

# Woman abuse: The construction of gender in women and men's narratives of violence



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Violence against women is a widespread social problem affecting millions of women. For more than three decades, researchers have explored the experiences of women in abusive relationships. Victims' accounts have been the main focus, often deflecting attention away from men who are most frequently the perpetrators. Consequently, woman abuse has come to be regarded as a 'woman's problem' – blaming women and rendering them responsible for change. The literature on perpetrators and victims of violence seems to be developing independently of each other and commonly provide one-sided accounts (mostly from victims and less often from perpetrators). This article reports on an ongoing research project that aims to explore how both partners in a violent heterosexual relationship understand and attach meanings to their experiences. In-depth interviews were conducted with five couples. An analysis of the narratives revealed that women and men's understandings of violence are both similar and different. They construct particular forms of gendered identities, which are sometimes contradictory and ambiguous. In their talk about violence and relationships, they 'perform' gender and enact hegemonic constructions of femininity and masculinity. The analysis also shows that women's and men's talk about violence is linked to broader socio-cultural mechanisms that construct woman abuse as a serious social problem in South Africa.

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Since the 1970s feminist activists and social scientists have pointed to woman abuse as a significant social problem that affects millions of women worldwide. It is also a problem in South Africa, where it poses a significant threat to gender equity. For

more than three decades, researchers, mostly from North America, have explored the experiences of women in abusive relationships. In the literature, victims' accounts have been the main focus, often deflecting attention away from men who are most frequently the perpetrators of violence against women. Woman abuse has thus come to be regarded as a 'woman's problem', with women, at times, being blamed and held responsible for change. The literature on both women's and men's accounts of violence is not well developed and our scientific understanding would benefit from an integration of research on the issue.

## **VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS**

The earliest psychological theories on abuse predominantly focused on women's supposed deficiencies or psychological abnormalities as precipitators of abuse (Gayford, 1975). Some of these theories typically described women as masochistic, passive and personality-disordered. Some authors, such as Walker (1979, 1984) proposed theories that attempted to explain why women remain in abusive relationships. More recently, constructions of abused women as passive have been challenged and authors have explored the active strategies women employ to resist violence from their partners (Baker, 1997; Boonzaier, 2001; Kirkwood, 1993; Profitt, 2000).

Feminism, through its focus on gender and power, has been a major theoretical force in understanding the dynamics of violence against women. A feminist analysis focuses on how traditional ideas about marriage, the family and gender roles support patriarchy, male domination and abuse (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Contemporary feminist analyses recognise the saliency of multiple sites of power and oppression (Bograd, 1999). It is acknowledged that structures of power, such as race, class, sexual orientation and gender shape and colour the meaning of woman abuse.

There are many research endeavours that show how women's experiences of violence are complicated by issues such as culture (Abraham, 2000; Haj-Yahia, 2000; Lui, 1999; Zaman, 1999), race (Callaghan, Hamber & Takura, 1997; Mama, 1996; Richie & Kanuha, 1997), class (McCloskey, 1996; Miles-Doan, 1998; Tiefenthaler & Farmer, 2000), sexuality (Shefer, Strebel & Foster, 2000; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1993) or a range of intersecting factors (Jewkes, Levin & Penn-Kekana, 2002). Feminist theorising has shifted towards an acknowledgement of the multiple sites of power and oppression that differentially affect the lives of women by attending to the broader context in which violence occurs. Thus, the beliefs and values surrounding masculinity, femininity, the family and violence within the culture are seen to shape and constitute the problem of woman abuse (O'Neill, 1998). However, within this line of feminist theorising the focus has largely been on women's experiences of violence and less attention has been accorded to abusive men.

A relatively new and emerging literature focuses on abusers' accounts of violence. Studies have explored how men talk about, or account for, perpetrating violence in their relationships (Hearn, 1998; Ptacek, 1990; Stamp & Sabourin, 1995). Researchers

have found that men typically justify, minimise or deny their own violence against female partners. They frequently describe violence as a loss of control, temporary insanity and accumulated frustration. Other reasons men offer for their violence relate to external factors, such as the behaviour or personalities of their partners, alcohol and jealousy (Stamp & Sabourin, 1995). These discourses of blame, denial and minimisation are employed at the individual and societal levels, frequently legitimising male violence against women. Although 'loss-of-control' or expressive discourses (O'Neill, 1998) are common, men also draw on instrumental discourses and describe the use of violence as an intentional means to exert authority and control over women (Dobash & Dobash, 1998). Through the practice of, and discourse about, violence, men construct particular forms of masculine identities through which they are able to control women (Hearn, 1998). Violence has also been described as a gendered practice whereby men 'accomplish' or 'do' gender (Anderson & Umberson, 2001). The practice and discourse of violence provide an opportunity for men to reconstruct contested and unstable masculinities shaped by cultural and structural changes.

Moore (1994) proposed a theory of interpersonal violence by exploring the interconnections between gender, violence and sexuality. She describes violence as highly sexualised within the personal as well as cultural and political economy. She draws on post-structuralist theories of subjectivity in order to argue for the existence of a range of femininities and masculinities. Moore (1994) also draws on Hollway's (1984) notion of investment, in order to account for how and why individuals 'choose' particular subject positions. The 'choice' (both conscious and unconscious) of various subject positions is linked to 'fantasies of identity' (based upon ideas about the type of person one would like to be) as well as fantasies of power and agency (shaped by material, social and economic conditions). She proposes that gender violence results from 'thwarted' gender identities. Moore (1994, p. 151) describes thwarting as: 'the inability to sustain or properly take up a gendered subject position resulting in a crisis, real or imagined, of self-representation and/or social evaluation'. Thwarting, according to Moore (1994), may come about as a result of others refusing to take up their subject positions *vis-à-vis* oneself. It may also result from the contradictions of various positions as well as pressures to conform to certain subject positions. Issues of self-identity and social presentation are also implicated. In terms of this theory, men resolve a crisis in their masculine identities through the use of violence against their partners. In this case, violence reinforces hegemonic masculinities.

In South Africa, there is a paucity of empirical research on violent men. Some researchers are starting to address this gap by problematising the relationship between violence and hegemonic constructions of masculinity in young adult relationships (Shefer et al., 2000; Wood & Jewkes, 2001). Others have explored the connections between men's reports of violence and factors such as age, education, race, poverty, alcohol abuse or a family history of violence (Abrahams, Jewkes & Laubsher, 1999; Abrahams & Jewkes, 2004; Jewkes, 2002). Morrell (2001), in a recently edited text,

*Changing men in southern Africa*, contributed significantly to our understandings of masculinity and violence in South Africa. Indeed, his book opened up an important space for debates and discussions on the issue of masculinity within the South African context. Contributors to the text explored the interconnectedness between masculinities and race, class, ethnicity, age and location. The text also drew attention to the multiple meanings of masculinity and how they are shaped by social, cultural and historical contexts.

### **The violent couple**

Although it follows a similar trajectory, the literature on perpetrators and victims of violence seems to be developing along independent trajectories. We are commonly provided with one-sided accounts (mostly from victims) of violence, with a dearth of research on both partners in the violent relationship. An integration of research on woman abuse is important as an exclusive focus on women may entrench existing stereotypes.

Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh and Lewis (2000), in their three-year evaluation of two programmes for violent men in the United Kingdom, used couple data to evaluate the effectiveness of different forms of intervention for violent men. In their longitudinal study, they conducted in-depth interviews with men and women immediately after a court sanction. They later contacted their 122 participants by using postal questionnaires. Dobash et al. (2000) provide aggregated data to show how men's and women's accounts differ in terms of the types and frequency of violence reported. They found incongruencies between women's and men's accounts in the following areas: reports of serious violent acts, the frequency of violence and the injuries sustained as a result of men's violence. Men typically underreported the frequency and severity of the violence. Dobash et al. (2000) also found that one-quarter of women in their study said that they had been forced to have sex, whereas only 3% of men said they had ever forced or coerced their partners into having sex. Similarly, Hearn (1998) found that men minimised their use of psychological and verbal abuse. They also failed to mention sexual abuse or violence unless they were prosecuted or convicted for sexual crimes. These findings provide initial evidence that women and men construct dissimilar accounts of violence in their relationships.

In Sweden, Hydén (1994) conducted a narrative study with 20 couples over a period of two years. She aimed to identify and describe the distinctive features of violence in marriage and to understand how couples made sense of these acts. Violence was described as cyclical in nature, consisting of these distinct but repeated phases. Couples' narratives consisted of three parts: the pre-history of the violence, progressing through the violent incidents and ending with the aftermath. Hydén found that there were marked differences between women's and men's descriptions of the violence. Women typically described the violence in terms of its consequences (such as fear and injury), whereas men most often described the functions of violence. Men, for example, often

described their violence as instrumental (used to achieve particular goals, such as ending a verbal fight). Hydén's proposition, that partner understandings of violence are individually, relationally and culturally grounded, holds promise for future research as it takes cognisance of the interactional issues involved in marriage.

Hydén (1994) also explored the distinctive features of marriage within the socio-historical context of Swedish society. She was particularly concerned with the process of social definition that turned woman battering from an invisible phenomenon into a well-conceptualised social problem. She explored how woman battering came to be named as a social problem in Sweden, suggesting that the socio-cultural context is an important contributor to understanding the problem.

This study endeavoured to take the above issues further by exploring women's and men's narratives of violence in the South African context, simultaneously attempting to address the paucity of research in the area.

Thus far, couple data have primarily been used to compare men's and women's accounts of violence in terms of the reported frequency and severity of the violence. Rather than simply comparing men's and women's accounts, the approach taken in this study assumes that their narratives are aimed at conveying particular forms of identities. In addition to exploring issues such as the roles and responsibilities involved in the marriage or the interactions between conjugal partners (cf. Hydén, 1994), therefore, this study also explored broader cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity and how they are enacted within partnerships.

The specific objectives of this study were to explore (a) how women and men understand and account for the violence in their relationships; (b) how their narratives of violence may be similar or different; and (c) the kinds of identities women and men construct in these narratives and how these draw on culturally specific forms of femininity and masculinity.

## **METHOD**

The interview material for this article forms part of a larger project comprising of interviews with 15 couples. We report on a subset of five couples in this article. Participants for the study were recruited from an agency in the Western Cape (hereafter referred to as 'the Agency') that provides services such as marriage and relationship counselling, family and individual counselling, as well as support and educational groups for victims and perpetrators of woman abuse. Consent for the study was gained at multiple levels. Owing to its confidentiality policy, the Agency was unable to release any personal details about their clients. An Agency employee assisted the researchers by contacting the participants in order to gain initial consent. Given that it was more likely that interviews would be obtained from both partners if initial contact were made with the male partner, participants were initially recruited from the Agency's support and educational group for men. At each interview, it was explained that the interviewer (first author) was interested in hearing the story of the relationship from both partners

and that separate contact would be made with the female partner to obtain her informed consent to participate in the study. In order to ensure the women participants' safety, they were contacted and interviewed separately. The research procedure was outlined and voluntary informed consent was negotiated. The interviews were conducted on the Agency's premises, unless the women preferred otherwise.

In-depth, narrative interviews were conducted in order to explore fully how women and men understand and explain violence in their relationships. In the narrative interview, the agenda is flexible, open to change and only partially guided by the researcher's meaning frame (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). The unstructured interview was guided by a broad open-ended question aimed at eliciting participants' stories of their relationships (viz., 'Please tell me the story of your relationship'). Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

## **Participants**

In order to respect participants' anonymity and confidentiality, identifying details have been changed and names have been omitted from this article. Participants ranged in age from 28 to 45 years. The duration of the participants' relationships ranged from 2 to 22 years. Of the five couples, one was divorced and four were married; and of the four married couples, two were separated at the time of the interviews. Two of the men were court-ordered to attend the Agency's intervention programme for male abusers and three attended voluntarily. All five couples could be described as working class to lower middle class, with jobs ranging from unskilled to skilled and professional. In the case of three of the couples, there were income and occupational disparities between the partners, with the women being higher earners than their partners.

## **Data analysis**

Participants' accounts were analysed by means of a narrative approach. A focus on narrative highlights how individuals construct meaning and identities through narratives (Riessman, 1993). The narrative analytical method employed entailed a holistic reading of the content of the narrative as suggested by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998). The analytical process involved a repeated reading of the interview transcripts in order to acquire a sense of the entire narrative. Transcripts were read individually and jointly (couples' interviews). Initial notes were taken while reading the transcripts. These notes focused primarily on the content of the individuals' stories and general impressions of the texts. Subsequent readings involved a more detailed analysis and elicited general themes that were followed throughout the narratives. In the detailed analysis, features of language (such as metaphors) were also taken into account. A post-structuralist view of discourse (Weedon, 1987) ensured that we were attentive to the discourses women and men drew upon in order to make sense of their experiences as well as to how these constructed subjectivity and meaning

for the participants. In sum, the analysis comprised a combination of narrative and discourse analytical methods.

In line with a postmodern theoretical approach, we also recognised that the narratives emerged out of co-constructions between the researchers and those being researched. Many things were said or left unsaid as a consequence of the identities of the interviewer (first author) and the participants. We therefore acknowledge that there may have been important lines of difference between the research participants and the interviewer that may have impacted upon the kinds of information conveyed.

In the study, gender was an important axis of similarity (in the interviews with women) and difference (in the interviews with men). The interviewer attempted to ensure that she was aware and constantly reflexive of her own biases and assumptions, as well as the power differentials between the research participants and herself. Having conducted previous research with women in abusive relationships and having some experience in counselling abused women, it was particularly challenging for the interviewer to be consistently empathic and open to men's stories. Furthermore, gender may have been an obstacle to obtaining 'truthful' information from men about their use of violence. However, as narrative and discursive researchers, we are less concerned about the 'truth value' of participants' stories and more concerned with subjectivity, language and meaning.

## **NARRATIVES OF VIOLENCE**

Below we present our analysis of the research participants' narratives of violence. We show how discourses of blame, justification and minimisation were common of men's accounts. We also illustrate how women sometimes concurred with these accounts of their partners' behaviour. Both women and men also drew upon hegemonic gendered discourses. However, the potential for resistance was also present. The findings are illustrated by means of excerpts from the interview transcripts.

Consistent with other similar research (Hearn, 1998; Ptacek, 1990; Stamp & Sabourin, 1995), this study focused primarily on men's accounts of their own violent behaviour and their justifications and minimisations of violence.

Men in this study drew on varying discourses of blame and denial in order to rationalise their use of violence against their partners.

### **Justifications**

Justifications are when men admit to using violence against their partners but do not accept full responsibility for their actions. Instead, they locate the responsibility for the violence with their partners (Stamp & Sabourin, 1995). This is illustrated in the following statement by a male participant:

I sound like somebody that's trying to justify what I'm doing, you know. It's that I'm not a violent person, I'm not. But if you push me too far then you push me off the edge and, I'm gonna come back to you with all I've got (M5).<sup>1</sup>

The participant attempted to justify his violent behaviour by representing it as a response to being 'pushed off the edge'. This depiction constructs him as out of control or the violence as an expressive release of tension or frustration (O'Neill, 1998). In this study, this proved to be a common justification for men's violence. Women also employed 'loss of control' metaphors, suggesting that violence is unpredictable and uncontrollable (cf. Eisikovits & Buchbinder, 1999):

And with this abusive and drinking, and so on, I feared that he would use the gun, just get out of control and use the gun (F2).

According to Eisikovits and Buchbinder (1999), sometimes it is in women's interest to represent the violence as something beyond the abuser's control, as this vitiates the construction of the abuser as completely violent – and the woman as essentially a victim.

The most common justification for violence was that it was a response to a female partner's nagging or provocation. Although some men acknowledged that they were violent, many consistently represented their partners as carrying some (or most) of the responsibility for their behaviour. For example:

I felt that, not unless she provoked me while I was in this rage, would I really go and intentionally hit her. I wouldn't, I'm not the kind of person that would come home drunk and just hit on the wife or say, 'Where's my food', or whatever the case is (M1).

Common justifications for violence also involved criticising the female partner's interaction styles, behaviour or personality, and in some cases, paradoxically constructing her as the abuser. Specifically, some men drew on discourses of blame and denial to position themselves as victims of abusive – or, potentially abusive – female partners.

She's retaliating. She's not that submissive anymore, she doesn't take on that. So I think, in a lotta ways I'm the submissive one. She hasn't been abusing me, not violently but I can see that point where she will (M3).

In the manner that he described aspects of his relationship, this man constructed a reversal of roles where it may have been likely for his partner to become abusive.

Family violence researchers, Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz (cited in Anderson, 1997) contend that there is an almost equal amount of violence in the home perpetrated by both male and female partners. However, feminist researchers (e.g., Dobash, Dobash, Wilson & Daly, 1992) have vehemently criticised this assertion and have consistently shown that although women sometimes use violence in self-defence, men are the major perpetrators of violence and that issues of gender and power cannot be



ignored when one considers domestic violence. This position does not deny that it is possible for a woman to abuse her male partner. However, it is recognised as being a departure from the norm.

## Minimisations

It is typical for men to minimise the violence they perpetrate against their partners. Stamp and Sabourin (1995) propose that men minimise the violence in two primary ways, namely, minimising the level and minimising the types of violence they employ. For example:

A restraining order was not that I – because it was stated . . . I don't use violence you know. It was more of intimidation and verbal abuse, and you know . . . (M2).

In the above extract, the male participant drew upon the commonsense understanding that verbal or emotional abuse does not constitute serious violence and may not have been as damaging to his partner. In this construction, he attempted to resist the representation of himself as an abuser, by stating that he has not used physical violence against his partner. Later in his narrative, however, the same participant described an incident where he 'smacked' his wife. Another man minimised the extent of the violence in his relationship by employing the frequently used 'volcanic' metaphor – namely, that violence is a release of built-up tension.

Um, for us it wasn't, I'm not trying to minimise the extent of what I did, but it wasn't, it was just two minutes, there and it's gone. And so much regret and so much pain afterwards, like lasting a lifetime. That half a minute or couple of seconds that you just lose it and try to retract but you lose sense of your emotions and can't control it. It becomes uncontrollable (M3).

Interestingly, while men in this study attempted to justify or minimise their behaviour, they were also at pains to make it clear that they were not doing so (e.g., 'I'm not trying to minimise the extent of what I did, but . . .'). These men had been part of an abuser's programme for varying lengths of time and were therefore familiar with the social and educational discourses surrounding woman abuse (such as, 'Violence against women is never justified'). They thereby situated themselves both inside and outside a discourse that does not tolerate violence against women.

Studies have found that women also minimise or justify their partners' violent behaviours (Boonzaier & de la Rey, 2003; Jackson, 2001). This was also evident in this study:

Look his hitting, hitting is not hitting, punching on one and it was only that two three times when he was seeing that girl, when he hit me like that. When he banged, banged, banged my [pause] if he, it would just be one blow, and that's it, you know.

It's not a constant *beating*<sup>2</sup> and, you know it was only that, when he was seeing that girl when it was the two three incidents when it was like that. But otherwise it would be *one* smack (F5).

It is interesting that this participant minimised the extent of the 'one smack' when elsewhere in her narrative she spoke about being fearful and described incidents of severe violence. This woman's minimisation makes sense if one considers it within the context of the status of her relationship at the time of the interview. This participant and her partner had been separated for more than one week and she had been receiving constant telephone calls and gifts from him in his attempts to persuade her to take him back. At the time of the interview she seemed to be re-evaluating the status of her relationship and rationalising about whether or not she should accept her partner back.

In sum, men utilised a variety of rhetorical strategies such as justification or minimisation in accounting for their own violence. They typically blamed their partners for provocative or verbally abusive behaviour. Men's justifications concur with the victim-precipitation theories (O'Neill, 1998), suggesting that women possess particular characteristics that lead to their victimisation. In some situations, men also constructed themselves as victimised by abusive female partners.

## **Gendered Discourses**

In their narratives, women and men drew on varied discourses of femininity and masculinity. The relational constructions of masculinity and femininity were evident in their accounts – through constructing their gendered selves, they were also constructing the 'Other'. As Anderson and Umberson (2001) propose, the performance of masculinity through violence is also a means by which men encourage the performance of femininity in their partners.

### **Masculinity as authority, femininity as subordination**

Men and women in this study drew upon hegemonic gendered discourses scripting standards of male authority and female submission. For example, one man spoke about his expectations of married life and the roles of the 'husband' and 'wife':

I probably had a more idyllic um [*Interviewer: view?*] view of marriage and stuff like this and I kind of thought because we both Christians and whatever the case is – I'll basically take the lead and . . . and . . . and sort of take things in a certain direction . . .<sup>3</sup> If I took a certain decision, my wife would basically bear with that (M1).

The participant invoked religious symbolism of the husband as the head of the household and the wife as the passive subordinate. He constructed the man as 'king of his castle' and the woman as 'subject' (Hollway, 1984) who has to abide by his laws or

decisions. Religious values and ideals often reinforce and sanction strict adherence to stereotypical gender roles. Female submission and male domination are inscribed in the religious construction of ‘women/wives’ and ‘men/husbands’ (Boonzaier & de la Rey, 2003).

In another instance, the above participant’s partner drew on the religious ideals of repentance and forgiveness in order to explain why she accepted him back after the second incident of violence in their relationship.

Um, I, I do actually believe in repentance, I believe people can repent of their ways and turn away from it. Um, and God will forgive them in any case for for doing that, I believe that. Um, and they, I mean, if we are willing to forgive them and give them another chance, there is a chance that things may change (F1).

Studies show that religious institutional practices sometimes sanction a husband’s violence against his wife through adherence to gender stereotypical ideals and by discouraging divorce – and, at times, encouraging a woman to return to an abusive partner (Boonzaier & de la Rey, 2003; Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000). Religion, however, often plays a dual role by also providing vital support to women dealing with violence from their partners.

Men’s use of violence may be a direct expression of male authority. Earlier, it was mentioned that participants spoke of violence as a loss of control or as an expressive release of tension. Violence, however, may also be instrumental, intentional and functional (Dobash & Dobash, 1998). A participant illustrates below:

That’s what made is so easy and that’s why I felt I could [inaudible], she made it too easy to exercise authority. But because of where my life was going and, my career, my personal life, I became overstressed, I think, with all the situations, that I ended up giving it to her (M3).

When violence is used as an expression of male authority, women become the ‘appropriate’ victims (Dobash & Dobash, 1998). The above participant’s partner, concurred with his construction and described her victimisation as follows:

So I’m the only person who he thinks he can just, it’s like a pillow, punching bag, you know. You can hit this person, you can hurt this person, do whatever you want to with this person, and this person will take it, absorb it, take it, absorb it (F3).

In the above extract, the participant’s repetition of ‘take it, absorb it, take it, absorb it’ invokes the imagery of her having to endure repeated abuse. Indeed, she ‘absorbed’ almost six years of verbal, physical, sexual and emotional abuse from her partner without any form of outside support or assistance. Shame and embarrassment contributed to her silence about the abuse. Her ‘absorbing’ or enduring the violence from

her husband for so long is possibly also linked to her positioning within traditional constructions of femininity as patient, selfless and long-suffering.

### **Emphasised femininity**

Femininity has traditionally been constructed as nurturing, caring and selfless. Women are seen as the providers of love and care, often putting their partners' needs before their own. Jackson (2001) explored how young women spoke about their abusive relationships by drawing on cultural narratives of romance. She showed how discourses of romantic love provide specific solutions to a partner's violent behaviour – women should provide love and tenderness to soften the male's abusiveness or harshness. This is exemplified in the following statement:

It was terrible, I always had to please him, you know. I could never think of myself. I always had to think of the peace and to keep him happy. Everything that I did, I had to do for him, you know. Everything that I do, I concentrate on him (F3).

Connell (cited in Jackson, 2001) used the term, *emphasised femininity*, to refer to a position characterised by nurturance and selflessness. It is clear that the women in this study often situated themselves within this conventional construction.

As women spoke about their relationships, they often referred to adopting or resisting a mothering role in relation to their partners. The lines between being the 'wife' and the 'mother' often become blurred, as both involve traditional feminine practices emphasising nurturance and selflessness:

I felt myself being like his mother. I have to support, I have to: 'Are you okay? Why are you not okay?' . . . And, it's like lots of hand-holding and spoon-feeding (F4).

Constructing the self as the mother may at first glance seem to suggest a position of traditional femininity. However, by positioning their partners as childlike and in need of support, these women were simultaneously constructing themselves as stronger. This representation, however, also serves the function of keeping women in the abusive relationship; as some may stay in the relationship out of feelings of sympathy for their partners.

### **Masculinities**

Notions of successful masculinity are frequently linked to a man's ability to provide for the family financially. A male participant seemed to take pride in the fact that he always provided for his family, despite financial disagreements or struggles.

There is one thing that I have to tell you . . . I made sure through the years that I provide for my family, you know (M2).

Others may have felt that they were unable to achieve successful masculinity when they could not provide for their families financially. The extract below reflects one man's feelings of helplessness, sadness and failure, resulting from his inability to provide for his family.

Trying to keep my life, at the same time I want to help, I'm trying to keep my family together. I've lost control over all of it. So I'm not gonna fight it. I'm not gonna go there until I'm in a position to make things right for all of us . . . A lotta areas would have been better if I was working, you know (M3).

This participant may have felt that he had failed by not being able to provide for his wife and children. Consequently, he experienced a lack of control. His accomplishment of masculinity seems to be closely related to his ability to be the 'breadwinner' and 'provider'. As a result of being unable to meet these obligations, he experienced a loss of confidence and self-esteem – characteristics that are also associated with successful or 'hyper-masculinity' (Connell, 1995). In other relationships the man's inability to provide successfully for his family seemed to be a source of conflict. Income and educational disparities between marital partners set the scene for constant disagreements. As one man illustrates:

Um, the problem was finances. And up till today I still feel, maybe her parents were right by telling me that I've got a Standard 8. She got a degree, it's not gonna work. Um, she would ever so now and then, she would tell me that, 'You know, I am the breadwinner in the house.' And, it made me feel like I'm being somehow ripped. Everything has been ripped away from me (M4).

A woman participant also acknowledged that her husband may have felt emasculated because of the income disparities between them.

And um, I must also mention the fact that um I do get more pay than [my husband] because in that also I feel that also has an effect on our relationship. [*Interviewer: Mmm*] That he, I think he feels that . . . that . . . that . . . he feels that I'm superior or whatever (F2).

Men who cannot provide for their families and women who identify as the primary breadwinner seem to disrupt gendered practices and do not allow for the successful accomplishment of traditional masculinity.

### **Power, powerlessness and control**

Issues of power and control were central to how women and men constructed themselves and their partners. Men used particular strategies to characterise their partners as 'masculinised' (Anderson & Umberson, 2001) – controlling, domineering and

demanding. In doing so, they suggest that they are uneasy with women's disruption of the binary opposition of masculinity (authority) and femininity (submission) (Anderson & Umberson, 2001). For example, a male participant stated, 'She wants me to do things the way she sees it and to follow what she believes.' Although many men spoke about control or power in their relationships, some had trouble verbalising exactly how controlling or domineering their partner was. Anderson and Umberson (2001) showed that men were sometimes unable to explain exactly how women exerted control. Conversely, women described concrete practices that men employed to exert power in the relationship. For example:

[My husband] always finds problems with me, with me. If it's the way I dress, if I blow my hair. 'Why are you blowing your hair all of a sudden? Why are you wearing, perfume? Who is at work? I must find out.' You know, forever threats (F5).

Other controlling strategies included male partners restricting women's movements or keeping them short of money.

By characterising their partners as 'masculinised' or controlling, some men positioned themselves as emasculated victims.

I had a flat when we got married, she had a house. So we decided to move into the house. And I feel that was also very bad judgement on our side because she, 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 to a certain extent (M1).

Petrik, Petrik, Olson and Subotnik (1994) suggest that men's violence against women is a reaction to feelings of powerlessness, having a low tolerance for being controlled and, consequently, feeling the need to exert control. Feminist researchers have long acknowledged that woman abuse concerns issues of power and gender (Bograd, 1990; Dobash & Dobash, 1979) and that violence against women is a re-enactment of male authority and female submission (patriarchy). More recently, however, theorists such as Moore (1994) have been looking at more complex ways of explaining (not excusing) male violence in terms of the maintenance of masculine and feminine identities. Obviously, the reasons why some men choose to use violence, as a reassertion of their masculine identities requires further exploration.

### **Women's sexuality: A site for male control**

The discourse on male propriety rights communicates messages about the 'wife' as the property of her husband, over which he is entitled to exert authority and control, as illustrated below.

I went [for swimming lessons] the Monday night. I went the Tuesday night. By the Wednesday night [my husband] couldn't handle it anymore. 'Do you now have to

fucking go every night? Is this now gonna be every night's thing? . . . Yes, go strip yourself . . . Go, go take your clothes off there for other people' (F5).

Earlier in her narrative, the same woman stated that her partner was extremely jealous. In the above extract she described his reaction to her attending swimming lessons. She outlined this incident as typical – he often questioned her movements and motives. His controlling and possessive behaviour reinforces the idea that his wife is his exclusive property.

The 'male sexual drive' discourse (Hollway, 1984, p. 231) is so familiar it is almost commonsensical. The discourse is predicated on the idea that men's sexuality is directly linked to biological drives or forces beyond his control. Some men drew on this discourse in order to justify marital infidelity and in response to disagreements about the quantity of sexual activity in their marriages.

But then again you know your wife sleep with you whenever it suits her. 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, 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 (M4).

In the above extract, the participant drew on the 'male sexual drive' discourse in his rationalisation of his extra-marital affairs. He also invoked notions about the marital sexual duties of wives – that they should always be sexually available to their husbands. According to Hollway (1984), women are seen as the objects of the 'male sexual drive' discourse.

Wood and Jewkes (2001) found that for some young men, the achievement of successful masculinity involved having multiple sexual partners. Below the above-mentioned participant described how he perceived his relationships with other women.

I can honestly tell you [Inaudible] to me it was just a means. [Inaudible] That is how I regarded my relationships with other women. With my wife it's different . . . It was either for the sex, it was either for the convenience, it was either for, the use of their car or their money. Here I find myself in a total different environment (M4).

Like the participants in Wood and Jewkes' study, this man had a 'Mercedes Benz' (his wife) and other girlfriends, described as 'cherries', which he used just for sex, convenience or money. In his construction of the differences between his wife and the women he uses 'for the sex' or 'for the convenience', we see the oppositional construction of femininity – that is the so-called Madonna–whore dichotomy

(Macdonald, 1995). In this construction women are defined in terms of two extremes: either sexually pure (the virgin or Madonna) or sexually impure (the whore). These oppositional constructions are used to police women's adherence to traditional femininity (sexually pure and passive).

The participant above also described his relationship with his wife as 'different'. Why? There is an inherent double standard in the 'male sexual drive' discourse – men achieve successful masculinity by having multiple sexual partners, yet the expectation remains that their wives should be sexually pure. This double standard manifested itself particularly when men accused their wives of being unfaithful. It was common for men to question their wife's fidelity. It is notable that all of the men who were extremely jealous or questioned their partners' motives and movements, were at one time or another unfaithful to them. The woman abuse literature has not adequately addressed the connections between marital infidelity (by the male partner) and woman abuse. Our understanding of the dynamics in the violent relationship would certainly benefit from the exploration of this issue.

### **Coercive sex**

Sexual abuse or coercion has been described as occurring on a continuum of controlling and violent behaviours (Kelly, 1990). These range from sexually violent acts to insidious coercive practices aimed at controlling access to women's bodies. Women often acquiesce to unwanted sex with their partners because they fear violence or other forms of retaliation (Basile, 1999), as illustrated in the following statement.

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, you know, that kind of thing. [*Interviewer: Did it happen often?*] Ja, especially when he's like drugged and stuff like that. And comes in late. [*Pause*] And wake me up, ja. That wasn't nice. It leaves you very empty. [*Interviewer: Mmm*] It actually leaves you with a feeling of being raped (F3).

The participant tentatively named the sexual violence by her husband as rape. However, the 'victim' role incorporates shame and humiliation and, in this context, it makes sense for her to speak of a 'feeling of being raped', rather than constructing the incident as rape. In her description of the incident, constructions of male sexuality as active and female sexuality as passive are also implicit. Another woman also spoke about sexual coercion and her reasons for acquiescing to her partner's demands for sexual contact ('He'll punch me or he'll throw me off the bed'). She also recounted how he expected sexual contact after episodes of verbal abuse:

[My husband] 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 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 (F5).



For this participant, her partner and many others in this sample being ‘wives’ means being sexually available to their husband and having to comply with their sexual demands. Constructing marital relationships in this manner may contribute to maintaining the silence around sexual coercion, rape and violence in marriage.

In sum, both women and men drew on hegemonic discourses of male and female sexuality, such as ‘the male sexual drive’ discourse, the ‘conjugal sexual duties of wives’ discourse and the ‘sexual double standard’ discourse. These discourses were employed to represent particular forms of masculine and feminine sexualities, where women’s sexuality was the object of male control.

### **Discourses of empowerment and resistance**

Although conformity to, and the sanctioning of, hegemonic gender roles were common, some men positioned themselves as supportive of changes to the traditional gender order. They did so by describing their willingness to assist with duties such as housework, cooking or child-care. Some women in this study also resisted traditional constructions of passive femininity and authored new discourses, which offered positions of empowerment. They seemed to challenge the traditional gender order and many identified it as a source of the conflict in their partnerships. Some acknowledged their own agency and success and denied any responsibility for the violence.

One woman located the source of her strength and assertiveness in her childhood – where traditional gender divisions between boys and girls were actively challenged:

I think also, the mistake that [My ex-husband] made 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, here I have quite 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 the boys and the girls were treated the same in the home. (F1)

This participant suggested that because her ex-husband was socialised into conventional gender roles (having an aggressive father and submissive mother), he expected her to behave in a similar manner to his mother. His abusive father also played a very important role in his gender socialisation and may have contributed to his ‘learning’ of violent behaviour. Other participants also described problems in their childhood and conflict between their parents, which may lend some credence to the theory of the intergenerational transmission of violence. Research shows that witnessing abuse in the home seems to be a significant factor for the later perpetration of violence against an intimate partner (Abrahams & Jewkes, 2004; Jewkes, 2002).

The woman mentioned above verbalised the problems encountered in a relationship where women challenge the gender order and resist traditional constructions of femininity as follows:

I think education also plays a role in, in how we interacted because he chose to marry an educated woman . . . there were certain things that I, I wasn't willing to accept and, um, I made my opinion very clearly known. And because of that, you know, it also caused conflict. So I think some men, especially men that expect women to, to just be quiet when they treat them badly, um those men should never be involved with women that won't be quiet [Slight laugh]. Because you know then it won't work out (F1).

## **CONCLUSION**

In this article, we showed that women and men consistently drew on varying discourses of gender in order to explain and understand the violence in their relationships. Both women and men situated themselves inside and outside hegemonic gendered positions at varying times in their narratives, reflecting the ambiguous and contradictory nature of gendered subjectivities (Hollway, 1984).

Discourses of active male and passive female sexuality were also common and were used to justify sexual violence and marital infidelities by male partners. This study showed that it is common for men who abuse their partner to have been unfaithful to them as well. The woman abuse literature has not adequately explored the interconnections between marital infidelity and woman abuse. However, it is an issue that requires further exploration.

The analysis indicates that there are similarities in men's and women's constructions of themselves and each other. Minimisations and sometimes justifications for violence are typical of both partners. Violent men seemed to resist the absolute or unqualified construction of themselves as 'abusers' and sometimes, in fact, attempted to position themselves as non-violent. Women also sometimes resisted the construction of their partners as completely abusive and, at times, represented themselves as 'survivors' of abuse.

The theory of 'thwarted' gender identities (Moore, 1994) seemed to hold true for some men in this study. They alluded to feelings of emasculation and of being controlled by a dominating female partner. Some women also acknowledged that income and educational disparities were sources of conflict or disagreement in their relationships. This construction suggests that abusive men may be uncomfortable with women's disruption of the traditional gender order. However, an issue that remains a problem for researchers in this area is how to acknowledge men's feelings of powerlessness or emasculation without excusing their violent behaviour.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We are indebted to the research participants who shared their stories so willingly. We are also grateful to the Agency for the support and organisational assistance for this project. Funding from the University of Cape Town and the A. W. Mellon Foundation is gratefully acknowledged.

## NOTES

1. 'F' denotes an interview with a female participant and 'M' an interview with a male participant. The number refers to the sequence of the interviews.
2. Italics indicate vocal emphasis by the speaker.
3. Ellipses indicate that talk had been omitted from the extract.

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