Performance of Agency in Real-life Encounters

Turning Unequal Power and Structural Constraint into Collaboration

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PERFORMANCE OF AGENCY IN REAL-LIFE ENCOUNTERS: TURNING UNEQUAL POWER AND STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINT INTO COLLABORATION

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the performance of agency within the context of unequal power resources and structural constraint. Based on 23 video-recorded placement meetings in three homeless shelters, we find that participants' agency is the outcome of both collaboration and resistance. To avoid interaction that fails to empower, social actors engage in "repair work" and face-saving practices. When clients display "wrong face"—that is, bring problems to the table that are not considered "reasonable"—then the service providers engage in "repair work." Participants turn conflict into collaborative agency because interactions that fail to deliver mutually empowering forms of agency have costs for both: clients' problems are not solved, and service providers fail to reach organizational goals.

Keywords: agency, face-work, symbolic interactionism, structural constraints, video-data

THE PERFORMANCE OF AGENCY IN REAL LIFE ENCOUNTERS: TURNING UNEQUAL POWER AND STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINT INTO COLLABORATION

INTRODUCTION

This article examines strategies of agency in structural constrained placement meetings in three Danish shelters. Vulnerable clients, such as homeless shelter residents, are a particularly interesting case when examining agency in everyday organizational life. These clients are defined by the complex problems related to their social situation, which often include drug use, low earnings, temporary housing, and a challenging physical and psychological situation, which suggests few power resources. The professionals they encounter often describe them as requiring empowerment through agency, yet the position of both groups—the client and the professional—in placement meetings are structurally constrained. In these meetings, an organizational guide, an Action-Plan, structures the interaction and identifies the problems and solutions of clients. The Action-Plan typically acts as a kind of aide-mémoire as the municipality service provider glances in their notebook to see if they addressed all the relevant key topics. The Action-Plan works as a checklist of prospects and limitations of the homeless persons' ability to change their situation. The Action-Plan reflects the organizational goals and frames the social construction of agency of both parties. Both parties know that alongside the frontstage version of client-centered equality, there is a backstage reality of the organizational sanctioned Action-Plan.

In line with other research, this study's findings suggest that vulnerable groups are constrained within complex sociopolitical, legal, and cultural contexts that do not (always) facilitate what was intended (Andersen 2014; Bjerge, Nielsen, and Frank 2014; Cuthill 2017; Frank and Bjerge 2011; Møller and Stensöta 2019; Nelson, Price, and Zubrzycki 2017).

Service providers construct the social problems of clients in a manner consonant with organizational objectives (Gubrium and Holstein 2001; Gubrium and Järvinen 2014; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Mik-Meyer 2017; Rosenthal and Peccei, 2006; Suoninen and Jokinen 2005). The organizational Action-Plan includes encouraging clients to make choices that will inform the service providers' decisions (Bowpitt et al. 2014; Ferguson 2007; Vinson 2016). However, such objectives create tension when clients identify problems or suggest solutions that are perceived by service providers to be unreasonable relative to organizational objectives and legislation. On the other hand, service providers are also dependent on cooperative clients because without cooperation, the goal of the Action-Plan cannot be met.

So, although vulnerable groups and the professionals they encounter are constrained by organizational factors and dominating discourses (Gubrium and Holstein 2001; Gubrium and Järvinen 2014; Mik-Meyer 2017), research questions the assumption that clients lack agency. Agency is socially constructed based on situational conditions as an interactional accomplishment. In the existing literature, the oppositional aspects of agency are often emphasized. For instance, research shows that clients display agency by challenging stereotypes related to their identities, such as "victims of intimate partner violence" (Leisenring 2006), "drug addicts" (Andersen 2014), "homeless individuals" (Gonyea and Melekis 2017; Meanwell 2013), "battered women" (Loseke 1989), "prisoners" (Toyoki and Brown 2013), and "unemployed" (Makitalo 2006). Clients even display agency when they resist client-centered approaches (Hoffmann and Villadsen 2013) that position them as agents of change (Andersen 2014). They resist diagnoses (Sanders and Roberts 2018) as well as treatment-regimes (Conrad 1985; Holt 2007) and the "formula stories" offered to them (Loseke 2001). In other words, research documents that clients are not "completely locked into ascribed identities" (Solberg 2011:381) or "objects of discourse" (Pascale 2005:261 in McCarthy 2013:53). Taking an interactionist approach to the examination of agency, we are

inspired by this branch of research. However, our contribution concerns the different kinds of agency displayed in client-staff encounters in three Danish shelters. Our research shows various kinds of agency—oppositional as well as cooperative aspects of agency—that are hashed out between clients and their service providers with interactional maneuvers and biographical particulars mediating the process.

In the case of homelessness, this group may resist the loss of autonomy, which is often a consequence of homelessness (Deward and Moe 2010). Research finds that homeless individuals try to "construct a sense of a valued life and self" (Gonyea and Melekis 2017:67) that emphasizes their own understanding of a relevant narrative (Marvasti 2002). When examining agency, research highlights homeless individuals' ability to choose and define their life situations (Brown and Meyer 2015) and/or to escape being labeled as a member of "the low-status" group of "the homeless." In order to avoid the negative perceptions associated with homelessness (Gonyea and Melekis 2017:74), homeless individuals try to establish a "service-worthiness" by showing staff that they are morally worthy of the help offered (Carr 2011; Marvasti 1998; Meanwell 2013; Spencer 1994). For vulnerable individuals, agency involves having a voice when negotiating choices that will positively affect their lives as well as avoiding a stigmatizing label (Boomkens et al. 2019; Bowpitt et al. 2014; Ferguson 2007; Vinson 2016). Agency involves the homeless individuals' ability to escape the "formula stories" of organizations (Loseke 2001) when these stories contradict the personal stories of the homeless.

Our study is inspired by the branch of research that reveals the complex strategies of agency. These studies investigate how homeless individuals establish a "service-worthiness." We examine a key concern of sociology: How actors negotiate "the range of actions that are possible (agency) and the systemic limitations of that action (structure)," as Fine (1992:98) puts it. In this line of work, concepts such as "agency-without-choice" (Mann and Grzanka

2018:341) and “bounded agency” (Evans 2007:92) are used to emphasize the structural constraints of agency of vulnerable groups. Vulnerable groups must accept structural constraints in order to gain agency “to have voice and some control over their circumstances within limited options and resources” (Munford and Sanders 2015:618). In that sense, agency is “socially situated” (Evans 2007:93) and entails “relational reasoning” (Parsell and Clarke 2019:363) when moving between accepting and resisting the categories and labels of social work. We are dealing with what Marvasti (2002:628) terms “collaborative editing,” when service providers, together with their clients, edit clients’ stories so they fit the organizational frame and become “service-worthy.” For vulnerable clients, practical issues can be solved (including accommodation, employment, and economic resources) by accepting the organizational stories attached to labels like “asylum seeker” or “homeless” (Cuthill 2017; Gonyea and Melekis 2017) that are seen as “service-worthy” (Spencer 1994).

Discussions that consider agency to be an interactive accomplishment are key in most of the cited research, especially in the literature inspired by symbolic interactionism. While the social construction of agency is an interactional accomplishment, few of the studies’ findings build on interaction data. Most studies look for agency in interview data and/or in the researchers’ field notes. The narratives of vulnerable groups collected from interviews are important data, but if the objective is to investigate agency as an interactive accomplishment, then interview data is not optimal; video-recorded interactions of “naturally occurring data” (Silverman 2011) are better suited. Video recordings allow for a detailed analysis of the interactive negotiation of agency. In placement meetings, video data can highlight how clients are urged to initiate certain courses of actions in the future, as the meetings’ agenda is future-orientated and the Action-Plan focuses on questions pertaining to the future: Where should the client live? Where should they work? What should they do if not working?

Goffman suggests that researchers should not study "men and their moments. Rather moments and their men" (Goffman [1967] 2008:3). We use "shelter moments" to investigate the negotiation of agency within a context of structural constraint and negotiation of what it entails to be a morally worthy client. This article explores the following research question: How do homeless-shelter residents and their interlocutors negotiate agency, within the context of structural constraint and organizational goals, when interacting face-to-face in public-service provision encounters?

PERFORMING AGENCY

Agency is an interactional accomplishment. In everyday interactions, participants' actions (re)produce the social order of which they are part. In order for the participants to realize their goals—be they service providers or clients—they have to maneuver the social order of the interaction of which they are part. As argued by Fine (1992:89), "Goffman's classic *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* can properly be read as a treatise on the Agency-Structure debate. How can an actor shape his or her behavior to make it 'fit' with external social order? What are the forces of control that prevent this?" Goffman's attention to participants' actions has to be understood within a wider frame of "strategic interaction"—a label Goffman used to describe his work (Manning 2016:145). Participants' face-work demonstrates a complex strategic game of agency when trying to solve the problems of clients as well as reaching organizational goals.

Real-life negotiations of agency can be investigated by using the concept of interaction ritual (Goffman [1967] 2008), which recognizes that the actions of individuals cannot be separated from social structures. Actors coparticipate in reproduction of structures through "ceremonial rules of social intercourse" (Goffman 1956:497), where attention to presentations of self and reproduction of routine are key. The face-work of participants

displays the rules of conduct and the social skills of the participants, and these rules make certain that social boundaries that might threaten their faces are not crossed (Goffman [1967] 2008). This presupposes complex practical knowledge of how to interact with coparticipants. Participants can act improperly (be in "wrong face") or properly (be "in-face"), depending on the ceremonial rules of the social situation (Goffman 1956, [1959], 1990).

A joint goal in everyday organizational life is impression management to avoid losing face, which entails practical knowledge skills by the participants of how to see themselves in the eyes of the other (Goffman [1967] 2008). Face-work involves a constant collaborative negotiation of meaning and a collaborative editing of clients' stories (Marvasti 2002), which involves "tact, savoir-faire, diplomacy and social skill" (Ivana 2016:112). This means that agency is anchored in the practical knowledge of the plurality of actors interacting. As we shall see, sometimes a mismatch of practical knowledge creates barriers to collaborative agency.

Central to agency is practical knowledge of the distinction between a frontstage official version of events and a backstage performance (Goffman [1959] 1990). This interactive play where actors try to get something done follows a complex script where the participants' actions reflect how they think others evaluate them and how their actions fit with the organizational horizon, that is, the Action-Plan of the meeting. With reference to Emerson and Paley (1992), Gubrium and Holstein (2009:187) argue that participants' actions build on "anticipated actions and settings (i.e., organizational futures) … [and] craft decisions and accounts in light of previous narrative formulations on the broader organizational horizon." In other words, when investigating agency in this study, we have a double focus: (1) how actions of participants display impression management related to other participants, and (2) the organizational horizon of the Action-Plan.

By keeping this double focus, we are able to demonstrate how the agency of both clients and staff in placement meetings reflects a collaborative accomplishment that reveals individuals negotiating their social selves (to see one's self in the eyes of the other participants) as well as the structure (their negotiation of the Action-Plan). By paying attention to the Action-Plan, which both limits and facilitates agency of clients and staff, we show how homeless individuals have agency—but not, however, as agents that are in a position to make unconstrained choices. Agency of both staff and clients is shaped relative to to the organizational horizon of placement meetings. We demonstrate that their actions are partly facilitated by a future-oriented strategic interaction of placement meetings (e.g., where should the client live and which job should they have) and by their immediate interactions with their coparticipants. Mik-Meyer and Silverman (2019) and Mik-Meyer and Haugaard (2020) found that the organizational horizon also includes an emphasis upon client-centeredness in placement meetings. Client-centeredness is a norm emphasizing equal moral worth (we are all citizens) and that vulnerable clients' voice should be heard. The norms and prerogative of the organizational horizon means that only certain performances of clients and staff are acceptable to the opposite party, emphasizing that agency is indeed conditioned by the social order. This tension between equal moral worth (we are all citizens) and service worthiness (clients must have problems and solutions that fit the organizational horizon) is central to the data and is a dilemma for service providers.

METHODOLOGY

Research Setting

In Denmark, approximately 6,400 people are homeless, which is less than a quarter of one percent of the Danish population. It is difficult to compare homelessness statistics between countries because of measurement differences. However, in Scandinavian countries the

number of homeless people is lower, and the welfare model secures better living circumstances for homeless people than in other European countries. In the United Kingdom, for instance, approximately half of one percent of the population is homeless (Webb 2017). In Denmark, homelessness is most common among men (77 percent), and only five percent of the homeless population are working. Therefore, the vast majority of the homeless population receives some form of cash benefit from the Danish welfare state (Benjaminsen 2019:37). Legal residents in Denmark, if homeless, have a right to a shelter bed in one of Denmark's 85 shelters. A third of the homeless population stays at a shelter, which makes this the most common solution during homelessness. The second most common place to stay during homelessness is with family and friends (25 percent); only 11 percent sleep on the streets (Benjaminsen 2019:25). Since Danish residents have a right to a shelter bed, it is the most vulnerable homeless people that end up as "rough sleepers," or sleeping on the streets (Benjaminsen 2019:31). Furthermore, 13 percent of rough sleepers in Denmark have no income at all, while the same is the case for only two percent of homeless residents staying at a shelter (Benjaminsen 2019:37). On average, a shelter stay lasts between three months to one year, and one bed costs the Danish welfare state about £4,000 a month (Danish National Audit Office 2014:4). While there, service providers offer residents assistance to obtain accommodations and provide training related to housekeeping, paying bills, and other daily living skills.

Recruitment and Ethics

Video recordings of real-time interactions are optimal data for studying the negotiation of agency in real-life situations. Such naturalistic data shows the dilemmas confronted by social actors in interaction (Heath and Luff 2012:35). Video recordings, like any other data acquisition tool, do not provide the researcher with an entirely undistorted insight, as

participants are aware of the camera (Aarsand and Forsberg 2010). Nevertheless, cognizance of some interference is a foundation for much research, as many data acquisition tools affect participants one way or another. With respect to these particular recordings, we looked for clues of clients' awareness of the camera, as evidenced by looking at the camera. We found that clients only looked at the camera initially; one client joked (with laughter) that he was going to be "on television." However, once participants were five minutes into the interaction, they rarely, if ever, looked at the camera. This could suggest that they were not, to a significant extent, scripting their performances for the camera.

While acknowledging the limitations to this data acquisition tool, as participants are aware of—and hence affected by—the recording (Hazel 2016), video data still provides an effective window into "elusive knowledge" (Toraldo, Islam, and Mangia 2018:439). The many tacit, non-verbal aspects of organizational life, such as smiles, anger, and bodily orientation, all affect a meeting between people (Soulaimani 2018). Consequently, the major strength of this kind of data is that it accesses how "key expressions" (Soulaimani 2018) affect interactions within placement meetings.

To schedule consultations and recruit participants, we contacted the managers of three shelters. Thereafter, further contact with shelter service providers and clients followed. Often, arrangements with one shelter service provider generated more consultations with other clients and municipality service providers. As an ethical standard, the contacted staff from the three shelters received written information about the research and ethics and the option to withdraw from the project at any time. The content of the written document was explained to participating clients and forwarded to the municipality service providers; more information was presented by phone and/or email. At the start of the consultations, the participants met with the first author or a student and were re-requested permission for video recording. We explained to the shelter residents that their participation would not affect the administrative

handling of their case. Furthermore, it was stressed that only the research team would view the video recordings and that footage and interviews would be safely stored. All participants were given anonymity, and the names and places mentioned in the analysis were fictionalized to protect participants, their colleagues, and work organizations. All rules for data storage and processing were fulfilled according to Danish law and the ethical standards of ASA.

Dataset

The dataset consists of 23 video-recorded consultations with homeless men (19) and women (4) living in three shelters in different parts of Denmark. The video-recorded consultations took place in the autumn of 2017 and winter of 2018. Typically, participants in the meetings consisted of a homeless shelter resident, service providers from the shelters and municipalities, and, in some instances, client relatives, mentors, drug counselors, and other staff. Typically, four people participated at the consultations. On average, each consultation lasted 57 minutes (longest was 82 minutes, shortest was 32 minutes). The first author or a student set up the camera, greeted all participants, and then left the consultation; in the first three consultations, however, the researcher stayed. The recordings were made from a mid-shot angel (Luff and Heath 2012:268), which was fixed on a single perspective of the recorded situation—the table-activity at the meeting—providing a view of the participants' behavior, such as note-taking, laughing, or pouring coffee to act as the host. Video-recorded consultations were transcribed in full. Afterwards, all participants of the consultations (N=77) were interviewed. However, the interview data are not part of our present analysis, which focuses solely upon the participants' real-life interactive negotiation of agency.

Analysis of Data

The first author viewed all the videos several times to gain a thorough understanding. The second author reviewed all recorded consultations once. Hereafter, a systematic thematic categorization of sequences showcasing participants' negotiating the structural constraints of the Action-Plan was conducted in all 23 consultations. The result of this first categorization let us focus more closely on the many sequences displaying collaborative agency. In other words, the sequences where participants negotiated the tacit, taken-for-granted, practical knowledge of the Action-Plan in order to reach suitable solutions for both client and service providers. Hereafter, we searched for sequences of interactions that displayed proper/improper actions—measured up against the organizational horizon of placement meetings—that suggested conflict. These sequences of conflict were found by viewing the responses of the coparticipants and being attentive to how a demonstration of a wrong face in interaction—for instance, actions that undermined a key goal of client-centeredness—was solved by face-saving work of coparticipants. Inspired by Goffman's analytical approach—the participants' face-work and negotiation of identities ("normal" as well as "deviant")—we decided on seven paradigmatic cases that show the many aspects of agency measured against the aforementioned criteria as well as sociological criteria of ethnicity and gender.

Our presented sequences include verbal expressions as well as descriptions of bodily expressions. When deciding on which prosodic features to include in our analysis, we examined the effect of the participants' bodily expressions on the coparticipants. Smiles and visible anger (loud voice, demonstrative body work, etc.) are always included in our analysis and presentations of sequences. Furthermore, we include body movement (looking down, up, leaning back, etc.) if we judged that these bodily actions affected the coparticipants or that a participant wanted to signal a particular mood or attitude with their body. Our analysis is based on all 23 video recordings, but the presented data stem from seven recorded consultations with three ethnically Danish men, three ethnically Middle Eastern men, and one

ethnically Danish woman. The sample represents the homeless population in Denmark with a disproportionally larger amount of men and men from the Greater Middle East.

NEGOTIATION OF AGENCY IN REAL-TIME ENCOUNTERS

Most consultations open with pleasantries and participants establishing mutual recognition, which suggests an equal relationship between clients and service providers. The service providers position themselves as facilitators whose goal it is to enable clients with a self-help agency. However, the overt statement of the structural constraint or "obligatory passage point" (Clegg 1989:205) that frames all the consultations is the Action-Plan. An Action-Plan is an organizational guide that structures the interaction and identifies problems and solutions. For instance, all clients are asked a variety of questions, including if they can save money (most have debt, so very few can); have a network or friends (staff wants to know if they are lonely or have social problems); use drugs or alcohol (most do, but the question staff wants an answer to is whether they are addicts); can live by themselves (what kind of housing is appropriate); can work (should the staff help search for jobs); can manage their email; can cook (especially an issue for males); and have mobility issues. The Action-Plan typically acts as a kind of aide-mémoire, as the municipality service provider scans in their notebook to see if they addressed all the key topics of relevance. It works as a checklist of prospects and limitations of the homeless person's ability to change their situation. Each issue establishes what kind of social problem the staff is dealing with. The Action-Plan represents the organizational horizon and, thus, staff and clients' negotiation of agency. Both parties know that alongside the frontstage version of a future-oriented, client-centered approach to solving the problems of homelessness, there is a backstage reality where service providers and clients must redeem the organizational goals exemplified in the Action-Plan.

The Letter of the Law

The structural constraint of the Action-Plan, the letter of the law, and the economic situation of the homeless is an ever-present context of the "relational reasoning" (Parsell and Clarke 2019:363) in all 23 cases. Consultations are constrained with respect to the law, which dictates available housing and finances of the shelter or municipality. Individually, the homeless are constrained by low income and, often, severe debt. Farrugia and Gerrard (2016:269) term it "the politics of homelessness research." Through techniques of informalization, service providers try to direct agency within the parameters of the structural constraints of the Action-Plan, emphasizing being realistic about the social problems of the homeless individual. This move can be challenging and sometimes fails to engage the client. Then, constraint thwarts the potential of agency, as in the case of William.

William, in his late 20s, is an ethnically Danish male who just returned from five years in Indonesia. Because of structural constraints of the law, William cannot claim a permanent address and therefore is not eligible for monthly allowances for the first three months of his return to Denmark.

During the meeting, William sits in a relaxed position. He speaks slowly, almost despondently. While William is calmly taking in the information, the service provider explains the legal base of the situation while gesturing with her hands. Another service provider leans back in the chair with a facial expression of concentration while her colleague slightly raises his eyebrows and briefly frowns as they talk about William. They seem more engaged in the discussion than William. The male service provider concludes that "there is nothing we can do about this." Accepting the letter of the law, William then wants to know if his "affiliation" to Denmark is the problem—immigrants do not appear to have this problem. By using the word "affiliation", he points to the paradox that his Danish citizenship and being ethnically Danish may actually harm his case. This prompts a long discussion among the

service providers, wherein another structural constraint emerges: clients must have a disposable income of at least £400 a month when they live at a shelter. They conclude that "a citizen has this right" but somehow William cannot claim it.

During this discussion, William sits passively, only tapping his right foot, which appears to be a display of boredom. This prompts the female service provider to ask if he "is in on" the technical discussion on the legal constraints. William nods, then in a frustrated tone tries to recapture the position of an agent and wants information about the Action-Plan, which he has discovered affects his possibilities.

> William: What is an action plan? [moves his hand to his temple, raising his eyebrows and looking straight at the service provider].
>
> Service provider 1: An action plan is actually a plan for what is going to happen going forwards [stretches out his hand in front of him], how do I move on. And because you're here at the shelter, then how do you move on from the shelter. The shelter, how do I …[2] where to live.
>
> William: Yes.
>
> Service provider 1: It can also be if you have any mental problems, substance abuse issues, other issues [counts his fingers], or something [makes sweeping gesture] … financially, financial problems, that we then try to make a plan together for how we'll approach it, plan out how we'll solve it, it might be that your contact person can help you, it might be that I can help you with something [places hand on the chest], it might be that we need someone else entirely in the picture [makes sweeping gesture

[2] Three dots … indicates self-interruption. Three dots in brackets […] indicates that talk have been removed.

with one hand]. And then we try, try to solve it. But again, it also depends on what you want.

William: Yeah … [looking down, tapping his legs slightly, moving his foot] well, I'm still motivated to start working again [looks directly at service provider 2], but um …

Service provider 2: Is that still …

William: Well, right now, it's the financial situation that's mostly on my mind.

William asserts that all he wants is to get a job. However, the lack of address, phone, and money for transportation makes this "unrealistic," as the service provider puts it.

Subsequently, the service providers switch into social worker mode by attempting to turn William's structurally constrained situation into an issue concerning his personal problems. A new drama is performed, which follows:

Service provider 1: In regard to… do you have any issues regarding mental or substance abuse or something like that?

William: I did during some periods, but it's not … [looks directly at the service provider, then down] well, not at the moment.

Service provider 1: And what was it you previously had that … [places his hand on his chest and leans back, briefly smiling] … if I can ask?

William: Yeah, well, it was just … I smoked a lot of hash and then I've sometimes isolated myself a bit.

Service provider 1: Okay, you've kept to yourself?

William: Yeah, and then I've gotten depressed and stuff like that.

Service provider 1: Okay [both service providers make a note in their papers, while William breathes in, looking around].

Service provider 2: [still looking at her papers] I remember that you said [William clears his throat, raising his eyebrows and looking at the service provider] that you'd seen some paper, where you had gotten a diagnosis, right?

As in many of the 23 meetings, the service providers pick up on the client's social and psychological problems (Is he smoking hashish? Is his mental health ok?). William unsuccessfully tries to steer the conversation back to the overt structural constraints blocking his agency to get a job. William appears to view their attempt to activate an encounter concerning their perception of his personal problems as a distraction, while, to the service providers, this appears to be a way forward as they keep asking about his personal problems. This sequence displays how structural constraints thwart the agency of William (he wants a job). The service providers solve this problem by turning their attention to another key goal of the Action-Plan, which is William's social situation. In this case it is the Action-Plan—and its focus on drug issues—that provides the service providers with agency as this theme engages both staff and William. However, this shift in focus does not solve William's desire and need of a job.

Agency and Tacit Knowledge

Egalitarian sounding small talk opens a consultation between Michael and two service providers. Michael has brought his own water bottle to the meeting and thereby shows his inexperience with these meetings, where coffee and water are always served.

Service provider 1: Do you want some coffee or something? [looking through her papers].

Michael: No, I've got [lifts his water bottle].

Service provider 1: … you brought water [looks up].

[…]

Service provider 2: [walking into the room] Is it just me or can you barely breath in these small rooms [opens the window]—and it has nothing to do with menopause [leans close to Michael].

Michael: No [voice lighter, laughs, the other service provider laughs as well].

[…]

Service provider 2: So, the two of us briefly talked before [leans slightly towards Michael], like, what's most important to you, what's most on your mind?

Michael: Yes.

Service provider 2: So, this meeting is like … [looks at the other service provider].

Service provider 1: That's great.

Service provider 2: … max an hour, now I know your situation [leans slightly towards Michael], so I think that it might not even be an hour, right?

Michael: [shrugs] It is actually you who decides that [laughs].

Service provider 1: [laughs] We'll see how much time we need.

Despite the causal egalitarian opening and an engaging forward leaning body posture of service providers, an inkling of unequal power appears. When Michael is asked to confirm the duration of the consultation, he replies, "It is actually you who decides." He thereby resists the official frontstage presentation of co-operative, equal relations, exposing the backstage reality of structural bias, where service providers as representatives of the organization decide the conditions of the meeting. Michael's resistance is polite as he laughs to save face, signaling a joke, but everyone knows that what he says is true. Scott (1990:196–197) characterizes this as "symbolic defiance." The objective is not to actually change the

order of things. Rather, the homeless clients signal that they have practical knowledge of the Action-Plan and that they know that the Action-Plan may block agency. The co-reproduction of the social structures continues. One of the service providers laughs at Michael's joke, gesturing that she understands, as a backstage friend, while attempting to reassert the appearance of equal positioning, stating: "We'll see how long it takes." Michael's intervention contains two types of agency simultaneously: Backstage symbolic resistance while facilitating frontstage, officially endorsed collaborative reproduction of agency and structure.

In the small talk opening of another consultation, Frank (shelter client) starts with the apparent agency of the host. The scene opens in a room with a large desk. Frank is sitting at the desk, pen in hand, taking notes. A service provider enters and comments that the table is large. Frank appears too busy to look up, muttering: "Then we need to speak louder." She agrees. Taking control, Frank looks up, puts his pen down, and offers her coffee. He sets up three cups in anticipation of others and pours. He asks if she takes milk, adding that he has brought milk along. To the observer, Frank's script gives him the role of host and the service provider the role of guest (Goffman [1959] 1990). As he pours, his host-authority role is dented: The service provider exclaims, "It's rotten!" and gets "proper milk."

There are three reasons for Frank's ease and assumption of the agency of a host. First, as a long-term client, he has practical knowledge of the field. Second, the interaction is at the homeless shelter where he is a resident. Third, clients are told that these consultations are for them; "this is your consultation" (act as a host).

The official Action-Plan consultation starts approximately 10 minutes into the meeting and begins with the two service providers speaking for several minutes, talking about Frank, eliciting monosyllabic confirmations.

Service provider 1: Before we get started, I'd just like to clear something with Frank. Also, in regard to this day today. Frank, I've printed out the first action plan, I've printed the status on the transfer, and I've printed this report [shows Frank the printouts]. And I'm thinking that that's actually really important documentation concerning the work that's been happening while you've been here, but also, this report actually provides a picture of how you've been doing before you got here. And it's a great tool for what we measure at registration and then at departure, so you can simply, objectively say …

Service provider 2: … It's the report from the shelter?

Service provider 1: It's the report from the shelter, exactly. And I'm thinking, if you're okay with it, then we'll pass it on.

Frank: [shrugs] Sure, it's…

Service provider 1: Because I think it's just great. And this is the report [places document on the table], this is the first plan, and it actually complements what you [Doreen] said as well. We've got some homelessness, Frank back to the city, registration in some housing association, all that work, it's in here, but also more precisely, specifically the second plan, it's called connection to alcohol, or connection to the center for treatment of substance abuse [passes documents to Doreen]. So that's great. And this [holds up another document] is just a draft for the review. We haven't started that one yet.

Service provider 1: No.

Service provider 2: But it's the review that will happen during registration.

Service provider 1: It'll start while you're in here [looks at Frank].

Service provider 2: Yes.

Frank: Yeah.

In this part of the meeting, the different version of the Action-Plan provides the service providers with organizationally endorsed agency. While the service providers' talk about the different documents, Frank is positioned as audience and hence in the position of a passive, vulnerable client. We learn that he is not proud of his situation as a "homeless alcoholic," yet accepts the verdict. Symbolically, they take notes, while Frank's pen and paper now remain untouched. Frank, as a passive participant and contrary to the impression he gave at first, accepts the new Action-Plan script that positions him as "an alcoholic in need of rehabilitation." However, later there is a trade-off for Frank; power is not zero-sum. Using his practical knowledge of the situation, he accepts a position in which he will not lead the meeting but in exchange will have accommodation outside the shelter, thus agency with regard to practical matters but not agency to overrule the goals of the Action-Plan.

When structural constraints are turned into personal social problems, a reorientation of the client's goals for the meeting must take place. In these situations, the clients' focus on the legal, financial, administrative, and employment problems (i.e., structural issues, which staff perceive as unsolvable) are reinterpreted into the Action-Plan's focus as social, psychological, or medical problems of the homeless person (as we saw in the case of Frank).

Let us revisit the consultation with Michael in order to get a more detailed account of how this key process takes place. Notice how the service providers reinterpreted what Michael sees as his main problem (employment) to a more actionable problem listed in the Action-Plan. This does not mean that Michael is positioned without agency.

As an unemployed carpenter, Michael wants help getting a job as a carpenter. Leaning forward and listening carefully while nodding to signal his engagement, Michael ardently expresses his desire to start working again. Service provider 1, sitting next to him, puts her hand on his shoulder in a calming manner, cocks her head, and reminds him that he has to get

better first. The other service provider gives a slight smile. It appears that Michael believes that his main problem is a practical job issue. The two service providers acknowledge his goal of work but consider it unlikely due to his health issues. They suggest that his medical issues be addressed first and accordingly suggest a script that emphasizes his disability. Therefore, when Michael inadvertently mentions problems with paying for physiotherapy, the two service providers immediately pick up on this issue. They argue that his physiotherapy is "*a must.*" As service provider 2, sitting in front of Michael, is arguing that the physiotherapy is important to his situation going forward, she maintains eye contact with him and punctuates the air while stretching out her arm, indicating the future steps moving from physiotherapy to employment. She then shifts her weight in the chair and leans in closer while the service provider next to Michael is making notes, looking intently at Michael. This epistemic reorientation from the field of work to the field of health—illustrating how participants use their tacit knowledge to maneuver the situation—is fraught to start with but later becomes successful until a red-tape structural situation occurs concerning payment for physiotherapy, which momentarily freezes the situation. Service provider 1 decides to exercise discretionary agency, overcoming the structural impasse. Should Michael have to pay, he can just tell her how much. This exchange follows:

> Service provider 2: Yes, and you should have some form of documentation (receipts) [looks Michael in the eyes with a serious look]?
>
> Michael: Yes, well one gets that automatically [makes dismissive hand gesture].
>
> Service provider 1: [speaking softly] You don't need them for my sake.
>
> Service provider 2: Not for your sake? She is very helpful! [looks at Michael and smiles].
>
> Service provider 1: I believe you, if you say it's that much, well, then it's that much.

Michael: [makes eye contact with service provider 2] Yes, but of course, and I will never say I need £500 for it, right?

Service provider 1: That's what I think [nods], I think we will figure it out [sips her coffee].

Here, service provider 1 steps backstage and outside her official role (receipts are the norm) in order to create a social bond with Michael as a reward for accepting actively their redefinition of his employment issue. This creative overcoming of a structural constraint develops a dynamics of agency with regard to practical matters. Similar to the case of Frank, (but opposite to William's case), Michael's structurally constrained position is conquered. For Michael, this entails accepting an agency position that emphasizes his disability and thereby imposes collaboration with the service providers.

Agency and Resistance

Jane has been a client most of her adult life, living in various institutions. She behaves with confidence. She sets up the chairs and giggles with the five professionals present: one from the shelter, one from the municipality, and three from the school her children attend. The meeting starts with everyone filing in and engaging in small talk about where to sit. Meeting participants laugh with each other, inquire how a staff member, who is not present at the meeting, is doing, and pass coffee around. Around Jane's neck hangs a key card that suggests she is staff. Relative to everyday Danish social norms, only her missing teeth suggest that she is the client. Jane's report states that she is a "drug addict" and has four children placed in care outside the homeless shelter. The atmosphere is convivial until the shelter service provider, in a low tone of voice, asks about Jane's former husband.

Service provider: Have you been talking about moving in together, you and your…? [service provider tries to make eye contact with Jane, but she looks away].

Jane: No, no, no, no, no [she shakes her head].

Service provider: Okay [defensively pulls back], we will leave this aside … it's only because … it is difficult to find a proper start, if it turns out … [Jane pulls her hair in frustration].

Jane: [interrupting and raising her voice while shaking her head, looking briefly at service provider] Well, but I don't think that we should … and I don't think it's a topic for this consultation. That is my opinion [looks away again].

Service provider: Good, all right, that's okay, but it's only because it can be kind of hard to talk about, if …

Jane: [raising her voice] I am saying NO [service provider unsuccessfully tries to make eye contact with Jane], and that ends it [rolls her eyes].

Jane's "no" is an overt exercise of resistance, and the service provider backs down, which constitutes a successful exercise of domination by the client. In the context of the 23 consultations, this is uncommon. Resistance usually results in stasis, not domination. What enables Jane to exercise agency, giving her the control in that moment, is that, in counseling terms, intimate relationships belong in the private sphere, which everyone knows is off limits at these meetings—as we saw in Michael's case as well. Jane understands that this service provider is breaking the rules of practice, thus the service provider takes on a wrong face (Goffman [1967] 2008). This less-common incident frames the entire consultation thereafter. Going through Jane's Action-Plan, the recurrent topic of saving money is brought up.

Service provider (municipality): [speaking in a calm voice, leans forward towards Jane] Well, I'm thinking, I don't know what the expenses … I can see that you have this disposable income that's £1,000 a month [Jane raises her eyebrows and sips her coffee], when the bills are paid, and we have subtracted money to the shelter. So, you could say that's where we say [Jane shifts her weight in her chair, stretching forwards with her arms folded upwards in front of her] … I don't know … of course you have expenses related to medication …

Jane: … and food.

Service provider (shelter): Yeah, you're paying for the food out here yourself.

Jane: Yes.

Service provider (shelter): Yeah, but that is something you have to do afterwards as well. But I'm thinking that if it's the case that you say, well I don't know, if you could do without DKK £240 a month?

Jane: [raises her voice] NO. That I damn well can't. I can't [shakes her head adamantly].

Jane states emphatically that saving is impossible: "That I damn well can't, I can't." Responses by the service providers follow. The responses suggest pleading, even pointing out loopholes to "what counts as savings," because saving up "will count as something very positive" for the authorities, as they explain. This diffidence reflects a judgment of Jane as a "vulnerable client" who should be treated with kid gloves. This interpretation is supported by the shelter service provider's next statement: "I am here all day, but of course you have to be ready for this talk. I promised that I would not press you too much."

The shared perception (among the two service providers and Jane) of her vulnerability taps into the dominant perception of client-centeredness as a core value. Jane's extensive

practical knowledge of the role of client has taught her that her opinions are important to them. She understands that she is cast in the drama of client-centeredness. Her classification as a vulnerable person, in combination with her extensive practical knowledge, gives Jane a rare kind of agency, where the client is allowed to resist the agenda of service providers.

Agency and Lack of Practical Knowledge

In any encounter, there are rituals that render certain actions reasonable and others not, which Goffman (1956) terms "the ceremonial rules of conduct." In the previous example it was a service provider who broke the rules of conduct and talked about intimate issues. In this case, two male clients lack practical knowledge regarding the appropriate problems to present at a placement meeting. The first interaction concerns the encounter between a shelter client (Marwan), originally from Yemen, and two service providers. Marwan (a divorced former taxi-driver) is new to the field of homeless shelter provision. In the sequence, his eyes are focused on the person speaking, signaling that he is an active participant in the conversation. However, he is the only one wearing his outdoor jacket, which could signal his readiness to leave at any point in time. He speaks slowly, sometimes struggling with expressing himself in Danish. When addressing Marwan, the municipality service provider speaks slowly, maintains eye contact, and leans back in his chair with a relaxed demeanor. The others look evenly between the two. The consultation begins with the introduction of the Action-Plan. This introduction provides an insight into the key organizational goal of the Action-Plan, which is clients and staff working together.

> Service provider: [looking Marwan in the eye] An Action-Plan is about community [points at all participants], about working together. We make a plan for how we can move forward from here. The plan can include things that you should do, and things

that you require help with, as well as things that I can do. We decide that collectively [points at all participants]. We make a plan for what should happen [Marwan nods].

However, Marwan's identification of what he thinks should happen turns out to be "unreasonable," relative to the structural constraints of the Action-Plan.

Marwan: The biggest problem I have is that it says on my passport that I was born in 1960 [unzips his jacket].

Service provider (municipality): Yes? Were you born in 1960?

Marwan: No, I was born in 1950 [finds his passport in his jacket, leans forward and makes eye contact with municipality service provider].

Service provider (municipality): That's your biggest problem, yeah?

Marwan: That's my biggest problem, yeah. I'm a taxi driver, and I can't do it anymore. I would kill someone in the street if I kept driving [uses emphasizing hand gestures].

Service provider (shelter): [addressing her colleague] We have worked a little on solving this problem. It didn't go too well [shakes her head]. It's a lot more complicated than that.

Marwan persists with the problem of his incorrect year of birth, suggesting DNA tests. The service providers are polite but exasperated; this is not a reasonable problem in a placement meeting. In their eyes, Marwan is not displaying a serious attempt at gaining agency with respect to a reasonable issue. This is not because Marwan wants to resist but because he does not know how to perform in accordance with the demands of the setting. To overcome the impasse, the municipality service provider suggests how to reframe the problem: Marwan

should seek an early pension based upon physical disability, which requires a medical certification of his physical inability to work. Early retirement due to a disability is a problem that qualifies as reasonable. Marwan stalls at first but slowly reorients himself:

> Service provider (shelter): But do you remember that we talked about it the other day, and you said that it wasn't so much this thing about the pension or the money, but it was about the connection to the labor market, right?
>
> Marwan: Yes, I cannot work [makes sweeping gesture].
>
> Service provider (shelter): No, that was important to you.
>
> Marwan: No. But I can't see if I take them off [removes glasses]. If you're 50 meters away, I can't see who you are [shelter service provider moves her hand to her neck and shakes her head twice].
>
> Service provider (municipality): I understand that, but the thing is, you can also apply for an early retirement pension. Then, even if you might be older. Then, if your physical health and your vision and all that isn't as it should be, then there are options to get an early retirement pension, if it can be documented medically. So, if the other thing can't be documented [his year of birth], then maybe there's this other option. And that might even get you more money. I realize if that …
>
> Marwan: … I don't care about the money [moves his flat hand emphatically in front of him], I don't think about the money [moves his hand to his head].
>
> Service provider (municipality): No, I get that. But what I'm saying is just that if the other thing isn't possible [change of birth year]. Or if they don't want to change it, because maybe it can't be documented—I don't know, I don't know about this stuff [holds up his hands in front of him]. Then I'm just thinking that if your physical health isn't as it should be, then there are other options than changing your …

Marwan: … who would I have to talk to?

This sequence shows how Marwan's initial resistance is smoothly turned into cooperation as he becomes knowledgeable of the Danish system. His acquiescence gives him the agency to pursue his goal of ceasing to work (but due to a disability, not age).

Rashid, who recently emigrated from Lebanon to Denmark, is another case of being in wrong face (Goffman [1967] 2008) because he lacks practical knowledge of proper behavior at a placement meeting. Rashid also has limited knowledge of Danish and communicates through an interpreter. Like Marwan, Rashid is recently divorced; but unlike Marwan, Rashid was formally educated as a physician in Lebanon. Rashid sits scrunched up with a despondent look on his face. He looks down, often sighing, and speaks with a frustrated tone of voice. Rashid desperately wants to live close to his two children and the local hospital where he hopes to work. While Rashid explains how he needs to be there for his children, the service providers are making notes, nodding, and looking between Rashid and his interpreter, seemingly attentive to his concerns. However, rents are high within the city limits. Proximity to his children and potential work is Rashid's Plan A, while the service providers' realistic Plan B entails living outside the city limits—away from his children and the city hospital.

At a certain point in the exchange, Rashid's phone rings. He cuts it off, but the video sequence shows that he keeps his attention on the phone, placing it in his lap under the table, which suggests that he is expecting a call or text message. There is a second call that he requests permission to take, which is granted. Rashid puts the call on speaker, instructing the translator to translate. The call is from his daughter. They express mutual affection. The Arabic words for *love* and *baby* are repeatedly heard but not translated. The crucial bit that is translated is as follows:

Daughter: I miss you, Daddy.

Rashid: I don't have an apartment.

Daughter: But what shall we do, Daddy?

Rashid: We have to wait for an apartment.

Daughter: I miss you, Daddy.

The service providers barely acknowledge the call and both look at the ground. One shows some irritation, expressed by facial expression. With this performance, it is clear that Rashid is breaking the ceremonial rules of placement consultations. To the outside observer, the phone call appears to be a staged intervention and the service providers appear to agree. Everyone is visibly uncomfortable, including the translator, who is selective with translations and mumbles for the first time. Rashid is attempting to exercise agency by using a backstage conversation to impact a frontstage official process, which does not elicit collaboration from the others and fails to empower him.

Both Marwan and Rashid's attempt to affect the outcome of their meetings fail. However, Marwan and Rashid's lack of success are not caused by a passive or negative attitude towards the service provider. In their attempt to solve their problem, they are both active agents, but they fail because they lack practical knowledge and unknowingly break the ceremonial rules of conduct when suggesting solutions that fall outside the organizational Action-Plan.

Displaying Wrong Agency

Rashid and Marwan's display of wrong face in the interaction was caused by lack of knowledge of placement meetings. However, a client can also display a wrong face as a

strategy of resistance of the ceremonial rules of conduct. The following consultation shows a confrontation between Yassin and two female service providers regarding how to behave as a young man living in a Danish homeless shelter.

Yassin is an Egyptian man in his 20s. The agenda of the meeting is not a typical Action-Plan agenda concerning future housing, jobs, or education; instead, the focus is on the behavioral attitudes of the client. At first, during the presentation of participants, Yassin smiles and laughs and accepts the service providers' parental tone and questions about his apparent nervousness or tiredness. However, when one of the service providers moves on to talk about the purpose of the meeting, which is Yassin's domestic abilities, Yassin shifts his position. The service provider is leaning forward, towards Yassin, talking about the purpose of the meeting and gesturing with her hands. Now, he leans back and sits with a lofty pose and gestures with his body language that he is bored and/or annoyed by this bizarre (to him) interest in his behavior in the shelter kitchen. The two service providers' manner of interacting with Yassin is stereotypically feminine: their advice consists of a mix of praise and caregiving, issued in a parental tone. The shelter service provider starts the conversation positively. She acknowledges that Yassin has made "such a nice effort to comply with agreements; attending morning meetings and cleaning duties." Then comes the qualifying "but": he made some "slip-ups last week." This gentle critique is followed by the other shelter service provider's detailed account of his behavior, which includes that he does not clean up after himself and puts dirty dishes into the clean dishwasher. She concludes that "kitchen work is a shared responsibility." Yassin does not say much and uses a defensive tone of voice, claiming "I don't understand, dirty dishes in the dishwasher?" He continues, "Honestly, I do not even know what to say…" The service providers persist, moving on to the importance of self-discipline with regard to little things. Yassin responds that he feels like they are throwing him "a ball, I can't catch."

The interaction fails to give the service providers the defining right of what this situation is about—and hence the norms regulating their interaction—because Yassin exercises resistance by refusing to engage. The service providers are attempting re-education to transform Yassin's perception of masculinity. However, from his perspective, this appears to be a conversation about trivial matters, not serious problems. So, he cannot engage. In contrast, the two female service providers consider kitchen skills to be part of a Danish gender-equal discourse, essential to the social integration of immigrants.

As in the case of Rashid and Marwan, Yassin's failure of agency is not caused by his passivity during the interaction. However, contrary to Rashid and Marwan, he demonstrates a negative attitude towards the service providers and is thereby completely cut off from his ability to affect his situation and their perception of him.

DISCUSSION

The analysis shows that participants' ability to reach organizational goals (of the service providers) or personal goals (of the clients) rest on both collaboration and resistance. The openings of the consultations are revealing. Typically, the openings are studiedly casual and egalitarian, exemplified by circular tables and informal chat. This is a frontstage performance where the positions of the social actors seem to indicate agency of all participants. Officially, agency is equal, commensurable with the ethic of all citizens having equal moral worth institutionalized in an Action-Plan that emphasizes client-centeredness. Yet, the frontstage equality is a ritualized interaction that obscures a backstage organizational reality of inequality, as one client (Michael) pointed out. In that skillful intervention, the use of laughter allows for both resistance and cooperative agency simultaneously. This is a theoretically significant form of agency that both resists and complies with dominant norms.

Jokes, humor, and the resulting laughter often indicate this hybrid resistance through compliant agency.

After the casual openings, the complex relationship between agency, structural constraint, and unequal positioning follows. Clients are told that the objective of the interaction is an Action-Plan. They are told that it is their Action-Plan and invited to identify their problem, which suggests unconstrained agency. In some instances, clients identify a problem that falls within the ceremonial ritual of placement meetings. However, often clients do not identify an organizationally relevant problem; as a result, they confront structural constraints of the Action-Plan. These backstage experiences fit Andersen's (2014) findings, where Danish clients in drug treatment are invited backstage in an effort to facilitate a client's role as an agent of change. In spite of this effort, as with the shelter-residents, clients are met by professionals who are experts on "what really matters" (Andersen 2014:497) and would rather engage in that than in problems that are not organizationally relevant. Failure to identify a relevant problem deprives the clients of agency to set the agenda at that moment. The Action-Plan is core to the real dilemma of client agency. It reflects the organizational horizon, goals, and limits agency of both parties; yet it also renders agency possible. If clients frame correctly, then they successfully resolve, for instance, their housing situation. Yet, homeless individuals' agency does not mean that they can translate the goals of the Action-Plan as they wish, even when they appear to be invited to do so.

Service providers frequently refuse to incorporate clients' improvisations of alternative scripts because they see these as symptomatic of inadequate practical knowledge on the part of the homeless shelter client. Some clients are not familiar with the variety of roles that can be performed (new to homeless shelter placement meetings, e.g., Michael), or they may not have sufficient practical knowledge of the Danish society (immigrants, e.g., Marwan and Rashid). Others simply do not want to perform the roles offered to them (e.g.,

Jane and Yassin). The failure to frame a problem correctly, that is, organizationally relevant, may also be a way of showing resistance. Clients may not wish to be identified as an addict or as having a disability or be associated with these identities (Gubrium and Holstein 2001; Gubrium and Järvinen 2014; Mik-Meyer 2015, 2016). Clients may also exercise agency by constructing and presenting an identity that expresses the complexity of their lives as well as how they perceive themselves. Simultaneously, clients seem to be fully aware that adopting institutionally appropriate forms of agency are often required to get help, as Leisenring's (2006) study found. In this regard, the analysis shows that becoming morally worthy selves (Marvasti 2002; Meanwell 2013) is not necessarily simply a conflict over personal identity, though it can be. It is also a conflict about how to translate the organizational goals as displayed in the Action-Plan into practice as well as a conflict about the relevance of the organizational horizon. Clients' resistance is also an example of not knowing what type of script they act in and therefore how to display appropriate agency.

In response to resistance caused by a client's lack of practical knowledge, service providers rarely exercise overt domination by explicitly coercing clients. Typically, service providers do not need to do this because clients require agency with respect to merely practical issues. Clients' resistance is seldom an expression of a resistance of the goals embedded in the Action-Plan. Consequently, clients are open to an invitation to reframe their problems in exchange for empowerment with regard to solving practical issues. For instance, they may accept disability as their problem if this allows them to obtain a pension or an apartment. This tradeoff is crucial to understanding why clients are often willing to adopt organizationally appropriate frames of interpretation.

Practical knowledge is based upon past experience. The service providers know what the structural constraints are: If the Action-Plan includes requests that none of the participants sees as reasonable, then both parties will maneuver the goals embedded in the Action-Plan so

they fit the situations of the clients (e.g., if the financial situation of clients does not allow them to put money aside, then this goal will be maneuvered skillfully). The goal for both parties is to transform the objectives of the Action-Plan into actionable objectives and thereby secure that both clients' and service providers' positions entail agency with respect to solving the many practical issues of homelessness. The agency of service providers is to realize organizational objectives. When clients display wrong face, that is, bring problems to the table that are not considered reasonable, then the service providers have a strong incentive to do repair work. For example, if a homeless person wants an apartment but presents this in an inappropriate manner, then service providers will teach the client the script that will enable him to collaborate and construct their agency appropriately. Such learning involves "relational reasoning" (Parsell and Clarke 2019:363) and impression management of both parties (Goffman [1959] 1990).

Similarly, Meanwell's (2013) study of constructed narratives among homeless shelter residents finds that the residents reconstruct narratives of their past in ways that fit the institutional mold and cultural context of the shelters. Aiming to convey a service-worthiness, these homeless individuals strategically reconstruct their narratives by distancing themselves from their past and signaling that they have reached a turning point and are serious about improving (Marvasti 1998; Meanwell 2013:452). Thus, agency becomes conditional upon clients establishing themselves as morally worthy selves who can shape their narratives appropriately (Marvasti 2002; Meanwell 2013). While previous research emphasizes the past-oriented aspect of being a worthy self, this data suggests a future-oriented aspect, teaching clients appropriate wishes and behavior with the promise of agency as a reward. In one instance, that incentive even took the form of relaxing organizational rules concerning voucher expenses.

The agency of participants is negotiated in the situation of which they are a part. The negotiation of agency is a collective process. It is a negotiation that involves what Manning (2000) refers to as credibility, whereby actors help each other achieve felicitous performances that make sense within the "enabling conventions of the interaction order" (Manning 2000:294). Bearing resemblance to the "morally accountable client" presented by Makitalo (2006:531), Manning (2000:293) argues that sustaining credibility necessitates "a willingness to abide by rules of conduct." This can be linked to how clients learn to qualify and construct their problems in ways that correspond to the structural constraint of the Action-Plan that the service providers have to adhere to.

While the position of service providers is a stronger position than that of client—when defining what constitutes real, organizational problems—service providers are not the sole experts. Once clients gain practical knowledge of shelter life and the ceremonial rules of consultations, they can resist the suggestions of service providers by pointing out that some questions fall outside the ceremonial rule of conduct. A question can be seen as too private and unconforming to the protocols of an Action-Plan—as with Jane. In terms of the agency of a vulnerable client, that particular case stands out, as a client is rarely able to shift the script to a play other than the one suggested by staff. This rare case shows that agency through overt resistance is possible when the practical knowledge of the client is equal or greater than the practical knowledge of the service providers. This is significant because it shows that agency is not simply defined by the organizational horizon and Action-Plan as interpreted by staff; the practical knowledge of clients can also mediate agency.

Compliance with organizationally relevant roles facilitates agency to solve practical issues and can also leverage relaxation of structural constraints. If the client performs agency that fits the script, they may gain trust, which is rewarded (such as discretionary payments without receipts). This is theoretically significant in that agency is not simply constrained in

an unreflective way. Rather, these bonds are malleable, and service providers can demonstrate agency by bending them. For clients, compliance with organization goals and making themselves morally service worthy not only gives them agency to solve practical problems but can result in service providers' relaxation of structural constraint. Yet, it has to be acknowledged that this relaxation has an element of a Faustian pact: the client agrees to enact a particular character that helps socially construct themselves as morally worthy in exchange for the relaxation of constraints. It has elements of what Mann and Grzanka (2018:341) term "agency-without-choice," whereby actors are paradoxically confronted with a reasoning that is "agency-promoting while being positioned as the only viable … option."

It is important to recognize that ceremonial rules can work against the collaborative agency of client positions. "Constraint and negotiation operate in a state of tension" (Fine 1992:94). When clients refuse help to adapt to a structural constraint by rejecting the definition of a problem or identity, the interaction fails to deliver agency for clients and diminishes the agency of both parties' positions. Or, differently interpreted, this may be resistance-agency acted out by clients when they refuse service providers' definitions of their problem. However, our analysis demonstrates that instances of failure of collaboration are less often deliberate resistance and more likely a failure of convergence due to the client's lack of practical knowledge. Real-life performances are different from plays in that "the props and staging of action are always shifting, and it's difficult for actors and audiences to know when and where to put themselves into the scene" (Alexander 2011:3). Social interactions are not well-rehearsed plays but involve dynamics of co-construction (Ivana 2016). Consequently, participants may fail to agree on what qualifies as a serious problem—injunctions to self-discipline may appear trivial—either because of resistance or because of differences in practical knowledge of what the other considers problems in the situation.

Implicitly all sociology, as Fine (1992:94) suggests, concerns this balance between agency and constraint, which results in a "negotiation or negotiated order."

To avoid unintentional failure of interaction to deliver agency, our interactionist data show that social actors often engage in repair work and face-saving practices (Goffman [1967] 2008) as part of the negotiation of social order. "Participants accept that claims and answers can be modified through ritual and interaction" (Fine 1992:95). As emphasized by Ivana (2016:109), the concept of face-work "highlights the construction of face in relation not only to the norms of performing … but also in connection with the actual performance of other, whose purpose may be far from aligned with one's own." When, through insufficient practical knowledge, clients inadvertently adopt the wrong face, service providers point them in the right direction. On a few occasions, however, clients provide the practical knowledge to the professionals. Often, this negotiated relational reasoning entails a strategy of moving between frontstage and backstage. However, this can go wrong if practical knowledge of placement meetings is not shared. When a client attempts to introduce a backstage private phone conversation into a frontstage consultation (Rashid), this is politely ignored. Such an intervention lacks "credibility" (Manning 2000) in the eyes of others, and so has to be remedied. As observed by Fine (1992), face-to-face interaction often implies a diversity of perspectives of how participants interpret each other. Therefore, people who differ from each other in relation to their background and experiences often see the world—and the situations in which they meet—differently: "When together and needing to coordinate their actions, they may try to negotiate their separate perspectives" (Fine 1992:103). We found many instances of such mismatch, and it was striking how often and skillfully social actors overcame these divergences of expectations and helped each other maintain credibility (Manning 2000). These instances demonstrate the extent to which social actors help each

other realize agency. When practical knowledge is insufficient, this study shows that there is help at hand from the other participants.

CONCLUSION

With respect to the relationship between agency and structure, we have demonstrated that social actors are remarkably creative in managing constraints in order to realize agency. Central to this is their practical knowledge, which they use with considerable skill to negotiate the organizational horizon and goals. When practical knowledge is insufficient, or incommensurable due to different socialization, actors are willing to help each other. This willingness to accept assistance from coparticipants entails accepting a redefinition of goals and social roles. The overriding reason why actors are willing to have their agency redirected in this way is that it delivers personally desirable outcomes (such as independent housing or a job). Humor sometimes serves as a lubricant to resist and yet to be in-face, allowing for a complex hybrid compliant through resistant agency.

Our research demonstrates that agency often involves social actors showing that their social construction of self is morally worthy. In our analysis, enrollment into social roles is often future oriented, as the Action-Plan is the manifestation of the organizational horizon on which both parties are part. The agency of clients is accepted by staff if clients' actions demonstrate that they intend to work towards the goals of the Action-Plan.

This moral discourse of worthy selves, as defined by staff, creates practical problems of negotiation because these organizations are steeped in a discourse that emphasizes client-centeredness. When clients are invited to set the agenda, they sometimes frame the agenda correctly—that is, according to the organizational horizon—but in many instances they do not and their agency falls outside the frame of organizationally appropriate actions. In these cases, service providers are caught in the dilemma of respecting equal moral worth while

making some forms of agency more acceptable than others. That tension is manifested by the lengths to which service providers go to avoid stripping the agency of clients. Rather, they attempt to redirect clients by highlighting the organizationally relevant agency. Often this takes the form of offering various Action-Plan scenarios (A, B, and C), some of which are deemed realistic while others are perceived to be unrealistic. By listening to the client's unrealistic wishes (according to staff), clients' inappropriate agency is not simply dismissed, which shows respect for their moral worth. However, in these cases the organizationally relevant agency prevails. In contrast, when clients refuse to redirect their agency, either through resistance or lack of practical knowledge, the interaction fails to deliver agency; neither the organizational nor personal objectives of the clients are realized, which is a cost for both staff and clients.

We found that different social constructions of agency either support or challenge the ceremonial rules of conduct embedded in these kinds of encounters. Typically, when clients find their perception of problems defined as unreasonable problems, the interaction fails to deliver agency to accomplish practical tasks. To have the privilege of being in face, participants in placement meetings usually adopt strategies that enable them to overcome that impasse, which includes adopting organizationally relevant positions of agency. Interactions that fail to deliver agency to solve problems hold a cost for all. For the client, the cost is failing to solve practical matters; for the service providers, the cost is failing to meet the organizational goals presented in the Action-Plan. Therefore, it makes strategic sense for both groups of actors to turn conflict into collaboration—to collaborate on editing the stories of the homeless (Marvasti 2002).

As a qualification on the above, we acknowledge that there are limitations in using video data. The participants' actions are, to some extent, affected by the recording (Hazel 2016). The attempt to act in a "recording-appropriate" (Hazel 2016:446) way could be

biasing these interactions away from conflict and toward collaboration. However, except in the initial phases, participants rarely looked at the recording device, which suggests that they were not significantly camera-scripting their actions. Acknowledging these limitations, video data gives access to an "elusive knowledge" (Toraldo et al. 2018)—that is, verbal as well as tacit, nonverbal aspects of organizational life. Smiles, anger, bodily orientation, and silence are all key expressions when people meet in real-life encounters (Soulaimani 2018), which video recording captures.

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