

# Social responses to narratives of sexual harmdoing

## Written Abstract

### NSfK Research Seminar, 2021: Sexual Violence in the Nordic Countries

**Author:** Anja Emilie Kruse, PhD

**Affiliation:** Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies (NKVTS) / Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law, University of Oslo

**Contact:** [anja.kruse@nkvt.no](mailto:anja.kruse@nkvt.no)

#### The powerful potential of responses to violence

In recent years, interest in the effect and meaning of *responses* to sexual, domestic and other forms of interpersonal violence has surged. This has been perhaps particularly evident in the powerful and transnational #metoo movement, with its emphasis on problematizing the *lack* of adequate responses to everyday sexism and harassment as well as criminalized forms of sexual violence.

In the context of this text, responses refers to how we as individuals, our institutions and our societies deal with events or actions that demand our attention – in short, what we say and what we do when we encounter, for example, sexual violence. What inspires and instigates social responses to sexual and other forms of interpersonal violence is, often, *stories* or *narratives* of such violence.

Institutional, local and interpersonal responses to violence and violations have the potential of producing and reproducing dominant understandings of violence and harm, but also of subverting and expanding them, sometimes creating grounds for recognizing new forms of harm and violence. Part of what has made #metoo such an influential social movement lies, I would argue, in how it insists on scrutinizing how our societies respond to, or rather have not responded adequately to, sexual harassment and sexualized abuses of power.

#### Responses, harmdoing and stories of harmdoing

One question that is not resolved in the wake of #metoo, however, is how to respond to those responsible for *causing* sexual harm through their harassing, violating, abusive or violent behavior. And, importantly, what would amount to adequate or fruitful responses to such behavior, ensuring a sense of recognition and justice for those harmed while at the same time allowing space for accountability, learning and rehabilitation in those who have harmed others, and making our societies better equipped for reintegration and restorative processes after harm has been done.

My PhD research, upon which this text is based, does not deal directly with harmdoers whose actions were exposed by the #metoo movement.<sup>1</sup> However, it does deal with understanding how social responses figure within and affect men's narratives of sexually violating behavior, and the meaning and consequences of such responses to these men's narratives of personal change following a conviction for sexual offences. Hence, I argue that my research can shed light on social processes similar to those that other people responsible for causing sexual harm may go through, in the wake of being identified as sexual harmdoers.

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<sup>1</sup> Kruse, A. E. (2020). *The Who, the Why and the Wherefore. Explanations, self-change and social responses in men's narratives of sexual violations*. Oslo, Norway: Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law, Faculty of Law, University of Oslo

The methodological and analytical framework for this text is my PhD project, finalized in 2019, where I conducted dialogical/thematic narrative analyses in a qualitative interview study with 17 men convicted of sex offences in intimate or close relationships.

The overarching theoretical and analytical orientation of my project is that of narrative criminology, which means that I have analyzed the men's stories of their violating behavior, and the function these stories have had for them; in the words of Arthur Frank, 'the work that these stories do'.<sup>2</sup>

### **Acknowledgement, social responses and (narratives of) dealing with harmdoing**

These are two of the research questions I posed in my dissertation:

How do men who have committed sexual violations narrate dealing with their acts and subsequent convictions, and what has affected them in their processes of doing so?

And how do social responses affect their processes of negotiating or coming to terms with having committed a sexual violation and subsequently receiving a conviction for such violations?

Hence, the present text revolves around how responses from others are affecting or impacting the narratives that the men I interviewed were in the process of developing about the violations they had committed. In what follows, I will outline some of the main results and findings with regard to these two questions.

The participants' narratives clearly indicated that feedback and responses from others had shaped their stories of themselves and their violations, in meaningful and sometimes very deep ways. It is precisely the social nature of these shifting understandings that I wanted to capture in my analysis of social responses and their meaning and influence *in* and *on* narratives of sexual harmdoing.

### **The meaning of responses: friction and turning points**

A hallmark of responses that carried particular meaning in the participants' narratives was how someone provided *resistance* to the participants' established understandings of their actions and of themselves, questioning them and pushing them in other directions. Such responses were often represented as *turning points*. Hence, one particularly salient aspect of these responses was how they represented a form of *friction* in the participants' narratives. My interpretation of responses revolves around the *meaning that responses are given* in the men's narratives.



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<sup>2</sup> Frank, A. W. (2010). *Letting Stories Breathe. A Socio-Narratology*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.

In these narratives I found two main types of responses, which I have termed, first; *productive* or *reintegrative*<sup>3</sup> friction and second; *destructive* or *stigmatizing* friction.

In short, *social responses* or *friction* are *evaluations*. They comprise the participants' experiences of feedback or judgement from others to their actions, and to their stories of these actions.

What my analysis suggests is that the productive type of friction helps the men to construct a narrative of change and make sense of the normative disapproval they have received through their convictions. The destructive type of friction, on the other hand, is stigmatizing because it enforces labelling and the conflation of act and person, and it creates serious doubts in the participants' own capacity to create believable change.



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### **'Productive friction'**

The first type of response is a kind of friction or resistance that is portrayed by the men as *productive*, in the sense that it pushed forwards their processes of dealing with or coming to terms with their violating acts and sex offense convictions. Particularly in the sense that it pushed the men to what I have termed *processes of reconstruction*, namely re-evaluating their understandings of violence, violation and consent, and of their own agency in the violating acts and responsibility for their consequences. Productive friction in the men's stories was critical and questioning feedback from professionals, such as treatment providers, program workers and prison officers, but also from significant others such as friends, partners or family members.

Now, to some people the men's talk about productive friction might seem to be merely expressions of internalised responsabilisation; being compelled to acknowledge one's crimes and taking responsibility for them.

My issue here, however, is to point out how such responses are *given meaning* in the participants' stories. This type of friction presents in my material as something leading to a necessary reconstruction – of their understanding of the violations, and of their understanding of themselves as someone who have hurt and harmed other people. It presents as painful, yet highly productive,

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<sup>3</sup> In my dissertation, I have used John Braithwaite's Reintegrative Shaming Theory (RST; 1989, see also Ahmed et al., 2001) to contextualize my findings on social responses. The characteristics of responses recounted in stories of productive friction significantly overlap with what Braithwaite's theory conceptualizes as *reintegrative shaming*. Reintegrative shaming denotes a form of social disapproval of unwanted or harmful acts aimed at accountability and normative reintegration rather than punishment and exclusion. It is predicted by the RST that societies who engage in reintegrative shaming will have lower crime rates than those engaging in stigmatizing shaming. For this reason, it is often assumed that exposure to reintegrative rather than stigmatizing responses after having committed a crime may contribute to desistance from rather than persistence in crime.

and intriguingly appreciated, responses, which the participants say have brought them to an expanded understanding of what they are convicted of, why they did as they did, and of the nature and consequences of their violations.

### **‘Destructive friction’**

Now, over to the other main form of friction I found in the material. The men conveyed this type of friction as destructive, leading to a magnifying of the stigma that sex offenders are often subjected to, through fear, shame and self-doubt. In many ways, destructive friction represents the opposite of what emerged when the men talked about productive responses: disrespect or mistrust, a lack of willingness to separate between *person* and *act*, and conveying a lack of faith in the men’s capacity for creating change.

Many instances of destructive friction seemed to bring the men in uncomfortable proximity with the feared category of the *monster*.

Destructive friction also signals a lack of willingness to reintegrate convicted sex offenders into a normative community. Examples of destructive friction may be different forms of stigmatization in words or action, including violence, threats and harassment associated with their sex offense convictions. Another example may be how it is made clear to participants that they will not be welcomed back into or reintegrated with their community after they have served their sentence, that they should rather expect social exclusion, because societies need protection from individuals such as them. Destructive friction in the participants’ narratives mainly came from other prisoners or prison staff, but also included ‘systemic’ responses, such as the experience of how difficult it is to achieve personal change within a preventive detention paradigm or when society at large seems prone to think that ‘once a rapist, always a rapist’.



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Where productive friction presents as contributing to the men’s greater understanding of why they did what they did, and of how and why punishment of such acts is legitimized, destructive friction creates fear, shame, insecurity and self-doubt.

The concept of *destructive friction* illustrates how the stigma of being a sex offender may creep under the participant’s skin, creating self-doubt and making it difficult to feel certain of their capacity for believable change, and feeding the fear of being relegated to a life of social condemnation. In that way, destructive friction and stigmatizing responses create poor conditions for *narratives of change*.

### **Friction and the importance of relationships: reinterpreting violations in dialogue with others**

While serving their sentences, persons convicted of sexual offences are often expected to acknowledge and take responsibility for their crimes. All the men in this study had reflected on questions like guilt, responsibility and shame with regards to their actions. They had been through processes of attempting to understand what they had done, why they had done it, and the

consequences their actions had had. My research shows how men's conceptions of self and their conceptions of their own violating acts may change over time, and that these new understandings of their violations develop in dialogue with other people, in social processes, resulting from *friction*.

There are fundamental differences between the two types of friction, differences that greatly affect how responses are experienced by the men, and how they impact their developing narratives of sexual harmdoing.

A key finding was how the nature and quality of the relationships within which friction was delivered was consequential for how it was perceived by the participants. Simply stated, friction received within relationships characterized by trust, respect or care seemed to be much more readily integrated in the men's developing narratives than in other types of relationships.

Having access to such relationships appeared paramount to talking about friction as *productive*. Firstly because it provided space for the men to discuss and talk relatively openly about the violations they had committed, and secondly; such conversations contributed to expand and deepen their understanding of how and why the violations came about. Thirdly, and most importantly, the men said they got the opportunity in these relationships to be recognized as something more and something other than a perpetrator of sexual violations – and to be recognized as someone with a capacity for change.

However, these relationships were also characterized by holding the men accountable for their actions and their consequences, and holding them accountable to the normative standards given in the law. Such relationship qualities were combined with characteristics such as reciprocal respect, a willingness to separate between violating act and the person committing it, and a belief in the participant's capability and capacity of creating change.

Conversely, what characterizes destructive or stigmatizing friction in the men's stories is in many ways the opposite of this. Destructive friction seems to amplify and worsen the experience of being alone and having no one to talk to about one's acts and conviction; of struggling on one's own with understanding why the violations happened and how they are linked – or not – to one's personal biography, and crucially, not getting the opportunity to be recognized as something else and something more than someone who has violated others.

The findings presented here indicate that the work involved in coping with a criminal conviction should be understood as a social process, rather than as an individual process. Meaning-making, identity and social reintegration are critical for rehabilitation and the process of *desistance*, i.e., the enduring cessation of offending behaviour. Taken together, these factors suggest that one way forward for our societies' approaches to those responsible for causing sexual harm is by facilitating such social processes of change. Doing so has the potential to increase and expand harmdoers' understanding of their actions, and of the consequences they have had for their victims.