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Motivational Interviewing as Governmentality: Shaping Victims of Men’s Violence into Responsible Subjects?

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ABSTRACT

Motivational interviewing (MI) is an evidence-based counselling method that has spread rapidly in Sweden during the last two decades. It is a technique designed to empower individuals to change an unwanted life situation. Through interviews with a strategic sample of persons engaged in work with men’s violence against women, this article critically examines the use of MI in this context. By analysing the interviews from a governmentality perspective, it is suggested that MI is a technique to produce a knowledgeable, strong, and self-animated feminine subject, capable of making the “right” choices and subsequently “choosing” to avoid violence. Although this may be beneficial to some, the analysis suggests that this places primary responsibility on the woman subjected to violence for her predicament and future. This may in turn increase the risk of self-blame for those who cannot follow through with their commitment, and obscure and renounce the role and responsibility of both the counsellor and the rationalized neoliberal welfare state. In addition, the one-sided focus on the individual largely ignores the surrounding context, which may obscure men’s responsibility for violence. This may ultimately undermine the collective formation of a political subject from women’s shared experience of violence.

Introduction

Motivational interviewing (MI) is a counselling method that has spread rapidly in Sweden during the last two decades (Lindhe Söderlund, 2010, p. 17). It is presented as an evidence-based method that, through employing specific techniques, stimulates the desire to change an unwanted life situation and empower individuals through eliciting their free will (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Based on psychological theories, MI was developed during the 1980s to overcome alcohol abuse but has now spread to other welfare arenas and is used to handle various different problems (Lindhe Söderlund, 2010) such as ADHD, eating disorders, obesity, self-inflicted harm, enduring pain, and for the long-term ill who “lack motivation” to work. The focus of this article is the fact that MI is also commonly used in counselling work with women subjected to men’s violence (Helmersson, 2017). So-called evidence-based studies, in which women with experience of violence are subjected to MI, report an increased “readiness for change” in terms of leaving abusive relationships when compared to a control group (Rasmussen, Hughes, & Murray, 2008). Qualitative studies on MI report enhanced self-efficacy around avoiding violent relationships and ending violence (Hughes & Rasmussen, 2010). Local and national government authorities in Sweden recommend the method and arrange frequent training sessions to spread the method (Lindhe Söderlund, 2010, p. 18).
The empowering approach of MI has progressive connotations, and research suggests that it may be helpful in enabling women to leave violent relationships. However, from the theoretical perspective of governmentality, the rapid spread of any particular technique to handle problems should be critically scrutinized. Under such a scrutiny, MI may be also be understood as a technique for shaping subjects in ways that may facilitate the governing of social problems. Theories of governmentality understand the exertion of power as consisting not only of overt commands and formal rules, but also of techniques that shape individual subjects in ways that make them amenable to governing in alignment with the interests of power (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 2007; Larner, 2000). Using interviews with a selection of those who use and advocate MI, the aim of this article is to analyse whether and how MI may shape the subjectivity of a woman who has experienced violence in ways that make her suitable for self-governing in a context of neoliberal individualization of responsibility and austerity.

The analysis shows that MI allows the counsellor to shape the woman subjected to violence into a powerful, knowledgeable, and self-animated subject, but that this is done in a way that is designed to make her understand this as emanating from her “self”, providing the opportunity to choose a life without violence. In the concluding discussion, I deliberate on some of the political implications that may follow from this.

**Violence and care in a neoliberal welfare state**

Swedish gender-equality policy on men’s violence against women (MVAW) is known for its foundations within a structural power perspective. Many people attribute this to the struggles of feminist social movements during the 1970s and 1980s (Edwards, 2002; Helmersson, 2017; Isaksson, 2007). Through such an understanding, ending MVAW was introduced as a central goal of Swedish gender-equality policy in a government bill enacted in 1994 (Wendt Höjer, 2002). Despite a number of shifts in parliamentary majorities, ending such violence remains one of the government’s central goals: “Men’s violence against women will cease to exist” (Swedish Government, 2017). Whether this policy has de facto resulted in effective prevention, prosecution of offenders, and comprehensive support for women subjected to men’s violence is debatable (Leander, 2006), and MVAW continues to be a widespread problem, with a similar prevalence to that in other Nordic countries. Studies report women’s experience of men’s violence during a lifespan to be 40% in Sweden, 43.5% in Finland, and 50% in Denmark (Westerstrand, 2010, p. 12).

Nevertheless, this article argues for the need to examine the use of MI in a contemporary context, because the Swedish welfare state has undergone a gradual but fundamental transformation during the last couple of decades. Central elements of these changes include: alternative regulation of state-controlled arenas; privatization, outsourcing, and decentralization, which are argued to stimulate user choice; individual agency; and cost-effectiveness (Hall, 2012; Högberg & Sundin, 2014). These changes share an underlying political rationality of neoliberalism (Brown, 2006; Miller & Rose, 2008) that favours self-sufficiency, efficiency, and profitability over values such as equality and quality (Brown, 2006, p. 694, 2015, p. 10; Dean, 2010). Neoliberal governing produces individual responsibility for health (Rose, 2001), which tends to produce an understanding of individual predicaments as being the result of poor choices (Brown, 2003; Mouffe, 2005). Pykett (2012) shows how psychological theories have become extremely useful in such a neoliberal scheme of self-governing. She exemplifies this by referring to a UK government publication from 2002 which argues for the usefulness of such theories in the endeavour to disclaim responsibility. By cultivating citizens’ willingness and motivation, and by harnessing their inclination to honour their commitments, they can be “given” individual responsibility for the delivery of public services.

Feminist scholars have highlighted how neoliberal rationalities are infused with a gendered discourse and expectations of self-regulation, individual responsibility, and compliance in
a welfare-state setting (Engel, 2007; Fahlgren, Mulinari, & Sjöstedt Landén, 2016). Dahl (2012) argues that neoliberal ideals, which promote a strong, active, and responsible citizen, effectively silence vulnerability. In sum, the logics of economy and austerity, paired with the trope of individual choice and responsibility, are central traits of the Swedish welfare regime. Such developments may seriously affect work with MVAW.

**Tackling men’s violence against women: from feminist empowerment to MI**

Sweden developed into a welfare state from the 1930s onwards, with successive reforms that supported the lives of the working class, such as expanded social insurance and redistributive income-tax policies. At a later stage, reforms that targeted women were initiated, such as public care for children and the elderly and paid parental leave (Sainsbury, 1996). Support for women subjected to men’s violence and measures to combat MVAW were not prioritized because domestic violence was regarded as normal, individual, and a private matter (Wendt Höjer, 2002). NGO shelters for women subjected to men’s violence (from here on Women’s shelters) developed during the 1970s as part of a broader feminist social movement which advanced an understanding of men’s violence as a structural phenomenon affecting all women (Eduards, 2002). Taking its cues from both structural feminist and empowerment theories, a key mission was to make women aware of their collective experience of violence and thus to normalize such experiences and strengthen them to leave their abusive partner (Bender, 1999; Svensson, 2005).

In recent years, select municipalities have initiated services for women subjected to violence and a closer collaboration with some Women’s shelters. Helmersson (2017) concludes that Women’s shelter activities have become more similar to municipal social services, and that they are experiencing increased administrative workloads and focus less on influencing public opinion. Ideals of empowerment are still central to organizations working with MVAW, but its current form tends to focus on individual change rather than ways to spur collective action (Helmersson, 2017).

Because MI has a lot in common with an empowerment approach, this probably explains some of its contemporary attraction in the context of MVAW. The following is an attempt to summarize their shared ideals: The counsellor understands herself as an equal and tries to establish a collaborative partnership and alliance with the client. By respecting the client’s autonomy, the counsellor refrains from giving direct advice, and instead begins from the idea that the client knows what is best for her and can make informed choices. This will enhance the client’s self-esteem and self-efficacy, which will make her more motivated to change an unwanted life situation (Miller & Rollnick, 2013; Payne, 2016).

An important difference between empowerment theory and MI is that the latter does not express a particular interest in the surrounding context, nor does it apply a structural theoretical perspective (Herz & Johansson, 2012, p. 37). In addition, it is a method for individual meetings between counsellor and client, without any outspoken interest in collective awareness-raising or the formation of a political subject.

So what kind of subject does MI produce? In order to analyse this question, I will turn to a Foucauldian theorizing around the exercise of power through subject formation.

**Neoliberalism and subject formation**

Foucault’s theorizing, about the interwoven relations between power/knowledge and how power is exercised by shaping subjects in ways that make them amenable to governing, makes important contributions to what is often referred to as a governmentality perspective. Such a perspective allows for an analysis of the “institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics” (Foucault, 2007, p. 108) that enable and mediate the exercise of power. This approach has been used fruitfully to study neoliberal societies (Walters, 2012, p. 10) and has illustrated that, under such regimes, power is often exercised through self-regulation. This means that governing
is not exerted primarily through the use of force or command, but rather by shaping subjects in ways that make them "cooperate" (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 2007; Larner, 2000). This kind of power is generally not understood as the exertion of power by those being targeted (Foucault, 2007, p. 105) because it is accomplished through the alignment of what we believe to be true about the world and ourselves, and the interests of power (Dean, 2010). Such an understanding of subjects is founded on the premise that subjects do not exist a priori; they are not an inherent essential quality, but rather the effect of power (Foucault, 1980, p. 98, 1982). As far as neoliberal governing goes, Miller and Rose (2008, p. 213) argue that individuals have replaced the state as the primary site of governing, and Larner argues that such forms of governing “encourage people to see themselves as individualized and active subjects responsible for enhancing their own well-being” (Larner, 2000, p. 13).

A number of scholars have analysed how gender-equality policies (Alnebratt & Rönnblom, 2016; Bacchi & Eveline, 2010; Tollin, 2011) and feminist movements (Fraser, 2013; McRobbie, 2009) have been affected, altered, and developed hand in hand with neoliberalism. Oksala (2013) encourages us to look beyond the all-too-obvious transformations of the welfare state under a neoliberal regime, and focus instead on how neoliberal governmentality has changed political movements and feminist political subjects in problematic ways. Oksala (2013) argues that contemporary feminine subjects have been shaped as independent and self-interested, preoccupied with self-determination, not due to the triumph of feminism, but through the triumph of neoliberalism. From this, it follows that many of what used to be regarded as social and political issues and struggles have mutated into a personal endeavour to improve the self.

There is substantial academic interest in the critical examination of the techniques of self-regulation that are found in different welfare contexts. However, studies that critically examine the particular method of MI are scarce and, as far as I can tell by reviewing the existing literature, there are none at all examining motivational interviewing in a context of MVAW from a governmentality perspective. In addition, critical examinations of MI rarely use interviews with practitioners, educators, or government representatives as empirical source of analysis. Examining MI in the context of MVAW from a feminist governmentality perspective allows an analysis of subject formation and the intermeshing of neoliberalism and feminism, which will enable an analysis of the possible consequences for the practical work itself and for its implications on policy and the political (Mouffe, 2005). This in turn may provide additional insights into the field of governmentality studies on how approaches that set out to resist suffering and oppression form themselves into techniques of self-governing (e.g. Cruikshank, 1999; Wright Nielsen, 2009).

**A critical approach to motivational interviewing**

In an analysis of a Norwegian government programme designed to screen for and reduce alcohol consumption among expectant mothers during pregnancy, Snertingdal (2013) examines MI manuals to understand what kind of governance such a programme represents and what the social consequences may be. The author criticizes the common-sense understanding of a division between control from the outside and that from within, and highlights MI as a technique that uses self-control as a means to exert control from the outside (Snertingdal, 2013, p. 41). By the use of such techniques of self-control, the opportunity for alternative experiences and understandings is silenced. In addition, the role and responsibilities of fathers are made invisible. Snertingdal argues that the programme may run the risk of undermining the staff’s ability to help those who cannot comply with it.

By analysing educational material produced for substance-abuse clinicians, Carton (2014) understands MI as a technique to produce clinicians as (unknowing) agents for shaping client subjects suitable for the retraction of the welfare state through self-government. One of these techniques expressed in the MI vocabulary is found in the hidden ideological values expressed through the dichotomization and hierarchization of approaches to the client where the key terms explore–elicit–reflect are favoured and
contrasted with an “obsolete” approach of correct–convince–argue. Through such techniques, “the client is free to decide, yet the clinician skilfully directs this freedom” (Carton, 2014, p. 200).

MI is widely used in the Swedish social services for handling several different problems. Although the method in general sets out to empower and elicit the “free will” of the client, it tends to favour a particular kind of “will” (Lauri, 2016). Rather than being merely a tool for empowerment, MI may thus also be regarded as a manipulative technique producing compliance, something which the founders of the method in fact claimed to characterize the “earlier” MI approach they helped to create (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p. 30).

Although evidence-based studies, as mentioned in the introduction, suggest that MI may be beneficial to women struggling in a situation of abuse, a critique has been formulated against interventions based on such evidence-based studies because of its falsely proclaimed neutrality (Ferguson, 2008; Gray & McDonald, 2006). One highlighted aspect is the individual focus, a necessary requirement in control-group studies, and the subsequent undermining of measures taking a group or structural approach (Herz & Johansson, 2012; Topor, 2010). Another is the overestimated support for evidence-based methods due to publication bias, because studies that produce positive results are more often published than those which do not (Greenhalgh, Howick, & Maskrey, 2014). A third objection is that comparisons between traditional interventions and new interventions that are expected to yield results may show strong support for the new intervention. However, when such evidence-based interventions are compared with each other, it is rare for any method to come out stronger than another. It is suggested that the positive results are a consequence of higher expectations and enthusiasm from both clinicians and the subjects of these interventions, rather than the particular traits of the intervention itself (Bergmark & Lundström, 2011). Such critiques taken together draw attention to the highly political nature of supposedly neutral and evidence-based science, and support the further critical examination of evidence-based methods and policy.

**Data and methods**

Seven approximately one-hour-long telephone interviews were conducted in 2016, focusing on how MI is used, how it differs from other methods, its benefits, and the particular problem to which MI is responding. The interviewees were selected through a strategic sample with the purpose of including experiences and reflections from different organizations, regions, and levels—some working closely with women subjected to violence, and some more distantly, in different parts of the country. This was done in order to find different experiences and perspectives, rather than probing deeply into one particular group. They are presented further in the following section. The interviewees have no known relations to each other. They were informed about the aim of the study and of the measures undertaken to ensure confidentiality. The interviewees are referred to using fictitious names.

The interviews were transcribed and coded using a thematic method of inquiry. The scope of the article was defined at the outset by reviewing the existing literature and developing the analytical framework. Through a dialectic and iterative process of reading the transcripts, three themes were identified in the first step. In the second step, these themes were analysed in detail, through the lens of my analytical framework.

Because the empirical material is limited and the approach is explorative, the results should be regarded not as definitive answers but as indications that help formulate critical questions (Milchman & Rosenberg, 2010, p. 62).

**Analysis: motivational interviewing and subject formation**

The interviewees’ stories about MI and their arguments about its benefits are analysed in this section in an attempt to tease out how MI may work to shape the subject of the abused woman. It is argued that MI constitutes a governing technique to shape the woman into a more powerful, knowledgeable, and self-animated individual, and that this may downplay the counsellor’s
arduous task of directing, protecting, and caring for her. These suggestions are interpreted within the current socio-political context of the individualization of responsibility for well-being and welfare (Brown, 2003; Dean, 2010) and further discussed in the concluding discussion. The interviewees are referred to by fictitious names; Felicia works as a municipal family counsellor targeting women subjected to violence, Aleksandra works at a women’s shelter, and Charlotte works at a municipal centre for women subjected to violence. Emily and Beatrice both provide MI training to such practitioners all over the country, and Grace and Daniela work for (different) County Administrative Boards with “knowledge governing” and the implementation of policy on MVAW.

**Producing a powerful subject**

Because of my interest in what MI “is all about” and how it differs from other approaches, I asked the interviewees to describe the key features and benefits of MI, and in response they used terms like self-liberation, individual strength, capability, control, and power. Grace describes MI as a way to “support victims of crime to find egenmakt” and Daniela as a way “to [give] back power, to give them egenmakt […] to make them stronger”. The Swedish word “egenmakt” literally translates into “one’s own power”. Felicia associates MI with mindfulness and argues that they are very much connected because of their shared belief in an individual’s “own ability to handle their situation”; she says that using MI in this context allows the counsellor: “To tease out the inherent individual capability in human beings”. Emily says that motivating for change is about liberating oneself from the situation in which you find yourself. Daniela argues that the previous dominant approach towards women subjected to violence has been to regard them merely as victims who do not understand what is in their own best interest, and in contrast “MI is a way to, like, give back their control”, in order to, as Aleksandra puts it: “make decisions about your own life”.

As illustrated above, MI is associated with words like individual strength, individual capability, individual control, individual power, and self-liberation. Using governmentality, MI can be seen as a highly potent tool that allows for the (re)shaping of the woman into a powerful subject who can (re)gain control (Foucault, 2007; Oksala, 2013). The emphasis on individual empowerment and on women subjected to men’s violence as not being victims fits well into a contemporary Women’s shelter empowerment approach (Helmersson, 2017) and current (neo)liberal feminist individualized discourses (Fraser, 2013; McRobbie, 2009; Oksala, 2013; Rottenberg, 2014).

Interestingly, the interviewees did not connect MI to awareness raising, direction, or protection, although these ideals have been central to Women’s shelters. Of course, this is not evidence that such links are in fact absent in the actual counselling, but Charlotte says that, when meeting women who have experienced violence, there is always a risk that “you take over in your frustration of witnessing” the suffering of this individual, “and that’s something we should absolutely not do”. Moreover, Felicia argues that “a lot of people are so afraid of change […] they don’t even think about it, only about protection”. Such statements may indicate that MI constructs the subject of the woman in ways that emphasize individual agency and change and downplay both awareness raising and protection (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 2007).

According to the interviewees’ accounts above, MI allows counsellors to produce a context in which women subjected to violence can (re)claim, or are given, power and control over their lives. The role of the counsellor is thus to release the inherent power that is hidden from, or out of reach of, the woman. From a governmentality perspective, this would mean that, in the process of (re)shaping women subjected to men’s violence into strong and independent subjects, the counsellors are themselves produced as powerful subjects because they are understood to enable such a process.

The mere understanding that power is something that can be given is an interesting claim as it stands in opposition to the theoretical roots of empowerment. Helmersson and Jönson (2015) conclude from their survey of Women’s shelters and municipal counselling centres that the contemporary understanding and usage of empowerment in the context of MVAW has drifted
away from a collective project in which subordinated groups collectively claim power. Instead, empowerment has become a project of individual change. This can be further understood in light of a more general “Western” tendency towards formations of subjectivity that are seen as increasingly responsible for choosing a positive state of mind and how to act accordingly (Ahmed, 2010; Binkley, 2011). This may brand vulnerability as a defect and undermine collective political projects (Berg, 2017; Dahl, 2012).

Producing a knowledgeable subject

Let us now turn to how MI is understood to produce a milieu within which this giving of power is possible. Central to this task is the counsellor’s ability to enable knowing. MI supposedly allows the woman, by listening carefully, to see the truth about herself. Charlotte says that living in an abusive relationship “makes you lose yourself”, but with MI it is possible to find “motivation for what you want yourself”. Similarly, Daniela argues that living in a context of violence makes it:

... difficult to realize what you’re in [...] and then I, being on the other side, want to motivate this person to see this and be able to leave. (Daniela)

According to Aleksandra, MI is a way for abused women to discover “the truth about their situation”, which according to Grace enables one to “gaze upon yourself” and to “figure out what you want yourself”. Similarly, Felicia tells me that MI is about changing your situation from your own perspective, from what the women want themselves, and that this state of mind is accomplished through the explicit absence of authoritarian advice. This is done by “being perceptive to their own way of thinking”, and by “teasing out their own thoughts and capabilities around changing one’s own situation” (Felicia). In a similar fashion, Grace says it is about “supporting the individual to figure out for themselves how to proceed”. Meeting the woman with respect and “listening to their opinions and thoughts” is a key component of MI, and this creates an atmosphere of trust (Felicia). This, according to Grace, allows abused women “to regain their self-esteem”, with MI being a way to understand, see, and “reconquer the self”.

Thinking with Foucault (1980, 2007), knowledge should not be understood as separable from power because power relations are intermeshed with knowledge production. Following this line of thought, the quotes above suggest that, by listening to the woman’s opinions and thoughts, with an explicit absence of authoritarian advice, MI facilitates the teasing out of what she wants for herself, from her own perspective. This enables and motivates her to gaze upon herself, to see the truth about herself, and to reconquer herself. On the one hand, such statements resonate well with the awareness-raising ambitions of feminist and empowerment theory. On the other, and quite opposed to such ambitions, this knowledge is produced at an individual level, as Oksala (2013) suggests, without reference to the surrounding context—either other women’s experience, or the supporting structures of the welfare state.

The accounts about MI given above suggest that the woman subjected to men’s violence is understood as the one who already knows what is right for her. Paradoxically, however, MI serves to tease out a particular gaze and knowledge about the self—as powerful, strong, independent, and with autonomous capabilities. The will and wishes of the woman are simultaneously understood as particular and inherent, and as having to be teased out (or produced) from the outside, by the counsellor. From a governmentality perspective, MI may thus be seen as a technique to shape an individualized and knowledgeable subject in ways that facilitate self-reflection and a particular understanding of the self (Foucault, 1980, 2007).

Producing a self-animated and responsible subject?

What is the purpose of shaping the subject as knowledgeable, capable, and powerful, as depicted above? What is the empowered subject expected to do with her regained insights into and control
over herself? As I will illustrate in this section, such agency is understood to produce a self-animated subject, i.e. the ability to act without external stimuli (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 2007). Aleksandra says that MI is about finding motivation for action, and Charlotte says it is about “awakening their own motivation for change” so that they “feel themselves that they want change”. The aspect of motivating for change, argues Emily, is in fact what differentiates MI from other counselling methods. Charlotte explains:

In terms of leaving a relationship, it has to grow from themselves [...] you can’t just tell them: “you’re living in an abusive relationship so you have to leave him” [...] You can’t approach an individual who has been subjected to violence and do the same thing as the abuser [...] like, run them over and like: “this is how it is!” (Charlotte)

As Carton (2014) has pointed out, producing dichotomies between MI and other approaches makes it seem like the only rational and empathetic approach. Here, Charlotte is pitting explicit directions and advice against the subtlety of MI by reference to abuse (“do the same thing as the abuser”). Using a similar logic, Charlotte argues that separation is the change that the abused woman wants, and underlines that, if it is to be successful, “it has to come from themselves”. Emily also tells me that, in MI, “autonomy is emphasized [...] to always be able to see that it is the individual who decides”. Similarly, Daniela explains to me the significance of having the choice to make changes emanating from the self: because it will strengthen the difficult decision to break up. Because if you are made part of the decision-making: “Do you want to do this?” and not just have it presented to you, there is a bigger chance you’ll accept it”. Emily argues in a similar way and brings the element of resistance into the picture:

Let’s say that you’re the one subjected to violence, and I come in and I want you to make changes that, from my perspective, are good for you. But you don’t want to and then it’s like, resistance occurs, and rather than trying to convince you, I say “Okay, you’re right, you can decide for yourself!”, then there is no more resistance. (Emily)

It seems that the central goal of shaping the woman subjected to violence into a powerful and knowledgeable subject is to produce action and change. With MI, such a change is easier to elicit, because it is a method that allows the woman “to see the truth” and, when she is provided with a choice, an understanding is produced that the decision comes from herself. This, argues Emily, undermines resistance and, thinking with Foucault (1979), produces a docile subject. I use the word docile here with reference to both its meaning of “easily taught” and “compliant”. This is because of the interviewees’ reference to MI enabling the “teaching” of a particular knowledge about the self, that women are provided with a choice which produces certain actions that emanate from this and strengthens the decision, i.e. the subject is shaped to “cooperate” (Foucault, 2007; Larner, 2000). This is understood by Charlotte, Daniela, and Emily as creating a bigger chance of the woman both honouring her commitment and accepting the outcome. Thinking with Pykett (2012), MI is a technique for cultivating citizens’ motivation to take individual responsibility and a way of disclaiming the responsibility of others, such as public services or Women’s shelters.

Handing over responsibility to the woman subjected to violence to decide for herself also reduces the counsellor’s arduous task of convincing her. In other words, by undermining resistance, MI produces “joint” decisions to take action, whilst at the same time it downplays the responsibility of the counsellor. Felicia argues:

MI helps you get around that resistance because you ask for and listen to the individual’s own ideas and thoughts and it’s important [to get across that] no one else is going to solve this for this person; rather, you allow each and every one to have their own ideas and thoughts regarding their own life. And that’s how you overcome the resistance. (Felicia)

Like Emily, Felicia highlights that, in allowing the decision to come from the women subjected to violence, resistance to action is undermined. Felicia also adds to the picture the idea that such an approach will make it clear to the woman that it is up to her to act, that no one else will. In other
words, not only is an MI approach expected to produce a stronger acceptance of the future outcome of her situation, it also makes it clear to the woman that she, and not the counsellor (or anyone else), is expected to solve her own predicament. Emily says that “if you want to remain in the [violent] relationship, that’s up to you”, and, on the same topic, Grace says that MI may provide the “power to choose a life without violence”. She elaborates:

MI is about handing over to the person I meet, to find her own way in this. Which is something I find appealing, that it’s not me, the welfare state representative, who’s expected to come up with the solution […] Thank God, we’re allowed to live our lives as we choose, even if it’s really painful to see someone returning to their abusive relationship or even risking their life. It’s still the individual who has to choose for herself.
(Grace)

Thinking with Foucault (1979, 2007) and Dean (2010), this last section of the analysis highlights MI as a technique to produce a docile subject and undermine resistance by handing over the responsibility for their well-being to the women subjected to men’s violence themselves. By doing this, it is made clear to the woman that it is she herself who has to generate the expected change, which in turn increases her acceptance of “joint” decisions—as her choice—with the further aid of the “welfare state representative”, as Grace puts it. I interpret Grace’s account as suggesting that, even though this may be painful to witness, the counsellor must disassociate herself from the pain because the individual has an undeniable right, or perhaps an obligation, to “choose”. Such a demand for disassociation has been observed in other studies as well, underlining the distancing effects of neoliberal rationalization and standardization between social workers and clients (Lauri, 2016).

This boost to the woman subjected to violence may be beneficial for those who are eventually able to follow through with a decision to make changes in their lives. However, I would also suggest that the emphasis on personal choice runs the risk of denying any alternative understandings or options for those who cannot live up to the ideal of the autonomous and strong self (Oksala, 2011; Snertingdal, 2013). This begs the question of what may happen if the woman is not able to leave her abusive relationship, despite having been “given” the power to do so. This is something that Aleksandra deliberated on when discussing the increased popularity of MI:

I hope it’s popular because it can feel like, a “pep” […] but I’m afraid that it’s popular because it’s individualistic and can aid in producing self-blame. […] that it’s a characteristic of our time that you’re responsible for your own situation. (Aleksandra)

Shifting the responsibility from the counsellor to the abused woman may lead to self-blame for not being able to avoid violence, according to Aleksandra. Perhaps the issue of choice and individual responsibility is a plausible explanation for the claim, from one of the interviewees, that using MI is less stressful for counsellors because it undermines resistance and makes the work smoother. This makes sense, given the gradual downsizing of the welfare state during the past few decades, which leaves those engaged with women subjected to violence (in social services and Women’s shelters) with less time and resources. In fact, Beatrice has precisely such fears:

You go from a structural level and instead talk about how you, on an individual level, can motivate people to live their lives more effectively, so they cost the state less. […] By focusing on her, like her lack of good choices, from now on, she’s supposed to make good decisions for herself and for her children. That reduces the responsibility of the welfare state […] but then again, this is nothing new, society hasn’t protected women and children before either, but there is a risk that this will further increase the focus on her. […] so I’m thinking that this method, in combination with these developments, like […] efficiency and individual responsibility and, like, lack of a structural way of thinking; structures of poverty, race and gender, then this method can become quite dangerous … (Beatrice)

Beatrice argues that individualization makes it easier to blame a victim of abuse for her predicament as being due to poor choices, and this in turn relieves the welfare state of its responsibility and reduces costs. In light of the austerity and feminized responsibility that characterize neoliberal welfare regimes, I suggest that the individualization of responsibility for an abused woman’s
situation and future, which MI seems to aid in producing, may silence the possible need for direction and protection. It may also undermine the ability of counsellors to help those who cannot follow through with the expected change (Snertingdal, 2013). From this perspective, the understanding expressed in the interviews, that power is an entity that can be given, may seem problematic as it suggests that, once the woman subjected to violence has been given back power to control her life, this power remains with her regardless of context. From such an understanding, it may follow that it is up to her to choose a life without violence once she has returned to her everyday abusive life.

Concluding discussion

The analysis has shown that MI allows counsellors to shape the woman subjected to violence into a powerful, knowledgeable, and self-animated subject in a way that makes her understand this as coming from her “true self”, “allowing” her to choose a life without violence. What are the political implications of this? The rationality of individual choice has been proven a key technique in neoliberal governing attempts to reduce state responsibilities and impose austerity (Brown, 2006; Larsson, Letell, & Thörn, 2012, pp. 263–264; Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 202), and in this context MI may disguise the role of the counsellor in actively producing a certain “willing”, or self-governing subject (Larner, 2000). This may obscure the inseparability of the exercise of power from the outside, from the governing of the self (Snertingdal, 2013).

Social work in general comprises a mixture of approaches and methods at both the individual and the structural level. Given that MI focuses on the individual rather than on the surrounding context (Herz & Johansson, 2012, p. 37), this may further undermine a structural and contextual approach to MVAW. Helmersson (2017) argues that during the 1990s a structural perspective on MVAW was prominent, but during the 2000s and 2010s a perspective that emphasizes violence as an individual predicament became dominant.

MI fits neatly with contemporary liberal feminism as sketched by scholars like McRobbie (2009) and Rottenberg (2014), with its focus on building self-esteem, individual vigour, and agency, and may reinforce current neoliberal welfare regimes’ emphasis on individual choice and responsibility (Oksala, 2013). This in turn suggests that so-called evidence-based methods such as MI may undermine awareness-raising approaches and the formulation of a subject who understands men’s violence as structural and shared collectively by women. Evidence-based studies should thus be understood as highly political and not generating the neutral knowledge they are often presented as producing.

Although the empirical material for this analysis is limited, the tendency to emphasize the woman’s individual ability and responsibility for handling the violence on her own may implicitly suggest that failing to do so is the result of poor choices, a logic also found in other contexts (Brown, 2003; Mouffe, 2005). This is not to suggest that those who use MI are willingly compliant in such a scheme, and, as illustrated in the analysis, some counsellors express hesitation about its use because they fear MI may produce self-blame, and claim that it owes its popularity to being a cheap intervention. The unreserved promotion of its use expressed by some of the interviewees could, however, be understood as governmentality proper, as contemporary dominant rationalities hold the neoliberal logics of MI to be true (Foucault, 2007, p. 105). What further insights may these findings provide for feminist politics? Although the public work with MVAW consists of a lot more than MI counselling, the alleged structural approach to violence in Swedish gender-equality policy seems not to resonate well with MI. In opposition to such official declarations, this analysis may suggest that MI is part of a broader assemblage of techniques to (re)produce women’s responsibility for men’s violence. Such a scheme may in turn further draw attention away from men’s responsibility for violence, abused women’s need for direction and care, and the responsibility of the welfare state. It may also undermine the collective formation of a political subject out of women’s shared experience of violence. Consequently, we need to be wary of efforts
to generate individual empowerment, because they may also constitute harmful techniques for self-governing (Cruikshank, 1999; Wright Nielsen, 2009). The results should thus be seen in light of how contemporary gender-equality policies and feminist movements have been affected, altered, and developed in accordance with neoliberal rationalities (Alnebratt & Rönnblom, 2016; Engel, 2007; Oksala, 2013).

How can one understand the findings of this study in relation to broader processes of state transformation and neoliberal governmentality? Neoliberal governmentality shapes humans to see themselves as individualized and active subjects responsible for enhancing their own well-being. MI may thus be understood as part of an assemblage of governing techniques that, taken together, constitute a broader shift in welfare state transformation, in terms of its reach, organization, and techniques in ways that reduce government responsibilities and obscure the difference between exercises of power from the outside and the governing of the self. This may make awareness raising, resistance, and the formation of collective political subjects more difficult.

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