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Floretta BOONZAIER

'If the Man Says you Must Sit, Then you Must Sit': The Relational Construction of Woman Abuse: Gender, Subjectivity and Violence

Woman abuse and other forms of gender-based violence are key obstacles to gender equity across the globe. Researchers have examined the problem of woman abuse from a multitude of perspectives. However, little research has focused specifically on both partners' constructions of their relationships. This article is based upon a study that examined how women and men in intimate heterosexual relationships attribute meaning to the man's perpetration of violence against a woman partner. Narrative interviews were conducted with women and men who constituted 15 heterosexual couples. In this study participants' narratives of self, other, relationship and violence included ambiguous constructions of victims and perpetrators; constructions of violent relationships as cyclical in nature; constructions of woman abuse as a problem of the self; narrations of violence as a mutual endeavour and all-encompassing narratives of power and control. This study provided insight into the subjective, relational and gendered dynamics of abusive relationships, illustrated the significance of the context in shaping the ways in which experiences are narrated, and showed the value of poststructuralist theorizing to feminist psychology.

Key Words: *gender-based violence, domestic violence, intimate partner violence, relational construction, narrative analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Violence against women is a widespread social, public health and human rights problem that affects millions of women worldwide, and it is also endemic to South African society. For more than three decades, researchers have explored the experiences of women in abusive relationships. The focus on women as victims was important in order for feminist researchers to draw attention to the

magnitude of the problem (Dobash and Dobash, 1979). However, this focus on victims' experiences inadvertently deflected attention away from men – who are the most frequent perpetrators of violence against women. This one-sided focus had the consequence that the literature on the accounts of *both* women and violent men is not well developed. Our understanding of the problem would benefit by according attention to both partners in the relationships. This article therefore examines the experiences of both women and men in intimate, heterosexual relationships characterized by men's violence, and explores how each of the individuals in the dyad constructs stories about violence and the relationship in relation to the other partner.

WOMEN'S AND MEN'S NARRATIVES OF VIOLENCE

Approaches to narrative have been shown to be useful for exploring men's violence in intimate heterosexual relationships (Hydén, 1999, 2005; Jackson, 2001; Wood, 2001). Research with abused women shows that, at times, women adopt hegemonic gendered constructions and at other times they resist them (Boonzaier and de la Rey, 2003). Women's narratives also contain culturally embedded stories of romance or fairytale, employed in order to make sense of the violence. Towns and Adams (2000) showed how cultural constructions of romance and 'perfect love' serve the function of binding women in abusive relationships. Similarly, Wood (2001) showed how women in her study co-opted the traditional gender narrative by making excuses for their partners' violence and internalizing expectations that they should nurture their romantic partners. Wood (2001) argued that women make meaning of their relationships by drawing on the available repertoire of discursive resources provided by the culture, and that their narratives 'reflect and embody culturally produced, sustained, and approved narratives of gender and romance' (p. 257).

In a similar vein, Adams et al. (1995) showed how abusive men employed a variety of rhetorical devices, underpinned by discourses of male dominance and entitlement, to discuss their own violence. Men also draw on a variety of narratives of masculinity when discussing their perpetration of violence against women partners. Men's violence has been described as a gendered practice whereby men 'accomplish' or 'do' gender (Anderson and Umberson, 2001; Hearn, 1998). Many men discuss their violence as an enforcement of the patriarchal masculinity narrative. Wood (2004), for example, showed how men argued that their partners disrespected their authority as men, that they had the right to discipline their partners, that the women provoked them and that their partners accepted their abuse. In an earlier paper, I showed how men attempted to maintain their hold on hegemonic forms of masculinity (through the perpetration of violence) in the context of a changing economic and sociopolitical climate in South Africa (Boonzaier, 2005). Research also shows that many men draw on narratives that define some sort of crisis in their masculine identities. In a study

by Anderson and Umberson (2001), for example, men suggested that their wives were responsible for the violence, they claimed to be victims of a biased legal system and they positioned themselves as emasculated victims of domineering partners. Buchbinder and Eisikovits (2004) also showed how men experienced repeated encounters with the police as disempowering and as a betrayal by their partners. The men discussed this in terms of a gender identity crisis and thus perceived shifts in the power dynamics of their relationships.

Studies examining men's violence in intimate heterosexual relationships often employ homogenous samples of either abused women or violent men. Few qualitative studies consider the perspectives of both partners in the dyad, and thus opportunities to examine how individual partners' narratives are constructed in relation to the other partner are missed. Further, research with both partners in the dyad is important as an exclusive focus on women entrenches stereotypes relating to blame and responsibility for the violence. As a result, this article intends to explore how both women who have experienced violence and men who have perpetrated violence within heterosexual relationships construct narratives about their relationships and the violence, in relation to each other.

This article is informed by feminist poststructuralism in its exploration of how women and men understand and talk about the violence in their relationships. Weedon (1987) defines feminist poststructuralism as 'a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change' (pp. 40–1). As an epistemological and theoretical approach, feminist poststructuralism accords attention to language, meaning and subjectivity, thereby offering a dynamic and fluid understanding of experience. The approach allows for the acknowledgement that competing discourses of gender and subjectivity may be available to narrating subjects.

Ussher (2004) argues that feminist poststructuralism offers a useful focus on the discursive realm and the ways in which representations of women, such as those of women's bodies, have fed into regulatory practices. However, she also cautions that the discursive realm should not be upheld at the expense of the material realities of women's lives. As a consequence, she poses a material-discursive positioning in which social and political forces, which entrench gendered, racialized, classed and other forms of inequality cannot be ignored. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that the intra-psychic realm is important too and cannot be separated from the discursive and the material (Ussher et al., 2000). The material-discursive–intra-psychic epistemological approach is particularly pertinent in this study too, and, as the analysis will show, structural and social factors impact on the discursive construction of relationships, gender and violence and on the subjective construction of identities.

NARRATIVE METHODS AND ANALYSES

The data for this article are derived from a larger project that examined narratives of 15 heterosexual couples through the method of in-depth, individual interviews.[1] A narrative methodological approach allowed for an examination of how women and men made meaning of their relationships that had been characterized by violence. Narrative imposes coherence on experiences that do not necessarily make sense (Wood, 2001). Moreover, a narrative approach allowed for the acknowledgement that narratives are not simply aimed at conveying meaning, but at constructing subjectivity for the narrating individuals. Women and men therefore not only told stories about their relationships and the violence, they constructed themselves (and significant others) in those stories.

Participants for the study were recruited from two organizations in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. These organizations provide psycho-educational groups for perpetrators of woman abuse as well as support for victims of violence. In the first of the social service organizations, the 'domestic violence' group facilitator introduced my study to potential research participants and obtained initial consent for me to make contact with them. In the second organization, I was allowed to attend the group sessions as an observer and an assistant to the group facilitators. I informed participants about my study and recruited volunteers from the group. Four of the 15 men in the sample had voluntarily attended the perpetrator programmes and the rest had been court-mandated to do so. A majority of the participants lived in historically marginalized suburbs of Cape Town (also known as the Cape Flats). The Cape Flats is a stretch of land on the outskirts of the city of Cape Town. Black people were relocated to these areas as a result of apartheid's Group Areas Act.[2,3] The Cape Flats comprises a number of suburbs, which are characterized by high crime rates, poverty, social marginalization and gang violence. All but one of the participants had, under the apartheid system, been previously classified as 'coloured'. The latter participant was classified as 'Indian'. Participants ranged in age from 28 to 48 years, with an average of 37 years.

The analytical method employed in this article involved an holistic analysis of the content and form of individual narratives (Lieblich et al., 1998). Similarities and differences vis-à-vis content and form were explicated within and across cases. Through a focus on the context, attention was also accorded to the function of individual and couple narratives. Attention to language and discourse also shaped my reading of participants' narratives. In particular, I was attentive to the discursive resources participants drew upon and the particular subject positions these made available to them. Furthermore, my analysis of women's and men's narratives of violence was also guided by Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) view of the 'defended psychosocial subject', in recognizing that 'the crucial motivation for investment in particular discourses is the need to defend oneself against feelings of anxiety' (p. 59).

The Social Context of Narratives of Violence

Narratives have been described as socially constructed within a shared system of meanings (Gergen and Gergen, 1984) and are said to involve a process of communal interaction (Riessman, 1993) signifying the fluidity and contextuality of meanings. Narratives are context bound and therefore shaped by cultural, social, political and historical factors. Narratives told depend upon the social contexts in which they are conveyed – who the narrators are, who the stories are told to, relationships between narrators and audiences and broader contextual features (Murray, 2003). As a consequence, the narratives produced in this study should be understood within the broader social context in which they were produced, as well as in relation to the varied positionings of the researcher. While it is beyond the scope of this article to sketch the historical context of South Africa, it may be germane to mention that it is a society with a long history of violence and oppression and is currently characterized by massive transformation at all levels. It is understood, then, that transformation at the political, social and economic levels will have implications for the ways in which interpersonal, heterosexual relationships are constructed and narrated.

On a different but related note, it is also relevant that the participants in this study were all, at some point, clients of a social service organization equipped to address gender-based violence. As a result, the narratives that were produced served particular functions for women who had been identified as the 'victims' of violence and for men who were identified as the 'perpetrators'.

At the interpersonal level, the narratives produced were also a function of the positionings of the researcher. The research participants and I were different in a number of ways including gender (to men), age, education and class.[4] Although the interviews with men were clearly framed in the context of men reporting their use of violence to a woman, *to a woman* (Riessman, 1990), I found (as did Scully, 1994) that gender was not a significant barrier to obtaining sensitive and personal information. However, as will be revealed in the analysis, gender differences (to men) and similarities (to women) clearly framed the context in which the narratives were produced.

During my interviews, issues of cultural and racial similarity were evoked in various ways.[5] Although distinct markers of shared cultural understandings are difficult to define, in many instances the language that participants used pointed to the assumption of shared understandings (e.g. 'Do you know what I mean?' or 'you know'). Assumptions of cultural similarity may also hinder the interview process in that some things might be left unsaid. An example is drawn from an interview with a participant who described how his relationship had begun. He stated that his partner became pregnant before they were married. During our interview, he relayed his conversation with her about the pregnancy: 'What are we going to do because people are gonna start talking?' The respondent did not elaborate any further except to indicate that they subsequently married. It is likely that he assumed that I knew there were cultural proscriptions against women

having children out of wedlock: thus, because his partner was pregnant, they were compelled to get married. Further, in communities characterized by poverty and economic hardship, certain aspects of 'respectability' seem to become even more salient (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). If these aspects of 'respectability', such as getting married before having children, are not adhered to, it may provide the opportunity for community gossip and social stigma. Of course, I knew all of these things but, had he elaborated on the issue, I might have been provided with some new insight into these social and cultural dynamics that might have facilitated my analysis of the narratives.

From a poststructuralist perspective, the notion of shared identity in research has been questioned (Lewin, 1995) because identity is assumed to be dynamic and fluid. The notion of 'shared identity' would therefore rest on individual meanings and would depend on which forms of identity are salient within the interview context (Lewin, 1995). For some participants, racial identities may have been salient and, for others, their identities as fathers, mothers, wives or husbands may have been more important – although the intention was to evoke common identities across interviews – namely, that of 'victim' or 'perpetrator' of violence in an intimate heterosexual relationship.

Ethical Challenges

Although not adequately explored in the literature, there are a number of ethical dilemmas that emerge as a consequence of research with two people in an intimate relationship. These issues include a conflict of interest, imbalance, taking sides, intrusion, inclusion, influence and disseminating results (Forbat and Henderson, 2003). A conflict of interest is not easily resolved, as each party approaches the research endeavour with a variety of expectations and might have their own assumptions about the role of the researcher and therefore use the research encounter in order to convey particular kinds of stories. Imbalance refers to privileging one partner's account over another's and, in this endeavour, it involved a reflection upon and awareness of my own biases and preconceptions about 'victims' and 'perpetrators'. Due care was taken not to intrude in the relationships by obtaining voluntary informed consent and by ensuring that participants were aware that they could withdraw from the research at any time. By obtaining separate, informed consent and stressing the voluntary nature thereof, I attempted to ensure that participants were not subtly coerced into participation (the ethical dilemma of inclusion), although I cannot account for the fact that they might have 'felt' coerced by virtue of being involved in a social service agency as a client. Influence refers to the risk of the second interview being guided by discussions within the first interview. Maintaining an unstructured approach allowed participants to guide the levels of disclosure within the interview, thus ensuring minimal interviewer input and, as a result, my attention to the impact my prior knowledge may have had on the data-gathering process.

The issue of disseminating results also becomes an ethical challenge, as the

researcher has to ensure that anonymity is retained. Providing details about the couple or the relationship may result in anonymity and confidentiality being violated, as the individuals might recognize themselves and their partners in the research report. Ethical care, in this regard, requires going beyond 'standard' procedures such as the use of pseudonyms. I have summarized the demographics of the sample in disseminations of this research. I also chose not to provide specific contextual details, such as the names of places or organizations. Furthermore, quotations from the transcribed interviews were only utilized when necessary and they were as brief as possible. While my narrative of the research process may claim to have given due care to ethical considerations in the dissemination of the results, the issue remains unresolved. It may be justifiable to claim that it is unlikely that participants will read my academic research outputs (which is an uncomfortable admission for someone who claims to adhere to feminist research principles); however, I cannot unequivocally claim that there remain no risks.

NARRATIVES OF SELF, OTHER, RELATIONSHIP AND VIOLENCE

The Narrative Construction of Victims and Perpetrators

In this study, constructions of subject positions as 'victims' and 'perpetrators' were multifarious and ambiguous. Many women, consistent with traditional femininity, fully situated themselves within the role of the victim and their partners often concurred. In the extract below, the woman constructs herself as the passive and helpless object upon which her husband acted out his abusive tendencies:

> I was very scared of him. I was terrified of this man. (3A)[6]

In another example below, the woman constructs herself as passive and in need of protection. She identifies herself with abused women as a group and retrospectively questions why she remained married to her partner:

> . . . they keep asking – why do abused women stay with their husbands? And I was thinking I wonder the reason why I perhaps stayed with him is because a year after we started going out my mother passed away and it's most probably somebody I just . . . got stuck on and then I just couldn't move away from it. I most probably feel that um if this marriage does end or whatever then it's like a failure to me. (11A)

The woman drew on a parent–child metaphor, describing how her partner took over the role of a parent after her mother died. As Ussher et al. (2000) argued, cultural representations of women as childlike or immature have historically been used to exclude women from full participation in the public sphere. The woman above also drew on the cultural discourse of femininity, inferring that she would have failed as a woman if she did not remain married despite her circumstances.

Her husband concurred with her construction of herself as childlike and in need of his protection:

> . . . when her mother passed away, so I had to look after her . . . (11B)

Women, usually at the beginning of the violence, came to view themselves in 'the position of the wounded' (Hydén, 2005: 176) or as 'pure victims'. Many women in this study described themselves as passive and helpless in response to their partners' control. Possibilities for agency and resistance, however, were found in strategies that they employed to end the violence.

Men's constructions of subjectivity were complicated by powerful issues of labelling and stigmatization:

> . . . it wasn't a nice place to be, it wasn't a nice programme to be in. . . . But um, this kind of thing is stigmatized in a big way. . . . So you have to search yourself in some way and know that you are now labelled and you are branded. (4B)

The label of 'perpetrator' was identified as problematic for many of the men in this study. Many of their narratives thus functioned to illustrate how they had transformed as individuals, resisted the negative label and attempted to maintain a positive sense of self despite their violent histories. It is also important to note that a majority of the men had been court-mandated to attend the perpetrator programmes and thus issues of labelling may have been particularly salient. Of course, it is also because of their 'identities' as 'perpetrators' that they had been asked to participate in the research interview with me.

Many have argued that woman abuse has been transformed from a private, family or relationship issue into a social and political problem that is receiving attention from a variety of avenues (e.g. legal, political and social) (Buchbinder and Eisikovits, 2004; Hydén, 1994). In the South African context, this problem has also justifiably received a fair amount of attention from governmental and social services agencies and from the media. In light of the social construction of woman abuse as a significant problem, a man who has been identified as domestically violent, and who has been compelled to cede to state or legal intervention, has limited options for negotiating a positive identity.

What is clear from the data is that participants (particularly men) brought a very specific agenda with them to the research encounter (see Banister et al., 1994, on the positioning of research participants). Some men provided very little detail about their relationships and, overall, their narratives functioned to show that they were 'actually' non-violent. One man (3B), for instance, maintained a positive identity, and depicted himself as eager, willing to learn and to change, as well as an active agent in his own life and relationship. He also constructed himself as non-violent. His wife was almost absent from his narrative, however:

> 'I'm mister so and so, I'm here for abusing my wife.' And then I said to myself: 'Geez, but I'm not an abuser, why must I come and confess that I'm an abuser?' (3B)

Again, the label of 'abuser' or 'perpetrator' was a salient feature in the man's construction of himself. His narrative about his relationship and about himself as an individual attempted to resist this characterization. In this interview, in particular, the issue of the power relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee was salient. As a man, and the one who are being interviewed about his experiences, he had the power to impose his own reality on the narrative and he consistently shifted the discussion away from the events that unfolded in his relationship. He employed a number of strategies in order to avoid speaking of the past and to represent a story of a couple who had experienced minor communication problems. He highlighted the present and constantly attempted to shift the conversation away from discussions of the past. Consider the following extract:

Floretta:	Can you please give me a bit of, er tell me a bit about your relationship with your wife or give me a bit of history on your relationship.
Participant (3B):	Present, past?
Floretta:	Well you could start with the past.
Participant (3B):	Well the past was a bit rocky and er, I wouldn't say rocky to that extent where it was, you know unsolvable. And er, it was minor and petty issues.

Above, the man's question ('Present, past?') in response to the interviewer's question immediately set the tone for how he would speak about his relationship. Generally, when one is asked to tell about a 'history', it is taken to mean the past. He provides us with a clue about how he will tell his narrative – a general reluctance to discuss the past, replaced with an eagerness to discuss the present instead. The man responded to the clarification by briefly mentioning a troubled past that was speedily overcome. His use of language such as 'a bit rocky', 'unsolvable' and 'minor and petty' serves to persuade the listener that the couple's problems were not serious.

Consistent with a feminist poststructuralist view, participants constructed a blurring of the roles of 'victim' and 'perpetrator'. Most notably, there were many instances where men drew on the very powerful narrative of 'emasculation' or 'crisis' (Boonzaier, 2005) and constructed themselves in the position of the 'wounded'. For example:

/. . ./ she wants me to do things the way she sees it and to follow what she believes . . . (2B)

/. . ./ I had a flat ((apartment)) when we got married, she had a house. So we decided to move into the house. /. . ./ she would often use the fact that I was in her house and stuff like this which made me feel, not insecure but I was in a sense emasculated . . . (1B)

And then she was fine then all of a sudden she's got this mood swing you know, and I can see it on her face, I know hey, here's shit coming my way again. Then my stomach starts turning again you know that type a thing. And it's a terrible feeling cause you dunno what to expect . . . (7B)[7]

The above examples show that men used particular strategies to characterize their partners as 'masculinized' (Anderson and Umberson, 2001) or domineering, such as positioning themselves in the victim role. Women who were depicted as controlling disrupted the binary opposition of masculinity (read as authority) and femininity (read as submission) (Anderson and Umberson, 2001). It thus becomes difficult for men to hold on to hegemonic forms of masculinity. Most of the men in this study lived in marginalized communities and thus it is questionable whether they were able to attain the ideals of capitalist hegemonic masculinity. This study, however, revealed that many were striving to attain these ideals and violence was an important means to achieve this objective. It is also important to note that narratives of emasculation are cultural resources that provide very powerful rhetorical functions. They allow men to explain away their violence toward an intimate woman partner.

In contrast to men's positioning above, women outlined changes from the roles they had occupied at the beginning of their relationships. These roles changed from initially passive to active, and they included strategies to cope with the abuse:

> . . . we have a good relationship now but I don't think marriage, marriage will work for us. It's too much, he did too much. . . . Made me hard. (15A)

> I think also, the mistake that [ex-husband] was to have married a woman like me – coming from a family with a very strong mother. You see. He had a very strong, a very aggressive and assertive father figure that was abusive. But his mother was very yielding. But in our family I have a strong mother so I grew up um in a household where assertiveness, you know, is part of our upbringing. And um, also where the boys and the girls were treated the same . . . (1A)

Some women depicted changes in their sense of themselves as a consequence of coping with abusive partners. Others concurred with men's narratives of emasculation by constructing themselves as already powerful and this as a 'cause' for the abuse. Women's constructions of themselves, however, allowed for resistance of traditional forms of femininity as passive and submissive.

Participants' narratives illustrate the ambiguity of subject positions for the individual partners in a violent heterosexual relationship. Particular subject positions are taken up at particular moments to achieve varied purposes. Narratives of emasculation, for example, allowed men to construct themselves as victimized and thus to minimize their reprehensible behaviour toward their intimate partners.

Constructing the Violent Relationship: Narratives of Cyclicality and Duality

In early feminist writing about women's positioning in relationships with violent men, Walker (1984) characterized the relationship as composed of three phases: the tension-building phase, the explosive phase and the honeymoon phase. Many participants in this study drew on the cyclical metaphor in their narratives of vio-

lence. This included descriptions of the vacillation between love and abuse. Some women, however, drew on their understanding of the cycle of violence as constituting their processes of leaving and returning to abusive partners. Returning to or accepting an abusive partner back was often attributed to feelings of sympathy or hoping for change. Women's hope for change was constructed as a strong factor compelling women to accept abusive partners back. It is also consistent with the construction endorsed by some women that the abuse is not a consistent feature of the man's identity but rather a departure from the norm:

> Every single time I thought: 'Ok maybe, maybe he's just going through a bad patch, you know he will change, he will change.' He never. (4A)

Many couples described their relationship patterns as highly consistent with the cycle of violence described by Walker (1984). Both partners depicted a calm, quiet (although not necessarily loving) phase that frequently preceded violent outbursts. One man (8A), who suggested that a cycle of love and abuse characterized his relationship, described how, at times, even after they divorced, they 'lived together as a married couple'. In his narrative, he makes it explicit that 'living together as a married couple' meant being sexually intimate with his partner. After the divorce, his partner moved out of the main bedroom and slept on the couch. He stated that when things were good, she would move back into the bedroom, and would later move out again 'for no reason'. This constant vacillation between sexual love and abuse was a recurrent theme in this man's story and it showed how his notions of manhood were intimately linked with ideas about sexual gratification and having other physiological 'needs' catered for by a woman partner, a theme evident in many men's narratives. Although his partner did not accord the same emphasis to their sexual relationship, she similarly constructed the relationship as one characterized by vacillation between honeymoon periods and violent episodes.

In psycho-educational groups dealing with violence in intimate relationships, the cycle of violence is often used in order for participants to 'recognize' their relationship and the particular phases it may be composed of. What participants' narratives show is that they draw on these understandings of the violent relationship as composed of this cyclical dynamic.

A dual-identity dynamic is implicit in the discursive construction of the intimate relationship as a 'cycle of violence'. The relationship is constructed as 'good-at-times' and 'bad-at-times' and thus the abusive partner is also constructed as both good and bad. One man, for example, portrayed himself as having a dual personality because his violent actions were not consistent with his sense of self. He described himself as normally a non-violent person who, through provocation, became violent:

> I eventually went to [the organization] because I couldn't understand why I would react in such a spontaneous manner, under such pressure . . . to become this monster ((laugh)) you know what I'm saying. (1B)

Above, the man depicted himself as a normally 'good' person who was trans-
formed into a monster by forces beyond his control. The language he employs
(e.g. 'spontaneous manner, under such pressure'), explicitly constructs the vio-
lence as an expressive release of tension (O'Neill, 1998). His partner's narrative
functioned to justify her decisions to return to him and, thus, she also utilized a
dual identity construction:

> And um, although on the other hand I knew that he was quite affectionate and
> loving on other occasions and that he seemed to be repentant, so um, I you know
> I had great difficulty making up my mind. (1A)

It is clear that both partners above employed a dual identity construction, albeit
for different reasons. The man maintained a hold on a positive form of identity
by describing the violence as a departure from the norm and also constructing it
as an expressive release of tension. The volcanic metaphor is used in his (and
others') narratives to mitigate responsibility and to suggest that the violence was
unpredictable and thus uncontrollable. For women, the narrative of duality func-
tions to allow them to attribute the violence to one aspect of the man's personal-
ity (the bad, hateful, selfish and abusive side) and to describe it as a departure
from the norm. It also allows women to overcome the paradox of the co-existence
of love and abuse (Yassour Borochowitz and Eisikovits, 2002) within the same
relationship. These characterizations are consistent with the poststructuralist
research that shows that women rationalize their partners' behaviour by creating
a split between the good and bad persona (Boonzaier and de la Rey, 2003; Towns
and Adams, 2000). Discourses of love and the romantic narrative also script
particular masculine and feminine roles. The romantic narrative provides the
space for women to construct stories of the beginning of their relationships as
typical of fairytales – the princess who was swept off her feet by 'Prince
Charming' (Jackson, 2001; Wood, 2001). Women are therefore able to show why
they entered into relationships with these men in the first place. Furthermore, men
are constructed with dual identities – the prince and the beast (Jackson, 1993,
cited in Towns and Adams, 2000) in which the prince/hero behaves in character-
istically masculine ways by hurting and humiliating the woman – but with her
patience and support his softer side is later revealed. As Jackson (2001) revealed,
women's passivity and subordination are core characteristics inscribed in the
romantic narrative.

A Problem of the Self: Narratives of Damage and Dysfunction

In this study, the language of psychology was often used to 'explain' violence in
participants' relationships. This is a common strategy found in other studies too,
as the problem of woman abuse is 'psychologized' (Palmary, 1999). Take for
example a woman's description of her husband's psychological state below:

> . . . I think there's issues deep down there that people don't know . . . (4A)

Take, also, her partner's construction of his own psychological state:

> . . . a lot of hidden emotional issues . . . there's a lot of condemnation, a lotta shame. There's a lot of pain . . . (4B)

It is notable that 'appeals to insanity' were common features of participants' narratives. Psychology and psychotherapeutic practice have been critiqued for overtly 'psychologizing' and 'pathologizing' human distress, thereby limiting attention to social and political structures (Pilgrim, 1991, cited in Hook, 2002). In the context of gender-based violence, the psychologization of the problem serves the function of ignoring the social and political contexts that support violence against women and also locates the abuser in the position of the 'patient'. As a consequence, gender-based violence is constructed as a problem of the self (Hook, 2002).

In this study, the terrain of psychology has been co-opted in another significant manner – namely, by constructing the man's childhood history of violence or dysfunctional relationships as a precursor to his current behaviour. Indeed, social learning theory is a significant psychological theory that may explain a range of behaviours. Many other studies have discovered a significant relationship between men witnessing violence against their mothers and later perpetrating violence in their relationships (Abrahams, 2002; Kalmus, 1984; Skuja and Halford, 2004). Indeed, it is a popular cultural discourse surrounding the perpetration of violence in intimate relationships and participants illustrate this in their narratives too:

> I um grew up with my parents and that was also like my father was also drinking and there I also witnessed like abuse in the family, swearing and er [Floretta: with your mother?] that's correct yes. My father used to hit my mother and all that stuff. But, um in the end actually we grew up believing that it was right. That the husband must hit the wife, that is how we grew up . . . And the drinking was also playing a very big role in the relationship and my mother and father they were also married till my mother couldn't also um take it anymore. And she also left my father . . . (9B)

In the extract above, it is apparent that the man connects his mother's experiences to an invisible other – namely, his wife's – and his own to his father's. The discourse on the intergenerational transmission of violence, while being a prevalent cultural resource, also emerges from a very particular context (i.e. the perpetrator groups) that allows and encourages men to make connections between their current behaviour and contextual factors in their families of origin. The language of psychology thus provides an important resource through which men and women can reframe their experiences of perpetration and violation within their intimate relationships.

Narratives of Mutuality and Responsibility

For many couples in this study, violence was constructed as a dual, reciprocal activity and depicted as largely expressive. The man's violence was depicted as resulting from extreme provocation by the woman partner. For example:

> . . . if I didn't agree with him on things, on everything then he would try and try and try and try and prove his point, . . . and if I still didn't back down and unfortunately I'm the kind of woman that digs my heels in . . . (1A)

> But um, there were other issues. Difference, any difference of opinion would lead into an argument. (1B)

These individuals described a relationship contaminated by constant conflict. The disagreement was presented as arising out of mundane household issues that could not have been amicably resolved. The construction of joint responsibility for violence was upheld by depicting the relationship as highly conflictual and each partner as controlling and 'stubborn'.

Participants also used particular forms of language to describe the violence as a mutual activity. Words such as 'fight' or 'argument' were frequently employed. Constructing the violence incident as a 'fight' suggests a 'reciprocal activity with no clear distinction between attacker and victim' (Hydén, 1994: 104). Similarly, an 'argument' suggests a verbal disagreement between equals:

> Um, you know the drinking got worse, start swearing at each other, start fighting. (9B)

> Now I'm someone, I will grab her arm and some. And once I choked her, yes, so I choked her. I am thinking I am just gonna choke you till you gone and you can't breathe anymore. No uh-uh drunk ((inaudible)). There all the stuff goes through my mind, now I'm thinking I'm not fighting with my wife I'm fighting with a man now. And . . . when she started making so ((makes gasping sounds)) so I let go and said ooh I went too far this time. (11B)

In the latter account, the man mitigates responsibility for his actions by mentioning that he was intoxicated when the violence occurred. In his account he also employs the strategy of 'changing the victim' (Hydén, 1994: 136) in his talk of 'fighting with a man' rather than with his wife. The term 'fighting' is employed to transfer a degree of agency onto the woman. However, in his account, his wife is almost absent except in the capacity of an object upon which he acted out his abusive tendencies ('I will grab her arm'; 'I choked her'). He used the strategy of changing the victim and the objectification of his wife to explain his extreme use of violence against her.

When violence is constructed as a reciprocal activity, both partners have to accept some responsibility for its outcome. Some women concurred with their partners' constructions of the violence as mutual and thus did not characterize themselves as 'pure victims'. Indeed, as women's and men's narratives show, there is much ambiguity and complication surrounding identifications of the 'actual victims' or the 'actual perpetrators' within the relationships. As a consequence, constructions of power and control within the relationship were also contradictory and inconsistent.

Narratives of Power and Control

While many participants drew on psychological understandings of men's violence as expressive, the man's violence was also understood as instrumental, intentional and functional (Dobash and Dobash, 1998) – in other words, used as an expression of male authority. Violence is thus used to fulfil the socially expected roles of the 'husband' and to monitor women's adherence to the roles of the 'wife' (see also Boonzaier and de la Rey, 2004). As one male participant notes:

> It all comes basically to one thing . . . at the end of the day we just all wanted to be in control. And we just couldn't accept that we're wrong. I mean I was like that. I just had to be in control of everything. I believed that I was the man in the house . . . (15B)

In the man's account above, he identified with 'abusers' as a group and described how the issue of violence was generally related to control. It is highly likely that this account of his behaviour may be a rehearsed story that had been repeated in a number of different contexts (e.g. in court, in the perpetrator groups, to social service agencies). However, the man's partner supported his construction of 'the man in control' by mentioning how she perceived gender relations in marriage:

> I always used to think women must be like that, you know. They must, if the man says sit then you must sit. I always used to believe that. (15A)

In relationships where men admit to using violence against women partners and where it may be difficult to attain expected gendered roles, issues of powerlessness and control are frequently implicated. Indeed, it has been shown that the imperative for successful masculinity involves taking up the role of the provider (Boonzaier, 2005; Boonzaier and de la Rey, 2004). One man (4B), for example, depicts a lack of control through the failure of his relationship and his unemployed status. His story encompasses depictions of control over his wife, on the one hand, and a lack of control regarding other spheres of his life, on the other:

> My life wasn't working so I needed to control everything. It gave me an edge because I was in control, trying to control a situation that was uncontrollable. So I needed to . . . I needed to mould the situation because . . . a lot of me knew that it was, it was a situation that – sounds very ironic when I try to say now. Deep down I knew I wasn't in control of it so I needed to have some control over it . . . So I needed to call the shots. (4B)

His partner expressed the duality between weakness and strength in her relationship with him in a similar manner. She had had to accept primary responsibility for the family because of his irresponsible behaviour, such as his drug-taking. She thus had to be strong. His abusive and controlling behaviour, however, rendered her weak. She thus vacillated between two extremes – just as her partner did:

> And he just partied it (the money) out and drugged it out. [Floretta: It became your responsibility.] It, everything, since we got married, he shifted on to me. And when things didn't work out, he blamed me for it, you know. (4A)

In some relationships, violence was depicted as the result of power disparities between partners. As a result of these disparities, the relationships did not conform to the expected traditional relationship type (man-dominant; woman-submissive). In these relationships, men usually perceived their partners as domineering and used violence to reassert their expected dominance in the relationship.

Narrating Sexual Control

Sexuality and the control thereof are issues closely linked to ideals of masculinity and femininity and it is a primary means by which men and women can adhere to and monitor conformity to hegemonic gendered standards. Many women in this study narrated their experiences of sexual coercion and violation. For example:

> . . . you know sometimes after we have sex I will cry because I feel like somebody that's been raped. You understand? You don't do it. For instance, he'll be rude to me in the bed then he still expects me to sleep with him. Then I sleep with him because I'm fearful [Floretta: Mmm]. You understand, but then it affects me afterwards because how can you? (3A)

The woman above explained that her husband exerted pressure on her to be sexually intimate with him. He did so by indicating that she did not gratify him sexually, and thereby also attacking her lack of conformity to traditional standards of femininity. She sometimes acquiesced to his sexual demands out of fear of future violence. Like many abused women, she spoke about the pain and anguish she experienced after forced sexual contact with her partner, also likening her experiences to rape (Boonzaier and de la Rey, 2004). Kelly (1990) described sexual abuse as occurring along a continuum of controlling and violent behaviours, ranging from sexually violent acts to insidious coercive practices whose aim it is to control access to women's bodies. While one of the core elements of the companionate marriage is sexual fulfilment (Riessman, 1990), abusive relationships challenge this ideological assumption, as women often acquiesce to unwanted sex with their partners because they fear violence or other forms of retaliation (Basile, 1999):

> And also when, I mean if you say no, he wants to have sex and you say no and then he just does it anyway [Floretta: Mmm] you know. That kind of thing. [Floretta: Did it happen often?] Ja, especially when he's like drugged and stuff like that ja. And comes in late . . . And wake me up, ja. That wasn't nice. It leaves you *very* empty. [Floretta: Mmm] It actually leaves you with a feeling of being raped. (4A)

The woman tentatively named the sexual violence from her husband as rape. The 'victim' role incorporates shame and humiliation but in this context it makes sense for her to speak of a 'feeling of being raped' rather than constructing the incident as actual rape. In her description of the incident, constructions of male sexuality as active ('he wants to have sex') and female sexuality as passive ('you say no and then he just does it anyway') are also implicit. Below, another woman narrates how her partner expected sexual contact after an episode of verbal abuse:

> (He) wants to swear at me, *so* ugly tonight, earlier and then tonight he wants to, I must now just forget about it. Cover it up. When *he* now feels it's right. But if he feels it must go on for a week, it must go on for a month then he'll ignore me, he won't speak to me. I can't ask him, nothing. I won't get any response. But now when *he* now feels it's just now long enough then I must just be ((snaps her fingers)), I must just be the wife. (7A)

For the woman (and her partner), being 'the wife' means being sexually available to her husband and having to comply with his sexual demands. Participants in this study constructed the disagreement about the quantity of sexual activity as a leading 'cause' for conflict in their relationships. At times the lack of sexual activity in the relationship was put forward as the rationale for marital infidelity by men, as the following illustrates:

> I believe that um, sexual contact with your partner is a very very vital part of marriage. My wife don't think so. /. . ./ Let me be honest with you my dear, my wife don't give me sex if I ask for it. ((inaudible)) Um, for two years I've been faithful to my wife. As straight as straight can be after the interdict,[8] I said well I'm not gonna be that faithful person, anymore. ((inaudible)) What I do is, shave, shower, get dressed, off I go. And, I actually go get myself a woman to ((inaudible)). Although it's wrong um, I haven't been doing it like um every week or every second week . . . (6B)

Above, the man outlines what he expected from a 'wife' – i.e. that she should be sexually available to her husband. He also stressed the importance of sexual contact in marriage. He drew on the discourse of the 'male sexual drive' in his rationalization for why he was engaging in extra-marital sexual relationships. The 'male sexual drive discourse' (Henriques et al., 1984: 231) is predicated on the idea that men's sexuality is directly linked to biological drives or forces beyond their control. Women, in contrast, are seen as the objects of this 'male sexual drive' discourse. The man, furthermore, draws on the very established discourse of men's proprietary rights over women. This discourse communicates messages about the heterosexual relationship involving the 'wife' as the property of the 'husband' (Henriques et al., 1984). In the extract above, and throughout his narrative, the man frequently referred to his partner as 'my wife', rather than using her name or a pronoun. His language usage may also connote the objectification of 'the wife', with the husband as the 'owner' (Adams et al., 1995), again consistent with the 'male proprietary rights' discourse. Later in this man's narrative, he goes

on to describe the differences between his wife and the women used 'for the sex' or 'for the convenience' and draws on the oppositional construction of femininity (see Boonzaier and de la Rey, 2004). This construction, otherwise known as the Madonna/whore dichotomy (Macdonald, 1995) constructs women in terms of two extremes, as either sexually pure (the virgin) or sexually impure (the whore). This narrative functions powerfully to enforce women's adherence to traditional forms of femininity (passivity and purity). These hegemonic discourses of male and female sexuality that emerged in this study were employed to represent particular forms of masculine (controlling) and feminine (subjugated) sexualities and it also functions to justify sexual violence against women.

Notions of successful masculinity were embedded in sexual practices and discourses. Women constructed men's sexuality as active vis-à-vis their own as passive. Men's active sexuality was discussed (by women only) in the context of sexual coercion used against their woman partners. The issue of marital infidelity also emerged as important and seemed to be a means by which men could attain successful masculinity. Reviewing studies on the meanings of masculinity and sexual identity in Mexico, Szasz (1998) found that sexual prowess was seen as an important aspect of masculinity, particularly in situations where economic resources were scarce and that, for working-class men in particular, notions of successful masculinity were associated with having multiple sexual partners. A similar finding was evident in a South African study (Wood and Jewkes, 2001). Like the latter, the Mexican studies reviewed showed that the objectification of women, through the Madonna/whore dichotomy, was common. In terms of this dichotomy, to reiterate the point made above, women are viewed in terms of two extreme 'types'. The first type includes those who are sexually pure and whom men would like to marry and with whom they want to establish family ties. These women deserve respect and protection, and they are inscribed with passive sexuality (Szasz, 1998). The other group of women are perceived as promiscuous and sexually active. They were not worthy to engage in committed, long-term relationships and men only used them for sex. These women were not respected but used as objects for sexual experimentation and pleasure (Szasz, 1998). In addition, the Mexican men who engaged in extra-marital sexual relationships did not consider themselves to be unfaithful. The men attempted to justify these relationships by maintaining that they involved no emotional investment or attachment. Successful masculinity thus, to a large degree, relies on the objectification and denigration of women.

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, participants' narratives of self, other, relationship and violence included ambiguous and contradictory constructions of victims and perpetrators; constructions of the violent relationship as cyclical in nature; constructions of woman abuse as a problem of the self; the narration of violence as a reciprocal

process and all-encompassing narratives of power and control. By and large, participants' narratives functioned to represent particular forms of (positive and morally acceptable) subjectivities within a context of speaking about morally reprehensible behaviour (Hydén, 1994). The research was conducted with the support of the social services agencies through which participants were contacted. Participants' roles as clientele of these agencies also served very particular functions in terms of how they narrated their experiences and whom they assumed the 'audience' of the narratives were.

The narrative interviewing and analytical methods employed in this study revealed that relationships are disorganized and conflictual and that the individuals in the partnership attempt to create order through their retrospective telling of the relationship. Couples' narratives involved speaking of the past, raising concerns about the present and presenting hopes and desires for the future. As Hydén (1994) argued, narratives have both retrospective and prospective dimensions, in that individuals attempt to make sense of the past but also express concerns and desires for the future.

Women's and men's talk about violence and relationships showed that gender is constructed relationally at particular intra-psychic, interpersonal, social and historical moments. It is significant that both men and women in this study drew on hegemonic gendered ideals in their narrations of their relationships. Some authors have argued that men who are marginalized and live in poverty have difficulty in attaining cultural standards of masculinity (Bourgois, 1995; Weis et al., 2002). As a result, men may perceive challenges to their masculine identities and develop a crisis in their gendered subjectivities – these feelings of powerlessness and insecurity may be translated into emasculation (Simpson, 1992). In such situations, women become the targets of the man's attempt to reassert his masculine identity. Moore (1994) used poststructuralist theories of subjectivity in order to theorize the relationship between interpersonal violence, gender and sexuality. She argued that individuals choose to take up various subject positions and that these positions are linked to fantasies of identity (ideas about the type of person one would like to be) and to fantasies of power and agency (which are linked to material, social and economic contexts). Moore (1994) further argued that men use violence as a result of 'thwarted' gender identities, which may result from the contradictions of various positions, the pressure to conform to certain subject positions and the failure of others to take up their 'proper' subject positions vis-à-vis oneself. She argued that men resolve a crisis in their gendered identities by using violence against their partners. This study showed that: 'The relationship of men to hegemonic masculinity is often fraught, the enactment partial, contested and capable of shifting into violence' (Connell, 2002: 94).

The narrative analysis revealed that, for many women, 'acceptable' forms of identity involved the appropriation of the 'femininity' narrative – being passive, accepting blame and denying or minimizing a partner's violence. Women's narratives of their relationships were also interspersed with discourses of love and romance (Jackson, 2001; Towns and Adams, 2000), which script particular fem-

inine roles for women and masculine roles for men. In contrast, a less prevalent feminist discourse emerged in which women presented themselves as strong, capable and independent, and as survivors rather than victims of abuse. Certain women told narratives that resisted the dominant feminine cultural script – and its associated discourses (e.g. romantic narrative) – and some resisted the enforcement of male hegemony by employing a variety of available resources in order to end the violence in their lives. Consistent with the ways in which masculinity has been constructed, this study showed that the adoption of femininity is, at times, shaky, unstable, contradictory and partial, and women (even those who are marginalized in a multiplicity of ways) struggle to negotiate, resist and situate themselves in relation to a multiplicity of 'feminine' subjectivities (Macdonald, 1995; Walkerdine, 1997).

At an epistemological level, this study revealed the value of poststructuralism to feminist theorizing in psychology. It showed that feminine and masculine subjectivities are far from being fixed, stable and unambiguous. Further, in the context of gender-based violence, it showed that men and women constructed various forms of subjectivity that were filtered through dynamic social, historical and cultural moments. At particular moments, women were able to construct themselves as victimized by a dominating male partner and at other moments they were able to acknowledge their own agency and draw on discourses of power and resistance. Similarly, the men in this study were able to admit to their control and domination, while also being able to construct themselves as powerless.

The value of feminist poststructuralist theorizing is that it allows us to acknowledge and even embrace contradiction, multiplicity and inconsistency. Gavey (1996) argued that relationship power is not unidirectional and static and that our scholastic endeavours should afford us a stance that allows for competing discourses of gender and subjectivity. In this study, the approach has enabled us to acknowledge that the categories of 'victim' and 'perpetrator' were neither static nor clearly distinguishable. The 'subject' is multiple, contradictory and fragmented (Gavey, 1989) and, thus, women and men may identify with, and conform to traditional constructions of femininity and masculinity, or they may resist or challenge these. However, expressed conformity to particular ideals may also be inconsistent with hidden desires (Gavey, 1989). The approach offered a broader and dynamic understanding of woman abuse, which allows for the acknowledgement of gender as a relational dynamic and also goes beyond individualistic and reductionist understandings of the problem. As Gavey (1989) argued:

> What feminist poststructuralism offers us is a theoretical basis for analysing the subjectivities of women and men in relation to language, other cultural practices, and the material conditions of our lives. It embraces complexity and contradiction and, I would suggest, surpasses theories that offer single-cause deterministic explanations of patriarchy and gender relations. (p. 472)

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NOTES

1. The presence of violence in these relationships precluded the use of co-joint interviews. However, the process of acquiring a sample of heterosexual couples where the man had been violent toward his partner was challenging and required a flexible and tentative approach. Given that gender-based violence is a sensitive and stigmatized topic, I decided to recruit participants via social service agencies, where they were already receiving assistance. I rationalized that obtaining interviews from both partners would be more likely if I contacted the man first. My reasons were threefold. First, it is justifiable to assume that men would be more likely to resist discussing their perpetration of violence against women partners. By contacting men first and obtaining consent, I was overcoming one difficulty. Second, I was mindful of the fact that women 'victims' often participate in research without the knowledge of their partners and that contacting the men afterwards might subject women to further violence. Third, having conducted prior research with women in abusive relationships, and being a woman myself, it made methodological sense to interview the men first in order to be able to establish rapport. Women partners were recruited separately and after the interviews with the men.

2. In this article, the term 'black' is used to refer to all groups who were oppressed during the apartheid regime – namely, African, coloured and Indian. The latter terms all signify apartheid 'racial' markers.

3. The Group Areas Act of 1950 ensured that 'races' were physically separated – in terms of residential areas and access to public amenities. Groups of people were moved out of areas in which they had lived for generations and moved into specific areas set aside for their racial grouping. These forced removals created an immense amount of psychological trauma as well as a number of associated social problems. The areas demarcated for the oppressed groups were usually far away from the city centres and were underdeveloped in terms of educational, social, recreational and healthcare facilities. These townships or ghettoes became breeding grounds for violence, gang formation and criminal activity.

4. At the time of the interviews, I was younger than most of the research participants. Having a university degree and postgraduate training also meant that I was better educated and economically privileged compared to most participants. However, it is not easy to argue unambiguously that the participants and I were very different in terms of class distinctions. As a result of apartheid policies, my family were also removed from areas that were demarcated for whites and, as a result, I grew up in the Cape Flats too.

5. While issues of 'race' and 'racial' classification are highly problematic, they remain a reality to the lives of many South Africans because they are still a function of many years of deep-rooted oppression; the effects thereof, such as poverty, violence and unemployment, are still faced by the majority of those who were previously disadvantaged (i.e. black South Africans). I was 'similar' to all but one of the research participants in terms of having been classified as 'coloured' (or of mixed heritage).

6. In order to protect participants' identities and for ease of reference, couples were assigned a number. The female partner is referred to as 'A' and the male partner as 'B'. The excerpts from the interview transcripts have been edited for clarity, while taking care to ensure that meaning is not lost.

7. /. . ./ denotes talk omitted from the extract. Double parentheses denote the transcriber's explanatory comments.

8. Under the Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998, South African citizens are able to apply for a Protection Order (or interdict) to protect themselves from violence by intimate partners.

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