About Motherhood

A number of girls at detention homes become mothers while detained. If seeing this from the young mother's as well as from the newborn child's perspective, this can be regarded as very troubling. According to a study of 718 girls in youth detention care, 27 % of the girls who were detained because of their own behaviour become teenage mothers, compared to 3.1 % of the general population of girls the same age. In the group of girls placed for other reasons than their own behaviour, the corresponding number was 14 % (Vinnerljung & Sallnäs, 2008). A large amount of research show negative consequences of giving birth during the teenage years, both for the mother and the child, such as bad economy, health and living conditions (Olausson, 2000; Serbin & Karp, 2004), aggressiveness and conflict in relation to the father of the child (Jenkins et al., 2006) or suicide attempts, deaths, alcohol and drug abuse (Ekeus, Olausson, & Hjern, 2006).

The focus groups at the youth detention home reviled a totally different view. The most popular topic during these focus groups was "I as a mother". The images of them-selves as future mothers turned out to be quite attractive. One example is from a session with five girls and the interviewer/moderator. She asks what they see for themselves in the future. What kind of hopes and aspirations do they have? The girls have earlier during the session talked about the importance of having a good job, a career and to look good. But when asked more

specifically what they wish for themselves, the answer is different. Ira, a 15-year-old girl with immigrant background answers promptly:

Excerpt 4 “I want to have children as soon as possible”

Participants: Ira (I), Kristin (K), Cecilia (C), Carolina Överlien (CÖ)

I I want a boyfriend I choose myself and not my parents
 CÖ Okay, that is important to you
 I Yes
 CÖ And what do you see in front of you if you, is it important to you to, have a career and look good and, all those things we have been talking about
 I Now actually I want to, I like children actually
 CÖ Mm
 K Mm
 C Mm
 I I want to have children as soon as possible

For Ira, whose parents come from a culture where the parents usually decide on their daughters' future husbands, one important goal for her future life was to marry a man of her own choice. When she was reminded of what the group had earlier decided were important goals in their lives, she introduced the 'me as mother' storyline, a storyline that dominated in many of the sessions.

In another focus group session, Sara brought up the question of children and argued that girls should wait until they are old enough to have children. She brought up the issue again later in the session and responded to her own proclamation:

Excerpt 5. “I long for children but I know I am not ready for it”

Participants: Sara (S), Nina (N), Carolina Överlien (CÖ)

S The question is how many really does wait, not many, I guess. I myself long for children so much
 N Yes I want it now
 S Me too
 CÖ Do you feel ready for it
 N No, I don't know but I actually want to have it S I long for children but I know I am not ready for it.

The girls had an articulated and well-reasoned way of seeing themselves as future mothers. Not everyone emphasized the positive aspects of being a mother. Some argued that a baby would severely limit their lives and restrain them. When one of the girls (Ira) in one session brought up the issue of children and told that she wanted to be a mother as soon as possible, this statement was strongly contradicted:

Excerpt 6. “I don't want to be a single mother and get stuck in some suburb”

Participants: Kristin (K), Cecilia (C), Ira (I), Carolina Överlien (CÖ)

C I can only imagine, no I wouldn't want to have a baby just like that and get stuck in some damn suburb and be a single mother and have to drag a baby car-riage around everywhere and stuff. I like want to, I want to have money so I can travel to begin with, I don't intend to get stuck and sit there waiting for a, man to come home

CÖ No
 C I wouldn't want to wait like that
 CÖ No
 K Me neither. I also want to go out and travel and be able to feel free
 C Not be dependent on anyone
 K Me neither. I also want to go out and travel and be able to feel free
 C Not be dependent on anyone
 K No, maybe travel with a friend or alone or, go to museums and things like that by myself and like explore and have fun you know
 CÖ Mm
 K And have the chance to see loads of things and experience loads of things (.) and not have a kid with you on your back in one of those backpack things (.) and go around giving the baby a bottle while you are walking around an art museum or something
 (Överlien & Hydén, 2004, p. 228)

Cecilia and Kristin are in this excerpt presenting a picture of the free, independent, modern woman in charge of her own life. This is the kind of women they want to be and not troubled women who are “stuck” in a suburb. In this excerpt the girls touch the story line of the troubled girl, but they resist it, and arrange their account according to the story line of “the woman as a life explorer.” By doing so, they resist the story line of the different and vulnerable troubled girl and are presenting an alternative story. They also express a view consistent with current cultural meta-discourse that states that there are correct times and conditions for having children and a certain order in which things should be exhibited. At the same time, none of them claim that they do not want children, which is also consistent with gendered meta-discourses about women; women are expected to want children “when the time is right” (Hoem & Bernardt, 2000).

Discussion

How to Tackle a Troubled Girl

What is reflected in the interviews with the girls that were in trouble because they had experienced domestic violence was the interviewer's (MH) decision to “recategorize” one of the girls—Emma—from being a lone girl to be part of a larger group. The interviewer wanted to try to substitute “loneliness” with “belongingness” and by doing so provide Emma with the empowering strength that belonging to a group of people with similar experience could mean. The conversation in excerpt 6 reflects how empowering a disruption of feelings of loneliness can be. Two circumstances make the basis for this disruption: the careful listener/witness/and the introduction of a story line that (re)positioned Emma from “the different” to “the common” (even if it could be argued who is “common” or not in the 50/50 situation she suggested). The group of people she felt kinship with did not even had to be identified; the very notion of their existence was enough to give her renewed energy.

The interviewer's effort to break the cycle of despair that was reflected in Emma's brief report about her suicide attempt puts the issues of power in the foreground. It could be argued that Emma's story, conducted along the lines of the lonely vulnerable young woman, reflects the dominant social story of child abuse and neglect. Most people want to think that a girl in Emma's situation makes a profound exception from girls' lives in general—and Emma might be one of these people. However, she should not have accepted the invitation from the interviewer to reposition her and be part of a story that included many children living a similar hard life as she, if she had no idea about the existence of this alternate story.

It has been argued that the suppressed or disqualified voice, such as Emma's when she was telling that she is not alone, does not escape the social and is located within dominant social stories and thus it must, like all the stories, be unpacked (Brown, 2007). This argument has been developed and put into clinical practice in narrative therapy, which emphasizes the resurrection of the suppressed voice and claims the importance of bringing into view disqualified knowledge. Within the realm of narrative therapy, it has been emphasized that it is important to externalize internalized dominant discourses, since it allows for suppressed or subjugated knowledge to emerge (White, 2001). In excerpt 3, the dominant discourse is not externalized—it is downright challenged and that on an evidence-based ground. Research reveals that children are exposed to some form of physical violence between their parents during their childhood in numbers that various to range from 20 % (Henning, Leitenberg, Coffey, Turner, & Bennett, 1996) to 37 % (Holden, Geffner, & Jouriles, 1998) and that the exposure lead to various kinds of psycho-logical and developmental difficulties (Adams, 2006; Edleson, 1999; McAlister Groves, 2001; Peled & Davis, 1995; Somer & Braustein, 1999). The interviewer carries this information and delivers it in form of a challenge and opens up for a new story to emerge.

Conclusions

Our basic argument throughout this chapter has been that the dilemma that occurs when the troubled themselves resist the prospective helpers' efforts to classify them, cannot be solved unless the helper not only recognizes the troubled's trouble, but their competence and potential for creating a better life for themselves. Some exam-ples of how this can be done have been given. In the example from the detention home study, the basic story lines in the staff members' and the girls' telling were compared, showing that while the staff members

were focusing on the differences and the vulnerability, the girls themselves were focusing on their future lives as mothers. These two story lines, as divergent as they seem, could in part be connected—but only if they are influenced by each other: a girl who is considered to be a “troubled girl” cannot expect to find enthusiastic audiences among adults if she stubbornly tells a totally non problematized story about herself as mother. A staff member, who insists that troubled girls are nothing but “different and vulnerable” and does not recognize the girl’s and young woman’s competence and potential at all, will not find great audiences among troubled girls. The girls had learned a lot about their ability to survive—and a lot about their limits too. As long as the competence part got unrecognized, the girls feared to expose their weakness. Competence is such an elemental component of self-confidence and culturally so highly valued that any encounter between humans will suffer if competence is not mutually recognized—as will the need for help get unacknowledged in company with her unacknowledged vulnerability.

The example with Emma showed that the “old” story of vulnerability could never be totally replaced by the “new story,” but they can exist side by side. The “old story” is culturally highly valued. This means that Emma’s new story exists within the opportunities and constraints of culture and cannot be taken out of context and individualized. In order to help a girl like Emma, space must be given to both stories to be developed and action taken accordingly, that is, her need to be taken care of and ability to govern her life must be allowed to exist side by side.

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