Young people’s narrations of the meaning of support after criminal victimization

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ABSTRACT
Criminal victimization early in life can lead to serious consequences such as mental health problems, behavioural changes, and school difficulties. To reduce these possible consequences, support is important; however, little is known from research about what support after victimization means. Therefore, using 19 narrative interviews, the present study analyzes how young people in Sweden construct their need for support, and what they perceive as supportive. The interviews are analyzed with thematic narrative analysis, using the concepts of agency and communion. From the results, it is concluded that victimization risks damaging victims’ sense of agency and communion. To repair the damage, the young victims describe wanting information and psychosocial support from professionals, family, and friends. In particular, information is lacking, but professionals also need to focus on building trusting relationships. Because each individual constructs his or her own need for support based on the damages experienced, the support needs vary. Hence, support must be adapted to the individual, and to what he or she perceives as supportive in relation to the social setting.

KEYWORDS
Victimization; young people; support; agency; communion; victimhood; construction; narrative

Introduction
As a member of the European Union (EU), Sweden has an obligation to follow the EU directive 2012/29/EU concerning minimum standards for the rights, support and protection of victims of crime (European Parliament and Council 2012). In Sweden, aspects concerning support are the responsibility of the municipal social services (Chapter 5 § 11 the Social Services Act, 2001:453), and it is specifically stated that the social services must ensure that young victims of crime and their loved ones receive the help and support they need. However, the actual support does not need to be provided by the social services; instead, it may be provided through other governmental or non-governmental organizations. The Swedish legislation does not define what support means, but there is an emphasis on talking about what happened (also called emotional support) (Thunberg 2020). This might relate to how the areas of responsibility outlined in the directive have been apportioned in Sweden, with the responsibility for information falling on the judicial system, for example (§ 13a the Decree on Preliminary Investigations, 1947:948). It is also important to bear in mind that the municipalities are locally governed, meaning that they can organize themselves differently as long as they comply with national legislation. As a result, some municipalities have formed special units that offer support to young victims of crime (e.g. Stödcentrum för unga brottsoffer), while others do not offer specific support for young victims (Thunberg, Ahonen, and Degner 2016; Thunberg 2020).

Support directed towards young victims of crime is important, as victimization can result in a number of harmful consequences such as poor mental health, behavioural problems, and financial
and educational difficulties (Banyard and Cross 2008; Adams et al. 2013; Cater, Andershed, and Andershed 2014). However, both internationally and nationally, few victims seek and receive support (Guterman, Hahm, and Cameron 2002; Prieb and Svedin 2008; Sabina, Cuevas, and Rodriguez 2014; Thunberg and Källström 2018). Reported reasons include fear of not being believed by adults, risk of stigmatization, and feeling the support is not beneficial to them or not perceiving it as available (Staller and Nelson-Gardell 2005; McElvaney, Greene, and Hogan 2014; Thunberg and Andersson Bruck 2019). The concept of support has a wide definition when it comes to victims of crime, but research has mainly focused on psychological consequences, and accordingly has emphasized emotional support provided by talking about what happened, for example in therapy or counselling (Bal et al. 2009; Capella et al. 2016). Adding to this is the importance of building a trusting, non-judgemental relationship with the support provider; otherwise, young victims will not talk about what happened (Crisma et al. 2004). Talking is important, but research also shows that support of a more practical nature, such as information about the judicial process and support services, and help with paperwork to receive financial compensation such as awarded damages or insurance payouts, is also needed (Burcar 2005; Thunberg, Ahonen, and Degner 2016). This shows that support after victimization can be defined in many ways, as the things needed to process victimization vary among individuals. It can include emotional and relational support, legal assistance, information, practical help, and financial compensation. Not all young victims will need psychological treatment; practical help or relational support given by a counsellor or family member may be enough. Several studies also show that support after victimization can have negative outcomes for the victim's mental health (Sabri 2012; Sabri, Coohey, and Campbell 2012; Button 2016). Thus, more research is needed on how young people express what is supportive to them, and how support has helped them process their victimization. Hence, the present study analyzes how young people construct their need for support after victimization, and what they perceive as supportive.

Theoretical perspectives

Social work is a narrative practice, and conversing with people to understand their narratives is central to everyday practice (Grossman Dean 2007; Parton 2007; Witkin 2007). Support, therefore, needs to start from the young victims’ own perspective and how they understand their situation. If the social worker lets young people be a part of the decision-making and exercise their agency (i.e. their ability to act in a specific situation), they might also be more positive towards the support they receive (Capella et al. 2016; Källström and Thunberg 2019). This can be related to adolescents’ desire to have control over their own lives (Geldard, Geldard, and Foo 2016) and how the victimization risks affecting this ability. Socially, young people need to construct their own victimhood, one that ‘fits’ their narrative of who they are; that is, the victimizing event needs to be incorporated into their master narrative (Pemberton, Aarten, and Mulder 2019; Thunberg and Andersson Bruck 2019). This process is a negotiation between the discursive meanings of different social categories and the young people’s social context (Harré and Slocum 2003; De Fina 2007). Individuals will construct their own victimhood, and this will affect what kind of support they request (Thunberg 2018; Thunberg and Andersson Bruck 2019).

Building on victimization as part of the self-narrative, Pemberton, Aarten, and Mulder (2019) theorize that victimization ruptures the self-narrative, or life-story, by damaging an individual’s sense of agency and communion. Young people can experience the victimization as a social exclusion (Van Dijk 2009), which in turn affects whether they view themselves as competent enough to use their agency, or morally worthy of being part of a social context. The young victims risk losing their connection with their social surroundings as well as their control over their lives, affecting the predictability of plans for the future. This can change how they view themselves and affect their self-narrative (Abele and Wojciszke 2014; Pemberton, Aarten, and Mulder 2019). The role of support is therefore theoretically to repair this damage by restoring the sense of agency and communion.
Agency and communion, also called the Big Two (Abele and Wojciszke 2014), focus on the dichotomous interactions that are fundamental to human existence. The Abele and Wojciszke (2014) argue that agency focuses on actions that are beneficial for the individual in terms of achievements, and relates to feeling respected and in control, and to assertiveness, decisiveness, and competence. Communion focuses on actions that are mainly beneficial for other people, such as shared moral values, and knowing that someone is trustworthy. It also relates to concepts such as compassion, understanding, and connection with and participation in a social group (Abele and Wojciszke 2014; Locke 2015; Pemberton, Aarten, and Mulder 2017, 2019). This entails both a connection with the immediate social surroundings (e.g. family and friends) as well as more distant (e.g. professionals, community, authorities), and symbolic representations of these communal bonds (Pemberton, Aarten, and Mulder 2019). Agency and communion affect how individuals will interact with other people in their social context. With this in mind, the concept of support focuses more on broader aspects of helping victims restore their damaged sense of agency and communion, and thereby repair their ruptured life-story, instead of matching specific support services with specific needs (Thunberg 2020). Thus, support must include several aspects that address sense of agency, communion, or both, depending on the individual victim.

The present study uses agency and communion to analyse what young people understand as supportive after victimization. I argue that for young people to understand their victimization, they need to construct a victimhood that corresponds with their self-narrative and is respected by people around them, and that these people need to show understanding for each victim’s unique situation. Through this construction, a need for support might develop where the individual needs help with incorporating the victimization into his or her life-story (Thunberg and Andersson Bruck 2019). Based on this, sense of agency and communion are of importance for understanding the varying forms of support that young victims might need in order to repair the damage caused by the victimization, regardless of whether the support is provided by social workers, other professionals, family, or friends.

Methodology

The present study is a part of a larger study on young people’s experiences of victimization and need for support, focusing on how they construct their victimhood and what they perceive as supportive after victimization. Narrative interviews were used to understand each participant’s context (Plummer 2001; Riessman 2008), for example, their social life before and after the victimization. The Regional Ethical Review Board in Uppsala (ref. nr. 2016/236) approved the study before it began. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

The participants were recruited using court verdicts from the years 2013 to 2015, with plaintiffs who were between 15 and 19 years old, and included crimes such as assault, harassment, robbery, and property crime. For reasons of practicality, the participants had been plaintiffs at a court in central Sweden, but lived all around the country at the time of the interview. For ethical reasons, I chose to have approximately 3 years between the trial and the interviews, to reduce the risk that participants were still processing their victimization. For similar reasons, victims of sexual assault (such as rape) and attempted murder were excluded, as the time needed to process victimization might be longer for these crimes. 270 potential participants meeting the inclusion criteria were contacted by letter to inform them about the study, tell them that I would contact them, and ask whether they wanted more information or wished to participate. Of these, 65 responded that they wanted information about the interviews, resulting in 19 narrative interviews with young victims between the ages of 18 and 22. Of these, 11 were female. Eleven were victims of assault and/or threats, one of robbery, three of theft, two of harassment, and two of intimate partner violence (IPV)/teen-dating violence (TDV). All young victims who wanted to participate were included. Still, only about a third of the people that initially showed interest in participating finally agreed to participate. Some cited reasons of personal safety for declining, while others felt they could not contribute to the study.
From the verdicts, interview guides with open-ended questions were constructed, to make sure that the participants could tell their life-story as freely as possible. The guides were similar, but uniquely tailored to each participant according to what was known from the verdicts. The guides for all victims included questions on their background, previous victimization, experiences of support, and current view of life. The interviews were held at the university, in the participants’ own homes or in public places, depending on the participants’ choice. Several participants said they felt as if they were talking to a friend and were comfortable in the setting. The interviews lasted between 20 and 120 minutes, with an average of 48 minutes, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The transcripts were analysed using narrative thematic analysis, which focuses on what was said (Riessman 2008), viewing the narrative as a whole when understanding how the participants construct the meaning of their situation. From this, a pattern emerged of young people’s support needs. In the present study, quotations are provided as examples of this general pattern, to analyse what kinds of damage the victimization resulted in, and what kind of support the young victims express that they needed to repair it. I analysed the interviews separately, organizing each victim’s narrative into a chronological sequence of events before beginning to look at what the participants’ narratives represent, connecting them to the concepts of sense of agency and sense of communion (cf. Riessman 2008). NVivo was used to systematize the narratives.

Findings

The narrative thematic analysis resulted in two overarching themes: Damage caused by victimization and Restorative support. These themes illustrate the entire process, from the victimizing event and the immediate aftermath, to moving on from the victimization.

Damage caused by victimization

In their self-narratives, the participants describe their victimization process. All of them describe the victimization as a turning point in their narratives – there is a before and an after the victimization. However, the effects of the victimization varied. It is apparent from the participants’ descriptions of the event and their reactions, that the victimization seems to have damaged their self-narratives. Some victims, like Emilia, who was threatened by a girl at school, were so fearful that they were scared to be at school or in public places where they could meet the offender. Emilia says:

So she [the principal] reported it to the police because I was so scared that I didn’t dare to be in the same place as her, I was so afraid that she would do something to me. So it was reported and I was on pins and needles, I was so scared. I took the back way into school to avoid her.

Emilia’s fear changed how she lived her life. For some time, she isolated herself at home, because she did not dare to be in the same location as the offender. Her reaction can be seen as a response to the damage caused by the victimizing event, mainly to her sense of agency, as she was no longer able to participate on her own terms in school and public places. The offender implicitly controlled where Emilia felt safe, and Emilia adapted her way of living, which can be understood as a way of trying to control a situation that she did not have control over. From her descriptions, she was not able to make decisions on her own, as illustrated by how the principal reported the crime to the police because Emilia was too scared. Another aspect that affects sense of agency is the lack of information. Nina, for example, expresses not knowing what was happening:

Yes, it’s the information. It feels like I’m just sitting here waiting for something to happen, not knowing what’s going on, and the thing is, the last time I met with the police to talk to them I thought they might already have talked to [the perpetrators]. They hadn’t done it yet and I would like to know once they have [talked to them]. The thing is, one of the two men contacted me during this period and I didn’t know if they had talked to the police yet. […] I can understand that it takes time, but I would have liked to know what was happening. (Nina, sexual harassment)
Not knowing what is going to happen can generate nervousness and anxiety, as it can amount to a loss of control, affecting people’s ability to act and make decisions and thereby harming their sense of agency. In Nina’s case, one of the perpetrators contacted her, which can cause anxiety and a fear of retaliation. The quote illustrates how the victimization has limited her way of living, affecting her sense of agency. Her self-narrative can be interpreted as a form of isolation, as she could not do anything until she had the information she needed. Everything was unknown, which affected her possibility to act and make decisions on her own.

Victimization can also damage young people’s sense of communion, mainly in relation to how others treat them. The participants directly or indirectly express that they need to be treated with understanding by the people around them, including professionals, friends and family. Linda, a victim of robbery, and Johanna, a victim of IPV/TDV, express how their friends treated them:

Either they couldn’t understand how I felt, or they thought I was exaggerating. “Yeah, she was robbed, but it was just someone taking her phone, and now she doesn’t dare to go out at night.” That’s what it felt like. So I didn’t feel that they were supportive. (Linda, robbery)

When it happened […] everyone turned on me. They didn’t believe he would do anything, so they turned on me. (Johanna, harassment, physical assault, IPV/TDV)

The quotes from Johanna and Linda show how the reactions from others to their victimization damaged their sense of communion, as they were excluded from a social setting by their friends. To their friends, their victimization did not fit into the master narrative the friends had of them, meaning that they must be either lying or exaggerating. Such exclusion from the ‘friend context’ results in a loss of connection to that social setting (Van Dijk 2009; Pemberton, Aarten, and Mulder 2019; Thunberg and Andersson Bruck 2019), which may change their self-narratives. Johanna, however, also had positive experiences; a police officer treated her in a way that made her feel safe and comfortable:

He was a really good police officer. He understood what I meant, so I told him everything and he helped me report it. […] He was my support during […] all the interviews. (Johanna, harassment, physical assault, IPV/TDV)

The officer’s actions can be understood as a way of strengthening Johanna’s connection with her social environment by displaying understanding and trust in her, reducing the risk of a changed self-narrative. The quote illustrates how little it takes for people to preserve the sense of communion after victimization. Still, Johanna’s positive experience of the police is not shared by everyone. Emma, for example, felt pressured to provide details she did not have:

I got loads of phone calls and I was sitting in school and they just called and called. The police called me and wanted supporting information from me and asked very leading questions. It was like this, if I couldn’t tell them what he was wearing in one phone call, then they might call me the next day and ask me “well, he was wearing a flannel shirt wasn’t he? Because you must have mentioned it.” So they were asking very leading questions and instructing me in what I should say. So that caused me to lose faith in the justice system a bit. (Emma, theft)

Emma’s view of the police changed because of how they acted towards her, which can be interpreted as a damaged sense of communion in a larger context. Unlike Johanna’s and Linda’s narratives, where the damage concerned close personal relationships, Emma’s damage is more on a societal level, affecting her view of the justice system and its foundations. Her self-narrative illustrates feeling objectified by the police and that the purpose of her participation in the justice process was only to give information (cf. Chapman 2018). The police did not consider the situation she was in, showing a lack of understanding and breaking the connection she previously had with them through her belief in a fair justice system.

As shown previously, agency and communion are multifaceted concepts, but in relation to victimization, agency focuses on people’s ability to be in control of their situation, and communion on how the degree of connection they feel to their social surroundings, both local and societal, is
influenced by how they and their unique situation are understood by others (Abele and Wojciszke 2014; Pemberton, Aarten, and Mulder 2019). From the narratives in this section, it appears that victimization first damages the participants’ sense of agency by taking away some of their ability to act and their control over their situation, and secondly damages their sense of communion, through how other people act and treat them. In turn, this damage risks affecting their self-narratives, as expectations they took for granted, for example that their friends would be there in times of crisis, were not fulfilled.

**Restorative support**

Victimization risks damaging sense of agency (e.g. ability to act and be in control of one’s life) and sense of communion (e.g. feeling connected to one’s social surroundings and being understood for one’s unique situation). Theoretically, support is meant to repair these forms of damage, and to restore the young people’s sense of agency and communion, which is why social work is important in these cases, to gain a more holistic perspective of young victim’s lives. Support after victimization includes several different aspects, and, as the analysis indicates, can be divided into informational and psychosocial support, with the latter including both professional support and support from family and friends with a focus on relational aspects.

To restore a sense of agency and communion, information is central, as it enables the young victims to take control of their lives and make their own decisions based on the information, and strengthens their connection with the social context. The participants wanted information concerning the police investigation, the court proceedings, whether the sentence has been carried out, financial compensation, and available psychosocial support. Information serves as a way of gaining control over the situation by knowing what is going on and what is expected to happen in the near future (agentic need), and also of feeling included in what is going on, for example in the police investigation (communal need). Those that had legal advisors express that they received the information they needed, Michael, for example, says:

> We met perhaps at least twice a month and went through what was going to happen, “something has changed here so this will probably change … This little thing will probably change things quite a lot.” She tried to lead me through what they would be able to prosecute for […] But I still feel … it felt good. She, my legal advisor, became like my contact person, because she had direct experience of working with crime victims. (Michael, physical assault)

Contrary to Michael, Emilia, who did not have a legal advisor, did not feel that she received enough information about the justice process. She says:

> All I heard, I think, from the police, was that I was going to say a few words and then she would say a few words, then we would answer some questions, and then there would probably be a verdict. That was it; I feel that I would have benefited from knowing what it looked like inside [the courtroom] beforehand. It was a shock when I went in. […] It was hard for me to handle. (Emilia, threats)

Michael’s and Emilia’s different experiences show the importance of information as a way of strengthening both sense of agency and communion. Because of how the legal advisor informed Michael about the case, he gained competence about his case, making it possible for him to also be in control of his situation, as the justice process was not filled with surprises and uncertainties. In this sense, the legal advisor’s work can be described as social work, as it enables the young victims to exercise their agency by providing information that enables them to act. Emilia, instead, did not feel well enough prepared, and was left with unanswered questions. This can be described as an excluding process, which further damages the sense of communion. Information can include the victim in the process, thereby strengthening the sense of communion. The victims may not have a full picture of what is going to happen with their cases; however, if they receive information, they will be less nervous and anxious, and feel understanding and respect in their social surroundings. This can in turn result in their being
more relaxed, contributing more information to the police investigation, and processing the victimization better (Burcar 2005; Thunberg, Ahonen, and Degner 2016). The task of strengthening a person’s sense of agency and communion does not typically fall to legal professionals but rather to social workers, but this shows that the professions can complement each other when supporting young victims of crime and make sure they do not feel excluded from the process.

When it comes to information about professional psychosocial support, the self-narratives illustrate that young people need guidance to seek support after victimization, as shown in the following two quotes:

I received no information or referral to support services at first, which made my mother furious. At the time, I didn’t feel that I needed support; I didn’t want anything then. I just wanted to let it go and move on, but my mother felt that I should have support. (Michael, physical assault)

If I remember correctly, I received a telephone number that I was too scared to call because it felt too impersonal. [...] To pick up the telephone and dial the number, it just felt hard right then. It felt like I didn’t want to stir things up, it could go wrong, so I didn’t dare to call. (Emilia, threats)

Michael and Emilia represent two different types of self-narratives. Michael received some guidance from his mother, who made it clear that he should receive professional psychosocial support, and more specifically, have the chance to talk about what happened. She fought for him, and he later received therapeutic support, even though he did not feel it was right for him. Emilia instead received no guidance and was not comfortable calling the telephone number she had received and speaking with a stranger. Therefore, she never sought support, even though she expresses a need for it. This illustrates obstacles regarding the structures for information about psychosocial support that risk causing young people not to seek professional psychosocial support at all.

Information is restorative support, as it enables young victims to regain control over their lives (Capella et al. 2016; Thunberg, Ahonen, and Degner 2016; Thunberg and Andersson Bruck 2019), with regard to both the legal process and further psychosocial support. Information enables them to feel competent about their unique situation, and that their competence is valued in their social surroundings, strengthening their sense of agency. Providing information is also a way to treat the young victims with compassion and understanding, and to let them be active participants in their own situation (Locke 2015; Pemberton, Aarten, and Mulder 2019), and thereby, for example, to make them feel connected with the justice system and that they are a part of their own case. This strengthens their sense of communion. Without further information about what is going to happen, the young victim risks losing faith in the justice system and society, as it can be perceived as excluding. Thus, information helps the young victims to repair the damage caused by their victimization.

In their self-narratives, the young people describe how they did or did not receive professional psychosocial support (e.g. from a social worker, counsellor, psychologist), but also the psychosocial support from family and friends. A large part of psychosocial support is relational, and when the young people describe what they valued the most when they met a professional, they mentioned it was when he or she took the time to build a trusting relationship before talking about the victimization in detail. Ida says:

She seemed to understand me, she talked a bit more like me. It was like you got someone who was like yourself.

It felt easier then, and like someone actually was listening without interrupting. (Ida, physical assault, threats, IPV/TDV)

The person Ida describes is her third counsellor in a couple of months. Ida describes the previous two as not listening to her and treating her as less knowledgeable, which made her suspicious of counsellors. Being able to establish a relationship is important for the young person’s ability to feel safe and conformable, which links to a sense of communion as it illustrates a way of showing understanding for the young victim’s unique situation and including the victim in the narrative constructed in the professional setting (Thunberg 2020). This is beneficial for victims, as processing
victimization can take place in several parallel processes – social, psychological, and judicial – that interact with each other, leading to the victim identifying diverse support needs which they then can express, if they feel comfortable and safe with the professional.

The time when support is offered is also a factor that affected the young people’s views on the professional psychosocial support. Some of the victims remember that they were offered professional psychosocial support but turned it down immediately, as it was not for them. They did not need that kind of support. Torbjörn says:

> About a month later, they should call back and ask how you’re doing. I doubt it takes all that much resources to do a little follow-up, even if you said no to support. That’s what I think. It would’ve been nice. (Torbjörn, physical assault)

Torbjörn does not specify who the professional was that offered support, but after some time he regrets having said ‘no’. He describes how he could have called the professional himself, but wanted to stand by his decision, even though he needed professional psychosocial support. An initial ‘no’ does not, therefore, mean that a need for support might not arise later. Because the social services are responsible for ensuring that young victims of crime receive the help and support they need (Chapter 5 § 11 Social Services Act, 2001:453), structures should perhaps exist that allow for follow-ups after some time has passed. Of course, a ‘no’ needs to be respected, but a follow-up could strengthen the sense of communion as the professionals thereby show they care about the young victims and what is happening around them, thereby also reducing the risk of changed self-narratives due to feelings that no one understands them or cares. The follow-ups can also strengthen victims’ sense of agency because they decide when they are ready for support, and accept it when asked again.

Psychosocial support also includes support from family and friends. This type of support takes the form of mundane actions – listening when they need to talk, distracting them when it all becomes too much, accompanying them to court, and making sure they feel safe in public. Julia, Vera, and Elias express:

> Many of my friends are childhood friends that I have known since I was really little, my trust in them is huge. […] Often I went to school with a guy from the same school so I wouldn’t be afraid […] So they supported me and I talked to them when something was troubling me. They never thought it was a problem to listen to me when I was sad […]. Just being with them helped a lot because I felt safe with them. (Julia, physical assault and threats)

> My parents … that we talked about it and that they … were on my side. They believed in me […]. To be able to talk about it, I think that’s the main way I’ve processed it, that I’ve talked with people about it. And friends, well … I think it’s good that we had each other because we’ve talked about it from time to time. (Vera, threats and harassment)

> I talked to my parents and they wanted to make sure I was ok. […] But I felt that … I felt quite good after the situation. So I didn’t need to talk to anyone, and then I just laughed it off. […] The whole thing became less serious and it was de-dramatized. I only needed to talk to my family and friends about it, and it felt ok. (Elias, physical assault and threats)

Family and friends are a safety net for these victims, trying as much as possible to enable them to continue living their lives, but also standing by them if they need to share the burden of the victimization. The quotes above illustrate how their families and friends, through their actions, included them in their social settings, and by doing so strengthened their sense of communion. Victimization can be taboo to talk about, with people distancing themselves from the victim (Van Dijk 2009), but the family and friends of these three did the opposite by making them feel safe, showing that they will listen when needed, or ‘de-dramatizing’ the situation. The problem is that not all young people have these kinds of relationships, which risks making them vulnerable (Thunberg and Andersson Bruck 2019) and suggests a greater need for trusting, supportive relationships. Society needs to compensate for this by prioritizing this group for professional psychosocial support, and social workers especially need to identify this group when assessing the need for support after victimization.
The young people’s narratives in this study show that it is not easy for them to talk about their victimization, whether it is with professionals, family, or friends, especially not all at the same time. Instead, they need to switch back and forth, and to take breaks, shifting between humour and seriousness as a way of ‘de-dramatizing’ the victimization (Källström and Thunberg 2019). If information mainly restores a sense of agency, then psychosocial support, both professional and from family and friends, seems more to restore a sense of communion. The reason for this relates to the relational aspects of both communion and psychosocial support (Pemberton, Aarten, and Mulder 2019; Thunberg and Andersson Bruck 2019), with the young victims needing to feel included in their social settings, that they are understood, and that someone is willing to listen to them on their terms (Crisma et al. 2004; Källström and Thunberg 2019). Building trusting relationships is, therefore, central if psychosocial support is to be beneficial, and to strengthen the sense of communion, which in turn will help young victims understand what has happened, regain control, and exercise their agency. To be able to repair the damage that a victimizing event has caused, it is necessary to balance agency and communion, as they interlink with each other.

Discussion

The present study analysed how young people construct their need for support after victimization, and what they perceive as supportive. From the results, it can be concluded that victimization risks damaging both sense of agency and communion. The young victims express wanting information and psychosocial support from professionals, family and/or friends, in order to repair this damage. What became apparent from the self-narratives is that information is especially lacking, and that this causes frustration among the young victims, who did not know what was going to happen with their case. However, professional psychosocial support also needs improvement regarding the building of trusting relationships. In other words, the support structures around young victims need improvement. The need for support is based on the damage caused by the victimization, which results in individuals constructing their own need for support. As a result, the perception of what is supportive also varies depending on the individual’s social context.

Social work is a narrative practice through which the social worker, together with the individual victim, can identify what kind of support he or she might need (Grossman Dean 2007; Parton 2007; Witkin 2007). Because of this and the social services’ responsibility in Sweden for organizing support for young victims of crime (Chapter 5 § 11 Social Services Act, 2001:453), social work is central in both policy and practice. The empirical findings show that social workers and young victims together can identify needs and construct support that addresses agentic as well as communal needs. However, the social services are not able to cover all needs that might arise. For example, because the various processes occur in parallel, the young victim might need social, psychological, and legal help. This means that different organizations can complement each other to support young victims. Social workers can coordinate the support, even though they do not provide all of it (Thunberg 2020). The findings and previous research (Burcar 2005; Källström and Thunberg 2019; Thunberg and Andersson Bruck 2019) indicate that the social services and social workers, in general, need a better understanding of victimization, as well as of how young victims construct themselves as victims and what they perceive as supportive.

Previous research indicates that sense of agency and communion is distinct aspects that need to be addressed differently (Locke 2015; Pemberton, Aarten, and Mulder 2019), but based on the findings in the present study it seems that the concepts are more interlinked than previously thought. Both aspects need to be addressed when supporting young victims of crime, as victimization appears to directly damage the sense of agency, while sense of communion is affected by how the social surroundings treat the young victim. During the restoration process, the individual victim might therefore have different needs at different times, and might not perceive a certain type of support, given at the wrong time, as supportive. For this reason, support after victimization needs to go beyond the strong emphasis on emotional support in previous research (Bal et al. 2009; Capella et al. 2016), and also
encompass social workers addressing young people’s agentic and communal needs. This includes also looking at what kind of social network the young victim has, to get a more holistic perspective and reduce the risk of social exclusion.

When it comes to support for young victims of crime, it is important that the individuals’ needs are identified by listening to their narratives of their lives and victimization (Grossman Dean 2007; Parton 2007; Witkin 2007), because some will receive enough support from their social network, while others will need professional support (Thunberg and Andersson Bruck 2019). As the parties responsible for organizing support for young victims of crime, and in relation to the introductory section of the Social Services Act (Chapter 1 § 1), the social services and social workers need to empower young victims to build their capacity to act and take control over their lives once again, and to make sure that they feel included in society (Van Dijk 2009; Pemberton, Aarten, and Mulder 2017). Support spans both sense of agency and sense of communion and can minimize the potential trauma of the victimizing event and the ensuing court trial; without it, there is a risk of great harm and cost for society.

Young people construct support through mundane actions, things that make them feel better for a while instead of always thinking about the victimization. It comes down to their loved ones just being there, not doing anything special. Once again, the relationship is key. There needs to be a relationship where the victim knows that the supporting person will be there no matter what. Therefore, support in itself may not be all that complicated, as long as time is taken to build a trusting supportive relationship characterized by trust (Crisma et al. 2004; Thunberg 2018). Some young people, however, lack these relationships in their social networks, which highlights the need for professionals to focus on these victims, as they may have a greater need for professional psychosocial support (Bal et al. 2009; Capella et al. 2016). Here, due to the social services’ responsibility (Chapter 5 § 11 Social Services Act, 2001:453), social workers need to identify these individuals to ensure that those who lack a social network are aware that they can receive support if they want and need it. Another aspect concerning support from family and friends is that the family and friends may themselves need support to handle their loved one’s victimization (van Toledo and Seymour 2016). The social services therefore also need to address the support needs of those around the victim, especially when it comes to young victims of crime, as family and friends are central when it comes to how they handle their victimization.

In Sweden, it is clear in the legislation where the responsibility for post-victimization support lies, but in practice, it involves several different governmental and non-governmental organizations. For this reason, the coordination of professional support services needs to be improved to increase the holistic perspective on post-victimization support for young people. Based on the findings in the present study, I suggest that the national government should clarify the policy concerning post-victimization support for young victims by stating that the social services in each municipality must serve a coordinating function and be aware of every organization within the municipality that can offer support. This is to help guide individual victims or their loved ones to support services. This could also improve the collaboration between the different support organizations. Society should allocate more resources to the social services for post-victimization support for young victims of crime, to enable the restoration of a sense of agency and communion, and to make sure that the young victims feel that they can participate in society despite their victimization.

**Limitations of the study and future research**

The study uses a non-representative sample, which limits the possibility to generalize the conclusions. Furthermore, it is not possible to present all narratives equally, which makes some more prominent than others. Even so, these themes re-occurred throughout all the interviews, supporting the conclusion that supportive interventions need to address sense of agency and sense of communion alike. Future research should focus on different types of victimization to investigate whether what is perceived as supportive varies in relation to this factor, specifically concerning young people.
Disclosure statement

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