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Subject subjected

– Sexualised coercion, agency and the reorganisation and reformulation of life strategies

Summary

When not acting in ways that are recognised as physical self-defence, women are often – in psychology and in other dominant discourses – generalised as inherently passive during subjection to sexualised coercion (rape and attempted rape). Likewise, in the aftermaths, their (in)actions are frequently pathologised as ‘maladaptive coping strategies’.

We present theoretically and empirically based arguments for an agency-oriented approach to women’s perspectives on sexualised coercion. Agency is understood as intentional, situated and strategic. Sexualised coercion is not generalised as a single “traumatic” event, but conceptualised as life events. Meanings of coercion are embedded in social activities connected to discourses on ‘rape’ and ‘trauma’. Thus personal meanings of subjection are understood as developed in and through participation in trajectories across diverse contexts.

Adopted in our study, this approach points to the great diversity of personal meanings of sexualised coercion. Moreover, it reveals intimate connections between situated, personal and dominant discursive meanings of coercion, and women’s strategies of (in)actions during and in the aftermaths of the events.

Our analysis of participants’ perspectives also indicates an imperative need for reinterpreting concepts such as ‘victim’ and ‘passivity’. In a reinterpretation women, although subjected to sexualised coercion, emerge as subjects both during subjection and in the aftermaths. Furthermore their seemingly pathological behaviour may be re-conceptualised as person-

ally sense-making strategies of action in reflected attempts at (re)formulating and (re)organising their life strategies.

Introduction

Women’s 1st person perspectives on the meanings of sexualised coercion, in legal terms rape and attempted rape, are at the heart of this article. Our approach and analysis is based on a social-psychological theory of the subject as a social agent. This means that we understand women subjected to sexualised coercion as subjects in trajectories of social- and institutional participation. We are concerned with their agency during the experiences *and* in the aftermaths. We also draw on diverse discussions of the meanings of sexualised coercion (Gavey 2005, Lamb 1999). One of the reasons for our choice of approach is that our initial empirical study of 40 women who consulted Centre for Victims of Sexual Assault in Copenhagen, suggested the need for alternatives to mainstream and to ‘victim’ oriented understandings.

The 15 narratives on which we draw in this article were chosen as being the thickest and

most illustrative with regards to the specific themes we decided to work on. However, our agency-oriented analysis draws on insights obtained through the empirical study as a whole.

The conceptualisation of ‘victim’, and the discourses in which it is embedded (Renzetti 1999), is indeed critical in the meanings given to sexualised coercion. Regehr, Marziali & Jansen (1999) suggest, that the concept is often used as a category that labels women as passive and/or as suffering from specific forms of psychopathology, as in the diagnosis ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’ (Caplan & Cosgrove 2004).

Mainstream psychological discourses often take a departure in objectifying 3rd person perspectives instead of 1st person perspectives. In 3rd person perspectives aspects of self-determination e.g. of agency are often blurred, or even invisible. The discourses limit or nearly eliminate women’s perspectives and reasons for their actions, as well as their connections to their participation in ever changed and changing trajectories. In theory and practice women are then deprived of subject status and are instead often pathologised and diagnosed. In this manner, possible positions and strategies they may take on and develop while participating in everyday life appear as predetermined and inescapable.

The labelling of women as ‘victims’ places them in discursive and practical positions from which they are expected to recover and overcome – most often with the help of professional experts – so called ‘maladaptive avoidance coping strategies’. In this approach importance is primarily placed on the “*victim’s [personal] cognitions in potentially leading to difficulties in recovery*” (Littleton & Breitkop. 2006). In disregard of the concrete conditions of sexualised coercion, as well as of social conditions for participation, life following sexualised coercion is conceptualised as depending on individual abilities to cope with the experience of coercion. Consequently,

de-situated and labelled in abstraction from their social conditions, women are not seen as intentionally reflecting and active subjects. Instead they are exclusively understood as passive containers of pathological symptoms of diverse diagnosis. They do not *act* but merely *re-act* to socially unmediated stimuli and stressors. Theoretically they are stripped of agency. But the analysis below shows how the experience of sexualised coercion is lived as a conscious and personal struggle with agency.

In our understanding, the concept of ‘victim’ is primarily of legal use in the sense of a person having been subjected to, made the *victim* of, an illegal action, and not wishing to contribute to mainstream discourses on ‘victims’, we do not use the concept.

Subject oriented approaches and agency

In order to do justice to the specific character of the personal meanings of the conduct of lives, and not reduce subjects to mechanical objects that *react* stereotypically to events such as sexualised coercion, psychology needs a conceptualisation of agency, that is of actions as personal, intentional and directed. This subject oriented approach is a. o. represented in works such as Dreier 2008, Holzkamp 1995 and Nissen 2005.

In the approaches of these authors people are understood as actively co-creating social practices and discourses through contributing to social conditions and changes in them. Furthermore they learn, develop themselves and become subjects through their active participation in and across diverse social contexts, and local versions of dominant discourses. The personal and social meanings of their actions are embedded in such contexts as actions are organised in institutional and personal trajectories of participation. Through trajectories people are engaged in several and diverse contexts of action. They must continuously

reflect on and (re)organise their participation in ways that take diversity and possible contradictions in – and between – contexts into consideration. In action they change contexts, emotionality, cognition and actions, all aspects of their action potency – or agency as we call it. Personal reflections thus draw on past experiences which are (re)contextualised while being connected to immediate and expected conditions for the conduct of life. Drawing on diverse discourses they are integrated into personal perspectives and become part of changing personal standpoints that serve as strategies in the everyday conduct of life. In this way 1st person perspectives and reflections are developed from personal, socially and locally organised positions, practices and discourses in contexts of societal, cultural and historical activities.

As embedded in changing social conditions agency is de-centred, but also always personal and changed. In other words, agency is constituted by the possibilities for action and reflection on action created in connections between personal and situational aspects of conditions for action. The relationship between possibilities for, and limitations on, reflection and action may be more or less constraining depending on diverse personal and situational aspects of societal practices and discourses. In cases such as torture or in some instances of sexualised coercion they may be extremely constrained, however participation is always active. Thus, being ‘subjected to’ also always means participating – although unwillingly – in contexts of action as a subject with intent and direction.

Alternatives to ‘victims’

As alternatives to approaches that mainly draw on the concept of ‘victim’ and which may contribute to victimising discourses, we are also inspired by Clemans’ (2005) concept of experiences of sexualised coercion as ‘life

events’, and by Fairclough’s concept of ‘social events’ (Fairclough 2003). Conceptualised as life events coercion is understood as events that, although they may stand out and be attributed specific meanings, yet occur in life in line with other events. As social events they are additionally understood as mediated through socially structured and structuring practices in similarity with Dreier’s concept of ‘trajectories of participation’ (Dreier 1994, 1999a and 2008). From this follows an understanding of the meanings of coercion as complex and in continuous change. Agency connected hereto is no longer de-situated, unmediated, unintentional and reified as *re*-actions to one single isolated and individualised event – sexualised coercion. In contrast, focus is directed towards the integration and disintegration of the meanings of the events in personal perspectives, standpoints, strategies of participation and situated agency.

In Dreier’s (1999b) optic, when dealing with new and unfamiliar experiences, people will change perspectives and strategies of action, and bring them into new contexts of participation in everyday life. As participation in contexts of action involves multiple subjects and is conducted from differently positioned perspectives, one’s perspectives and actions are not always understood or recognised by others. As such participation is conducted as potentially ‘conflictual participation’ (Axel 2002). When engaging in life after sexualised coercion, women who participate in the (re) production of its conditions, or attempt to change these conditions, will sometimes be met with scepticism from others and get involved in conflicts (Haansbæk 2005, Pedersen 2007). This was often the case for women in our study. For example when seeking to connect their experiences in and to diverse contexts of action they faced difficulties that in various ways led to different forms of isolation (Pedersen 2008a). Temporary social withdrawal came to serve the purpose of self-

protection, but could at the same time result in difficulties in maintaining social positions. Hence, what in the women's perspectives were necessary changes in patterns of participation sometimes also resulted in restriction in other aspects of their agency and to mutual avoidance between the women and their friends. It was restrictions that especially made the younger women vulnerable to exclusion from peer group participation (Salkvist 2006).

Dreier (1999b) proposes that delimiting and connecting one's own participation in relation to that of others and to learn how to balance, connect and coordinate participation in different contexts of action in relation to different sets of other participants and one's own concerns are aspects of learning through participation in contexts of action. When drawing on this insight in our analysis, women's reflected choices of how or whether to participate or not in particular contexts, and to engage or not in well-known or new everyday activities, appear as intentional and make sense in the contexts of their personal trajectories of participation.

Maintaining a view of women who have been subjected to sexualised coercion as actively participating subjects with specific intentions, does in no way mean dismissing that they have been subjected to unwanted and uninitiated experiences, which constrain their participation. Anxiety, difficulties in sleeping or with getting up in the morning, fear of being assaulted again, actual stalking or threats of violence that sometimes follow sexualised coercion become conditions that some women have to deal with. Also, most women in our study continuously had to (re)evaluate old and new constraints in their possibilities for participation. But although the frequent (re)evaluations contributed to a general uncertainty, the women actively evaluated and conducted their participation in daily life and developed new personally meaningful strategies. We shall exemplify and analyse some of these.

'Non-agency', intentionality and strategy

Coercion, as discussed in this article, consists of men's subjection of women to very diverse but always unwanted and sexualised experiences. Subjection at first sight may seem to reduce women to mere *objects*, but for the women in our study, having defended themselves during the events became a repeatedly reflected key issue. Not having been subjects *over* the events, it was an issue related to understanding themselves as *subjects in* them (Markard 1997). In other words as others forced actions upon them they experienced being forced to act within severely constraining conditions. Women subjected to sexualised coercion must therefore be understood in the double sense of the word 'subject'. They have been *subjected* to coercion, but their actions during coercion simultaneously qualify them as *subjects*. A critical analysis must therefore address both the connections between practices and discourses, that attribute men's violence against women to women's (in)actions, and their personal meanings for concrete women (Roche & Wood 2005, Pedersen & Stormhøj 2006). In this article the major focus is on the analysis of personal meanings.

In her study of complainants' 'ineffectual agency' when subjected to sexualised coercion, Ehrlich (2001) shows, with inspiration from Fairclough's (2003) notion of the institutional subject as a subject acting through discursive constraint, how women (re)produce stereotypical portrayals of femininity. Through descriptions of 'non-agency' and 'ineffectual agency', primarily when describing themselves as 'non-resisting' because of fear, or when explaining feelings of having been acted upon unwillingly, they reproduce discourses of women as inactive, powerless, vulnerable and subordinated non-agents.

However, Ehrlich's study also challenges the discursive (re)productions of femininity

and agency as inherently incompatible. It offers a perspective of women subjected to sexualised coercion as agents displaying resistance and strategic agency on three levels. *First*, as what she describes as attempted but unsuccessful cognitive action, meaning the conscious consideration of possible actions, such as escaping, fighting back or screaming. *Secondly*, as attempted but unsuccessful verbal acts of resistance in the sense of saying ‘no’ or trying to persuade the perpetrator to stop. *Thirdly*, as attempted but unsuccessful acts of physical resistance.

Our findings echoed her observations of women’s (re)productions of stereotypical femininity and display of strategic although often ‘ineffectual agency’, but ineffectual only in the sense of not preventing coercion.

One woman’s perspective, and a common understanding of what may constitute unsuccessful verbal acts or of not having shown non-consent clearly enough, is particularly interesting. She attempted to express her non-consent when waking up to a male acquaintance on top of her:

“Well I told him to stop when I woke up [...] I said: hey what are you doing and stuff...”

Her acquaintance did not respect this as a clear expression of non-consent, and it did not stop him from penetrating her. In the aftermaths the woman herself was unsure whether her objections could be considered ‘non-consent’. In practices and discourses, in which only physical resistance may count as expressions of agency, women’s verbal acts are not seen as resistance and non-consent. When considering this, as well as the uncertainty and/or fear involved in contexts of sexualised coercion, *consent* constitutes a more appropriate measure of determining whether such events may be understood as coercion (Gavey 1999, Laudrup & Rahbæk 2006).

In the aftermaths participants in our study

reflected on the connections between fear, coercive and restrictive circumstances, and diverse forms of action. Taking a taxi instead of walking home from a private party, one woman was taken to an unfamiliar and desolate place by the taxi driver and subjected to sexualised coercion. As she told him to stop, he tried to make her believe that by choosing to sit in the front seat next to him, she was the one having taken the initiative. She explained:

“Well, I thought I should have done something [...] but then again I couldn’t because I was wasted. I wasn’t really conscious so there wasn’t really anything I could do, but when I woke up... perhaps I could have screamed or run away, but I don’t know. I was so scared I was numb and I didn’t know where I was or how to get home, it was truly horrid”.

This woman had been intimidated, was frightened, felt numb, ‘wasted’ (drunk), and compelled to comply. Her further descriptions of the circumstances showed how she then had considered various options for escape. But the unexpected and unfamiliar character of the situation (Pedersen 2008a), the unknown location, and the physical dominance of the taxi driver had narrowed her options. She had not dared take the risk of being subjected to further physical harm, and of being left behind not knowing how to find her way home. Having consumed large amounts of alcohol had only added to her difficulties in demonstrating ‘effective and strategic’ agency. Not being able to predict the consequences of acts commonly associated with such agency, her decision not to scream and not to try to run away had been a *reflected* one, and one reflecting her situated agency.

Other women gave reasons for not displaying ‘effective strategic agency’ by physical self defence. A woman who was subjected to sexualised coercion by a close relative said:

"I didn't [defend myself], you can't, because I was in a state of chock so to speak. As if my body froze. It is as if only the mind functions at that time. You only have energy to think, think, think... and 'go away' and stuff. And 'leave me alone' and stuff. But then the rest of the body yes... and you also feel disgusting and afraid to move because it was simply so revolting [...] You don't stand a chance, you can't do anything. Escape or something. Because it happens so fast. It happens so fast [snaps her fingers]. Like that, right? So you are not even prepared or anything, not at all".

This woman highlighted how events can take place so unexpectedly and quickly that there is little time for reflection or evaluation of potential 'effectual' strategies. Agency, such as described by her and other women, may then best be conceptualised as prompt and dominantly emotional evaluations of situated constraints, such as the perpetrators physical power, and as leading to (in)action (Pedersen 2008a).

Another woman described her evaluation of the situation and her own strategies in the following way:

"He was a huge man and I knew that he had relatively easy access to weapons, so I knew that what I did, I did it to survive. And also my children were asleep in the room next door, so I was afraid that they might wake up [...] he held my neck so firmly that he could have broken it, I could tell that he was strong enough to do so by looking at him [...]. And then you just have to accept that people think that you can be a hero, because I have been doing Martial Arts for so many years, but I also know that there are some things one can't argue against..."

What was considered as inaction, partly by herself and by several of her acquaintances, was a result of her deliberations regarding possible consequences of personally imaginable strategies. She concluded that the risks to her life and the lives of her children posed more of a threat than did the act of sexualised coercion. She decided to strategically subject herself to the perpetrator, in order to avoid getting

killed or of her children being harmed. Here again, 'ineffectual agency' is only ineffectual as prevention from sexualised coercion itself. Conversely it is effectual in preventing further harm to her children and herself.

In spite of such (re)presentations of 'ineffectual' or 'non-agency' a quotation from another participant shows how some women may understand themselves in terms of discourses that designate them as active and successful agents. At first this woman did not want anyone to know what had happened to her, because she did not remember how she ended up in the situation in the first place, but she said:

"It is humiliating to say that someone did this to me and really I don't think I did anything at all to prevent it. That sure as hell doesn't feel nice to say. [Afterwards] I did run away to the people from my own camp and stuff, so I did do something".

Like others she initially portrayed herself as someone who had had something done to her and who did nothing to prevent it. But as an afterthought, she corrected this initial portrayal. She then explicitly formulated how she did do something, managing on her own initiative to successfully escape to her own camp. Although she does not describe herself as subject *over* the situation, which in any case she was not, she still (re)presented herself as an active subject *in* the situation.

In all the narratives of the women above (in)actions or 'ineffectual agency' emerge as situated strategies of action. Given their restricted options, they evaluated 'ineffectual agency' as the best and sometimes only way to ensure protection against that which was clearly evaluated as more threatening and dangerous. Thus, probably because in most cases physical resistance was not thought to be a potentially successful strategy, only one of the participants in our study took that chance. However, the imagined and reflected strategies

of the participants included such possibilities, primarily in the form of screaming, scratching or running away.

Consequently, as in Bergart's (2003) and in Ehrlich's (2001) work 'subjection' to coercion must be analysed as strategic modes of action.

The use of a concept of agency as 'situated, intentional and strategic (in)action' will encompass Ehrlich's critique of representations of women subjected to sexualised coercion. Furthermore, it embraces characteristic contradictions in agency in 'ineffectual agency'. Agency becomes an analytical concept that connects concrete personal and situated possibilities and choices of action in sexualised situations of constraint. It includes the personal and situated meanings of – as well as the meaningfulness of – intentional and strategic courses of (in)action.

Concrete conditions and personal meanings

As exemplified above, situated, intentional and strategic (in)action was a central issue in accounts of subjection to sexualised coercion.

In this vein, the young women who had been 'too drunk' or had walked home alone at night were often perceived as acting 'carelessly' (Pedersen & Stormhøj 2006). They were at times considered partly responsible for making sexualised coercion possible. Social practices and related discourses, however, are fraught with paradoxes and may contradict each other. Young Scandinavian women are in principle regarded as free and equal subjects. But discourses of equality contradict discourses of carelessness, as 'carelessness' must be seen as an expression of agency related to freedom and equality as embedded in dominant discourses (Ronkainen 2001). Here actions are (in)action in the sense that the young women did not initiate sexualised coercion, and in that they attempted to protect themselves by not drinking or walking home

alone again. But when they were seen as partly responsible for being subjected to acts of coercion, this is discursively denied. The taxi driver account sketched above is an example of an active (mis)use of such paradoxes.

In the aftermaths of sexualised coercion, constant reflections on – and protection of – one self in acting as a subject in and over one's life collide with a conflicting desire for self-determination. In some accounts events which may have been experienced as unsuccessful attempts at self-protection made the women *rethink* and *reorganise* strategies in their everyday lives. They did so in order to meet discursive demands for self-protection, which became integrated in personal and situated ways in their perspectives and standpoints. It was an aspect of parallel attempts at reclaiming scope of action and preventing similar events from occurring again.

Two high school girls missed the last train, and were invited to stay over by a male friend of one of them. He subjected the other to sexualised coercion while her friend was asleep next to them. She said:

"That I had been drinking a few beers, and that... not saying that I was drunk or anything but... and that we had gone home with him. We could have not gone home with him and stuff, right? [...] I don't know. Perhaps, well I think perhaps we should have stayed and slept at the party, and maybe I think it was partly my fault, or else I just should have tried to, or not to have gone to sleep, and then just stayed awake to take care of myself, or something like that".

Despite knowing the boy, and having been two girls, accepting his invitation to stay the night, and falling asleep instead of staying awake to protect herself, weighed heavily in her determination of responsibility. Here, again, focus was more on actions not taken, than on what was actually done. In the immediate aftermaths such considerations are frequently turned into strategies of avoiding specific ac-

tions and contexts closely connected to – or associated with – the course of events.

Furthermore this girl thought that her friend, who had been lying right next to her and had not helped her, had not been asleep at all. Later, her friend would not talk about what happened, ended their friendship, but continued her friendship with the perpetrator. The girl who had been subjected to coercion stopped participating in social activities such as going clubbing or spending the night with friends. She was afraid of being taken advantage of by boyfriends of her female friends or by other men, and did not trust friends to help her should a similar situation occur. For her, reorganisation of strategies of action and participation meant withdrawing from some personally important social contexts, which also led to exclusion from many of her classmates' activities, in class as well as out of it. What she saw as a necessary step to protect herself, her friends perceived as an exaggerated response to a situation unlikely to be repeated. Furthermore, she lived in a rented room in the home of a young man. For her the resemblance of this situation to the one in which she had been subjected to coercion, meant great difficulties in sleeping at night. For a while, she was fearful of most men, but there were exceptions. For instance she enjoyed doing a school play with some boys from another school. This context, the activities that constituted it and its structuration of her possibilities for participation was new and markedly different from most contexts of her everyday life, causing her to add very different meanings to them, which made overcoming fear possible.

In theory and practice as well as in the perspectives of women, avoiding situations similar to the events is often understood as post traumatic reactions, also known as maladaptive coping strategies. The identification of more clearly intentional strategies is often overshadowed by this dominant discourse. We shall return to a discussion of this later.

A woman, who did not want to risk getting killed or for her sleeping children to be harmed, decided not to attempt physical resistance in any form. In the aftermaths she expressed satisfaction with her decision. She had tried to negotiate with the perpetrator to give up intentions and to convince him to leave:

"I got away alive, right, and this has been... I was damn lucky, right? So no I do not walk around beating myself saying 'why did you do that and why didn't you do this...'"

These women and others in our study, who also displayed strategic and intentional (in) action, were not *careless*. They were in fact being *careful*. Ironically, in dominant discourses, while being described as inherently passive and responsive to the needs of others, women are expected to display decisive non-questionable, goal-oriented or even aggressive forms of action in order to protect themselves. Thus, while women may be considered to be passive *re-actors* to active male desires, they are simultaneously expected to fight off inappropriate male 'access' (Lamb 1999, Gavey 1999), and that in ways associated with masculine agency.

Below we shall illustrate some of the concrete conditions that became aspects of the women's agency and contributed to the complex constellations of personal meanings of events.

Knowing the perpetrator

Categorising the accounts on the basis of circumstances related to sexualised coercion as we do here and in the following passages, is an analytical distinction. Circumstances related to coercion and their personal meanings cross such categories and often have, and are allocated, meanings that are not simply nor directly linked. The meanings of conditions such as the situated character of acquaintance-

ship between a woman and a perpetrator, of the geographical location of the event, and other circumstances are mediated through the connections between such aspects of the events and the conduct of lives of the women themselves. Therefore the following categorisations merely serve to highlight how different circumstances may contribute to shaping personal meanings and conduct of lives.

For the young woman, who woke up with an acquaintance on top of her, knowing the perpetrator had particular meanings related to dominant discourses of perpetrators as strangers:

“I don’t think I quite realised that you could be coerced or assaulted by people you knew. Well [...] it caught me off guard.”

This contributed to her uncertainty about what had happened to her. Was it rape or not? Gavey (2005) discusses such dilemmas in her analysis of agency related differences between what she terms unwanted sex, sexual coercion and rape. Furthermore she raises the question of whether a woman may be raped without knowing it. What does it actually mean to be able to categorise what has happened to one as an illegal misdeed? For this woman it meant, that instead of blaming herself for her consecutive difficulties, she was able to accept that she had become very frightened and lost trust in some people she knew.

Experiencing constant fear of the perpetrator, the woman above isolated herself from friends and acquaintances who knew the perpetrator and his friends. Simultaneously, those of her own friends who knew them actively excluded her (Salkvist 2006):

“I think that they were sort of, well scared that this gang thing eh... That they were a little afraid of what I might do, that I might report it and stuff eh. So... so I think that perhaps they just wanted to make themselves respected or something like

that yes, and then they couldn’t come up with any other ways, I think, even though I think it was a bad solution”.

As she continuously tried to avoid meeting the perpetrator, social isolation made it extremely difficult for her to navigate in her daily life, and contributed to further loss of friends. Still, as revenge for her having told one of her friends of her first experience and although she put great efforts into avoiding him, the perpetrator and some of his friends subjected her to coercion once more.

In our study, several other women were subjected to sexualised coercion by one of their acquaintances¹. Whether the perpetrator was a relative, a close acquaintance, an ex-boyfriend, a potential boyfriend, a classmate or simply a friend it was given specific and personal meanings contributing to specific constraints (Salkvist 2006).

A young woman who was subjected to coercion by a close relative had experienced his increasing and unpleasant approaches. He had patted her behind, sent her flirtatious messages on her mobile and, thinking that she was asleep, kissed her goodbye in the morning. She had felt unsafe and applied for an apartment of her own. When he suddenly assaulted her it was surprising as well as expected. She was part of a large family from an ethnic minority. Her experience contributed to family conflicts, and made her participation in everyday life a balancing act on the edge of a knife (Pedersen 2007). For instance, drawing on late modern discourses and practices her younger siblings saw and supported her as a woman with individual rights. Meanwhile older siblings referred to her ‘flirtatious behaviour’, meaning her ‘Danish ways’, and blamed her for the

¹ In 2002 and 2003 approximately 44% of the women who contacted the Centre knew the perpetrator, and from 2002 to 2004 approximately 16 % of the women experienced coercion by 2 or more men.

events. Her parents went on accepting visits from the perpetrator. Her mother, being caught up between conflicting conducts of life, and focusing on the family as a whole, left it up to her daughter to decide whether or not she would risk meeting the perpetrator when visiting her parent's and younger siblings. The young woman decided to move immediately after having experienced coercion. But not wanting to risk meeting the perpetrator, who was threatening her physically and verbally, she did not move in with her parents. Instead she moved in with her boyfriend and his parents, adding to her estrangement from parts of her family.

Another woman who had been clubbing with friends probably had her wine drugged, and blacked out after a single glass. She woke up in the home of a classmate, who advised her to take a 'morning after' pill. Her conduct of life after the events was complicated by her feeling that she constantly had to be prepared to bump into the perpetrator. Thus, as for the other women, the specific and situated character of her acquaintance posed specific restraints on her choice of actions:

"There is always the chance of running into him, because he also goes there [school and social gatherings], and I simply can't be bothered [...] Well, what can I say, I got a really awkward relationship to my classmates eh, and I also... also it was really strange that it was someone I knew and someone that I had had some good talks with, and then it happened... But I will say that the worst part is that I feel that I have been disconnected [from the class], that is what I feel. But it is also something psychological or how should I put it; if I don't see them, then I also distance myself from it in that way, right?"

As she did not wish to put her friends and fellow students in the position of relating to both her version of the events and that of the perpetrator, she chose not to discuss what happened with her classmates. Instead, restricting

the conditions for her studies and her social engagement, she chose to spend most time at home.

Acquainted with the perpetrator and knowing about violence he had committed earlier, one participant in our study was submitted to several forms of coercion in the aftermaths:

"It was hell in that he chased me. He brought presents and he became angry and then he threatened me and then... Well, and we had him banging down the door constantly, and although I didn't let him in eh, then he sought me out in the street. All the time I was so scared. I was scared of going out and I was afraid that it might happen again, or I was afraid that he might kill me or something".

As he threatened to kill her and her children if she did, she never reported the events to the police. Her knowledge about him, and her consecutive experiences affirming the possibilities of his threats being carried out, explain her intentional and strategic (in)action after the events, as well as her breaking off all contacts with friends who knew the perpetrator, and the public un-listing of her phone number.

Several of the women who were subjected to sexualised coercion by a man they knew, described how they would feel insecure with friends and acquaintances, especially men. For a while or for good, they changed their perspectives on agency in relating to them.

Not knowing the perpetrators

Not knowing a perpetrator also had personal implications. The woman, who had decided to take a taxi instead of walking home, lived in fear of the driver, who was never identified. Not being able to place the perpetrator in specific contexts, but being at risk of meeting him 'anywhere', she limited her geographical scope of action and changed her conduct of life in additional ways:

"I constantly looked to see if this man was nearby [...]. And all the time you felt as if you were being watched".

"I haven't taken a taxi since [...]. I have not at all been secure with the situation. And I also think you notice people more, also in trains if you sit and they look peculiar, then you quickly suspect them of something they haven't even done [...]."

As she was afraid of walking alone she became dependent on others to escort her. For some time she had her parents take her places, or had to have friends pick her up if they were going somewhere. She also tried to change her appearances as a way of making sure that the perpetrator would be unable to recognise her.

At a music festival two men, who were never identified, subjected another woman to sexualised coercion. She was unsure of what her perpetrators looked like and did not believe that she would be able to recognise them. She did not fear being recognised by them and did not socially and geographically restrict herself in the same way as some other women in our study. What makes her account interesting is that coercion took place in a context *other* than her everyday life contexts. Also, the men were probably foreign tourists, which made it unlikely that she would ever meet them again. She added that having been drinking herself partly unconscious she had little recollection of fear, threats or violence. Some of the aspects connected to her experience were not connected to, associated with, or in conflict with her everyday practices in ways that they were for several other women. She was cognitively and emotionally able to isolate restrictive aspects of the events from the conduct of her everyday life.

Location

A further categorisation of circumstances, that helped make personal meanings and thus (lack of) possibilities in agency surface in our analysis, was location.

When the perpetrator stalked her and repeatedly showed up on her doorstep, a woman, who had experienced coercion in her own home, suddenly felt that it was no longer safe. Not being safe in her home nor outside of it, she constantly had to be alert. Having installed extra security devices on her front door her home became what she referred to as a "*Fort Knox*". Having experienced coercion in her home she had additional difficulties:

"I need to sort of have a place where I can sort of say, 'well, this is mine, this is where I can hide a little' [...] Having two people over was just too much because you are constantly aware of the people who are in your home and what are they doing and stuff, right? Even if they are going to the bathroom it makes you listen".

Having several visitors at a time resembled the event of coercion. During her subjection, and in order to pay attention to her children and the perpetrator at the same time, she had equally had to split her attention. Furthermore having trusted the perpetrator her trust in friends and acquaintances was affected.

Walking home at night another woman was dragged into a car by two men and subjected to sexualised coercion. The perpetrators were not identified, and she had no knowledge of their whereabouts. As the events were described in the local newspaper she was afraid of repetition and revenge. It added to her fear that she had been sought out by the perpetrators. The events had taken place right outside her apartment and she could see the crime scene from her window. Being at home now became a constant strain. For a while she lived in her flat with her curtains down:

"The thought [of them knowing where I live] is awful [...]" "You are sort of a prisoner in your own home, right?"

In spite of strains on her economic situation also connected to the event of coercion and its aftermaths, the meanings of events made her decide to move:

“The best thing I did was to get away [from my apartment]”.

As her experiences represented different everyday life contexts, the woman, who woke up to an acquaintance lying on top of her, and who was later assaulted in broad daylight by him and his friends in her small home town, experienced sexualised coercion as an event many men could subject her to in many places and social contexts. She became frightened at school, of being with many people both in private and public, and of walking the streets of her home town and in the area around it. Still not having expected that one could experience sexualised coercion from an acquaintance, this aspect became more decisive in her generalisation of places she feared. This was also partly the case for the women below, but the other way around. She described how others criticised her for having let the perpetrator into her home: How could she even invite such a man to her house?

“Well it happened to be someone I knew [...] we had had coffee before [...] I have learned that it can happen eh almost with anybody you know, right? You can be really unlucky, right? [...] Because you can't keep everybody out because then you'll never get to know anybody, and you don't know anybody deep down really”.

This woman considered loss of trust and the man's violent subjection of her in her own home to be the most difficult aspect to accept.

For some women who did not know their perpetrator(s), and who were not submitted to coercion in or near their homes, constraints in agency were related to several ordinary everyday life activities such as visiting people,

shopping and going from one place to another. As the perpetrators had not been identified or imprisoned, the women were not able to protect themselves by isolating possible events to particular places and limiting or rather changing the locations of their social engagement and participation.

Violence

Having been or not having been physically harmed or threatened, violence constitutes another aspect of sexualised coercion that has specific meanings in the aftermaths.

To be subjected to severe physical violence during and after the acts of coercion was a very real possibility for the woman, who was subjected to coercion in her home:

“I didn't want for my children to wake up and see their mother getting her neck broken, or for them to come and find me like that, or be shot...”.

In our study, most of the women were not subjected to what they considered extreme physical violence, other than what the sexualised acts as such implied. The reason for this is probably that most of them chose to recourse to situated, intentional and strategic (in)action. But like when they were acquainted with the perpetrators, when there was no other physical violence involved in the events, the women often reflected intensely on how to understand them. Their dilemmas purported to the hegemonic discourses on sexualised coercion/rape as violent as well as committed by strangers, and to the divergences between these discourses and their personal perspectives. In seeking to create categorisations that would reflect their experiences and needs of agency, violence or lack of violence did only sometimes, and not always directly, qualify their categorisations. Thus the continuum of rape, coercion and unwanted sex that Gavey (2005) proposed does not consistently do jus-

tice to the perspectives of these women. They attributed very diverse personal meanings to the term of 'rape' and to events which Gavey may have termed unwanted sex. They often ended up terming the event 'rape' in the sense of a sexualised practice they had not consented to participate in, had tried to avoid, and that constituted illegal harm done to them.

Perhaps because they match media and other hegemonic representations, the women appeared to be less confused, and not always more frightened, by instances of violent assault. This was highlighted by a woman, who reflected on how physical evidence in the shape of blue marks could have made it easier for her to understand that she had actually been subjected to coercion. She explained:

"I simply didn't get it. I think it was difficult for me to understand, because he didn't beat me, and eh it really took me a long time to realise that okay he wasn't nice to me really [...] I really wish that he had hit me hard in the head so that I would have been bruised [...] I just can't get it into my head that anybody would do such a thing".

Like other aspects of coercion, violence or the absence of it had multiple personal meanings. Its consequences for agency in daily life marked the lives and perspectives of the women in our study. For some of them emotional and cognitive evaluation of immediate practical and physical consequences played a central role. As one of the women said:

"It is one of those experiences, and it just shouldn't have happened and it was so disgusting, but I wasn't physically, you know... I have no permanent injuries at all. That was important to me... the first thing I said when he pulled himself out and I gained consciousness. I actually say... eh how should I put it: 'Did you use anything? Did you use anything?' I panicked over the possible consequences; you know if it would have any. It was... it was right after it had happened. Well you know, not... oh well, but I was really really drunk but... but if I had caught

some sort of sexually transmitted disease or had become pregnant, then I think it would have been a completely different matter to me..."

The woman above, who wished she had physical evidence of her experience, became pregnant. The differences between her perspective and that of this woman who is relieved that she did not get pregnant or infected with a sexually transmitted disease underscore the impression of diversity in the constellations of personal meanings. Where the second woman's first concern was whether she would suffer any physical consequences, the first woman perceived such physical evidence as a tool she may have used in (re)structuring her perception of the event she had experienced as well as of others. Interestingly, the pregnancy was not considered such a physical evidence.

The quotations above highlight the dominant understanding of what may count as sexualised coercion. This is underlined in Danish terminology in which rape is termed 'voldtægt' and literally translates as 'taking by force of violence'. It probably contributes to the assumptions of perpetrators, boyfriends, police and prosecutors, and even of the women themselves, that violence is an integral part of sexualised coercion (Laudrup & Rahbæk 2006), and to the reproduction of stereotypical discursive conceptualisations of rape, gender, responsibility and their interconnectedness. As one of the women put it:

"It wasn't a classical rape – there was no violence".

The simultaneously over-determined and under-determined term of *rape* and its connotations in Danish makes it an inadequate concept for the analysis of the situated varieties of the experiences of women. This is one reason for our use of the broader concept of sexualised coercion (Sidenius & Pedersen 2004).

Agency and intoxication

Several of the women had had so much to drink or had been drugged and had little or no recollection of what happened prior to, or during, the event. The cognitive and emotional states of these women had some similarity in that they were barely tormented by memories of the event. Not remembering aspects of the events and their own participation in them did contribute to the questioning of their ‘responsibility’ for the events (Madsen 2005). This became one more reason for avoiding contexts that might remind them of, or contribute to, similar situations. Again, this was a potentially socially isolating strategy grounded in the circumstances of coercion. However, a woman who was subjected to sexualised coercion at a private party, disclosed how being under the influence of alcohol can also be instrumental in de-dramatising the event, and in integrating it in the conduct of everyday life as a young woman:

“You can choose to think of it as... sometimes I have gone home from clubbing with some idiot and then woken up the next day having regretted big time, and just thought ‘what was I doing, what happened?’ and just [makes a vomiting sound] felt really bad about myself and stuff. This is actually how I kind of think of it...”

This woman had fewer problems during coercion and with its aftermaths than many other participants in the study. Her perspective, and the knowledge we have gained through talks with women who have not sought institutional help after having been exposed to sexualised coercion, and who have experienced only very few problems in the aftermaths, is one more illustration of the particularity and complexity of the possible constellations of personal meanings of sexualised coercion (Pedersen 2003, Refby 2001).

Additionally, through their analytical anchoring in contexts of action, the ‘course of

life events’ character of these meanings becomes visible in the study. As follows, the participants of the study were often mainly preoccupied with what happened in the contexts of their social lives *after* coercion, and with how it contributed to or constrained their possibilities for a (re)organisation of their strategies of participation (Pedersen 2008a).

Ensuring Agency and Scope of Action

In attempts at evaluating what made the event possible the women reflected repeatedly on whether or how their actions – and thereby implicitly their (in)actions – contributed to the course of events. The girl who stayed over at a boy’s house with her friend said:

“I now think perhaps we should have stayed at the party and slept at the party, and I still think that it is partly my own fault.”

About the second assault that she was subjected to in broad daylight she reflected:

“Well we did go across this kind of path... and then I just thought that then we shouldn’t have. We should have gone across the square instead of walking along the path and stuff. And I then... I shouldn’t have brought her along with me [...] and then that perhaps we should have hurried up and turned around when we saw some strange figures or something, right?”

Her reflections show how difficult, if not impossible, it is for women to display ‘effective agency’ when it is not possible to foresee courses of events in life. In the first situation nothing alerted her. In the interview she, at first, considered how she could have declined the man’s invitation. But as a previous quote shows she had never considered sexualised coercion being possible when being with a friend. She reflected on the option of having stayed awake, but what then would have been

the point of accepting the invitation? In relation to the second course of events she again questioned her own judgement. She suggested that she should have chosen another route, or that she and her friend should have turned around when they saw someone coming, or that she should not have brought her friend along at all. Similar lines of thinking are prevalent in other women's accounts of agency. She who was subjected to coercion by a close relative thought she should have moved out of the house in time. She said:

"I have been, how shall I put it, kind of been stepping back for him, right? Even though he kept stepping forward I kept pushing back, right? So that is why I thought of moving".

Considerations about appropriate and inappropriate actions draw upon the individualising discourses of 'effectual' and 'ineffectual actions'. Even so they indicate how in practice personal and situated agency was severely constrained by the impossibility of foreseeing events. They also point to many young Danish women not expecting to be subjected to sexualised coercion. This tendency reduces agency in relation to coercion by severely limiting informed, intentional, strategic and directed action to avoid it (Pedersen in prep.).

Being subjected to coercion the women were stripped of citizens' rights of self-(co) determined participation in diverse activities. As a result they changed their strategies in the diverse ways that mainstream psychology frequently de-situate and term 'maladaptive coping strategies' (Littleton & Breitkop. 2006). These coping strategies are abstractly defined as strategies applied to cope with, or recover from, what is (pre)defined as *traumatic experiences*. They are thought to be genderless and to apply to people of different ages more or less independently of context. As such the strategies are often understood as resulting from internalised and abstracted 'personal-

ity traits'. From the perspective of relatives, friends, professionals or researchers, their strategies may at times appear not only 'maladaptive' but even self-destructive (Holzkamp 1998). But from the 1st person perspectives of the women, who explicitly and continuously evaluated their possibilities for participation during and after the events, they were strategies aiming at ensuring meaningful and effective agency, understood as the development of personal scopes of action in different contexts. As continually orchestrating subjects they reflectively and strategically directed their lives in new ways.

When, like in our endeavour, a goal of a study is to identify and understand the interconnected nuances of agency, this suggests the necessity of analysing women's strategies as (re)formulations and (re)organisations of previous and partly routinised aspects of the conduct of every day life. As we shall further illustrate, (re)organisations and (re)formulations of standpoints and life-strategies are directed at ensuring possibilities for current and future participation.

Reorganising and reformulating life strategies

The woman who was assaulted outside her home, formed strategies for moving around safely. She did not walk alone in desolate streets, not even if they provided shortcuts like the one she had chosen on the night of the event. She said;

"I never take the side streets. I take the main roads. I don't take a side street, if I know that maybe it will save ten minutes to take a route because it is the little side streets, I won't take that route then".

Some women who experienced sexualised coercion during the night, suffered from insomnia, and developed strategies for sleeping during the day. One of the women, who worked

in public health care, chose night-shifts, which served several purposes: She could sleep during the day, work seven days and have seven days off to be with her children. And as most of her patients would be asleep she did not have to relate to a lot of unfamiliar people.

A strategy chosen by the woman, who was subjected to sexualised coercion by a classmate, was to avoid meeting him and her classmates in order to stay clear of gossip and questioning. This kind of strategy is often interpreted as self-isolating maladaptive coping. But it helped her reduce the confusing complexity of her feelings and perceptions while (re)formulating and (re)organising her conduct of life. Furthermore it only isolated her from her classmates and the group of friends she would usually go out with. Instead she sought the company of other female friends and developed new friendships.

The aspect of direction in agency was even more evident when women explicitly challenged aspects of the personal meanings of coercion. After a while the woman who was assaulted outside her home insisted on walking the route she had walked the night of the assault. She tried several times to do it alone, but did not succeed. With the help of a close friend she eventually did. She said:

"It was definitely to exceed... you know to walk that way. It is probably one of the most difficult things I have ever done in my life, but eh it was also a good thing to do".

The woman at the music festival equally challenged the meanings of her experience at the following year's festival:

"I had actually agreed with my boyfriend that he'd come and pick me up at the station in the afternoon for us to go together. Then he could show me where the camp was. Instead I took the train the evening before – in the deepest darkness – and found my way to the camp, and it was awesome because it

wasn't at all unpleasant for me to be there. I kind of think of it as a huge victory, really".

Conditions for, perspectives on, learning, and experiences pertaining to one context of participation are connected and evaluated by the subject with regards to its meanings in other contexts (Dreier 1999b). Well-being and feelings of being subject *over* one's own life are aspects of personal standpoints related to participation in and change of one's life conditions. The personal standpoints may be recontextualised over time and place, but they are still aspects of one's efforts at developing disposal over one's life conditions. Continuously evaluating their possibilities, the women above actively chose strategies through which immediate as well as future agency could be unfolded in the least constraining way. Common to them was that reflections on participation and self-determination for a while became key issues. Yet their reflections were not only directed at their immediate agency, but at future directions in life as well. An example of this is, that for one woman strategic absence from school and some classmates was also part of an integrated plan for passing her final exams.

For some women the experience of sexualised coercion and its aftermaths dominated life for a while. However, they often thought it most imperative that the event should not *permanently* dominate their conduct of life. One of the women said:

"Well it has definitely been important for me to say that it shouldn't control my life, because it has [for some time] and I can't accept that. I won't allow those guys to have that kind of power over me [...] it is always best to be in control of one's own life, right?"

The woman further reflected on changes, which may for some time have contributed to the complexity of (re)organising and (re)formulating her life:

"I choose what I want and what I don't want, which I see... which some people may regard as selfish... I think very selfishly, think a lot in well, what means something to me? What do I want? Never 'well, okay what do you want', well of course you think that too. But if you feel that well, this is for me, or to me this is not the optimal... actually it saddens me or it scares me or it isn't really something I want to do, well then you'd better say no".

She had seen herself as someone who primarily provided help and care for others. Like some of the others she now took more charge of her own immediate interests. Her new strategies challenged her understanding of herself and her standpoints. Also, they challenged routinised aspects of her conduct of daily life. She believed her reflections in the aftermaths had qualified her conduct of life in them having led to personally meaningful changes:

"The rape did have something positive in it, in the way that I got so many things put into perspective in order to say; 'which people are in my life and who did I realise I feel comfortable around, who I can trust and who will be there for me, and who is just shallow and pretty much indifferent to me".

Some of the women described sexualised coercion as marking a new era in their inclusion and exclusion of friends, fellow students, classmates and even family members. The woman quoted immediately above added:

"Because I think for... yes it is from before the rape, right and then until now... for so many years I have had to accept some things and why, really, when it is my life? Why not make a decision about my life and be the one to decide when enough is enough for me".

She decided to end her very difficult relationship with her alcoholic mother, who had frequently called her threatening to commit suicide, expecting her to provide immediate help, comfort and company.

It seems as if experiences of sexualised coercion and its aftermaths may bring about changes in standpoints and strategies that incorporate them into a development of new standpoints and courses of action. One of the women said:

"I have started prioritising other things more than I used to, right? I have always been somewhat of a loner eh, and I have always been a little bit different. I always liked motorcycles. I always liked to travel, I always liked to travel alone and those things will never change. But I am beginning to see that some of the little problems in my daily life might not be so big, and it may not be so important to me whether I have a big telly or a small one. As long as I have a telly that is working, then that is fine, right? Eh, it gives you some social problems in that it may be difficult to meet your friends where they are, because it might be important to them to build a new bedroom, or that the toilet tissue matches the kitchen towels [...] you think, why eh, why is this important when you have so many other good things? You have good health, the weather is great or the flowers have come out or something like that".

It appears that agency, having been severely impaired during and often after sexualised coercion, becomes a more conscious and central issue for the women. In the immediate period after the experience, their intentions to minimise difficulties were to facilitate ways of participating that, from their perspective, would ensure the quickest possible stabilisation of their emotional and cognitive potentials while they developed their scope of action:

"I am going to take dancing lessons. It is something I really like and I love to dance, also to get my mind away from things [...] so you sort of do something you like. I think this is really important, that you do something you like".

For some women the (re)formulations and (re)organisations of life events meant changes in education and career motivation. Changes in

standpoints and courses of action may cause changes in their trajectories of participation so as to coordinate past experiences with situated, immediate and ongoing personal meanings. The changes may in some aspects constrain their lives, but may also be changes that make the personal meanings of their trajectories of participation more cohesive and self determined. Studying at a university, one of the women decided to change from one major to another. She had previously not been satisfied with her choice. This lack of satisfaction was accentuated as she re-evaluated her life. Eventually she was very satisfied with her change of plans.

For a while, placing their conduct of life at the centre of their attention makes sense in ways the women were not aware of, interested in or focused on prior to coercion. This exposes the personal importance of – and their struggle in – participating as reflecting subjects *in* and *over* their lives in connection with experiences of subjection. Additionally, the last example shows how meanings of the experiences themselves, and the changes that the women make are imbedded in their past, immediate and future trajectories of participation across contexts, although this may not always be immediately evident. This points to the importance of analysing sexualised coercion as courses of events in the personal conduct of social life rather than as isolated, abstract, individual, internalised, pathologising and always traumatic events.

Concluding remarks

In psychology taking a point of departure in the 1st person perspective is often seen as not analytic and naïve. Through our theoretical approach and the use of its concepts, however, these perspectives are connected to the concrete and societal conditions in which they are embedded. We show how, what may at first and even by the women themselves be

perceived as ‘non-agency’, blind submission to perpetrators, and *re-* actions to coercion and its aftermaths, are actually situated, intentional and directed strategies for self-protection and even self preservation, as well as for ensuring immediate and future agency.

Discussing the meanings of sexualised coercion as situated, continuously and actively changing complex personal constellations of meanings and strategies of action, we have analysed the interplay between conditions of coercion and the perspectives, and (in)actions of the women involved. We have also focused upon what this interplay may mean for the conscious and intentional (re)organisation and (re)formulation of the conduct of life in the aftermaths of experiences of coercion.

We have used a theoretical approach to women as participating subjects, and to sexualised coercion as courses of events in social life, which cross contexts and trajectories of participation. We hope to have increased awareness of the dangers of labelling women as passive victims, and their feelings, thinking and actions as un-reflected and/or pathological *re-*actions to a single traumatic event. We also hope to inspire to inclusion of the analysis of the meanings of concrete conditions, social practices and social structurations across time and place on several analytical levels.

It follows from our approach that in order to be supportive, help offered by professionals as well as non-professionals must be attentive to the public and private discourses, concrete conditions, and personal meanings of sexualised coercion. Attention must be directed to the processes of women’s attempts at personal sense making in (re)organising and (re)formulating strategies of action as ways of (re)contextualising meanings and participation. This demands recognition – in the sense of identification, acknowledgment and appreciation – of similarities and differences in potential difficulties in conducting life in the aftermaths of coercion. It should also offer

empowering recognition of how these difficulties may contribute to the development of explicitly intentional reflections and strategies for future participation (Pedersen 2008b). Recognition of this kind contributes to the integration of the courses of events in the women's lives, while emphasising agency as directed intentionality and situated action possibilities.

Sexualised coercion is committed by people, and social relations play significant roles in the aftermaths. Therefore, and as it may reduce potential conflicts rooted in differently situated and informed perspectives, general knowledge concerning the complexity of personal constellations of meanings of coercion may prove to be important. Focus on constellations of meanings that surface through analysis of personal perspectives, may also inform professional practices such as gynaecology, nursing, psychology, physiotherapy, social work, forensic medicine, and law enforcing systems.

Finally, by pointing to the connections between social practices, discourses and the personal meanings of sexualised coercion, our study challenges individualisation built-into hegemonic discourses and practices related to sexualised coercion, violence, and gender. Through the analytical linking of personal perspectives and difficulties to social conditions we show that women's attempts at protecting themselves and changing their life is not a maladaptive coping strategy. It is a (re) organisation of life inspired by new knowledge of possible risks in a gendered conduct of life. This points to the importance of not individualising gendered social problems such as the restrictions that sexualised coercion and its aftermaths impose on women's agency.

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