



A Narrative Case Study of How Individuals Construct Meaning Concerning Their Situation Through Their Meetings with Work Counsellors

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Unemployed individuals with health problems may need extensive work counselling to return to work. Narrative meaning-making processes provide possibilities for healing and change; however, we do not know enough about how such processes unfold throughout work counselling. The aim of this study is to explore how individuals construct meaning concerning their situation through their meetings with work counsellors. We sought to create in-depth knowledge according to this aim through a narrative qualitative case study design. We created data through a narrative interview with “Erin”, who shared her story about being mentally ill, unemployed, and engaging in work counselling in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration. Data were analysed through a narrative approach. Our main finding is that through seemingly small and mundane interactions, work counsellors may have an important impact on individuals’ meaning-making processes. Our findings show how this impact might be quite hidden, both positive and negative. We discuss how our findings and interpretations may inform our understanding of what it may be like to be sick and unemployed. Further, we discuss how a narrative perspective can be useful in work counselling for people with sickness or disabilities and what implications our findings may have for practice.

ABSTRAKT

Arbeidsledige med helseproblemer kan ha behov for omfattende arbeidsveiledning for å komme tilbake i arbeid. Narrative meningsskapende prosesser gir muligheter for helbredelse og endring, men vi vet ikke nok om hvordan slike meningsskapende prosesser utspiller seg i arbeidsveiledning. Målet med denne studien har vært å utforske hvordan individer konstruerer mening om egen situasjon gjennom møter med arbeidsveiledere. Vi søkte å skape dybdekunnskap i henhold til dette målet gjennom et narrativt kvalitativt casestudiedesign. Data ble skapt gjennom et narrativt intervju med “Erin” som delte sin historie om å være psykisk syk, arbeidsledig og engasjert seg i arbeidsveiledning i NAV. Data ble analysert gjennom en narrativ tilnærming. Vårt hovedfunn er at gjennom tilsynelatende små og dagligdagse interaksjoner kan arbeidsveiledere ha stor betydning for enkeltpersoners narrative meningsskapende prosesser. Våre funn viser hvordan denne påvirkningen kan være skjult, og både positiv og negativ. Vi diskuterer hvordan våre funn og tolkninger kan utdype vår forståelse av hvordan det kan være å være syk og arbeidsledig. Videre diskuterer vi hvordan et narrativt perspektiv kan være nyttig i arbeidsveiledning for personer med sykdom eller funksjonsnedsettelse, og hvilke implikasjoner våre funn kan ha for praksis.

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More than 137 000 individuals received work assessment allowance (AAP) from the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV)¹ in 2022. These are individuals who, due to health problems, have been out of work or studies for more than a year, 42,6% of them due to mental illness. During a period of 6 months, only a few of these individuals, approximately 2,5–3,5%, succeed in getting back to work (Grønlien, 2022). The consequences of long-term unemployment may be challenging from a societal perspective and are detrimental to the individual. Not being involved in work or studies is correlated with lesser quality of life (Støren et al., 2020), as well as mental and physical health problems (Ockander & Timpka, 2003).

Counselling is an important part of NAV's work in supporting unemployed individuals (Helgøy et al., 2010). However, the low rate of success in getting back to work or studies signals that the work counselling individuals on AAP receive today may not be satisfactory. Aronsson et al. (2015) write that individuals on medical leave often have insecurities regarding their future and that how the individual is met by professionals may influence their possibilities of returning to work. The impact of client-professional relationships on the effect of counselling and therapy has been documented in several studies. A literature review found that the relationship between counsellor and service user is crucial for the success of work counselling (Fyhn et al., 2021). Natland et al. (2019) point to how the counselling relationships that contribute to clearing away obstacles and releasing energy for focusing on moving forward are the ones that are experienced as helpful from the service users' perspective. Ljungberg et al. (2016) found that some relationships between clients and professionals may even worsen the client's situation, leading to negative thoughts about themselves, as well as loss of hope for the future. These findings of how counselling relationships may be both constructive and destructive are also supported by Stenbrenden et al. (2018). However, we do not know enough about *how* such counselling relationships unfold and impact users' situations (Fyhn et al., 2021; Stenbrenden et al., 2018).

Several studies argue that meaning-making is a central issue in return-to-work processes. Vijayasingham (2018) highlights the internal meaning-making processes involved in coping with chronic illness and unemployment. Danneris (2018) shows how phases of progress in the work counselling process are associated with experiences of meaningfulness, while phases of deterioration are associated with meaninglessness. Furthermore, Hansen and Gubrium (2021) suggest that users make meaning from interactions throughout the work counselling process and that these meaning-making processes are influenced by both structural, social and personal factors.

In addition to being crucial in return to work, meaning is described as an important resource for health. Knizek et al. (2021) write that the experience of meaning in life correlates highly with health and well-being and may be an underestimated resource for health. Frankl (1963) argues that humans have an innate will to meaning, seeking coherence between their values and actions, and that failure to do so may result in an existential vacuum followed by, for instance, aggression and/or depression. Thus, we argue that meaning-making should be focused on in a variety of helping contexts, perhaps particularly in work counselling individuals who experience both ill health and unemployment. However, according to Knizek et al. (2021), this has not received adequate attention so far.

The literature reviewed above suggests that more knowledge is needed about the process of how work counselling relationships impact the life situations of individuals struggling with health issues and unemployment. Further, meaning is found to be an important dimension of the processes of returning to work and healing. Following this, the aim of this study is to explore how individuals construct meaning concerning their own situation through their meetings with work counsellors. We chose the narrative perspective on these meaning-making processes, as narrative theory is valuable to understanding human actions and experiences, such as the experiences of counsellor-client relationships and meetings we explore in this study (Bruner, 1986; Ricoeur, 1984).

1 The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) is the public welfare agency in Norway. NAV's public mission is to contribute to social and economic security and promote transitions to work and activity (www.nav.no). To receive financial benefits, citizens are required to participate in activities such as counselling, courses, and work training.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Frankl (1963) writes that humans have a will to meaning and constantly seek to find and fulfil meaning in their lives. Meaning is understood as coherence contributing to purpose and value in one's life (Martela & Steger, 2016), helping us relate to and interact with our surroundings (Sørensen, 2020). In this article, we build on a narrative understanding of meaning-making. Following this, meaning-making processes entail connecting past and present experiences, as well as hopes and images for the future, into *narratives* through which these experiences are understood in relation to each other. We engage in creating narratives continuously as we live our everyday lives, making use of events and experiences to create meaning as we go along. Our narratives are constantly re-made and negotiated based on new experiences and interactions (Ricoeur, 1991). Mattingly (1998) writes that through narratives, meaning-making involves that happenings are transformed from 'one thing after another' to 'one thing because of the other' connected by a plot. Plots are thematic threads in our narratives that mediate connections between past and present experiences as well as our images of future possibilities. These thematic threads are related to important issues or values in individuals' lives (Polkinghorne, 1995). Similarly, Frankl (1963) writes that to create existential meaning, individuals need to be directed by future possibilities or goals in coherence with their values. Sometimes, narrative meaning-making is a collective activity which unfolds through communication and negotiation with people around us (Reed et al., 2018). However, narrative meaning-making may also unfold internally and implicitly as a mode of thought (Bruner, 1986).

Our narratives hold meaning and contribute *order* through connecting events. However, they also provide a *creative* function. Josephsson et al. (2006) describe how the myriad of contradictory events in our lives create "possibility rooms" where there is an opportunity for new interpretation and change. In these possibility rooms, individuals "imagine, negotiate and try out different views of themselves" through interactions with other people and contexts. Some events, such as illness and unemployment, may cause breaches in our ongoing narratives and require us to enter such possibility rooms to explore and try out new possibilities of making meaning (Mattingly, 1998). Mattingly (1998) shows how narrative meaning-making processes provide possibilities for healing and change and how therapists and individuals create narratives of change both together and individually as their counselling relationships unfold. Further, she shows how powerful individuals' images of being in either therapeutic or non-healing plots may be as either resources or limitations for change.

In this study, we explored our aim through a narrative theoretical perspective on meaning-making as described here. Additionally, we also applied narrative research methods, as described in the following.

METHODS

This is a qualitative, narrative case study building on a social constructionist understanding of knowledge creation (Gergen, 2015). Narrative methods preserve the complexity of unfolding events and may contribute knowledge about motivational, emotional, social and other contextual aspects of these events (Polkinghorne, 1995). The study is part of a larger research project focusing on work counselling in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration.

RECRUITMENT

For the research project as a whole, counsellors and service users were recruited in pairs and interviewed individually. Work counsellors with courses or education in professional counselling were recruited by the first author through contacting three NAV offices in Norway. The recruited counsellors were then asked to recruit service users from their portfolios. Criteria for inclusion were that both counsellor and service user were content with the counselling and experienced that it had been helpful and contributed to returning to work. Further, the service users should have been out of work for more than a year due to sickness. Four service users were recruited for the project. For this study, we chose to focus only on the data created with one service user participant, whom we called Erin. These data yielded particularly interesting and detailed findings according to our aim. A case-study design allowed us to analyse, interpret and discuss these findings in depth.

DATA GENERATION

The first author conducted an individual, narrative interview with Erin, where she was asked to talk about her meetings with counsellors and how she experienced that the counselling had influenced her process of returning to work. Inspired by Rosenthal's (2003) writings about narrative interviews, Erin was first asked to talk freely about her experiences without being interrupted. The first author then asked follow-up questions to elicit more elaborate descriptions of events that had been already mentioned by the participant. This approach rendered an openness to the stories Erin wanted to tell and reduced the impact of the interviewer on what became the topics during the interview. The interview was conducted in 2019 at the NAV office at the participant's request and lasted 1 hour 38 minutes. The interview was sound recorded and later transcribed by the first author, yielding 17 pages of written transcripts.

ANALYSIS

Our analysis was based on Polkinghorne's (1995) understanding of narrative analysis. This involved connecting different parts of the data material into coherent narratives to explore and show how events in the material may be understood. This was done through a hermeneutic process of moving back and forth between parts and wholes (Gadamer, 1988), focusing on parts of the data-material and then seeking to make sense of them by connecting them to other parts of data into a narrative that helps shed light on the aim of this study. The narratives we constructed through our analysis may only be recognised as one of many possible understandings of the analysed events (Polkinghorne, 1995).

First, the data material was read thoroughly by the first author, searching for passages relating to the interaction between work counsellors and Erin. When reading, the first author discovered how Erin returned to what she called "a slight misunderstanding" several times in the interview and how this seemed to be very emotional for her to talk about. The first author wondered what this could be about. Were there other events that could help understand this emotional tension connected to a seemingly small misunderstanding between Erin and the work counsellor? The first author then re-read the interview transcript several times, searching for other parts of the data material that could help shed light on possible understandings of the passages first identified. Through discussions with the second author and viewing the findings in light of narrative theory on meaning-making, events such as Erin questioning her own communicational skills, as well as experiencing other insecurities concerning herself and her situation, were interpreted as possible related events. Lastly, the authors constructed a narrative from these data elements through which we present our main findings and interpretations.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The project is approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD/Sikt, project number 445502). The participant received written information about the study, including her right to withdraw at any time, and signed a written consent form prior to the interview. The participant is anonymised in the article to reduce the chance of being recognised by others.

The first author is employed as a work counsellor. This has had an impact on both the creation of data as well as the data analysis. From a social constructionist perspective, such an impact between the researcher and the study will always be present. However, one should make visible how this impact unfolds (Gergen, 2015). Prior to the data generation, the first author did some observations with the work counsellors to widen her knowledge and experience of how meetings between counsellors and users might unfold. Further, the first author was open to the comments and views of the second author, allowing for her own understanding to be challenged. However, the first author's position as an "insider" in NAV also helped the authors' understanding of the data material, perhaps allowing for a deeper understanding than would have evolved had the author not had this insight.

FINDINGS

The aim of this study has been to explore how individuals construct meaning concerning their own situation through their meetings with work counsellors. Our main finding is that work counsellors may have an important impact on individuals' narrative processes of visualising

how their future might evolve and trying out different plots. Further, our findings show how this impact might be quite hidden, as well as both positive and negative. To show this in-depth, we present our findings as a narrative together with our interpretations of how Erin's interactions with work counsellors affected her narrative meaning-making processes.

Erin is a woman in her forties who is married and has two children. When the first author interviewed her, she had recently returned to work after being out of work for several years due to mental health problems. A few years ago, she was in a major conflict with her siblings. According to Erin, she was under constant scrutiny and critique, which eventually led to health problems and insecurity regarding self-worth. In the end, she was not able to work anymore. Because of her personal and health issues, she experienced a need to change her profession from working in sales to a job within public administration. During her years of sick leave and unemployment, she was followed up by several work counsellors at NAV, together with treatment by a psychologist. During the interview, Erin talked about how they had all been helpful to her, providing both emotional and practical support. However, she also described being vulnerable and confused during the work counselling process, as we will show in the following.

BEING AMIDST A THICK FOG – DELIBERATING EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS

During the interview, Erin told elaborately and with much feeling about how difficult being sick and unemployed had been for her. When talking about these experiences, it seemed as though she was reliving them, talking slowly with a distant gaze and pausing on several occasions. Her life had changed suddenly, from being a hard-working employee and contributor to her family to feeling useless and insecure about who she was and her own feelings. She had broken down, feeling sick, afraid, and crying all the time, requiring her husband to help her out a lot. She said: *“At first, everything was chaotic; everything was like in a fog. I had a chaos in my head that I had to figure out...”* She further described that it felt like a thick fog suddenly surrounded her, and she could not see anything or get an overview of where she was or how things looked around her. This felt very stressful, as she was constantly wondering: *“What happens now?”* While talking about this, she seemed vulnerable and emotional, her voice being low and trembling.

Thus, Erin communicated how being sick and out of work had been very hard for her. Through using the metaphor of the fog, she conveyed how difficult it was for her to see the situation clearly and predict what could be the next step. At first, we understood this as an insecurity about what to do next and that Erin was contemplating: *“Is there a job future for me?”*. However, based on what Erin told about her vulnerability, feelings and thoughts during these events, as well as the emotions she showed while talking about it, we understand that she experienced the situation of being sick and unemployed as a serious disruption from her ordinary life and that her chaos and insecurities were of a more existential kind, evolving around the question: *“Is there a future for me?”*

From what Erin told in the interview, we understand that she experienced a sequence of “nows” asking, *“What happens now?”* She seemed to lack an overview of why things were as they were. Events seemed random, making it difficult for Erin to foresee what could possibly happen or visualise and hope for any future positive change. This lack of future possibilities further seemed to disable her from knowing what actions she could or should take. Mattingly (1998) underlines that it is not mainly based on the past that the present acquires its meaning; rather, more importantly, the present acquires meaning by being a part of a narrative about where one is going. This involves, according to Mattingly, making future images that guide our actions and contribute to meaning in the present. In light of this, we suggest that without the context of clear future images, Erin was having trouble knowing what actions were meaningful to her in the present. As we will show in the following, support from her work counsellor was crucial for Erin while she was in this state.

REACHING OUT FROM THE FOG – EXPERIENCING RELIEF AND HOPE IN RECEIVING SUPPORT

After a year of sick leave, Erin still felt very confused and insecure: *“I feared everything then, really...”* she said with a lowered voice before pausing for a while. Further, she said that one thing she was insecure about was whether she would get further support after her sick leave

expired or if she would have to fend for herself completely. She said she felt very insecure and wondered, "What will happen next?". Due to this insecurity, she called her current counsellor. The counsellor reassured Erin that she would receive further counselling, asked if she had any thoughts on what she wished for support, and let her know if she needed anything. Erin said that she got very emotional when the counsellor said that because "*I thought that I might have to manage by myself without any help, with no one to talk to, nothing. So, when she said that I was going to get further counselling, I was very, very happy, and tears started running down my face*". Telling about this in the interview was emotional for Erin, her voice breaking and requiring her to pause for a while.

We understand that while still in a foggy state of confusion and distress, as described above, Erin reached out to her counsellor hoping to receive continued help and that this help felt extremely important to her. At this point, Erin still seemed unable to move the process of narrative meaning-making forward by herself as she could not visualise what could happen next and, therefore, neither knew what actions to take. However, Erin did reach out to the counsellor, in our understanding, signalling that she thought she could find a way out of this foggy state with help. Perhaps the counsellor would know what to do next? And as she learned the counsellor was willing to continue supporting her, that must mean *she* has some hope and faith in her, right? The great emotional reaction Erin experienced when receiving further counselling highlights the severity of the situation for Erin and, in our understanding, provides additional support for our interpretation that she experienced profound existential challenges. Further, as we will show in the following, we suggest that being ensured further counselling was crucial to Erin, as it helped her build some hope and start visualising future possibilities.

THE FOG GRADUALLY LIFTS – MAKING VISIBLE BOTH POSSIBILITIES AND TANGLES

Although Erin was relieved about receiving further support, she explained how finding her way out of the fog was a challenging task and a weird state to be in. But as the fog gradually lifted, she felt she could express her needs better. However, Erin talked about one specific episode that she wished could have gone differently, and that was difficult for her: "*I felt I expressed my needs clearly to the counsellor. I made a mind map, including all possibilities and disadvantages, and explained that I could not handle too many steps right now and that one step was enough. Based on what I presented, I expected to be offered a placement of job training. However, to my big surprise, I was referred to a course instead... At this point, I asked myself: Was this what I had communicated that I wanted? I asked for a work placement, and then I got a course instead...*" Erin laughed an exasperated laugh and added: "*So, I thought that maybe she had misunderstood me somehow... a little bit*". Erin further said that she understood that the counsellor had good intentions, thinking this would be the right step for her at that point. So, she went to the course and experienced that she benefited greatly from it in several ways. Through the course, she got more in touch with herself, and she met a course leader whom she could trust and who knew where she should go next. However, despite these positive outcomes of the course, Erin experienced the initial misunderstanding between her and the counsellor as troubling. Erin said she spent much time and energy deliberating the question, "*Do I not communicate well enough?*". She explained this with her low self-esteem and stated: "*It gives you some downs when you get rejected, and maybe to not be understood and believed in what you need and stuff like that*".

Erin here conveyed that after some time in great despair, the fog lifted, and she was finally able to visualise future possibilities and start acting again. She thought she was being very clear to the counsellor about what she needed, but nevertheless, there was a misunderstanding between them. There may be several ways of interpreting what Erin here understood as a misunderstanding. The counsellor could, for example, have listened carefully to Erin's plea and thought that this course would be a more suitable measure for taking a small step. This understanding is in line with the course turning out to be contributing positively to Erin's process. This could also be supported by how she, as a counsellor, has knowledge about the available measures in work counselling. However, it may seem that the counsellor did not communicate such knowledge and arguments in the way that Erin perceived them. Thus, Erin's experience was that of being misunderstood, and this experience followed her.

It became clear throughout the interview that Erin experienced this as more than a small misunderstanding. It became a big tangle for her, showing her sensitivity to the counsellors' responses in their interaction. Further, we understand that the misunderstanding affected how she saw herself and her future possibilities: Can she at all hope for and pursue a future work life if she can't even make herself understood by the work counsellor? Will she be able to get in touch with herself again and find a way out of illness and unemployment?

Further, Erin tied her insecurities caused by this misunderstanding to her low self-esteem. In line with this, we suggest that her sensitivity and the impact this misunderstanding had on her were perhaps intensified by her past difficulties in communicating with and being critiqued by her siblings. This rendered Erin insecure about her own ability to communicate with others, as well as her own self-awareness of what a meaningful next step for her might be. This insecurity further complicated her faith in being able to realise desired future possibilities and, therefore, also left her unstable and more sensitive to and easily affected by reactions from others.

Grounded in narrative theory, we understand this as a narrative instability. We suggest that Erin's insecurities became a tangle in her process of creating what Mattingly (1998) refers to as a "therapeutic plot". For Erin, that could be a plot of being an active and competent person finding her way back to work in spite of her health issues. Rather, the misunderstanding fed into a competing non-healing "problem plot": that of not having the communicative skills and self-awareness enough to manage her way back to work. This shift between plots was driven by a seemingly small and mundane misunderstanding but ended up having dramatic effects on her emotionally and on her trust and agency towards her goal of working again. This instability may seem destructive; however, it also implied an openness to new interpretations. We understand that this unstable view of herself and her capacities may also have rendered Erin open for change and movement, both in how she understood herself and the situation she was in, contributing to what we understand as an openness of "possibility rooms" (Josephsson et al., 2006). In the following, we will show how she was also open to movement in positive directions.

A MUCH-NEEDED CONFIRMATION – RESOLVING THE ENTANGLEMENT

After plaguing herself with thoughts related to this misunderstanding for some time, Erin finally talked about it with the course leader, with whom she had now gained trust. Followed by what seemed a little apologetic laughter, Erin told the first author: "*Luckily, the course leader assured me that he could very well understand what I was saying*". Erin described how his response enabled her to move on from her deliberations. However, Erin repeatedly returned to talking about the misunderstanding later in the interview as something she wished could have been different, and that was challenging for her. Although it was sorted out, it had made a big impact on her that she wished she could have avoided.

We understand that Erin's thoughts about herself and her situation were affected by this misunderstanding for quite some time and that she was not able to let it go until the course leader confirmed that she communicated well enough. We ask ourselves what would have happened if the course leader had not reassured Erin of this. We believe that this could have led to a serious breach in her meaning-making process, hindering the evolvment of a therapeutic narrative.

However, based on the relief and direction Erin described that the course leader's answer gave her, we suggest that this confirmation enabled her to move focus towards more optimistic and therapeutic narrative plots yet again. In our understanding, this episode shows how Erin's sensitivity to others also holds possibilities for seemingly small and mundane interactions with work counsellors to be very effective in positive directions, providing confirmation and encouragement and thus supporting therapeutic plots. This interpretation is also supported by Erin's accounts of her further process, as presented in the following.

OFFERING WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT – SETTING A PLOT TOGETHER

During her further process of counselling, Erin participated in a new measure where she met yet another work counsellor at NAV. Erin told about their first meeting, which she remembered vividly: "*That's where we really doodled, and almost all of the current possibilities were written*

down". Erin further talked about how she, at the very end of the meeting, was walking out of the room, and the counsellor had said something like: "There is use for you as well, Erin", with care in her voice. Erin said that she felt the counsellor had picked up on her insecurities about the future and negative thoughts about herself and, therefore, offered these words of encouragement. Erin said it was important to her that the counsellor signalled that she was valuable and an asset to society. Although she did not believe in these words right away, they were something she started thinking about and gradually let sink in.

Erin here described how she experienced that this counsellor understood her. We understand that this counsellor picked up on Erin's insecurities and addressed them openly. In light of narrative theory, we suggest that this counsellor was sensitive to Erin's competing narrative plots and sought to confront her problem plot and add drive to a therapeutic plot of being valuable and needed. This, too, happened through a seemingly small passage of interaction on Erin's way out, but it still had a great impact over time on Erin's thoughts about herself and her possibilities.

Erin's process of getting back to work was still ongoing during these events, taking both time and effort. She engaged in work training at several locations and contacted multiple employers asking for work. There were many ups and downs, such as additional health problems during the process. Her efforts were worthwhile, and at the time of our interview, Erin had secure employment and was in the process of ending her contact with work counsellors at NAV.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to explore how individuals construct meaning concerning their own situation through their meetings with work counsellors. Through a case-study design and narrative analysis and interpretation, we have gained in-depth knowledge concerning this aim. Our findings show how Erin's ongoing meaning-making process was quite dramatic, deliberating the question, "Is there a future for me?". We wish to highlight three main findings: *Firstly*, our findings and interpretations show how individuals in work counselling may experience that sickness and loss of work yields an existential crisis, making it difficult to know what to do and have hope for the future. *Secondly*, we have shown how seemingly small and mundane interactions with counsellors may have a large impact on service users' meaning-making processes, as they may be wavering between several competing plots. Our findings show how the interactions throughout the counselling can contribute both tangles as well as positive images contributing to drive and direction in the process of returning to work. *Lastly*, our findings show how meaning-making processes may be tacitly affected through interaction with work counsellors. Thus, service users and counsellors may not be aware of how their interactions affect ongoing meaning-making processes. These three main findings raise some thoughts and questions regarding counselling relationships, which we will discuss. First, we will discuss how the dramatic story of Erin and our narrative interpretation of it may inform our understanding of what it may be like to be sick and unemployed. Further, we discuss how a narrative perspective can be useful in work counselling for people with sickness or disabilities and what implications our findings may have for practice.

A VOID OF NARRATIVES – WHEN BEING SICK AND UNEMPLOYED YIELDS EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

Based on our findings, we suggest that Erin, seemingly without the counsellors being aware of it or addressing it, deliberated some fundamental existential questions. Our findings show how Erin perceived the situation on sick leave as dramatic and life-changing. She described how she experienced a lack of future visions and directions and did not know what to do. Erin's words point to an unforeseeable future as something more than not knowing what will happen next month but as a question of who she is and if she has a future at all.

From what Erin told in the interview, asking herself the question, "Is there a future for me?" we suggest that Erin was struggling with an existential crisis at this point of the counselling process. Supporting our interpretation, also Maglio et al. (2005) connects career transitioning to existential issues such as "Who am I?" and "What place do I have in the world?". Building on Maslow (1960), Maglio argues that the collapse of a person's external value systems due to

being unemployed can stimulate a person to look to internal values, as these can endure the chaotic and shifting external systems. Further, Faria et al. (2020) found a connection between unemployment over time and suicidal ideation, which highlights the potential gravity of the existential crisis resulting from unemployment. Also supporting our interpretation of Erin struggling with an existential crisis due to illness and unemployment, Stifoss-Hanssen and Kallenberg (1998, p. 17) write about how illness is associated with existential questions and questions about one's own worth. Similarly, Mattingly (1998) points to how sickness can be seen as a "breach" or "death of self", making it necessary to rethink who one is and where one is going. Erin's experiences of being ill and not able to work for some time may have caused such a serious narrative breach in her life, disrupting her processes of creating meaning through being productive at work and at home. This breach caused the state of total confusion and despair she describes with the metaphor of the fog. We suggest that Erin, while being in what felt like a thick fog, did not know what her internal values were and, therefore, lingered in these deliberations of existential issues for a while. Building on narrative theory, we suggest this lack of internal values yields a lack of possible plots to make meaning by. Without possible plots, Erin is also unable to draw on past experiences and future images to figure out what to do in the present. We suggest that Erin experienced meaninglessness or a "void of narratives". Her ongoing narrative is in suspense, and she is waiting and hoping for possibilities to form that can guide her actions.

In this state of existential crisis, or void of narrative meaning, Erin reached out for help from her counsellor. Erin described how, after a while, the fog lifted, and she could see more clearly what she needed. We suggest that "the fog lifting" meant she had gained a narrative understanding of the situation, seeing possible plots and future images more clearly and understanding more about what is meaningful to do in the present to reach a desirable future. With this, her serious existential crisis was somewhat detangled. We do not know what eventually enabled Erin to engage in narrative meaning-making again, but we suggest that interactions with the counsellor can be helpful in such situations, as we will discuss in the following.

HOW MAY A NARRATIVE WAY OF THINKING AND UNDERSTANDING BE USEFUL IN WORK COUNSELLING?

Our findings, interpretations and discussion above highlight how narrative theory and a narrative way of thinking may inform our understanding of individuals in situations like Erin's. Further, our findings show how counsellors may have a large impact on individuals' meaning-making processes and how this impact may be unspoken and hidden from the actors involved. However, we argue that this impact is important for counsellors to become aware of, as they otherwise risk unknowingly contributing to problem plots of meaning-making.

As stated in our introduction, several studies point to the importance of the relationship between the service user and the counsellor for work counselling to be helpful in bringing the users back to work (Fyhn et al., 2021; Stenbrenden et al., 2018). However, more knowledge is needed about what characterises such helpful counselling relationships. Based on our findings and interpretations, we uphold that the "magic" of a helpful counselling relationship may be tied to how the relation supports the client in imagining therapeutic plots, plots that are meaningful to the client and which give them direction and drive to act provided by narrative meaning-making processes. Danneris (2018, p. 370) supports this, pointing to the importance of clients experiencing trajectories characterised by coherence, meaning and clear goals. Further, they state that an effective measure in work counselling is "[...] *what makes sense to the individual client in a specific situation*". Following this, we suggest that a narrative way of thinking and understanding individuals may be an asset for counsellors in creating constructive work counselling relationships with service users.

As we have pointed out, our findings show how the process of work counselling, which seemingly is about choosing a measure, is about something more for Erin. It is a deep and profound process of meaning-making involving deliberations of existential questions. But should work counsellors be inflicted in such existential issues? Or should existential issues rather be restricted to the domain of therapy? Our findings and interpretations concerning Erin suggest that work counsellors may have an influence on the existential processes service users go through, although unknowingly. For example, our findings and interpretations show how

counsellors may provide information that users form negative future images from, resulting in knots that need to be disentangled before the user can move forward in the process. This underlines the importance of bringing this to the awareness of the counsellors. We therefore argue that counsellors' sensitivity towards existential issues and meaning-making processes is important in work counselling relationships. Thus, for individuals with complex health and work-related problems, such as Erin, we suggest that work counselling should focus on issues broader than measures of getting back to work.

Following this, our findings and interpretations point to the importance of counsellors being sensitive and oriented towards service users' values and ongoing plots, as well as to their possible impact on meaning-making processes. But how can they do this? Based on Mattingly (1998), we suggest that counsellors should make such processes more explicit by asking about service user's ongoing narrative meaning-making processes. Mattingly points to how contributing to therapeutic plots entails that the helper is aware of what view the individual has of their situation and the counselling process, what limits they set for themselves, how many let-downs they can handle and how much risk they are willing to take. Further, based on our findings, we suggest that counselling should involve narrative competence for building shared healing plots with users, providing them with "material" for such plots throughout their interactions. However, as our findings show, individuals may not be fully aware of their own internal meaning-making processes, also requiring counsellors to be able to pick up on subtle cues from service users and thereby adjust the plots along the way (Mattingly, 1998). Such counselling work with a focus on narrative meaning-making processes may perhaps also be helped by the use of creative and narrative methods for career counselling. Natland and Celik (2015) show how making fairy tales of a period of one's life can be used to change service users' self-narratives from shame to pride. Two other possible methods may be "My career story" and "Pictorial narratives", as described by Taylor and Savickas (2016). These methods entail that service users draw and write about their current situation, their dream scenarios, possible steps to get closer to what they want, as well as their role models, likes, and values. These methods foster reflexivity and validation in the counselling relationship and may uncover hidden feelings, thoughts, and insecurities as those Erin experienced. Further, these methods may help uncover preferences, dreams and strengths, and thereby provide users with an increased overview, control and agency in the situation.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this article, we have presented our narrative of one person's meaning-making processes in work counselling and our interpretations of it. This is, as previously highlighted, and in line with being narrative research, one of many possible interpretations. We suggest further research to deepen and nuance the understanding of meaning-making in the process of returning to work.

The fact that the first author and interviewer in this article is a work counsellor could influence the participant's openness about difficult topics. Nevertheless, Erin shared her story, entailing negative experiences, critique, vulnerable moments, and deep feelings, signalling a level of trust needed to share this with the interviewer. The first author's experience in the field and what challenges work counselling could include also inspired the starting point for the study's purpose and focus. Further, the focus of the analysis and interpretation was inspired by what surprised the first author and what she became curious about in the material.

CONCLUSION

We have used a narrative approach, making in-depth processual and contextual knowledge about how one individual constructs meaning concerning her own situation through her meetings with work counsellors. Our findings highlight how vulnerable unemployed may experience existential challenges and how this can make it difficult to act and to have hope for the future. Building on narrative theory, we have shown how what seems like small and mundane interactions may have a large impact on the users' meaning-making processes during the vulnerable process of returning to work. We have shown how the interaction itself may contribute to knots that need to be detangled before continuing the process. Our findings also show how counsellors affect these processes in both positive and negative directions and

in tacit and unconscious ways. We therefore argue for the importance of counsellors becoming more aware of these processes, as we believe this holds potential for the success of counselling processes. This entails an awareness about how the interaction is important, not just what the meeting results in; for example, how one communicates to support the users' meaning-making processes, and not just having chosen a measure. We also suggest that work counsellors utilise narrative approaches to support users' meaning-making processes. This may also point to a need for further research about the meaning-making processes in work counselling. Further research could, for example, include researching these processes from the counsellor's perspective and as they unfold in the counselling meetings.

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