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Enacting shared narratives in work counselling: A narrative study of how work counsellors can support service users in the process of returning to work

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Abstract

Work counselling is complex and challenging. Research highlights the importance of user involvement and client-professional relationships for successful counselling outcomes. In this narrative case study, we explored how work counsellors may support service users in the process of returning to work, by focusing on meaning-making processes in counselling. We created data through a narrative interview and conducted a narrative analysis of the data. Our findings show how counsellors may support users through being open for multiple understandings of the situation, in particular users' ongoing narratives. Further, our findings show how believing in, and acting on, users' ongoing plots, may help in the process of returning to work. We discuss how our findings of counsellors' role in meaning-making processes may shed light on how user involvement can be put into practice, but also how this may involve some dilemmas.

Keywords: Guidance, supervision, working relation, social work, user involvement, qualitative research.

Norwegian abstract

NAV-veiledning er komplekst og utfordrende, og tidligere forskning fremhever betydningen av brukermedvirkning og relasjonen mellom veileder og bruker for utfallet av veiledningen. I denne narrative casestudien har vi undersøkt hvordan NAV-veiledere kan støtte brukere i prosessen med å komme tilbake til arbeid, ved å fokusere på meningsskapende prosesser i veiledningen. Vi skapte data gjennom et narrativt intervju og utførte en narrativ analyse av dataene. Våre funn viser hvordan veiledere kan støtte brukere gjennom å være åpne for flere forståelser av situasjonen, og spesielt for

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brukernes pågående narrativer om den. Videre viser våre funn hvordan det å tro på og å handle i tråd med brukernes plot, kan bidra inn i prosessen med å komme tilbake til arbeid. Vi diskuterer hvordan våre funn om veilederes rolle i meningsskapende prosesser kan belyse hvordan brukermedvirkning kan omsettes i praksis, men også hvordan dette kan innebære noen dilemmaer.

Norwegian keywords: Rådgivning, arbeidsrelasjon, sosialt arbeid, brukermedvirkning, kvalitativ forskning.

Introduction

The Norwegian welfare system is a service-intensive organization that provides the public with economic benefits as well as help, support, and treatment (Vabø, 2014). In the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), the context of this study, one of the main tasks is to counsel and support persons who have lost their connection to work (Halvorsen et al., 2020; Helgøy et al., 2010). Service users in work counselling are diverse, facing a wide range of challenges that may have multiple causes and be difficult to define. There are no simple solutions for these unique and complex problems, often referred to as 'wicked problems' in the health and social sector (Rittel & Webber, 1973). This complexity in work counseling highlights the need for individual user involvement (Prop. 33 (2015-2016)).

Klausen (2016) defines individual user involvement as the right to information, participation and real impact on one's services. However, there are many different understandings of user involvement. These range from viewing it as a democratizing concept that safeguards users' rights, to a consumer-based concept that assumes individuals know best what services they need, to a co-production of services concept (Brandsen et al., 2018; McLaughlin, 2009). Consequently, user involvement will also be translated into practice in different ways (Askheim & Andersen, 2023). In this study, we understand individual user involvement as both a democratic right, as a way to ensure personally adjusted services, and as a way of co-producing effective services.

User involvement is complicated by different stakeholders having different interests in relation to it, and because the concept also entails a question of power (Askheim & Andersen, 2023; McLaughlin, 2009). One criticism is that user involvement at the system level can be a way for organizations to save money by shifting responsibility to the user, without actually giving them real power (Askheim & Andersen, 2023). Bouchard (2016) indicates that it can be difficult for professionals to relinquish power to users, and other studies show that work counselling often features an authoritative language and low levels of involvement and cooperation (Andersen, 2020; Høiby & Ranger, 2019). Further, work counsellors can be understood as street-level bureaucrats, who are required to help translate policy into practice (Lipsky, 2010). This role often involves balancing the needs of users with the institution's frameworks and requirements, leading to dilemmas of prioritization that require professional judgment (Lipsky, 2010; Røhnebæk, 2016). Research shows that welfare organizations with their system logic often fail to incorporate service users' experiences, downplaying the relational and contextual aspects of returning to work and overemphasizing individual factors like personal motivation (Danneris & Nielsen, 2018). Studies in work counseling contexts have similarly shown that counselors may feel controlled from above, with limited time and space to build therapeutic relationships and ensure user involvement (Matthies et al., 2018). Research also shows that users may have different backgrounds for involvement, for example varying cognitive ability and different desires to participate (Skarli, 2021). Summarized, these are some of the factors that make individual user involvement complex and challenging. Askheim and Andersen (2023) underline the need to explore and analyze the concept in the context it is practiced, such as in the counselling relationships in this study.

Several studies highlight the importance of client-professional relationships in the success of counseling processes. Empirical studies of user perspectives have found that helpful counselling relationships are characterized by recognition (Skjefstad, 2015) and help remove obstacles, allowing users to focus on progress (Natland et al., 2019). However, such studies also show that counselling

relationships can sometimes be unhelpful and worsen the situation for unemployed individuals (Ljungberg et al., 2016; Stenbrenden et al., 2018).

Further, research and academic literature highlight the importance of meaning-making in work counseling relationships for successful return-to-work processes. Danneris (2018) found that progress in counseling is linked to experiencing meaningfulness, while regression is linked to experiencing meaninglessness. Strong (2003) argues that counsellors should focus on the meaning-making of the person being counselled and use this as a starting point. He emphasizes the importance of creating "genuine moments of meaning-making" with the person being counseled to give new meaning to their situation and facilitate changes in their lives. According to Knizek et al. (2021), meaning-making processes can help bring order to chaotic and difficult situations and should therefore be emphasized in helping contexts. Further, based on their study of service users' narratives, Natland and Celik (2015) emphasise how working with narratives can contribute to work counsellors' sensitivity and understanding of users' perspectives. Similarly, in a previously published article about service users' experiences of work counselling, we argue that knowledge about narrative meaning-making can help understand and support the existential challenges faced by individuals in work counseling (Sorgendal & Reed, 2023). Although some research exists on meaning-making in counseling processes, more knowledge is needed on how this unfolds (Knizek et al., 2021).

Thus, studying the communication between work counsellor and service user may create valuable knowledge concerning user involvement and how to assist individuals with health problems back to work. Furthermore, exploring how meaning-making is part of this communicative relationship may be particularly interesting. In our previous article, we analyzed meaning-making in counselling processes through service users' narratives (Sorgendal & Reed, 2023). In this article, our aim is to explore how work counsellors may support service users in the process of returning to work, by focusing on their ongoing meaning-making processes in counselling. We chose to do this by applying narrative methods, as described in our methods section, and by drawing on narrative theory, which we present in the following.

Theoretical resources

Striving for meaning and purpose in life is fundamentally human (Frankl, 1963). Ricoeur (1991) emphasizes how narratives help understand human meaning-making. In narrative theory meaning is understood as coherence between events in our lives (Mattingly, 1998). Through narrative thinking we create meaning from the constant stream of events in our lives. We do so by connecting our past and present experiences and our visions for the future by means of a plot (Bruner, 1986). The plot is a thematic thread that structures choices, planned and unplanned actions, and events into causal connections (Polkinghorne, 1995).

However, Ricoeur further underlines that narratives also help understand human actions. He argues that narrative is not only a way of thinking, but also a way of acting, as our ongoing narrative meaning-making guides what we do (Ricoeur, 1991). Thus, narrative meaning-making is not just a thought process we engage in to make meaning from past events, but rather an active process of thinking and acting that we engage in as we go along with our lives. Humans also use narratives to communicate with others, to convey what has happened and how they understand it, and as a ground on which to decide how to act (Mattingly, 1998). Based on our previous experiences and our visions for the future, we try out possibilities for meaning not only through our thoughts and actions, but also through communication with others (Mattingly, 1998; Ricoeur, 1984). To create meaning we sometimes need for others to provide emotional and practical support. To acquire this, we need for them to understand and help enact our ongoing narratives (Reed et al., 2020). However, there are several possible ways to create meaning from the same events, requiring us to negotiate our understandings and action choices with others (Alsaker, 2009; Ricoeur, 1984).

This adheres to narratives having a creative function and an ordering function (Josephsson et al., 2006; Ricoeur, 1984). The creative function involves possibilities of exploring, trying out and interpreting how actions and events can be connected in multiple ways by different plots to contribute coherence and meaning. The ordering function involves how the narrative when 'set' and communicated helps understand single actions or events in relation to other actions/situations over time and to choose how to act. However, our ongoing narratives may be fragile, and new events may require us to re-enter the creative process and renegotiate them. Further, it is important to note that these processes of communication and negotiation concerning narrative meaning-making are often fast, subtle, and implicit (Alsaker, 2009; Ricoeur, 1984).

In this article, narrative theory about meaning-making both inspired and informed our analysis and interpretation, and we will now present our narrative research approach.

Method

This narrative case study is part of a larger research project focusing on how counsellors in NAV can contribute to service users' processes of returning to work. The project is grounded in social constructionism (Gergen, 2015), understanding counselling as a hermeneutic and socially constructed process (Strong, 2003).

We chose a narrative method for this study as narrative methods help create knowledge about contexts, complexities and possible understandings of unfolding events (Polkinghorne, 1995). Furter, narrative methods and theory may be particularly valuable in exploring human actions and experiences (Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1995; Ricoeur, 1984), such as the counselling process in focus of this study. We chose a case study design to analyse, interpret and discuss the findings in depth.

Recruitment of participants

For the research project as a whole, four counsellors and four service users were recruited in pairs and interviewed individually. However, for this particular study, we focus on data created with one of the counsellors, "Anne". The interview with Anne gave particularly interesting data related to the aim of the study.

To recruit participants, the first author contacted the leaders at three unemployment offices particularly focused on counselling, asking for permission and help to recruit counsellors willing to participate in an interview. Inclusion criteria were counsellors who work with individuals in need of extensive counselling and who have competence and interest in counselling techniques and attitudes. The four counsellors recruited were then asked to invite one of the individuals they counsel to also take part in the study. Inclusion criteria for users were that they had been registered at NAV for more than one year, and that both the service user and the counsellor had experienced the counselling as helpful in the service users process of returning to work. What was considered 'helpful' was up to the participants themselves to define.

Data generation

The first author conducted an individual interview with Anne, using a narrative approach inspired by Rosenthal (2003). The interview opened with "When you are ready, I will ask you to tell your story about the counselling with Kirsten at NAV". Anne was asked to talk freely focusing on what she experienced as important. Afterwards the first author asked follow-up questions, to get more elaborate descriptions, for example "Can you tell me a little bit more about the first contact you had with Kirsten?". The interview lasted for 1 hour 33 minutes, was sound recorded and then transcribed by a research assistant. The transcribed material constituted 24 pages.

Data analysis

We conducted a narrative analysis of the material, inspired by Polkinghorne (1995). In narrative analysis different actions and happenings are drawn together by means of a plot. Following Polkinghorne, narrative analysis starts with an end result moving backwards exploring what may have contributed to this result. To explore how work counsellors may help individuals back to work, we therefore sought to create data about successful work counselling processes, and in the analysis, we explored how this success may have come about. Furthermore, we drew on narrative theory of meaning-making in our analysis and interpretations, focusing on how human meaning-making unfolds as often implicit, but always social processes (Ricoeur, 1984).

To start the analysis, the first author read the data material several times. First openly to get an overview, and then more focused, searching for events that seemed interesting and significant in relation to the aim of the study (Mattingly, 1998). Anne's narration of what she identified as a turning point very early in her counselling relationship with Kirsten, surprised the first author. The event sparked her interest in why Anne and Kirsten seemed to move forward in their process so fast. The first author understood this as a significant event which could serve as a "point of departure" for the further analysis exploring how this counselling process had evolved in a helpful manner. The first author searched the material for other parts of data that could help shed light on this significant event.

The first author then presented and discussed these parts of data and her preliminary analysis and interpretation with the second author. From this chosen data material, the authors created the narrative presented in the findings section, together with the authors' interpretations of how this came about. It is important to note that these are the researchers' interpretations and that there may be several other possible interpretations (Polkinghorne, 1995).

Ethical considerations

This project meets the standards for privacy requirements set by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD/SIKT, Project number 445502). Before the interview, the participant received written information about the study and her possibility to withdraw at any time, and signed a written consent form. The data material is anonymized by changing names and details.

The first author has experience as a work counsellor and is employed at NAV. This can involve both challenges and advantages for the study. One challenge may be overlooking elements that are familiar to counsellors but may be puzzling to others. To avoid this this the first author discussed possible interpretations with the co-author and other co-researchers. An advantage may be understanding the significance and depth of the challenges the counsellors are facing in their work, and of being interested in the small details in the counselling. Further, being interviewed by what may be understood as a colleague may have affected the participant. This may have led the participant to think that the interviewer understands the difficulties of the work, and therefore she could talk more freely. However, it may also have led her to want to "perform well", saying "the right things", as individuals seek to present themselves well (Goffman, 1978). To support Anne in being comfortable with talking freely, the first author talked to her ahead of the interview about the difficulties of counselling in a job centre context and of herself making mistakes. Anne later shared episodes where she failed in the counselling process, suggesting that she felt she could be open.

Managers in NAV know which counsellors may have participated in the study, and this poses some extra challenges in keeping the participant anonymous. However, the events presented in this article could have been told by any of the four counsellors interviewed in the project, contributing to some anonymity. Additionally, the way Anne handled the situation may be seen as a strength and is not likely to contribute any negative consequences for her if recognized by readers.

Further the service user, Kirsten, knows that her counsellor was participant in the study. This means we continuously had to consider how what we present in this article can affect both Anne and Kirsten. Therefore, we sought to present our findings and interpretations in a sensitive and nuanced manner to

minimize the risk of negative emotional or relational consequences for the persons involved. Further, the counselling relationship between Anne and Kirsten was coming to an end, and a long time has now passed since the interviews, contributing to diminishing such consequences.

Findings

The aim of this study was to explore how work counsellors may support service users in the process of returning to work, by focusing on their ongoing meaning-making processes in counselling. Through our narrative in this section, we present our main findings and interpretations of how work counsellor Anne seems to support service user Kirsten through building on her own narrative understandings of the situation.

The turning point

Anne had worked as a work counsellor for several years at the time we interviewed her and had been counselling Kirsten for about two years. Kirsten had been out of work for a few years and had tried several different work practices and measures to get back into work. The counselling process with Anne had proved helpful for Kirsten, and we asked Anne about what she experienced as the turning point.

Anne told about how she experienced that the turning point in the counselling of Kirsten happened early in their relationship, when they had figured out that Kirsten should try a shift of career to work in caring practices. This decision was built on Kirsten's own wishes, Anne emphasized, believing that this would increase her chances of success. The first author followed up by asking: "What makes you think of this as the turning point?". Anne answered: "Because that was the first time as a recipient of work counselling by NAV that Kirsten was genuinely allowed to make the initiative in her own situation, her own life." She underlined: "That is, she was in the driver's seat, deciding where to go."

How did this come about? At first, we understood this turning point to be about counselling Kirsten to do what she was motivated for. However, while analyzing the material further, we suggest that placing Kirsten in the driver's seat was about something more than that. It was about staying open to several understandings of what had happened in previous work placements and handing Kirsten power of definition. As we show in the following, we suggest that Anne made an important choice about what to make of the information handed over to her by a previous work counsellor, starting out on new terms.

Starting out on new terms

During the interview, Anne told about when she received Kirsten's case and took over as her counsellor: When they started their counselling relationship, Kirsten had several negative experiences with work placements arranged by the unemployment office behind her. Her previous work counsellor had explained this to Anne as being a result of Kirsten's personality. "The feedback given was that she had a bit of a 'difficult personality', if we can call it that", Anne said.

From what Anne shared here, we understand that Kirsten's case was handed over to her together with a set understanding of the situation created by the previous counsellor and mainly based on previous work leaders' feedback. It seemed that Kirsten's own understanding of the situation was not communicated to Anne at all. As we will show in the following, Anne chose to contest what might be a practice of excluding Kirstens understanding, in our interpretation drawing on her narrative resources of creativity in exploring Kirsten's own experiences (Bruner, 1986; Josephsson et al., 2006).

Staying open to several understandings

As we show in the further presentation of our narrative about Anne's experiences, her decision of supporting Kirsten's wishes was based on a stance to stay open to several understandings of what had gone wrong in previous work practices, rather than blindly supporting the logic presented to her by the previous work counsellor: Anne said that she was very concerned with meeting Kirsten with an open

mind, and not to be affected by the previous work counsellors' perceptions. She shared her reflections of how there could be several reasons why the last work placement did not work: "There do exist bad work leaders out there, that we know. And it could have been an unlucky match between Kirsten's personality and the work leaders." Anne continued: "It could also be that she was a bit insecure, and that this left it difficult for her to bring out the best in herself… So, there could have been several reasons why the previous work placements didn't work out." Anne further listed several other possible explanations, without herself choosing a particular one to believe in.

As can be understood from this, Anne could imagine several different ways of making-meaning of why Kirsten's previous work placements had not worked out. However, she chose to leave this open, and did not choose a particular narrative to believe in when starting her collaboration with Kirsten. Interpreting this in light of the process of narrative meaning-making as described in our introduction, we understand this as Anne lingering in the creative and interpretive space of narrative meaning-making (Alsaker & Josephsson, 2010; Josephsson et al., 2006), choosing to explore and stay open to different possible meanings of the situation. Further, she refrains from setting and communicating an understanding of the situation.

Anne signals an awareness of how several explanations, or plots, can be viable at the same time, as is also described by narrative theory (Polkinghorne, 1995). She does not accept a previous employer's or the previous counsellor's explanations as "the truth" of what happened. We understand that she deliberately holds on to the multiplicity of the situation. As narratives have two important functions, both providing a creative, interpretative space with multiplicity, but also an ordering function of the plot, narrative theory suggests that our understanding of what has happened in the past is important to guide our current actions (Mattingly, 1998). Thus, without an explanation, will not Anne lack a direction of her counselling work?

Choosing to believe in Kirsten's understanding

Anne further showed to how she chose to explore and be guided by Kirsten's understanding. During the interview, Anne said that it is important to her that users experience being met with respect by her. Anne described how this meant to listen, and to have faith in Kirsten's story: "When she shared her understanding of this work placement that didn't work; how she felt she had done everything she should, offered all that she had, and worked much overtime, but still wasn't respected, I needed to believe in it!" She continued: "I needed to trust her version of the story and make that version the starting point of our work together," Anne underlined that she sees Kirsten's explanation as Kirsten's subjective understanding. And that she, herself, could also make up her own subjective understandings, but she would not have the grounds to set aside Kirsten's version. Based on these arguments she underlined that which story she chose to believe in would greatly affect her plans for further counselling of Kirsten.

Thus, Anne acknowledged there may be several different understandings of what went wrong in earlier work placements, but she chose to explore and make Kirsten's understanding their mutual starting point by which to move together from. In light of previous narrative research on collective meaning-making (Reed, 2020), we understand that Anne here chose to invite herself into Kirstens ongoing meaning-making process, building on Kirsten's current understanding of a plot. Kirsten had described herself as a hard-working and motivated employee, who was disrespected, taken advantage of, and treated badly by previous work leaders. Adhering to this plot, Anne and Kirsten therefore chose to keep trying out work placements with new leaders and tasks in other sectors to see if they could work out. However, in the following we will show how trying out what we understand as a shared narrative was also challenging for Anne.

Awareness of power

Anne told in the interview that she knew she had great power as a work counsellor: "I had power, lots of power, I had the power to help her pursue her wish, and of finding employers I thought could work."

Anne reflected on how her power as a work counsellor involved the power of granting support: "I would not have chosen this placement if I didn't think she could make use of resources she already had. And I had the power to grant a course", but also power of definition: "I had the power to choose to believe her and to take her seriously or not, right?" She continued: "To put it bluntly; everything I do is affected by the imbalance of the situation. I can choose to not take her seriously; I can take away her power and misuse my own." Anne further highlighted the range of her power: "I choose who fulfils certain criteria for help, I interpret the judicial framework, and I interpret others' situations.

Thus, we understand that for Kirsten to create meaning by the plot of being resourceful and fit for work within caring practices, she needed Anne to take part in this ongoing narrative. As a service provider, Anne had the power of choosing whether to do so or not, which has also been described by Mattingly (1998). Anne seemed very aware of how power was distributed in their counselling relationship and understood the importance of using this power to work with Kirsten's understanding of the situation to make sure they pulled in the same direction and together created a drive towards Kirsten's goals. However, with power Anne also assumed responsibility, and as we show in the following this created some dilemmas for her.

Being in a narrative dilemma

Anne talked about how supporting Kirstens understanding of the situation, brought about some dilemmas: Helping Kirsten try another work practice would involve the risk failing once again. Could she do this while trusting solely in Kirsten's own understanding of her strengths as well as previous failures, or should she seek confirmation from others?

Anne told that before she granted funding for studies within health science and a work placement in healthcare, she chose to contact a nurse who knew Kirsten well from following up Kirsten's daughter and her family. She underlined that Kirsten had approved of her doing so. She wanted confirmation from this nurse of their understanding that Kirsten has the personal resources needed to work within healthcare. The nurse did confirm this and underlined how Kirsten had been resourceful while her daughter was ill. Anne explained that she views all experiences, positive or negative, as possibilities of learning. However, she could not just see how it went with Kirsten in the health field without knowing more about the conditions for mastery. She said: "We can't just randomly throw people out in work placement and wait to see if it ends well or not" and explained this with a sense of ethical responsibility of not exposing individuals and workplaces to unnecessary hardships.

We understand this as a narrative dilemma; Anne still has some doubts about whether she can believe in their shared narrative. Anne therefore chooses to consult with others to further try out and consolidate their understanding of Kirstin's personality not being the problematic issue, as well as the meaningfulness of trying out a work placement within health services. Anne's actions could be interpreted as paternalistic and undermining of Kirsten. However, Anne deliberately sought support of their shared understanding of the situation, rather than contesting it. She asked for input from people who could have a positive view on Kirsten and her competence.

We understand that Anne's feeling of responsibility for the situation was part of what challenged her willingness to 'set' and enact her and Kirsten's shared narrative. She knew she had the power of definition, resources and action as a counsellor and representative of the system, and we understand that she felt much responsibility for the possible outcomes as it was her power that could put things into motion. Thus, she wanted to be more certain of their shared narrative before she was willing to trust and act on it, and this required communication and consolidation with others.

Discussion

The aim of this case study was to explore how work counsellors may support service users in the process of returning to work, by focusing on their ongoing meaning-making processes in counselling. Our findings and interpretations show how the counsellor Anne experienced a turning point in the

counselling process with Kirsten when they communicated what we understand as a shared narrative to enact together. This involved Anne allowing Kirsten into the driver's seat when defining the situation. This aligns with the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's (1813-1855) famous words about the art of helping; one must start where the user is (Kierkegaard et al., 1998). However, we argue that a narrative perspective can provide insights into how work counsellors can think and act to achieve this helpful starting point and implement user involvement.

Firstly, our findings and interpretations show how Anne used narrative creativity to remain open to multiple possible understandings of the situation. Secondly, we suggest that Anne paid attention to what we have interpreted as Kirstens ongoing narrative meaning-making in the counselling process. Anne had a particular, and deliberate, focus on making explicit Kirsten's own understanding of the situation: How does Kirsten understand previous events? What are her future wishes? And how may this affect the current situation and guide their actions? Thirdly, Anne chose to engage in a shared narrative based on Kirsten's understanding of the situation. Perhaps because she knew from experience the power of meaning in creating movement in the return-to-work process? Lastly, our findings also reveal how this choice posed some dilemmas for Anne due to her role, power and responsibilities as a representative of a public system.

In the following, we discuss how working with shared narratives in counselling can be useful for ensuring user involvement. We further discuss some challenges counsellors may face with this approach, and how these challenges may be overcome.

Shared narratives and user involvement

User involvement is crucial for successful work counselling because there are few "correct" solutions. One reason is that individuals best understand their challenges and opportunities and must be self-motivated for work (Prop. 33 (2015-2016)). However, research shows that it is challenging to achieve user participation in practice. Counselling is characterized by the counsellors assuming expert roles and actively directing the service users' choices (Andersen, 2020; Høiby & Ranger, 2019).

User involvement is a broad term and with various definitions (Askheim & Andersen, 2023). NAV emphasizes that work counsellors should support the service users in making their own decisions, being active, and motivating them to reach their goals (Navet, 2023). In line with this, our findings emphasize how user involvement could be more than choosing between measures deemed sensible and made available by counsellors. Instead, our findings show how the counsellor, Anne, let Kirsten sit in the driver's seat, which she experienced as a turning point in their counselling process. These findings are supported by Danneris (2018) who points out that what works is what makes sense to the service users. Through our narrative interpretation we further showed how Anne used her narrative capacities to support Kirsten in this. She not only gave Kirsten the power of definition but also engaged in her narrative understanding when considering new measures in the counselling process. Thus, we suggest that supporting users' own ongoing narratives is an important aspect of user involvement and highlights user involvement as co-production. The importance of this is supported by Natland and Celik (2015) who point out how constructing narratives of oneself as a hero in one's story can contribute to empowerment and user involvement.

A critique of user involvement as co-production is that it often overlooks power imbalances and that it often is the counsellor that controls the direction (Askheim & Andersen, 2023). Our findings and interpretations suggest a way of facilitating more control to service users over the process which is ultimately about their lives. This is not, as we see it, opposed to a democratic or a consumerist view on user involvement, but should be understood as complementary.

Narrative meaning-making may unfold implicitly (Alsaker, 2009; Ricoeur, 1984), and thus also user involvement according to our arguments. This means that counselling relationships may also be influenced by counsellors' underlying perceptions of users' credibility and worthiness (Hasenfeld, 2010). However, making the narrative aspects of meaning-making explicit throughout the process of counselling can help counsellors guide and evaluate their own understandings and actions to support

user involvement. Additionally, when processes unfold implicitly, or when difficulties arise, we suggest that counsellors should reflect on which narrative they sought to enact, and whether it aligned with the service user's ongoing narrative.

Based on this, we suggest that counsellors should make users' ongoing narrative processes explicit. This involves exploring and opening up for users' own understandings and possible plots for meaning-making. Further, inviting users to define their situation and using their narratives as a starting point for decisions can add motivation and drive in the process of returning to work.

Shared narratives and professional dilemmas

However, as our findings show, acting on shared narratives also means the counsellor will have less control of the process, which can involve some dilemmas. In the narrative presented, Anne referred to how she has the power to choose whether to believe in Kirsten's understanding of the situation. From a narrative perspective, we understand that this is also a choice of whether to join Kirsten's ongoing meaning-making. This is a powerful choice, as their following measures and actions in the counselling process are based on this narrative created about the past, present and future (Mattingly, 1998). Anne seemed aware that her choice of what to believe would greatly influence their future actions.

Although Anne acknowledged the importance of supporting Kirsten's understanding and ongoing narrative, she still chose to verify their current understanding with a third party before acting. Anne explained this as an ethical responsibility to protect both Kirsten and the workplace from unnecessary difficulties. Such ethical dilemmas are well known in helping professions (Askheim, 2020). As professionals, counsellors must follow ethical principles of beneficence, nonmaleficence, autonomy, and justice (Varkey, 2021). In Anne's situation, the principles of doing good and not doing harm could conflict depending on the outcomes of the suggested work practice which were still unknown to her. We understand that she therefore had to balance these principles based on the most likely outcome. To better predict this, she gathered more information before acting, although this could challenge their shared narrative.

Anne's sense of responsibility for the outcome of the situation could further conflict with the principle of respecting Kirsten's self-determination. Anne experienced having much responsibility, but how would this be shared if Kirsten had the power to define the situation? As a citizen, Kirsten has the right to self-determination, including taking risks and responsibility. Based on their empirical study about user involvement within mental health services, Klausen et al. (2017) argue that it is important to allow service users to have insecurities, and to fail, when it is not harmful or dangerous to themselves or others. We think this applies in work counselling too, and that counsellors should not assume all responsibility for users' situations. However, complicating such dilemmas further, counsellors may question if all users have the cognitive ability, or willingness, to take an active role in meetings with public service providers (Skarli, 2021). Additionally, as street-level bureaucrats, counsellors must consider institutional demands and laws, rules and routines (Lipsky, 2010). This may limit which activities are approved for receiving benefits or which measures users are entitled to.

This addresses some of the complexities counsellors need to balance when supporting user's meaning-making processes. When trying to meet both individual needs and institutional demands, there are many considerations which may conflict. Research shows that such dilemmas are common for work counsellors (Matthies et al., 2018; Røhnebæk, 2016). This may explain why some service users experience that they are not given the power to define, or are supported in their own solutions, when choosing measures in the process of returning to work (Hansen & Natland, 2017). This makes us wonder; how can counsellors and service users share power and responsibility in ways which adhere to ethical principles and external considerations, while at the same time keeping users' own understandings as their shared starting point?

There are no simple solutions to this question. However, based on our findings we suggest that work counsellors should recognize and make room for the power of narrative meaning-making. Our findings show how when Anne supported Kirsten's ongoing narrative - her understanding of the past, her visions

for the future and her suggestions for action in the present - the process moved forward, unlike previous work-counselling processes. This aligns with narrative theory, which suggests that a sense of meaning and coherence provides both direction and motivation to act (Mattingly, 1998; Ricoeur, 1984). Knowing this, counsellors may prioritize understanding and supporting the user's ongoing narrative processes.

Lastly, we wonder if counsellors could be more at ease with handing over power of definition if they reflect on the issue of sharing power and responsibility together with service users and openly discuss their considerations, as Anne did. She told Kirsten she felt a need to check out the potential of their shared understanding and action choices – and it seems Kirsten understood her need to do so by consenting to the contact between Anne and the family nurse. Negotiating with service users, and sometimes also other stakeholders, has been described by service providers as helpful in solving some of the dilemmas that service providers experience when practicing user involvement. Such negotiations involve openly discussing both counsellors' and service users' wishes, concerns, obligations, resources and so on, and then balancing these to agree on a solution (Reed et al., 2017).

Conclusion

This study provides new insights into how counsellors can support service users, and ensure user involvement as co-production, by embracing service users' interpretations and building on their narrative understanding of the situation. However, our findings highlight that work counsellors, as street-level bureaucrats, may face dilemmas of power and responsibility that can hinder joining service users' narratives. This presents challenges in negotiating a shared narrative to guide work counselling processes.

Based on our findings and discussion, we suggest that counsellors consider making service users' narratives the departure point of their joint efforts to bring the service user back to work. Doing this can open for the great potential for motivation and drive of service users' own meaning-making processes in returning to work. Further research should explore how NAV as a context affects user's opportunities to create meaning. Research should also further explore how narrative resources could be used in work counselling.

Methodological considerations

As a case study, this article explores one person's story of the process of supporting service users. The narrative presented is only one of many possible and should be understood as the researchers' constructions (Polkinghorne, 1995). It is likely that other factors than the counselling also helped produce the outcome of Kristen returning to work. For example, support from family and friends, fluctuations in the labor market, what education the user has, how treatment and training have had an impact, user efforts, coincidences and more. Further, previous counsellors of Kirsten have not been given the chance to explain their versions of what happened. This article focuses on the experience of Anne and how we may understand her way of supporting Kirsten.

The fact that the first author is employed as counsellor in NAV had an impact on the planning of the study, the interviews and the analysis process. The first author experienced that she and several colleagues were uncertain about how they could contribute in the service users' situations through conversations (other than perhaps supporting or helping with benefits and measures) and was curious about what other counsellors do when they succeed in helping the service users. This guided her focus on success stories. Choosing to interview persons in need of extensive counselling came from her experience as a counsellor for various user groups, seeing how the challenges in the different user groups may align, but that they are particularly visible in this user group.

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Conflict of Interest

The first author is employed at NAV, and her PhD is partly funded by NAV. The second author has no conflicting interests to declare.

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