Could Life Be… Producing Subjectivity In Participation

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Abstract

The article discusses a video produced and displayed on the internet by a Copenhagen facility for young drug users. This analysis is part of a collaboration with the counselors that articulates 'user-driven standards of social work'. In the context of this book however, it is first of all a prototype of the theoretical approach to collaborative projects that the author has expounded in *The Subjectivity of Participation* (2012). In the first step, the video production is explored as not only a vaguely circumscribed practice, but a singular collective. It is argued that this requires facing issues of power. Next, it is described how the collective is framed in powerful discourse. It is, however, argued that the fashionable totalizing and anonymous view of power must be developed with the concept of recognition, and that this facilitates a fuller realization of the complicity of research in the constitution of collectives and their participants. Finally, the anticipatory nature of this collaborative project is discussed with the concept of hope, stressing the kind of 'blues hope' that goes beyond common sense.

The Video *Could Life Be…* as Prototype

In May, 2013, a video was posted on the website of the Copenhagen facility for young drug users *U-turn*, under the heading "Narratives by Youths" [1]. It is titled "Could life be…". If we click on it, we first read a sort of poem:

> I grew up in chaos and confusion
> Stuck in a destructive relationship
> On a travel I met a young Turkish man – with bleached hair.
> He sang for me on the beach, under the stars
> Old Turkish folk songs
> About moving on [2]

Then we witness a young woman – the motion pauses as her name *Berrin* appears in print – walking towards, climbing, and finally jumping from, a diving tower in an indoor swimming-pool, all the while singing in Turkish, accompanied on the saz by a Turkish-looking man sitting on the pool edge in swim shorts.

Danish subtitles appear as she sings:

> *I'm on a long narrow road*
> *I walk all day, I walk all night*
> *I don't know what state I'm in*
> *I walk all day, I walk all night*

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[1] By October 2013, the URL was http://www.uturn.dk/fortael_unge_kunnelivet.html, but at the time you read this, the homepage may have been rearranged, so that the video may be found somewhere else on U-turn's or Copenhagen City's website, or may be gone.

[2] All Danish text is translated into English by MN

Berrin does not look like a professional singer or model, and the room is visibly ordinary. Yet the overall impression strikes as aesthetic: beautiful images with interesting cuts and camera angles, including a vertical shot from the bottom of the pool through the shiny surface to the artfully patterned ceiling, suddenly broken by Berrin's plunge.

At the website, we can read that the manuscript was written by a "Youth from the evening group", and that Lotte Svendsen, a famous Danish film director, participated, along with Kristian Kofod, psychologist at the facility, whom we can also see in a set snapshot, holding a camera on the diving tower, facing Berrin.

What's the point? In a recent article in *STOF*, the Danish journal for drug treatment professionals, Kofod and one of his colleagues explain:

> When the young people, through creative work, make new narratives, this leads to reflection and experiments with acting differently. (…) Many of the young people we meet carry identity documents from schools, welfare offices or clinics. (…) These documents tell strong stories about failed persons and negative identity, when they are based on deficits or psychological symptoms. (…) But many of the young people we meet also bring along a wish to make creative narratives through creative activity. (...) By working from these interests we try to help the kids create identity narratives that match their preferred self-image. This way, we try to give them a stronger position from which to act on their use of drugs and the relations that this use is part of. (Nielsen & Kofod, 2013, pp. 33–4)

This video, and the reasons for making and showing it, is one of the things we currently (fall, 2013) analyze as instances of 'User-Driven Standards in Social Work' as part of our research on 'SUBSTANce - Subjects and Standards' [3]. At a time when drug counseling is increasingly standardized – not least, through representing clients by using validated standard tests such as the 'Addiction Severity Index' / the 'Euro-AdAd' (Carpelan & Hermodsson, 2004) or the 'Outcome Rating Scale' (Miller, Duncan, Brown, Sparks, & Claud, 2003) – aesthetic objects of this kind, and the practices of producing and using them, are visibly unorthodox as images of drug treatment and its clients. They seem to be completely idiographic and subjective. And where are the drugs? Yet they do suggest standards of some weight for social work with young drug users: Even though it goes against the dominant trends, the Ministry of Social Affairs have declared the 'U-turn' approach a *model* to be implemented in other Danish towns, and we are following and analyzing this process in collaboration with the social workers. Among other things, we have noticed that the video may well be unorthodox and 'idiosyncratic', but it is also not only state-sanctioned but reproduced on numerous computer screens and presented in a journal read by hundreds of drug counselors.

The concept of 'standard' speaks to the current waves of standardization, and to the 'science and technology studies' (STS) that investigate that process (cf. e.g. Bowker & Star, 1999; Busch, 2011). But it also has a deeper tradition in philosophies and social theories of practice and language (Jensen, 1987; Thorgaard, 2010; Wartofsky, 1979; Ilyenkov, 1977), including the Vygotskian. As such, a standard is a form of practice,

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[3] See http://substance.ku.dk

perhaps immanent to a singular practice, and perhaps objectified as a model (or prototypical) artifact taken to regulate that practice, and potentially other practices.

Uffe Juul Jensen (1987) writes, under the heading "The ideal as a prototype governing a practice" – using the example of a car:

> The ideal is that particular car which, produced by the manufacturers, serves the function of a prototype for the production of cars in the particular practice, with a range of uses in mind. (…)
> a prototype (or copies of a prototype) also serves an essential function in the learning process; it can be regarded as an embodiment of the standard procedures of the practice. (…) The ideal is public, using prototypes as a realization of standard procedures for doing certain things, and it is collective, that is shared by members of a particular practice. (p. 92-3)

Thus, in our example, "members of that particular practice" of U-turn-style drug counseling can regard the video as a "shared" prototype, a realization of its standard procedures, and use it to learn and "govern" their practice. In the Vygotskian tradition, we might come to think of Leontiev's example with the child for whom the spoon, as an objectified meaning, is a not just an immediate instrument, but prototypical of the cultural standards for eating that the child is learning (Leont'ev, 1981).

Jensen studies health care practices. On his account, one kind of clinical practice that is currently struggling for recognition in health care is what he calls the 'situation-oriented' practice. This is the practice of helping individual persons to cope with particular life-situations. That practice may include identifying and treating diseases, as defined in diagnostic manuals and guidelines, but it is different in its overall scope and orientation. Here, the main point is in fact to go from "file selves" to "real selves" and "let the individual person become his or her own standard" (1987, p. 158).

The U-turn model represents a similar movement in social work, from the stigmatizing disease-oriented 'file selves' toward the "user-driven standards" of "identity narratives that match (the) preferred self-image" of girls like Berrin. What they do at U-turn is (among other things, such as conducting parent groups, supervising professionals in other institutions, and providing secondary school teaching and physical training) to arrange various activities where such preferred narratives are cultivated. Making the video is a way of helping Berrin by engaging her as participant in creating a prototype that not only embodies standards of a 'situation-oriented' social work, but also Berrin's personal standards.

This description of the practices at U-turn is one out of many instances of the U-turn *as model*. It resonates in many ways with that given on the U-turn website, and even, to some extent, with the one rendered on the Ministry homepage. But, as we shall unfold throughout this chapter, such articulations are far from innocent, since they are the artifacts that objectify the U-turn as the "U-turn model". So, dear reader, if you are impatient for a simple, concrete description of the youth social work at U-turn, I shall have to disappoint you: There isn't such a thing.

Moving on: Collectivity, Power, Recognition, and Hope

Whenever I watch that video, I am moved almost to tears. In the introduction you just read, I have tried to reproduce this movement, for a readership of more or less critical,

more or less Vygotskian social theorists. The tricks I used were to set a scene in which 'we' – the readership-as-audience – identify with the 'good guys' who help a disadvantaged young person in dire need, while struggling against the anonymous machine-like forces that generate an oppressive common sense; and to imply that our common project, in our local research collaboration, *and* in this book, is to theorize the exceptional and beautiful scenery of human practice that those good guys are able to uphold, and in which Berrin can develop and flourish as participant.

I did this because it is a true story that displays an important prototypical practice and useful analytical concepts, and because I still think there is good reason to be moved. But I also did it because, if we really want to theorize what goes on, in ways that help those social workers, and ultimately girls like Berrin, we must develop our approach. While being moved is crucial, moving on is no less.

So, like Berrin's old Turkish folk song, this is about moving on – not quite knowing the state we're in, perhaps, but with the hope of strengthening our position by reflecting on the stories we tell of ourselves.

We could move in many directions, of course, but, given the line of theoretical work I have taken part in developing[4], *and* given the kinds of issues that face people who work to create 'User-Driven Standards of Social Work', my suggestion – and my plan for this chapter – is to go on to raise questions of *collectivity*, *power*, *recognition* and *hope*.

In brief:

1) *Collectivity*: The kinds of 'we' that are summoned and aligned – such as 'U-turn' and its 'evening group', the community of Danish drug counselors who identify with the 'U-turn model', and the society of researchers who theorize their practice – each and all of those collectives are both vital and precarious. Even if we do approach them as 'particular practices', simply designating them as such is to obscure or sanctify the ways they emerge and exist as *singulars* – as not just kinds, but things of which there exists only one exemplar in the world[5]. We must keep asking also how any given collective is constituted and recurrently reconstituted.

2) *Power*: We may spontaneously think of these collectives of 'good guys' in terms that push aside power as only relevant outside them, or at their borders. But in fact, the outside is deep inside, and the border is at the core. What we are dealing with are practices, collectives and identities that are formed and framed through being objectified with 'discursive' artifacts that mediate inter-subjective relations including selfhoods.

3) *Recognition*: Although we can arrive at some understanding of the 'power of doing good' by thus stepping out of our spontaneous standpoint of solidarity, it also leads to a reductive approach to collectivity and power, and to another way of avoiding a reflection on the impact of what we do. The full concept of power goes beyond the idea of framing or discursive ordering and addresses processes of recognition of singular collectives and participants, and this, in turn, requires that we, as writers and readers of social theory, admit to being involved.

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[4] This work is presented at length in Nissen (2012b)

[5] Although this may appear to be a tricky logical category, it is one we use every day: Things like Turkey and Berrin are singulars, unlike, for instance, Turks, clients or artists, which are particulars. See Harré (1998). In general, I use Hegel's logical categories Einzelnes, Besonderes, and Allgemeienes translated as Singular, Particular, and Universal.

4) *Hope*: The narrative question "Could life be…" is not only key to personal identity. Collectives, too, are *collaborative projects*, defined by hopes such as that of 'user-driven standards'. All too often, such hopes are reduced to rational plans, within the parameters of the given state of affairs, or, often in a counter-move, denied in favor of a purely negative vision of process. Yet that choice is barren if nothing can be created beyond schedules and disturbances. Instead, just like Berrin and her helpers, we must cultivate our hopes.

The Collective

Let us begin with the collective, in two steps: First, sketching an interpretation of the video as a particular collective practice, and second, asking for how that collective is constituted as singular unit.

The video is contemporary in its strong focus on the person, expressed, among other things, by its many close-up shots of Berrin's face. The same focus seems to characterize the drug counselors' methodology of identity narratives. In fact, it seems more obvious to call this kind of practice 'person-oriented'. Clearly, this is all about Berrin, and all for Berrin's sake.

Yet, it is more than that. If this were the whole story, why would a famous film director help make it beautiful? And why would it be posted on the internet?

If we ask the counselors, they are experimenting with 'aesthetic documentation':

> When the youth is engaged in working on the 'product' or the 'document', the problem is bracketed. (…) Just as narrative therapy investigates preferred identity narratives, making them stronger, richer, and more elaborate, we try with aesthetic documentation to strengthen the narrative. But here it is through the creation of *the product*, which sustains or *freezes* meaning. (…) If the document is given an artful form, many seem to be more keen to expose it than if it were a letter, which is typically more private. Thus, the document helps the youth bring her story to others, and to hear their response to the story. (Nielsen & Kofod, 2013, pp. 36-7)

The bracketing of the problem – addiction – is achieved by working on a product. The set shots on the website hint at the simple fact that creating a beautiful video is hard and complicated work. There are many things to learn: How long should the silent initial frame be? How do you hold a camera at the bottom of a pool? How do I sing in clear tone without strain or pretense? Etc.

If Berrin were to describe her problems, her hopes, and her cultural tradition in a group therapy session, that, too, would be a kind of skilled production. But we wouldn't notice because we would take it so much for granted. Or perhaps we *would* notice, if it turned out – as it sometimes happens at U-turn – that Berrin is *not* skilled in this kind of verbal self-presentation; and soon, we could add an intellectual dysfunction to her long list of diagnoses…

Here, the production process is amplified, and the product itself is emphasized, by valuing an aspect that appears to lack any therapeutic rationale: its aesthetic properties. In this production, Kofod's and Nielsen's amateur skills in photography and music are expanded by Lotte Svendsen's know-how as film director. Berrin's drug problem is

bracketed as she learns by participating in a practice, the procedures and objects of which embody the standards, not of counseling or even drug abstinence, but of cinema.

The sense Berrin makes of herself is mediated and cultivated by cinematic – not therapeutic – standards. This is meaningful: In Leontiev's terms (borrowed through Vygotsky and Paulhan from Gottlob Frege), sense is developed into meaning. The meaning of a work of cinematic art is complex and open to multiple reinterpretations, but it is also, as the counselors note, 'frozen', stabilized and generalized across situations and communities.

As an aesthetic product, the video connects the production team, through the internet, with mixed audiences of Berrin's peers, family, social workers, management, researchers etc. These connections are multiple, but not endless; they still guide the process, just as the view to traffic would guide the manufacture of a car. Importantly, the artfulness of the product is something to be proud of, for Berrin as for all members of the team. For those audiences, and together with the rest of the team, Berrin is showing off, displaying herself not only as main protagonist, but also as writer, actress and co-producer of a work of art.

Thus far, we have reconstructed the video production as a kind of collective practice. We remarked how one kind of practice – aesthetic documentation – is substituted for another kind, which would be more typical in drug treatment institutions – counseling or therapy.

The 'kind' or 'form' of practice, or in other words, its standards, can be grasped in four dimensions: Agents, object-focus, ends and means. Who, what, what for, how? Since these are dimensions of intentional practice and are always defined in relation to each other, they can be said to make up the *intentional structure* of a collective (Nissen, 2012b, ch. 5). When we opened the U-turn website, we expected to learn about therapists using counseling techniques to cure addictions in young people. Instead, we enjoyed a music video over a Turkish poem, made by a film crew with camera and saz.

In both cases, one could argue, the object-focus is a person, and the same person would also participate as agent. But the differences are great between the person as the site of a disease or as the protagonist of a poetic cross-cultural journey – and between that person as client-user or as actress-singer-scriptwriter. These differences are not only between categories that describe the person. They are first of all differences between the practices in which those categories make sense, and the person's ways of participating in them. The client category is part of a clinical practice in which Berrin, safely within a confidential therapeutic space, learns to deal with herself in terms of her drug problem; her trajectory points toward leaving the practice behind and keeping the experience mostly to herself. In the film production, Berrin learns by peripheral participation in a *community of practice* defined by aesthetic standards; though she is not likely to become a professional, aesthetic practices are everywhere and she will probably go on to boast the video to her friends and family.

The difference between the closed circuits and self-reference of the treatment institution, and the open communities of aesthetics is important if we take a broad, contextual view of the life and development of a girl like Berrin. Still, we would not be quite fair if we claimed that it is only the clinical practice that is circumscribed as a unit, or that only the aesthetic practice opens to the world. The institution only closes on itself as it simultaneously connects to the clinical world of professions, sciences, and also users, relatives, and even the soaring lay culture of addictions. And conversely, the

existence of a singular unit has been presupposed all through our account of the aesthetic practice, or designated with everyday terms such as 'the production team', or indeed, we have used – along with the counselors – the given terms for the institutional entities such as 'U-turn' and its 'evening group'.

I also borrowed the term 'community of practice' (COP) from the situated learning tradition (e.g. Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). This was deliberate: As a theoretical concept, the COP is meant to open just the sort of questions we have been addressing in this section … except the very last. The COP is not supposed to be identified in singular instances. When, in 2008, Jean Lave reflected on the fate of the concept, she explicitly refused to accept that a COP is "a thing to look for"; instead, it was only "a way of looking"; and that way of looking would always see a "complex practice" never existing but always "under construction" (Lave, 2008, 290-1).

This is a strange situation. Precisely when we focus on participation, learning and identity, the question of the unit of practice, the collective, appears obvious. And of course, for the counselors at U-turn, the establishment of a video production team with proper relations of 'old-timers' with 'newcomers' was no small feat at all. In fact, while a drug treatment institution is a fairly standard unit, it takes some skill and effort to form and uphold an aesthetic production team that is at the same time part of a drug treatment institution.

So why would Jean Lave shy away from that question?

In the first instance, we might think it had to do with the basic contradiction between the finite, situated nature of any singular collective, and the universality and transcendence of human practice as such[6]. What 'we' do, and who 'we' are, always make sense in *this situation*; it is situated, and this is basically how we engage, participate and learn. Yet as we saw, that sense depends on it being continuously developed into meaning that goes beyond the situation, and on conversions the other way, of such objectified meaning into local sense. Is Lave, perhaps, eager to avoid the trap of severing the local from the global?

She is indeed. But at a closer look, we can see that this contradiction is easily overcome / superseded in the concepts of exchange and cross-contextuality. People and things simply move between situations. For this, the question of unit need only be answered by its most unspecific qualities: the here and the now. This approach to practice is unfolded by Ole Dreier (2008), who has worked closely with Jean Lave. To him, an 'action context' is circumscribed in time and place, just as a subject is always coextensive with a human body. This way, he turns away from structural abstractions, toward what he calls the concrete.

Of course, as testified by a respectable phenomenological tradition that stretches back to Schütz, Husserl and Heidegger, these are indeed fundamental qualities of being in the world, and they will not quite yield to even the most radical cyber-globalization. Still, this – as it were: 'physiocratic' – way of understanding the singularity of collectives is unsatisfactory. The time when collectives were always locally delimited, and those limits were directly given physically, has long since passed, if ever there was such a time. Even Heidegger had to learn that Germany was not guaranteed by its blood and its

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[6] In the dialectical tradition, 'human practice as such' is often termed Praxis (Bernstein, 1971). The problem of unit only arises because it *contradicts* Praxis. Without Praxis, units would be simply given as accidental things – groups, aggregates of individuals – as in most mainstream social psychology.

soil. Time and place are always part of the story, but they do not in and of themselves explain how human practice is sliced up, between people and between times and places. Perhaps Jean Lave's retreat to a nominalist epistemology (the COP is only "a way of looking" etc.) is because she realized that this move to the hyper-concrete is really a hyper-abstraction from the real life of abstractions.

But there is something more going on to justify it. Like the social phenomenology he draws on (though often unacknowledged), Dreier highlights spatio-temporality as a reaction to the obvious alternative, which is structuralist. Just as Garfinkel reacted to the Parsonian functionalism of his day (Heritage, 1984), so, Lave and Dreier sought alternatives to structural-functionalist versions of Marxist social theory, not least those that had become part of the cultural-historical tradition to which they both contributed. A structuralist approach to social units would simply derive them from the standard intentional structure, as given in a functional division of labor. From Leontiev to Engeström, Hedegaard and many others, the unit of an activity would be defined by its 'object' or 'object-motive' (Engeström, 1987; Hedegaard, 2011; Leontiev, 1978). The collective in question is circumscribed as a either a therapy group with the object of cure, or a film crew with the object of a music video.

The structure of practice, which Ilyenkov (1977) called the "objective form of subjective activity" is thus declared *identical* with that subjective activity itself. The conversion of meaning into sense is no longer problematic. This has the great advantage that we can know directly about subjectivity, including the motives of participants – unless, of course, those motives are deviant...

Or, to put it in less ironic and more direct terms, it tends to substitute normativity for understanding[7]. And this precisely becomes problematic when we approach unorthodox units such as U-turn's 'evening group / production team', and unusual kids like Berrin. Especially when both are struggling with powerful and problematic ways of being defined.

So the phenomenological reaction is understandable. At least, in a situated approach we can allow for multiple and contradictory standards to coexist, and we can sympathize with those who struggle with them. The only trouble is, we have to look the other way when units are constituted.

This impasse can be regarded as a utopian way of dealing with the issue of *power*, in two opposite versions[8]. Either we pretend that defining a collective unit by its structure is innocent, or we pretend that there is an innocent collective unit, always-already given, beneath those structures – when in fact, the constitution of a collective, a 'we', is a crucial exercise of power, and in fact the attribution of intentional structure is a key aspect of that constitution.

And because it is, we, as researchers, are participants in this process. This most likely explains the utopian preference for innocence. Not that the researchers I mentioned

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[7] See also, to this critique, Nissen (2011).

[8] See also, to this, Nissen (2013). I should add, however, that in both traditions, this set of problems has been discussed intensely and various strategies have been developed to handle it. To some extent, my critique is unfair toward later works of Engeström (2008) and Lave (2011). I claim, however, that if it rests on popular, skewed readings of their earlier work, those widespread misreadings are not accidental, and have not quite been remedied by their later work in these respects.

stand back from engagement in worldly affairs, but more that a deep and understandable solidarity with practitioners makes it hard to identify with power.

Power

The second part of my analysis of the video will focus on discourse and power, on the framing of collectives and subjectification of their participants. If, in the first part, the ethos was one of a utopian identification with practitioners, this second part will start with a cynical break with that solidarity, in a perverse, Foucauldian or Goffmanian identification with power – which I will then criticize.

Inspired, first, by Erving Goffman (1986a; 1986b) , we can note that participants *frame* their interaction, that is, they take the attribution of structure to regulate it, to constitute its singular instance, and from that, they learn who they are. This is of course the point in the counselors' counter-framing of what goes on in the U-turn evening group: Berrin is identified, and takes part in identifying herself, not as client but as participant of a video production team, carrying a rich Turkish culture.

But with Goffman, things soon get a little more complicated. The story of Berrin, the film crew apprentice, reminded me of a paradox that we came across two decades ago in a similar research collaboration with social workers who took their inspiration from Goffman, but who were never quite sure that they managed to achieve a counter-framing (cf. Nissen, 1997; 2012b: ch. 5). What if they didn't? Did they in fact perform what we came to call the 'paradox of the horny hooker'? It goes like this: In prostitution, the main premise for both participants is that the prostitute's sexual desire is irrelevant. Yet precisely for that reason, she puts up a show of sexual arousal. The pretense does not fool anyone, but it keys and makes possible the exchange. So, in order to do A, we must pretend Non-A. Could it be the case that social work sometimes needs to be framed as 'not social work' in order to be realized?

It could indeed, if we learn from Foucauldian studies of social work (Dean, 1999; Philp, 1979; see also Nissen, 2012b, ch. 3). Characteristic of social work is just the kind of utopian humanism that moved us in the first section above.

In the first instance, we should not underestimate the power of the disciplinary apparatus of which the U-turn is part, no matter how progressive its professionals want it to be. When they, as we saw, refer to "… identity documents from schools, welfare offices or clinics (that) tell strong stories about failed persons and negative identity, (…) based on deficits or psychological symptoms" – those documents tell strong stories because their meaning is fixed, frozen and stabilized, not just in material artifacts, but also in the constellations of power that they mediate. For instance, the diagnosis of some students' failure is a necessary structural aspect of the way the institution of the school is built, and the way this is part of class structure, labor market organization etc. in present Western societies (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). Similarly, the individualized diagnosis of addiction as a minority trait, rather than as a problematic aspect of late modern life, congeals strong social interests in institutional habits and material conditions that are not easily transformed (Alexander, 2008; Schüll, 2012).

Secondly, these power structures do not only work at political levels or as the strategies of oligarchic individuals bestowed with a uniform capacity we call power. Rather, they are discourses that people generally take to order how they deal with people – that is,

with other people or even with themselves[9]. Subjectification ensues when people take up the agent-positions they provide, including the reflexivity highlighted by Goffman: When I am objectified – e.g. as client – then I relate to myself as such, and display that I do, within those therapeutic relationships.

But, on top of this, those discourses work to subjectify because they are at the same time *humanistic*. This is where it really gets nasty. In modern times, we do not kill criminals or cut off their hands; instead, we install the disciplinary structures of the prison because we want to empower the poor criminals by teaching them how to behave, so they can unfold their human potentials (Foucault, 1997). And all the grotesque humiliations of psychiatry were always meant to help the madmen finally assume responsibility for themselves as human beings (Foucault, 1967). And then, when perhaps we have realized that schools, prisons and asylums do not quite emancipate all their inmates – since labels such as dyslexia, deviance and madness prove to be stronger than their hosts – social work is invented to invoke the true, *holistic* human subject. This is done by drawing on discourses such as Vygotskian or Critical Psychology, where the subject is at her most universal, free of any specific qualities, since she is regarded as the subject of *social* problems. It is precisely by setting itself off as critical, as different from the apparatus of power – and by thus reforming and expanding that apparatus – that social work is constituted (Philp, 1979).

If we take another look at the video, we might note the strange juxtaposition of *laminations*, or layers of reference (Goffman, 1986a, ch. 3). The beauty of the images and the song is set within the website of a treatment facility, and the poem at the start reminds us that, if "life could be …", then it is probably not quite there yet, for the Berrin who "grew up in chaos and confusion" and has been "stuck in a destructive relationship". What we enjoy is not the beauty of the film as such, or of Berrin as such, but of a *movement* away from the "strong stories about failed persons and negative identity".

Further, the three dots in the title nicely convey the fact that, what precisely life could be, is extremely open, or even arbitrary. As Berrin sings about moving on, not knowing her mind, the cinematic symbolism of her open face, looking out into nowhere, is as obvious as that of her plunge into the unknown.

In other words, the video is prototypical, not of treatment, nor of filming, but of a collective defined in terms of a critical social work humanism. As we have established in countless user interviews at U-turn and similar places, being an 'alternative' facility, struggling for recognition of itself and its users, is a very strong kind of appeal. This is also how it works to invite us, readers and viewers, into communities, not just of practice, but of social problems and social movements to address them.

If we follow the Foucauldian approach further along this track, we do not imagine that we escape from power. Rather, what we encounter is a form of governance and mentality – in short: governmentality – that is now rivaling discipline for socio-cultural importance: pastoral power. The counselors Nielsen and Kofod are like priests who engage Berrin in a transcendent community, free of the constraints and passions of worldly institutions, but with obligations and resources to become the author of her own

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[9] This, for Foucault, is ethics. In The History of Sexuality (Foucault, 1985), he suggests a set of analytical concepts to study ethics, or 'technologies of the self', that are almost identical with what I call intentional structure above.

life. They have not just taken Berrin's motivation as premise (as in a disciplinary practice), but worked to elicit and enhance it. They have exercised the 'powers of freedom' by carefully staging a process where Berrin is 'inventing herself' (Rose, 1996; 1999). And although she is now recognized in a new way as a human being, absolutely free to define what life could be, it is understood that this life will be adapted to society's demands, not because of a force wielded against her, but because of her own responsible self-care. 'User-driven standards', perhaps, but it would be naïve to regard those as values simply grown authentically somewhere within Berrin and now free to unfold as they please.

Now we begin to sense how the Foucauldian approach, beyond a certain point, is barren. We have broken our solidarity with the counselors and revealed that, when they imagine to be breaking new ground and setting new (user-driven) standards, all they do is perform the prevailing, pastoral form of power. But, they might ask us back, does that mean they should rather stigmatize and discipline Berrin, or just leave her alone with her drugs? If they did, we would have no other Foucauldian answer than to say no, no, by all means, please go ahead and do whatever best suits the powers that be, only now with the stoic awareness that this is, indeed, what you are doing. Foucault's famous injunction to "refuse what we are" was never meant as a practical advice – only an ironic stance.

Precisely that kind of cynical pragmatics is currently rising to dominance as ruling ideology. And, just like the functionalism that fed into the disciplinary apparatuses of the twentieth century, part of how it rules is by overlooking struggles and contradictions. Even though all the key writers in the Foucauldian tradition claim to cherish fractures and multiplicity, the upshot is invariably the cynical reduction of any struggle, any progressive movement, to expressions of humanism viewed as a smoother and more economical power structure.

Some post-structuralists attempt to counteract this impending return to structuralism by highlighting the interactionist problematic of how agents deal with discourse by framing, positioning etc. (e.g. Davies, 1990). No doubt, much can be learnt from taking up the interactionist legacy, just as I have done with Goffman. But in theoretical terms, the problem of structural homogenization is not solved by invoking the infinite vicissitudes of situations. We still have nothing to work with apart from the given and well-known structures and discourses. And since, at this point, we are no longer lured by the phenomenological dream of the here-and-now beneath or beyond structure, we are immediately sent back to discursive ordering, in an infinite regress: What frames the framing? In which discourse is the subject who manages discourse subjectified? Who are we who define ourselves the way we do? Etc.

Of course, that perpetual evasion can be attractive. Currently, much post-structuralism seems to be stuck in a futile exercise of inventing ever new terms that are meant to defend subjectivity by being purely negative, by not yet having been colonized in positive determinations imbued with power (heterogeneity, heterotopia, multiplicity, lines of flight, affectivity etc. etc.). It is as if a utopian flame is still seen to flicker in all that which we have not yet determined, except as indeterminate. Yet, as it fails to provide any substantial hope of change, it feeds a dystopian powerlessness: Even if the light gets in through the crack in everything, as post-structuralists are fond of quoting Leonard Cohen saying, we are still prisoners of precisely 'everything', in a world thus totalized.

Thus it turns out that cynicism, no less than innocence, is a way of evading ourselves – that is, of not addressing how the standpoints that we assume as researchers form part of the struggles we are witnessing.

Recognition

Let us pick up the argument from the before it went astray with the totalizing hypothesis of governmentality. We identified a collective struggling for recognition. In this section, I suggest we grant it recognition, as far as it is in our power to do so.

The video does not simply provide a an example of contemporary 'pastoral', neo-liberal counseling. Certainly, a range of approaches do exist that aim to develop clients' motivation for self-care in drug counseling, by focusing on solutions rather than problems, and by emphasizing the client's autonomy while at the same time assuming social adaptation as common sense – e.g. 'solutions-focused therapy' (de Shazer, 1991) or 'motivational interviewing' (Miller & Rollnick, 1991)[10]. These are in fact part of the professional background at U-turn.

But that background also includes approaches that are explicitly framed as critical, and which problematize the institution of counseling itself. One such approach is 'narrative practice' (White, 2007), which is developed with inspiration from, among others, Foucault, Derrida, Bruner, and Vygotsky. In this tradition, diagnostic discourse is not only treated as potentially counterproductive in a therapeutic sense, but also as something which can be part of a social problem. Thus, White writes of addiction:

> In that contemporary culture is a culture of consumption, and in that there is an ever increasing range of substances available to us, it should not be so surprising that addiction and/or the excessive consumption of these substances is so prevalent, and that this is destroying the lives of so many persons, traumatising of their families, and wreaking havoc in our communities. In the view of the burgeoning nature of this situation, I believe that it is unrealistic to expect that individual therapeutic responses will ever be able to respond adequately. The need for organised community responses is urgent. (White, 1997, 5)

Could the video be regarded as prototypical of a collective struggling for recognition as an organized community response to a general social problem?

We noted at the outset that the video became data in our research because the state has proclaimed U-turn's approach a model for Danish work with young drug users. But also that it is, nevertheless, unorthodox. Most of what is thus sanctioned is standardized, individualized and evidence-based drug counseling. If we zoom out to contemplate the recent changes in public management in Denmark and similar countries, this is no surprise. 'New Public Management' (NPM) is the neo-liberal attempt to reorganize state activities in the forms of market and civil society, and, apart from outsourcing activities to private enterprise, and the 'pastoral' appeal to the self-responsibility of citizens as

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[10] Certainly, if we were to study instances of counseling that could be described with these names, we would also have to slow down analysis and recognize much that would go or point beyond this ideological form; but that is not a matter for this chapter.

users and self-helpers, a very important kind of NPM governance is through standardization (Busch, 2011; Du Gay, 2000).

The point in standardization is to govern by descriptions of what works best, as judged by available effect studies. As simple as it sounds, that tends to veil political issues about what is the problem, for whom, in which situations, etc. In other words, each time a standard is defined, a particular intentional structure is taken for granted and the question of its relevance is excluded from awareness, in the interest of pragmatic simplicity.

In the field of drugs and addictions, like in many other fields, this means that the social problem that Michael White identified above is transformed into a problem with and for individuals, and aggregates or populations of individuals. That is, it is indeed possible, in terms of NPM, to address social problems as such, as long as they are viewed statistically. It is thus likely that the more liberal 'harm reduction' approach to drugs will prevail in many countries such as Denmark, because it is more effective measured by effects on populations of diagnosed addicts – and so, methadone clinics, street nursing, syringe programs, heroin trials etc. will thrive, although even the harm reducing effects of some such interventions are paradoxically curbed by their having to meet the gold standard of basing on evidence from randomized controlled clinical trials (Houborg, 2012).

But a 'social problem' in the sense exemplified by Michael White, and as reconstructed in Mark Philp's (1979) genealogy of social work, is more than that. This becomes evident if we do not limit our focus to that circumscribed by a given diagnosis, within the standard of drug treatment. As soaring numbers of addicts are diagnosed or define themselves as such, it is increasingly debated whether that is the best way to conceive of the phenomenon. This resembles closely the development in child psychiatry, which is emerging as another drug problem, only from the opposite side, as it were, as the deluge of drugs is prescribed by doctors – often the same drugs that some of these children will later buy in the streets (Keane, 2008).

The "organized community response" has got to go beyond the narrow standard of drug treatment to address these broader questions. And that is not just obvious at a community level. When the clients are young people whose lives have not already long been defined by their specific deviance, professionals are often encouraged to zoom out to what Jensen would call a situation-oriented view and practice. Youths like Berrin, users of U-turn, typically have a broad range of problems in their life. They also have a range of abilities, resources and dreams to build on. But it takes more than a standard counseling situation to address those problems and to elicit those resources. The knee-jerk reflex idea of staging a 'talk about your problems and your targets' just does not work with Berrin and her likes at U-turn. And, in each case, the social workers anyway work with networks of professionals, peers, and relatives. So they are almost pushed by the nature of their work to experiment beyond 'what works' in terms of the narrow standard, with practices such as 'aesthetic documentation'[11].

But they have to struggle to do it. While counseling methods such as 'solution-focused therapy' and 'motivational interviewing' fit smoothly into NPM, 'aesthetic

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[11] I have unfolded this point more in Nissen, 2012a, where I also take up the concept of 'life' in different articulations. This could be another way of discussing the meaning of "Could Life Be…": The 'life' that is recognized here is well beyond that which emerges in harm reduction policies.

documentation' is far too wild and fluffy to be standardized and evidence-based. Even if Berrin and her peers in the 'evening group', along with Kofod, Svendsen and their colleagues, had a crucial learning experience, this does not necessarily translate to evidence of efficiency as a drug treatment method. For that translation to occur, we would be faced with questions like these: How many addicts have an interest in Turkish folk songs? What would it cost to hire famous film directors in every Danish counseling facility? Etc. Such questions are absurd; but we only notice that absurdity because we venture far enough beyond the standard for them to be exoticized.

The collective formed around the practice of creating the video was *unique*. It formed itself, and it was formed through its relations to others, as an alternative kind of practice. They knew quite well, as a collective and as participants, that they were doing something different from what normally happens at treatment facilities like U-turn. That is, the collective did not emerge innocently, beneath formal structures, only in my analysis to be attributed with an alternative quality. And it also did not simply perform a fashionable governmentality. Instead, it was constituted in a struggle for recognition, as a unique part of a singular state agency that organized a new kind of community response to a social problem. By performing and embodying such a response, like many other agencies in the history of social work, U-turn forms part of a precariously democratic, expanding welfare state – not a mechanism in a uniform apparatus of power.

This way of regarding the collective finally provides a way of approaching the question of unit that we could not address if we ignored power, nor if we totalized it. Collectives are forged as singulars in relations of recognition. To understand this, I have taken up the 'dialectics of recognition' that was first sketched in Hegel's Phenomenology (Hegel, 1977; Nissen, 2012a; 2012b, ch. 7)[12].

The concept of recognition is not simply cognition – the identification of a person or a collective as contingently autonomous, self-reflective participant – but includes social consequences: power. This power is mediated by structural attributions – recognitions are always recognitions *as* – but they are never *only* that, since they are always singular and, we might say, situation-oriented, and they always co-constitute collectives to which both parties belong. The full concept of power is a dialectics that continuously unfolds between – and transforms – the singular, the particular, and the universal. Meaning is converted to a sense that is common – to the recognized and the recognizing – only then to be reconverted in the production of new meaning that challenges and overcomes this common sense, in a process of ongoing ethical universalization. As we put together references from music videos and addiction counseling to make (common) sense of the video, we are invited to treat Berrin – along with Kofod, Svendsen, and U-turn – in a new way that critiques the elitism of cinema and the stigma of treatment.

This gives us a way to reinterpret the Foucauldian concept of subjectification (and the Althusserian 'interpellation'). It was indeed naïve to conceive of 'user-driven standards' in absolute liberal terms, but it was unhelpful to just flip the coin and mock them as subjection to a given discursive structure. Rather, participation implies relations of

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[12] Although there is no space here to unfold it properly, I should mention that this requires a reading of Hegel's concept of recognition that does not reduce it to Kantian formalism, nor set off a zone of purely psychological dynamics, but which regards it as constitutive of an ethics in a wide sense (as in Højrup, 2003; Musaeus, 2006; Taylor, 1995; Williams, 1997).

recognition between collective and participant, 'Us' and 'Me'. Like in Hegel's allegory, this must go through opposite logical moments: First, a superficial, mutual recognition; then, the submission of the participant to the collective; and finally, the transformation of both participant and collective through the practical realization of this participation that also substantiates the recognition.

Berrin's plunge is symbolic of her surrender to the logic and the ethics of 'aesthetic documentation'. If she is to take part in this, she must submit to the standards of this practice, and indeed, to 'this practice' as a singular collective. But 'this practice' is precisely *emergent*. Although Berrin probably learned some very old tricks of the trade of video production, her participation was crucial to the advent of the novelty we are discussing here: The collective practice of "Could Life Be…".

Conversely, our discussion of it also has implications. Although the collective was already self-consciously struggling for recognition as alternative before I came along (at least, as author of this text), articulations in research like this are part of this recognition, too. Especially at a time when 'scientific knowledge' and 'evidence' are otherwise increasingly taken, as relevant to practices like that of U-turn, to mean models that purify instrumental cause-effect-relations, that is, abstract standards. If this text and the likes of it are recognized as 'scientific knowledge', then the U-turn model can be said to be 'evidence-based', although in a way that expands that concept considerably.

Just so: *If*. Now we can see how this works the other way, too. If my texts are important to U-turn, U-turn's work is just as important in my struggles for recognition, not just of this particular theory, but, more generally, of social research in a dialectical, cultural-historical tradition.

Hope

In the final part of my argument, I will suggest that this reciprocal inter-subjectivity is best conceived in terms of hope. Not the kind of hope that is immediately reinscribed into the dominant discourse, nor the kind that only thrives in a sheltered dreamland of abstractly concrete being-in-the-world – but the kind that grows from the way real struggles for recognition make real subjectivities.

With the formula "Could life be…", our video is all about hope. But which kind of hope?

As mentioned, to anyone acquainted with drug treatment, the video might appear to be just another instance of the emphasis on targets and solutions in contemporary counseling.

Of course, this emphasis can be done in different ways. 'Motivational Interviewing' and 'cognitive-behavioral therapy' provide ways to help clients set their targets rationally, directly in connection with their problems. Compared to such rationalism, our video appears more to the dreamy, romantic side, and the drug problem is not really present at all.

So perhaps a better way to articulate it could be solution-focused therapy, which is famous for the 'miracle question': "Suppose you woke up one morning and your problem, by some miracle, was gone. How would you notice?" The idea is that the 'language game' of solutions is different from, and does not depend on, that of problems. One of its key writers, Steve de Shazer, nicely deconstructs dynamic and structural approaches to therapy and their focus on understanding the problem that the

client presents as signs of some structural defect (in the psyche or in the family system) (de Shazer, 1991). But, characteristically, what he substitutes for this is a pragmatics of communication that, in the end, rests on common sense:

> Clients are seeking practical results when they come to therapy; they are pragmatists. They are "in pain", and they want to get rid of the ~~problem~~, plain and simple. (Ibid., 110)

De Shazer writes "problem" in strikethrough to signify the intention of deconstructing it. But it still figures as an anchor to the "plain and simple" hopes that define therapy. The common sense in terms of which counselors and clients meet and recognize each other, in this field, is standard drug treatment that positions them as provider and user of a service. Consistent with NPM, this resembles a commercial 'service relation', even though it is state-financed and imbued in many ways with state power, including the power to define deviance (cf. to this, Goffman, 1961, p. 321 ff.). The hope of cure, in and of itself, is negatively defined: It is the absence of addiction. If it works better to focus on positive targets, then *anything* the client wants will do. So, you like to picture yourself singing a Turkish folk song and jumping from a diving tower? No problem… as long as it works.

The video could in fact be articulated that way. But where would that lead? That is not so hard to predict. If cost-efficient treatment is guiding us, there are much cheaper ways to achieve a formulation of the clients' targets that 'works'. We wouldn't actually need the director and the rest of the 'aesthetic documentation' practice. Except, perhaps, if we think of it all simply as a way of 'branding' and 'marketing' U-turn. This would make sense if they wanted to attract clients from richer municipalities, or those whose parents could pay the bills. In other words, the sense this would make would match the current drift of welfare states like Denmark toward the class-divided health and social care known from many other rich countries, such as the USA.

Instead, through this text, I have articulated the video in terms of a quite different kind of hope. This is the kind of hope that drives an aesthetic practice were dreams are precisely no longer just 'anything', but carefully cultivated as meaningful, in the framework of a collective that struggles for recognition of a new level of responsibility for the real social problems of communities and persons, far beyond the common sense of efficient addiction treatment.

Along with Cheryl Mattingly (2010), I suggest that the most important kinds of hope should be understood on the background of its dialectical counterpart, despair. These are the kinds that go beyond common sense. Since they imagine a more profound change than that which fits into the given state of affairs, their shadow of despair is never quite out if sight. Mattingly takes up the term *'blues hope'* from Cornel West to portray a genre of narrative among poor, African-American users of health care, in which hope figures as

> "…a journey that requires not merely a transformation of the body but the transformation of a person's, a family's, or even a community's whole life" (ibid., 73).

Imagine a community where the most disadvantaged, immigrant girls were allowed to work with famous film directors to cultivate their dreams into beautiful works of art!

The true beauty of the video lies in the blues it sings, even with a Turkish folk song: The shadow of despair is felt all along. We can easily sense the precarious nature of Berrin's dream because we feel it ourselves, as the radical utopia of this kind of aesthetic documentation being the practices of a municipal drug treatment facility.

Yet, the utopia of the video is at the same time concrete, in Ernst Bloch's term (Bloch, 1995). It points to a radical transformation, but it is also a continuation of a lived narrative, a historical tendency that has a *real possibility* of materializing. The video is actually there on the website, and the story it tells of 'aesthetic documentation' as a kind of social work is a true story of 'user-driven standards' that are not arbitrary and free in an absolute liberal sense, but a carefully cultivated prototype that intervenes in the development of drug treatment practices in Denmark.

The abstract utopia of various arbitrary miracles may be very efficient in pragmatic terms, as the long history of religion testifies, but their pragmatic efficiency is as conservative as their images are kept separated from worldly life and practice. Although the Foucauldians, as we saw, do have a point when they regard social work as continuous with that history, they are mistaken if they do not recognize social work also as part of real social transformations. This is one of Bloch's main reasons for reconstructing a long cultural history of utopia in his *Principle of Hope*. Abstract utopia cannot be simply replaced by factuality, since we are always nurturing hope, not least, various kinds of blues hope that we have to balance between despair and abstraction. Instead, they must be cultivated, rearticulated as part of real history.

As mentioned, the U-turn model – as exemplified here by the video production – is not only an answer to real needs that are felt in practice for going beyond a narrow conception of addiction counseling, but also state-sanctioned, as unorthodox as it is. It does not represent the dominant standard – the evidence-based counseling methods that fit into NPM , but it does provide a model of some significance, which is why I have articulated it here.

The story of Danish public services is not only a story of NPM, but also that of a welfare state attempting to respond to social problems, and continuously and precariously emerging in such attempts. As any state practice, it is contradictory. Different state *projects* clash, coexist, and are continuously rearticulated. Each singular agency is torn by such contradictions, and as such always emergent. This is part of why the collectives they form are responsive in their recognition of participants. Berrin plunges into a submission to the aesthetic documentation of U-turn, but in the same movement, she takes part in forming it.

Identities are formed in anticipation. Not just the identities of persons, but also of collectives. The understanding of collectives as *collaborative projects* implies not only that social units are first of all units of practice, but also that they are forged in struggles for recognition to which cultivations and articulations of hope are crucial.

And this is the point in writing and reading a book like this: We take part in articulating hopes of the kind that build on real tendencies yet suggest radical transformations.

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