Supporting Masculinities: Wounded Healing and Masculinity in Peer Support Organizations for People with Experiences of Criminality and Substance Abuse

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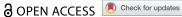
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ABSTRACT

The role of the "wounded healer" can have positive effects for former offenders as regards desistance and social (re)integration; however, research focusing on wounded healing/peer mentoring from a gender perspective is limited. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Swedish peer support organizations (PESOs) for former offenders and qualitative interviews with former offenders working in five different PESOs, this study analyses how masculinity and support are performed and narrated by 15 wounded healers/peer mentors (men = 11, women = 4, age range 19–60 y/o). It contributes to knowledge about gendered power dynamics of peer support by showing that while masculinity can and do function as capital in peer support work, some displays of masculinity can trigger trauma, with negative consequences for women within PESOs.

Introduction

In an age of neoliberalism, where social responsibility has increasingly shifted from the state to individuals and charitable institutions, the penal voluntary sector (PVS) has gained a more prominent role within criminal justice (Buck, 2020; Helminen & Mills, 2019; Maguire, 2012; Quinn, 2020; Tomczak & Thompson, 2019), and a seedbed for self-help/peer support groups has emerged (Karlsson, 2006). In Sweden, the first peer support organization (PESO[1]) for former offenders – CRIS (Criminals' Return Into Society),[2] was founded in 1997[3] by a group of men with a history of incarceration and substance abuse who believed that society's support for formerly incarcerated people was deficient. A number of similar organizations have started up since then.[4] PESOs such as CRIS are based on the idea of self-help and are characterized by the emphasis on experiential knowledge (Borkman et al., 2020; Helminen, 2016; Karlsson, 2006; Maruna & LeBel, 2015; Silverman, 2011; South et al., 2017). Unlike lay knowledge (e.g., common sense ideas, folk knowledge) and professional knowledge (based on theory or scientific principles), experiential knowledge is grounded in lived experience and embodied practices (Noorani et al., 2019). Becoming involved in PESOs thus makes it possible for former offenders to make use of their experience by helping others in similar situations, and the desire to do so is well documented within criminological research (Brown, 1991a, 1991b; Heidemann et al., 2016; LeBel, 2007; Leibrich, 1993; Maruna, 2001; Soothill et al., 2009).

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Former offenders helping others have been called professional ex-s (Brown, 1991a, 1991b), peer mentors (Buck, 2020) and wounded healers (LeBel, 2007; Maruna, 2001; Maruna & LeBel, 2015), the latter referring to the notion that people with experiential knowledge of adversity and how to overcome it may have special skills in helping those experiencing the same adversity (White, 2000a, 2000b). Research has stressed the benefits of making the former offender part of the solution to reduce crime by means of "giving back" to society (Bazemore, 1999; Bellamy et al., 2012; Brown, 1991a, 1991b; LeBel, 2009; LeBel et al., 2015; Maruna, 2001; Nixon, 2020; Runell, 2018). This may aid (re)integration into society, contribute to healing trauma and creating a meaningful existence (Flood, 2018).

Even though peer mentoring is an expanding area in criminal justice, it remains "an empirically neglected practice, within a woefully under-researched sector of criminal justice – the penal voluntary sector." (Buck, 2020, p. 4; see also LeBel et al., 2015). Moreover, research on PESOs and peer mentoring/wounded healing among former offenders that applies a gender perspective is even scarcer. Overall, there is a lack of studies that critically address how constructions of gender may affect the practice of peer mentoring among former offenders (Buck, 2020).

The present study

This study used observational data gathered using ethnographic methods, supplemented by interview data, to understand gendered power dynamics of peer support and wounded healing. The study analyses how reformed masculinities are performed and narrated by former offenders in the context of peer mentoring in Swedish PESOs. Furthermore, it addresses consequences of masculinity norms and performances for women within peer support settings.

Masculinity, femininity and peer mentoring/wounded healing

Peer mentoring has been theorized as positive role modeling (Buck, 2019; Sullivan & Jolliffe, 2012), a liberatory task (Fraser & Freire, 1997), an empowerment-based practice and strengths-based approach (Maruna & LeBel, 2015), and as identity, pedagogy, fraternity/sorority, and collective politicization (Buck, 2020). Few criminological studies specifically address the centrality of gender in relation to PESOs and peer mentoring for former offenders, but as peer mentoring studies are part of a growing field of penal voluntary sector studies (Buck, 2020; Tomczak & Buck, 2019), this may be changing. Buck (2020) has raised important aspects in relation to gendered power dynamics of peer mentoring and states that it "often embraces assumptions about masculinity and femininity and in doing so becomes regulatory from a gendered viewpoint" (p. 214–215). Buck (2020) notes that peer mentoring is often viewed as an egalitarian practice, which obscures gender as a central power dynamic. The study shows that mentoring activities sometimes build on essentialist notions of gender, separating men and women into events such as boxing and fashion. However, Buck (2020) argues that these activities can offer a space in which mentors and mentees can connect with each other.

> In this light, essentialist gender positions become a 'way in'. Gendered social scripts (like the ex-offender identity itself) becomes bridges, known ways of being on the path to new. Gendered norms, in this light, are not (just) forms of imposed domination, therefore, but a known order which individual subjects utilise, transgress and reproduce for particular purposes.. (p. 218)

This highlights the importance to look beyond gendered activities as such and focus upon what gendered activities *do* in terms of building relationships and providing a space for empowerment (or not).

Within a Swedish context, Bäcklin et al. (2013) studied how men working in PESOs for former offenders relate to masculinity norms, showing that the emphasis placed on support persons' criminal backgrounds risks reproducing the hypermasculinity that the peer mentors claim to have renounced. Furthermore, Lalander's (2010) evaluation of CRIS youth association (Young CRIS)[5] argues that while male members in CRIS often created a compensatory masculinity during their years offending, many of them developed a softer and more reflective masculinity as they grew into mentors for others. That peer mentoring, or a mentor ambition, can be part of masculinity reformulation is further shown in Søgaard et al.'s (2016) study about how young men with a history of criminality and cannabis use do masculinity in a Danish rehabilitation programme. Many of the young men are, or express a wish to become, mentors for others with similar experiences. The authors argue that the "wounded healer narrative" (p. 111) is part of the men's constructions of a reformed masculinity, which is also linked to concepts of an age-appropriate masculinity involved in generative projects such as "responsible nurturing and guidance of 'younger generations'" (p. 112; see also Bäcklin et al., 2013; Carlsson, 2013; Maruna, 2001). Søgaard et al. (2016) maintain however that the programme's hypermasculine symbolism creates a risk that some men will experience a twofold failure – both in relation to desistance from crime and drugs, and in relation to norms of masculinity. In addition, the programme's masculine symbols and boxing training activity reproduce traditional patriarchal norms built on homophobia and the exclusion of women, showing how reformed, hybrid masculinities sometimes reinforce symbolic and social boundaries between groups, in this case based on gender and sexuality (Deuchar et al., 2016) Bridges and Pascoe (2014, 2018).

This dynamic of distancing and reinforcement is also evident in the ethnographic research of Flores and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2013) and Flores (2014, 2016) that builds on data from two mutual-aid, faith-based programmes for marginalized Latino men recovering from gang life. For example, Flores (2016) examines how embodied practices facilitate desistance from gang life. This study shows that former gang members negotiate the meaning of being a man and regain more socially acceptable forms of masculinity ("the family man" or "man of God") by distancing themselves from their previous gang masculinity. This is achieved partly by using homophobic language to shame and emasculate active gang members, thus fortifying boundaries "between (racial, gender, sexual) groups – further entrenching [...] inequality in new ways" (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014, p. 250). This dynamic is key to the construction of more hybrid forms of masculinity, discussed further in the theory section below.

The only study found that specifically addresses the wounded healer role for previously incarcerated women is Heidemann et al. (2016). The authors base their analysis on a gender socialization perspective, arguing that women are socialized toward an "ethic of care" (p. 4) that makes them more sensitive to the needs of others. One of their central points is that the

opportunity to give back by means of peer support work is a chance to reassume a kind of caretaking responsibility, which can provide an increased sense of self-esteem for women whose traditional roles as mothers and caregivers have often diminished or disappeared completely during incarceration (Heidemann et al., 2016). This study reinforces stereotypical images of women as having helping skills, or helping needs, because of their gender socialization rather than because of their lived experiences of incarceration, which seems to contradict the very definition of a wounded healer. However, it nevertheless shows that gender is an important aspect to consider when researching peer mentoring and wounded healing for former offenders.

Role modeling & peer mentorship

By virtue of their own desistance, wounded healers and peer mentors are often considered successful role models (Buck, 2020; Fletcher & Batty, 2012; LeBel et al., 2015). The present study's focus thus puts it in conversation with a field of research within education and social work that critically examines the male role model discourse (Hicks, 2008; Johansson, 2006; Tarrant et al., 2015; Ward et al., 2017). While feminist criminologists have emphasized the intimate connections between traditional norms of masculinity and criminal behavior (Skrinjar & Pettersson, 2020), the male role model discourse on the other hand, stresses a link between a lack of masculinity norms, criminality and violence (Johansson, 2006). Although the male role model response has come to be accepted as a common-sense solution to the perceived problem with boys and the so-called "crisis in masculinity" (see for example, Ward et al., 2017), it has limited empirical and theoretical support and tends to overstate the significance of gender at the expense of other intersecting inequalities (Robb et al., 2015; Tarrant et al., 2015).

A criminological study that interestingly captures the tension between successful ex-convict role modeling and successful masculinity (cf. Baird, 2012) is Halsey and Deegan (2012) who explore how ex-convicted fathers used their experiences of criminality and incarceration to support their incarcerated sons. Even though this study does not explicitly apply a gender perspective, it does link to a number of aspects of gender-theoretical relevance. The authors argue that the most important resource that the fathers can share with their sons is their personal experience of detention, as this gives fathers an authentic and grounded empathy for their sons' situations. However, they detect a "paradox of proximate success stories" in that the sons view their fathers as successful, having managed to leave their criminality behind, without this necessarily leading to the sons renouncing crime. Halsey and Deegan (2012) maintain rather that sons risk prolonging their criminal careers, seeing "their fathers' legacies as evidence not of forgone opportunities or immense collateral damage to loved ones, but as proof that one can 'get out of gaol free' (with life opportunities and relationships intact)" (p. 358). However, the paradox of proximate success stories cannot justly be interpreted as a paradox from a feminist criminological perspective (which, as highlighted above, stresses the intimate links between men, masculinity, and criminality). Still, the position of the ex- as an imagined success story is relevant as it pertains to PESOs where professional ex-s are expected to function as successful role models and mentors for other men.

Hybrid masculinities

In a Swedish context, studies on the declining gender gap in crime have shown that male criminality has decreased over time and now approaches womens' rates of crime, which have remained low (Estrada et al., 2016). One explanation for this is, that traditional masculinity, partially expressed through aggression, has become less legitimate and less tolerated over time (Estrada et al., 2016).[6]

Within the field of critical studies of men and masculinities, numerous new concepts have arisen, (e.g., inclusive masculinities, positive masculinities, caring masculinities), which all attempt to make sense of recent transformations in masculinity (Berggren, 2020). Bridges and Pascoe (2014) call this body of scholarship *hybrid masculinities* and states that "the question driving the bulk of the literature on hybrid masculinities is whether (and how) they are perpetuating and/or challenging systems of gender and sexual inequality." (p. 247). According to Bridges and Pascoe (2014), hybrid masculinity is a concept that critically highlights changes in men's doing of masculinity. Rather than seeing hybrid masculinities as a way of doing gender that deconstructs and challenges normative notions of masculinity, it should be viewed as an adaptation strategy that reproduces unequal power relationships in refined and less explicit ways (cf. Randles, 2018). Bridges and Pascoe (2014) highlight three aspects that demonstrate the consequences of hybrid masculinity and its creation, reproduction, and masking of inequality. These are 1) Symbolic and discursive distancing from hegemonic masculinity, 2) privileged men's strategic borrowing of certain expressions and practices associated with femininities and subordinated masculinities into their identity projects, and 3) concealment and consolidation of social and symbolic borders and inequalities based on, for example, race/ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality.

It is not surprising that research on hybrid masculinities has focused primarily on white, heterosexual, middle-class men. The fact that it is primarily privileged men who have the opportunity to adopt hybridized forms of masculinity while maintaining their position in the social hierarchy shows, according to Messner (1993, 2007), that these hybridizations do not challenge fundamental systems of inequality (see also Ingram & Waller, 2014; Umamaheswar, 2020). Randolph et al. (2018) maintain that hybrid masculinities are of limited relevance in studies of subordinated groups of men, due to the concept's failure to highlight differences among different subordinated masculinities, and focus rather on the relationship between dominant and subordinated masculinities. However, some researchers maintain that the concept may be meaningful in understanding the doing of masculinity among less privileged groups of men, since they also benefit from male privilege and power (Fefferman & Upadhyay, 2018).

Ricciardelli et al. (2015) maintain that hybrid forms of masculinities associated with feminized qualities such as caregiving, sensitive vulnerability, parenthood, and empathy are very seldom observed in prison research, which has a tendency to construct prison as a uniformly hypermasculine environment where "some men are prey and others predators" (p. 493). They argue that the specific logic of the prison context influences how men strategically relate to and do masculinity based on perceptions of risk and vulnerability. In situations where men find themselves physically vulnerable, hypermasculinity can act as a strategic choice to reduce the risk of being subjected to violence; in other situations, it can be more viable to adopt a feminized position of the victim. Thus, incarcerated men relate

actively and strategically to different masculinities based on risk awareness, and "the more appropriate a prisoner's strategy, the more effectively it mitigates risk, decreases vulnerability, and consequently increases status" (Ricciardelli et al., 2015, p. 509).

There are both similarities and differences between how Bridges and Pascoe (2014) and Ricciardelli et al. (2015) view the doing of masculinity. The understanding of masculinity as a *strategic* doing unites them, but whereas Bridges and Pascoe primarily base their work on privileged men, Ricciardelli et al. base theirs on marginalized men sentenced to prison. Bridges and Pascoe (2014) and Ricciardelli et al. (2015) maintain that men strategically can adopt femininity and subordination as part of a (temporary) masculinity project that is advantageous for them; either to avoid violence, or to present themselves as equal men and thereby receive certain privileges (although there are surely differences in what types of "advantages" that apply in these both examples).

Men with a history of criminality and substance abuse occupy a rather complicated position in relation to masculinity, balancing between hypermasculinity (i.e., a heightened version of hegemonic masculinity) and marginalized masculinity, linked to dependency and financial and social exclusion. In this study, the term *hybrid masculinities* is used in order to permit a critical analysis of how (partially) marginalized, former criminal men working in PESOs (re)construct "supporting masculinities," without concealing how these reformulations can build on different exclusion mechanisms and reproduce unequal power structures, affecting the potentials for women within PESOs to get the support that they need.

Methodology

Setting

Participant observational data were collected in several PESOs in different parts of Sweden. The most extensive observation (30 days) took part in the premises of a well-established PESO for former offenders located in a central part of a large city (in the following called A1, see Table 1). This organization was chosen out of geographical convenience and accessibility and access was granted after a meeting with the chairperson of the organization.

At the time of the field visit, the youth association of this particular PESO (A2) had temporary premises in a municipality located about a twenty-minute train ride from town. The mentors at A2 were dissatisfied with this arrangement, which they considered made them inaccessible to those who needed their support. This meant that the peer mentors at A2 for the most part used the A1 premises, or that they did community outreach activities (e.g., meeting and discussing project collaborations with different social actors in socially disadvantaged areas). During the fieldwork, I had the opportunity to participate in the activities of both A1 and A2. This included different activities such as morning meetings, group discussions, lectures, visits to treatment homes, meetings with various third parties, but often just hanging out at the premises socializing with the people who spent their time there. In addition to the month-long fieldwork conducted in A1 (and A2) in the large city, five shorter field visits (1–2 days) was conducted at different PESOs (A1, A2, B2, C1, D1) in both smaller and larger cities of Sweden.

Table 1. Participants appearing in this data.

Pseudonyms	Age	Gender	Organization	Location
Adela	32	F	A1	Large City[a]
Alexander	19	M	A1	Large City
Emil	23	M	A2	Large City
Felix	19	M	A2	Medium-sized town
Gabriel	39	M	A2	Large City
Harry	21	M	A2	Medium-sized town
Love	20	M	A2	Medium-sized town
Sebastian	30	M	A2	Medium-sized town[b]
Milo	32	M	B1	Large City
Isak	41	M	B2	Large City
Ulf	60	M	C1	Large City
Agnes	44	F	D1	Large City
Cecilia	41	F	D1	Large City
Helle	42	F	D1	Large City
Bengt	35	M	E1	Large City

aMunicipalities with a population of at least 200,000 inhabitants and at least 200,000 inhabitants in the largest urban area (www.skr.se).

bMunicipalities with a population of at least 50,000 inhabitants and at least 40,000 inhabitants in the largest urban area (www.skr.se).

Participants

The participant sample for this study consists of eleven men and four women between 19 and 60 years (mean = 33,2).

At the time of the interviews and the fieldwork, the participants were working in PESOs for former offenders located in various regions of Sweden. Together they represent five different main organizations (A1, B1, C1, D1 and E1) and two youth associations (A2 and B2). All participants in the study once sought help from the same kinds of organizations where they now work, and their narratives therefore sometimes move between a helper- and a helpee perspective. All participants have histories of both criminality and substance abuse and the majority have spent time in prison and/or in youth detention centers.

Data collection and analysis

At the initial stage of the research, I contacted Swedish PESOs for former offenders through their web- or Facebook pages, introducing the project and myself, explaining that I was looking to interview male former offenders working in these organizations. Seven men from three different organizations were interviewed at this phase. Interviews were semi-structured and touched on various themes related to the PESO, peer support work and masculinity. These first seven interviews were made prior to fieldwork and included questions about the interviewees' lives before they came in contact with the PESOs where they started working. In the later interviews (which also included female peer mentors/wounded healers), I chose to exclude such questions and direct a more focused attention on their peer support work and how they made use of lived experiences in their work. The interview guide for the later interviews was semi-structured and divided into three broad sections. 1) How the peer mentors came in contact with the PESO and how they came to work there, 2) what role they considered the PESO and the peer support work to have played in their own process of desistance, and 3) how they made use of their own

experiences of criminality and substance abuse in their work. These broad themes revealed different gendered aspects related to peer support work, which were explored further with follow-up questions.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts and the field notes were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), a flexible method with potential to provide rich and complex understandings of the material (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The coding of the interviews and field notes was guided by theory and the research aims. For the purposes of the results reported in this study, the data were read, re-read and coded for expressions or manifestations of gender (especially masculinity) in relation to peer support work. These narratives and events were then grouped into two analytic categories that related to lived experiences: *masculinity as capital* and *masculinity as trauma.*

Most interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis. On one occasion, two PESO members were interviewed together. The narratives of the three women from the women-only PESO (D1) are drawn from a group discussion that I participated in and recorded (with consent) during a one-day field visit to their premises.

Researcher's role

Doing qualitative research is a creative process based on meaning making and interpretation, rather than finding a true essence magically hidden in the data. With a different theoretical approach, other interpretations could have been made and other stories told. For example, although the women spontaneously mentioned masculinity as a distinct and problematic feature within gender mixed PESOs, the male participants did not bring up masculinity explicitly. However, with theoretical focus on masculinity in approaching their narratives as well as the practical work of the PESOs, various dimensions of doing masculinity were made visible, which this study tries to highlight, interpret and analyze. The following excerpts are an attempt to demonstrate my active role in the research process, both as participant and as interpreter of data. On a number of occasions, the men I met and interviewed during my fieldwork showed me the scars on their bodies while they were telling me about their previous lives. In the examples from recordings and field notes provided below, I clearly take part and encourage their displays of hypermasculinity by looking, reacting, and asking about their injuries.

Isak Because of cocaine, parts of my body if you wanna look . . . shot here [points] and here [points] . . .

Int Ayayay.!

Isak A lot . . . [Shows his leg]

Int Oh! What happened there? Were you stabbed?

Isak Nah, I was in a road accident. At that time, I was like 110 kg of muscle. Me and my mate went to [name of town] to do a bit of business . . . We did a lot of partying, I hadn't slept for two days, and I'd taken a ton of cocaine . . .

Gabriel I've got a whole load of scars and stuff on my hands here [shows] and like, there [shows], and there they gave me over 20 stitches [we look closely at the scars on his fingers and hands].

Int What happened with your finger?

Gabriel You know, I lost muscle and nerve here ... there look, I can't feel anything here. They had to sew it together [shows] between here. Like I said, I got no feeling there, yeah there you see, there and there, there, and in between there, and this one [the finger] is completely crooked

Int Good God ... !

Gabriel Yeah, here I got done by knife too. My nose got broken four times, I've broken a lot of noses [laughter]. I had stitches here, there and there [points].

　　Beyond demonstrating how the male participants are often *wounded* healers in two senses of the phrase, these excerpts also shows that part of the doing of masculinity, analyzed below, arose during and due to my interviews and field interactions. That the presence of a researcher may influence that what is being researched, the so called "observer effect," is a concern often raised (by non-ethnographers) in relation to ethnographic methods. An underlying assumption in this critique is that the study would be more objective and valid if the researcher's influence was reduced. However, Monahan and Fisher (2010) argue that "[i]nformants' performances – however staged for or influenced by the observer – often reveal profound truths about social and/or cultural phenomena" (p. 358), in this case masculinity, violence, trauma and victimization. On that note, subjectivity is a resource rather than a problem to be managed (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Ethics

All participants were informed that partaking in the study was voluntary, that they could withdraw their consent at any point, and that they could chose not to answer questions without having to explain why. Participants were also informed that their names and the locations of the organizations would be anonymized.[7] Participants often responded that anonymity was not an issue and that they were glad to appear with their name and organization. Needless to say, this reflects some of the core activities of these organizations, which includes members telling their life stories in schools and to other actors like social workers, but also occasionally to journalists. Many of the participants were both comfortable with, and experienced in, telling their stories and were used to having their own narratives placed in the center and (re)constructed. However, they were informed that the study was not focused on their individual life stories, but on what their collective stories could say about the meanings of peer support. The names of individuals and organizations were removed already upon transcribing the data. All files were encrypted and stored safely where only the author had access.

Results

The two main themes outlined above structure the analysis section: *Masculinity as capital* and *Masculinity as trauma*. These two main themes are discussed and problematized in relation to the most basic premise of PESOs for former offenders – the importance of lived experience.

(Hyper)masculinity as capital in peer support work

PESOs for former offenders are possible arenas for the construction of new, reformulated identities. However, PESOs for former offenders sometimes have a bad reputation in the prison and detention facilities where they regularly visit, and their target groups do not necessarily consider the PESOs to be an enticing alternative.

Harry for instance, says that "*the first time I met* [A1], *I thought who are these clowns? I didn't give a fuck what they said.*" Milo says that while working as a newly recruited peer support person at B2 he met many young men in jail and in youth detention centers who held negative attitudes about (male) former offenders.

> They think that those of us who have given up [crimes and drugs] are sissies, we're odd . . . [. . .] They think you should be a criminal, should like be a gang member . . . They live in a fantasy world, this Mafia world. They think a man should do that, spend a few years inside and then come out, you know [. . .] In the beginning, I found it hard obviously because they, yeah well "snitch, you're a rat , you're this and you're that" kind of . . . and it's not true. That's just their of way of seeing it. They've heard that we've gone straight and yeah, we don't do crime anymore and we don't take drugs anymore. Then over time you learn to treat it like a job. You can't take stuff personally, because they're going through a process, too. (Milo)

According to Milo, many young men who are still active in the criminal world look down on ex-criminals, such as the men from the PESOs. These young men thus appear to construct criminality and lawfulness as mutually exclusive dichotomies, far from the non-binary understanding of criminality and desistance as processes of drifting and zigzag patterns revealed in life-course criminology. Criminality is constructed as a hypermasculine ideal (and an underclass response to limited life chances) where gang membership and prison time are a way of life. Those who desist are "snitches" and "sissies," representing a male betrayal of protest masculinity rather than bearers of lived experiences to be admired. Milo's narrative of his own change retains traces of a process of mental maturation through a changed perspective on the hypermasculine reference frameworks of young men (which he once shared). Defining the young men as being "in a process" links to notions of a normative life course in which the men subsequently are expected to orientate themselves away from street crime and heavy drugs, toward family, employment, and socially acceptable levels of drinking.

Similar to the examples above, Gabriel (former gang member) initially felt skeptical about the PESO where he now works.

> Yeah, they came to the [prison] and I was like, [A1], who the hell are they? I remember that I had seen some A1 brochures or something in different prisons and stuff and I heard people saying, "that's that fucking idiot [person from A1]", there was someone who said "fucking wanker" and stuff, you know "he is a numbskull" . . . Then I saw that [the person from A1] comes from the same town as me, and I thought, shit, that's great!" It was a bit of a laugh, you know. (Gabriel)

After hearing rumors about some of the A1 members' criminal records of from other prisoners, Gabriel's interest and faith in the organization grew.

> I thought, shit, it seems just like a gang, except they do positive things. They have colours and everything, T-shirts and that kind of stuff [laughs]. And then there were some guys I was banged up with who said that "he was right in with the Bandidos, and he used to be in the X-team", so I thought shit man, just a load of old gang dudes! [...] This seems to be like a really good organisation! [Laughs]. (Gabriel)

The fact that other men that Gabriel was "banged up with" confirmed the former gang status of some of the A1 members was key, because it provided proof, from Gabriel's perspective, that the representatives had actually been "real" criminals. Thus for Gabriel, the hypermasculinity represented by former gang members became an expression of the legitimacy and authenticity of the organization. A *certain* criminal history and a *certain* place provided important mutual reference points between Gabriel and the organizations' representatives, and this imagined fellowship is woven into Gabriel's narrative about the process of becoming a wounded healer/peer mentor.

Ulf and Isak provide other examples of how the criminal background can be an asset in peer support work. They both regard the fascination that many (predominately young men) have for the peer support workers' criminal backgrounds as a tool that they can use to build trust and form relationships.

> The guys from the special care homes and young offenders' institutes, they call me up cos they enjoy it when I'm there. [...] I know everything about what it's like at Kumla[8] and what solitary at Hall[9] is like and what you have to do, nothing phases me. (Ulf)

Isak believes that, in some cases, it is precisely the peer mentors' criminal backgrounds that gets the youngsters to turn to the PESOs for support.

> That's completely fine, they can think that maybe I still am a criminal or that being a criminal is a really positive thing. When they come to us and begin to chat with me, *that's when* I try to explain to them about the consequences. What did I lose? What can you lose? It makes ripples that spread. (Isak)

In the PESOs the members make a clear distinction between different levels and dimensions of knowledge. The difference between lived, experiential knowledge (which the interview participants possess) and professional knowledge (which they often criticize) is central in the male mentors' masculinity constructions. In the interviews and throughout the field-work, participants often stressed the competence provided by lived experience, as well as the importance of getting support from people who have been through what they have been through. The history of criminality is construed therefore as an important asset in encounters with individuals seeking support. The key significance of receiving support from former criminals who have changed their lives is one of the most frequently expressed in the life narratives of the study participants. In the narratives this asset is construed as currency for establishing contact, trust, and, in the long run, change. Through narratives of their time as criminals or active drug users, the men in the PESOs construct themselves as persuasive *ex-*criminals that "know what they are talking about." Not having the "right experience," or the "right background," is put forward as a problem by many of the interviewees. Individuals with professional expertise rather than personal experience are seen as problematic and potentially counter-productive. The asset of a criminal background, on the part of peer

support workers, is perhaps the greatest difference between PESOs and institutions like the social services, or the Swedish Prison and Probation Service, whose staff, in Sebastian's words, "*have never had anything to do with [crime and drugs], they've just read a book. Your trust disappears right there.*" Others are of similar opinion:

> When we sit and talk with someone, I sometimes hear them tell all those lies that I myself have told before. Then I can say, "my friend, that's exactly what I used to say, but think about it this way" [. . .]. So, it's incredibly important and we know what we're talking about. Not "it says here in this book". (Felix)

> I've got friends here who went before me, so they know what things are like for me and we can depend on each other better than, say, with a social worker, they don't have that experience in their lives. (Alexander)

> It's about identification . . . to feel that you really understand what I'm saying, not only that you have read about it, but that you *really* understand what I'm saying. To meet someone who doesn't really understand but who pretends to do so, or to meet someone who actually genuinely understands, there is a big difference. (Bengt).

In narratives about experiential knowledge, a barrier is thus created and reinforced against other forms of knowledge and occupations. This barrier is, I argue, clearly gendered as it positions social workers and other feminized professional groups, particularly in the social services, as illegitimate and irrelevant in contrast to peer support workers, whose grounded experience as wounded healers is construed as productive, authentic, and legitimate.

Masculinity as trauma

Several male interview participants maintain that the PESO was a place where, for the first time, they had the opportunity to learn to talk about feelings and trauma. Sebastian says "*a lot has happened in my life which I had never talked about with anyone. [. . .] I never talked about my feelings in my former [life], not even with my absolute closest friends.*" Now, after giving up drugs and learning how to express a whole range of feelings, he tells me he feels better and is a calmer person who solves conflicts with words rather than with fists. Taking drugs and suppressing feelings are associated here with childhood trauma and an unreflective, immature way of relating to oneself and others. Sebastian's improved state of mind can be understood as part of a hybridization process, whereby giving up crime becomes part of growing up and growing away from a masculinity project based on explosiveness, aggression, and injury. Thus, the process of desisting from crime is linked with a construction of "safer" masculinity (cf. Robb et al., 2015; Ward et al., 2017) and health through the resistance to patriarchal mores of emotional stoicism (hooks, 2004). Sebastian tells me that he used to believe that "*big tattooed men don't talk about feelings.*"

> When I came here [to the PESO], everyone was bigger than me and had more tattoos than me, so I didn't feel like a big-ass criminal. But then I watched these [men] sitting and saying, "I'm sad". I mean, sad. Can you be sad? Actually, yes you can. [. . .]. (Sebastian)

The "criminal body" is presented in Sebastian's narrative as hard in a double sense, both muscular and unsentimental. The fact that men who are "bigger" than Sebastian, and have "more tattoos" than he has, can be sad, and moreover can express that sadness openly,

appears for Sebastian as an odd but eye-opening contradiction. In comparison with the big, tattooed men, Sebastian does not feel "*so much of a big-ass criminal*," which seems to play into traditional hierarchies among men based on age and life experience, where the elder "goes before and shows the way."

> There are people who been there before and can show the new ones the way. For there to be someone who is maybe a little older . . . The guy who supported me when I first came to [A2] had been straight and clean for six years. For me, it was two months when I arrived there. I wanna do what he's done so, of course, I look at what he's doing. He's sitting there in front of everyone and saying that he's feeling sad. He's asking for help. (Sebastian)

Norms regarding gender and sexuality are central in a number of different ways in the relationship between the (often) young men who turn to the PESOs, and the peer support members. For example, in Love's narrative, quitting drugs was associated with fear about what kind of person he would become – a wimp. However, meeting other men who had become sober, this changed.

> I believed that if I gave up drugs, I'd become some kind of *boring* person, some kind of *wimp* . . . That's what I was [thinking] just when I began [here] . . . I am *not* gonna be a wimp! But down here [at the PESO], no one is [a wimp]. When you're sober you understand that to change your life in this way is one of the coolest things there is. (Love)

Love presents sobriety as the opposite to being a "wimp;" it is rather "cool" because it entails successfully changing one's life, which is in turn associated with an admirable strength (cf. Robb et al., 2015).

The PESOs can function as an arena for the construction of safer and more responsible masculinities, where former criminal men are given the opportunity to develop a softer, more sensitive side of themselves and to grow into role models for other men. In the narratives, role modelhood appears as a hierarchal, age-related and generative process linked both to a notion of authenticity associated with hypermasculinity in the past, and to a self-reflective, acquired hybrid masculinity in the present. The narratives of the women in the women-only PESO (D1), however, challenges the picture of peer mentoring as a hierarchal relationship where the elders and the more experienced are seen as (male) role models.

Cecilia We [who work at D1] are not experts, we never consider ourselves to be *above* our visitors, we are the same. It doesn't matter that we have many years [of recovery] or that we have done this and that, and that the person who comes to us may have had only two days away from drugs, we are the same.

Helle Yes. We have also had two days.

As compared to the male peer mentors, the female peer mentors from D1 frame the importance of shared experiences somewhat differently.

> We decided from the beginning that everyone who works here should have their own experiences [of criminality or addiction]. And that's because we want our visitors to never have to explain or defend themselves, *ever*. When you come down here [to the PESO], first and foremost you get to just *be*. (Cecilia)

Whereas the men talk about being acknowledged, seen and understood, the women talk about having a space where they can rest, not having to defend themselves or suffer judgment. Building on the notion of women's groups or spaces as places for rest (a room of one's own) I will turn to two examples from the study relating to situations where women's spaces have been interrupted by men.

> Agnes [D1] tells me that some men from their target group get provoked because they are not welcome in the women-only PESO. They sometimes open the door to the premises and ask if they can come in, or they pretend that they are going to come in, leaning in with an arm, a leg or a head over the doorway. "Then we reply like 'no, you need to put on a skirt if you are going to come down here', and then they usually leave", Agnes says with a laughter. *(From field notes)*

> Adela and her mentee are sitting at a table in the kitchen area at A1, painting their nails. Emil throws himself down on a chair and greets the mentee with a flirtatious smile. He's revved up and talks a lot, it's quite hard to keep up. He says his mother thinks he has gotten away easily in life and that it's damn true, because he hasn't been caught for any of his serious crimes, only for minor things. Minor drug offenses, illegal possession of weapons, and something else that I don't remember. I get the feeling that he is trying to impress the mentee, but neither she nor Adela encourages him or asks him any questions. He keeps on going about that one time when he met a police officer who didn't notice that he was high as a kite on concerta. At one point he lifts his shirt and exposes a tattoo on his lower belly that conveys a message about his virility and heterosexuality. When Adela and the mentee are getting ready to leave, Emil says that he wants to join the women's group that Adela is leading. "But you're a guy Emil, you have to start a men's group" Adela replies. Emil seems unhappy with the answer and says "but you have recruited really hot girls!" "I can put on a wig!" he suggests and calls out a flirtatious "Bye, it was very nice to meet you!" to the mentee who walks out of the premises without responding. *(From field notes).*

While the symbolic references to drag in these both examples could be read as attempts to destabilize gender boundaries, they rather reveal the material and emotional effects of gender that have created the need for women-only spaces within PESOs in the first place (eg. violations of boundaries, sexualization, etc.). Regarding the boundary work of D1, the call to "put on a skirt" is a strategy that seem to work by exploiting the men's presumed fear of feminization; in the case of Emil, the proposal to "put on a wig" appears to be based on heterosexual interest, not alliance with a feminist or otherwise empowering agenda (cf. Bridges, 2010). Furthermore, the masculine body with "criminal markers" as proof of authentic lived experiences, which for several male peer mentors has positive connotations (they can relate to this body, they look up to it, identify with it, and put confidence in the bearers of it), may have less positive connotations for women with experience of crime and substance abuse. In the group discussion with the women from D1, PESOs such as CRIS and X-cons were described as (hyper)masculine and unsafe environments.

> CRIS is a very, very masculine environment. You enter and there's a big sofa or something where the men spread out, telling cock-and-bull stories about how cool they've been out there, all the cool crimes they've done. It's so pointless to have to listen to! [Laughter] (Cecilia)

A lingering nostalgia for criminal past experiences is linked to the PESO as a hypermasculine space. Moreover, Agnes and Helle have experienced that these environments are not always safe spaces for women.

Agnes I worked at X-cons a while back, but for me it didn't work at all. I got sick. The mentality, the way the men treated us girls . . . We were only two [girls] when I started and a lot of men, tough guys from the can and . . . well, no . . . I lasted a year, then I was in really bad shape. I stopped wearing short-sleeved shirts, I covered my body . . .

Helle To avoid getting comments . . .

Agnes Yes, it was [comments about] my looks, come back to my place, things like that, every day.

Helle Someone always grabbed your ass.

Essentialist gender positions within peer mentoring settings have been framed as a bridge and a "way in," possibly leading to positive change (Buck, 2020). I make a similar analysis earlier, arguing that hypermasculinity can function as capital in peer support settings as it is sometimes performed as proof of authenticity, which can build trust between (male) mentors and mentees. Like Buck (2020) I interpret this as active and strategic doing rather than something that is imposed upon passive objects. However, it is important to note that the narratives of the women in the women-only PESO offers a different take on essentialist gender positions as a "way in," seeing the familiar patriarchal structures as a problematic feature of gender mixed organizations, rather leading backwards.

> You often live in male structures out there [when you are abusing] and then when you quit, when you have actually decided to move on in life, you need other women because that is the only identification that exists. It is not possible to identify with a man when you quit because we have different experiences, different wounds, different scars . . . It is almost impossible to discuss my scars and my wounds with a man. I will never get an understanding there. [. . .] Women have *different experiences of their experiences* [my emphasis] than men have, and what we saw is that when women step into places like this, drug-free places where there are a lot of men, they fall back into old behaviors and that kind of hinders their development. (Cecilia)

While this example relates to traditional gender positions within gender mixed environments, Buck's relates to situations where men and women are separated into activities based on stereotypical notions of gender. Even so, Cecilia's statement that women have "different experiences of their experiences" than men do points to at least two important gendered distinctions as regards to the limits of shared experiences. Firstly, even though men and women share experiences of drug addiction, homelessness and criminalization, their different positions within the structures of social exclusion affect the possibilities to actually be peers in the egalitarian sense of the word. Secondly, while PESOs may offer a space where masculinity norms can be both challenged and reformulated, they sometimes also fortify sexist gender structures that trigger women's traumatic experiences of violence and sexual abuse in their previous lives.[10] However, this frames the limits of shared experiences as a gender problem based on sexist power structures between men and women, which possibly obscures other intersections and inequalities based on for example, class, sexuality and ethnicity/race.

Conclusions

This article has examined how masculinities are performed and narrated by former offenders in the context of peer mentoring in Swedish PESOs. Furthermore it has addressed consequences of masculinity norms for women within peer support settings. It argues that masculinity is constructed in two main ways in relation to peer support work: as *capital* and as *trauma*. Using the concept of hybrid masculinity, the study shows that the male peer mentors negotiate masculinity and legitimacy based on a complex relation to both hyper, hybrid, and hegemonic forms of masculinity. The male wounded healers in the PESOs give expression to a discursive distancing from hypermasculinity; their own identity projects strategically incorporate certain expressions and practices traditionally associated with femininities and subordinated masculinities, but they also make strategic use of hypermasculinity in the peer support work setting. In addition to the symbolic and discursive distancing from hegemonic masculinity that Bridges and Pascoe (2014) define as one of the central aspects of hybrid masculinity, the male peer mentors rather construct a combination of distancing and closeness. While they distance themselves from criminal and intoxicating practices, a symbolically and discursively important part of the peer support work is the ability to demonstrate a credible proximity to (past) hypermasculinity. This dynamic may be better understood by applying Ricciardelli et al.'s (2015) understanding of masculinity as strategic doing based on the relationship between masculinity, vulnerability, and risk (cf. Buck, 2018). Whereas displays of hypermasculinity may have been a successful gendered strategy to improve status or to avoid or minimize risk and vulnerability in their previous lives (Ricciardelli et al., 2015), becoming a peer mentor demands that they (also) perform more hybrid forms of masculinity, for example, by showing vulnerability. Performing "woundedness" may relate to physical wounds associated with their bodies as battlefields – in which case their woundedness manifests itself as a hypermasculine symbol of their authentic criminal history that may be used to build trust and establish contact with young men who seek help. In other cases, emotional woundedness may be expressed and understood as a construction of maturity, adulthood and of transitioning into a safer future (cf. Robb et al., 2015; Ward et al., 2017).

This study also shows that even though men and women within the PESOs share experiences of drug addiction, homelessness, criminalization and other vulnerabilities, some experiences relate to specific, violent and gendered power structures that may affect the possibilities for men and women with experiences of criminality and drug abuse to connect as peers in the egalitarian sense of the word. Furthermore, while PESOs may offer a space where masculinity norms can be challenged and reformulated, these spaces also reinforce sexist gender structures that sometimes trigger women's traumatic experiences of intimate violence and sexual abuse.

Implications

Studies on PESOs and wounded healing among former offenders should be cautious not to overlook gendered aspects of peer support, acknowledging that the very idea of what embodied knowledge of offending is and looks like is gendered. Lived experiences of criminality are

valued in terms of authenticity, which in turn is often associated with masculinity. Expressions of masculinity, however, are intimately linked to trauma and injury and risk fortifying sexist gender power structures that compromise the supportive potentials of the PESOs.

Limitations

The small number of women in this study is a serious limitation, given that their narratives point to important and overlooked aspects of gender structures within PESOs for former offenders. Future studies would do well to focus on women's experiences of PESOs and peer support. This study also lacks insights into intersecting power structures that might affect the peer support settings and thus fails to contribute to a more complex and nuanced analysis of power within the PESOs. Another important limitation is the fact that this study is silent on the ways that masculinity also causes trauma in men's lives. Even though the empirical data contains men's narratives of trauma (caused by, for instance, their fathers' violence and neglect), many of these narratives were excluded in this study as they did not relate specifically to peer support work. Future studies on peer support and wounded healing could focus on masculinity, vulnerability and victimization and in what ways PESOs can, and do, offer space for men to deal with trauma.

Notes

1. I found this useful shortening in Helminen (2016).
2. In Swedish: KRIS: Kriminellas Revansch i Samhället.
3. Several similar initiatives began at about the same time in Sweden, including *Basta, Bryggan* and *Vägen ut*. For a description of these groups, see Hedin et al. (2006).
4. E.g.: *X-Cons, Process Kedjan, Tjuvgods* (2006–2017), *QvinnoQraft* (women-only), *EXIT* (focusing on violent extremism), and *Passus* (defector support programme). *EXIT* and *Passus* are not strictly PESOs and use both professionals and "ex-s" as part of their programmes.
5. Young CRIS (targeting young people in the ages between 13 and 25 years) started in 2006 after receiving a 25 million (SEK) start-up grant from the Swedish Inheritance Fund (which, at the time, was the largest contribution that the Swedish Inheritance Fund had granted to a single project) (Lalander, 2010).
6. However, this general analysis of a changing masculinity obscures differences between men based on class inequalities as "decreases in crime (property crime) are stronger among the more affluent, and increases (violent crime) are primarily located among the lower levels of the income distribution" (Nilsson et al., 2017, p. 599; cf. Tarrant et al., 2015).
7. In the end I decided to anonymize the organization names as well, but this was a decision that was made later in the process. The participants, however, gave informed consent under the impression that their PESO would be named.
8. High security prison in Sweden.
9. High security prison in Sweden.
10. This aligns with research that shows how past victimization can have negative effects on women's desistance processes (Gålnander, 2019).

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