

## The dilemmas of victim positioning

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**W**hy<sup>45</sup> is it that some people, when subjected to assault, bullying, violent domination or other forms of humiliating and marginalizing forms of relational actions, seem to hesitate to call themselves victims and to seek help from outside the oppressive relationship? Which alternative paths present themselves as more accessible or perhaps more attractive than that of a declared victim?

This article centres on some of the dilemmas contained within victim positioning. Such dilemmas are often overlooked by the authorities involved with people subjected to relational aggression.<sup>46</sup> For example, when teachers rule out cases of bullying because the victim has ‘participated in’ or ‘laughed at’ some of the bullies’ initiatives, or when a rape victim’s status as

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<sup>45</sup> This article is a revised version of an article published in Danish in the book ‘På Kant med Historien’, edited by Karin Lützen and Annette K. Nielsen (2008).

<sup>46</sup> See Evaldsson who in her definition of relational aggression quotes Crick, Casas and Ku, 1999: ‘Relational aggression refers to ‘behaviours that harm others through damage (or the threat of damage) or relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship or group inclusion’ (Evaldsson 2007a: 321). See also Evaldsson, 2007b.

a victim is questioned because, in the lead up to the assault, she was supposedly friendly to the rapist. In these cases, it could be useful to explore the reason for the bullying victim's apparent collusion or to better understand the premises for the rape victim's positioning options in relation to the perpetrator. In other words, it could be fruitful to explore the dynamics and dilemmas of the victim position. In this article, I aim to reflect on the motivational conditions of the victim phenomenon. These reflections are based on an analysis of qualitative data produced through interviews with school children as well as on relevant secondary literature.

The reflections in this article are based on several empirical sources: The first source derives from a research project on bullying among children in school, *eXbus: Exploring Bullying in School*.<sup>47</sup> As part of the eXbus project, I interviewed and observed children aged between 10 and 14 in Danish schools (the first case study in this article forms part of this project). The second source derives from two other researchers: Ann-Carita Evaldsson's empirical research on relational violence<sup>48</sup> and Bronwyn Davies' analyses of positioning and the ethics of responsibility.<sup>49</sup> In both Evaldsson's and Davies' analyses, I find material for my reflections on the dilemmas of victim positioning.

The structure of the article follows a reflexive move from a first elaboration of the research questions in focus to a case of a school girl who during the five years she spent in her school class changed strategies in relation to the exclusion and bullying she was a victim of, in an attempt to enhance her possibilities of

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<sup>47</sup> Schott and Søndergaard eds. 2014.

<sup>48</sup> Evaldsson, 2007a, 2007b.

<sup>49</sup> Davies, 2008.

negotiating conditions for social belonging. This case is followed by the case of another school girl whose situation and social negotiations with the other girls in her class shows some of the mechanisms involved in the inertia that may be activated when social degradation takes direction. The following and last case to be included in the article opens reflections on the potentials and limitations for a girl to report assaults to authorities outside of the group and thereby distance herself from the insider positioning as part of a particular 'we'. This case specifically focuses on the effects that followed from the girl being barred from experiencing the potential transformation of the discursive practices of the group, the 'we', which led to her abuse.

## **Elaboration of research questions**

Not all 'victims' hesitate in declaring themselves to have been abused and in need of help. Many do not hesitate at all. They immediately identify the relationally aggressive act as unacceptable and position themselves and the others involved as victims and perpetrators respectively. As such, they are able to seek any legal rights associated with the form of violation in question. This lends legitimacy to their legal, moral and/or discursively condemnatory and rectifying reactions.

But some victims do hesitate. Some hesitate to the point where they never classify the act in question as abuse. And others do not just hesitate — they explicitly and actively refuse the definition or description of their position as one of victim, even when it is offered to them. For these people, being offered the victim position is seemingly more of a threat than a help.

One group of people to whom this applies is women who choose to stay in violent relationships. People around these

women often wonder: ‘Why doesn’t she report him? Why doesn’t she leave?’ If directly questioned, the victim of domestic abuse may fabricate spontaneous stories of colliding with doorframes or falling down stairs to explain her physical injuries. Not a word about being the victim of an abusive husband or partner, and no appeal for sympathy or help.

Rape victims may also hesitate to call themselves victims. Some rape victims immediately report the incident to the police, but many do not; there is a particularly high proportion of so-called dark figures within this category of aggression and crime. This is presumably due to the perceived difficulty of proving that a violation has taken place, given the specific legal practices that characterize this field. Victims may also refrain from reporting rape because of their thoughts or perceptions concerning the effect such a report would have on their social relations and on their identity. And it is perhaps in this way that we should attempt to understand Diane’s hesitation. Diane was a 16, turning 17, years old school girl during the period of time, when she was part of a group of teenagers — and victim of rape by some of the boys in that group. The group belonged to the same high school environment in a town in Australia. Diane’s case, which will be presented below, is part of the qualitative study used in an article by Bronwyn Davies.<sup>50</sup>

It can also appear difficult to admit to being a victim of bullying. Many of the adults who reported on bullying experiences to researchers in the eXbus team claimed the label ‘victim of bullying’. They recounted experiences with social isolation or persecution by their fellow students for years, and

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<sup>50</sup> Davies, 2008. The age and school status is not made explicit in the article but communicated in a private conversation with Bronwyn Davies, who did the interview and analyses.

often claimed that such an experience of bullying had made its mark on their later adult life. However, there are also adults who have chosen to redefine or play down continuous relational aggression from their school days; who have avoided being categorized as (for example) a victim of bullying, and who hesitate, reject, deny, trivialize or remain silent about their own experiences with bullying. Some of them appear as adults in therapy, where, to their surprise, they identify a pattern in the ways they orient themselves. It is only with the therapist's intervention that this pattern is described as consistent with repeated humiliation during their school days. Others appear in interviews within completely different research projects, where past experiences of bullying reveal themselves as part of their current generation of meaning in relation to other issues. Others appear in the empirical data which eXbus collected in connection with its research into bullying.

This approach is similar to that of Katinka, whose story will be presented shortly. Katinka is a Danish school girl, whose case is part of the data generated in my research project, which, as already mentioned, is part of *eXbus: Exploring Bullying in School*. It also applies to Leena, a Swedish school girl, whose case forms part of Ann-Carita Evaldsson's research, which investigates relational aggression among Swedish school children. Leena refuses to call herself a victim. We shall return to her story later in this article.

Other researchers have also reflected upon why some victims reject the victim description. Among the possible explanations – in this case, from the field of psychology — are Anna Freud's

concepts of ‘splitting’<sup>51</sup> and identification with the aggressor, both of which can be categorized as defense mechanisms of the ego.<sup>52</sup> These concepts were later employed in connection with the analyses of cases such as hostages’ development of loyalty towards their captors.<sup>53</sup> Other conceptualizations can be found in the Marxist concept of false consciousness, which aims to explain the lack of rebellion against class oppression — a concept that has been rewritten and developed in different versions within Marxist psychology and feminism.<sup>54</sup>

My argument in this article does not aim to invalidate any of these approaches for understanding victim positioning. These approaches each grasp significant aspects of the phenomenon and, with careful re-tooling, could be integrated into a conceptualization of the kind this article rests upon.<sup>55</sup> The purpose of this article is to offer a socio-psychological angle on the dilemmas of the victim position, focusing on the options for positioning that the victim relates to and maneuvers through. This does not mean that the individual psychological or socio-political dynamics are rendered insignificant; it simply means that this article prioritizes an analytical focus on elements of the

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<sup>51</sup> In parts of the psychoanalytical tradition, the child is thought to experience a series of intra-psychic phases of development in which strict oppositions of good and bad constitute one of many factors that are slowly overcome so that the child is able to contain and meet others as less singular representatives of this polarity. Later in life one might find a regression to this splitting functioning as a kind of defence mechanism and, for example, switching good and bad may figure as one of many psychological survival strategies.

<sup>52</sup> Freud, 1971.

<sup>53</sup> The so-called Stockholm syndrome, see Namnyak, Tufton, Szekely, Toal, Worboys and Sampson, 2008 for a discussion of the term.

<sup>54</sup> See, e.g., Haug, 1988.

<sup>55</sup> For re-tooling as a theoretical strategy, see Søndergaard 2005a.

phenomenon that appear to be in much need of further research.<sup>56</sup>

This article will present analyses rooted in a basic theoretical assumption about human beings as existentially dependent on social integration into human communities. It therefore also views human beings as dependent on dignified positioning and belonging, which is based on the premises for producing and negotiating the social order immanent in this condition of existence.<sup>57</sup> In line with this, concepts of subjectivation, positioning, belonging and inclusion- and exclusion-dynamics will function as some of the main pillars in the analytical strategy.<sup>58</sup> Subjectivation refers to the double, even ambivalent, status of subject formation. Judith Butler writes:

Power acts on the subject in at least two ways: first, as what makes the subject possible, the condition of its possibility and its formative occasion, and second, as what is taken up and reiterated in the subject's "own" acting. As a subject *of* power (where "of" connotes both "belonging to" and "wielding"), the subject eclipses the conditions of its own emergence; it eclipses power with power. The conditions not only make possible the subject but enter into the subject's formation. They are made present in the acts of that formation and in the act of the subject that follow.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> See also Bansel, Davies, Laws and Linnell 2009; Hepburn, 1997; Horton, 2011; Kofoed and Søndergaard eds. 2009, 2013; Schott and Søndergaard eds. 2014; Shariff, 2008; Søndergaard, 2011, 2013a, 2013b; Myong and Søndergaard, 2013.

<sup>57</sup> Bruner, 1993. Geertz, 1993. Guldbrandsen, 2003. Haavind, 2000. Kofoed and Staunæs, 2007. Søndergaard, 1996, 2002, 2005a, 2005b.

<sup>58</sup> Subjectivation, positioning, subject position, discursive practices etc. are all conceptualizations developed within poststructuralist and to some extent cultural psychological thinking (Butler, 1999, 2004; Davies, 2000; Staunæs, 2005; Søndergaard, 2002a, 2002b, 2005a, 2005b).

<sup>59</sup> Butler, 1997: 14.

The concept of positioning was originally defined by Rom Harré and Bronwyn Davies as a discursive process “whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines”.<sup>60</sup> In 2008 Davies critically discussed the concept and suggested a further elaboration. The original definition, she argued, was not sufficiently sensitive to the differential power between on one hand those engaged in citational speech, which reproduces unreflected repetitions of the conventional normative order, and on the other hand those who rebel against that speech. By treating these as symmetrically positioned the analysis was rendered deceptive. Furthermore the original conceptualization failed to recognize the ethical dimension of responsibility for harm implied in such citational reiterations.<sup>61</sup> Today several researchers integrate such insights with conceptualizations from new materialism<sup>62</sup> emphasizing the material-discursive enactment of subject positioning and subject formation.<sup>63</sup>

## **Katinka in fifth grade**

In this article analytical reflection is based on work with qualitative data, so we shall begin with Katinka, who forms part of eXbus’ empirical data.<sup>64</sup> Katinka is in the fifth grade at a school in Denmark. This environment, which constitutes the

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<sup>60</sup> Davies, 2000: 91.

<sup>61</sup> Davies, 2008.

<sup>62</sup> Barad, 2007.

<sup>63</sup> Højgaard and Søndergaard, 2011; Davies, 2014.

<sup>64</sup> The empirical data includes interviews with school classes, essays on bullying authored by children, children’s drawings of bullying situations and observations both in class and leisure time contexts. Katinka, Tobias and the children around them are found in the qualitative material from student projects under eXbus (Nina Andersen, Ditte Dalum Christoffersen and Peter Henningsen). Data has been anonymized.



space for Katinka's social and academic development, is full of tension and conflict. It is not easy to hold one's own in this school class. It is easy to do something wrong; use the wrong words, send the wrong signals or react in a wrong way to things you did not realize were sensitive. Wrong behavior is severely punished by the other children in the class through abusive language, rejection, slander, or physical attacks.

It is difficult for Katinka and many of the other children to decode the system of what is wrong, when it is wrong and for whom it is wrong. And this is exacerbated by the fact that the system appears to change continuously. Just when Katinka thinks that she has decoded the system and can react proactively in order to avoid negative positioning by others, these others read her endeavors negatively and punish her. Katinka used to cry a lot about being rejected and subjected to abusive language. Now she tries to do the same as the others — to reject and use degrading labels — but the effects are ambiguous. While the interviews indicate that some of the other girls understand this shift as a reaction over time, this understanding does not produce any reconciliatory moves towards evaluating Katinka as a potential friend.

In their interviews, the boys claim to actively avoid Katinka's company. The girls say that Katinka 'just isn't really like the rest of us' and that 'she is seen as a kind of nerd. She wants to be a snob but it doesn't really work because everybody sees her as a nerd... so she's excluded a lot of the time'. Ina remarks that all the boys bully Katinka because they think she is ugly. Ina also comments that her own mother has said that she does not understand why anyone would want to play with Katinka. When Anna arrived as a new pupil in the class, she was quickly presented with these descriptions of Katinka and told that she

should avoid Katinka's company. Anna ignored this advice until, at some point, Katinka made a 'mistake'. Anna immediately took this as confirmation that the others had been right. Following this incident, Anna also avoided Katinka. Neither Anna nor Ina think that Katinka herself knows that she is being bullied. Ina further adds that she thinks it would be hurtful to tell Katinka about it.

What about Katinka herself? In the interview, Katinka does not describe herself as a victim of bullying, at least not initially. But she knows that there is a girl in the class who is being bullied. This girl is called ugly names (whore, bitch, etc.). However, during the interview, Katinka shifts between talking about 'the girl' and talking about 'me' being bullied. When Katinka speaks about what is happening to the girl, Katinka positions herself as a person who defends this other girl. A little later, however, bullying appears to be something that only happened in the past, again for the other girl. No one is bullied anymore, says Katinka. She claims to be friends with almost all the girls in the class; there are only two girls she 'doesn't like'.

How is it possible that the other girls position Katinka as a victim of bullying — and that the boys even speak of actively avoiding her — while Katinka herself thinks that she is friends with practically everybody and that bullying is something that happens to another girl in the class? Why does the story of her own subjection to bullying come out almost as a slip of the tongue? And why does she occasionally project the bullying into the past when her schoolmates speak of it as occurring in the present? Why is it that, during the interview, she only has a very vague memory of a fight with another girl, which the interviewer observed in the schoolyard a few days earlier? The

fight resulted in Katinka having to watch her movements carefully in order to avoid further physical confrontations. She remembers having to think strategically about her patterns of movement in the school landscape, and she can talk about this in detail. Why does she remember this part of the incident but not the fight itself?

### *Levels of negotiation of social reality*

Katinka oscillates in her approach to whether any bullying is taking place at all — now, in fifth grade — and whether it is happening to herself or another girl. In addition, she admits her own relational aggression towards the two girls she just ‘doesn’t like’. Can this relational pattern be understood as a part of her tentative and unfinished efforts to reposition herself within the social space of the class?

The classmates describe how Katinka used to cry when she was subjected to abusive language and rejection. She no longer cries. Now she acts, both with a sense of purpose and a direction. Katinka approaches the other girls. She touches some of the other girls physically in order to invite friendship and she talks behind the backs of some of the others. Katinka is active in fights when she feels wronged. Importantly, by talking behind the others’ backs, she actively signals her ideas about the future premises of belonging to the girl group. To this end, she acts upon and emphasizes her knowledge of the passage from child to adult: she knows what it takes to distance oneself from ‘childishness’ and to enter into ‘youth’.<sup>65</sup> Katinka wants something that apparently requires a lot of work and resistance

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<sup>65</sup> Davies, 2000; Gulbrandsen, 2003. Haavind, 2003. Kofoed, 2008. Staunæs, 2005.

against certain parts of the current relational practices in her class. It is something that does not fit into the usual dynamics of the class. It is also something that, for Katinka, is not clearly directed towards certain members of the class. In Katinka's narratives — as well as in the narratives of her classmates — friendship and hostility change places, sometimes at daily intervals. The only relatively unambiguous feature in the picture of oppositions in the social landscape she relates to appears to be the concept of childishness and, as a result of this, the positioning of the two girls marked as ethnic others, who are nominated as special representatives of this phenomenon.

Thus, rather than settled positions, there seems to be a lot of turbulence around the conditions of being and relating in this fifth grade. It is perhaps this very turbulence that appears promising for Katinka in her attempt to renegotiate the premises for prestige and for an acceptable level of participation in school life. The concept of negotiation points to people's active participation in the constitution of social order and premises of subjectivation. This is not a consciously calculated negotiation but deals with the effect that human participation, subjectivation and becoming has on the ongoing formation of, for example, normativity, cultural codes and mutual practices of categorization<sup>66</sup>. In this sense the children in this school class seem to relentlessly renegotiate their conditions for social belonging.

What at first may look rather confusing might therefore be understood through distinguishing between at least three levels of negotiation of social reality as it occurs in this school class: a level that concerns the individual people who are in or out of

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<sup>66</sup>Søndergaard, 1996, 2002a, 2002b.

the various groups and hierarchies in the class; a level that concerns the criteria and premises for who is in or out of these groups and hierarchies; and a level that concerns whether the practices of inclusion and exclusion should play a prominent role in the class' current culture and relational patterns, which occasionally spill over into bullying. We can therefore distinguish between the three following levels:

1. The concrete level of person-nominating positioning
2. The level of positioning premises
3. The level of negotiating degrees of inclusion and exclusion practices — that is, the level of negotiating more general norms of how restrictively the premises for positioning should be managed: how violently and how rapidly one can/should activate accepting or condemning relational practices.

In a certain sense, all of the children in this fifth grade can be seen to participate in negotiations on all three levels. Through their strong engagement in mutual nominating and moving each other in and out of various positions, all the students contribute in a general way to the reproduction of the dominant role of inclusion and exclusion practices in their relational patterns — they reproduce the role of these practices as being pivotal to class life. Through the use of special pointers, such as 'snobbish', 'disloyal', 'ugly', and 'smelly', they contribute to the ongoing negotiations concerning the positioning premises. And through concrete instances of classifying Katinka as 'out' and Ina and Anna as 'in' (for example), they contribute to negotiations on the level of positioning individual schoolmates by practicing direct peer nomination.

However, what this distinction between levels can bring into focus is the directionality involved in these students' specific negotiations and the clashes and disagreements that arise — not just as an effect of the different directionalities on one level, but also as an effect of the efforts made on different levels that various participants bring into the social space. For instance, it appears that Katinka completely overlooks — or considers it unrealistic to have — the opportunity to challenge the central role that the inclusion and exclusion engagements play in this class. She does not direct her own behavior towards containing or challenging the class' preoccupation with circulating contempt and acceptance, although it is precisely this circulation that — at the most basic level — resulted in the long phase of exclusion and crying she experienced prior to adopting her active effort at positioning. Katinka's current positioning does not seem to allow for negotiation of this issue. As a marginalized person, it would always have been difficult to engage in such a negotiation, even if she had sensed the potential of its directionality.

Instead, she has adopted the class's engagement in inclusion and exclusion practices: she has accepted it and uses it as a platform for the negotiation she conducts on the other two levels. Of these two levels, her primary concern is with the level of positioning premises. Her engagement here is directed at introducing a reorientation. On the other hand, her efforts on the level of individual positioning appear to take on a more exemplifying character for her: the two girls she 'doesn't like' are not particularly interesting for her — except as points of departure for and as contrast to her new premises. Katinka is primarily engaged in redefining the positioning premises and criteria. However, in this endeavor, she stands fairly alone.

Most of the other girls accept the existing class culture as a given — for now — and concentrate instead on negotiating on the level of the specific, individual positionings.

So what change is Katinka trying to work into the existing social order at the level of positioning premises and criteria, and why does this negotiation require that she avoids the victim position? Katinka's efforts on the premises level seem intended to introduce a new set of premises that increase the likelihood of her gradually becoming able to take up a position as a more worthy and perhaps even notably attractive participant. Her strategy is to use the axis of development, which, in general, is a popular axis used for ranking children. Children are evaluated and placed along this axis by their significant adults and fellow students according to concepts such as maturity, age-appropriateness, being 'advanced for one's age' or 'too advanced for one's age' or 'too behind for one's age'.<sup>67</sup> This ranking is based on consensual considerations of not only normality and age but also gender, ethnicity, race and other specifications of social categories.

At an early age, children recognise the importance of this axis of development to their own legitimate participation and dignity in social and cultural communities. They also quickly learn the premises of evaluation related to positioning along the axis of development. Simultaneously, however, they themselves create parallel and specified premises for evaluation, and this is where Katinka strikes by accentuating the meanings tied to the passage from childhood to youth: you can no longer speak of 'playing together' but, rather, of 'being together'. You have to be more fashion conscious. You cannot act 'like a baby'. In support of

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<sup>67</sup> Haavind, 2014.

this negotiation effort, Katinka has a range of intra-acting discourses and materialities at her disposal, such as the body's relative biological development, age and artifacts (make-up, clothes, bags, technologies).<sup>68</sup> And these are closely connected to more general social discourses about, for example, fashion, youth, beauty, ethnicity and gender. Katinka also has the social, economic and youth-competent support from her mother as an external force in aid of developing discourses as well as practices and consumption that can signal being 'closer to 'womanhood' than childhood'. However, what Katinka does not have is the other children's recognition of these elements as a platform for the creation of worthy participation. For Katinka, however, there is hope in the power constituted by the 'taken for granted' nature of the axis of development with its promises of transfer from childhood to youth as something all children have to experience.

Katinka's efforts thus include the use of age as a category ('the others are still childish, but the axis of development is working for me'), but also the use of ethnicity: the ethnically other do not participate in the right way within the premises that privilege youth. Aisha, whose attempts include knowing the fashionable names of cosmetics and accessories and claiming access to the consumption of both, is the object of ridicule in Katinka's narrative. An ethnic other insisting on her rights to the advanced premises that (the more mature) Katinka uses in order to claim social legitimacy for herself will only provoke Katinka. Katinka conflates age and ethnicity in Aisha's character: Aisha attempts to influence the creation of premises

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<sup>68</sup> For the concept of the material-discursive enactment, see, e.g. Barad, 2007; Højgaard and Søndergaard, 2011, Søndergaard, 2013a. See Barad, 2007 more specifically concerning the concept of intra-action.



in similar ways to Katinka, but being ethnically other and not 'perfect' in Katinka's eyes makes Katinka push her that further away from the powers of definition. If Aisha were to gain access to this power, Katinka would risk a dilution of the new premises and see a diminishment of their potency in the process of positioning, which is intended to bring about Katinka's own dignity and inclusion. The difference between Katinka and Aisha is therefore actively produced in Katinka's narratives and accentuated through sensual appeals that postulate the different smell of the ethnic others. 'They smell odd. They smell Pakistani- and African-like, and yuck!' she says.

Thus, Katinka's participation in the social negotiations is primarily directed towards the level of premises. On the other hand, the other children in the class have invested much of their engagement on the level of individual positioning — in the negotiation of which children should be included into which groups and where in the hierarchies. In this organization, the two other levels' current status and content are seen as more or less given. While some of the other children may be able to sense the future potential in Katinka's suggestions for new premises, to some extent, her efforts can be negated by using the label 'snob'.

### *Social mobility and negotiation tools*

Markings, challenges or reproduction on all three levels take place through commentary, slander, distancing, grimacing, and physical violence; these tools are part of a repertoire that has seemingly been developed over a number of years in this school class. The different children and groups of children utilize this repertoire in their relational practices when they actively work to position and reposition themselves and each other. They

seem to spend a great deal of energy on these positioning efforts. In fact, the children's narratives indicate that positioning efforts constitute the primary element, while the school activities constitute the secondary element, in the collective engagement of the children's group.

The tools are employed in different quantities at different times. This is true not only for the girls' group. In the boys' group, the same tools are used, though with increased emphasis on physical violence. This is perhaps what has made Tobias, one of Katinka's classmates, choose a different strategy. For some time, Tobias has been the target of and loser in the violent interactions within the boys' group, and, contrary to Katinka, he has chosen to categorize himself as being in the victim position. Tobias' problem, however, is that his positioning is not working as 'intended' when it comes to receiving help from authorities outside the violent relations. In spite of his descriptions of his position as a victim and his appeal to teachers and parents for help, Tobias experiences only trivialization and suspicion from the adults.<sup>69</sup>

Perhaps Katinka has learned from Tobias' situation, though most likely not on a reflective level. But, from her time as someone who would cry and appeal for inclusion in the shared social arena, she is likely to have gathered some experiences concerning the lack of help, which, in some way, has directed her towards another strategy. She has moved from appealing for help (crying) to attempting neutral survival to finally making an

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<sup>69</sup> Here lies another subtlety that needs to be considered when dealing with the avoidance of victim positions: the victim position's implicit promise of realization of rights and help from outside the group is not always fulfilled. For some, this might be the most obvious reason for not explicitly declaring oneself a victim.

active effort to become a participant in the space in which she is obliged to live her childhood.

By taking as her point of departure her two ethnically different classmates, by declaring the rest of the girls to be her friends, by revising the narrative of bullying into a story about the past, and by adopting and actively participating in the fifth grade's practice of circulating contempt but renegotiating the content of its directionality, Katinka attempts to move towards a more secure social position. Katinka hopes that she is actively moving away from being marginalized and away from being 'smaller'. However, the negotiation is far from over. And it is here, at the point of inconclusiveness, insecurity and hope that we may begin to understand the inconsistencies in her narrative.

Is Katinka being bullied or not? Is there bullying in the present or only in the past? Perhaps there is still bullying, but, if so, the bullying is, at least according to Katinka, now happening to others. And, if someone is being bullied, Katinka will help, since bullying has the potential to come full circle ("what if it comes back to you?") and should therefore be avoided. Yet throughout most of the interview, Katinka states that she is not being bullied in her new position. With this statement, Katinka declares that a better present or future is already in existence. If she wishes to be successful in her (desired) repositioning, it is important that she holds on to and reproduces a narrative in which she is not being bullied. If she had presented herself as a former and current victim of bullying, she would thereby have contributed to (re)producing a picture of herself with the characteristics from which she most emphatically wishes to distance herself. So, no, she is not being bullied and the schoolyard fight was insignificant! In fact, she can hardly

remember it. In so far as it has any significance at all, she was certainly in control of the situation — at least afterwards, when she proved capable of surveying her options of movement in order to avoid further confrontation. This, she remembers: her mastering this situation, an important point in the revision of her narrative of self as related to the interviewer. The mastery! Not the fact that the fight took place.

In a certain way, the oppositions in the interview between bullying and not bullying, bullying of Katinka and bullying of others, and bullying in the past versus bullying in the present all function as areas of dry land in the marshy landscape of meanings and practices through which Katinka moves — shifting between success and failure. In some places, the ground beneath her gives way and, in other places, the ground holds temporarily before subsiding and requiring a new jump. She has to balance her act between, on the one hand, naming her fear and tendency to marginalization (risking the reproduction of this position), and, on the other hand, naming the new and hopefully future situation (friends with everyone, mastering most situations, not bullied, someone who sets the premises of inclusion and exclusion through markers of youth) in order to draw attention to the new as something that already exists in the present. However, neither of these points can really become sustainable claims to reality unless others recognize their enunciative power. As soon as the statements are disqualified by others, Katinka is forced to look for other areas of dry land in her attempt to stay proactive in setting premises of description.

*Another look at splitting and aggression*

Katinka is moving on. To call herself a marginalized victim of bullying would be to drag herself back. The interviewer who focuses on bullying must therefore be handled with caution in this kind of balancing act, because who is to know in which direction the interviewer will draw her self-narrative? If the interviewer calls for a victim narrative, she can expect silence. If the interviewer calls for a narrative of mastery, that is ok — but will she deliver recognition in return? Does the interviewer receive the narrative in a way that can be used for validation? Katinka hesitates and leaps around.

So is it ‘identification with the aggressor’ that we see in Katinka? Well, yes, to some extent we could use this conceptualization. But aggressor in this context is not present as an individual perpetrator of aggression. Perhaps it is more a question of a repertoire of premises and tools of interaction in the fifth grade culture that have been developed and further sophisticated over time. Seen through a socio-psychological lens, the aggression can be thought of as having the character of a social and cultural dynamic, gathered and employed by a group of children and either not challenged at all or only unsuccessfully so by the adults around them. One may also want to question the explanatory usefulness of a concept of identification that depends on a notion of fixed patterns in the personal psyche. Katinka does in fact show herself to be fairly flexible in her relational adaptation strategies. There is more mobility and flexible analysis, more adaptation and reorientation, and more attempts at exercising influence involved in her processing than the concepts of splitting and identification in a strictly individualizing focus would appear to be able to explain.

Upon further reflection, we might even consider that splitting may just as well be understood as something found in strategies and cultural guidelines as in a fixed pattern of orientation in her personality. Katinka shifts and adapts her strategies in a constant decoding of social possibilities of movement and in evaluation of the effects of her strategies. She appropriates strategies and practices of orientation. Both positionings and strategies are tied to certain people at certain times: to the friend who is bullied, to herself as a victim of bullying, to herself as the one who helps her friend and herself, or simply to the ‘dry land in the marshes’ used in her efforts at repositioning in a complex social space. ‘Splitting’ as division could also be reconceptualized as the dry land Katinka moves between and therefore not as fixed inner psychic formations.

We will be able to produce other points of departure for intervention if we take up reconceptualizations of this kind and try to understand Katinka through her efforts to achieve inclusion and worthy participation rather than through concepts of psychological pathology.<sup>70</sup>

## **Leena and the inertia of the victim position**

In Ann-Carita Evaldsson’s research on relational aggression among 11-12 year-old girls in a Swedish school class, we are presented with Leena in verbal interaction with Nahrin, Elisa and Jacky who have gradually escalated their attempts to position Leena as problematic.<sup>71</sup> Leena faces moral degradation; she is described as someone who breaks with the social and moral norms of friendship and is labeled disloyal. She is marked

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<sup>70</sup> Søndergaard, 2014b.

<sup>71</sup> Evaldsson, 2007a, 2007b.

as ‘mad’ (a ‘psycho’ who has been admitted to the hospital and who, the girls joke, can ‘stay there for a thousand years until you’re dead so there won’t be time for you to feel better’.<sup>72</sup> Leena is mocked for giving money to the boys, for talking behind the backs of the other girls, and for being a person without friends. This process escalates until, at the end of the research period, Elisa threatens Leena with physical violence.<sup>73</sup> Evaldsson’s report presents Leena as moving from a marginalized position to total exclusion from the girls’ group.

Leena’s strategy is to defend herself. She claims that the other girls do not know anything about her that could justify their attacks. She tries to appeal to a more factual exchange by conceding that she had indeed been admitted to a psychiatric ward for a short while. She follows up this information with an appeal for understanding — an appeal that is quickly interrupted and ignored by the other girls. The exchange draws Leena ever deeper into degradation and accusations and, according to Evaldsson’s analysis, Leena herself to some extent begins to participate in the escalation of accusations by acknowledging them as accusations that need to be met offensively. Leena and the three girls move into increasingly direct and unyielding confrontations revolving around Leena’s moral character. Evaldsson’s analysis draws attention to the relational aggression as an expression of gender ‘policing’ and social control<sup>74</sup> but generally places more emphasis on the point that relational aggression should not be understood as one-dimensional and static, but rather as a dynamic phenomenon that grows out of and adjusts to the verbal interactions of

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<sup>72</sup> Evaldsson, 2007b: 394-395.

<sup>73</sup> Evaldsson, 2007a: 327.

<sup>74</sup> Frosh et al. 2002.

everyday life.<sup>75</sup> It is the marginalizing effects of Leena's constant rejection of the negative descriptions delivered by the other girls which Evaldsson finds particularly interesting in her analysis of the girls' verbal interaction.<sup>76</sup>

Drawing out these analytical points is interesting when it comes to understanding relational aggression. However, I am more interested in an aspect that Evaldsson does not address directly; namely, that Leena is upset by Nahrin's statement that Leena used to be bullied. This is a statement that Leena cannot accept under any circumstances. She does not deny having been admitted to hospital, and she is able to answer accusations that she gave money to boys (by suggesting the others are jealous). But she cannot accept being called a victim of bullying — seemingly crosses the line. Only at this point do she and the others begin shouting at each other.<sup>77</sup> There is no way she has been bullied. She has been teased, once! But not bullied! For the other girls it is equally important to insist that she *has* in fact been bullied. They demand that she admit it.

What is at stake here? Why is the recounting of the events as bullying so central to the girls' argument? Why can that naming itself be used offensively by the excluding girls while the victim of bullying for her part is fighting to remove that description from herself? Could Leena not have taken that label and turned it into an offensive along the following lines: 'Yes, I've been bullied once already and therefore recognize it when I see it. You are bullying me, which isn't acceptable, so please stop right

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<sup>75</sup> Evaldsson, 2007a.

<sup>76</sup> Evaldsson, 2007b: 400.

<sup>77</sup> Ann-Carita Evaldsson uses print norms from conversation analysis where pausing, intonation, phrasing, etc., are noted and thus enables a reading of this kind of detail of the transcription.



away. Otherwise I'll call upon forces greater than us, on authorities whose explicit focus and politics are to counter bullying. I'll tell the teachers and the school board ... .' Could Leena not, albeit in her own words, have taken up the victim position, joined the category of victims and used it to claim the rights of the victim? Would that not have set the girls straight and made them reconsider? Would they not have acknowledged their aggression and the illegitimacy of their actions? Would they not have turned a critical eye upon themselves and then turned to welcome Leena into their group?

The point is that they probably would not. It is highly unlikely that they would have acknowledged their actions as wrong and adopted a favorable stance towards Leena; otherwise, Leena would probably not have hesitated for a moment in claiming herself a victim of bullying. But she does not even consider this option. Leena reacts immediately with the strategy of denial: she has never been bullied! She has been teased! Once! At another school! And only for a short time!

### *Denial of victim status as a strategy of social survival*

Leena, like Katinka, is very active in negotiating positioning practices, but Leena's situation differs from Katinka's in several ways. Firstly, she is more dependent on the aggressive girls because the class comprises twenty boys but only five girls. As Leena says, this ratio is the reason why the group has to stick together.<sup>78</sup> In Katinka's class, there were more girls amongst whom she could move relationally.

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<sup>78</sup> Evaldsson, 2007a: 322.

Secondly, Leena's case is not only a matter of marginalization within the girls' group but of actual exclusion from the group altogether. Leena attempts to negotiate on all three positioning levels: individual positioning (she should be included in the girls' group), premises for positioning (it must be alright to give money to a boy and to have been admitted to hospital), and, to a certain degree, also on the level concerning whether practices of inclusion and exclusion should have such a prominent role in the class (since there are only five girls, they will have to stick together and accept the group as a given). However, the other girls gradually lose interest in her efforts, regardless of which level Leena activates. The girls slowly move towards withdrawing her negotiation legitimacy altogether and on all levels. The development thus does not stop with Leena being marginalized within the group but moves towards excluding her from the group altogether. In the context of a school class environment divided by gender, this is a positioning in no man's land. In other words, it poses a social and existential threat to Leena.<sup>79</sup> And, apparently, it is the definition of her as "victim of bullying" that threatens to realize the final exclusion. Leena's example offers an additional possibility for reflection in relation to Katinka's case in the questions it raises concerning how victim positioning in certain situations can become a platform not only for marginalization but also for further escalation of the marginalization and victimization leading to total exclusion.

Firstly, we should again focus on the fact that designating the victim simultaneously amounts to pointing out the losing and weaker party in a relation. By invoking the meaning of this position, the images of Leena as a previously subordinated and weak person are made real for the other girls. These images of

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<sup>79</sup> Søndergaard, 2014a.

Leena lend a certain generalizing effect to the other girls' marginalizing offensive: 'We're not the only ones who think that you are unworthy of social inclusion. The others did so too, earlier, in your previous school environment; it is actually an evaluation that more people, maybe even lots of people, agree upon'.

Another part of the explanation for the escalation of the process lies in the inertia that may be activated when degradation takes direction — that is, the degraded can be made the object of further degradation while no sense of respect, or responsibility or fear of punishment from the already socially weakened person herself or her allies intervenes to slow the developing dynamics. When the movement from marginalization to exclusion is in process, alliances may on the contrary be further weakened around the degraded person because the allies will fear that the degradation will infect them too. Others may therefore feel safer if they quickly cut or slacken ties (less empathy, understanding, defense of, company with) in order to decrease the risk of being associated with the degraded person and his or her positioning.

The forces with the potential to stall this kind of inertia could be found in the collision between more stably manifested ties and alliances — perhaps stabilized through a strong shared interest between the victim and one or several others, a shared responsibility towards something, a shared practice of understanding, a shared aversion, or some other shared feature that has somehow been strong enough to resist, drown out or compensate for the wave of degradation. Such forces appear to be absent in Leena's relations with others.

If there are no such elements of alliance or shared responsibility to stop the process, a special mechanism comes into play in the aforementioned inertia. It is a mechanism that grows out of the fact that from victim positioning as such, one cannot or only with great difficulty fight or negotiate within the boundary of the group. Resistance from the position of the (isolated) victim has to rely on forces outside the group. This has to do with the way that marginalization proportionately weakens the victim's legitimacy as negotiator within the group. The relatively more marginalized has relatively less access to powers of definition and negotiation of the group's social reality.<sup>80</sup> When the possibility to reposition and elevate oneself through relations to others, activities or the necessity to contribute to something shared is no longer acknowledged, the victim is left to pull him or herself up by his or her own hair. This is why the (isolated) victim is forced to ally him- or herself with forces outside the group for help when negotiating the definition of dignity and premises for positioning.

However, through this alliance with forces outside the group, the victim is also easily moved away from some central dimensions of the group. The person loses touch with the collective and the taken for granted 'we' that constitutes the group's coherence. This is why the fact that the other girls' labeling of Leena as a previous victim appears to be socially far more threatening than her being called immoral and disloyal in the present. Morality and loyalty can be discussed and made object for claims to powers of definition — even in an offensive by Leena — in relation to premises of participation. But the victim position does not give Leena any basis inside the group for claiming powers of definition. As a victim, she is not only

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<sup>80</sup> Søndergaard, 1996, 2011, 2014a.

unworthy; she has also left the position as someone with influence. She has resigned from the common understanding and practice in the group. She is no longer ‘disagreeing from the inside’. Through her alliance with external forces, she ‘disagrees from the outside’. Should she and her alliance approach the group from the outside, it would only contribute further to making the group members inside close ranks against her.

Having come this far, we might ask: If Leena cannot be accepted into this group, could she not otherwise benefit from receiving external help (requested by her) based on her position as a self-declared victim of bullying and aggression? Perhaps. First of all, however, we do not know, with Tobias in mind, to what extent such help is actually available. There is no information in Evaldsson’s texts about the school culture in which Leena lives. We do not know whether it is a culture that acknowledges and attempts to solve her types of problems, or whether it is a culture that ignores and trivializes such issues or perhaps even considers them natural and unavoidable. Perhaps it is a culture that appeals to individualizing explanations and considers the victim position as per definition self-inflicted; or perhaps it is a culture that perceives contempt and degradation as processes that other children and surrounding adults should validate and strengthen. All these possibilities and more exist.

Secondly, a clumsy intervention may appear to be more destructive than no intervention at all. If Leena calls for help and it arrives in the form of a superficial demand that the group behave and let Leena participate in their activities, then Leena as — an uninvited participant — will have her legitimacy deposited in a power external to the group, which will function to constantly devalue her access to the group’s collective ‘we’. In

order to have influence as a member of a social group, it is necessary to have a legitimate access to the shared 'we': 'we' have this or that task, opinion, interest, communality, or, as in Evaldsson's analyses, morality and normativity, through which 'we' act and evaluate the world, ourselves and each other. This 'we' is only obtained through the group's acknowledgement. The group's acknowledgment of participant worthiness determines the legitimacy of enunciative and participatory positioning. This cannot simply be enforced on the group from the outside. Others may enforce a mask, a proper behavior, a set of rules based on threats of sanctions — but others cannot enforce the implicit, taken for granted and subtle rules of the 'we'. The constructive intervention which 'others' could engage in would have to consist of helping a 'we' along and creating the conditions to facilitate its establishment and its expansion of the premises of its constitution — but others would never be able to forcibly bring about and dictate a 'we'.

Leena could benefit from her school having the competence to support such a 'we' that would include her. However, an insensitively enforced group membership would be more likely to function as a further barrier. Perhaps Leena has already sensed that no external forces can help her, and that victim positioning therefore carries no potential for integration for her in the long run. In any case, she refuses to resign from the collective 'we'. Through her constant rejection of the accusations, her self-justifications and counter-accusations, she continues to insist on her participation in the 'we' and on her legitimacy in negotiating membership premises from inside the group, as well as in negotiating rules and standards for morality and normativity: it is ok to have been admitted to hospital, ok to have given a bit of money to Nicko, ok to be Leena — in the

group. But in the confrontation concerning her having been a previous victim of bullying, she meets an overwhelming power of exclusion. This is far from being a negotiation of participation premises. This is about marking her for exclusion and dissolving her inclusion in the 'we'.<sup>81</sup>

## **Diane and the hope for a dignifying transformation**

The last point I want to make on the dilemmas of the victim positioning concerns the victim's experience of the possibilities for a transformation of the oppressive forces. This point draws together three of the previous points: first the point concerning the social imperative of inclusion in human community and, therefore, the processes of creating social order as a necessary medium for subjectivation, agency and development; second the point on levels of negotiation of the social order and, third, the point about accessibility to the process of negotiation and the power of definition based on the group's acknowledgement of an individual's membership of the collective 'we'. The conditions for victim positioning could be further elaborated on many levels, but, for the purposes of this article, these three points can serve as perspectives for reflecting on the potential for transformation, which a victim might be able to perceive and by which a victim may be influenced. Diane's story functions as the analytical catalyst for the following reflection.

As already mentioned, we find Diane in an Australian high school youth context.<sup>82</sup> She is part of a mixed-sex group of friends of which some are involved in heterosexual romantic

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<sup>81</sup> Søndergaard, 2005a, 2011, 2014a.

<sup>82</sup> Davies, 2008.

relationships.<sup>83</sup> The girls who are not in established relationships are called ‘dogs’ by the boys. This is meant to indicate that the girls are sexually available on a more arbitrary basis than those positioned in relationships. ‘Dog’ is not a name with which the girls are necessarily familiar, but the name creates meanings, practices and positionings in the group.

One evening, Jeff and one of the other boys from the group meet Diane. They take her to a park and subject her to a violent sexual assault. Diane returns home crying and tells her sister that ‘the boys had been mean, they had hurt her’. The sister responds: ‘No, this is not meanness, this is rape. It is gang rape’. As Davies writes, the sister removes the boys from their potential boyfriend positions and repositions them as criminals. The sister makes Jeff recognizable as a gang rapist. Diane is at first unsure about how to react to this offer of understanding and about whether to report the incident, but the sister insists, and Diane ends up reporting the incident to the police.

In the analysis, Davies emphasizes that, through the name ‘dog’, Diane not only figures as sexually available and simultaneously unworthy as a potential girlfriend (which is Jeff’s definition of the term), but also that she is subjected to certain practices based on this label. Dog is not only a name but a position in the group. It is this label that opens a particular positioning and paves the way for the rape as an acceptable act for the boys. The positioning indicates and cites the norms for how ‘good girls’ should behave, and Diane is recognized and made recognizable through the naming, whether or not she is aware of its existence.

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<sup>83</sup> Bronwyn Davies’ text builds on an interview with one of Diane’s two rapists, Jeff, when he was 17 years old.



Davies' main point in the article deals with the responsibility for citation of oppressive naming and discourses. In Diane's case, the focus is therefore on Jeff's responsibility for citing the 'dog' discourse and the way that this citation is used and leads to the sexual assault. Davies is here interested in the opposition between citation and resistance; she is interested in Jeff as the one who continues to cite the dog discourse right up to the indictment, and in Diane who permits this discourse to shape her understanding of the positionings within the group. Diane does this in spite of the fact that she has experienced its consequences as evil in this particular incident, and in spite of the fact that she does not have direct access to the main term driving the boys' citation, namely 'dog'. Diane is orientated through this discourse until the sister intervenes. The sister's intervention, on the other hand, gets its power from the law: a strong, external apparatus of definition and intervention.

There is, however, one particular detail in this case that has aroused my curiosity. This concerns Diane's hesitation in relation to breaking out of the 'dog' discourse — including the version where the name dog is not used directly but nonetheless is productive in relation to her and the other girls' position and understanding of themselves and others. Within the 'dog' discourse and the 'we' that it permeates, it is not a straightforward matter to attach the words rape and crime to the incident in the park.

Davies' main interest is related to the freedom that the sister's insistence on an alternative discourse opens up for Diane. But I find it interesting to listen more carefully to the kind of hesitation that Diane exposes in order for us to understand the victim's dilemma. Diane cannot have been ignorant of the legal

discourse that criminalizes rape. It is unthinkable that she would not have had access to an understanding of the park incident within this discourse. Ignorance simply cannot explain her hesitation; there must be something else at stake. One way to continue this line of thought might be to consider the various potentials for transformation and for re-establishing dignity that can be found in the various victim strategies — in this case, simply the two strategies that Diane oscillates between.

Diane's report to the police establishes a clear barrier between her and the group. In all likelihood, it marks the final dissolution of Diane's access to the 'we' that used to centre the group.<sup>84</sup> The meanings, discourses and practices created in the group — with all their inconsistencies — have also shaped and subjectivated Diane. She has lived her identity, her personal narrative, meaning and agency through these discourses and practices. They have lived and worked in and through Diane and in and through the group to produce a meaningful 'we'. Marking the dissolution of Diane's access to this 'we' therefore also means that Diane cuts herself off from having influence from inside the 'we'. Her report to the police will certainly have consequences for the further constitution of the 'we', but, for her part, the 'we' will most likely be transformed as she leaves it and resigns her position as a legitimate member. She will not experience the transformation, which might have included her in a way that acknowledged her dignity.

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<sup>84</sup> This may not be the case in all cases of relational aggression. In some cases (of bullying, violence, hate crimes) the 'we' may possibly be restored after internal or externally facilitated transformation. But I guess a case like Diane's, containing that kind of intimate violation, involvement of police and legal punishment, will make healing of the 'we' particularly difficult. That is why the case is particularly helpful for reflections on further aspects of victim dilemmas.

But not only is she barred from this transformation from the inside, she is also cut off from experiencing the transformation of the discursive practices of the ‘we’ and the way they permeated her. The transformation in her must be undertaken without the support of a simultaneous transformation of the group and the collective processes that have lived through her and formed her. She must, figuratively speaking, pull out all the plugs of the collective processes in her old group and try to find new connections/discursive practices into which these plugs can fit — in the hope that this will enable more dignifying discursive currents to run through her.

To acknowledge that she has been raped (victim of a criminal act) and to report the rapists (in this case, to criminalize her friends) therefore carries a number of meanings for Diane. Firstly, of course, it means that generally accepted legal and moral concepts will be attached to the incident and that justice can run its course in accordance with these concepts. Secondly, it also means that Diane loses a social inclusion that has been important for her — irrespective of what we might think of it.

Thirdly, there is the consequence that the breaking of the ‘we’ that has formed Diane deprives her of the hope that, at some point, she can access the restoring, dignifying and healing process, that this ‘we’ — of all ‘we’s’ — apologizes, adjusts its meanings, makes reparations and reinstates Diane in a dignified position. This would not, from the perspective of such a wish, take the form of a forced confession, but rather a movement and adjustment of the ‘we’ with Diane as a part of the group, whose ‘inside’ also constitutes a subjectivating force in and for Diane herself. Diane relinquishes the hope of experiencing such a transformation.

She therefore also cuts herself off from the possibility of ever actively and purposefully leaving the ‘we’ and choosing another, from a position of having been healed and having had her sense of dignity restored from inside the group. This scenario could also have allowed her to make the break with the knowledge that in the remaining ‘we’, there would no longer be positioning practices containing degrading forces of the kind that had permeated and subjectivated her.

Viewed from a position outside a group like Diane’s, one might easily think that such a hope for intra-group transformation is naive and unrealistic,<sup>85</sup> but that does not prevent the person belonging to the group from retaining such a hope, irrespective of how degrading and oppressive the inclusion premises might have been. Diane may obviously have hoped that, at some point, there might be a dignified position for her, in whatever way dignity was constituted in this group through gendered meanings and positionings inside and outside heterosexual relationships.

### *Avoidance of the victim category’s over-determination*

Diane chose to report the gang rape. She simultaneously left her group of friends and entered the category ‘victims of rape’. Diane had the law on her side, and her accusation was upheld

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<sup>85</sup>It is for example a typical reaction in cases of bullying where a child continues to approach a certain group that just as consistently continues to exclude, humiliate and bully — despite there being other children in the social space who could be approached instead. In order to understand the desperation demonstrated by such a child in his/her hope for inclusion, one might benefit from considering the kind of healing and transformation possibilities tied to gaining acknowledgement from precisely this group rather than others. The victim’s perception here is that the group that took away his or her dignity can also give it back.

by the court. Davies' article provides no information about what happened to Diane after this process, but we might ponder her options. Who might Diane be after such an event and after the court case? Diane has many options when considering how to move on with her life. She no longer has to deal with a degrading group's oppressive positioning practices. She has an opportunity to seek out new social relations with new and more dignified offers of positioning. But there could also be challenges tied to moving into new spaces and relations with the name 'rape victim' attached more or less visibly.

Leena experienced the 'new' schoolmates' knowledge of her earlier experiences as a victim of bullying as very burdensome in her efforts to become an accepted and integrated part of the new environment. The 'victim label' stuck and was used in the new social space to marginalize her even further. Katinka, on the other hand, used to cry and be left out. The other girls conflated this information with a host of other markers to form an overall evaluation to the effect that Katinka 'just really was different' and that her exclusion was her own fault.

Diane may be able to turn her encounter with the group of friends and the positioning as a rape victim into successful positionings in new contexts — depending on the nature of the new contexts. But she may, on the other hand, also run into many other ways of trying to understand 'rape victim'. For instance, she may choose or be forced to play a walk-on part in the political efforts of others, or she may become an extra in relations where she, by being categorized as a victim (and thereby 'othered' in new ways), can contribute to the self-affirmation of others, who, in the light of her experiences, can breathe more easily and think: at least I am not the kind of person who has experienced something like that.

All categorizations have an impact. But the undesired victim categories tend to have very strong impacts and effects. Often, very clear and socially legitimized identity aspects are required to compensate for the impacts, effects and signification that a victim category entails: the child incest victim, the raped teenage girl, the child with bruises from a parent's daily abuse — who can look beyond and past these elements of categorization and see the human being with the needs, feelings, views, humor etc. that are also part of these people's being and agency?

The victim categories affect and shade how we interpret contributions and efforts of interaction. This is yet another reason why some people either try to avoid being categorized as victims or why they conceal an early experience when they change context. It becomes problematic when the children at a new school are told that the new girl in the class was a victim of bullying at her previous school, since this affects the evaluation of her both by the other children and by the adults. It is problematic if the young woman on her first date after an assault happens to reveal that she is a former rape victim; romance and eroticism will immediately take on a different hue and be overshadowed by all sorts of associations with that kind of event. It presents problems to a child if he overhears the others in the new sports club whispering about his violent parent and exchanging ideas about whether, with this in mind, he might be good at fighting or whether he is a cry-baby. In a new social situation, it is best to appear intact and with a current and hitherto unchallenged dignity.

## Conclusion

It appears that there is no easy answer to the question of why ‘victims’ do not always take the victim position upon themselves, call for external help, and demand that their rights are respected. There are many dilemmas tied to positioning oneself as a victim: resigning group membership, potentially losing social inclusion, renouncing a shared understanding and concept of dignity that has constituted a collective ‘we’ and through which the ‘victim’ has been subjectivated, losing identity, and renouncing hope for a group internal compensation and healing — just to mention a few.

In this light, it is important to note that, despite their good intentions, standard recipes for concrete forms of intervention may be quite ineffective, if not counter-productive.<sup>86</sup> Ideas for intervention against bullying should obviously be considered in the context in which the bullying occurs. But socio-technical recipes may prove to be quite insufficient in the encounter with complex social, cultural and subjective dynamics of the kind considered in this article. In many cases, there will be a greater need for a qualified understanding that takes a sensitive approach to the complexities of the dynamics in the relational aggression, if the intervention is to have a positive effect for the victims themselves. In other words, it is important to be aware of the difference between socio-technical competence and competencies related to process and constitution interventions. Therefore, an ethics tied to processes that seek to help ‘victims’ of relational aggression also needs to include dignity-generating potentials in the intervention processes themselves. The processes need to incorporate how the ‘victim’ is categorized,

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<sup>86</sup> Søndergaard, 2014b.

referred to and addressed. They need to determine which categorizations and inclusion potentials can support the ‘victim’ through the processes activated by an intervention. And they need to discover which alternatives become available during the processes and how this affects the dignity of the victim during the process. Interventions also need to find ways to work with the perpetrators and the other participants in the social group where aggressive relating takes place.

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