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The monster and the self: Taking on the monstrosity of sexual violations

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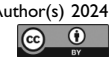
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Abstract

The contemporary normative climate regarding sexual violence affects how perpetrators of such violence relate to their harmful acts. In this article, we analyze how men convicted of sex offences are affected by how perpetrators of such offences are often represented as monsters and ask what this tells us about what characterizes the Monster as a figure. While people convicted of sexual offences are likened to monsters in many contexts, there is little research that unpacks the characteristics of this figure and how it is contingent on ideas about and the regulation of sex offending. By analyzing data from qualitative interviews with 17 men convicted of sexual offences in Norway, we found that, although they presented themselves and the acts they were convicted of committing differently, they had a common fear of being identified as a monster. In these narratives, a monster was characterized by (1) intentionality—having intentionally harmed others, (2) preference—having a sexual preference for harmful, nonconsensual sex, and (3) authenticity—being authentically violent. We conceive of the narrative processes that the participants engage in as forms of social abjection and discuss the consequences that abjection may have for accountability, rehabilitation, and justice.

Keywords

sexual offending, sexual offences, abject, social abjection, monster, narrative

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Introduction

Both internationally and domestically, thresholds and definitions of sexual violence have changed, as has the severity of the punishments handed out for these crimes. Feminists have fought to establish sexual violations as serious crimes over the past decades. In the mid-1970s, feminist analysis began to formulate the sexual offences of individual men as a result of the structurally based and culturally mandated power that men have over women generally (Brownmiller, 1975). Interpreting rape as a result of general gender and sexuality norms partially replaced the previous interpretation; that men who commit sexual offences are individuals deviating from the norm.

These ideas about rape position "the rapist" either as someone who embodies sexual danger, stemming from pathology, or as someone whose acts are based on privilege and disregard for women's right to sexual autonomy. In this article, we begin with the assumption that both interpretations still exist and that both ideas inform society's response to rape.

For several scholars (e.g. Simon, 1998; Wacquant, 2009), the punishments meted out to sex offenders serve as a prime example of modern penology. Over the past two decades, in jurisdictions such as the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, people convicted of sexual offences have not only received long prison sentences but also postparole control and surveillance measures, which some scholars have interpreted as robbing them of their civil liberties (Lacombe, 2008; Pickett et al., 2013). Spencer (2009) has even described such offenders as being relegated to an existence of "bare life," in the philosopher Giorgio Agamben's sense. The severity of the punishments meted out to people with sex offence convictions, their later surveillance, and the general orientation of the assistance offered to them are built on the idea that such offenders are incorrigible recidivists (Rickard, 2016).

A recent study of how the imaginaries of US parole personnel affect their approach to the surveillance and control of sex offenders on parole poignantly illustrates the observations made above (Werth, 2023). The prevailing imaginaries among Werth's research participants cast sex offenders as monstrous in the sense that they are not just radically Other, morally aberrant, and repugnant beings but also incorrigible and irredeemable. They are imagined as "the subject who must and will reoffend" (Werth, 2023: 9). This "monstrous imaginary," asserts Werth (2023), "assembles a sexual monster who can and should be preemptively purged from society" (p. 3). Following Werth, sex offender monstrosity is saturated with an ongoing risk of reoffending, and this legitimizes the urge to remove them from society. Such sentiments are concisely epitomized in the common saying "once a rapist, always a rapist," mirroring popular blanket assumptions of recidivism risk in people with sex offence convictions to be high, stable, and linear, despite research evidence to the contrary (Lussier et al., 2010).

The present article investigates experiences of being at the receiving end of the forms of labeling that follows from the monstrous imaginaries that Werth and others describe. From a sociology of deviance perspective such purging of unwanted or monstrous "elements" may also be seen as effectuating and strengthening the social bonds of a normative community—those *inside*—at the expense of severing the bonds of the expelled—the *outsiders*

(Rickard, 2016). In line with the thinking of both Durkheim (1933) and Garfinkel (1956), collective identity, social cohesion, and symbolic boundaries are maintained through punishment and expulsion of those who violate common norms.

Additionally, scholars have argued that attitudes toward people convicted of sexual offences and policies stemming from these have been predominantly and increasingly geared toward a default approach of risk and danger management, resulting in partial or full social exclusion, rather than attempting to transform or reintegrate such people (Rickard, 2016; Simon, 1998). The labeling that we observe in the stories of our participants seems pervasive across diverse contexts and should be seen as one expression of such exclusion mechanisms.

The context of our study is Norway. Sexual offences are high on the Norwegian political agenda, and recent debates have centered the need for further legislative change. Since the end of the 1990s, there has been a heightened awareness of the harmfulness of sexual offences and legal definitions of and punishments for sexual offences have changed considerably (for a description of the development and current regulation of rape in Norway, see Kruse, 2020). Definitions are broader, thresholds lower and punishments more severe. While the seriousness of sexual offences has been clearly established, and the discursive climate mandates politicians and the police to take sexual offences seriously, such offences continue to be a problem that affects many. One could argue that public discourse in Norway is generally characterized by the social and moral condemnation of sexual offences. Within this discourse, the phenomenon of rape is an act that is never acceptable, which assures victims that they were right to react and report these acts to the police (Hansen et al., 2021).

Norwegian criminal justice approaches to people convicted of sex offences are not explicitly geared toward the more permanently marking and marginalizing of sex offenders. Instead, they, like other offenders, are ideally punished to deter future crime but also to be rehabilitated and reintegrated into society. However, people convicted of sexual offences in Norway have also encountered more explicit vilification in public debates over the past two decades. As members of such a society, perpetrators need to find ways that are acceptable to themselves and others to reconcile the past and the present —their acts and identity—and this is what we explore in this article.

We will explore this via an empirical analysis of how men convicted of serious sexual offences relate to the danger of being seen and treated as a Monster. The Monster is a trope, in this context meaning a figure of speech, or a rhetorical device with which to liken something to something else. Several scholars have shown how media representations of men who have committed serious sexual offences use the trope of the Monster (Lós and Chamard, 1997; Mack and McCann, 2021; O'Hara, 2012). This literature also illustrates the potential problems inherent in this way of representing offenders, not least for its capacity to alienate offenders or colonize their identity, both of which may make desisting from offending more difficult for them (Malhotra and Gussak, 2023).

In surveying existing research on the way people convicted of sexual offences are represented and how they respond to the risk of being labeled a Monster, we were struck by the lack of analysis regarding what characterizes the figure of the Monster and how this trope varies across time and space. Rather, the Monster appears as a universal.

Norms concerning masculinity and sexuality have changed considerably over the past decades, along with shifts in the explanations and consequences of sexual violence. In light of these developments, why should the figure of the Monster not shift as well? We use our analysis of how men convicted of serious sexual offences relate to the Monster to investigate the Monster as a contemporary and concrete figure.

For our purposes, investigating how the figure of the Monster is conceptualized in the concrete context of contemporary Norway is important, but we should also note that ideas about sexual offending and-offenders circulate across contexts via scholarship, the media, and Western popular culture. Chrysanthi Leon (2011) for example demonstrates how the Monster figure has been a leitmotif of sex-crime concerns and policies in the United States since the 1930s, when an understanding of the irredeemable, deviant, and uncontrollable sex offender surfaced and, it can be argued, prevailed.

Historically and as a cultural figure, the Monster referred to people who had committed acts that were generally considered unnatural, sexual acts that were typically seen as violating the natural order, such as bestiality (MacCormack, 2004). Michel Foucault argued (in Douard, 2008) that monstrosity no longer is a designation for unnatural sex but, rather, a characteristic of the self. The modern self is expected to control his[1] sexuality, not be controlled by it, and the Monster is frightening because he relates differently and unpredictably to his sexuality, even though he can "pass" as normal (Gottzén, 2015, see also Carter, 1998). What the Monster transgresses and therefore blurs is no longer the boundary between animal and human but, rather, that between the normal and abnormal psyches. Following this argument, we can see monstrosity as something that stems from being a monstrous person, rather than from performing monstrous sex. The figure thus serves both as an identity marker for those at a safe distance from it and a warning for those whose acts mean that they risk becoming a monstrous self (Moffat, 2018).

Methods, data collection, and analysis

The present study is based on 27 in-depth, semistructured qualitative interviews with 17 men between 18 and 60 years old who had committed serious sexual violations. Most were convicted of rape, but some were convicted of other sex crimes, such as statutory or attempted rape. The men's victims were mostly adult women or, in cases in which the participant himself was an adolescent or young adult, adolescent girls. One participant had only male victims. The interviews focused on the men's preconviction and postconviction experiences as accused or convicted sex offenders, with a particular emphasis on how they attempted to align the conviction with an acceptable conception of the self, both in their own eyes and those of others.

The men were recruited via various professional gatekeepers, such as prison social workers, therapists working inside or outside prison, and prison officers, some of whom had special responsibilities in carrying out so-called sex-offender programs. Some gatekeepers were part of the first author's wider professional network, others were nominated by the Correctional Services to aid in recruitment. The first author instructed recruiters to explicitly state to prospective participants that neither accepting nor declining the invitation to participate would have any consequences for them, and

participants were informed that what was discussed during interviews would not be reported back to prison staff. That participation was voluntary and the participants' rights to refrain from answering questions and withdraw from the study were reiterated before and during the interviews. For participants still serving their sentences, interviews were carried out in prison visitation rooms. Some others were interviewed postrelease, in locations mutually agreed upon with the first author. Only the first author and the participant were present during interviews. Considering the sensitive topics of the interviews, we consider our emphasis on the participants' autonomy and privacy to be particularly important.

In addition to the basic characteristics mentioned above, one central inclusion criterion was that participants should have a certain degree of acknowledgement with regard to their conviction. This did not necessarily entail that they agreed with all aspects of their convictions, but it did mean that they agreed that someone was or had felt sexually violated by something they did. Most of the interviewees in our study had attended rehabilitation programs in prison, undergone individual psychotherapy, or participated in other goal-oriented and structured conversations about their criminal acts with professionals. Thus, to some degree, they were familiar with the responsibilization discourses that typically permeate rehabilitative criminal justice paradigms (Crewe and Ievins, 2021; Smith and Ugelvik, 2017; Waldram, 2010). The fundamental rationale of individual criminal justice responsibilization is that by accepting the condemnation of one's acts and the normative rationale behind that condemnation—and by accepting personal responsibility for committing these acts and working to correct the wrongs one has caused—one's chances of desisting from future condemnable acts increase (Maruna and Mann, 2006).

Sex offenders are often said to occupy the bottom rungs of the prison hierarchy (Ugelvik, 2015). Convicted sex offenders generally constitute a particularly despised group, often becoming targets of outrage and potentially violence (McAlinden, 2005). In such a context, acknowledging and taking responsibility for sexual offences is clearly different from and perhaps poses a greater threat to one's identity and self-image than, for example, acknowledging tax fraud, property crime, or drug offences.

The men we interviewed either directly or indirectly conveyed the need to not come off as a Monster. For this study, we were interested in what their maneuvers to avoid this label tell us about self-making and sense-making, and through analyzing this also shedding light on what characterizes the figuration of the Monster in contemporary Norway. To do so, we analyze the stories that the men tell about themselves, their self-narratives (Presser, 2009). The telling of self-stories from a labeled offender's point of view can be conceptualized and analyzed as *moral work*: efforts to make oneself morally and culturally legible (Frank, 2002), both to oneself and to others. Narratives have a double nature because they are "at once both *subjective* (i.e. belong to the teller) and *external* (i.e. are borrowed and shaped from pre-existing stories)" (Brookman, 2015: 213, emphasis added). Self-narratives can therefore offer insight into how offending was or was not inscribed within the participants' narrative identities, but they can also potentially illustrate more general processes of moral and normative self-presentation, reflecting cultural and contextualized boundaries between morality and immorality.

For this analysis, we first read all the interview transcriptions, coding for various forms of self-talk manually. We identified all instances of self-talk that *related understandings of the self to understandings of the violating act(s)*. Using this, we constructed types of self-narratives that addressed interviewees' past or present selves *in relation to* their commission of, being accused of, or being convicted for sexually violating acts.

Interpreting interview data, particularly on heavily charged topics such as these, is challenging. As we aimed to investigate the participants' self-narratives, one challenge relates to dealing with narrative ambiguity and incoherence, as well as accounting for the possibility of denial and mischaracterizations. Although our analytical method—like any—necessitates a certain degree of simplification, we did pay particular attention to and incorporated ambiguity and denial or minimization into the narrative types.

A few participants did vacillate between the types of self-narrative that we found, but most employed only one of the narrative types in their telling of self-stories. This should probably also be understood as reflecting an expectation in Western societies to "have" and to tell coherent life stories, which perhaps feels even more pressing for people convicted of sex offences than for others (Victor and Waldram, 2015).

We apply the theory of abjection to study the role played by the Monster trope in the participants' self-narratives. According to the theory of abjection, developed by Julia Kristeva (1982), the "abject" denotes that which frightens and disgusts us, that which must be expelled so as not to disturb the boundaries and borders of the unified, integrated subject—in short, that which threatens an orderly, controllable existence (Tyler, 2013).

Even though Kristeva's theory of the abject is rooted in psychoanalysis and the philosophy of the development of the psychological subject (Tyler, 2009: 79), the theory has also been utilized in sociology as a foundation for theories of mechanisms of social inclusion and exclusion—what Imogen Tyler (2009, 2013) labels social abjection. Social abjection operates on many levels and integrates mechanisms of separation, exclusion, and stigmatization between individuals organized in small groups, in social institutions, on the national level, and on supranational levels (Tyler, 2013). Exclusion of who and what is deemed unacceptable is made possible by how cultural figures, like the "the Monster," express a stereotypical representation of difference (Tyler, 2008). Such representations are produced well beyond the nation state and are formative for approaches to a particular group, also in contexts where formal policies build on a nuanced understanding of individuals and situations.

Constructing some bodies or groups as "abject" produces dual and paradoxical outcomes. The unwanted is expelled in processes of abjection. In acknowledging the unwanted as something that must be expelled, however, the body or social entity that expels it also acknowledges the relationship it has to the abject—abjection establishes a bond between the abject and the "abjector." In other words, the abject can never be completely separated from that which attempts to banish it (Tyler, 2009).

According to Tyler (2013), the theory of social abjection not only offers opportunities to study social abjection from the top down—how a group from a position of privilege marginalizes, vilifies, and subordinates another group—but also allows us to consider abjection as a lived, embodied experience. While enacted and experienced on an

individual level, Tyler demonstrates that both forms of abjection are thoroughly social (Tyler, 2009). This makes the concept useful for our task.

People convicted of sex offences are themselves under a constant threat of being effectively turned into Monsters (Douard, 2008; Lacombe, 2008). This *threat* of alignment with the Monster label appeared to be a very real prospect in all our participants' accounts. In this article, we relate to the Monster as an abject that operates on an individual and relational level because people with sex offence convictions must refute both the identity and label of the Monster.

Based on the analytical strategy described above, we identified two types of self-narratives—Transformation and Adaptation—and below, we highlight the themes that emerged within the two types and what moral work this diversity does. This should not be understood as an analysis of individuals and their particular stories, but rather as an investigation of the types of self-narrative that are and can be told by people with sex-offence convictions. We will briefly describe these self-narrative types before turning to our analysis of how they frame the participants' strategies for avoiding becoming a Monster.

Self-narratives: Transformation and Adaptation

The first type of self-narrative—Transformation narratives—is most importantly characterized as attempts to deal with the events of violation, accusation, and conviction as grave threats to the narrator's identity and his access to having and telling an acceptable self-story. The most salient "low points" in Transformation self-narratives included painful introspection; having to acknowledge the committing of violations and to recognize having harmed other people. Although those participants who employed Transformation self-narratives did worry about how they were perceived by others, they seemed to be more concerned with the degree to which such perceptions might be accurate or valid because of a gradual realization of *having been truly bad*. Such a realization seemed to necessitate one response in particular: a desire for and a need to change.

Perspectives on violations were *introspective* in Transformation self-narratives in the sense that the causes of and explanations for violating behavior were primarily located *within* the narrator's self, particularly in renderings of his biography. Having past experiences with sexual abuse victimization was hardly mentioned in this material, and in the few instances it was brought up the participant emphasized how this was *not* relevant to understanding his later victimization of others. However, victimization such as parental neglect, physical abuse, and bullying was made relevant in several cases—and markedly more so in the stories of participants employing Transformation self-narratives than those employing the other self-narrative type.

Transformation self-narratives seemed to hinge on an inclination to reveal and acknowledge the power abuses one had committed, as well as to place oneself at a safe distance from such abuse in the present. In comparison with Adaptation self-narratives, in which participants were eager to point out how blame and guilt must be shared in some way with the victim, or insisted that some of the blame could be attributed to cultural or situational forces, participants who employed Transformation

self-narratives persistently returned to how the blame and responsibility for their sexual violation of others were, ultimately, their own.

In Transformation self-narratives, the acknowledgement of harmful and violating acts toward others often created an unsettling by-product—being confronted with how such an acknowledgment would turn them into an authentically violent figure, in the eyes of others as well as their own. Narratives of change thus became essential and constitutive for telling Transformation self-narratives and were a necessity for demonstrating a departure from this past, monstrous self.

The second type of self-narrative—Adaptation narratives—is one that preserves the narrator's sense of self without directly or explicitly admitting moral wrongs. In this type, the narrator was someone who had been misunderstood, mischaracterized, and misjudged by the victim of his sexual violation, by the system that had convicted him, and by society, represented by concrete people in his community or in more abstract references to generalized others.

The narrator in Adaptation self-narratives still spoke from a position of relatively acceptable morality, both presently and retrospectively, and negotiated this moral position via various narrative devices. For example, the narrator may question the *degree* of the immorality of the violating act and conclude that the condemnation he has been faced with was too harsh. Sexual violations that were acknowledged in Adaptation self-narratives became largely forgivable transgressions or temporary lapses of judgment that were out of character but not shockingly deviant.

While the moral capital in Transformation self-narratives depended on the ability to tell a convincing story of no longer resisting or avoiding unfavorable or painful revelations about oneself, as well as the ensuing *commitment to change*, the moral capital within Adaptation self-narratives depended on the ability to keep the undesirable identity as a sex offender at arm's length by questioning the *legitimacy* of such labeling.

In Adaptation self-narratives, an accusation of or conviction for sexual violations did not reveal a fundamental fault in their personhood; the causes of what happened were not primarily attributable to the narrator, something within him, or something within his biographical history. In this type of self-narrative, the reasons narrators gave for a situation turning into a violation were often attributable to how "one thing leads to another," without any particular *agency* being involved. Thus, Adaptation narrators had less need for the violations *qua* violations to be actively integrated into any sense of self or identity, which allowed them to maintain a fairly intact sense of self without demonstrating self-transformation.

The Monster: What they are up against

The above presentation shows that the participants had two highly different stories to tell about themselves and the acts they had been convicted of and, often, their stories indicated having moved between the two over time. These stories did have one important aspect in common, however; that the implicit threat to identity and selfhood was personified, intensified, and put into relief by the Monster figure. The Monster was both a figure that the participants dreaded being identified with and a figure that came uncomfortably

close to them. Below, we unpack how the Monster personifies three characteristics or traits, with each necessitating particular narrative strategies to keep it at arm's length. The Monster is someone who (1) intentionally harms others, (2) has an established sexual preference for sex that is violating and harmful to others, and (3) is authentically violent.

Intentionality: The Monster intending to cause harm

Insistence on not *meaning* to cause harm—not *planning* and not *making a conscious choice* to sexually violate someone—was a recurring theme in many participants' stories. This scenario points to the need for the interviewees to leave something, namely the intention to harm someone else, out to be able to describe a viable self, also when being aware of the consequences for the victim. To acknowledge one's own intentional harm-doing seemed particularly difficult to shoulder for those participants who had been convicted for violations in relation to heavy drinking, including violations against victims whom the court deemed unable to resist the act due to intoxication. One such participant was Mats, an Adaptation self-narrator, who explained why he was contesting his conviction for rape:

> According to the charges I was convicted of, I am innocent … I have never intentionally tried to harm anyone. Willingly and on purpose. Never ever. Neither her [the victim] nor anybody else … This is not something that I've wanted; it's not something that I've attempted to do … I just can't imagine that I have … [pause] done anything to her *against her will* [emphasis is his]. That she said no and I didn't give a fuck and just kept going. That's intentional for you. You know what you're doing, and you're doing it anyway … She says that she tried to resist, both verbally and physically. If I'd picked up on that—had I been myself, so to speak—then it never would've continued. … I never continue if [someone] says no. I know that, right? That's just wrong … And if I'd heard her saying no or trying to resist it in some way or another, of course I wouldn't have kept going. And then, my opinion is that this was not an intentional rape.

Mats appeared to have much difficulty integrating having *intentionally* harmed someone. The Norwegian criminal code includes a separate section on rape by gross negligence, and the background to Mats's narrative is that he said he would be willing to accept such a charge but not the charge of rape, which requires the act to be premeditated. Mats's unwillingness to define his crime as intentional resonates with central findings from the research literature on psychosocial development. Such findings indicate that acts of wrongdoing that are attributable to *intentionality* and result from *stable* or *static* personality traits are often associated with maladaptive outcomes that are difficult to resolve, such as anxiety, despair, and shame (Ahmed, 2001).

However, Mats's worries concern more than his own process of reckoning with himself and his violating acts following his conviction. Later in the interview, he talks about how his conviction casts him as an intentional harm-doer and he fears that this trait will remain with him regardless of what he does or says in the aftermath:

> For all convicted sex offenders, whether we're talking sexual acts without consent or really serious sexual abuse by pedophiles, you're portrayed as almost monsters. And that is the stigma you have, that's how you are perceived. For me, really, when I get home, I will always be the one who raped [the victim] … They hear the word "rape," and so they see me, and then I'm simply regarded as some kind of monster … Like, what I want would be that people simply asked: Why did it turn out like this? What really happened here? … And, ideally, try to understand *me* [emphasis is his]. Not to defend what I did, but try to understand me as a person. And that they would try to figure out whether I really am a dangerous person that people should stay away from … Because I'm not a monster, you know.

The *intentionality* characteristic of the Monster figure demonstrates how the participants in our study attempted to preserve an intact sense of an acceptable self through casting themselves as unwilling harm-doers and the harms they committed as instances of miscommunication or misunderstanding. At the same time, like Mats, they were also acutely aware of the "stickiness" of the sex offender label. In the participants' self-narratives, the dangerousness attached to anyone with such a label seems intimately connected to the presumed intentionality of their harmdoing. Resonating with what Werth (2023) demonstrated in his study of contemporary imaginaries of sex offenders, the danger of being seen as an *intentional* harm-doer is also related with being seen as incorrigible and irredeemable.

Preference: The Monster as sex fiend

Almost all the participants in this study emphasized that they did not see physically forcing others to have sex or harming others via sex as normative behavior, or they stressed that such behavior was not a part of their sexual preferences. As Robert put it, "I can't understand it. I've never had those kinds of thoughts before; it's *just not my thing*." Thus, the second characteristic of the Monster is being someone for whom forcing or exploiting someone to have sex is not a *means* to an *end* of achieving sexual gratification. Rather, the force, violence, or exploitation involved in sexual violations are *ends in themselves*. Another aspect of this second characteristic is being someone for whom violating behavior and other sexual interactions are not normatively distinguishable. Some of the participants in our study attributed the intentional and preferential sexually violating behavior to a particular type of Monster: a primitive, oversexed fiend, someone for whom care or consideration for anything or anyone else becomes secondary.

Positioning the "real rapist" as a sex fiend—and maintaining narrative distance from this figure—can be an effective way of de-coupling one's own sexually violating behavior from one's inherent or authentic sexuality.

Stian's self-narrative was clearly of the Transformation type. Below, he discusses how his attempts to determine why he had violated others did not succeed during the first of his two sex offence convictions. He had difficulty reconciling his violating behavior with his ideas about what normally causes such behavior, as well as what commonly characterizes those who commit such acts.

> I didn't want to talk about why I was in prison, 'cause I understood soon enough that that wasn't really something you do … I didn't properly deal with anything at all. I thought, "Once I'm done in here, all my problems will be over. 'Cause then I'll have served my time, and I've done nothing wrong."
>
> Interviewer: Okay, so that was how you saw it back then, that you hadn't done anything wrong?
>
> Right, and I haven't *thought* anything wrong either. 'Cause I was thinking, "It's not like I'm going around thinking about sex 24 hours a day either." I've heard of all these other lunatics [who were convicted of sex offences], and I thought, "Hell, those people are sick. They're sitting around thinking about sex all the time. They're in their cell jerking off 24 hours a day"—that's what I was thinking. And then I thought, "Well, *I'm* not thinking like that." Like, I'd hear my fellow prisoners talking about female prison officers, "Check out the ass on her, or her tits," and I'm sitting there thinking, "You really can't say stuff like that!" I've been thinking to myself, "Well, that means that I don't have a problem. I don't have a problem with sexuality." … So, I didn't really have to deal with my conviction, didn't have to think about those things that I really didn't want to think about. I just drifted through my time inside and [thought that] when I'm done with my time and get out, I can leave my problems behind in here, in prison … I've had a normal sex life with my girlfriends, and my relationship to porn is normal and to masturbation too … [Sex] is not something that has preoccupied me any more than for others. So, the big question is, then, why did I come to assault others?

The sex-fiend aspect of the Monster appears to have been a characteristic that Stian needed to negate in his own self-story. The idea that sexually violating behavior was always committed by sex fiends was something that made it difficult for him to "deal with his shit," as he put it later.

Embedded in the participants' narrative constructions of the monstrous sex fiend was the fear of being understood as someone who *preferred* to commit sexual violations, as opposed to fundamentally harboring a genuine preference for consensual and reciprocal sex.

These fears represented a particularly challenging prospect for those who had violated several times, because repeated violations create grounds for suspecting a pattern of deviant sexual preferences. For those who had violated "only" once, however, characterizing their violation as a one-off incident was a useful narrative resource when they wanted to point out that their violating behavior was neither coherent with nor predictable from their true selves.

By differentiating between themselves and sex fiends, the participants were able to claim to have control over their sexual impulses and sex drives, as opposed to being oversexed "victims" of uncontrollable biological impulses, for whom sexually violating behavior is something inherent, ingrained, or authentic to their *sexuality*. Leon (2011) details how the sex fiend aspect both historically and in the contemporary is integral to discourses on sex offender monstrosity—that is, the idea of a compulsive sexual

deviant who must be controlled and incapacitated to keep society safe from him. Creating or maintaining narrative distance from the sex fiend may also communicate an awareness of normative boundaries for what Lucas Gottzén labels "respectable heteromasculinity" in a society that idealizes gender equality, because sex fiends typically engage in sexual acts that breach norms of "good" (i.e. consensual) sex (Gottzén, 2019: 9).

Authenticity: The Monster as authentically violent

The second characteristic of the Monster, as discussed above, may be understood as denoting how sexually violating behavior is something inherent, ingrained, or authentic to the perpetrator's *sexuality*. The third characteristic of the Monster is being inherently and authentically *violent*; someone who accepts and perhaps even enjoys using violence, someone for whom acting and reacting with violence is a naturalized and acknowledged part of their identity.

Tommy's self-narrative was in many respects a Transformation narrative, though he did at times during the interviews voice a certain ambivalence toward aspects of his rape conviction, indicating that he sometimes doubted the moral wrongness and blameworthiness of what he had done. In such instances, however, he would quickly adjust himself back to what seemed to be his primary self-narrative—a Transformation story. Below, Tommy clearly distinguishes between different types of sex offenders among his fellow prisoners: those whom he calls predators and those who are only guilty of a glitch or a misstep, those unlucky ones who have been imprisoned because of their involvement in "stupid situations," as he called them.

> I'm really good at singling out those who really do have a problem and those who have perhaps just had a lapse of judgment. I find it easy to spot those who have ended up in a stupid situation, been in a situation and done something wrong, and then there are those who really are… predators. I stay away from them.
>
> Interviewer: So, you stay away from those people. What's that about, for you?
>
> Well, I'm in this program with people who bluntly say, "I used to hide in the bushes, waiting for women and then throwing myself at them." It's just awful to sit there and listen to stuff like that, and [they] take no responsibility for it, like, they just don't want to understand … Compared to that, I don't feel so terrible … Because that sounds just dreadful … I think that's perhaps one of the worst things that can happen to a person, to be assaulted like that. Be it violence or rape, either way. You're just walking down the street, everything is normal, listening to music, and then you're slammed to the ground. That… sounds brutal. And when people sit there and they don't understand… there are lots of those people here … I don't even acknowledge their existence in this place. It's too grim.

Later in the interview, however, Tommy appeared to express his struggle to keep the Monster at bay for his own part as well. He talked a great deal about regret and shame over the various types of crimes he had been convicted of, particularly over the way

he had treated other people. At one point, after discussing the crimes he had been convicted of and the impact his crimes had had on people close to him, Tommy first fell silent and then quietly said, as if almost to himself, "Well… I *was* in some ways a monster." He continued, "And I think there's still some of that monster left in me, although it's becoming more and more distant." At another point, he said this about his relationship to the Monster category:

> Because I went far off track with violence. My whole life was based on violence. It's consisted of violence for the past, well, decade or so. I didn't even understand that it was violence when I… Even when I didn't hit them, it was still violence … When I think about a monster, I think about how I was, the way I treated people … If the police pulled me over and asked me about something, I was like, "Fuck you, who are you? Go to hell. Don't talk to me." You see? I was like, "Fuck off." That's a monster.

Although Tommy had opinions about what separates "predators" from "nonpredators," the Monster figure clearly came uncomfortably close to him at times, which was also characteristic of how other participants rendered their relationships with the Monster figure. While they sometimes very clearly communicated how they diverged from the monstrous, their insecurity over and ambivalence toward whether they perhaps did deserve such a description were also common in both types of self-narrative.

In their study of prisoners with convictions for violent crime, Hochstetler et al. (2010) argue that the status of violent offender is a virtual stigmatizing identity (Goffman, 1963). Being assigned the status of violent "communicates presumptions that those assigned the label are essentially malicious, dangerous and harmful to the public, more deserving of punishment, and the most difficult offenders to manage and reform" (Hochstetler et al., 2010: 493–494). To distance themselves from such characteristics, people convicted of violent crimes may argue that even though they have committed violent crimes, they are not *authentically violent* and instead point to others who do inhabit such a position, demonstrating their difference from these others. Above, Tommy performed a similar interpretation of his fellow prisoners as authentically violent in their lack of consideration for others, their disrespect for common social norms, and their readiness for violence. However, he also demonstrated ambivalence regarding his own (non-)membership in the same group when he later considered that his own previous atomistic or antisocial attitudes may have justifiably placed him in the same category.

What separated Tommy from the predators, as he described them, was the fact that he displayed deep shame and insisted on taking responsibility for his actions and their consequences. Expressions of responsibility and shame may serve as narrative devices for maintaining a somewhat moral self, even in the face of seemingly inescapable truths about having committed moral wrongs.

The Monster as abject

As discussed above, the construction of viable self-narratives for people convicted of sex offences is contingent on the integration or rejection of violations as part of an ongoing

self-story. To be made into an abject means both to have one's identity equated to a Monster and to cease being a subject (Kristeva, 2020: 98). The idea of a coherent and authentic self (Victor and Waldram, 2015) carries an expectation of the moral alignment of self and action, that what one does can be easily integrated into and seen as a representation of one's idea of oneself. Our analysis thus resonates well with Maruna's observation (2001) of how offending and the ensuing incarceration constitute a "narrative crisis" for the individual. As Victor and Waldram (2015) point out, a major challenge for anyone who commits acts that are inconsistent with their own moral standards is that they easily come to resemble someone "immune to moral (re)habilitation" (p. 97).

The self-narratives of the participants in our study demonstrate how they responded to an expectation of actively engaging with evaluatory questions about guilt and responsibility. Whenever traits or characteristics akin to the Monster arose in interviews, the participants did not ignore them; instead, they actively explained why and how their actions and self-understanding must have been something other than monstrous. However, they often used characteristics or traits associated with the Monster figure to refer to their fellow prisoners serving sentences for crimes similar to those that they themselves had committed, but whose perspectives on their crimes and themselves differed radically from the participant's own, often in terms of a lack of responsibility or consideration for victims. This finding indicates to us that monstrosity involves much more than acts. The participants often used the monstrosity of others as a form of comfort and consolation. As several of them noted, "At least I'm not the worst of the worst." In their efforts to demarcate boundaries between themselves and the Monster, the participants in this study engaged in processes of abjection.

Our analysis of the presence of a Monster figure in the participants' narratives clearly shows that processes of abjection work on at least two levels. First, the Monster figure is abjected in the participants' narration of their past and present selves and, in Transformation self-narratives, functions to construct narrative identities that at least presently are devoid of monstrous characteristics. The Monster figure becomes something of a narrative punching bag, evidenced by how other prisoners convicted of sex offences become examples of subject positions and moral practices that the participants presently condemn and would never, or at least no longer, inhabit. Both Transformers and Adaptors performed such abjection.

Second, the participants used the Monster figure in Adaptation self-narratives to showcase the hypocrisy and unreasonableness of society's attitudes toward sex offenders as a group, arguing that the public is ignorant in its blanket condemnation of all kinds of sex crimes. Such condemnation is unfair, some participants argued, because not all sex crimes are equally bad and, crucially, not all sex offenders are equally bad. In other words, not all sex offenders are Monsters. Ultimately, the Monster figure became what the participants were up against and had to work to differentiate themselves from, whether they thought this was fair or not. In Adaptation self-narratives, the Monster carried less personal relevance than in Transformation self-narratives. What participants emphasized instead was the unfairness of being lumped together with other sex offenders who truly did embody monstrous characteristics and, by extension, the unfairness of having to distance themselves from the Monster that the public deems all sex offenders

to be. In Transformation self-narratives, on the other hand, the Monster seemed like a more present and personally relevant menace, representing a feared but also abandoned mindset and outlook on social relationships and other people. The prospect of being viewed as a Monster by others did not seem as paralyzing for participants who employed Transformation self-narratives, however. Those who told Transformation self-narratives sometimes indicated that a confrontation with the Monster inspired the reconstruction and reconsideration of the self and one's identity, minimizing the Monster's self-threatening potential and resulting in a desire for reckoning and change.

Crucially, constructing an abject in an ongoing narrative of the self means establishing what one is not, what is cast out as impossible to integrate into an acceptable narrative identity. Such an approach to self-narration comes with a cost, however. Although the Monster does indicate the limits of acceptability, it also inherently provides proof that "[t]he abject is the darkness we constantly attempt to, but never completely succeed in, externalizing" (Gottzén, 2015: 18, our translation). The preoccupation with the Monster in the participants' self-narratives may thus be read as intense attempts at narrative identity boundary work, but may also be interpreted as signaling doubt and uncertainty regarding the security of these boundaries. Our analysis indicates that acknowledging to some degree that one is responsible for having harmed others does something significant to this distance: it makes boundaries fuzzy and creates, in many instances, a fear of having truly harbored previously unacknowledged monstrous traits. Such fear and destabilization may amount to a significant challenge in the lives of people with sex offence convictions and may be related to issues of desistance and rehabilitation (Kruse, 2020; Maruna, 2001; Waldram, 2010; Werth, 2023).

When participants referred to the Monster, two things stood out as pivotal for them and allowed them to position themselves as fundamentally different from the Monster. First, they described the Monster as highly *agentic* in that he commits his sexual violations intentionally and willingly, according to plan and in order to satisfy his own interests, caring about nobody's interests but his own. Second, the Monster is also socially *atomistic* in the sense that he acts in purely self-centered ways, without care and consideration for anyone else and with explicit disrespect for common social rules and norms. The Monster has contempt for ideals concerning nonviolence and consensual, reciprocal, and "ordinary" sex. In short, the Monster is a representation of a "real rapist."

Our participants' attempts to manage their labeling and social exclusion resonates with what is happening to people with sex offence convictions in society at large. According to Durkheimian thinking, punishment is an "expressive form of moral action," working primarily to "reaffirm the moral order" and create a "socially binding circle of affirmation" (Garland, 1990: 44–47). But also outside of the criminal justice system, the abjection of the Monster draws attention to and strengthens the norm (see e.g. Rai, 2004). Still, the Monster easily produces a discomfort as it represents the presence of what "in a given context, shouldn't be, but is" (Weinstock, 2020: 3). In a context like the Norwegian, where sexual offences are interpreted as a result of unwanted gender and sexuality norms—norms that civil society and government have invested much in shifting—the continued existence of sexual violations is a reminder of a failing. For our participants, who typically share many of the same norms that are reified by their punishment, this

situation becomes very difficult to maneuver. In protesting the relevance of the Monster label, our participants can be seen as seeking to reestablish the social bonds that are threatened or severed, through demonstrating their (current) alignment with prevailing social norms (cf. Rickard, 2016). In representing the Monster figure as socially atomistic, participants can be interpreted as insisting, after all, on their commitment to normative social values. Because the participants themselves are objects of social abjection (Tyler, 2013) as convicted sex offenders, their banishment of any signs of antisocial tendencies from their self-narratives could become increasingly important, as many participants seemed to believe that their chances of postsentence reintegration into society largely hinged on making others believe that they were no longer men capable of sexually violating others. However, as demonstrated by Malhotra and Gussak (2023) in their study of the demonically monstrous self-images in people convicted for sex offences, ideas of sex-offender monstrosity and Other-ness inhibit people with sex offence convictions from being seen by others as able to engage in self-reflection and rational control. Negotiating a departure or progression from a position as social abject may prove difficult as long as society uses punishment and other degradation ceremonies (Garfinkel, 1956) as preferred mechanisms to preserve social and normative cohesion, while at the same time treating convicted sex offenders as "moral strangers" in a way that leaves little hope for change, rehabilitation, and reintegration (Laws and Ward, 2011).

Conclusion

In this article, we have shown how men who have committed sexual violations may construct different types of self-narratives in response to the demands of responsibilization. In presenting and discussing a twofold typology of self-narratives, we have demonstrated how our interviewees employed various narrative strategies to preserve a self-story that was viable for them and intelligible to others. In juxtaposing this typology and the men's narrative configuration of a Monster image, we have shown how this figure aided the participants in telling both types of self-narratives and manifesting how they were essentially *different* from the Monster as a true abject. The Monster acts on dispositions and urges that are thoroughly selfish and nihilistic and identification with such characteristics would make accountability near impossible (Schultz, 2005).

We also identified several cracks and crevices in the men's self-narratives, including instances in which the Monster image became unsettling and created uncertainty because of the inherent impossibility of completely externalizing that which one is not. Our findings indicate that, although normative boundaries are partly upheld by using creations such as narrative punching bags through abjection processes, the Monster also creates serious self-doubt, fear, and defensiveness when it comes uncomfortably close.

Representations matter, and facing the stigmatizing stereotype of a sex offender has observable and detrimental effects on the self-conceptions of people with sex offence convictions (Ievins and Mjåland, 2021; Ricciardelli and Spencer, 2014) and may also have consequences for the capacity of prisoners to achieve personal change that others can believe in (Kruse, 2020).

The presence of what "shouldn't be, but is" (Weinstock, 2020: 3) challenges the imagery of Norway as an exceptionally gender equal and safe place, and this might heighten the need to turn to monstrosity as an explication of sexual violations. Doing this situates abuse as something that has no history or reason that can be addressed (Schultz, 2005: 200). Applying and reifying the Monster metaphor for sex offenders could therefore weaken society's ability to prevent sexual violence. Attributing sexual violence to monstrosity individualizes the problem and thus exonerates culture and normativity (Mack and McCann, 2021).

Furthermore, the representation of sex offenders as monsters could be detrimental to victims' identification of their violation experiences and reporting of their experiences to the police. The construction of the sex offender mirrors the construction of the victim, and the representation of the perpetrator as a Monster facilitates expectations being placed on the victim to be an "ideal" type of victim (Christie, 1986). Our analysis has demonstrated that the discursive and normative climate regarding sexual violations affects how available stories of responsibility and agency are to offenders—something that, in turn, is key to both transformation and accountability and, therefore, to justice.

We have situated the Monster in a Norwegian context and interrogated which threats this figure holds there, but also what possibilities may exist of escaping association with it. Being someone who intentionally harms someone, being a sex fiend with a preference for coerced or nonconsensual violent sex, and being someone that is authentically violent are highly negative characteristics in most contexts, but there is reason to believe that boundaries are drawn differently across contexts between legitimate and monstrous acts. In this article we have described boundaries drawn between acceptable and unacceptable acts and selves in a Norwegian context. However, such analyses also open up for further investigations into the variability and consequences of vilification of perpetrators of sexual violations, how perpetrators are situated as belonging to or alien from the Nation, and how perpetrator constructions juxtapose with desired representations of its counterpart, the victim.

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Note

1. Although men are not the only people who commit sexual violations, the Monster figure that we explore in this article is male, and we therefore use male pronouns in our discussions.

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